

HOT LAKES

THE COMPLETE SERIES

New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

ERIN NICHOLAS

Hot Cakes

THE COMPLETE SERIES

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Sugar Rush:

Copyright © 2020 by Erin Nicholas

Models: Chelsey Nicole, Adam Johns

Sugarcoated:

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Forking Around:

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The Hot Cakes Series

One small town.

Two rival baking companies.

A three-generation-old family feud.

And five best friends turned accidental millionaires who are going to be heating up a lot more than the kitchen...

Books in the series:

Sugar Rush (prequel)

Sugarcoated

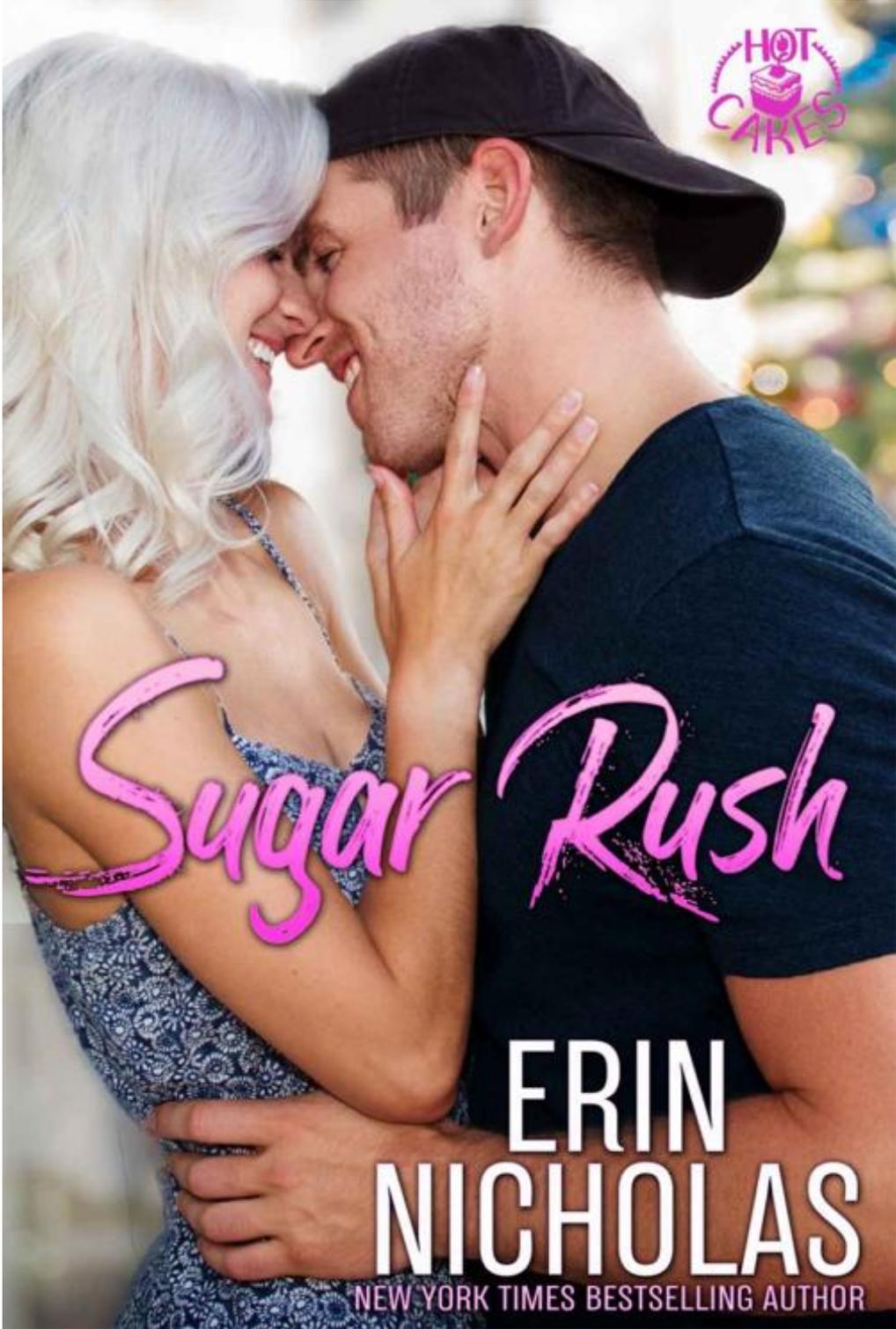
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Sugar Rush

**ERIN
NICHOLAS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

About Sugar Rush

*A prequel to Sugarcoated
and the Hot Cakes series*

He's been her brother's best friend all her life. He's always been there for her, no matter what she needed.

He's loaned her money, let her borrow his car, and told her the truth about her bad haircuts.

Surely, he do her this one favor.

Yeah, it's a big one. But she really needs to get rid of her V-card and she can't ask just anyone to help her with that.

She needs one night and a little coaching from a guy she trusts. Heck, she'll take twenty minutes if that's all he's got.

She's got the chocolate pie and the pink lingerie and...she really hopes he can take it from there.

And that this isn't the worst idea she's ever had.

Chapter One



She was really tired of being a virgin.

Zoe McCaffery rolled her eyes as she loaded a plate into her mother's dishwasher. She was twenty-five, for God's sake. What was she waiting for?

Well, it sure wasn't for The One.

She knew better than to think that Prince Charming would be the one to...deflower her.

She rolled her eyes again. Deflower. See, it was the fact that it even had special terminology. Sure, some of it was nice and sweet while some of it was a little vulgar. "Popping her cherry" came to mind. But either way, there was so much importance put on the whole first-time thing that it even had specific phrases referring to it.

Anyway, it would *not* be Prince Charming who took her V-card—another specific term, though for some reason one she didn't mind quite as much—because she was going to take care of it long before that guy came along.

In fact, she intended to take care of it long before *any* other guys came along.

Well, except *him*, of course. The one who would take her maidenhood.

Zoe shuddered. That was just so bad. Why did all of the slang terms for having sex the first time have to be so obnoxious?

She rinsed a pot under the warm water, lost in thought.

This was going to suck. And not in the fun, dirty way.

If she'd just *gone all the way*—seriously, ugh—at age seventeen or eighteen like a normal horny teenager then the guy would have understood if she was... well, terrible at... well, all of it.

But at age twenty-five? No way. She should not be fumbling around in the dark, trying to find *stuff*, and not sure where to put that stuff once she found it.

She was good at everything she did. Everyone knew that.

She could not be bad at sex.

Especially given the eighty-five percent chance that her first time would be with someone she'd known since kindergarten. Her hometown, where she still lived and worked, was small. Really small. They got a few people moving in here and there, but they were never young, hot guys. Unless they were young, hot guys that had left Appleby after high school and now came home from time to time to visit their grandmothers.

Who she'd known since kindergarten—them *and* their grandmothers—and who knew everyone *else* that she knew.

Which meant that even if she hooked up with one of them when they were home visiting for Christmas, they could still tell the entire town how bad she was in bed.

That couldn't happen. It just couldn't. She had two choices: she could wait and have sex with the man she married, *after* they were married and he essentially had to keep her secret because...*marriage*. Or she could lose her virginity with someone she completely trusted not to blab about it.

She was good at things. When she wanted to learn something new, she researched, she practiced, and she worked at it until she was good. And then she just kept doing it the same way over and over again.

Like in her bakery. She had recipes that people drove from over an hour away to get. Her bakery, Buttered Up, had been her grandmother's and the recipes had been making people happy, and making the McCafferys money, for over fifty years.

Zoe had never changed one thing on the menu or one measurement in the recipes. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Sex could be like that. Once she knew what she was doing and was good at it, she could just keep doing it the same way.

She just needed to get there first. And not humiliate herself in the process.

“Here's the last of the plates.”

And the maybe-kind-of-bad-but-hopefully-not-totally-terrible idea that she'd had brewing was suddenly front and center.

Aiden Anderson.

He was the solution to her problem. The *only* solution to her problem.

She needed a guy who she was attracted to and who wouldn't spill her big bad-at-sex secret. Aiden was the only one who checked both of those boxes.

She watched as he bent to put the plates in the dishwasher.

He had a nice ass.

She wasn't sure when that had happened, but she certainly knew it to be true now.

She'd known Aiden all her life. He and her brother Cam were five years older than she was and they'd become best buddies their first day of school, so it was not an exaggeration to say that Aiden had *always* been there.

Zoe tipped her head and studied him. He was a lot bigger than her. The top of her head came about to his nose and her head settled perfectly on his shoulder when they hugged. They hadn't hugged in a while though. Now that she thought about it, they hadn't hugged since he'd seen her in her bra and panties. Huh. That was interesting. Had their physical awareness of one another subconsciously kept them from touching?

She'd always liked his hugs. He had big arms and a wide chest that she'd fit against perfectly. She knew he ran to keep

in shape and his flat abs and muscled thighs and that nice ass were definite perks. He had dark blonde hair and deep green eyes and an easy smile that was as familiar to her as her father's or brother's. More familiar, really, than her brother Cam's, because Cam didn't smile as easily as Aiden did.

Aiden had been like a brother to her for *years*, but she'd been very aware that other girls found him hot. Because they were constantly telling her that. She'd have older girls ask her about him—what he was like, if he liked chocolate chip cookies or peanut butter cookies better, if he had a date for the school dance. She'd gotten so sick of being Aiden Anderson's personal dating assistant that she'd started lying to them all. She told them he picked his nose and was mean to dogs, hated all cookies, and that yes, he did have a date for the dance.

He'd been annoyed. But then he'd picked his nose and wiped it on her arm and made her make him chocolate chip peanut butter cookies to make up for it.

She'd made the cookies. And spit in the batter.

That was how their relationship had been. Older-brother-younger-sister type stuff.

Until one day it hadn't been anymore.

Aiden had gone off to college and gotten hot.

And nicer. That hadn't hurt. He'd never been an actual jerk, but he'd teased her and pointed things out like bad haircuts and done things like the boogers on her arm.

Once he went off to college, he'd just been *nicer*. More mature. He'd ask how she was and actually listen as if he was interested. He'd tell funny stories about what he and Cam had been up to and wouldn't roll his eyes when she asked questions. And, maybe most of all, he *raved* about her baking. Every time he came home to visit, it was as if he hadn't eaten a decent cookie or cupcake or piece of pie in months.

Nothing got to her like someone loving her cupcakes.

Her literal cupcakes.

But then one day he'd walked in on her ironing a dress in her underwear.

And the way he'd looked at her had made her think that maybe he kind of liked her *cupcakes* too.

Her body had heated and tingled and in a blink Aiden had gone from her brother's annoying friend to a hot guy she would really like to kiss.

It had been that fast.

That had been two years ago. They hadn't kissed, or seen each other in their underwear, or anything else unusual since then. But she hadn't stopped thinking about it whenever he was visiting. And wishing he'd just take the initiative and *do* something.

How was *she* supposed to make the first move? The furthest she'd ever been had been Justin Lewis's hand in her bra in corner of his living room during a movie party with twenty other people.

She hadn't liked it.

Aiden had to be better than that. He *had* to be. According to the rumors, the girls in Appleby generally thought he was very good. At that and more. Of course, these were the same girls who, apparently, didn't care that he picked his nose so maybe their opinions shouldn't have mattered quite so much.

But after his muscles had gotten bigger and he'd grown another two inches and he'd started walking around her mother's house without a shirt on when he was back visiting, she'd thought maybe the girls had taken one look at that cocky smirk of his, and those green eyes, and those abs and thought *what's a booger or two when I can have that?*

Or maybe that was just her.

It was so stupid. She'd been looking at that smirk and those eyes all her life. Was she really so superficial that a few sit-ups and some time apart was all it took to slide him from the friend-zone into the fornication-zone?

Ugh, fornication. Really? The terms for losing her virginity were bad, but there were plenty of bad ones for sex too.

But yes, apparently, that was all it took because she couldn't even imagine doing the deed—seriously, ugh—with anyone else.

The first time.

Right, that's what she meant. She couldn't imagine having sex with anyone else her *first time*.

It wasn't like she thought *Aiden* was The One or Prince Charming or anything like that. That was *not* why she was picking him. She'd heard the guy belch, fart, and tell *really* stupid jokes far too many times to even think about him romantically.

She just needed someone who knew what he was doing in bed and who would never tell anyone that she didn't.

She'd been thinking about this for a while. Probably since that day he'd made her tingle just by *looking* at her. But for sure for the past four months. Ever since she'd run into him in the upstairs hallway with only a towel around his waist. They'd literally run into one another and one of his hands had shot up to keep her from falling on her ass and the towel had slipped and...

She hadn't gotten a look at anything.

But she'd *wanted* to. She'd been disappointed that she hadn't. And that's when she realized that, yeah, *Aiden* was the perfect choice to get laid with.

Zoe frowned. *Get laid with* sounded weird. Should it be “he was the perfect choice to lay”? Ugh, that sounded awkward too. Plus she wanted *him* to lay *her*. She didn't know how to do that. Well, technically she did, of course, but not in the make-the-first-move-be-seductive way. Maybe she should say “he was the perfect choice to be laid by”? Nope, that sounded stupid too.

“Are you okay?”

Zoe blinked and looked up at Aiden. He was standing right in front of her, watching her like he was afraid she was about to puke or something.

“I’m...fine.” *My hymen is still intact and that’s bugging me, but otherwise fine.*

Geez, even ‘hymen’ was such a weird, not-at-all sexy word.

“You look...”

She lifted a brow. She’d worn this top because it was a little clingy and it slipped off one shoulder. She’d hoped that was sexy. She didn’t have a lot of curve up top for it to cling to, but the pale pink color was soft and feminine and the jeans she’d paired it with were fitted and she hoped that it all made Aiden think that...well, that she was a *woman* and not just his best friend’s little sister.

“I look...?”

“Weird.”

Chapter Two



Zoe sighed. So much for the clingy-top factor.

“You look like you’re worried about something,” Aiden said. “Everything okay?”

Well, worried was better than weird.

And she was worried. She was worried that Aiden would think sleeping together—okay, that was one she could kind of get on board with though *sleeping* wasn’t the key focus really, so that made it misleading... Zoe forced herself to concentrate. On Aiden. And convincing him that them having sex was not a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad idea.

Zoe braced her hands on the counter behind her and leaned back casually. Maybe that would make her breasts seem more obvious too.

His gaze didn’t leave her face.

“I actually could use your help with something,” she told him.

“Okay.”

Just “okay”. Some of the nerves that had tightened her shoulders unknotted and she took a deep breath. This was *Aiden*. Sure, he’d teased her and been disgusting around her over the years, but he’d also always been there for her.

After his mom had died when he was fourteen, he’d practically moved in with the McCafferys. Her mother had been his mom’s best friend and Maggie stepped in to mother him as if he was her own. His dad had still been around, but

had taken his wife's death really hard and had spent a lot of time at work or a little drunk. They'd helped him as much as they could, but her dad had also stepped up as a father figure to Aiden.

So, yeah, he'd always *been there*, but he'd also been there. He'd never said no to her if she asked to borrow his car, borrow twenty bucks, if she'd needed a ride home from a party, if she'd needed help with her math homework.

He'd be here for her now. Surely.

But instead of saying “can you take me to bed and ravish me?”—because seriously, who would say that anyway?—she asked, “Can I have that last piece?”

While she'd been wrapped up in her thoughts about sex and him, he'd taken the last piece of chocolate pie from the tin on the counter. It was his favorite. The thing he most looked forward to when he came home—or so he said. She knew it wasn't true. Strawberry cupcakes were his favorite. But they reminded him of his mom, so he never ate them.

Besides, Zoe was pretty sure that what he most looked forward to was being mothered by her mom and sleeping in his old bedroom and eating *anything* Maggie and Zoe made, not just that pie. But Maggie always made sure Zoe made it for him. Just like she always came over to Zoe's house and cleaned from top to bottom, put out the “special” towels that only came out when Cam and Aiden visited, and made sure that their favorite coffee was stocked by the Keurig.

Now that she had moved out, when Cam and Aiden came home to visit, they stayed at Zoe's with her. There were four big bedrooms and they were only a block away from Maggie's so it worked out better than having two grown men sleeping on couches or blow-up mattresses on the floor.

Of course, it also led to things like half-naked interactions in the upstairs hallway. But Zoe wasn't complaining.

She only complained about how her brother seemed absolutely incapable of wiping up toast crumbs and how

neither of them ever remembered to bring toothpaste and that she ended up with half her tube gone by the time they left.

How did two men use so much toothpaste? Were they brushing their teeth five times a day? That, of course, led to her thinking about how minty fresh Aiden would taste if she kissed him though, so...that wasn't exactly a complaint either.

Aiden looked at the pie on the plate he held, then back to her, then sighed. But he held it out. "Okay."

She didn't grin. That would have been rude. Yes, she'd been testing him. And he'd passed.

He would give her his pie.

Not dirty, not dirty, not dirty. She told herself. She had *not* meant that dirty. He would, literally, give her his piece of pie. The last piece. Of his favorite pie. Because he was a good guy who liked her.

Besides, when people referred to pie in a dirty way it was usually referring to— She cut her own thoughts off there. Didn't matter. Didn't need to think about that.

"Thanks." She took the plate and the fork and started to take a bite.

Aiden did, however, reach out a swipe his finger through the meringue on the top of the pie. He gave her an unapologetic grin as he stuck his finger in his mouth.

She couldn't smile back. Or even give him a proper "hey!". Because her gaze was latched on his finger. In his mouth. And how he sucked on it. And how it was wet and glistening when he slid it back out...

"You okay?" he asked.

Zoe squeezed her eyes shut and shook herself mentally. *Get a grip!* She opened her eyes and gave him a bright smile. "Yep. Of course."

He looked from her, to the pie, and back to her. "Are you going to eat that or not?"

Right. The pie. She'd asked for it. If she didn't eat it, he'd want to know why she'd wanted it. Was now the time to say, *I was wondering if you'd give me anything I asked for?* And what if he said yes? Should she then say, *great, then next I'd like an orgasm please?*

“Zoe?”

Again she realized she'd zoned out. She picked up the fork and stuffed a piece of pie in her mouth.

Aiden was watching her. Well, he was watching her mouth. She withdrew the fork slowly, pressing her lips around it to be sure to get all the chocolate.

He stepped closer. Had he meant to do that?

She felt her heart rate pick up. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, then pressed her lips together.

His eyes were on her mouth the entire time.

She felt hot. Very hot. Maybe because he was standing really close now. He was big and it made sense that he'd put off a lot of body heat.

But no. This felt very much like it was coming from inside of *her*. Her blood was humming through her veins, her stomach was swooping, her skin was tingling.

Holy hell. He hadn't even touched her yet. Hadn't even said anything that was sexy or romantic or dirty.

Oh, she wanted Aiden to say something dirty.

Where *that* thought had come from she had no idea. This was *Aiden*. She wanted to hear him say... what? She wasn't even sure. She wondered if it would sound weird if he *did* say something dirty. Would she laugh? Dammit. Maybe.

See, this was the kind of stuff she needed to with Aiden first. If she did laugh when he talked dirty, she'd rather it be with him than with some guy she was really into and trying to convince she was a sex goddess.

“So...you really like my pie, right?” she asked.

She didn't cringe. But it was close. That did *not* sound sexy or seductive. She was not cut out for this.

But one corner of his mouth curled up. "Your pie is the best I've ever had," he told her.

And damn. *That* did sound sexy. Dirty-ish. Because he said it in a lower, kind of husky tone that she wasn't sure she'd heard from him before. No, she was sure. She had *not* heard that tone from him before.

Her suddenly tingly nipples confirmed it.

"Yeah? You've had a lot of other pie?" she asked.

Wait, she didn't want to know that. She did *not* want to know that. Of course he'd been with other women. Women who would be better at this than she would be. She just really didn't want to know about that.

As a matter of fact, she didn't want to know how much other *actual* pie he'd had either. Because she thought he'd probably had quite a bit and she really liked being the one who made his favorite.

Yes, she rolled her eyes when her mother insisted she make Aiden's favorite because well, really, did Maggie have to make it *that* obvious that she felt Aiden should be treated like a prince? But truthfully, Zoe loved the idea that Aiden looked forward to coming home and... eating her pie.

She actually felt her cheeks heat at that thought.

Baking terms as sexual innuendo were going to make her professional life difficult.

"I've had my share," he said with a little nod. "But none like yours."

Of course, they were talking about pie. Not *pie*. Because he hadn't had her *pie*. Yet. But she still felt warm and a little light-headed.

"I'm glad," she said honestly. And a little breathlessly.

"So, if you're not going to eat it, I am." He took the plate and fork from her and took a huge bite.

“Hey!”

He grinned as he chewed. “You can’t be dainty and slow with pie like yours, Zoe. Your pie inspires *enthusiasm*. Your pie should be eaten with *gusto*.”

Her mouth fell open. He didn’t mean it like that but...

There was something in his eyes as he finished the pie off that made her wonder. Maybe he *did* mean it that way. But maybe he thought she didn’t know what all of that was insinuating and he was just messing around.

She reached out and ran her finger over the plate he held, lifting some chocolate pie filling to her mouth and licking it from her finger as he watched.

His eyes definitely heated a bit. She definitely didn’t mistake that.

Okay, good.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” she told him with a smile. “Do you think about my pie when you’re not here, Aiden?”

His smile was gone and he was watching her with a look that was hot and serious and maybe a little confused.

She liked that. Confusing him a little seemed like a good idea if she was going to have *any* kind of control here.

“I do,” he said. “A lot, actually.”

Yeah, they were probably talking about actual pie now, but she liked that he thought about that when he wasn’t here too.

She smiled up at him. “Hey, can I borrow a hundred bucks?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Sure.”

See? Not even a *what for?* Just “sure”. He was definitely willing to do her favors and give her things.

“Thanks. And—” She might have batted her eyelashes a little then. Accidentally, of course. “I have to pick a friend up from the airport in Dubuque tomorrow. Really early. Was wondering if you’d go with me? You know how the roads can

be extra slick in the early mornings before the sand trucks have been out.”

For a second, she thought maybe she'd made a mistake. He'd think this was suspect for sure. Zoe would never ask someone to get up early and drive with her to the airport. She was completely capable of driving to Dubuque by herself in her own car at any time of day.

She didn't have a friend coming in tomorrow. She just wanted to hear him say that of course he'd get up super early and drive her to the airport in the freezing cold on Christmas Day. Because if he'd do that, surely he'd do her the favor of helping her get rid of her virginity too.

This was a test but she couldn't let Aiden know that.

“What friend?”

Fair question. Aiden knew all of her friends. All of her friends were from Appleby and it was reasonable to expect that the two who didn't live here now would already be home for the holidays.

She really should have planned out these test questions ahead of time. But she was absolutely winging *all* of this.

“Emily. You don't know her. Moved in our senior year. Lives in... California.”

She'd have to eventually tell him this was all a big, fat lie. But after they had sex he'd be willing to forgive her, she figured.

He sighed. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Okay, she hadn't messed up. He wasn't enthusiastic about it—not like about eating her pie...and yes, her cheeks heated again thinking about how he'd said that—but he was willing. She would want him enthusiastic about the sex, of course, but the first step was *willing*. For sure. And surely, he'd look at sex as more appealing than getting up early and going out in the cold, dark morning to pick someone up from the airport.

Wow, she hoped so at least.

But hey, if she could only have willing *or* enthusiastic in bed, she'd take willing at this point.

“Or I could just borrow your car,” she said, wanting to hear him say that no, he really was willing to make the twenty-minute drive with her in the dark and cold. “You have better tires than I do.”

“I'll drive you,” he said more firmly. “Now that I know you're going, I'll feel better if I'm with you.”

“You don't think I can drive myself?” she asked, because usual, not-trying-to-get-laid Zoe would be offended to think he thought she couldn't do it herself.

He sighed. “For fuck's sake. Of course, you can. But now you're not going to.”

Dang, she liked when he got a little firm.

She frowned. Okay, *that* was new. She didn't like being bossed around.

He leaned in and she sucked in a breath. But he was just putting the empty pie plate on the counter.

She let the breath out slowly so he wouldn't know that she'd sucked it in.

“What time are we leaving?” he asked.

He seemed to still be leaning in a little.

“Five a.m.,” she tossed out. Since it was a lie, it didn't matter.

He sighed again. Aiden wasn't really a morning person. It was one of the reasons she was the story she'd come up with to test him involved an early hour. Five a.m. was a normal time of day for her to open her eyes. The bakery opened at six. But Aiden didn't get up before eight and it was rarely before nine when he was on vacation.

“Fine. But you better have muffins and coffee ready.”

And just like that, everything clicked into place. Relief washed through her.

He'd been willing to give her the last slice of his favorite pie. He'd loan her money without question. He'd get up three hours early and drive on snowy December roads to pick up a friend of hers from the airport on Christmas Day.

He would definitely help her get rid of her virginity.

"Thanks, Aiden," she said with a bright smile.

He lifted his eyebrows again, probably thinking that her sincerity was a little over-the-top for a simple ride to Dubuque.

And it was. He had no idea all the things she was going to be appreciating him for later.

Chapter Three



Aiden heard his door creak as it opened slowly and he sighed.

Was Cam in the wrong room?

He'd had several beers—as he often did after running into Whitney Lancaster—so maybe he was too drunk to find his own bed.

“Cam, wrong room, bro.”

The door swung wider and the floorboard just on the inside of the threshold creaked.

Aiden rolled to his back. It wouldn't be the first...or maybe last...time he and Cam shared a bed. They'd crashed together on more than one spring break trip and road trip. It had been a while though and his best friend was a blanket hog.

His door swung shut and latched and another floorboard creaked. Aiden sighed. He'd just have to get up and go to Cam's room, he supposed.

“Cam, dude. You better not puke in here.”

Aiden had had a few beers too as they'd all played cards and chatted and laughed. He always kicked back and relaxed when he was in Appleby and he didn't usually drink much. His hometown was one of his favorite places in the world and the McCafferys were some of his favorite people and he found himself mellow and having fun without any extra alcohol. But trying to ignore Zoe tonight had required a couple additional beers.

It hadn't helped, but he'd tried.

But he definitely wasn't puking drunk. Or not-find-his-own-room drunk.

Thankfully, while Cam would have nasty headaches and be ten times grumpier than usual—which was *really* grumpy—after having too many, but he rarely puked.

“Aiden, it's me.”

That soft voice was *not* Cam's.

Aiden blinked into the darkness. “Zoe? You okay?”

Zoe McCaffery was in his bedroom. Well that was... unexpected. And way, way too tempting. Especially after the chocolate pie incident.

It had hardly been an incident. He knew that. But his brain wouldn't stop thinking about her mouth and her finger and the chocolate...

Yeah, she really needed to *not* be in his bedroom.

But if she was sick or hurt or something was going on, then he'd have to fix that first. And pray to God that she was wearing long, baggy, flannel pajamas.

She moved closer to the bed and the light from the street light outside his window hit her from the waist down.

She was *not* wearing long, baggy flannel pajamas.

She wasn't even wearing that little bitty nightgown she'd been wearing around the house.

In fact, he was pretty damned sure that what she was wearing didn't even qualify as pajamas.

That was a teddy.

A skimpy, silky, lacy teddy.

In pink.

Candy pink.

His favorite color.

Fuuuuuck.

“I need you, Aiden,” she said, her voice soft and almost tentative.

Soft and tentative were not usual adjectives when it came to Zoe. She was fierce and sassy and stubborn and easily annoyed, by him and her brother in particular.

He pushed up onto his elbows. She needed him? Maybe she wasn't okay. Maybe she always slept in that thing—holy shit was he going to wonder about *that* now—and she was in here because she was sick.

“Zoe, what's going on?”

“I need you,” she said again.

“Yeah, but—”

Her meaning became very clear a moment later when she climbed up on the bed, and straddled his thighs, settling her hot, soft body on top of his.

On top of his.

In that barely-there teddy. And him in only his boxers.

His body reacted far faster than his brain did. His heart started thumping, his hands moved to rest on her hips, and his cock swelled. Instinctively, he pressed her down against the nearly instantaneous ache. Hey, he was a guy...a sleepy guy with a few beers sloshing around in his brain...and there was a hot, sweet-smelling woman right on top of his cock. What did *anyone* think was going to happen in that situation?

Besides, this was not just any hot, sweet-smelling woman.

This was Zoe. He'd thought she was beautiful, sexy, smart, and funny for *years*. Literally.

And for the past two he'd been trying very hard not to kiss her.

And not to admit that he was in love with her.

She gave a soft moan and circled her hips, rubbing against his hard-as-fuck erection. One thin layer of cotton and one *very* thin layer of silk was all that separated them and her heat seemed to seep into him and spread through his body.

He gripped her hips, fighting with himself.

He wanted to pull her in and kiss the hell out of her. Then roll her to her back, strip this tiny scrap of silk off of her, and plunge into the hot, sweet body he'd been trying *not* to think about when he jerked off at night. He'd even succeeded. Seventy-five percent of the time.

Okay, fifty percent.

But he couldn't quite get past the *what the hell is going on?*

Had *she* had a bunch of beer? He hadn't noticed her drinking during the card game earlier. Maybe she'd taken a couple of shots at some point when he hadn't been looking? Though he felt like he'd been looking at her all night since the pie thing in the kitchen. The pie thing. Where they'd talked about how much he liked her pie. And about how he loved eating her pie. And how her pie needed to be eaten with gusto...

Fuck. He was definitely in trouble here.

What was going on? Was someone daring her? Was she just messing with him?

One of the things about having grown up with her as a like-an-older-brother was that it was *not* impossible to believe this was some kind of elaborate, torturous prank.

“Zo—”

She leaned forward, taking his face between her hands. The move shifted her forward on his lap and pressed her pelvic bone and clit against his cock. She sucked in a breath as he groaned.

But she started talking before he could say anything.

“I need your help, Aiden. I'm a virgin. A *twenty-five-year-old* virgin. And I want you to be my first. I can't do this the first time with anyone else.”

She was a virgin.

His brain short-circuited at those words.

Jesus. He knew she didn't date a lot and never seriously, but he'd had no idea she was a virgin.

And she wanted him to be her first.

Fuck yes. That was his first reaction.

But right on the heels of those two words, he realized that yes, he was going to be her first.

But not tonight.

He nearly groaned out loud.

It was a surprisingly abrupt thought, but he realized in that moment that he'd known he and Zoe were headed in this direction for a long time. Maybe forever. Maybe they'd been destined for this.

But Zoe McCaffery was a not a one-night-stand girl. Not for anyone really, but especially not for him.

Everything in him knew that when they did this—not if, but *when*—it was going to change everything. Forever.

“Zo—” he started again.

But she leaned in and kissed him.

And he was half-naked, in bed, attracted to her, and not stupid.

So he kissed her back.

He cupped the back of her head, opened his mouth, and *kissed* her. He tasted her with his tongue, desire ripping through his body at the touch of her tongue in return, making his cock pulse against the hot silk she had pressed against him.

She made a whimpering noise that elicited a groan that he almost didn't recognize as his own.

Then she pressed her whole body against his, her hard nipples against his chest, making him growl.

It took everything in him not to flip her over and take her, make her his, end this torture.

Instead, he pushed her back.

She blinked down at him, looking dazed.

Her hair was mussed where he'd had his hands. Her chest was rising and falling with her ragged breathing.

He just stared at her for a long moment.

God, she was gorgeous.

She could be his. Right now. Tonight. From now on.

But that was the only thing that was getting through his lust-filled brain... it wouldn't be from now on. He couldn't stay. Not right now.

He was going back to Chicago the day after tomorrow. His work, his apartment, his life was there. It wasn't home. He'd never been able to think of Chicago as home. Appleby was home. It always would be. But he had to go back to Chicago. At least temporarily.

There was no way he was going to be able to leave if he slept with Zoe tonight. If they crossed this barrier there would be no going back.

So he couldn't do it. Not now. Not *yet*.

This was Zoe. This would involve all the McCafferys, the people who were his family in every sense but blood. He *had* to do this right.

He was going to have to marry her.

"Aiden, please..." She started to lean in again.

He was doing the right thing. He knew that. But he was only so strong. She couldn't kiss him again. And she sure couldn't do more than that. Not if he had any hope of being a good guy here.

"No," he finally managed.

She stared at him.

She looked like everything he wanted.

So he put his hands on her waist, picked her up, and set her on the floor next to the bed.

For just a moment, he thought she was going to reach for him again. He sat back quickly so she couldn't.

He was certain she was going to argue. Possibly cuss. Probably tell him that this was *way* worse than the time she'd asked if he liked her new haircut and he'd been honest. It had been a *terrible* haircut.

Instead, she pressed her lips together, spun on her heel, and left his room.

She even closed the door quietly behind her.

Aiden slumped back against his pillows.

Shit. That wasn't good. Zoe McCaffery was *definitely* a door slammer.

He scrubbed a hand over his face.

Did he go after her?

His cock pulsed at that idea. Of course *it* liked that idea. Thankfully, with her and that damned teddy and all that bare, creamy skin, and those fuck-me-please eyes out of his room he was able to think more clearly.

That had been the right call.

He couldn't sleep with Zoe and leave.

But now there was no way he could stay away from her.

Looked like it was time to come home.

Chapter Four



Zoe slammed the oven door shut, tossed her spoon into the metal mixing bowl in the sink, and whacked the metal muffin tins against the stove top. Then pivoted to turn her stand mixer on high.

“Holy hell, Zoe. It’s pretty damned early for all this noise.”

She stiffened at the sound of Aiden’s voice from the kitchen doorway, but she didn’t turn. She did, however, take a moment to bang her metal spoon against the side of her metal mixing bowl. To knock the batter off, of course.

“Not trying to be quiet even though it’s five a.m. Got it,” he said.

It was her damned house and her damned kitchen and if her damned house guests couldn’t sleep through her making some damned muffins, that was just too damned bad.

She took her time adding the eggs and then the dry ingredients to the mixing bowl.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him prop his shoulder against the fridge and settle in. Apparently not planning to attempt talking over the noise of the mixer.

Finally, when the batter was done, she shut the mixer off and removed the bowl, folding in the blueberries.

“So you’re mad at me,” Aiden commented.

He was dressed. In jeans and a Henley. He’d maybe even showered. She hadn’t heard the water running from upstairs,

but she'd been rage baking since four thirty with her earbuds in.

Yes, rage baking.

Baking always made her feel better so the morning after the biggest humiliation, and disappointment, in recent history—or even not-that-recent history, honestly—she was baking. Especially considering she hadn't been able to sleep anyway. What else was a baker going to do but bake? It was that or go back into Aiden's room and demand to know what the hell was wrong with him. Or smother him with one of his pillows.

Baking was the best option.

Because she wasn't speaking to him—which made the demanding-he-explain-himself thing difficult—and her mom would be upset if Zoe killed him.

The silent treatment wasn't brand new to him. She was *great* at the silent treatment and had used it several times over the years with Aiden and Cam.

She started ladling muffin batter into the tins for her fourth batch of muffins. That was a lot for a family Christmas morning brunch, but Jane and Josie were going to stop by and Jane would probably bring her little sister Kelsey and Josie might bring her sister Paige and there were always a few friends of her parents' that stopped by to say hi. And Cam and Aiden could each eat half a dozen of her muffins by themselves.

Yeah, Aiden liked her muffins *and* her pie.

Zoe felt her eyes narrowing and her blood pressure increasing.

He'd said *no*. Not just that, but he'd *only* said no. No explanation, no *let's talk this out*, no *I'm-too-drunk-to-do-you-right-but-how-about-tomorrow-night*. Just no.

She realized she was beating the batter with the ladle and crushing the blueberries. She dropped the ladle, braced her hands on the counter and just breathed in and out.

Or maybe there would be no *tomorrow night* because he just really didn't want to have sex with her. All the pie talk had just been talk about pie. Real pie. She'd read into the whole stupid thing. It had sounded fun and sexy and flirty in her mind but she was just crazy and Aiden saw her as a little sister and someone to wipe boogers on and nothing more.

She really hated him right now.

Aiden pushed away from the fridge and crossed to the coffee pot.

Zoe straightened and felt herself smile. A very wicked smile. She started scooping batter into the tins again.

"There's no coffee?"

There was coffee. But she'd hidden the grounds and the K-cups for the Keurig.

"No."

That was all she said. Just no. Simple.

He sighed. He knew that there was coffee and that she'd hidden it. There had been a bunch of coffee yesterday. But Aiden also knew her. She was a McCaffery. Specifically, she was Letty McCaffery's granddaughter. Letty had held a grudge against her best friend from childhood for fifty years. It had divided the entire town and set up a professional and personal feud between the two families that was still going on.

Zoe was not someone who got over being slighted easily.

And turning her down for sex had definitely *slighted* her.

"Can I have a muffin at least?" he asked.

He was really pushing his luck. She turned to face him, her eyes narrow.

"No."

She could see that he completely understood why 'no' was the only answer he was getting.

He sighed. "We should talk about this. You know that."

"No."

“Are you going to speak to me at all today?”

She folded her arms, not caring that she was dripping muffin batter on the floor. She didn't even have to answer that one. He knew.

“And I'm going to assume that there's *not* a friend to pick up from the airport and you got me up this early for...some other reason?”

She lifted an eyebrow.

He nodded. “Got it. I think I'll head over to your mom's for coffee. And... friendliness.”

Zoe didn't really care. He wouldn't tell Maggie that Zoe was mad at him because then he'd have to tell her why and he did *not* want to do that, she was sure. It was likely her mother was up already, getting brunch stuff ready. If not, she was at the table, drinking coffee and reading. All of the McCaffery women were early birds. Maggie would love to have Aiden come over.

And it would get him out of Zoe's sight.

Because dammit, she really was mad. And he looked really good this morning.

How could he look good after turning her down and leaving her...ugh, *humiliated* like that?

It was the kiss.

She could *not* forget the way he'd kissed her. Like he was all in. Like every single thing she wanted and needed was *right there* and he was ready and willing and able to give it to her.

But then he'd pulled back.

He should have fucking said no and pushed her away *before* he kissed her and made her one thousand percent sure he was *the one* she wanted to do this with the first time.

Yeah, she hated him.

He stopped at the back door and looked back. “You going to forgive me?” he asked.

She felt her eyes burning slightly, but she lifted her chin.

“Right. No,” he answered himself. He blew out a breath, then let himself out.

Chapter Five



“Oh my God, please make it stop.” Camden looked at Aiden. “I’m begging you.”

The “it” he was referring to was Dax Marshall, another of their partners and friends. More specifically, it was his whistling of “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!” as he came into the conference room for their morning meeting.

Aiden understood. Cam was severely hung over, as he always was after they took a trip to Appleby.

“Seriously. Shut him up,” Cam hissed. He was surly on a good day, but downright asshole-ish when hung over.

Aiden swallowed hard and scrubbed a hand over his face. He wasn’t feeling a whole hell of a lot better than Cam at the moment. Last night he’d joined his buddy with his bottle of whiskey because he’d had a not-great-at-all run-in with a woman in Appleby as well. Thankfully, Cam had been caught up in his feelings over Whitney so hadn’t asked why Aiden was drinking too. Not that Aiden would have told him the truth. Definitely not.

Cam wasn’t exactly the protective type. Zoe wasn’t the type that needed protecting. She was feisty and more than able to take care of herself. And she certainly didn’t need to be *protected* from Aiden. He’d never do anything to hurt her. He was ninety percent sure he was in love with her. But he didn’t really want to know what Cam would think of him and Zoe together at the moment.

Then again, he and Zoe weren't *together*. At all. They were *less* together now than they had been before she'd kissed the hell out of him in his bed.

The next morning in the kitchen had been downright *chilly*. And loud. Good Lord the woman could make muffin tins sound like gongs.

The reception in her kitchen had convinced him to eat at Maggie's before Zoe showed up for brunch. Zoe would have absolutely put ghost peppers in his eggs or dog shit in his hash browns.

She was *not* happy with him.

As in, she wasn't speaking to him. Every time he was within two feet of her, she'd found a way to skirt around him or simply head in the other direction.

The *one* time he'd managed to block her into the corner of the dining room, she'd given him a look that could only be described as *murderous* and said, "If you really think I'm above kneeing you in the balls in my mother's house, you are dead wrong."

Not the kind of talking he'd hoped to get from her. He'd let her go.

"I'm going to heave my coffee mug at his head," Cam growled.

Dax was still whistling. He was also sitting at the head of the conference table, with his feet propped on the shiny mahogany surface. He had his hands linked behind his head and Aiden knew Dax realized Cam was hungover.

"Knock it off," Aiden told him. "You know he's always like this the morning after."

Specifically, the morning after being within a hundred yards of Whitney Lancaster.

Cam's ex. The woman who'd broken his heart. The woman he'd never gotten over. And, inevitably, every fucking time Cam was in Appleby, no matter how hard he tried not to, he ended up running into her.

He really did try like hell not to see her or have to talk to her. But every damned time, something happened—he'd stop for a tank of gas or to pick something up at the hardware store for his father or he'd just be walking down the damned street—and suddenly she was there in front of him.

This time he'd nearly run her over in a crosswalk on Main Street.

Dax stopped whistling. “Did you know that it's a commonly held belief that you can only kiss *one* girl under the mistletoe on any given night?” he asked. “It's not like New Year's Eve where you can go around kissing everyone while the clock strikes.”

Cam groaned, propping his elbows on the table and resting his head in his hands. His huge biceps bulged, making the tattoo that ran from shoulder to wrist jump.

“That right?” Aiden asked, amused in spite of himself.

“Guess so,” Dax said. “At least that's what the four girls at the Christmas party told me.”

“You kissed four different girls under the same mistletoe at the same party?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah. But one at a time. It wasn't like a mistletoe orgy or anything,” Dax said.

“But they thought mistletoe should be a monogamous thing?” Aiden asked.

Dax shrugged. “Yep. Ridiculous, right?”

“I've honestly never given mistletoe etiquette a lot of thought,” Aiden told him.

“Well, now you know.”

He hadn't made a lot of use of mistletoe at all actually, but he wouldn't mind getting Zoe there. She'd *have* to kiss him again then, right? He had a feeling he was going to need all the help he could get. He didn't know all the mistletoe rules, but he knew that the basic one was you had to kiss whoever was under there with you.

“But being *under Mistletoe* later ended up being completely worth having to apologize about the other three girls,” Dax said.

Aiden lifted a brow. “One of them was *named* Mistletoe?”

Dax grinned. “That’s what she told me it was. She was in a tiny green dress with little white ‘berries’ dangling from it.”

“Was this a costume party?” Aiden asked.

“Nope.”

Aiden shook his head. That kind of stuff happened to Dax all the time.

The conference room door opened again and Oliver and Grant, their other two partners, entered followed by their executive assistant, Piper.

She set a bottle of water and two ibuprofen tablets next to Cam. She rubbed his shoulder. “I’m ordering burgers and fries for an early lunch,” she told him. “It will soak up some of that shit in your system.”

He nodded but didn’t look up.

She smiled at Aiden. “You want anything?”

“Same,” he told her with a grateful smile. He wasn’t as hungover as Cam, but he was damned tired and feeling like a jerk.

He wasn’t sure a burger would actually fix how he was feeling, but he was positive a salad wouldn’t.

Piper laid papers next to Ollie and Dax, picked up Dax’s empty coffee mug—and would likely refill it—and handed over Grant’s glasses, which he must have left somewhere.

She was always taking care of all of them. Grant had hired her as Ollie’s assistant, because Lord knew Ollie needed the most babysitting. The visionary of the group, Ollie had a hard time with things like schedules and deadlines. He was always thinking five steps ahead of the rest of them. But he wasn’t at all detail oriented. He came up with the big ideas and then

trusted Dax, Aiden, Cam, and Grant to make them actually happen.

He was brilliant. But he couldn't be counted on to show up for a dinner reservation—or to even remember to eat at all—without Piper.

“I want something for lunch too,” Ollie told her.

“I know,” she replied, heading back for the doorway.

“Do you want to know what I want?” he asked.

“A teriyaki burger with pineapple and no onions.” She did not put a question mark after onions.

Ollie frowned. “Yeah.”

She simply nodded and swept out of the room, the air behind her smelling like spicy candy. Aiden had yet to place the scent exactly—and she wouldn't tell him, always giving him a mysterious smile when he asked—but it was delicious.

“She's a know-it-all,” Ollie said to no one in particular.

The rest of the guys didn't reply. Because she was. Thank God.

“You gonna live?” Grant asked Cam.

“Unfortunately, I think so,” Cam told him, tossing the ibuprofen tablets into his mouth. He swallowed a mouthful of water, then said, “It's going to be a long fucking day though.”

“Why do you do that to yourself?” Grant asked.

“He almost killed Whitney this time,” Aiden said. He much preferred talking about Cam and Whitney to thinking about Zoe and how badly he'd messed things up with her.

She couldn't go without speaking to him forever. Her family was his family. They *would* see each other again. They'd sit across from one another at her mom's dining room table. They'd lounge on the sofa in the living room and watch movies with Henry, her little brother. They'd sit around the firepit on the back patio and drink spiked lemonade with Cam and Josie and Jane.

She couldn't avoid him.

And the next time he saw her, he was going to fix everything. Somehow.

"You almost *killed* her?" Dax asked. "What's that mean?"

"I did not." Cam shot Aiden a scowl.

"That's not the story I heard," Aiden said, unable to resist needling Cam.

They'd been best friends since kindergarten. Cam had done a lot of stupid things over the years and Aiden knew about every one of them.

"I was turning the corner onto Main and she stepped out into the crosswalk. It was totally her fault," Cam said with a scowl.

"But you *did* almost hit her," Aiden said.

"Holy shit," Dax said, his eyes wide.

"I. Did. Not." Cam sighed. "I saw her immediately and slammed on the brakes. She was startled and dropped the bag she was carrying which made it look a lot worse than it was."

"What was in the bag?" Ollie asked.

"Uh." Cam clearly didn't want to say.

But Aiden really had heard the whole story. It had happened on Main Street in Appleby, Iowa. It was a tiny town and everyone heard every "whole story". And then some. The stories got embellished, of course, but this one was pretty good even without the extras.

"Panties and frosted cookies," Aiden said.

Dax thought about that. Then he nodded. "Two of my favorite things."

Aiden grinned at Cam's pained expression.

"Apparently she'd just been shopping at the boutique and had stocked up on panties," Aiden supplied helpfully. "She also had a box of frosted cookies. So the crosswalk was strewn

with panties in various colors that were covered in frosting and pieces of cookie.”

Cam groaned, folded his arms on the table, and put his head down.

Aiden chuckled. He couldn't believe his badass, tattooed and pierced friend, who had plenty of women who wanted to ride his motorcycle—literally and metaphorically—couldn't get over this woman. But if Aiden kept joking about it and kept the Whitney-incidents light, he hoped one day Cam would be able to do the same.

“So, being a gentleman, of course Cam helped her clean everything up,” Aiden said.

“I couldn't just drive off,” Cam muttered into the table.

“Of course not,” Ollie agreed.

“But now you can't stop thinking about how you never thought you'd touch her panties and...cookies...again, right?” Dax asked.

“You're an asshole,” Cam said, also into the tabletop. But his words were clear.

Dax grinned. “And, if you were me, you would have been thinking of how symbolic it all was. How sticky and sweet those panties could get—”

“I hate you,” Cam said.

Dax's grin grew. “But you're not me, so that's good.”

“Okay, enough,” Grant said. He was always the one to pull them back to business.

Of course, ‘business’ was a loose term around the thirty-ninth floor of the office building in downtown Chicago that housed the Fluke, Inc. offices—named because all of their success really did feel like a fluke a lot of the time.

They met around this table every morning they were all in town. They'd been working together for nine years and it was a rare morning that they missed this ritual. It was less about actual business and more about touching base with one

another. And giving each other plenty of shit before they went their separate directions to do their individual jobs.

They'd met in college and the five of them had accidentally created the decade's most popular online video game. They were millionaires. Famous in the video game world. They were stars at gaming cons, even Comic Con in San Diego. They had a huge fan base online. They were wildly successful.

And it had all started in a dorm room at the University of Chicago.

"Oh, hey, gift exchange," Dax said, dropping his feet to the floor and reaching under the table to pull out a package.

Grant sighed.

He really would like to talk numbers and get everyone back in the work mindset, Aiden knew. But Ollie and Dax were always barely in that mindset anyway, Cam was obviously in bad shape, and Aiden was so distracted that he wasn't sure he was going to get anything done today.

He'd told Zoe no.

She'd come to him in lingerie, slipped into bed with him, kissed him, and asked him to be her first. To take her virginity. To have sex with her.

He'd never wanted any woman the way he wanted Zoe McCaffery.

But Zoe was never leaving their tiny hometown. Which made it clear that *he* was now going home. To stay. He was more sure of that now than he had been after she'd kissed him. Even after she'd tricked him into getting up at four-thirty a.m., hidden the coffee from him, and threatened to knee him in the balls.

He grinned at that. He did like her feisty side.

"Aiden?"

He jerked his attention back to the Chicago conference room. Dammit.

“Yeah?”

“Merry Christmas, man,” Ollie said, pushing a wrapped gift toward him.

“Aw, you shouldn’t have,” Aiden said. But they always did. They exchanged gag gifts every year after Christmas.

They were millionaires. They all could, and did, buy whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it. So this was more for fun than anything. But he did enjoy seeing what his best friends picked out for him.

Aiden pulled a coffee mug out of the paper gift bag. It was black with two simple words in white block letters. HEAD DICK. He grinned, glad the words weren’t reversed. “Thanks.”

He was the head of these dicks, that was for sure. Grant was CFO, but Aiden was CEO of Fluke, Inc. His position as head of the company wasn’t because he was smarter or more driven than any of the other men. They all worked their asses off and every one of them was talented and smart and gave their all to the company. But they needed someone to bring them together. That was Aiden. He saw every one of their strengths—and weaknesses—and was a master at putting those puzzle pieces together into one awesome big picture.

Cam was the attorney and had never backed down from a fight. He protected their copyrights and trademarks like a bulldog, he negotiated kickass contracts, and he was always the go-to guy when someone needed yelled at.

Ollie was the visionary. He was the creative juice behind the game and all the products and events that Fluke did to promote their brand.

Dax was their graphic designer and computer geek. Though he was the least geeky geek Aiden had ever met. Dax took Ollie’s ideas and made them tangible things. He made the scribbles on their white boards into the people, places, and things in *Warriors of Easton*, their video game. He also charmed Comic Con crowds and did hilarious YouTube videos.

Dax and Ollie were the faces of the company. They were the ones that could talk story and character arcs and all of the details and nuances that the fans raved about—and bitched about—on social media.

Grant was the money guy, the one who made sure that Dax and Ollie didn't blow through every penny of their profit with their grandiose schemes. He was also the one made sure that everything they wanted to do would, actually, get funded while also paying their employees well and making sure all of the partners would retire young with healthy investment portfolios and a chunk of cash in the bank.

Aiden was the people person. Not with the fans, not like Ollie and Dax, but he dealt with their merchant accounts and their employees. And his four partners. He mediated arguments, made sure they were all fully utilizing their talents, and made sure they were happy.

They were a well-oiled machine. They all fit together perfectly, and they accomplished amazing things together.

How as he going to leave them? Leave Chicago? Leave the company? Aiden ran a hand through his hair. This was complicated.

He wanted Zoe. But Zoe was in Iowa. His business, his partners, and his life were here.

He had no idea how to work this out.

“This is for you.” Aiden slid a wrapped box toward Ollie.

Ollie tore it open immediately. Inside was a case of Fudgie Fritters, Ollie's favorite snack cake. It was from the Hot Cakes factory that was located in Appleby, Iowa.

And run by Whitney Lancaster's family.

Cam just growled.

“Hey, you are absolutely forbidden to eat a single one of these,” Ollie said, holding the box against his chest protectively.

Cam wouldn't touch Hot Cakes products if someone offered him a billion dollars.

“You can only get them by the case from the factory,” Aiden told him. “And those are the freshest Fudgie Fritters you’ll ever eat.”

“You’re a man among men,” Ollie told him. He held out a bag to Dax. “For you.”

Dax immediately turned the bag upside down, shaking tissue paper and his gift out onto the table. He held it up. It was a necktie. With gummy bears on it.

He grinned. “I fucking love this.” He immediately pulled the tie he’d been wearing—the red one that was covered Christmas lights and actually lit up if he pushed the button—from his collar.

They all wore shirts and ties, and often jackets, to the office. But Dax had been adamantly not a “tie guy”, until he’d discovered all of the dumb and ugly ties he could buy. Like the rubber ducky tie, the emoji tie, the bacon tie—yes, it looked like a slice of bacon hanging down the front of his shirt—and the Clue tie with all of the weapons from the board game Clue. And now he had a gummy bear tie. Gummy bears were Dax’s favorite thing in life. Even higher on his list than girls who called themselves Mistletoe and got busy with him on Christmas.

“I don’t know if I should give you your gift today,” Grant said to Cam, pushing a box across the table anyway.

Cam reached for it. “Why’s that?”

“You’ll see.”

Cam tore the paper back from the box. And groaned. It was a bottle of whiskey. His favorite kind. The really good expensive stuff. The stuff he’d been tipping back in his father’s den after nearly running Whitney over.

“Sorry.” Grant didn’t really look sorry. He looked amused.

“Hair of the dog,” Dax said. “Take a swig. You’ll feel a thousand times better.”

“Do not do that!” Piper called from her desk that sat just outside of the conference room.

“Oh yeah, he’s doin’ it!” Dax called back. “And if you could run and get some raw eggs and hot sauce for the hangover cure, that would be great.” He grinned.

“No way!” she called back, in spite of the fact she was talking to her *five* bosses. “We all know who would be cleaning it up when he hurls!”

“Can everyone stop shouting?” Cam asked, looking seriously miserable.

“What did you get for Grant?” Dax asked Cam.

“Oh. Shit. It’s out by Piper’s desk.”

“Hey, Piper!” Dax yelled.

“Jesus,” Cam groaned. “Seriously, man. I will flush your gummy bears down the toilet if you keep doing that.”

Dax just chuckled. Cam could probably flush the ones Dax had on his desk in his office, but Aiden was sure Dax had pounds of them stored elsewhere. He claimed they helped with his creativity. As did the ping pong table he utilized regularly.

“Here. Good lord.” Piper pushed a huge cardboard box into the room, but the ease with which she moved it indicated it was fairly light.

Grant looked at it as if it was full of snakes. “What the hell?” he asked Cam.

But Cam wasn’t in the mood to joke around. He just gestured toward it vaguely with his hand. “Open it.”

Grant stood and rounded the table, still looking like he was walking toward the guillotine.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Dax bounded to his feet and crossed to the box. He ripped the top open and peered inside. Then he started laughing. “Awesome,” he told Cam over his shoulder. “Nice job.”

“Oh God,” Grant muttered.

Dax reached into the box and pulled out Grant’s gift. It was a giant bean bag chair. It was a rich, soft brown leather

and was far too big to be a child's chair, but it was definitely a beanbag chair.

Aiden chuckled.

Dax had only bean bag chairs in his office. He claimed, predictably, that they helped with his creative process too. Because his creative process was so important to the company, they let him get away with that shit. But they knew it was at least half made-up. Dax was the class clown, the life of the party. He felt it was his personal duty to make sure everyone enjoyed their work and that Fluke was a fun place to be.

Grant, on the other hand, refused to attend meetings in Dax's office because of the bean bag chairs. And the gummy bears. And the bright yellow walls. He said the whole room gave him a headache and that grown men shouldn't sit in chairs that were multicolored. Leather—brown or black—was the only acceptable upholstery for “serious chairs”.

So Cam had gotten him a “serious” beanbag chair.

“I'm not sitting in that,” Grant said.

“You have to,” Dax told him. “It would be rude not to. How would that make Cam feel?”

Grant cast a look at Cam. Who was looking a little green around the edges actually. “You're an ass,” Grant told him.

Cam nodded. “I'm aware.”

For a moment, Aiden thought about giving Cam more shit about being so hung-up on Whitney.

But, for the first time, he thought maybe he completely understood.

Zoe had gotten to him. He hated knowing she was upset with him. More, the idea that he might not have another chance with her made his stomach twist.

And he hadn't really *had* her. Not the way Cam had had Whitney. Aiden was certain he'd never get over Zoe. Even now. What if he *had* taken her virginity? How could he have gone on as if nothing had changed? Once they were together, there would be no going back to how things had always been.

He'd never thought of her as a romantic interest or even a sexual interest until two summers ago. But since then, he'd been doing his damndest to ignore the fact that the girl he'd always thought of as a little sister was suddenly the only woman he wanted.

Now, there was no avoiding it. He'd seen her in pink lingerie. She'd kissed him. She'd confessed she was still a virgin and had told him that she wanted him to be her first.

He wasn't going to get over that.

He was going home to Appleby—somehow—and he was going to convince her—somehow—that he wanted more than one night with her.

He wanted forever.

But when he got there, he knew he definitely had some sweet-talking to do.

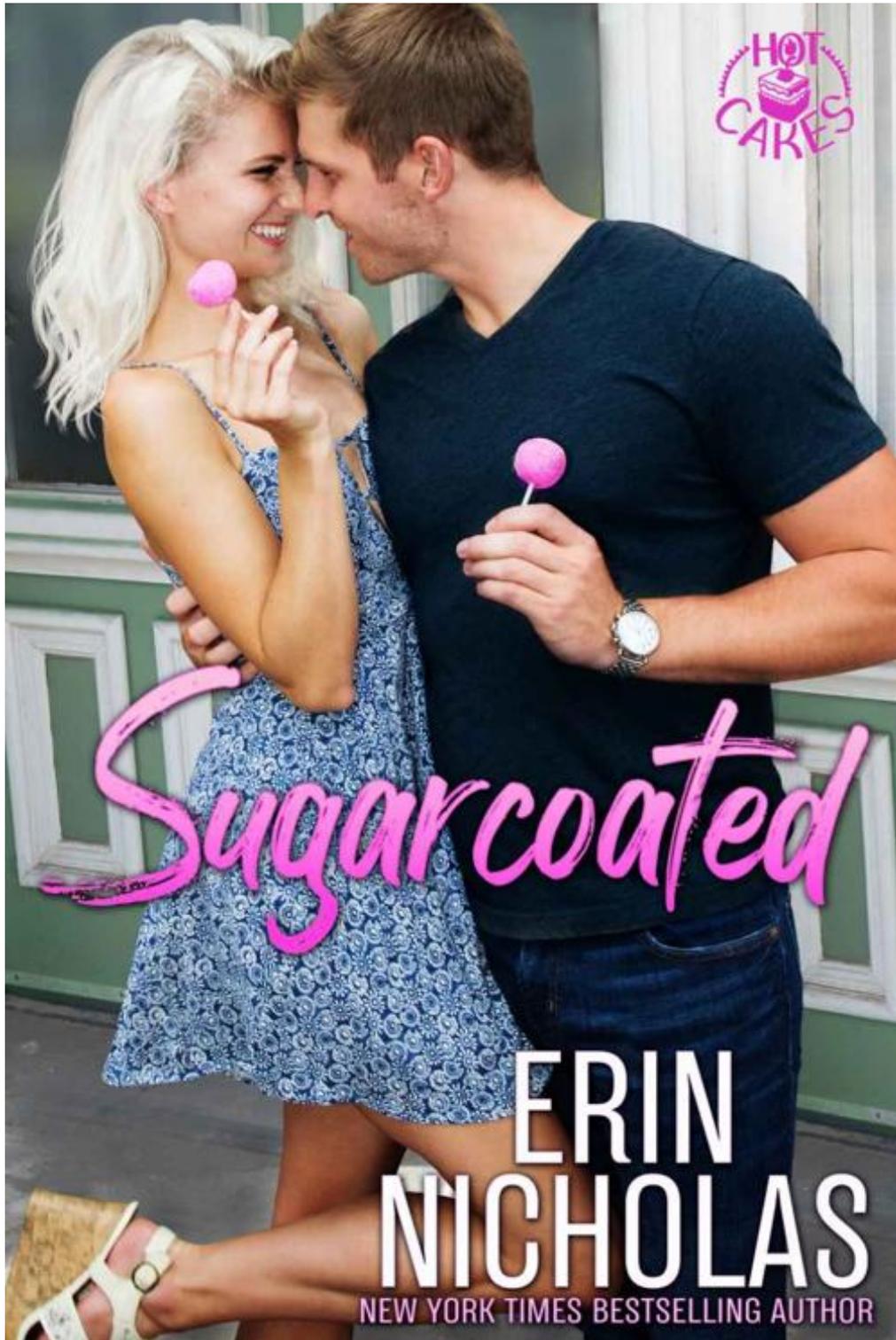
* * *

Thank you so much for reading *Sugar Rush*! I hope you loved meeting Zoe and Aiden!

Find out what happens when Aiden shows up back in Appleby...this time to stay...in [Sugarcoated](#), book one in the Hot Cakes series!

Getting Zoe to forgive him and believe that he wants forever is *not* going to be a piece of cake.

But he's up for the challenge. Even if things get a little...
sticky...



Sugarcoated

**ERIN
NICHOLAS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

About Sugarc coated

Hot Cakes Book One

A hot, funny brother's best friend rom com ... with sugar on top!

She's his best friend's little sister. He's known her all his life. He's practically part of the family. There is nothing either of them could do to surprise the other at this point. Then she showed up in his bedroom in lingerie and asked him to take her V-card.

Okay, that was a surprise.

Aiden is pretty sure Zoe was equally surprised when he told her no.

To say that he didn't handle it well would be a massive understatement. Almost as massive as the amount of work he's going to have to do now to convince her that he wants her. Forever.

Right after he tells her that he's bought the company that's her bakery's biggest competitor.

Maybe if he tells her he's in love with her first, that will help sugarcoat the whole we're-rivals-in-business-now thing.

So, first "I'm in love with you", then "take off your clothes", then "I'm now your business adversary".

Sure. Piece of cake.

Chapter One



Zoe picked up the tray of little balls of cake and backed through the swinging door from the kitchen to the front of Buttered Up. She needed to dip them in their colorful coatings, add the sparkly sugar, and stick them on sticks, but she could do that on the prep table in the main part of the bakery while she watched for customers and waited on anyone who came in.

She and her best friend, Jocelyn—Josie to her friends—did most of the baking in the back, but they liked to frost and decorate the goodies up front where people could see what they were doing. It was where people really saw their talents and what all they could offer.

Honestly, Jocelyn was a better cake decorator than Zoe. If someone asked for something custom and elaborate, it was always Jocelyn who made it happen. Especially since the Great Hippo Cake Incident of last year. Zoe liked the more straightforward, simple icing jobs of their basic cakes, cupcakes, and decorated cookies. Tasks she'd been doing all her life. Well, since she'd been tall enough to reach the top of her grandma's worktable anyway. Even though that had required a stool at first. She could frost a cookie and add icing roses to cupcakes in her sleep.

But honestly? She was a girl who'd inherited a bakery and was tasked with keeping her family's legacy going, and she wasn't all that good at anything other than the essentials. So she stuck to the basics like peanut butter stuck to... well, everything.

Zoe noticed someone out of the corner of her eye as she set the tray down on the big prep table that sat in the middle of the area behind their L-shaped display cases.

When she turned, she was afforded a very nice posterior view of a man who was leaning over, studying their display of cake stands. She took him in from foot to head. Well, foot to midback. That was all she could really see with the way he was bending at the moment.

He was not the average Appleby-ite. The general male dress code around here was work boots, denim, and t-shirts. Henleys on occasion. Flannel when it got cold. Not this guy. He was in a freaking suit. Only Mr. Thompson, the bank president, wore a suit. Some of the guys wore slacks and button-up shirts—other bankers, the ones who worked at the insurance company, the school superintendent. But honestly, dressing up in Appleby mostly consisted of khakis instead of jeans. Ties were saved for funerals. Not even weddings a lot of the time. Things were very casual in Appleby.

This man wore a full-on suit. Pants, jacket, dress shoes. She could even see the end of a tie hanging. Red. The tie was red. Nice. As far as she could tell, this was a custom-tailored suit too because it fit *very* well.

She didn't know who he was, but she appreciated him stopping by. She liked a guy in jeans. Ones that were well-worn and fit nicely across the ass. Not the bagging, hanging-on-their-hips kind. But she saw a lot of jeans. She definitely appreciated finely woven Italian wool.

She sighed wistfully. But it wasn't just the suit that was making her study him. He was new. And there wasn't a lot of new in Appleby. Especially of the male, around-her-age variety. She cared about that more than she'd liked to admit. She hadn't before. But things had changed.

She'd become horny.

Not just oh-he's-kind-of-hot aware or even an oh-I'm-very-attracted-to-him realization. It was no-I-really-need-to-have-sex horny. She didn't know if it was hormones, or her friends who had active sex lives and loved to talk about it, or

her friends who *didn't* have active sex lives and loved to talk about *that*, or her biological clock, or what. But she had sex on the brain now. All the time.

Which seemed odd for a virgin.

She didn't even know what she was missing, and was, honestly, a little uptight about finding out.

She sighed again. The truth was, she *did* know what had started it all.

Aiden Anderson.

And The Kiss. The stupid, what-the-hell-had-she-been-thinking-throwing-herself-at-him-Christmas-Eve kiss.

The best kiss ever. For sure in her life. She might be a virgin, but she'd kissed guys. A few anyway. And Aiden was the *best*. It had been romantic-movie good. R-rated romantic-movie good. *Definitely* not Hallmark.

Of course, she was never going to be able to face him again after that. Well, after the moment *after* the kiss anyway. But that was just something she was going to need to deal with. Somehow.

The guy she'd been studying from behind suddenly straightened and turned.

Zoe smiled and opened her mouth to ask how she could help him. But the words got stuck in her throat.

No. *No*. NO!

Seriously?

What was *he* doing here?

“Hey, Zoe.”

Several emotions swept through her as she stared at Aiden. And his stupid, handsome face, and his sexy, things-are-totally-fine smile.

Shock. Happiness. Mortification. In that order.

She snapped her mouth shut, shook her head, turned, and headed back into the kitchen.

Jocelyn looked up from where she was cutting a 3D cat figure out of a tall cylinder of chocolate cake.

Zoe again opened her mouth, then snapped it shut, shook her head, and turned. She went straight for the freezer. She opened the big door, stepped inside, and shut it behind her.

Cold. She needed cold to combat that hot flush of humiliation that had just washed over her. And a huge metal door between her and Aiden.

She pulled in a deep breath of freezer air. The cold prickled her nose and was sharp in her lungs. She blew the breath out, studying the puff of white in front of her face. Then she did it again.

What was he doing here? Why hadn't he told Maggie he was coming? No way did her mother know Aiden was in town. If she knew, Zoe would have known.

Her mother always told her when he was coming to visit. The news of either of her boys—Aiden or Cam—coming home made Maggie giddy like a little girl. She cleaned and cooked at her house and then cleaned Zoe's house, since that was now where the guys always stayed when they were in town. Maggie brought over scented hand soap and new towels and filled the fridge with their favorite beer and juices, and the cupboards with chips and crackers. It was like a freaking bed and breakfast at Zoe's house when the guys were home. Which had never bothered her before.

But this time... this was the first time she'd seen Aiden since The Kiss. And there wasn't a single new towel or box of crackers in her house.

And even more importantly, now that he was here, how was she supposed to sit across her mother's dining room table from him and not shrivel up thinking about the fact she'd asked him to take her virginity and he'd said no?

She'd been dressed in lingerie. He'd kissed her as if he wanted to eat her up—in every single dirty way that could be intended. Then... He'd. Said. No. To. Taking. Her. Virginity.

Zoe put her hands over her face and groaned.

She'd known never seeing him again was impossible. He was practically one of her brothers. Which, yeah, sounded *ewww* when paired with the kissing and sex thing. But they'd grown up together. He'd more or less lived with them after his mom died. Zoe had known him her *entire life*.

And she'd never even thought about kissing him until about two years ago when he'd walked in on her ironing a dress. She'd been wearing only a bra and panties, and the look he'd given her had been holy-hell-melt-those-panties-right-off hot. She'd never seen him look like that. She'd never even imagined him looking like that. Certainly not at her. But that was the moment she'd stopped considering Aiden her older brother's best friend and started thinking of him as a very hot guy who she would like to get naked with. It had been like a light switch.

A very inconvenient light switch that had led to the most humiliating moment of her life. And that included the one time she'd tried to make a 3D custom-decorated cake.

Josie had been sick, and Angela Adams had needed the elephant cake. The elephant cake that had ended up looking like a hippo. A melted hippo. With an unfortunate snout deformity.

Zoe shuddered thinking about the fiasco. She'd been so mortified. She'd had to deliver the cake. The horrible gray-blob-with-eyes cake. Angela had already paid for it, and there hadn't been time to make another.

There had been forty kids at that party. Forty kids who had moms who may or may not ever order a cake from Buttered Up again. Even now she blushed thinking about it.

But the moment after The R-rated Christmas Kiss with Aiden had been, amazingly, worse.

Suddenly Jocelyn whipped the freezer door open.

"What is going on? Why are you in the freezer?"

"I—"

"Hey, Josie."

Jocelyn swung around at the sound of Aiden's voice. "Oh! Hey, Aiden." She paused. Then said, "*Ohhhh.*" She looked back at Zoe. "Never mind."

Zoe blew out a breath. "Yeah." Then she raised her voice. "Oh, here they are!" She picked up another tray of cake balls. After they were formed, they sat in the freezer until they got firm enough to work with. These needed sticks and the coating and decorations to officially be cake pops, and they weren't ready to be finished yet, but what, she was going to let Aiden think she'd run into the freezer to *hide* from him? Yeah, running and hiding wouldn't be embarrassing at all.

She'd just about used up her embarrassment quota with Aiden. For the decade. She needed to cover here.

Jocelyn stepped back as Zoe carried the tray out.

Zoe pasted on a bright, completely fake smile. "Hi, Aiden."

There. Just "Hi, Aiden" as if nothing at all was wrong. Or awkward. Or horrifying. Or even surprising. As if she'd known he'd be walking into her bakery, unannounced, looking amazing.

What the hell was he doing walking in here in a *suit*? He didn't want her to take her panties off for him? Then he needed to wear ripped-up blue jeans and an old hoodie.

She sighed internally. Even that wouldn't make her *not* want him.

But the suit was really unfair.

"Ladies." He gave them both a grin. "Just got into town and thought I'd stop in and say hi."

"Did my mom know you were coming?" Zoe asked. Maybe she did have a freshly clean house and lavender-scented sheets on her bed after all. She loved when Maggie spruced things up because she always washed the towels and sheets in every room and then spritzed all the beds with the Sleepy Time Lavender Sleep Spray she swore by.

"Last-minute decision."

“You just left Chicago and drove over on a whim?” Chicago was five hours from Appleby. “Is everything okay?”

Was he sick? He didn’t look sick. He looked... really, really good. But maybe he wasn’t feeling well. Maybe he needed some TLC. Maggie would make him soup and some of her menthol shower fizzies for any sinus issues. She’d gotten into Pinterest and Do-It-Yourself projects over the past couple of years big-time.

He lifted a shoulder. A big shoulder clothed in expensive, charcoal-gray fabric. That probably smelled great. The fabric, not the shoulder. Though she wouldn’t mind putting her nose against his shoulder either. Especially if it were bare...

“Everything’s fine. Great. It wasn’t really a whim, no. I’ve been planning the trip for a while.”

“But you didn’t tell my mom.”

“No,” he admitted. “I—” He shot a glance at Jocelyn. “I thought it might be best to surprise you.”

Zoe blinked at him. Surprise her?

There were no surprises in her life. She lived in the same town she’d lived in since she’d been born.

She worked in her family’s bakery, where she’d been working since she was sixteen. But she’d been helping in this bakery since she’d been old enough to work a mixer.

She’d lived with her parents until two years ago when she’d moved into a house she knew almost as well as her own—the house Aiden had grown up in. The house his dad had given to her parents when he’d moved to Des Moines and that her parents had been renting out ever since. Which meant it was the house Zoe had helped clean and repaint several times over the years.

She used the same recipes in her baking her grandmother had used for over fifty years.

She saw the same people she’d been seeing for the past twenty-five years with very few exceptions.

Yeah, surprises weren't really a thing in her life. Especially from Aiden.

That's why she'd picked him to take her virginity. She knew him. Well. That had been a perk of the first-lover thing. She had no worries with Aiden.

Until he'd said no to the whole thing, of course.

Yeah, calling that a surprise was an understatement.

She didn't really like Aiden surprises, it turned out.

Zoe cleared her throat and moved forward, stepping around him to carry the cake balls to the front. The cake balls that would totally defrost before she had a chance to put a stick in them or dip them in the coating.

"Mom's going to be pissed you didn't warn her so she could scrub the bathroom and grocery shop for chicken alfredo ingredients." Maggie always made chicken alfredo for Aiden when he came home.

She stepped through the swinging doors with the big, useless tray of cake balls. Then froze.

Wait. The bathroom. The bed with the sheets Maggie was going to spritz for Aiden. The crackers. Those were all at...

No. No, no, no.

She turned quickly. The doors into the kitchen were still swinging, and she saw Aiden through them. Then she didn't. Then she did.

She was vaguely aware that a few of the balls had gone rolling off the tray with her quick turn.

She couldn't care about cake balls right now. Her whole world was rolling off the tray—so to speak. *Pull it together*, she told herself sternly. *Don't act like an idiot.*

"Where are you going to stay?" she asked. Dammit, her voice sounded funny.

"At the house," he said easily. "Of course."

But the way he was watching her told her that he realized there was nothing *easy* about that now. The house referred to *his* old house. The one she was now living in. Her and Camden's childhood home was only a three-bedroom house. Her younger brother, Henry, had slept in a bassinet in their parents' room until Cam went off to college. Then his old bedroom had become their little brother's. Her old bedroom was now Maggie's sewing room, and the guys were too old, and big, to sleep on couches and air mattresses.

Zoe's house, on the other hand, had four bedrooms. She used one as a library-slash-office, but the other two were, well, bedrooms. They still had all the bedroom furniture in them from when Aiden had lived there. It only made sense that her brother, and the guy who was practically a brother, would stay in those extra rooms. Hell, Aiden stayed in *his* old bedroom.

That had always been a perfect solution to the space issue around holidays and family get-togethers when the guys stayed for a few days.

Perfect until she'd made a complete and total ass of herself. In Aiden's bedroom. Hell, she still blushed when she walked past the room five months later.

"No," she said softly, shaking her head. She was aware she was not playing this cool as she'd wanted to. But her heart was suddenly pounding and she felt hot. She kind of wanted to head back to the freezer.

Aiden stepped through the doors into the front of the bakery. "Yes," he said. His voice was a little gruff and firm.

Her stomach flipped. Gruff and firm? That wasn't Aiden. But it was really working for her.

Uh-oh.

"We can't be there. Alone. Together. Now." She sounded like an idiot. But he knew very well what she was talking about. He'd *rejected* her. She'd made a fool of herself. She couldn't relive that with him every day for however long he was staying.

"Yes. We can."

Yeah, there was definitely a little huskiness in his voice. And her stupid stomach swooped again at the sound. This horniness was a huge problem, and when facing the man who had started the whole thing, it was simply the *worst* idea to have him staying with her.

Could she use her vibrator, knowing he was just down the hall?

Taking in the sight of him in that suit and tie, her first and only thought was, *Hell yeah, I can.*

“The idea of that is...” she started.

He gave her a slow, stupidly sexy smile.

“Horrible,” she finished.

Chapter Two



Maybe not exactly the word he'd expected her to use, but Aiden understood where Zoe was coming from. He'd known this first time seeing her was going to be a little awkward. But they'd get past it. He just needed to tell her he'd worked everything out, and he was totally on board now. He would be *very* happy to help divest her of her virginity.

In fact, his entire body reacted to the mere *idea* of it with a hot, primal surge of *mine* that was actually shocking in its intensity.

But before he could tell her that—there was no point in beating around the bush after knowing her for twenty-five years and the brazen way she'd come into his bedroom on Christmas Eve—someone came through the front door of the bakery to pick up a cake.

Aiden moved to the cluster of little round white tables where people could enjoy their bakery items and coffee inside the cheery, iconic bakery.

He took a deep breath as he chose the table close to a window and sank into the bistro chair with the wrought-iron back that curved into a heart shape. He was here. He was home, and things were in motion. Seeing Zoe again had been step one. Well, after packing up most of his life in Chicago and driving back to Iowa. To stay.

The window was on the side of the bakery and looked out onto what was essentially an alley between the bakery and the antique store next door. The alley, however, was as wide as a

street, paved in cobblestones, had little benches and planters full of flowers set along the length, and twinkle lights draped overhead between the two exterior brick walls. People used the alley to cut through from Main Street to Railroad Avenue, the street with the bar and café in this half of town. He had to admit, at night when the alleyway was lit up, it was pretty cool.

He smoothed his tie and sat back. Was he going to stick around and watch Zoe work? Yes, he was. He was going to talk to her the very first chance he had. If he had to wait for her to bake four cakes, frost six more, and wait on a hundred people, he would. She had to understand he was back for *her*. Before she found out about him buying Hot Cakes, the snack cake company that had been operating in Appleby since 1969.

The company had gone up for sale three days ago, and as soon as he'd seen the notice he'd known this was the way he was going to get back to Appleby and Zoe.

He was a millionaire. He and his best friends had developed the biggest online video game to hit the market in the past decade and had become wildly successful. And rich. He could have moved back to small town Iowa with nothing more than what he had in his bank account.

But he wanted more than that. He'd promised his mom before she died that he'd do something important with his life. That he'd make sure he did something that mattered. He'd been working on that since she'd died fifteen years ago. And for the past one year and eleven months—ever since he'd realized he was in love with Zoe McCaffery—he'd been trying to figure out how to do that in tiny Appleby, Iowa.

Now he knew. He had to buy the Hot Cakes factory, protect three-hundred-some jobs, and save his hometown.

And marry Zoe.

Which sounded easy enough.

If Hot Cakes wasn't her major competitor and if she wouldn't hate him for buying it and keeping it open, of course.

And if she'd forgive him for turning her down for sex five months ago.

Yeah, he had some work to do.

"So who died?" Jocelyn asked as she approached with a cup of coffee.

She set it down on the tabletop for him along with a little silver pitcher of cream. Ah, Josie had remembered how he liked his coffee.

He ran his hand over his tie again. "No one. Came straight from the office."

He'd worn the suit on purpose. He knew Zoe liked him in a suit.

Aiden remembered the one time he'd been in a suit in Appleby. It had been for the funeral of a beloved teacher about year and a half ago. Zoe had been coming down the stairs and looked up from messing with her necklace on about the third stair. She'd seen him standing there and had nearly tumbled down the rest of the staircase. He'd caught her on the second step. Their gazes had met. Instant heat and awareness had sparkled between them. For just a second. Before her brother had said, "Jesus, Zoe, if you can't handle the heels, go put on some different shoes."

Had Aiden thought he needed an extra edge today, seeing her for the first time since she'd kissed him? When he was here to tell her he wanted her, forever? Oh, and that he was also buying her archenemy's company? And planning to keep it going?

Yes, definitely. He'd figured he should use any extra advantage he could come up with.

Judging by her reaction to seeing him in the bakery, that had been the right call. She was a little jumpy, and her skin was flushed and she was clearly worked up. This was good. So, so good.

"You came straight *here*, to the bakery, from your office in Chicago?" Jocelyn asked.

“Yep.”

A metal tray clattered against the granite surface of the work island as if someone had just dropped it, and both Aiden and Jocelyn winced.

“You know that you embarrassed the hell out of her at Christmas, right?” Jocelyn asked.

Aiden grimaced. Dammit. Josie knew about Christmas. And Zoe’s offer. And Aiden’s response.

“She has nothing to be embarrassed about. I loved every minute.”

Josie gave him a wow-you’re-a-dumbass look. “I think it was the ‘no’ followed by you physically picking her up off of you and setting her on the floor that maybe made her think ‘loving it’ wasn’t really where you were at.”

Aiden coughed. Yeah, Zoe had definitely shared *all* the details.

He glanced at Zoe. She was working with her back to him and Josie. Maybe trying to ignore him.

Dammit.

He’d thought she’d be angry. *That* he could have handled. She was scrappy. She’d been raised, in part, by a grandmother who’d kept a personal grudge against her childhood best friend for over fifty years. But he hadn’t expected Zoe to be *ashamed* of what had happened.

God, that night she’d been... everything he wanted wrapped in a hot-pink silk-and-lace package. But yeah, to be fair, who the hell turned that down? Who the hell turned down a gorgeous, smart, funny, sassy woman when she showed up in lingerie in his bedroom, *period?*

A guy who wanted a lot more than that from her. A guy who would want to marry her afterward. A guy who hadn’t had any idea how to make it all work in that moment. Especially with the sight of her nearly naked scrambling his brain.

He hadn't handled it well. Clearly. But he was here now to make up for that.

"Okay, I get that I have some making up to do," he told Josie.

"It took you five months to figure that out?"

Aiden shook his head. "No. It took me about an hour to figure that out. It took me five months to come up with *how* to do it."

Josie frowned. "It took you five months to come up with apologizing?"

"Oh, I'm not apologizing," Aiden said.

Josie leaned in and lowered her voice. "You're *not* apologizing? We're talking about what happened Christmas Eve, right?"

"We are," he said. He looked past her at Zoe, who was boxing up cupcakes for a customer. But her body was stiff and her cheeks were flushed. She felt awkward having him here. But she was *aware* of him. He could work with that. "I'm not sorry about Christmas Eve." He met Jocelyn's gaze. "I'm sorry she was hurt by it, but I'm not sorry for saying no. That was the right call. I couldn't go there with her then. She'll understand why as soon as we talk."

Now Josie looked suspicious. "But you're planning to go there now?"

"And more."

One of Josie's eyebrows arched. "What's your plan?"

"Sweep her off her feet, of course," he said with a grin.

Josie's eyes widened. Then she straightened and gave a little laugh. "Oh. Of course. Well, good luck with that."

Aiden frowned. "What do you mean?" He didn't need luck. This was Zoe. And him. They were the perfect match, and now their timing was finally working out. But he felt a niggle of trepidation at the amused expression on Zoe's best friend's face.

“You were pretty good at scoring—lots of home runs and touchdowns, and you were the leading scorer in the conference in basketball for, what was it, two years?”

“Three,” Aiden mumbled, suddenly feeling a little less optimistic.

“Right.” She laughed. “I just think it might be entertaining to see the Golden Boy throw a few... pitches... that don’t land just perfectly.”

Aiden didn’t like the way she said that. “Hey, I—”

“Try the cake pops,” Jocelyn said. “They’re great.” Then she turned on her heel and headed back for the kitchen.

Cake pops? Aiden focused on what Zoe was doing rather than just on *her*.

They didn’t have cake pops here. The menu at Buttered Up hadn’t changed even once in all the time he’d been coming here. The way they iced and decorated the custom-made cakes varied, of course. If someone wanted Spider-Man, or the Eiffel Tower, or a fire truck, they got it. But the cake and icing always tasted the same. It was the best cake he’d ever tasted, and everyone he knew who had ever had a Buttered Up cake agreed.

What was up with the cake pops?

He’d been so tuned in to *her*—her light blond, almost white hair, that fell in waves to her shoulders, her bright blue eyes, her petite body with just enough curve to make his palms itchy to touch—he hadn’t even really noticed what she’d been doing other than *bakery stuff*.

He quickly lost interest in the little balls of cake she was dipping into some kind of pink coating. Because studying Zoe would always be more interesting. She had a runner’s body, trim and muscular. In bare feet, the top of her head came to his nose, so she wasn’t exactly short. She was the perfect hugging height. He could easily kiss her on top of the head or on her forehead, but she’d have to be on tiptoe, or he’d have to lean in, to *really* kiss her.

If they were standing up.

Aiden shifted on his seat, suddenly thinking about the kiss she'd laid on him before he'd pushed her back. He hadn't had to bend over for that one. He'd been propped up on his elbows in bed, having just been awakened, and she'd climbed up on the mattress with him, straddling his thighs. She'd definitely been the one leaning in for that kiss.

Behind her bright yellow apron tied in a bow at her lower back, it was actually hard to make out much about her body. She was tiny through the breasts and hips and the apron covered both. But in pink lingerie, even in the dim light of his bedroom, he'd been able to see enough to haunt him for five months now. Every night.

He hadn't been with another woman since. Hell, he hadn't even been *with* Zoe that night. But he'd tasted her for the first time. He'd felt her silky, hot, bare skin. He'd seen her breasts and the hard nipples behind the filmy pink material of the teddy she'd been wearing.

And that had been more than enough.

That had done it. She was all he wanted after that kiss. Zoe McCaffery was the one.

“So you're just going to sit there?” she asked.

It took Aiden a second to realize she was talking to him. Her attention was still on the cake balls. But when he looked around, he realized the front of the bakery was empty except for the two of them.

“I'm going to sit here until you're done and able to talk.”

“We can talk now. While I work.”

“I don't know if it's a good idea to talk about this when you're within arm's reach of knives and forks,” he quipped.

She looked up. “That's a good point.”

Okay, so she really was mad. Too. Besides being embarrassed.

“Where exactly do you think this conversation is going to happen, then?” she asked. “I've got knives and forks at home too.”

He gave her a smile. He understood he'd screwed up, and he was going to explain and make it up to her. But this was Zoe. She knew him too well, for too long, to stay mad at him. They had too many people in common. People who loved him and thought he was awesome. People who would be thrilled if they got together.

People like her mom and dad.

Them fucking around on Christmas Eve before he went back to Chicago? No. Not that. But long-term, forever? Definitely.

And there was always Henry, Zoe's little brother. Henry thought Aiden was a rock star. Aiden was one of the guys behind Henry's favorite video game after all. There was very little in the world Henry cared about as much as he did about *Warriors of Easton*. But Henry loved Aiden not only because he got tokens to unlock new levels of the game before they were even available to the public, but because Aiden had always been a part of his life. He was another big brother to the kid. Henry was one of Aiden's biggest fans. Henry would absolutely be a wingman if Aiden needed it.

But he really hoped he wouldn't need it.

"You wouldn't use a knife or fork on me," Aiden said.

Zoe dipped two more cake balls, rolling them in pink sugar, before answering, "Maybe I wouldn't use one on a major artery or anything. But I am mad at you."

Okay, she wasn't looking at him, but she wasn't yelling or throwing things either.

"I know."

"Actually, I'm... I wish I was mad. Or more mad. But I'm..." She let out a breath. "Christmas was humiliating. And I don't like having that between us. I can't avoid you, and it feels weird to... feel weird around you."

"You should *not* feel humiliated, Zoe. Christmas Eve was... amazing." That actually seemed like a weak word for the moment that had changed his life.

That sounded dramatic, he knew, but it was true. It might have taken him five months to figure out what *exactly* to do about it, but that night, kissing Zoe for the first time, had changed his course. Now he was here, on the verge of buying a business that would save his hometown, and able to dive in fully on a romance with Zoe.

Things were pretty fucking great.

Other than her deep hatred toward the business he was buying. But they'd get through that. Somehow. His plan for that at the moment? A lot of sex and sweet talk. Not necessarily in that order. Or maybe just at the same time.

She laughed lightly, swirling another ball on a stick through pink coating. "Pretty amazingly stupid and horrible."

"Stop."

She looked up at his firm comment. She shook her head. "You don't have to make me feel better about it."

"Fine. Maybe I don't. But I'm allowed to feel how *I* feel about it too."

She frowned slightly. "And how do you feel about it?"

"I feel like it changed everything," he told her honestly.

He rose from the table and approached the counter where they rang customers out at the register. There was a wide slab of granite and a few feet of the scarred wooden floor between them, but he still saw her draw her shoulders back as if preparing for a confrontation.

"I'm back," he said simply. "Things are different now than they were at Christmastime."

Her gaze went over him. "You had to wear a fricking suit, didn't you?" she muttered.

He grinned and smoothed his hand over his tie. "I just got in the car and drove straight here."

"Liar. You knew the suit would make me weak. Or you would have changed."

He definitely liked her admitting the suit was doing its job.

The clock over Zoe's head chimed and she glanced up. It was five o'clock. Closing time for the front of the bakery. His meeting with the guys had been at 9 a.m., as usual. He'd been on the road for Appleby by eleven. He'd rolled into town around four thirty, knowing Zoe would still be at Buttered Up but that she'd be closing at five.

"Hang on," Zoe told him with a little sigh. She wiped her hands on the towel lying next to the tray of pink-coated cake balls. She crossed to the swinging door that led into the kitchen and poked her head through. "Hey, Jose? You can head out. I'm going to finish the cake pops and then close up."

"You sure?" he heard Jocelyn ask.

"Yep."

"Is he still here?"

Aiden smiled. He wasn't going anywhere.

"He is," Zoe said, sounding resigned.

Well, resigned wasn't knife-throwing-angry.

"You sure you want to be alone with him?" Josie asked.

Zoe's shoulders lifted and fell as she took a deep breath. "Might as well get it over with."

"Okay. Well... call me later," Josie told her.

"I will," Zoe promised.

"Okay." Josie still didn't sound sure.

"She'll be fine," Aiden called.

"I'll hunt you down if she's not!" Josie called back.

He believed her. It should be funny. Jocelyn Asher was a tiny woman too. She was at least three inches shorter than Zoe, and though she had bigger boobs, she was very petite.

But he knew the protective streak in these women for one another was wide and intense. He didn't really want to test Josie's temper. Plus he liked her. And having Zoe's best friend on his side would be a very good thing.

Getting *Zoe* on his side might be a challenge, but he was up for it. He was a very successful guy. Things had always come a little easy to him—sports and grades and business achievements—but hey, he'd lost his mom as a fourteen-year-old kid. His dad had sunk into a workaholic daze afterward. It wasn't like everything had always been a piece of cake for him.

His gaze landed on the cake pops *Zoe* had been working on.

She might not be a piece of cake for him, either, but she'd be worth whatever work he had to put in.

Finally, *Zoe* turned back to him. She gave him a long look. Then she said, "Can you take those trays into the back?" she asked, pointing to the trays of cake balls and the already finished cake pops.

"Sure." He started around the edge of the counter.

She passed him on her way to the front door of the bakery. He lifted the first big tray as she turned the sign that hung on the big glass door from *Top of the Muffin To You!* to *Bake Later!* and locked the door. She flipped off the main overhead light, leaving just the lights in the display cases on. Anyone walking by would still be able to look in and appreciate the homemade pastries, cupcakes, and muffins *Buttered Up* had to offer.

Aiden took the tray into the back, setting it on the massive worktable in the middle of the kitchen. Over the fifty years of existing, they'd had to upgrade the appliances a couple of times, of course. The stainless steel, state-of-the-art refrigerator and ovens were clearly high end. But the wood flooring was original, just like it was out in the front. The exposed brick walls were, of course, original, as was the worktable in the middle of the room. *Zoe's* grandmother had made cakes and pies and cookies on that worktable just like her daughter and now granddaughter. There were other little touches that spoke of the bakery's history. The light fixtures on the walls were the same. They'd added bright, overhead lighting at some point, but the sconces with their softer light

made the kitchen feel cozy in spite of the overhead illumination, and even that came from a long, multi-bulb brass chandelier that matched the sconces pretty closely.

The oven mitts and hot pads and aprons hung on the wall were not fifty years old, but they were the same style and color Letty McCaffery had used, and bore Buttered Up's logo that had been the same from day one.

Aiden would also bet that several of the pots and pans hanging from the rack suspended over the center island were also Letty's.

It was an interesting space, a nice fusion of new and old, and he knew it took Zoe a lot to replace anything. Things had to wear out or break down before she'd get new. Her fierce protectiveness of the family business and Buttered Up's reputation was one of the things he admired most about her.

Zoe came into the kitchen with the other tray of cake pops that needed to be finished. "Okay, if we're going to talk, you're going to help me work so that we can get these done, and I can storm out of here when you piss me off," she told him.

He laughed. "Fair enough. I guess it doesn't matter that I'm staying at the house with you?"

"If I storm out of here mad, then you need to take your time coming to the house," she told him.

"I can always detour past your mom's house."

"You could also stay there."

Zoe set the bowl of cake pop coating—whatever it was—in the microwave to reheat.

"But you won't be there," he said.

"Exactly."

She still wasn't really making eye contact, but she was in here with him. The doors were locked. There was no countertop between them. They were alone, together. Something they hadn't been in five months. Something he'd wanted most out of this trip to Appleby.

Yes, the factory was important. A several-million-dollar investment was not a tiny, by-the-way kind of thing.

But Zoe was the reason he was here.

The microwave beeped, and she retrieved the bowl of pink liquid without saying anything.

She turned toward him, crossing the worktable. She set it down and braced her hands on the tabletop. Finally, she lifted her gaze to his. “Let’s get this done.”

“The cake pops?”

“The awkward conversation.”

“You definitely want to talk here?”

“Definitely. As soon as my mom finds out you’re here—which will be three minutes after you park your car in the driveway—she’ll be over. She’ll be flustered she didn’t know you were coming. She’ll want to clean everything and cook dinner and fuss over you.”

Aiden grinned. He loved all that about Maggie. She was the best. And Zoe was right. His childhood home was on the block over from the McCafferys’ house. Maggie could see the driveway from her kitchen window. She spent easily 80 percent of her time at home in the kitchen. He was certain she loved keeping track of Zoe that way, and it would take no time for her to notice his car.

“And, of course, Henry will want to come see you,” Zoe said. “Then Dad will come too because he won’t want to miss anything.” She sighed. “If we want to have a honest conversation about why you don’t want to have sex with me—and I’m not sure *we* want to have that conversation, but I know you’re very used to getting your way so you won’t let it drop—then we should do it here. On my turf.”

Maggie had run the bakery with *her* best friend, his mom, for nearly fifteen years. They’d hired another woman, Alicia, after Julie had died, until Zoe was old enough to take over. Then Maggie had gone part time. Now Maggie only came in a couple of days a week. The bakery was definitely Zoe’s turf. Even if most everything inside had barely changed and Zoe

ran things much the way it always had been, she was still definitely the one in charge.

“The house you live in isn’t your turf?” he asked. He maybe should have started with correcting her assumption that he didn’t want to have sex with her, but they’d get to that. For sure. She would have *no* doubt about that soon enough.

“The house is...” She shrugged. “Still kind of feels like your house.”

He liked that. The house had been where he’d spent all fourteen years he’d had with his mom. The memories in the last couple of years there weren’t very happy, but they were mostly overshadowed by the ones that had been. That house was where he’d celebrated birthdays, Christmases, many of those home runs and touchdowns Josie had mentioned. The house was mostly full of great memories for him, and he loved that Zoe felt he and his family were still a part of the house.

“I love that you’re living there,” he told her, honestly. It was an aside to what he really wanted to talk about, but it was true, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever said that. “It felt weird thinking about other people living there. I like knowing that it’s still in the family.”

She was watching him closely. “We are pretty much family,” she said. “Is that why you don’t want to have sex with me?”

“That is not...” He thought about that. “Okay, maybe a little of it.”

She rolled her eyes and reached for a cake ball. She dipped the tip of a stick in the pink goo and then pushed it about an inch into the cake. She just let it sit like that.

“It’s not what you think,” Aiden said. “It’s not because I think of you as a sister or something.”

Zoe picked the cake pop up by the stick and dipped the whole ball into the coating. She twirled it, covering all sides, then she tapped the stick gently on the side of the bowl, getting rid of the excess coating.

“We know each other really well,” he went on when she still didn’t say anything. “But I’m definitely attracted to you.”

She moved the ball to the plate of pale pink sugar next to her and rolled it, covering it with sparkling pink. Then she stuck it into a square of Styrofoam with the other completed cake pops so the coating could set up and harden.

“That’s why I picked you,” she finally said. She handed him a stick and gestured toward the bowl of pink goo. Clearly she thought he should know what to do now.

“You picked me for sex because I’m like a big brother to you?” He inserted the stick the way she had.

“Ew, of course not,” she snapped. “But I picked you because I know you. Almost too well.” She muttered the last three words.

“Almost too well?” he asked. He dipped the ball into the coating and swirled it to cover all sides.

She stood with her hip propped against the counter, watching him. “Make sure you tap it a little to get the extra off. You want the coating to be thin but to totally cover the cake.”

He did as she asked, but tapped way too hard. The cake ball fell off into the goo. Zoe sighed.

“Yeah, see, I knew that was going to happen.”

He frowned and started to reach for the ball.

She slapped his hand. “Don’t stick your hand in there!” She grabbed a spoon to fish the cake ball out. “You always go hard. You just assume you’ll be good at whatever you do. You believe everything will just work out. You don’t think it through.”

Aiden’s frown deepened. “That is *not* true. I think things through. I manage our business by thinking through how everyone else is going to react to things and what they would be best at handling. I make sure everyone on our team is doing what they’re best at.”

Hell, thinking things through was most of what he did. He prided himself on reading the people and situations around him and making adjustments as things developed. He was the *most* thoughtful one, in fact.

He was the head of the company, the first contact, because Ollie would get in over his head saying yes to everything. Dax would get distracted in the midst of a project with something else. Grant would say no to everything right away. Camden would piss everyone off before they got anywhere just because he had to push buttons.

So no, Aiden didn't think things just worked out.

Much.

Zoe set the cake ball to the side and looked up at him. "Okay, then, maybe it's just with us. My family. This town. But you expect things here to always fall into line."

"Do I?"

"Don't you?" she shot back. "You think you can just walk back in here after five months, and I'll just forget what happened and forgive you and sit with you across the table at my mom's and sleep down the hall from you and share the coffeepot in the morning and everything just like it's always been? No awkwardness? No embarrassment?"

"No," he said honestly. "I don't think you'll forget what happened. And I want you sitting across your mom's table thinking about it. I want you sleeping down the hall thinking about it. I want you having coffee in the kitchen in the morning thinking about it. Because I sure as hell will be."

Something flickered in her eyes. But she shook her head. "What do you want?"

"You."

She blinked at him. Then frowned. Then blinked again. "What?"

Aiden braced his hands on the countertop and leaned in. "You. I want you. I'm here. To stay. I couldn't say that five months ago. But now I can."

“That’s... I...” She took a deep breath. “That’s not what I wanted you to say. I wanted sex, Aiden. Not a commitment. Oh my God.” Her eyes widened that all seemed to sink in. “Is that what you thought? You thought I expected a *relationship*? No. Wow. No, that is *not* what I wanted.”

Okay, she didn’t have to be so adamant about it. “But that’s how it would have to be with us, Zoe,” he said. “I don’t do casual and temporary.”

That was for sure. Casual and temporary didn’t really work in his life in general. When he dated, he did it for long periods and was always committed to the person for however long it lasted. Obviously, none of them had turned into forever yet, but he’d never had flings or one-night stands. He was a serial monogamist. And until Zoe had appeared in his bedroom like the Ghost of Christmas Fantasies last December, he hadn’t realized the reason none of those had worked out was because *she* was the one he was supposed to be with. When the time was right.

Like it was now.

Losing his mom so young had taught him early that life went fast. You couldn’t take things for granted. You couldn’t waste days and opportunities.

Zoe took a deep breath. “Okay, I know you don’t do casual. I get that. But... I picked you because...” She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and looked up at him for a long moment. She had a smear of pink icing on her chin, and her cheek sparkled with pink sugar.

He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to lean across the worktable, cup the back of her head, and pull her in for a kiss. A kiss that would be surrounded by the scent of vanilla cake. He wanted to lick that icing and sugar off of her. And then keep licking.

“I needed to know what sex was like before I had it for real with someone,” she finally said. “I picked you because I know you’ve done it—a lot—and I know you and trust you. I knew I’d be safe with you and you wouldn’t make fun of me, and I could get the first time over with and not have to worry about

running into you repeatedly afterward at the café or grocery store.”

There was a lot there, and Aiden wanted to respond to all of it. He wasn't sure where to start. “What the hell do you mean you wanted to get it over with?”

That may not have been the *best* place, but it was one of the things that stuck out.

“And what do you mean before you had it for real with someone?” he asked before she could answer. It wouldn't have been real with him? What the fuck was that?

“I'm a twenty-five-year-old virgin,” she exclaimed. “I have no idea what I'm doing. The whole concept of sex makes me a little anxious. I don't want to be awkward or do something wrong or stupid. So I wanted to get my first time out of the way, and I thought doing it with you was the best idea.” She shook her head. “And then *that* was a humiliating disaster.”

“I was going to be your guinea pig?” he asked. He was a little amused. And a lot ticked off. Because she'd clearly intended for it to be a one-time thing before she moved on to other guys.

And that was *not* okay with him.

“Kind of.” She shrugged. “I figured you'd show me the basics, and I'd be able to get over the anxiety.”

“The basics.” He intended to show her a hell of a lot more than that.

“Yeah. I mean, I *know* the basics. In general. In my head. But I've never done them with another person.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “So yeah, I wanted to be prepared and figured you were a good person to help me with that.”

He was momentarily distracted by the “with another person” thing filling his head with thoughts of the things she might have been doing alone. But he shook that off. He needed to focus. There was time for all that—and they *would* get to it

—later. “Because you know me so well, you figured I’d be fine being your sex tutor.”

The idea of that was a little hot, but he also ignored that. This was *not* a short-term, just-about-sex thing. Though tutoring her in sex seemed...

Focus, dammit.

“Look,” she said, bracing her feet and squaring her shoulders. “Being a virgin at sixteen and learning about sex with other sixteen-year-olds who are virgins too, or at least not very experienced, is one thing. Being a virgin at twenty-five is different. The guys my age are probably not virgins and definitely have some experience. I don’t want to be *bad* in bed, Aiden.” She frowned at him. “This is a small town. That kind of stuff gets around.”

He just stared at her for a long moment. “You’re worried about getting a reputation for being bad in bed?”

“Yes.” She actually smiled at him as if relieved he was finally getting this.

He could tell her there was no way she was going to be bad in bed. She was passionate and sweet and smart and self-deprecating and gorgeous. He could tell her that even when it was bad, sex was pretty damned good. He could tell her he was *certain* she was going to catch on right away.

“There’s no recipe for it, Zoe. It’s different with everyone.”

She was already shaking her head. The idea of something *not* having a recipe she could follow was the easiest way to make Zoe McCaffery nervous. “There is a *basic* recipe,” she said. “There’s a starting place.”

“Right. Tab A into slot B,” he said dryly.

“And I want to know what it’s like so I can be prepared.”

She didn’t even smile at his quip. She was totally serious. “Really romantic and sexy, Zoe,” he told her.

“That’s just it. I don’t need it to be romantic and sexy the first time. I just need the *knowledge*,” she told him. “That’s why I picked you. And because you wouldn’t talk about it

around town after or make fun of me.” That part seemed very important to her. What the hell was she doing even thinking about sleeping with guy who might make *fun* of her in bed?

But she’d picked *him* because she didn’t want her first time having sex to be romantic or sexy. Oh, this woman had a lot to learn.

Chapter Three



“Well, I’m here now and very happy to help with the virginity thing,” Aiden said. “And I can fix all the rest too. I’ll happily walk you through every fucking thing you want to try. Repeatedly. Until we’re the best there’s ever been.” He gave her a wicked grin. He meant that to his soul. “There’s also no way in hell I’m telling anyone a single detail, and Sugar, there is no damned way you’re going to be bad at this. So no more worries about any of it.”

She looked legitimately confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Everything is good now that I’m back,” he said with a little smile. “You don’t need to spend one more second thinking about or worrying about any other man ever again.”

She slowly nodded as if catching on. “So we’re just going to have sex every time you come home to visit. And I don’t see anyone else? I just wait around for you? We’ll have a long distance relationship from here to Chicago?”

He shrugged. It was not the time to tell her about Hot Cakes. It was definitely *not* the time. “Fuck, yes to the not seeing anyone else. Yes to the sex every time I come home. But no more visits, no more waiting around, no more long distance, no more Chicago.”

“What?” She was clearly puzzled.

“I’m here now. To stay.”

“Come on,” she scoffed. “Sure.”

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about Christmas,” he said, letting his voice get a little husky and holding her gaze. “The kiss. Everything. I want it. All of it.”

“Oh.” She blinked at him. She frowned. Then her eyes got wide. Then she crossed her arms. “Well, you need to get over that.” She swallowed hard at the end though.

That was the tell. The sign that she wasn’t flippant about this. Or angry at his audacity. She was shocked, sure, but she wasn’t nonchalant about this.

“Not gonna happen,” he told her honestly.

“I can *not* have an *actual* relationship with you, Aiden.”

“Of course you can. It’s perfect.”

“You really think you’re just going to move here?”

She did actually seem confused by all this.

“Sure,” he said simply. It was simple. This part anyway.

“How does *that* work?” she asked, clearly thinking he was nuts. “Your company is in Chicago.”

“I’ve got a lot of money, Zoe,” he said. It sounded arrogant, but it was also true. And with her, he could be a little cocky.

“Oh, great, I definitely want to date a guy who’s just sitting around on his ass being rich,” she said with an eye roll.

She knew he’d never do that. He wasn’t wired that way. “You know, we just sold our company to a bigger gaming company,” he told her. He and Cam had shared the news with the family at Christmas as a matter of fact. “They’re taking over most of the operations. We’re involved as much as we’d like to be, and we still get royalties, but we’re not as busy with it now. We’re in the midst of looking at new opportunities.”

All true. No need to go into those specific opportunities—or the one that was in her backyard—at the moment. He really wanted to get a feel for the Hot Cakes situation and how the transition would work before he made a big deal out of it with the McCafferys. Yes, her whole family hated Hot Cakes, and

more specifically, the Lancaster family who had started and owned and was now selling the company. He wanted to be able to assure them it was all nothing to worry about, and it wouldn't change their relationships at all, but he felt like he should at least set foot inside the factory before he said that.

"I can work from anywhere," he said.

That was true enough. He'd still have a hand—or at least a few fingers—in Fluke Inc., his company in Chicago. It was best when the five of the partners were together. It would be *best* if he was there with them, at least some of the time. God knew what Ollie would have them investing in next or who Cam would piss off if Aiden wasn't there some of the time. But Chicago wasn't that far away. Even if he was there once a week, he could keep them on track. Probably. Piper, their executive assistant, was there, at least. He could give her more authority and power to keep the guys in line. Especially Ollie. Grant, their CFO, had hired her as Ollie's direct assistant, though she definitely helped them all. If someone could just keep an eye on what Ollie was doing and knew when to alert Aiden, things wouldn't get too far out of hand.

"You're going to *move* here. We're going to have tons of sex. And then what?" Zoe asked. "How does that breakup work out? My family will be heartbroken. No other guy in this town will want to date me."

"Well, *excellent* on the second part," he said firmly. "As for the first—there's no breakup. Nothing to worry about."

"We're never going to break up?" she asked, her eyebrows nearly to her hairline.

"Right."

"You're crazy."

"Why? This makes total sense."

"It makes *no* sense. You can't just kiss someone, push them away, then come back five months later and essentially propose!"

He was getting a little irritated with her insistence against this. "Looks like I can."

She huffed out a breath while rolling her eyes. “Well, I’m not going to marry my brother’s best friend. A guy I’ve known *forever*.”

“Why not?”

Zoe propped her hands on her hips. “My entire life goes according to plan too, Aiden. But not just everything I touch turns to gold like you. I *make* it happen that way. But I live in the same town I’ve been in all my life. I took over my family’s business. I moved into a house of a lifelong family friend. The people I work with and wait on are people I’ve known forever. The things I do at work go according to specific recipes that have been tried and true for *half a century*. There are very few surprises or bumps or glitches.”

“And you love it that way,” he pointed out.

She nodded. “Which is why I think having some surprises, excitement, adventures in my love life... and my sex life... would be great.”

He lifted a brow. “Really?”

She tipped her head. “Yes. Really. Is that so hard to believe?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged.

“Hey.”

“You haven’t even deviated from a recipe by a half a teaspoon in all your life,” he told her with a little laugh.

“We’re making cake pops now!” she said, gesturing toward the worktable.

“And I’ll bet you one million dollars that it was all Josie’s idea that the cake and icing and everything you’re using is the same stuff you’ve always used, so that those things taste *exactly* like all the other Buttered Up cakes—which is a fantastic thing, by the way—and that even having those little balls of cake added to your menu makes you a little itchy.”

She chewed on her bottom lip.

“Deny it,” he challenged. “Any of it. You make those balls out of the same cake batter you do everything else, don’t you?”

“No.” She paused. Then she admitted, “We use the leftover cake Josie trims off the custom cakes she makes. And leftover icing.”

“Ah-ha!” He knew this woman. She needed to realize that.

“It’s a great way to reduce waste,” she said.

“It is,” he agreed. “And a great way to not really *change* anything.”

She scratched her arm. “Even more reason to want an exciting sex life.”

“The exciting, spontaneous sex life you wanted so badly but felt you needed to try out before doing it ‘for real’?” He even made the air quotes with his fingers because he did *not* take seriously that sex between them wouldn’t have been very real.

”Shut up,” she muttered.

Aiden grinned. Zoe had never been good at admitting she was wrong or giving up a fight. Definitely something she’d inherited from her grandmother.

“Hey, no worries,” he said. “That is *not* going to be a problem. I’m *all for* an exciting sex life. Whatever you want.” His body stirred with the very idea of exploring anything and everything Zoe would want to try.

“Not. With. You.”

She was so damned stubborn. “Zoe,” he said, dropping his voice.

But she just narrowed her eyes. “Marrying a guy who’s basically been a part of my family my entire life, who I know as well as I know my brother, who I already have years of memories with, isn’t new or exciting.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he finally said. “Knowing me, *liking* me, your family already loving me, having a history

together—that’s all counting *against* me here?”

She shrugged. “Yes.”

“*That* is nuts,” he told her.

“Actually, the idea of marrying the first guy I ever sleep with is so sane and normal and”—she wrinkled her nose—“*cliché*, it’s ridiculous.”

He straightened. “So the sex thing is still on the table though,” he said, focusing on the part that would help him out most. Because the rest of it... well, she wasn’t wrong. Falling for the first guy she slept with was absolutely a possibility, and Zoe was a forever kind of girl. Finding out she’d seriously dated and been intimate with only one guy would not have shocked him.

And now that the guy was going to be *him*, it made perfect sense.

Was he above taking her to bed and *then* pressing hard for more? Nope. Not at all. Zoe McCaffery was difficult. He wasn’t sure why he’d thought she’d suddenly be easy for him. Oh yeah, the candy-pink teddy she’d worn into his bedroom on Christmas Eve. That whole thing had seemed *very* easy.

Forgetting about it had been the hard part. Impossible, in fact.

She flipped her hand as if waving it all away. “Oh, no. Don’t worry. I’m good there.”

He looked at her closely. “Good where?”

“The sex thing.”

He sighed. None of this was turning out to be romantic or especially hot. He’d expected it to be sexy. He’d truly thought he’d show up, she’d be a little miffed, but he’d quickly wear her down. She wanted him. That was a well-established fact now. That kiss was not something either of them was going to be able to forget about. He’d really thought by this point of being alone with her, they’d be back at it.

“Look, I know you’re ticked off and embarrassed that I turned you down,” he said.

“Of course I’m ticked off and embarrassed!” she exclaimed. “I asked you for *one* little favor! We’ve been friends forever! You couldn’t just do that one thing for me? Take twenty minutes out of your night? Instead, you had to make it this whole humiliating thing. Just no. That was all you freaking said, Aiden. Just no.”

He opened his mouth then shut it and frowned. She really did make it sound like she was considering it a request she’d made of him like “Could you kill a huge spider in the bathroom for me?” or “Could I have a few of your frequent-flier miles?”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a *little* favor,” he said, his jaw tight.

Her eyes dropped to his fly.

He was surprised. That wasn’t what he’d been talking about. But it was good to know where her mind went.

Then she rolled her eyes. The way she’d done to him probably a million times in their lives. But this time his male ego got riled up. “And twenty minutes? You haven’t even been reading good books about it or watching decent porn if you think it would only take twenty minutes.”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed, then went normal sized, as if responding to a series of thoughts going through her mind.

All of which made him really nervous.

Her voice was completely calm when she said, “*Anyway*, you don’t have to worry. That’s all done. I’m good. I’ve got it taken care of.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” he demanded.

But he knew. It meant that some other guy had showed her what sex was all about so that she could “get it over with” before she had it *for real*. And now he was going to need names and addresses. Because Zoe McCaffery was *his*.

Not that he was going to say it quite like that to her. Zoe was very much her own woman. Hell, the sentiment would

likely shock her. He wasn't that kind of guy. He'd certainly never been that kind of guy about Zoe.

Of course, if anyone had ever messed with her—teased her on the playground, been mean to her in high school—he would have been there to make that person sorry.

This was different. This was about someone touching her, her *wanting* that person to touch her, pleasure her, do things she'd never experienced before.

That was all supposed to be his territory.

She would *not* appreciate that sentiment from him at all.

The other men in Appleby would though. He'd be sure of that.

"It means I'm fine. Without you," she said. She cocked her head, giving him a little smile. "But really, thank you for your concern."

"You're fine without me?" His voice was low, and he was sure she could see his temper was rising too.

"What?" she asked, her eyes wide and blinking. "You thought I'd just be waiting around for you to come back?"

"Yes!" It was the wrong answer, he knew, even as he said it. But it was true.

"You are so full of yourself!" she said, immediately dropping the whole, obviously fake, you're-so-sweet-to-worry-about-me thing. She frowned. "You actually thought I'd be waiting around, pining for you, didn't you?"

Maybe not crying herself to sleep every night, but thinking about him? Yeah. Fuck. He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind for more than a few hours at a time. "It's only been five months," he said. "Is it really crazy for me to think that you didn't get it 'taken care of' yet?"

"Exactly! It's been *five months!*" she said.

"You went twenty-five years without sex, and you couldn't go five more *months?*"

“Well, it’s not like you gave me an IOU!” she shot back. “I had no idea when you were coming back, and I assumed your answer would have been the same. Not that you really gave me any explanation other than *no*. So yeah, I moved on, Aiden.”

“Who was it?” he asked, noting his tone was suddenly a little ominous.

“I’m not telling you that.” She looked at him like he was insane.

“Tell me, Zoe.”

“*No*.”

“I’ll find out. This is Appleby. I’ll probably know by the end of tonight.”

“You won’t.” She lifted her chin. “I can promise you that.”

“Bet I do.”

“Why do you really even care? Now you don’t have to do it.”

“Because you’re mine.”

Yeah, shit. See, he’d known that was the wrong answer to give. Guys didn’t go around claiming women like they were property or possessions. He knew that. He’d never had that urge before. This woman was strong and independent and confident and certainly didn’t *need* him for anything.

But the idea of another man touching her, seeing her naked, making her feel the ultimate pleasure, made his blood boil.

She stood, just staring at him. Then she picked up a cake ball. And threw it at him. It hit him square in the red tie and bounced back onto the table.

“You’re a jerk.”

Yeah, maybe he was. A nice guy would probably just take all her explanations and excuses about why they shouldn’t be together and admit his idea was crazy.

He didn't say anything. He didn't wipe away the sticky crumbs the cake ball left on his tie. He picked up the ball and rounded the worktable.

Her eyes widened, and she backed up as he came closer. He kept going. Until her back was against the front of the fridge.

He didn't say a word as he stopped right in front of her, lifted his hand to cup her face, and leaned in.

Aiden ignored her hands on his chest. She wasn't pushing. She wasn't pulling him closer either, but she wasn't trying to get away. She wasn't lifting her knee to his balls. She wasn't saying no.

He stared into her eyes for a long moment. She could stop this. He knew she knew that.

She didn't.

So he kissed her.

He took her lips softly at first but then more fully. He stepped closer as he deepened the kiss, pressing her between the fridge and his body. He slid his fingers into her hair and tipped her head back slightly. Then he opened his mouth.

She gave a little sigh and followed suit. *Yes.*

He licked along her lower lip. She was so fucking sweet. She smelled and tasted like the cake and sugar and vanilla that surrounded her every day. It was like the scents had seeped into her skin and became a part of her. Appropriate. She and this bakery were connected in a deep way.

Aiden slid his other arm around her, pulling her up against him fully. He was careful not to crush the cake ball he still held. But his arm around her waist settled her against him. Her breasts pressed into his chest, their pelvises aligned, and he took the kiss deeper, stroking his tongue in along hers, tasting her fully.

She arched into him, her arms going up to encircle his neck as she went up on tiptoe.

Damn, he wanted her.

She slanted her head in the other direction and slid her hands up to the back of his head, pressing her body even closer.

She fit against him perfectly and he had a few options. He could lift her against the fridge, put her up on the worktable and lay her back, or bend her over it to take her from behind.

He took the tiny step that brought her back against the fridge again and moved his hand from her hair to her ass. He lifted her easily. She was light enough and she definitely helped. She pulled herself up, wrapping her legs around his waist and giving a little moan that made fire lick through him.

Aiden leaned in, aligning his cock with the sweet spot between her legs, gripping her ass in one hand as she linked her ankles behind him.

He ground into her. He wanted bare skin, but he also didn't want to let go of her for a second. This spot—fitted against her like this in the middle of her kitchen—was ideal. In this moment, Christmas Eve, the past five months apart, the factory... none of it mattered. *This* was why he was here.

This woman, who he'd known his entire life and shared so much with, also made him hotter than he could remember ever being for another woman. He knew their history, their shared loves—her family, the town—and their shared desire for purpose and meaning in their lives and work were a part of that. How could he ever feel this way for someone he didn't know this well? That he hadn't known through triumphs and tragedies, victories and challenges? How could *she* want someone who she didn't know like that?

Exciting? Adventurous? Surprising?

Yeah, he'd give her all that.

He might be her brother's best friend, and this might sound a little cliché, but he didn't give a damn.

This was happening.

He pulled back and looked down at her, still holding her against the fridge.

She was flushed, her lips dark pink, her pupils dilated, and she was breathing hard.

She was also wrapped around him like a spider monkey on a banana tree.

Slowly she pulled in a deep breath and blinked.

“Surprised?” he asked, his voice gruff.

She licked her recently ravaged lips. And nodded. “Um, yeah.”

Even the Christmas Eve kiss hadn’t been this hot. In part because he hadn’t been prepared for it. In the least. In part because he’d only let himself indulge for about ten seconds before he realized he had to stop.

This time he wasn’t stopping anything.

He pressed her more firmly into the fridge to hold her up and brought the cake ball he was still holding to his mouth. He bit into it as she watched, her breathing still uneven.

He chewed, swallowed, and then gave her a cocky smirk. “I intend to have my cake and eat it too, Zoe.”

Chapter Four



It took about three seconds for that to sink in.

Then she realized she was plastered against him like a sucker fish on the side of an aquarium.

Zoe unwrapped her legs and put her hands on his chest to push him back.

Aiden let her go and leaned back, allowing her to slide gracefully until her feet were on the floor.

She pushed her hair back and pulled in a deep breath. Well, *that* wasn't going to help her convince him she didn't want any of this.

Truth was, she wanted it so badly she was torn between pretending to be huffy and stomping out of here with her dignity slightly still intact, or stripping all her clothes off and begging him to resume the position.

Honestly, she'd only have to pull her panties down. This dress was very little barrier.

As she knew by the way the skirt had hiked up when he'd put her up against the fridge—damn, that was hot—and she'd felt every big, hard inch of him. Her panties and his suit pants were definitely not enough to hide that he was very okay with what had just happened.

Thankfully he said the thing about having his cake and eating it too. It was so classic Aiden. He'd really never *not* had his cake and eaten it too. It reminded her he'd pushed her

away at Christmas when it wasn't convenient—or whatever—for him and *that was not* okay with *her*.

He thought he could just breeze back in here after five months? Of course he did. He was so... Aiden. The Golden Boy. The favorite son. The honor-student-class-president-star-athlete-debate-team-captain-perfect-commencement-speech giver. *Of course* he thought he could just waltz back in and say, "Okay I'm ready now. Take your panties off."

It really burned her up that she wanted to take her panties off so badly.

Because, of course, he was an amazing kisser.

Argh!

She was grateful for the cocky grin on his face at the moment because it was all that was giving her the ability to smooth down her dress, brush back her hair, and look him in the eye when she said, "Oh yeah, we should totally get married."

She *knew* he heard her sarcasm. But his grin grew. "I knew I'd bring you around." He reached for her face.

Zoe slapped his hand away. "You're insane."

"I don't think so." He stepped in and brought his hand up again. He ran his thumb over her cheek. "You're dusted with sugar." He put his thumb to his mouth and licked the sugar off.

Her nipples tingled.

"Hazard of the job."

"I like it."

She blew out a breath. "Knock it off." She pushed him back and slipped around him before he could touch her again. It was clear that *that* was going to be of the utmost importance—keeping a nice, big space between them.

Had he surprised her with the kiss? Yes. Yes, definitely. Had the heat of it surprised her? Yes, indeed.

Did that surprise make up for the fact that she knew everything from his favorite color to his favorite pizza

toppings to his favorite church hymn? No, it did not. They had unexpected chemistry. Big deal. He was still the last person she should get involved with if she wanted surprises and excitement.

“I need to get going.” She grabbed the trays of fully finished cake pops. Thank God she’d gotten a few of those done. She’d just store everything in the fridge overnight, and then she could finish the others tomorrow.

She turned. And stopped. Aiden was still standing in front of the fridge. The fridge they’d just made out against. The fridge she was very afraid she was now going to be unable to pass without thinking of him every damned time.

She passed by that fridge probably a hundred times a week.

Great.

“Excuse me.”

He stepped to the side. “You’re just going to leave? We’re not going to talk?”

She looked at the handle on the fridge pointedly, and he reached for it, pulling the door open for her. She slid the tray in on the lower shelf.

“I think we both said plenty,” she told him, turning back for the other tray. “You want to get married. I don’t. I think that covers it, don’t you?”

He laughed. “Yeah, not quite.”

She grabbed the bowl of melted candy coating and stored it too. She should be able to remelt it in the morning. She couldn’t deal with cleanup right now.

Slamming the door, she reached for the tie on her apron. “Really? What else do we need to cover?”

“The fact that I need to know who took your virginity,” he said bluntly. Not smiling. “For one thing.”

She rolled her eyes. Yeah, she wasn’t telling him that, and there was no way he was going to be able to find out. Because

the answer was *no one*. But she wasn't about to tell *him* she hadn't done a thing about her V-card in the past five months.

Mostly it was because of all the reasons she'd chosen him in the first place. She didn't know anyone else she could totally trust with her lack of knowledge and ineptness in that area. She *hated* being incompetent at anything.

That was actually something she and Aiden had very much in common. The difference between them was Aiden always thought he could *become* good at anything he wanted. Zoe was not at all sure of that herself. That was why she stuck with the things she knew she was good at.

The majority of which involved sugar, butter, and flour.

Definitely not sex. She wanted her first time to be with someone who could, and would, coach her through it, wouldn't think she was an idiot—or wouldn't let her know he thought that, anyway—and who would then leave town and wouldn't be running into her all the time and thinking about what a dork she'd been between the sheets.

Sure, she'd have to face Aiden again, eventually. She was going to have Aiden in her life forever. That was just a foregone conclusion. But it was *Aiden*. She'd truly thought they could have sex and then go back to things as they'd always been. He could do her a favor, help her out like he had when she'd been struggling with chemistry in high school, and after that one night, they'd just fall back into their regular relationship.

It had only taken one kiss to realize she'd really messed up that line of thinking.

Okay, yes, that had been a surprise.

And now that they'd kissed again... and this time *he'd* kissed *her*, which definitely made a difference... sitting across from him at her mother's dining room table was going to be difficult.

Dammit.

"You have to know there is no way in hell I'm telling you who I've slept with," Zoe told him, putting her hand on her hip

and summoning all her annoyance.

“I just want to have a little talk with him and let him know that you’re now off limits.”

She stared at him for a moment. Then she started laughing. “Yeah, sure, that’s totally fine. You can absolutely go stomping around all over Appleby acting like a caveman who’s marking his territory. Everyone will think that’s adorable. Not to mention, totally in character for you. And I’ll be paging through bridal magazines the whole time so turned on and ready to settle down with all *that*.” She crossed the kitchen to the hooks by the back door. She hung up her apron and grabbed her purse. She looked back at him. “You coming?”

He had his arms crossed and was just watching her from beside the worktable. The worktable that was covered with drips of candy coating and a dusting of sugar. She was going to have to come in early to clean up tomorrow, but she couldn’t be here, alone, with him any longer.

“Did you actually lose your virginity, Zoe?” he asked.

His voice was low and a little husky, and she felt a little shiver tickle down her spine. Bastard. He knew her. He could tell she was lying?

No way.

She gave him a bored look. A fake bored look—she couldn’t deny her heart was pounding and she was having dirty thoughts about candy coating and sugar—but still. “You don’t think so?”

He wouldn’t know *for sure* either way. Maybe that would drive him even crazier. That seemed like it could be fun. Playing around with Aiden could be a good time. She hadn’t had a good time in... a while. Maybe since planning her little Christmas seduction.

Which had turned into a huge humiliation.

She frowned.

He came toward her, almost like he was stalking her. Zoe felt herself straighten instinctively then told herself to relax.

She didn't need to be defensive around Aiden. This was none of his business now. She just needed to remember that.

And remember to hate that he seemed to legitimately feel possessive of her. She did *not* like that. She didn't want some guy thinking he could control her.

But that's not how it felt. That's not how it would be with Aiden. He knew her too well for that. He knew she was *very* good with a paring knife.

Besides, she knew *him* too well. He was used to getting his way and having things just work out, sure, but he was a good guy. He'd always been a good boyfriend. She hadn't been close to any of the girls he'd dated in high school, being four years younger, but she knew he had a reputation for being charming and sweet and considerate, and yeah, good in bed. Or at least in back seats and on blankets down by the river. Rumors got around in a small town. Girls had known Aiden was Camden's best friend and that he was at her house a lot. They'd always wanted information about him. What kind of cookies did he like? Did he have a girlfriend currently? Would he be at her house after the basketball game? Would she take a note to him? Or a secret admirer gift?

It had been funny when she'd been twelve and he'd been sixteen.

She frowned a little. Now it wouldn't be so funny.

Now that she knew he was a good kisser. And that he wanted to sleep with her. And that he was feeling possessive of her.

Dammit.

He stopped right in front of her, totally in her personal space. Close enough for her to confirm, once again, that yes, he did smell as good as he looked in that freaking suit.

"I think if you wanted a guy, all you'd have to really do is snap your fingers, and you'd have a line out the door," he said. "But," he added. "I also think all the reasons you wanted me to be your first are still true. So I'm not so sure that you haven't just been waiting for me to come home."

All the reasons she'd wanted him to be her first were definitely still true. The bastard. He could have taken care of this five months ago, and she'd be over her hang-up about having sex for the first time at twenty-five and could maybe be dating someone now and having regular, fun sex and doing the relationship thing.

But no...

"It doesn't really matter if you believe me," she told him truthfully.

"You could still just tell me."

"It's really bothering you, huh?"

"It is."

"Then no, I don't think I will." She pulled the back door open, flipped off the kitchen light, and stepped out into the evening before he could say anything.

He stepped out right behind her and grabbed her upper arm before she could get too far. He pressed in close behind her and put his mouth against her ear. "I want to be your first," he said, his voice rough. "But more importantly, I intend to be your last."

Those damned shivers rippled through her, stronger and longer than before. She took a deep breath. "Your ego is out of control, Golden Boy."

But dammit, her voice was a little too breathless to really pull off the sass she'd wanted.

He chuckled, the sound low and delicious against her ear. "Comes from years of getting my way. You should remember that."

She sucked in a breath then elbowed him in the ribs. "I think maybe you need someone who doesn't just fall to her knees in front of you."

Too late, she realized how that sounded. And with absolutely zero experience with blow jobs, she still had a pretty vivid picture of her and Aiden in her kitchen with her on her knees holding a jar of pink sugar.

Crap.

He chuckled again. “Believe me, getting you on your knees will be a pleasure, no matter what it takes.”

She stepped away from him and he let her go.

“I’ve got to get going.”

“You mentioned that.”

She didn’t look back. Or say anything more. What more was there really to say?

* * *

Zoe headed straight to her mom’s house. She had dinner with Maggie and Steve a couple of nights a week. Not because she was lonely or hated cooking for one, but because she legitimately loved hanging out with her parents and because, well, why not? They lived a block away, and her mom loved to have her over. Jocelyn and Jane, her two best friends, joined them a lot of the time too.

They were careful not to talk about Jane’s job with Hot Cakes too much. The snack cake company that was headquartered in Appleby was the McCaffery family’s nemesis.

Zoe and Maggie didn’t blame Jane for working there. The girl had to have a job. Zoe got that. But they just avoided the topic for the most part. It helped their friendship that Jane was a sugarholic and that she much preferred Buttered Up’s sweets to the ones she made every day. They hadn’t been close in high school because of their age difference, but once Jane had confessed her addiction, Zoe and Josie had become her dealers. She showed up at the back door of the bakery every morning at 6 a.m. sharp, just as they were opening, and they gave her a sugar hit for the day in the form of muffins, bars, cookies, cupcakes, and pie. Particularly strawberry pie. Zoe honestly believed Jane would kill someone for her if the payment was strawberry pie.

She was relieved to see Jocelyn and Jane's cars were both already in front of her mom's house. She needed some girl time. She needed to forget about Aiden for a little while. Then she needed to pull her friends onto her mom's back patio, tip some vodka into the lemonade Maggie no doubt had in the fridge, and ask them what she was supposed to do about Aiden.

She wanted to have sex with him.

She should *not* want that.

He'd had his chance. He'd turned her down. He'd left without any contact for *five freaking months*.

She should definitely not give him a second chance.

Especially when he was talking crazy about moving here and them having an actual relationship.

Unless she should.

She needed her friends to tell her what to do here. Both Jocelyn and Jane had dated more guys than Zoe had, and they would be objective about Aiden and all his nutso claims. At least, more so than Zoe was.

"Hey, everyone." Zoe let herself in through the back kitchen door.

Jocelyn had one of Maggie's favorite pink, polka-dotted aprons on and was stirring something on the stove. Jane was sitting at the table with a glass of the lemonade Zoe wanted to spike. Jane wasn't much of a cook. Jocelyn, on the other hand, was amazing. She'd practically grown up in Buttered Up too, working after school with Zoe at a young age.

They all gave her big smiles.

"Hi, honey!" Maggie leaned over for Zoe's kiss on her cheek. "Did you get my text?"

"Text? No." Hell, she wasn't even positive she had her phone now that she thought of it. She'd been way too distracted after closing time. "Why?"

"Oh, I was hoping you'd bring a pie home."

“I um... didn’t check messages before I left the bakery,” Zoe said. She shot Jocelyn a look that said, *Don’t tell who I was with.*

“She knows,” Jocelyn mouthed.

Zoe sighed. Of course she did. She should have known Aiden couldn’t be within the Appleby city limits for more than fifteen minutes without Maggie knowing about it.

“Can you run back down?” Maggie asked. “You know the chocolate pie is one of Aiden’s favorites.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. Behind her mom’s back, of course. Jane saw her though and smirked. “No, I’m not going to run back down to get a pie for Aiden,” she said. Then she realized what Maggie’s question truly meant. “He’s coming over for dinner?”

“Of course he is.” Maggie beamed at her. “I wish he’d told us he was coming home today, but as soon as he texted me I was able to hop over to your place and clean up.”

Zoe tossed her purse onto the kitchen table—dinner would be at the dining room table with the nice dishes and even a tablecloth if Aiden was here—and slumped into the wooden chair across from Jane. “Great,” she said. At least her sheets would be especially lavendery tonight. That could be helpful. She had a feeling she might have some trouble sleeping, what with the hot guy she wanted to get naked with right down the hall. And supposedly willing this time.

Jane gave her a wink. “Josie told us he stopped by the bakery. In a suit.”

Jane and Jocelyn knew about Christmas Eve. Or The Great Seduction Debacle as they’d started calling it over hot chocolate and peppermint schnapps two nights later.

They didn’t think it was quite as horrible as Zoe did. They were plenty protective of her and would absolutely give Aiden a hard time about it, but they thought his “no” made some sense. She and Aiden were longtime friends, and they’d have to see each other again—forever—afterward. She’d taken him by surprise. One night of sex to learn how to have sex with

other guys was a strange request, and no way would Aiden Anderson ever be able to just casually have sex with her. They'd given her all those reasons.

Zoe hadn't wanted to hear any of it. Which had ended up with her being more hungover the next morning than she had been in a very long time. From schnapps. That was kind of hard to do.

But the part she *really* hated, was how their insistence that Aiden could never be casual about her had stuck with her. She'd assumed "he can't have casual sex with you" meant *he can't have sex with you at all, ever*. Not "he's going to want to have sex with you and only you. *Forever*."

That was nuts.

But it was also nuts that she couldn't stop thinking about it now.

"Yeah, he stopped by," Zoe said, trying to act nonchalant.

"In a suit," Jane repeated with a knowing grin.

Her back was to Maggie, so Zoe was the one who had to school her features. "Yeah, I guess he was wearing a suit, now that you mention it."

Jocelyn tossed something into the sink and turned on the garbage disposal. Because she was an awesome friend.

Jane leaned in. "She also mentioned he looked hot as hell in it."

Zoe glanced at her mom then at Jane. "So?"

Jane laughed. "You kissed him."

Zoe opened her mouth, then frowned, and said, "I kissed him *back*."

"And how was it?"

Zoe shrugged. "Fine."

Jane laughed. She sat back and lifted her glass. "You're a terrible liar."

She was. She said what she thought, and she had no poker face whatsoever. Which sometimes sucked. Like when she was trying to convince Aiden that she had no interest in picking up where they'd left off—where *he'd* left off—on Christmas Eve. “What do you mean?” she asked anyway.

“You haven't looked in a mirror?”

“So?”

“You've got frosting and sugar all over, and your hair is coming down.”

Zoe's hands flew to her head. “So?” She'd just come from work.

“You were distracted when you left the bakery.”

“And?”

“And I find it interesting that Aiden—a guy you've known your entire life—can suddenly distract you. He must have done something... unusual.”

Well, that was a freaking understatement.

Jocelyn shut the disposal off and glanced over. She had a stupid knowing grin on her face too.

Zoe loved these women. Usually she loved that they knew her so well. Right now, though, she was trying to *not* give away the fact that she was having a hard time looking at her mother's refrigerator and not getting flushed.

“I'll be back in a minute.” She quickly escaped the kitchen and headed to the upstairs bathroom, calling a “Hey, Dad!” to her father where he was coming down the hall from his office as she ran up the stairs.

She shut herself in the bathroom, leaning against the door, and squeezing her eyes shut. “Dammit, Aiden.” Then she took a deep breath and opened one eye, moving to stand in front of the mirror.

Both eyes opened.

She was a mess.

She'd had an apron on, but she still had a smear of pink frosting on the top edge of her sundress. As Jane had pointed out, she had pink candy coating on one cheek, a dusting of sugar on her cheek and neck, and most of all, her hair, lips, and *eyes* looked like she'd been making out.

Of course, that was in part because she *knew* she'd been making out. But yeah, she looked like someone had had his fingers in her hair and his lips all over hers and... dammit, her eyes looked like she was maybe glowing a little or something.

Glowing? For Aiden Anderson? Seriously?

Zoe shook her head and turned on the faucet. She washed her face, pulled her ponytail out and brushed her hair. She slicked on some of her mom's pink lip gloss—that would at least be a better reason for her lips to be pinker than usual—and took a deep breath.

This was Aiden. She knew everything about him. His first dog's name had been Badger. His second dog had been Finley. She'd loved both of them. He loved asparagus and any movie Gerard Butler was in—which she couldn't disagree with, exactly, but was a little weird for a guy—and got motion sick on roller coasters.

That was *not* exciting. A guy who couldn't even go on a roller coaster? Come on. She could do better than that.

Zoe stared at her reflection.

She really was a bad liar.

Even to herself.

Aiden Anderson was a good guy. Full of himself, yes. But a good guy, deep down. He'd been an amazing friend to her big brother, an awesome big brother to her little brother, a fabulous, practically adopted son to her parents, a wonderful real son to his own father. Things seemed to work out for Aiden, but he also worked hard and took things seriously. After losing his mom and kind of losing his dad—at least emotionally—Aiden had seemed to decide that he needed to make the most of everything in life. He'd been determined to leave Appleby and really do something big with his life.

He'd done that. He was a millionaire at age twenty-nine, for God's sake. And she knew he gave a lot of his money to charity. Not only because Camden gave him a hard time about it, but because the *Appleby Observer* was run by Aiden's great uncle, and he kept tabs on him and published all the great things he and Camden did, for the town and elsewhere.

Aiden was nearly a saint in Appleby. But she couldn't deny he deserved a lot of the accolades.

Still, if an exciting, surprising, adventurous love life was what she was going for, Aiden was not the guy. She knew he would add more pepper than should be allowed to his fettuccini. He'd eat only a few pieces of broccoli so as not to insult her mother even though he didn't really like it, and he'd drink at least three glasses of lemonade. Lemonade her mother made extra sweet for him. Yes, he also really liked chocolate pie. He liked most of the things they made at the bakery, but that was his favorite. He definitely had a sweet tooth.

She frowned. Yeah, there weren't a lot of surprises there. And his lemonade addiction was going to make having enough to spike later with the girls difficult.

Of course, him being here was going to make it difficult to sneak off with the girls and talk about him at all.

Finally, Zoe pushed away from the counter and headed back downstairs.

She heard his voice before she was even halfway down the staircase. He was here. For dinner. The way he'd been hundreds of times before.

But she'd never felt her heart flip or tingles go through her body just hearing his voice.

She groaned. This was *not* good.

"*Purple diamonds,*" Aiden was saying to her little brother Henry.

"No. Way."

They were in the living room, the room right off to the side of the staircase. Aiden was sitting on the couch, and Henry

was on the ottoman facing him. She was sure Henry had come running the second he'd heard Aiden's voice. Not hers. He probably hadn't even said hello to Jane and Jocelyn yet. Of course, Jane and Jocelyn and Zoe never came bearing news, or even better, insider tips about *Warriors of Easton*.

Sometimes she couldn't believe these guys were actually famous. Cam never went to conventions or did interviews, but Aiden often accompanied two of their partners, Oliver and Dax, to fan events. She'd seen a few of them online. But it was always surreal to think about the two boys who'd built a tree house in her backyard and who got caught at fifteen with beer in her basement and who'd been hospitalized—in side-by-side beds—after a nasty dirt bike accident were guys people *thronged* to see and listen to.

Okay, so the “people” were mostly boys between the ages of eight and twenty. Still, Cam and Aiden were successful and famous, at least in their little corner of the world, and it was weird.

“Seriously. But not until September,” Aiden said to Henry.

He must have seen her out of the corner of his eye or sensed her presence—or maybe he heard the fourth step from the bottom creak—but he looked over just as she stepped into the room.

For a second, she froze. Their eyes met. He stopped talking, and her stupid heart flipped again.

He'd stopped by her house. His old house. *The* house. She had a hard time referring to it as *hers*, considering it had been Aiden's house for most of her life.

He was now in a t-shirt and jeans, and his hair was slightly damp.

He still looked really damned good.

And there was something about knowing he'd been naked in the same shower she'd been naked in that morning that made heat curl through her stomach and dive lower.

She mentally rolled her eyes and made herself move into the room. He'd showered in that shower hundreds of times.

Many before or after she did. Why was this an issue all of a sudden?

The. Freaking. Kiss.

And now there had been two.

She also wanted to smell his hair to see what his shampoo smelled like. She admitted she'd probably sniff his shampoo bottle the next time she was in there.

That was so damned stupid.

“Hey, Henry,” she said.

“Hey.” He barely glanced at her.

Yeah, well, she knew nothing about purple diamonds after all.

“Purple diamonds don't really sound very warrior-like,” she said, passing the ottoman.

Aiden gave her a lifted eyebrow and half smile. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

Fuck breathlessness. Fuck. It.

“The diamonds are for the princesses,” Henry said.

She turned back, mostly to break the eye contact with Aiden. “Oh, nice, that's pretty gender stereotypical, isn't it?” she asked, propping a hand on her hip. “Only princesses can have diamonds? I suppose the princesses just sit around and wait for the warriors to bring them diamonds and stuff?”

She doubted that was true. She didn't play the game, but she'd read enough about it—hey, it was her brother's company—to know the women in the game were every bit as kick-ass as the men, and the guys gave the women important roles throughout their virtual world.

Henry rolled his eyes. “The princesses get diamonds every time they bring a monster head to the queen. They get blue ones for troll heads and red ones for witch heads and black ones for dragon heads—only the bad dragons, of course,” Henry said.

Of course. Zoe hid her smile. There was very little her baby brother was as passionate about as *Warriors of Easton*. Being Camden and Aiden's little brother basically made him famous with his friends and most of the boys his age from the neighboring towns. It was serious shit in his world.

“And the purple ones are going to be for the new monsters—the Rabid Arctic Rabbits.” He said it like someone else might talk about the Ark of the Covenant. There was awe and excitement mixed with a solemnity that was unmatched.

Zoe turned wide eyes to Aiden. “Wow.”

He nodded with a grin. “They’re pretty horrible.”

“The snow bunnies?”

He gave a little chuckle that tickled her stomach.

“Yep. They eat hot coals and breathe fire.”

“Well, sure they do,” she said. “I mean, they’re *arctic*, right? They have to stay warm somehow.”

“Right,” Aiden agreed. “The burning rage against humans who’ve taken over their territories and driven them into the desolate, icy mountain ranges isn’t *quite* enough.”

“Huh,” she said. “I don’t think you should teach kids to underestimate burning rage.”

He outright laughed at that. She really liked his laugh.

That thought seemed to come out of nowhere. She’d heard him laugh a million times. This post-Aiden-kiss period of her life was really getting annoying.

“I’ll be sure to send Dax a note,” Aiden said.

She’d never met Dax or Ollie or Grant, the other three partners in Cam and Aiden’s business, but she’d read about them all, and Aiden and Cam talked about them when they were home.

“By the way, there’s no dessert tonight,” she said. “And you’re going to think it was because I was distracted when I was leaving the bakery so didn’t check my texts, but honestly, I don’t have any chocolate pie so wasn’t able to bring one.”

Because you didn't tell us you were coming home. So none of us were prepared."

Why did she feel the need to point all that out?

It wasn't as if Aiden would believe she hadn't been distracted. She'd *clearly* been distracted. And he obviously knew she was attracted to him. If not because of Christmas Eve, then by the way she'd wrapped herself around him in the kitchen like she was drowning in the ocean and he was her life preserver.

She could be upfront about that. She could face that. That was out there in the open and so what? That didn't mean he was going to get his way.

But it felt like he was going to get his way, and she kind of felt like she needed to keep reminding him—and herself—that she wouldn't be that easy for him.

"Oh, that's fine," he said, leaning back into the couch and draping an arm along the back of it, the picture of casual and content. "I had a taste of something a lot sweeter than chocolate pie earlier. Maybe I'll just have seconds of that. Later."

She blushed. Hot and immediately.

He was going to be at the house. With her. Just the two of them. With four beds and three showers and multiple other firm horizontal surfaces. Not to mention a big old fridge in the kitchen.

That was all she could think about.

He was watching her with a mix of heat and amusement and cockiness.

And she wanted to... climb into his lap and kiss the hell out of him.

Damn. Him.

Chapter Five



She shot a glance at Henry—who, of course, had no idea what they were talking about—and then narrowed her eyes at Aiden. “Wouldn’t want to overdo and get sick of it.”

“Not one bit worried about that.”

It was really good that eleven-year-olds were unable to pick up on innuendo and sexual undertones and things like husky, low voices that gave new meaning to every word they said.

She swallowed.

“Zoe! Henry! Aiden! Dinner!”

Zoe actually breathed out a huge, relieved sigh when her mom called from the kitchen.

Aiden gave her a knowing smile.

She was really getting tired of knowing smiles.

Then he stretched to his feet.

Zoe backed up, quickly. Clumsily. Stupidly. It wasn’t like he was about to grab her or bite her.

Though that was kind of how he was looking at her.

Henry jumped up and ran past them.

Zoe started after him, not even willing to be alone with Aiden in her mother’s living room, with five other people in the very next room, for two minutes.

But he caught her by the wrist before she could escape.

She pulled in a deep breath but didn't look at him.

"You know we're not done."

Yeah, dammit, she did know that.

"You should let it go," she told him.

"I'm not going to do that."

She finally looked up at him. "Thought you were a nice guy."

"Well, *surprise*, Sugar, I'm not nice all the time." His voice was firm, and his expression said he was not teasing.

Well, she was sure surprised to find the way he said that pretty damned hot. And Sugar? Really? In her head she thought that should sound a little condescending. Especially coming from a guy who had never had a nickname for her before. But his tone and the look in his eyes did not allow that to sound like anything other than an affectionate-slash-sexy just-between-them name she wanted to hear him call her in bed. Low and husky. Maybe even a little needy. While he was licking her like he was licking sugar off of the cake pops they'd made.

Finally, she sighed. "Yeah, we're not done." She didn't know what she meant by that exactly. That they'd talk about it more? That she'd use him for sex tutoring after all?

But his expression went from surprise to victorious almost instantly. "That's—"

"What's going on? Come on, dinner." Maggie stuck her head around the corner from the dining room.

Zoe jumped. Aiden, of course, acted like he was totally in control and casual. He moved his hand from her arm to her lower back and nudged her in the direction of her mother.

"On our way, Maggie," he said. "Zoe was just apologizing for being too distracted to check your message about the pie."

Ugh. He was definitely *not* nice all the time. She elbowed him.

“He had cake pops at the bakery earlier. He’s fine, Mom,” she said, moving toward the table and taking a seat next to Jane, leaving two empty chairs across from them. She couldn’t sit next to him. Because his shampoo did smell really good. And because she was afraid he’d find ways to “casually” touch her through the meal, and she’d be tearing her clothes off the second she hit the door at the house—that they were going to be sharing for the next who-knew-how-many nights.

“I definitely did *not* get enough at the bakery,” Aiden said, pulling a chair out.

Jocelyn coughed slightly as she carried a big bowl of noodles to the table.

Jane outright laughed.

Zoe sighed. There wasn’t enough vodka and lemonade in this house by far.

* * *

Teasing Zoe was nothing new in his life.

She’d had a crush on his and Cam’s friend Dillon when she was ten. She’d written terrible, angsty poetry when she was thirteen. She’d gotten a horrible orange fake tan when she was fourteen. There had been a lot of wonderful reasons for two big brothers to tease her over the years.

Teasing her about sex though... yeah, that was new, and he was fucking in love with it. He intended to keep doing it. For a very, very long time. Like forever. Because even once they were sleeping together every single night, making her blush and stammer and drop her fork at her mother’s dinner table was a hell of a lot of fun.

Aiden took the seat next to Henry, who paused talking about *Warriors of Easton* only to say grace and then finally stopped only after his father finally told him that every time he said the words troll, diamond, level, enchantment, or awesome, Henry owed him a quarter from his allowance. The

kid would have blown through his entire allotment for the week before he was halfway through his meal.

Aiden chuckled and shared a look with Steve. Henry had been an “oops” baby, and he was beloved—and spoiled—but Steve and Maggie often commented about how there was a reason people had kids when they were younger. Henry was bright and energetic, and frankly, exhausted his parents a lot of the time. His mind went a thousand miles an hour all the time, and it was difficult to keep him from being bored.

Steve and Maggie loved when Cam or Aiden were home because then Henry focused all his intense, spirited, optimistic energy on them. Yes, Henry was an optimist. He insisted on happy endings. He was the ultimate *Warriors of Easton* fan, along with being their biggest critic. They’d made him an honorary member of the board and he used his Fluke Inc. coffee mug every morning for his orange juice.

Having Henry quiet and eating gave everyone else at the table a chance.

“How are things in Chicago?” Maggie asked him.

“Good. Great,” Aiden said. “The big sale has been an adjustment though. We all have more time on our hands now. I think we’re all feeling a little restless.”

“That sale was a great decision,” Steve assured him. “You guys should be proud of yourselves.”

Aiden nodded. They were. Being bought out by a bigger gaming company had been a dream come true. The money that came with it was unreal, and the company’s plan for expansion and development of the *Warriors of Easton* were amazing and far beyond anything he and the guys could have done. They’d pondered the offer for months. It had felt strange thinking of letting go of something they’d built together from the ground up. But it had been an offer they couldn’t refuse. They’d finally decided it meant it was time for them to look at new opportunities.

Still, Aiden knew they were all feeling a little directionless at the moment. Hence, it was the perfect time to take over Hot

Cakes. They needed a new project, and Hot Cakes and Appleby needed them.

“I think that’s exciting,” Maggie said. “We’re very proud of you.”

Aiden heard a soft snort from Zoe. He looked over at her. “I know you don’t think my new... opportunity... is exciting, but I intend to prove you wrong.” Did he mean his move home to be with her? He most certainly did. And she knew it.

She gave him a wide-eyed look as if she hadn’t meant for him to hear that. She cleared her throat. “I, um... was laughing because Mom was practically scandalized by us adding cake pops to the bakery menu. But she thinks it’s exciting that you sold a huge chunk of your very successful company and have no real plan for anything now.”

“I do have a plan,” Aiden said, looking at her directly, his tone low and firm. “I’m happy to go over it with you again if you’ve forgotten.”

“No,” she said quickly then glanced at her mom. “I mean, I know you think you do. It’s just that your decision, which is a lot bigger and *crazier*, makes her proud but us adding little round versions of our cakes on a stick made her worry.”

Maggie shook her head, seemingly too distracted by talk about Buttered Up to wonder what Aiden’s big, crazy plan was. “The bakery is different. It’s small and very dependent on this community. That means we have a much bigger obligation to give everyone exactly what they want and expect from us. We can’t deviate or experiment much. We have a very focused brand.”

“Yes, Mom, I know,” Zoe said.

They all knew. This was the mantra that had led the McCaffery family and Buttered Up for over fifty years.

Maggie wasn’t wrong. Their customer base was much smaller than Fluke’s. That left less wiggle room when it came to giving their customers what they wanted. Aiden understood that. But it had always seemed extraordinarily rigid to him, especially when he’d started actually studying business.

“And you can’t take a bunch of risks when you have Josie to worry about too,” Maggie pointed out.

Zoe frowned. “I know that.” She shot her friend a look. “I would never do anything to risk the business.”

“I know,” Josie said, looking uncomfortable. “Of course I know that.”

“She can always come work with me,” Jane said, taking a big bite of fettuccine.

“Hey, stop trying to poach my employees,” Zoe said, elbowing her. “I’ve stopped pressuring you to quit Hot Cakes and come work for me, but don’t flaunt your medical and dental in Josie’s face or I’ll start again.”

Jane grinned at Josie. “Okay, I won’t mention that I have no medical office co-pays and that I also have eye coverage. I definitely won’t mention my paid vacation time, and I wouldn’t dream of telling her about the big Christmas bonus we got.”

Josie covered her ears with her hands. “Don’t hear anything, Boss.”

“I hate you,” Zoe told Jane. “I worked her ass off at Christmas.”

Jane put her head on Zoe’s shoulder. “You know I love you, and working in the bakery would be a hell of a good time, but you get that I need the solid benefits and stuff.”

Zoe put her head against Jane’s. “Of course I do. And if I could, I’d offer all that and more. To you *and* to Josie.”

Josie removed her hands from her ears and blew Zoe a kiss, proving she’d heard it all.

Aiden frowned, listening to the exchange. “You don’t offer benefits?” he asked Zoe.

“There’s no such thing as paid time off when you own your own business,” she said. “Well, I mean, unless you’re a millionaire. I guess you own your own business. And you’re here. Out of the blue. For no reason. Taking time off.”

He gave her a look. She knew very well why he was here. He'd been *very* clear. At least about her part in why he was here. He shifted, a little uncomfortable about the part she didn't know. But she would. Eventually. When it wouldn't ruin everything. "We have benefits though," he said. "Health insurance and stuff."

She glanced at Maggie and lifted her shoulder. "We're fine."

"But—"

"We have a plan," Zoe interrupted him with a look that clearly said, *drop it*.

"Zoe's still on my insurance," Steve said, taking a bite of garlic bread. "When she's too old for that, we'll look into a policy. It will be wildly expensive, especially for such a small operation, but she's saving and we're shopping around. Lance Gordon is our agent and he's helping us."

For not the first time, Aiden appreciated how open the McCafferys were with him. There weren't really any off-limit topics. He was part of the family. Even when it came to finances and business.

They needed more than a local insurance agent. Hell, Zoe probably needed a financial planner and business adviser. Things were vastly different now than they had been when Letty had started the business. They were different even from when Maggie had worked in the store. She'd had her husband's health insurance at least. His dad's insurance had covered his mom when she'd worked for Buttered Up. Zoe and Jocelyn didn't have that.

There was another good reason for Zoe to marry him. Even before her dad's insurance kicked her off.

Aiden frowned. He didn't like how unstable all this sounded. None of this was really news, but now he was looking at it from the perspective of a businessman, a guy who'd been running a company for nine years now.

"Anyway, I think it's safe to say we won't be taking any risks bigger than rolling our cake into little balls," Zoe said.

“We all know what Buttered Up is known for and good at, and we’re good if we stick with that.”

“I trust you, Zoe,” Josie said. “I really do.”

“I know.” Zoe gave her friend a smile, but Aiden could see there was a little worry at the edges.

He’d never really thought about Zoe as a business owner. That sounded stupid, even in his head. She’d been a business owner for five years now. But she’d just eased into it, taken over slowly, was doing something he’d watched her do for as long as he could remember. The bakery was such a fixture, in the town and in his life, that it never occurred to him it would be anything but solid, and yes, unchangeable. It had never dawned on him that she had business worries like he did. That probably made him kind of a jerk actually.

Zoe looked at Aiden. “I guess Aiden doing something big and risky like suddenly thinking he needs a new... opportunity... isn’t that out of character.”

Yes, she paused before *opportunity*, emphasizing it the way he had.

Aiden leaned in slightly, curious where she was going with this.

“Aiden and Cam really are the only ones who’ve ever done anything different or big and adventurous,” she went on. “Leaving here. Starting a company. Traveling. Meeting new people. Trying new things.”

She seemed thoughtful, as if she were just realizing all that, and Aiden lifted a brow. Yeah, maybe he wasn’t as boring as she thought.

He could admit it bugged him that she thought that. He’d definitely done a lot over the past nine years. He’d been coast to coast, seen every major city, met celebrities and influencers. But surprising her was turning into a really good time.

“I guess it was inevitable that he’d get bored with things in Chicago and look for a way to shake things up,” she said.

That was *not* what was going on here. Aiden gave her a look that said he realized they were having another conversation inside of the bigger conversation.

“Still, there’s definitely something to be said for long history and stability and comfort,” Aiden said. “Knowing exactly where you are and what you’re doing and why, knowing the people you’re with completely... that is all pretty damned great.”

Zoe didn’t frown at him the way he’d expected. He knew she knew what he was getting at. Them. Their history, how well they knew each other, how comfortable they were around each other. Other than the constant semi-erection he’d had since seeing her again today, of course.

Finally, Zoe nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I wouldn’t change anything about what I’ve got.”

He lifted a brow again, silently calling bullshit. She was the only one who needed to know he wasn’t buying it.

She might not *want* to want to change things between them, but she wanted more of the heat and chemistry. She wanted more of what they’d started in the kitchen. More of what she’d started at Christmas. Building on everything they already had was going to make all that even better. He knew she could feel that.

“Um, so... speaking of shaking things up,” Jane said. “Some of us might have to get used to change whether we want to or not.”

Zoe frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Someone’s buying the factory.”

Suddenly a bite of fettuccini lodged in Aiden’s throat. He reached for his lemonade, taking a quick drink. Then another. Fuck. The news was already out? Of course it was.

Aiden had called Eric Lancaster before he’d left Chicago, indicating he was interested and wanted to talk about a deal. But nothing was in writing, and Eric had been clear that until they signed on the line, he would still be entertaining other offers. Aiden understood, but it made him anxious. He needed

to talk to his partners as soon as possible. Zoe had been his first priority upon getting to Appleby, but getting the deal done with the Lancasters was priority two. He'd also made it clear to Eric that he wanted to keep his interest in the company under wraps for a few days.

Dammit.

“Really? Wow,” Zoe said.

Aiden focused on the conversation around the table. This was actually key. He needed to see their reactions.

Zoe was frowning. Maggie looked more curious than upset. Jane looked a little worried. Steve was definitely just interested. Jocelyn too. But Josie was a secondary nemesis to the Hot Cakes company. Like Aiden always had been, he supposed. She hated the Lancaster family because she loved the McCafferys, and the McCafferys hated the Lancasters.

“Who is it?” Zoe asked.

Aiden gulped more lemonade. This was it. Jane might be about to out him. To his family. Because they were. Not by blood, but by everything else that mattered in a family.

He did not want to hurt the McCafferys, and he did not want to lose them. He *needed* Maggie. She'd been his mom for longer than his own had, and had been there for him through his loss. The worst thing a kid could possibly go through.

Maggie had nursed him through illnesses, broken bones, a broken heart or two, definitely wounded pride. She'd encouraged him. She'd scolded him. She'd told him he could be whatever he wanted, but that he'd better want to be a good guy. Most of all, she'd talked with him about his mom. In a way no one else could or had been willing to. His dad hadn't been able to handle it. Maggie had known Julie longer than his dad had anyway. Maggie and Julie had grown up together. Maggie had memories to share with him that no one else could. And she had. She never shied away from helping him know his mom better, from remembering her, and he would be forever grateful to her for that.

Maggie McCaffery had helped him through the worst time of his life, and he knew for a fact that he would not be the person he was today if it wasn't for her.

He loved her to his very bones. He could not hurt her or lose her.

He focused on Zoe though.

Because Maggie would forgive him. Eventually. She might be angry. She might be hurt. It might take time. But she would forgive him, and they'd talk it out and they'd be okay.

Zoe was the one he wasn't so sure of. The woman was irrationally protective of that bakery. Nothing mattered to her more than her family's legacy. And she didn't have fifteen years of loving him like Maggie did. Zoe really might not forgive him.

Aiden held his breath, waiting for Jane's answer.

Chapter Six



“We don’t know,” Jane answered.

Aiden struggled to hide his expression. He wanted to slump in his chair and suck in a relieved breath. Instead, he gulped more lemonade.

“All we know is someone made an offer. It hasn’t been accepted or anything. We don’t know who it is. But Melissa told Nancy who told Taylor who told Brianna who told me that Eric got a call from a guy who said he wanted to buy Hot Cakes, and Eric was in a really good mood when he got off the phone.”

Eric Lancaster was Didi’s oldest son and president of Hot Cakes. Melissa was his executive assistant. Melissa was the mother of one of Aiden and Cam’s classmates. But that was as far as Aiden could follow the names. The rest didn’t really matter though. Eric was happy about the conversation. That was the key takeaway here. That was good. That meant there wasn’t another offer on the table. Yet. It meant Eric liked what he’d had to say.

Aiden blew out a breath.

“Well, that sucks,” Zoe said.

Aiden frowned. “It does? Why?”

“Someone is keeping Hot Cakes alive,” she said. “Obviously, I was hoping that it would close and die.”

Aiden cast a look at Jane. She was chewing on her bottom lip.

“That’s not a very cool way to feel about your friend’s job, is it?”

Jane had started working for Hot Cakes part time after school in high school and had stayed on. She had certainly been bright enough and had the grades for college, but she had a complicated home life, and college hadn’t been a part of her plan. He remembered her telling him once that the more things could be simple and straightforward in her life—like a factory job that she knew inside and out and could depend on for decent money and benefits—the better.

“Jane knows how I feel,” Zoe said, frowning at him and then looking at Jane. She grabbed her friend’s hand. “I love Jane and want her to be happy, but she can do more than that factory. If they closed down, she’d be fine.”

“Are you happy the factory is staying open?” he asked Jane directly.

She squeezed Zoe’s hand and then said to him, “I am. Definitely. I don’t want to make cupcakes at Buttered Up, and I don’t want to work as an aide at the school, and I don’t want to do farmwork, and I don’t want to learn data entry for any of the offices in town... and that’s pretty much all there is.”

She was right. Small-town Iowa had limited job opportunities. It was just a fact. In fact, there were fewer jobs now than there had been ten years ago. Online shopping, faster shipping, and bigger stores in the next city over with more selection and cheaper prices made it almost impossible for small shops to stay open in little towns. The jobs in Appleby, like many towns in the Midwest, were teaching, healthcare, or working on the family farm. And even family farms were struggling. If Jane wanted to drive to the next city, there would be more jobs, but that would take job training, if not a degree, as well as time on the road and the expense of gas and more car maintenance along with the time away from her family.

Small Midwestern towns were dying. Young people went away to college and then never came back because there were no jobs. The cities in Iowa were growing, but the rural areas were losing population every year. It was one of the huge

reasons keeping Hot Cakes open *in Appleby* was important to Aiden.

“You make cupcakes every damned day,” Zoe said grumpily. She let go of her friend’s hand as Jane reached for her lemonade.

Jane laughed. “Yeah, okay. But not *quite* the same way you do, Z.”

The Hot Cakes brand snack cakes offered cream-filled cupcakes—Cupettes—in chocolate, vanilla, and red velvet. They were mini sized—about two bites each—and came in packs of four. They were nothing like what Buttered Up did.

“But you *could* do cupcakes with me and Josie. If you wanted to.”

Zoe almost seemed a little hurt Jane didn’t want to work for her.

“I don’t even run the cupcake line,” Jane said. “You know that. And even if I did, the machines do all the work. I can’t stand in your cute little yellow bakery in your cute frilly little yellow aprons and make cupcakes into cats and baseballs and...”

“Poop emojis,” Henry said helpfully.

Jane grinned at him. “And poop emojis.”

“You’re very talented and smart and awesome,” Zoe insisted. “Josie and I could teach you. And you look great in yellow.”

Jane shifted in her chair. “Z, I don’t *want* to be creative like that. I like my job. It’s... a job, and that’s all I want it to be. I don’t need to be creative or fulfilled by my work. I have plenty of problem solving and fulfillment *outside* of work. I just want to go do my job, not hate it, know what I’m doing every day, and collect a paycheck. I want that to be one area of my life that is steady and predictable and... boring.” She frowned. “I just want it to still be steady with these new people.”

Aiden didn't know Jane well enough to know *everything* about her personal life to know what all she was talking about, but he knew she had at least one younger sibling and that her father was sick with one of those horrible, progressive neurological diseases—he couldn't remember which one at the moment, and he made a note to ask Zoe about it.

Her job would still be stable though. It would be an even better job than it had been before. He'd be sure of it.

And that was the moment it really hit Aiden—he was going to be Jane's boss.

She was going to be working for him.

Well, that was... awkward.

Now when she bitched to her friends about work and her boss—because everyone bitched about work and their boss—it would be his company and him.

Hot Cakes had nearly three hundred employees. He'd briefly thought about the fact he would personally know many of those employees. That was one of the driving factors for him wanting to buy the damned company in the first place. To save those jobs.

But sitting across Maggie's dining room table and eating fettuccine with one of them while she worried about her job to her best friends was not something he'd thought through.

If she got pissed off at something at the factory, would she bring it up over dinner with Maggie and Zoe? Maybe. What about the other people at the factory? If they got ticked off, he'd probably hear about it at the post office and the diner and the corner of Depot and Main and probably in the bakery. Of course, that was assuming Zoe didn't ban him from Buttered Up for the rest of his life.

That was actually kind of how the town worked now. Among those who had deep roots in Appleby, the town was strictly divided, between those loyal to the Lancasters and those loyal to the McCafferys. The Lancasters had a larger number of employees and also a bigger network of people who wanted to be nice to them because of their wealth. Like the

bank, the medical clinic they donated to, the various community groups they supported, the mayor whose campaign they'd contributed to.

But the McCafferys had what they called *true* friends because their allegiances weren't dependent on employment or donations. There were people who truly thought what Didi Lancaster had done to Letty had been a terrible betrayal and who distrusted the Lancasters' money and influence. It was also a fact that Didi's husband Dean and their son, Eric, didn't have a lot of actual friends. At least not the "regular people" of Appleby. Dean had always given off very elitist airs, and Eric had been an asshole as long as Aiden had known him. Aiden's dad had never liked Eric and had stories from high school of Eric thinking he was better than everyone else and getting away with a lot because of his daddy's penchant for getting out his checkbook whenever Eric got into trouble.

There was also a well-known policy at Hot Cakes that no employee there could do business with Buttered Up. It was ridiculous, of course, but no one had ever had the spine to challenge it. That meant all three hundred employees, plus their families, got their birthday and wedding cakes, muffins, cookies and so on from the bakery in the next town. Never from Letty, Maggie, and Zoe. It was why Jane's sneaking up to the back door of the bakery was a big deal. It was part of the Code of Conduct and was a fireable offense.

It would, of course, be the first thing Aiden changed at the company, but for now, it was one of the biggest things that kept the bitterness between the families alive and well. Just like the fact that none of the McCafferys' friends or family members bought or ate Hot Cakes products. The convenience store on this side of town didn't even carry the snack cakes.

It was all ridiculous. The companies were not actual competitors. A prepackaged snack cake someone stuck in their lunch box or grabbed during a road trip was hardly the same thing as a made-from-scratch and custom-decorated cake for a special occasion. There was room in people's lives for both.

Just not in Appleby.

“You do like your job there though?” Aiden asked.

He had to be careful pressing for information. He couldn't act too interested. But Jane was a friend. A friend of a friend, at least. And they were on the subject, so surely he could get away with a few questions without it seeming suspect.

“I do,” she said. “Mostly.”

“Except when they're making you do mandatory overtime,” Josie said.

“Well, right,” Jane said.

“And not when they're offering people early retirement and then not replacing them,” Zoe said.

“Right.” Jane sighed.

“And not when they're taking away the childcare center,” Josie said.

Jane held up her hands and gave Aiden a weak smile. “I said *mostly*, right?”

He was frowning and worked on not acting completely pissed off about the things Josie and Zoe had revealed. “All that has happened?”

“It has.” She shrugged. “Cutbacks.”

“Why all the cutbacks?” he asked. “They netted five million last year. That's down a little over the past three years but it's still profitable.”

They all stared at him.

Right. Why would he know that? Shit. “I was curious when they went up for sale,” he explained. Which was true. He'd wondered if they'd been losing money or if someone had been embezzling or just what the hell was going on.

Jane leaned in. “Eric was hanging on, doing the bare minimum, until his dad died. Then he just let it go. Didn't invest, did as much cutting as he could. It's clear he's completely over it. Everyone was sure he was just going to close it up.”

Aiden knew all about Eric's attitude. But he hadn't known about the cuts and early retirements. Because he hadn't asked.

He realized he'd come in here thinking he'd be the big hero, but just keeping the factory open was not the whole story. There was a lot more that needed to be done to make Hot Cakes a great place to work.

He was going to do it. He had to. Not just because this was his hometown and people he knew, but because how could he not? How did someone pocket five million dollars while their employees, the people actually doing the work, worked mandatory overtime and lost their childcare?

"I know you're worried," Zoe said to Jane. "But just know my offer stands."

"And I love you for it, and if these new people are horrible, I might be begging on your doorstep," Jane said with a smile. "But I'm hopeful it will be okay."

"You can't employ them all," Aiden said. Without really thinking. But even as Zoe frowned at him, he didn't regret it. He lifted his eyebrows. "You can't absorb the entire Hot Cakes workforce, so that's not really a solution to this problem, is it?"

"So?" She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms.

"That's a lot of people out of work if this new buyer hadn't come along."

"Not really my problem," she said. "They all chose to work there. People think a big company is going to take care of them, but sometimes they learn the hard way." She glanced at Jane. "Sorry, babe. But you know I'm right. Big companies are less intimate. They care less about individual people. There's less loyalty. It's about the bottom line."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Aiden protested.

"I suppose it doesn't," she allowed. "If rich people weren't assholes who only think of themselves."

He narrowed his eyes. "Referring to anyone in particular?"

“You and Cam are pretty generous,” she said. “But tell me, Aiden, do you *like* being rich?”

She was such a brat. “I do. Because then I can give it away.”

“Sure. But you still make more than fifty grand a year, right? And you don’t worry about things like your farmland flooding or your kid getting a basketball scholarship because that’s the only way you can afford college, or you being off work because of a horrible case of pneumonia and using up your sick days.” She leaned in, pinning him with a serious look. “Your money doesn’t just give you *money*, Aiden. It gives you privilege. Privilege to not worry. To not be scared. To not lie awake at night and wonder what you’re going to do. To not be at someone else’s mercy. You work your ass off and you’re rewarded for it. You don’t have to sit around and wait for someone else to notice you’re working your ass off and feel generous toward you.”

Her eyes were glittering and her cheeks were pink. She looked a lot like she had after he’d kissed the hell out of her against the fridge. Or when she’d been pissed at him for telling her they should get married.

But this was even hotter in a way. Because now she was riled up on someone else’s behalf.

“You’re right.”

Her eyes flickered with surprise at his response.

But she was right. “You’re absolutely right.” He looked at Jane. “The first thing you need to do when new people take over is make an appointment to talk to the CEO. You’ve been there a long time. You know all the people who work there. You know the place inside and out. Tell him you have some ideas and demands. Tell him you can be a resource. And tell him there needs to be some changes.”

Jane’s eyes had gotten progressively wider as he spoke. Then she laughed. “Sure. Okay, Aiden, I’ll do that.”

“Trust me. Someone needs to speak up for the employees.” He frowned.

“I told her she should be the union leader,” Josie said.

Jane gave Josie an eye roll. “Yeah. I don’t want that at all.”

“Why not?” Aiden asked.

“I take care of and worry about a lot of people outside of work,” she said. “I don’t want to be in charge of worrying or taking care of people *at* work too.”

“You already do,” Josie pointed out with an affectionate smile.

Jane sighed. “I just want to go to work, get paid, and go home.”

“But you can’t, because you’re strong and smart and loving,” Zoe said. “You care about the work conditions and how people are treated and if they’re happy. You can’t help it. You might as well be in a position to *do* something about it.”

Aiden nodded. “You really need to at least get your current union leader to meet with the new management.”

With him. Aiden realized it was strange he was giving her this advice. Eventually, she would find out it was *him* he was encouraging her to meet with. But he really did want to hear this. He wouldn’t be waltzing into a company that was perfect and running smoothly, obviously. But if he knew the problems, he could fix them. Hopefully.

“We don’t have a union leader right now,” Jane said.

“Then you need to do it,” Aiden told her. Jane was perfect for it. She was smart and dedicated and no-nonsense. She knew the factory inside and out. If Aiden wanted to know what was really going on, Jane was exactly who he should be talking to. “As a guy in management, I can tell you people like you are invaluable to us.”

“I’m not some geeky computer programmer who knows all about dragons and trolls.” She gave Henry a wink. “I’m just a girl who knows how to push buttons and pull levers.”

Aiden dropped it. For now. His pushing was going to seem suspicious. But he needed to get into the factory, see how it worked, figure some things out, dive into the employee

benefits. And more. There was a lot. He was going to need his partners.

They could look at benefits, even talk to employees. Cam would review the contracts, of course. Grant could help look at new benefit plans and do some cost analysis. The Fluke team could definitely make this happen.

“Well, Letty is probably frowning down from heaven, convinced Didi waited to sell until Letty was dead,” Steve said with a little chuckle. Clearly, he was trying to lighten things up and divert the conversation from all of Jane’s worries.

Maggie shook her head. “Didi probably did.”

“Oh, come on,” Steve said.

“You come on,” Maggie told him. “You always said there were two sides to the story, but she named it Hot Cakes. You know that made Letty almost crazier than anything.”

Aiden looked from Steve to Maggie and then back. “What do you mean? What about the name made Letty crazy?”

He’d heard some of the stories about Charlotte “Letty” McCaffery and Dorothy “Didi” Lancaster, best friends growing up, who started the bakery together—and then Didi’s betrayal—but it was very possible there were family stories he didn’t know. Now, more than ever, he was curious about the feud.

“Once it was doing well and she was getting ready to incorporate and make it an official business, Didi went to Mom and asked if she’d be her partner,” Steve said. Letty was his mother, but he’d had no interest in the bakery as a full-time job. Fortunately, his young wife had jumped at the chance to work with Letty and had eventually taken it over.

“Wait, Didi asked Letty to be her partner in Hot Cakes?” Aiden asked. He’d definitely never heard that part of the story.

Steve nodded. “Yep. They hadn’t spoken in months, but Didi credited her success to Mom’s recipe and told her, ‘They’re selling like hotcakes, Letty. Come on, let’s do this together.’” He shook his head. “Mom told her she could shove her hot cakes straight up her ass. So Didi went on and filed her

official paperwork, including trademarking the original recipe, and the name Hot Cakes. When they first painted that on the side of their factory, I thought Mom was going to have a stroke.”

Aiden’s eyes were wide, he knew. Everyone around the table was listening raptly. “I have never heard this part of the story,” Aiden said.

He glanced at Zoe. She shook her head. Josie and Jane looked just as surprised.

“What I’ve heard is that the most popular cake among the men who would stop in before their work shifts was the butter cake,” Aiden said. “One day, one of the men asked Didi and Letty if they could wrap up several pieces and bring them out to the factory—when the farm implement factory was still here.”

Steve nodded. “He said if they could bring them out there, right to the men, they could sell a lot more. Mom, of course, said no. That would mean one of them needing to leave the bakery, and she had no way of knowing how much more to make and a dozen other excuses.”

“So Didi did it on her own. Just to see what would happen,” Aiden said. “She made extra cakes the night before at home, wrapped up individual pieces, and took them out there.”

“And sold out,” Steve said.

“But she couldn’t tell Letty because Letty would have been upset with her,” Aiden went on with the story he knew. “And she wanted to be sure it wasn’t just a one-time stroke of luck. She did it again. But word had spread and she ran out. Men promised to buy them if she’d bring extra the next day. She did. She made a couple of other kinds of cake too. Everything sold out. Then people would stop her and ask if she could come by their place of work to sell them some. It was the convenience of it that they liked. Pretty soon, she was doing it every morning before work. It went on for over a month before she told Letty about it. She was sure Letty would be excited because it was new business—people who didn’t have

time to stop by or a way to get to the bakery before work but who wanted the cakes for lunch or snacks.”

“And Letty was absolutely *not* excited. She was furious. They had a huge fight about Didi going behind her back and using her recipes,” Steve said. “But Didi knew it was a great business plan.”

“So she kept doing it. With Letty’s butter cake recipe,” Maggie said.

Steve nodded. “She used other recipes for the other cakes, but that was the most popular one and the one people asked for when she tried to leave it off her menu. She adapted it a bit, but everyone—including Letty—knew it was essentially Letty’s recipe and the whole reason things took off for Didi.”

Aiden sat back in his chair. “But she offered Letty a chance to go into business with her and Letty turned her down.”

“She couldn’t have said yes to that,” Zoe said from across the table. “Didi took her recipe and then kept selling the cakes even after she knew Letty was upset. Didi chose making money over their friendship.”

“Or was she just embarrassed Didi’s idea was better than her own?” Aiden asked.

“Better?” Zoe asked with a frown. “We make cakes that *mean* something. We make birthdays special. We’re a part of celebrations like weddings and graduations and retirements. People come to us for special occasions. Not just a wrapped-up snack cake people don’t think twice about when they wolf it down at lunch.”

Aiden took a deep breath. She was right. He wasn’t wrong. Didi hadn’t been wrong. But Letty hadn’t been wrong either.

“But Letty was too proud to expand her business and save her friendship,” Aiden said, his eyes on Zoe.

Zoe met his gaze. “Or was she brave enough to realize maybe that friendship wasn’t what she thought it was and to let it go in order to keep doing what she believed in?”

Okay, that was another way of looking at it.

He turned to Steve. “Was that why Letty never changed anything at the bakery? Because she was proving what she’d been doing from day one was right just as it was?”

“You’ve got it,” Steve said with a nod. “She wouldn’t even want to add a new pie after that because people might not like it. And that would be like admitting Didi had been right in thinking the bakery wasn’t already everything it could be.”

“Wow.” Aiden shook his head. Then looked at Zoe again. Surely, she could see that *that* level of stubbornness was too much.

Zoe just looked back at him, leaning on her forearms on the tabletop.

“Grandma told me if someone makes fun of you, you have to act like you love whatever they’re making fun of.”

Everyone looked at Henry as he scooped the last of his noodles into his mouth.

He had been, for the most part, ignoring everything they were talking about. Or at least, he’d seemed to be. Henry’s future plans had nothing to do with the bakery. He fully intended to come work for Cam and Aiden and one day take over their company. Probably by the time he was twenty-five, if they were all being honest.

“When did she tell you that?” Aiden asked.

“A kid at school was making fun of this part of my hair that always sticks up.” Henry flicked at the cowlick on the back of his head. “I told her it was making me mad and asked her to cut it off. She said no way. The best way to get back at that kid was to get some gel and make that part of my hair *really* stick up and then tell everyone how much I loved it. She said people won’t make fun of things if they think it won’t bug you.”

Steve and Maggie both smiled at Henry. “That hair *shouldn’t* bug you,” Maggie said. “It’s just hair.”

Henry nodded. “Yeah, and when I made it stick up on purpose, that’s kind of what everyone figured out.”

Aiden thought about that. It was all very interesting. Didi had proposed change, and that change had worked out. She'd made a point of that with Letty, even naming her company Hot Cakes because her cakes were selling like crazy, and in response, Letty had dug in, deep, on exactly what she'd been doing, absolutely *not* changing a single thing.

They started clearing the dishes from the table and conversation diverted to lighter topics, probably by Josie and Maggie, until eventually, Aiden found himself in the dining room with Zoe alone, picking up an empty breadbasket and a handful of forks.

"I assume you still want to get in my pants?" she asked.

Maybe being in the dining room alone with her wasn't an accident.

"With everything in me," he said sincerely, looking at her across the table.

"Then I would suggest you quit thinking my grandmother was crazy and stop defending Didi Lancaster and Hot Cakes to me," she said.

Aiden sighed. "Zoe, come on. You know the factory needs to stay open. You have to be able to sympathize with all those people. This town. The *town* would be affected if that factory closed."

"They're our competition, Aiden."

"They're not really. And you know that."

"The Butter Sticks should have been ours."

He sighed. "That may be true," he admitted. "But those don't actually compete with anything you sell now."

"You don't think people sometimes grab Peanut Butter Pinwheels or Fudgie Fritters rather than coming in for peanut butter cupcakes or fudge brownies from me because they're easier and already packaged and cheaper?"

He thought carefully about how to answer. Finally, he just went with honest. "Okay, yeah, they probably do."

“Of course they do,” she said with an eye roll.

“But if Hot Cakes was in another town or even state, it would be the same thing. You could say the same thing of Hostess or Little Debbie. You don’t consider them competition, do you?”

“I do,” she told him stubbornly. “But, of course, Hot Cakes is different because all that could have been ours.”

He didn’t believe that, actually. Even if they’d kept the original butter cake recipe, they never would have packaged them individually and sold them in gas stations. He studied her for a moment. “So why don’t you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Prepackage some stuff and make it cheaper.”

“I don’t have the machines or capacity to do something like that.”

“You could figure it out. Just wrap or box things individually.”

“Extra packaging costs more money. I have to cover my costs.”

“Then make the stuff smaller. The Fudgie Fritters are way smaller than your brownies. For a reason,” he said.

“The other reason is they’re mass produced and they can negotiate for bulk ingredients,” she said. “There’s a limit to what I can do.”

“But you could do *something*. If your quality is better—which it is,” he said quickly, holding up a hand, “then people will pay more. Prepackage some stuff, and mark it down a little, and talk to the convenience store about some shelf space.”

“How does marking it down help me make more money?”

“At a lower price you could sell greater quantities.” She knew this, but he was willing to talk it out with her. “Or if you don’t want to do that, add some new products.”

“I did. We’re doing cake pops now.”

“With the leftover cake and frosting you already make. And only because Josie pushed. And you kind of hate them,” he said.

She didn’t deny it.

“Maybe you could offer something like cake-decorating classes instead.”

“And teach people to make everything for themselves instead of paying us to do it?”

“You have an excuse to avoid every single idea.” She was incredibly obstinate. But she made his heart pound. She didn’t think he was always right or perfect or some kind of savior. And that was probably good for him.

“They’re all risks,” Zoe said.

“You mean they’re all changes.”

She frowned.

Aiden smiled. God, she was stubborn. And gorgeous. And a pain in the ass. And he’d never wanted a woman more.

“So about me getting into your pants...”

“Not tonight,” she told him with a look that said *that* should have been obvious.

“And why’s that?”

“You’ve been arguing with me all night. And judging me. I’m not taking my clothes off for you after that.”

But that sure as hell sounded like there was a chance that was going to happen in the future. If he toed her line. He grinned internally. He’d do whatever he had to. He could work on softening her feelings toward Hot Cakes more slowly.

“For future notice, if I want to get you naked, I need to always go along with whatever you say, do whatever you want, and generally agree that you’re always right.”

She nodded. “Yes. Definitely. Absolutely.” She tilted her head and looked him up and down. “And wearing a suit doesn’t hurt.”

Then she turned on her heel and headed into the kitchen.

He looked down at his t-shirt and jeans. And chuckled.

But if she thought she'd just stumped him there, she was *very* wrong.

He had plenty of suits. And as she'd pointed out, plenty of money to get more.

Was that also privileged of him? Yes, yes it was. Because getting Zoe McCaffery naked was absolutely going to be a privilege.

Chapter Seven



She'd totally lied to him.

Aiden did not need to agree with her and think her ideas were all brilliant for her to want to sleep with him.

In fact, arguing with him about things of substance—business and employee benefits and the effects of Hot Cakes on the town and people of Appleby—had been... interesting.

And surprising.

It wasn't that they'd never argued. Lord Almighty. They'd argued about Hawkeye football play-calling and if pineapple belonged on pizza—it definitely did—and if she'd cheated at poker—another definitely. But this was different. This felt grown-up. Important. Challenging.

She'd liked it.

She *hadn't* been lying about the suits though. Him wearing a tie definitely made her more inclined to take her clothes off. Whether or not she wanted him to take the tie off in bed remained to be seen.

The dining room and kitchen were finally cleaned up, and the huge perk of her family loving Aiden became apparent when her mom and dad and Henry all settled in the living room with him and started chatting. It gave Zoe the perfect opportunity to pull Jane and Josie out onto the back patio after all.

“Tell me what to do,” she demanded of her friends as soon as she slid the glass door shut behind them.

“About?” Jane asked. But she was already smiling.

“Aiden. Living with me.”

“Be grateful for all the water you’re going to be saving?” Jane suggested.

Zoe frowned at her. “What?”

“By showering together.”

Jocelyn giggled.

“That’s not helpful,” Zoe muttered.

“True. The showers will probably be even longer if Aiden is in there with her,” Josie said to Jane.

“Good point,” Jane said. “Well, less laundry because you’ll only be washing the sheets on one bed?” She shook her head. “No, because you’ll probably be getting those sheets even dirtier than usual, so you’ll have to wash them more often.” She shrugged. “Sorry, I’ve got nothing. There is *nothing* good about Aiden living with you.”

Zoe huffed out a frustrated breath. “I know.”

Josie and Jane both laughed.

“Come on,” Jane said. “Aiden’s awesome. And clearly he’s regretting his Christmas decision. That’s got to feel good, right?”

Zoe sighed. “That’s the thing. He doesn’t regret it. He’s not sorry for turning me down at Christmas. Thinks that was the right thing to do.”

“What’s he want now, then?” Jane asked.

“Her.”

Zoe shot Jocelyn a look. “What?”

“That’s what he told me. I asked why he was here, and he said he’s going to sweep you off your feet.”

Zoe felt her heart do a little flip. She frowned. That was so annoying.

“Wow.” Jane looked from Josie to Zoe. “Well, awesome, now you can get rid of that pesky V-card, once and for all, just like you planned.”

“Shh!” Zoe glanced at the house. There was no way anyone inside could hear them. “You can’t let him know that’s still a thing.”

“But...” Jane frowned, confused. “Wait... what?”

“He thinks maybe I already got rid of it.” Zoe winced after she said it.

Jane’s eyes widened. “Why would he think that?”

“I might have insinuated that.”

“*Why?*” Josie asked.

“I can’t have him think I’ve been pining away for him for five months!” Zoe said.

“But...” Jane looked at Jocelyn and then back to Zoe. “You haven’t been *pinning* for him. But you haven’t been with anyone else either. There’s a lot of space in between those two things. Why can’t he know that?”

Zoe sighed. “I don’t know. I sort of... panicked, I guess. He just struts in here after all this time and says ‘Okay, let’s do this,’ and I’m supposed to just melt. That’s so typical. And insulting.” She crossed her arms. “Especially when he turned me down so easily before.”

Jane grinned at her. “That’s your ego talking.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah.”

“How is that really different from what he’s doing?” Josie asked. “You expected to walk into his bedroom at Christmas and say, ‘Hey, could you give me a quick orgasm, please?’ and he was supposed to just be all in without a single thought.”

Zoe stared at her. “Well, first, I didn’t expect an orgasm.” She knew enough about sex to know those didn’t happen every time, and very often they didn’t happen the first time. “And second... yeah. I did expect him to just be all in. It’s sex.”

“It’s sex *with you*,” Josie said. “We told you even back then that makes it all different.”

“Argh!” Zoe let her head fall back, covering her face. “I thought going to someone I knew so well would make it easier. Instead, it’s complicating everything. Now he thinks we need to get married!” She looked at her friends. “I need a one-night stand. With a stranger. Who’s not an ax murderer but who I will never see again. Can you help me out with that?”

Josie’s eyes got wide. Jane started laughing.

Zoe propped her hands on her hips. “What?”

“That is the *last* thing you need,” Jane informed her.

“You would be *terrible* with a one-night stand,” Josie said.

“Excuse me?”

“Seriously,” Jane agreed. “You’re not one-night stand material, Z.”

“I. Just. Need. Sex.” Zoe was gritting her teeth. Good Lord. Everything in society made it seem that a young, healthy, relatively decent-looking, willing woman could have sex—especially no-strings-attached-sex—*very* easily. That was very much not turning out to be the case.

“I know you think so,” Jane said, a little sympathetically now. “I understand everything you’ve said about being a twenty-five-year-old virgin and everything. I do. But honey, you don’t do casual. You don’t do short term. You don’t do superficial. I mean, the guy you thought of to take your virginity is literally the one nonrelative male you’ve known the longest.”

“Because I can trust him.”

“Exactly,” Josie said. “There is no way in hell you could go to a hotel room with some guy you just met at a bar and get naked. No. Way.”

Zoe frowned at her. “And you could?”

“Maybe.” Josie lifted a shoulder. “He’d have to be a *very* good flirt. Very charming. He’d have to be funny and make me

laugh. He'd have to do something sweet—like rescue a kitten or help an old lady carry her groceries or something. But I wouldn't have to know his whole history.” She nodded as if thinking it all over. “Yeah, a funny, cute, sweet guy could definitely get me naked on the first date. If he was wearing a t-shirt that said something like ‘I'm very good with my rod. I make fish come,’ I'd be all over him. Even if it was one night.”

Zoe actually snorted at that. Josie was sweet. Like *sweet*. But clearly she'd given this some thought.

“I saw Sam Carson wearing that shirt the other day,” Jane said. “Naughty girl.” She gave Josie a grin that looked almost proud.

“Sam is definitely someone who would be fun. For one night.” Josie winked.

Sam was a nice guy. Funny. Goofy even. But he wasn't all that bright. Josie would be bored with him after one night for sure.

Zoe immediately thought of Aiden. She wouldn't get bored with him.

Wait. What? She *would* get bored with him. Right? She knew everything about him. How was that *not* boring?

But bantering with him was fun. Sassing him was fun. Kissing him was definitely fun. Seeing him with her family made her happy. And listening to him talk business tonight had been interesting. Arguing with him was fun. He took her seriously and listened to her, even when he didn't agree with her.

Sure, he thought her beloved, recently deceased grandmother was crazy. But... he'd still loved her. He would have still sat at the dining room table with her tonight and been respectful and sweet and teased her and made her laugh. He might have even gotten away with teasing her *about* being so stubborn and a little crazy. He *might* have even gotten away with teasing Letty about Hot Cakes. If anyone could pull that off, it would have been Aiden.

He had a way about him. A way that even Letty McCaffery wouldn't have been able to resist.

Zoe sighed. He definitely had a way with *her*.

Could she come home at night and talk about her day with him? Not just about how they were making poop emoji cupcakes for some kid's birthday party, but about things like how amazing all the reviews for her last wedding job had been or how she was worried about her favorite vendor increasing prices on her?

Yes.

She didn't even have to think about it.

Talking about muffin pans and spatulas might not seem *exciting* exactly, but being able to share her business, her day-to-day thoughts and issues would be nice, and yeah, Aiden would get it.

He'd care. He knew what Buttered Up meant to her and her family and respected that. He knew the bakery inside and out and understood their business, the town they did it in, the people they dealt with. He also understood business on a big-picture scale. Profit margins, dealing with vendors, taxes, and everything else that went into it all.

"Did you sleep with Sam Carson?" Jane demanded of Josie.

"No." Josie laughed. "I'm just saying I wouldn't rule it out." She focused on Zoe again. "But Zoe would definitely rule Sam out."

"I'm not attracted to Sam," Zoe said.

"Sam is *hot*," Jane said.

Zoe thought about that. Yeah, he was. She frowned.

"But you could never be comfortable enough with Sam to get naked," Josie said.

Jane was studying Zoe. "But she knows Sam really well."

Sam was just a year older than Zoe and Josie. He'd grown up in Appleby and farmed with his dad.

“She does,” Josie agreed.

“And Sam is a nice guy,” Jane went on, almost contemplatively. “He wouldn’t talk about their one night together.”

“Nope,” Josie agreed again.

“I’m not attracted to him,” Zoe repeated.

“I know,” Josie said. “Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Wonder what?” Zoe asked.

“Why you’re not attracted to him.”

“Yeah,” Jane agreed. “He’s got everything Aiden does. Except the money.”

No, he didn’t. He didn’t have a history with her like Aiden did. No one did. Dammit.

“Because...” Zoe just shrugged. “Attraction is hard to explain, isn’t it? It’s a chemistry thing.”

Josie grinned as if Zoe had just given the perfect answer. “It really is. And more goes into chemistry than good looks or someone being nice or how well you know them.”

Zoe sighed. Two people she knew *very* well were these two women. “You’re trying to make a point.”

“Yes I am.”

“Can you just get to it?”

Josie nodded. “Fine. I think you need to think about *why* you’re a twenty-five-year-old virgin and why Aiden was the one you thought of to change that.”

“Yeah,” Jane said, joining in. “I mean, you’ve dated a few guys. Some who really liked you a lot. Some who I’m *sure* would have helped you out there.”

“I’m a virgin because I’ve never been with anyone I thought I could be with long...” Oh. Damn.

Josie nodded. “Exactly. You didn’t think any of them would be long term. You’ve always been thinking along those lines. But you want to sleep with Aiden.”

Zoe felt her stomach flip, but she shook her head. “I just went to him for a one-time tutorial.”

“I think that was a *really* good excuse you came up with to make yourself get into that lingerie and walk down the hall,” Josie told her with an affectionate and gentle smile.

Yeah, it had been. She’d been repeating it over and over as she’d listened for him to shut the shower off and open the bathroom door and walk down the hall over the creaking floorboard and then shut his bedroom door. She’d repeated it over and over again as she waited the thirty minutes for him to relax and maybe even start to drift to sleep. And as she’d gotten dressed. And as she’d approached his door.

Dammit.

“Josie’s right, you know,” Jane said. “You weren’t just mad when he turned you down. It wasn’t just an ego thing. You were *hurt*. You’d been waiting for him, and you finally got your nerve up and then he shot you down.”

Zoe grimaced. “Okay, we all know. No need to rehash.”

Jane put an arm around her and gave her a side hug. “I’m just saying that it meant more than you’re admitting. It wouldn’t have hurt you if it hadn’t.”

Josie reached out and squeezed her arm with a smile. “Zoe, you’re not a casual kind of girl. Like Jane said. There is nothing in your life that is short term. Your business, where you live, your friendships, your *recipes*... everything has history and is a true part of your *life*. Sex is going to be like that for you too. And that is not a bad thing. But you have to accept that before you jump into it. Because Aiden’s already realized it,” Josie said. “And I think that’s pretty amazing. Even with you half naked and in his bed, he still *knew* that it was not going to be casual for you.”

Zoe felt a jolt of... something... shoot through her. Aiden had known that about her?

But yeah. She realized a second later that, of course he would have known that. If Josie and Jane knew that about her, then Aiden would. It wasn’t just *her* that knew everything

about *him*. She was certain she could ask him right now what her least favorite food at Thanksgiving dinner was and he would know. He'd also know her favorite card game, and she was sure he knew she'd chosen a pink teddy because she loved the color. And it was his favorite. No, pink wasn't commonly a guy's favorite color, but it was Aiden's. Not that he admitted it readily to his buddies. But she knew.

She also knew it was because of the bakery. His love of pink had started young when he'd come to Buttered Up with his mother. He associated the color with frosting and candy and cupcakes and happiness and sweetness and the fun and laughter that had always been part of the bakery. And especially the strawberry cupcakes that had been his mother's specialty. He'd been requesting those for his birthdays even after he was a teen. Right up until his mother passed away. Zoe doubted he'd eaten a strawberry cupcake since.

"And once you sleep together, you're going to have to be ready to at least give it a chance to really work," Josie added after letting Zoe think for a moment.

Zoe felt like her whole body was swirling with emotions. And realization. Which wasn't an emotion exactly, but she felt like someone had turned on a bright light in a previously dim room. Why had things felt so hot with Aiden? And so painful when he'd turned her down? And why hadn't she gone out and found someone else in the past five months since she'd made this huge decision to end her virginhood? And why had it taken twenty-five years to get to the point where she wanted to end it?

Now she knew.

Josie was right. She didn't do casual. And without even fully understanding it, when she'd decided it was time, she'd gone to the one guy who was the most long term in her life that she could actually get naked with. Who also didn't do casual.

She blew out a breath.

"But," Jane said, her grin sly, "that doesn't mean you can't torture him a little for turning you down the way he did."

The way he'd done it had been born of sleepiness and shock, Zoe knew. When she wasn't being irrationally angry at him about it. But he'd been pretty blunt about the no. And he *had* waited five months to come back and fix it.

"Yeah?" she asked, interested.

"For sure," Jane said. "You'll be living together. And Aiden will never do anything you don't want him to do. So if, for a few days, you eat breakfast in your shortest nightgown, or take your bra off first thing when you get home from work, or blow dry your hair wrapped only in a towel with the bathroom door open..."

"I already do all those things," Zoe said.

"Exactly." Jane gave her a wink. "And why would you stop just because the guy, who's practically like a brother to you and who was very clear about *not* wanting to sleep with you, is staying there."

Ah. "He did say no," she mused.

"Yes, he did." Jane's smile was devious. "And I can tell you from personal experience that really pent-up, waiting-forever-for-it sex is *soooo* good."

"Almost as good as make-up sex, which this also will be," Josie piped up.

Zoe was going to have to take their words for it, but she liked this idea. A lot.

Okay, so she wanted Aiden. And Aiden knew it. And she hadn't actually gotten rid of her V-card yet. And Aiden at least suspected that.

That didn't mean she had to just let him pick up where they'd left off without a little pain of his own.

But she was going to let him pick up where they'd left off. Where they'd left off in her bakery kitchen earlier tonight, as a matter of fact.

She couldn't get that pink candy coating and the pink sugar out of her head.

* * *

Zoe took her bra off the second they stepped through the back door of the house.

The house.

The house where he'd grown up and where she was now living. The house where she'd tried to seduce him five months ago.

The house where he fully intended to make her his and then raise their children and live well into their old age together.

Yes, his drama about this whole situation had gotten more intense since actually getting to Appleby, seeing her again... and having her tell him he was insane.

He watched as she reached down the back of her dress, unhooked her bra, and then pulled the straps down one arm and then the other, pulling the pale pink bra fully off and tossing it toward one of the kitchen chairs. The tiny piece of silk caught on the back of the chair, swinging there, taunting him. Probably still warm from her body. Probably smelling like cake. And Zoe. Which was kind of the same thing.

He propped a hip against the counter just inside the back door and watched her cross to the fridge. She pulled the door open and took out a bottle of water. She bumped it shut again with her butt as she twisted the cap on the bottle. She took a long drink, meeting his eyes over the bottle.

After she'd swallowed she asked, "What?"

"Just waiting for you to keep going."

"Keep going with what?"

He let his gaze drop to the front of her dress where her nipples were prominent now without the bra. Then he glanced at the bra on the chair.

"Oh. I didn't even think," she said, waving her hand like it was no big deal. "That's always the first thing I take off."

Then she kicked her shoes off. “Then the shoes.”

“Don’t let me being here stop you.”

She gave him a smile. “I won’t.”

“And don’t worry about picking your shoes up from in front of the fridge so I don’t trip on them and break my neck.” He looked at the shoes.

She took another drink from the water bottle and lifted a shoulder. “It is my house. And you think you want to just insert yourself in my life... well, this is what it’s like.”

Uh-huh. That’s what he’d thought. In all the times he’d stayed over here, and previously at Maggie and Steve’s, Zoe had never taken her bra off in front of him. She didn’t exactly treat him like a *guest*—they were hardly formal—but she did act like he was a guy who... well, who she didn’t take her bra off for.

“Good to know,” he said. He crossed to where she stood. She straightened as he got closer, awareness flaring in her eyes. But he simply bent and picked up her shoes. He tossed them over by the door, out of the way of foot traffic. “I mean, if *this* is what I can look forward to around here”—he let his gaze drop to her breasts again—“I’m never leaving.”

He was never leaving anyway.

She started to lift an arm, almost instinctively, as if to cover herself, but then she thought better of it. Her arm dropped and she took a breath.

“I’m glad you’re fine with us just both being... ourselves. Comfortable. Just doing whatever we usually do,” she said.

“Of course. Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’m going to take a shower and go to bed, then.” She turned and headed for the hallway and presumably the stairs up to her bedroom.

“Zoe.”

His low voice stopped her in the kitchen doorway. She looked back at him over her shoulder.

“Sweet dreams.”

“Yeah. You too, Aiden.”

She headed down the hallway and then turned up the staircase.

He leaned around the door, expecting to see at least one more tease.

He wasn't disappointed. Her dress hit the hallway floor when she was far enough up the stairs that he couldn't see anything more than her ankles.

And then a scrap of pale pink silk floated down on top of the dress.

She was a brat. And she was going to torture him over turning her down at Christmas. Make him horribly sorry. Maybe even get him begging before she gave in. Make him come to her this time.

“Can do, Miss McCaffery. Can do,” Aiden said softly as he snagged the panties and dress on his way up to his bedroom.

He tossed the dress in front of the bathroom door, which was already closed with the sound of the shower running behind it. His body responded to the thought of her naked and wet just behind a slab of wood. Not that he'd ever do anything he wasn't absolutely sure she wanted him to do. And he wasn't *absolutely* sure she wanted him to join her in the shower tonight. Besides, shower sex wasn't first-time, take-her-virginity kind of sex. It was on the list for eventually, of course, but that wouldn't be their first time.

Yeah, he was 90 percent sure she was still a virgin.

But he intended to find out for sure. Before he took her to bed. He was taking her to bed either way. He'd meant it, absolutely, when he'd told her he now intended to be her last. But if he was her first—and good God, he wanted to be her first—then their first time needed to be even *extra* special.

Okay, really, he needed to know so he could be a little more careful. He wouldn't want to hurt her, and with how he was feeling about her, he wasn't so sure words like “ravage”

and “pounding” wouldn’t be applicable. He needed to know how easy he needed to take her the first time.

They could work up to ravaging and pounding.

His body liked that idea too.

He looked down at the panties in his hand, then at the bathroom door. The tease. Well, two could play this way. He tucked the panties into his pocket and headed for his bedroom.

This was going to be a hell of a lot of fun.

As long as his balls didn’t explode before he teased her out of her panties when she was within reach.

Chapter Eight



She was pretty sure he'd kept her panties.

After her shower, she'd found her dress outside the bathroom, obviously tossed there by Aiden. His bedroom door was shut, and she hadn't heard him stirring around in the bathroom until after she'd paraded down the hallway in only a towel, changed into her pajamas, and gotten into bed.

Her bra was still on the chair in the kitchen when she went down for coffee in the morning.

But she couldn't find her panties anywhere. Which sent her thoughts spinning. If he'd taken them... why? What was he doing with them? Why was that hot?

She was thinking about all that, staring at the Keurig while stirring hazelnut creamer into her coffee, when she heard, "'Mornin,' Zoe," in a deep, rumbling voice behind her.

She jumped and turned.

Okay, he'd taken the "do whatever we usually do" thing to heart. It looked like he usually grabbed his first cup of coffee dressed in only the boxers he'd slept in. She knew he slept in only boxers because of last Christmas.

Or he was just torturing her right back.

That was equally possible.

Though she wasn't sure she minded. At all. Because he looked very, very good in those boxers. At Christmas the room had been dark, and she hadn't fully appreciated just how hard and long he was. She'd felt some of it. But she'd been so

worked up about the whole situation and nervous and then distracted by the kiss and then by him saying no and physically setting her back *off* of him that she hadn't really taken time to *feel* him the way she would have liked to.

She could make up for that right now. If she reached out right now and put her hand on his chest—his wide, hard, probably hot-to-the-touch chest—he'd welcome it. He might grasp her wrist with his big hand and pull her close. Or maybe he'd move in and press her against the counter like he had against the fridge last night.

It was a thrilling feeling knowing she could reach out and run her hand over his abs, and lower, and this time he'd absolutely take her up on it.

That was a *really* thrilling feeling. Whatever crazy thoughts were going through his head, one was clear—he wasn't going to push her away this time.

It was also a heady feeling knowing she could pretend this was all no big deal.

She could keep him guessing. She was in control.

But she could also parade around her kitchen in a t-shirt and panties and ogle him in his boxers and think dirty thoughts and flirt and not worry.

This was Aiden. She could be different with him than with any other guy. She could... practice. Flirting, teasing, being sexy, having fun. It wasn't *meaningless* the way she'd made her thoughts about Christmas sound. In fact, it was more meaningful. Because she could be herself. She might be awkward or clumsy about it, but that would be okay. Then again, maybe she'd be good at it. That would be okay too. She didn't have to worry about leading him on, hurting his feelings, giving off mixed signals.

Because she would mean everything he thought she meant.

She took a deep breath and gave him a bright smile, leaning back against the counter nonchalantly. She was wearing only a big t-shirt, which hit just below the curve of her butt, and a pair of red panties this time. They matched the

sparkly words “Inside” and “Hot” on the front of her t-shirt. Zoe braced her hands on the counter behind her so Aiden could better see the shirt she’d worn just for him. There was an oven and a cake pan. The oven said to the cake pan, “I want you inside me.” The cake pan responded, “That’s hot.”

Aiden definitely read it. Or at least, he looked at it. She wasn’t wearing a bra now either, and he took his time dragging his gaze over her breasts. She was hardly well endowed but he didn’t seem to mind. His attention lingered there nice and long. Her nipples responded. Which made his gaze stay. But eventually the corner of his mouth quirked up, and she assumed he’d taken in the whole shirt.

“Good morning,” she greeted. “I didn’t know you’d be up this early.”

She went to the bakery at six every morning except Sundays.

“Well, I knew if I wanted to catch you in your skimpy pajamas, I’d have to be up.”

He moved closer and she caught her breath. But he only reached past her left ear to the cupboard that held the coffee cups. She didn’t move though. There was no reason to move. She wanted to be this close. To smell him. Feel his heat. Tease him.

And herself.

But after he’d retrieved a mug, he didn’t move back. He stayed way closer to her than was necessary to put the pod into the coffeepot and pushed the buttons.

As the fresh brew poured into his cup, he put a hand on the counter next to her hip and leaned in. She looked up, tipping her head back.

“And I definitely wanted to catch you in your skimpy pajamas,” he said, low and husky.

He smelled good. She felt his body heat soaking into her skin.

She took a big, deep breath. “Well, it’s not a pink lace teddy. But I’m glad you like it.”

He definitely liked how she was dressed. His erection was obvious. The boxers wouldn’t have hidden it anyway, and he was doing nothing to shift the hard length away from her hip where it was pressed.

His hand skimmed down her side to the edge of her t-shirt, and he inched it up, then looked down. “There’s some lace.” He dragged his finger over the lacy top edge of her panties.

Zoe felt tingles trip through her, her nipples beading even tighter as she sucked in a deep breath.

“And you in a sassy t-shirt is a lot more appropriate than a teddy.”

She narrowed her eyes. “So if I’d worn this into your bedroom at Christmas, you would have taken my virginity?”

When she said *taken my virginity* heat flared in his eyes. Interesting. He liked that idea. He’d been acting all jealous and possessive yesterday, but she’d been so flustered about seeing him and her own reactions to him and just general surprise over him assuming they’d now get married, that she hadn’t *really* thought about that.

“I still would have said no,” he said, his voice gruff. “But...” He looked like he was fighting the instinct to keep talking.

Zoe pressed against the erection that was hot and hard against her. “But what?”

“I would have kissed you longer and touched you a lot more first,” he admitted. “I might have even slipped a finger into those silky panties.” He ran his finger down the front of her panties now, pressing against her clit, before sliding under the elastic edge and brushing over the hot, now wet, folds between her legs.

She gasped, then moaned, reaching up to grasp his opposite arm.

He leaned in, putting his mouth against hers. “I might have even—I *should have*—made you come before I sent you back to bed.”

Her body shuddered. With need. And irritation.

Only Aiden could make her feel both of those things at the same time.

“I could have had an orgasm except I wore the wrong outfit?” she demanded. Or tried to demand. Being breathless with her heart pounding made it difficult.

“That teddy just brought home how unusual it all was and kept reminding me,” he told her, brushing his lips over hers and his finger against her clit without any silk between them.

Zoe realized she could get a before-work orgasm. She was apparently dressed correctly this time. That wasn’t exactly her “usual morning routine” but damn, it could be. It really freaking could be.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him. Then she wrapped an arm around his neck, arched closer, and kissed him.

Aiden must have decided not to be an idiot *again*, because he kissed her back. Deeply. Hotly. While sliding his finger into her in one smooth, firm, but gentle thrust.

Just one finger. One long, thick, knowing middle finger. But wow. She had a great dildo. She had her own fingers. *This* wasn’t exactly virgin territory—so to speak—but no guy had ever had his fingers there, and now she realized *she* was the idiot. She should have been asking guys to put their fingers there over and over.

Okay, no, that wasn’t true. She would never let another guy do this to her. That thought hit her even as a spiral of pleasure shot from Aiden’s finger to her toes, literally curling them.

She was probably uptight or a prude or weird or something. But it was true. She couldn’t imagine letting anyone else put his hand where Aiden’s was right now.

He slid his finger in and out, then brushed his thumb over her clit at the same time and Zoe felt even her scalp tingling.

She would never admit it, but she really hadn't known that this could feel like this and be this good. It was just his finger. Just one finger. And she was going to insist—probably pathetically, with lots of compliments heaped on—that he do this to her all the time now. Maybe hourly.

Zoe pulled her mouth away and gasped. “Aiden. Oh my God.”

“Damn, you feel so fucking good,” he rasped against her neck. “You’re so damned tight.”

She gave a half laugh, half moan. “Is that good?”

Now it was his turn to give a choked laugh. “Fuck, you have no idea.”

No, she didn't. That was kind of the point. Which reminded her, that if he wasn't an *idiot* who got hung up on things like her wearing a teddy instead of a t-shirt, she could have felt this *five months* ago and been feeling it repeatedly since then.

But that was when the *real* realization hit. If she couldn't imagine anyone but Aiden Anderson putting his hands in her pants, then it wouldn't have been repeatedly even if he had done it five months ago. He'd left. He'd gone back to his life in Chicago. Just as he'd *planned*. That had been part of why he'd seemed so perfect. But truthfully? That would have been... horrible. She would have felt all this amazingness then realized it could probably only happen with him, and she would have been cut off. Or driving to Chicago every other day and begging him for orgasms. Which would have been humiliating.

Not to mention hard on her business.

And her car.

Dammit. Aiden had been right to say no.

Oh, she really hated that.

She started to squirm, intending to push him away, too confused and annoyed to really focus on here, on what was happening now.

But then it didn't matter.

Aiden curled his finger in just a certain way and shifted his hand just so and pressed against her clit just right, and suddenly Zoe was pulling him closer and grinding against his hand and gasping his name along with, "Oh, yes, please," and then her body pulled tight, like someone was stretching a rubber band inside her and then let go, like they'd shot it across the classroom—and she was flying.

Pleasure flooded through her scalp to her toes and back again. Heat and relief and want and an insane desire to thank him and beg him to start all over again washing over her, and all she could do was grip his arm and try to stay upright.

Aiden pulled his hand from her panties and wrapped a big arm around her waist, pulling her against him, his other hand going to the back of her head. He hugged her as she struggled to catch her breath, running his hand over her hair.

"You're so amazing, Zoe. Damn, that was hot. Holy hell, girl, that's so much better than coffee."

He said it all against the top of her head, kissing her and stroking her, and making her feel amazing and hot and like maybe *she'd* just rocked *his* world. Which was crazy. But damned if her ego wasn't ballooning up like he was pumping helium into her.

Along with his fingers.

Suddenly she giggled. It was adrenaline and a little feminine empowerment and endorphins like crazy, she knew. But she pressed her face against his chest and giggled.

She felt the rumble of a chuckle from him.

"Okay, well, laughter might not have been what I was going for."

She tipped her head back, looking up at him. "I think you know this is the wrong place, and I'm the wrong girl to be

expecting to hear ‘Oh, Aiden, you’re a god.’”

He grinned down at her, his gaze hot, but affectionate at the same time. “I’ve got time, and the patience and inclination, to work on that.”

Heat fizzed through her bloodstream, but she managed to not melt into him. Somehow.

“I need to get ready for work.”

“I need coffee.”

“Okay then.”

But before he let her go, he leaned in and gave her a hot but sweet kiss. Unlike the others. All their kisses, even the surprising one, had been hot. This one was... different. There was a lot of lip, a little tongue, breaths mingling, tasting, arching closer. But it felt... slower. And intentional. And like he wanted to keep doing that for a very, very long time.

Maybe forever.

He lifted his head, looked into her eyes for a long moment, then stepped back.

She brushed her hair back, took a deep breath, and said, “Right.”

Right? Right about what? What did that mean?

“I know,” he said.

Then he gave her a cocky grin.

Dammit. He thought she meant *he* was right. About all of it. Everything. That saying no at Christmas had been the right move. That things between them should get serious now. That she wasn’t going to be able to resist him.

And... she thought that was maybe what she meant too.

* * *

He jacked off in the shower to images and thoughts of Zoe.

Not that it was the first time. He'd been *very* good about pushing thoughts of her out of his head if they tried to wander there before last Christmas. And they had, on occasion. But after Christmas? It had been impossible.

Now, though, there was no holding back or even a flicker of guilt about it.

He'd just made her come, in the kitchen where he'd grown up, before he'd even had coffee.

And it had been the hottest thing he'd ever experienced.

He hadn't intended to touch her like that this morning. He hadn't really intended to touch her at all. He'd *wanted* to, but he knew she had some plan to tease and tempt him for a while first, and he was very willing to play along.

That had all gone up in smoke in about ten minutes.

She'd looked so fucking hot... and adorable. That was the problem. It was that combination. Because Zoe McCaffery was a lot of things—sassy, smart, fierce, stubborn, funny, loving. But she wasn't very often adorable. That came with a hint of vulnerability and sweetness which was at odds with the woman he knew.

It was the idea that there were sides and layers he didn't totally know, which made his heart really race. He wanted everything he already knew about her. He wanted her exactly as she was. But the idea that she would show him some new things, let him get closer, be even more real with him in a way she hadn't been with her brother's best friend before, made everything in him shout *yes!*

That was what the virginity thing had been about. It had hit him as he'd slid his hand into her cherry-red panties and felt her sweet, hot wetness for the first time. It had nearly brought him to his knees. *That* was a place they'd never gone before, a place they'd never really imagined in all likelihood. Had they recognized the other was attractive? Sure. That was just one of those things that registered and then sort of went out of mind. Zoe being beautiful was like saying Zoe was wearing a green dress or that she made the best lemon bars in the state.

But being intimate with her like that was something new. Something that had thrown him for a huge loop five months ago.

Something that he was all fucking in on now.

And now that he'd touched her, felt her sweet pussy clench around his finger, heard his name from her mouth as she came, seen the dazed look of pleasure, and yes, surprise, dammit, in those big blue eyes when she'd looked up at him after... yeah, he was done. Addicted. Whipped. A goner. Going to fight to have that for the rest of his life. She was his.

Aiden stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel, drying off quickly. He wasn't walking around with a raging hard-on now, but he was far from satisfied. He wanted her. And it was more than physical now. There was this nagging need that went beyond needing to sink deep and thrust hard and feel all that amazing tight, wet heat around his cock. Though he definitely wanted all that. It was this need to be sure she was on this same page with him. That Zoe knew what had happened in the kitchen this morning was the start. To... everything.

That no one else would ever touch her like that. That he would never touch anyone else like that again. That he might not finger-bang her *every* morning before work, but they would be in their kitchen together every morning before work from now on. Their kitchen. Yeah, that was now *their* kitchen. And that they would be going down to that kitchen from *their* bedroom upstairs.

That was a lot to lay on the woman today. He knew that.

But the quick finger fuck had to help his case.

He grinned as he brushed his teeth, shaved, and finished getting ready for the day before heading down the hall for his clothes. He didn't hear anything in the house, and he looked out his bedroom window to find Zoe's car was already gone from the driveway.

That was fine. They needed to drive to the bakery separately today anyway. He needed to try to find a way to get

over to the Hot Cakes factory later without being noticed if possible.

But he was definitely going to the bakery. He was going to use Zoe's Wi-Fi and hang out while she worked today. Because she was the reason he was in Appleby right now, and the more he was with her, the faster he could convince her this was all meant to be.

And then he could tell her about Hot Cakes and wouldn't have to find ways to sneak around over there.

He had some business to do before he could stake out a spot at the bakery though.

He'd sent his partners a message before he'd gotten in the shower, so they should all be logging into their video conferencing service by now.

The Fluke Inc. guys weren't early-bird-gets-the-worm types. They were much more night-owls-get-the-juicy-mice types. Plus owls were fucking majestic as hell. But if one of them needed the others, they'd be there.

Aiden settled into a chair at Zoe's kitchen table and connected to the call.

"Where the hell are you?" Camden McCaffery asked, squinting at his computer screen from where he was lounging on his couch in Chicago.

Aiden was five feet from where he'd made Cam's little sister come before he'd had his first cup of coffee.

He was not going to tell Cam that.

He was already pushing his luck asking them to all be on a video call this early. His four partners were not morning people. This would have been better around the table in their conference room in Chicago rather than with him in Zoe's kitchen and them all in their apartments almost two hundred miles away, but he wasn't leaving Iowa any time soon, and he needed to fill them all in ASAP.

"Appleby."

“What the hell? Is everything okay?” his best friend since childhood asked. Cam was frowning. Aiden understood. The only people in Appleby that Aiden came home to see were Camden’s family members.

“Everything is great,” Aiden assured him. “I’m just... moving back.”

Cam blinked at him. “When?”

“Yesterday.”

“To *Iowa*?” Oliver Caprinelli asked. Then he yawned. “*Why?*”

To marry Cam’s sister, actually, but he was going to hold off on that information for a bit as well.

Oliver was propped up in his bed, his laptop propped on his thighs. He looked truly confused about why anyone would ever utter words that were even close to, “I’m moving to Iowa.”

Grant Lorre, Fluke Inc.’s CFO, was at the breakfast bar in his ultra-modern kitchen. He was dressed to head to the gym after the call. He simply lifted his coffee cup, listening.

“Well... Hot Cakes.” Aiden hit a button, sending the article about the sale of the factory to his partners’ phones.

He gave them a second to scan the article. Ollie was actually the one who was going to be most in favor of this. Ollie was always in favor of the crazy ideas.

Ollie looked up. “Okay, and...?”

“It’s for sale. You want in?”

“It’s in Iowa?”

“It is.”

“Well... I’m a little tied up right now... and possibly allergic to pigs...” Ollie trailed off without finishing the thought.

Aiden looked at Cam. He would know why Hot Cakes being for sale was important. And complicated.

Grant lifted a brow. “You eat a lot of bacon for a guy who’s allergic to pigs,” he said to Ollie.

“Wide-open spaces, then,” Ollie said. “They have a lot of those there, right?”

“A lot of those,” Aiden agreed dryly.

“Why are you into this?” Grant asked simply, his attention on Aiden.

Cutting through the B.S. was one of Grant’s roles in the group.

Okay, well, the short answer to that was *Zoe McCaffery*. But that wasn’t a *simple* answer. Grant and Ollie didn’t know anything about Zoe other than her name and that she was Cam’s younger sister.

“The Hot Cakes factory went up for sale this week. I think this would be a great investment for Fluke.” Aiden put on his CEO voice. He wasn’t CEO of Fluke because he was smarter or more driven than any of these men. But Aiden was a natural leader and manager. He’d brought these men together and knew how to handle them. He knew them each very well and knew and appreciated each of their strengths. And weaknesses.

“Why?” Ollie asked.

“Hot Cakes makes Butter Sticks, Peanut Butter Pinwheels and...” Aiden paused for emphasis. “Fudgie Fritters.”

Ollie sat up straighter. “Shut the fuck up.”

“Seriously.”

“Hey, sorry I’m late.” Dax Marshall, their fifth partner, logged on. He was in a shirt and tie and had a to-go coffee cup in hand. Of course, it was the same shirt and tie he’d been in yesterday before Aiden had left for Iowa.

“She didn’t even make you coffee before kicking your ass out?” Cam asked Dax, watching him toss back two ibuprofen tablets and wash them down with coffee.

“Never get coffee from ’em,” Dax said, after he’d swallowed.

“Because?” Cam asked.

“Coffee is to sober up, to focus, to get *work* done. I take my work with coffee. I like my girls with tequila.”

“Coffee is too serious for you and your girls?” Grant asked with an eye roll.

Dax grinned. “Yep. I save all my good, really strong coffee time for you.” He batted his eyes at Grant.

Grant flipped him off. “I’m so blessed.”

The term “herding cats” could have easily applied to day-to-day operations of Fluke. And Aiden was the master herder of these tomcats.

He oversaw the nerdy dreamer, Ollie, the everything’s-a-party playboy, Dax, the arrogant, spoiling-for-a-fight lawyer, Camden, and the serious, not-everything-is-a-fucking-game-you-guys CFO, Grant. Which was one of their favorite things for Grant to yell because Fluke was, first and foremost, a game company. They’d created *Warriors of Easton*, the fastest-growing online video game in the world. Much to all of their surprise on a daily basis.

Dax pulled something out of a plastic grocery bag and started unwrapping it, making a lot of noise. It was a Cinnamon Curl. A mini coffee cake. Made by Hot Cakes.

Aiden chuckled as Dax bit into it. He looked up. “What?”

“You’ve got impeccable timing,” Aiden told him.

“Check your phone,” Ollie said to Dax.

Dax picked up his phone, moving his thumb over the screen while still eating with the other hand.

“Okay. Why do I care about Lancaster Foods and their factory being for sale?” Dax asked.

“They make Hot Cakes,” Ollie said.

“No way,” Dax replied.

“So we’re buying it,” Ollie told him.

Yep, that was exactly the type of spontaneous, sudden-pivot, I'll-brave-pigs-to-save-my-fritters kind of reaction that was classic Ollie.

“Cool.” Dax bit into the Cinnamon Curl.

And *that* was probably as much a reaction as they would get from him. Dax was a roll-with-it, up-for-anything guy.

“We’re buying a failing company?” Grant asked. “A company that does something we know nothing about?”

“I’ll have you know, I’ve eaten my weight in Hot Cakes in my lifetime,” Ollie said.

“Same,” Dax agreed around a mouthful of cinnamon crumbles.

“That doesn’t actually make you qualified to run the company that makes them,” Grant said, his tone long suffering.

“You sure?” Dax asked with a grin. “I mean, we made a pretty great video game company, and all we knew how to do was play video games.”

“And draw cartoons on the computer,” Ollie added. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

Dax nodded. “Thank you. You’re right. I can draw cartoons on the computer really, really good.” He even made the cringeable grammar error just for Grant.

Grant sighed. But he didn’t argue. Because Dax was right. The game Ollie had come up with and Dax had designed—and that Cam, Aiden, and Grant had marketed and sold—had accidentally become an overnight sensation. It had been a total fluke the five of them had become rich and successful. Hence, the company name, Fluke Inc.

“The company isn’t failing,” Aiden inputed. “The grandfather, who was the head of the company, died about a year ago, and the son wants out. His big project now is in Texas. He wants to get rid of this part of the company quick and focus his time and energy in Dallas. They’re still in the

black. Profits were down this past year a little, but they're still doing well."

"Then someone will come in and buy it up. The Peanut Butter whatever's will be safe. If it's a solid product they shouldn't have any worries," Grant said.

"*If* it's a solid product?" Ollie protested. "Peanut Butter Pinwheels are the best thing anyone ever did with a nut butter."

Okay, *that* was not true. Hot Cakes were great, but they were individually packaged snack cakes sold in grocery and convenience stores. They were bought in boxes of twelve or twenty-four and stuck in lunch sacks that spent the day in school lockers. They were tossed up on counters with beef jerky and energy drinks when paying for gas. They were great. But they were hardly changing the world.

Nor were they anywhere near as amazing as the peanut butter chocolate bars Zoe made at Buttered Up.

The crinkling of the plastic wrapper around Dax's second cinnamon curl seemed extremely loud in the microphone suddenly.

"Someone *will* buy it," Aiden agreed. In fact, he was afraid someone might just come in and do that today. Right out from underneath him.

That's what had prompted him to get in his car yesterday and head straight to Appleby after he'd read about the news. "But it will likely be a competing food company. They'll absorb the products into their existing lines and probably move production out of Appleby. That would mean over three hundred people out of work and a huge hit to the town."

"But the Fudgie Fritters will be safe?" Ollie asked.

"We can't let someone else buy it," Aiden insisted. "They... uh... might change the recipe." He had to get the guys on board. He could do this alone, but he'd feel so much better if he had his partners with him.

"*What?*" Ollie said, looking horrified. "No. I won't let that happen."

Yeah, Aiden needed Ollie's drive and fuck-it-let's-make-this-amazing attitude. He needed Dax's laid-back, fun attitude. He needed Cam's who-do-I-need-to-call-and-yell-at attitude. And he needed Grant's let's-look-at-all-the-possible-scenarios attitude. They were all pieces to one big whole.

The kind of overnight success they'd experienced as a bunch of young twentysomething guys had, predictably, come with a few hiccups. Aiden had kept them together through it all and made sure their friendship was always the top priority. He made them work together as a team that, frankly, when they were all at their best, kicked major ass.

"Why do you really want to do this?" Grant asked, watching Aiden carefully.

Grant always paid attention and never missed details. Like the fact that Aiden cared about more than Fudgie Fritters.

"Appleby is our hometown," Camden said before Aiden could respond. "And that factory has been there since 1969."

He was lounging on his sofa, his feet propped on his coffee table. In a t-shirt instead of his usual dress shirt, his tattoos were on full display. He looked completely nonchalant. But Aiden knew better.

Besides being Letty McCaffery's grandson and Zoe's big brother, Camden had a long, not-great personal history with the Lancaster family. Primarily the family's one and only granddaughter and heiress apparent, Whitney.

"No shit?" Ollie asked.

Camden shook his head. "No shit. It's been for sale for about two days now. I'm sure everyone in town is panicking."

Technically, it had been for sale for three days, and it was starting to make Aiden itchy. He wanted the company. He would have had this meeting three days ago if he'd known Eric wanted to sell. But he wasn't plugged into anyone who would have told him the news. Because they wouldn't have known he wanted to know the news. He hadn't seen the announcement in the *Appleby Observer* until yesterday because his hometown newspaper was a weekly publication,

and he had to wait to get it in the mail. Two days after, everything in it was old news. But he still liked to flip through it. After all, it didn't really matter that he missed the notice of the chili feed for the football cheerleaders or that the dentist was changing his office hours.

Getting the news from Appleby two days late had never mattered. Until yesterday.

Now, the company he hadn't even known he needed until twenty-five hours ago, had been on the market for three days, and he was certain another food company had their eyes on it. Maybe more than one. Hot Cakes was no Hostess, but they did fine. Like millions of dollars' worth of fine every year. They were not going to be unclaimed for long.

They were not going to be unclaimed by *him* for long. He was giving his friends about thirty more minutes to get on board here.

"I need you to do your numbers thing right away, Lorre," Aiden told Grant.

"My numbers thing?" his much more serious partner asked.

"The thing where you add and subtract shit until you say, 'Yeah, we can do that,'" Aiden told him.

"It's only been up three days," Grant said. "Why don't I call over there, feel them out? Maybe they're willing to negotiate—"

"No," Aiden said simply. "I want you to make this happen. Today."

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Grant asked.

Zoe was never leaving Appleby. So Aiden was now never leaving Appleby. So he needed a job. And now, especially after talking to everyone last night, including one of his soon-to-be employees, it needed to be *this* job.

It was pretty simple, really.

It had gotten that simple over the past few months after realizing he was in love with Zoe. Or maybe it had always

been that simple and he'd just been very slow realizing it.

Zoe had been ten when Aiden's mom had died, and he'd more or less moved in with her family. She'd been his little sister as much as she'd been Cam's.

Until she hadn't.

Until that Fourth of July almost two years ago when he'd walked in on her ironing a dress in the kitchen wearing only a bra and panties.

Until he'd finally admitted she was the funniest, most interesting, most amazing woman he'd ever known, and that he could no longer shut down his inappropriate thoughts about what she looked like without her clothes on once he'd actually *seen* the sight. There was no forgetting that.

Or the way she'd confidently faced him in only her underwear, not acting embarrassed or like he should *not* be seeing her that way. But also not at all like someone she thought of as a brother who had just walked in.

But she was also the reason this was all so fucking complicated.

Instead of all that, he said, "Someone has to save the factory and all those jobs. If that factory closes because some other company buys them out and relocates the production, it will devastate my hometown. I can't let that happen."

"Yeah, I definitely want in on this," Cam said. He was sitting forward now. He looked serious.

Aiden sighed. He'd been expecting this.

Cam cared about the impact to the town, no doubt. But Cam would want to buy the business for the same reason he'd donated money to build a new baseball field—that had turned into an entire youth sports complex. And the same reason he'd donated money to the school for a scholarship. A full-ride scholarship. In his name.

Appleby was a small town. The kind of small town you never truly, fully escaped.

Cam would want to do it to be a big hero and to show the Lancasters up.

Which was very complicated.

“You *sure?*” Aiden asked. “*Really* sure? This won’t be easy.”

“Totally sure,” Cam said resolutely.

“You both want to be the big hero,” Ollie said, grinning. “You small-town boys are so cute.”

Aiden felt a mix of relief and trepidation. He wanted his friends and partners with him, but it wouldn’t be a cakewalk for him and Cam... pun intended.

“Oh, I’m totally in too,” Ollie said. He pointed into the screen. “Lorre, you won’t want to be around me if I can’t have Fudgie Fritters.”

“What makes you think I want to be around you anyway?” Grant asked, sounding bored.

He was almost always bored with Ollie’s big ideas. Except when those big ideas were costing him money. Which was often. Or when those ideas ended up with Ollie and Dax stranded in a foreign country and needing money for plane tickets. And new shoes. That was a great story though.

“You do,” Ollie said confidently. “Without us you’d be sitting on Wall Street, hating your life, drinking every night, and wondering why you don’t have any cool friends.”

Grant didn’t say anything to that. Aiden thought he was maybe thinking he should give the Wall Street thing a try.

“Snack cakes and video games... seems like a great combo for our brand,” Dax said.

Aiden frowned. *Is that really making the world better?* a voice asked in the back of his head. Getting kids who were sitting around playing with virtual people instead of real friends to eat more sugar?

But it was bigger than just the snack cakes. People depended on that factory for their livelihood, to keep their

families supported. If those people couldn't work in Appleby—something he knew all about—then they'd move. They'd take their tax dollars with them. They'd take their money from the grocery store, from the hardware store, from the cafés, from the gas stations. The whole town would be affected.

“Can we find a potato chip factory to buy too?” Ollie asked with a grin. “Or soda. We should absolutely own a soda factory. Fluke Soda. That has a ring to it. Hell, we should *start* a soda company.”

Grant sighed and finally set his cup down and leaned in. The sign things were serious now. Because in spite of the grin, Ollie definitely now wanted to start a soda company.

“Okay, gentlemen, let's dial it back,” Grant said.

Everyone knew that “gentlemen” meant Ollie *and* Dax.

Dax was, no doubt, quietly thinking of the different flavors of soda he'd want them to offer. At least one would be something bizarre like *Unicorn Piss*. Dax was very proud of the fact that he made Grant reach for his antacids more often than anyone else. He kept a tally of Grant's Tums ingestion on the whiteboard in his office.

Grant wasn't wrong—Aiden had no idea how to run a company like Hot Cakes. Fluke had literally started in a dorm room and had grown with them. They had employees, but they had been relatively small, and things had always been very casual. They'd recently sold to a bigger company which had reduced all their roles, and now they were all trying to figure out what to do next with their time and energy. This was the perfect thing.

Probably.

Maybe.

Aiden wanted to shrug out of his jacket. He was suddenly hot. This idea was complicated. He didn't even really know where to start, but he had to hope a company that had been running for this long would be easier to step into than starting something from scratch.

Of course, the McCaffery family feud with Hot Cakes made it more complicated. And for Aiden and Camden to come in and save Hot Cakes would be... yeah, complicated.

But he wanted to do this. He wanted to be in Appleby, and this was his shot at having an actual purpose here. He wasn't a farmer. He couldn't open a business fixing anything or selling anything—they had everything they needed there already anyway—and he wasn't a doctor or teacher. That was why he'd headed out when he'd turned eighteen. He'd wanted to own his own company but one that served more than the seven thousand people who lived in and around Appleby. He wanted to do something bigger.

“Don't call anyone,” Aiden said to Grant. “I'm going to go meet with them in person and make an offer. Just figure out how to make the money work.”

“You're really moving there?” Dax asked. “For good?”

Aiden nodded. “I'm not leaving Fluke. Just Chicago. I'll come back for meetings and things as needed. But”—he took a breath—“yeah, I'm moving back to Iowa.”

“Okay, I changed my mind,” Ollie said. “Let go see some pigs and wide-open spaces and save the Fudgie Fritters.” He picked up his phone and started tapping it. “Piper,” he said a moment later. “I need to reschedule Thursday.”

Their executive assistant also didn't start work this early. Though Ollie called her at all hours.

“Ollie, *no*,” Aiden said firmly. Of course, Ollie was ready to just pack up and go to Iowa.

Ollie looked up, his phone at his ear. “What?”

“Let me start on this. Just me. Quietly,” Aiden said, trying not to look like he was panicking at the idea of Ollie charging into Appleby and announcing they were there to save the day. He had to hope no one gave Ollie the idea to ride into town and down Main Street on a white horse.

“You want to make the announcement?” Ollie asked. He nodded. “I guess that makes sense. Hometown boy comes home to save the day.”

“Actually, no. I just need a little time to...”

“Figure out how to keep my mom and sister from hating him when he tells them that we’re their major competitor now,” Camden said.

“Wait, Hot Cakes is your family’s major competition?” Grant asked, frowning.

Aiden sighed. Camden was a McCaffery through and through. He might not live in Appleby anymore, but he’d been ingrained to hate the Lancasters. Even when he’d been kissing Whitney Lancaster and trying to talk her into running away with him after graduation.

Aiden wondered if Cam knew the story about Didi offering Letty a partnership. Or her naming it Hot Cakes to rub it all in when Letty turned her down. Or that everything in the bakery was exactly the way it had always been because everyone was now completely scared of trying anything new because of the risk of looking like fools.

“It’s... a long story,” Aiden told Grant. “But yes, this could be a little complicated with Cam’s family. Just let me... ease them into the idea.”

“You can do that?” Grant asked. He looked at Camden. “You sure you want to do this?”

Cam shrugged. “I’m not gonna lie to you—the idea of coming in and buying Hot Cakes away from the Lancasters and then making it even bigger and better is like fucking karma filled with cream and wrapped in chocolate.”

“But your family.” Grant looked legitimately concerned.

Camden looked at Aiden. “The Golden Boy can deal with them. They like him better than they like me anyway. Let him hang out with my family for a couple of weeks. I’m sure he’ll find a way to sugarcoat the news.”

All he really wanted to coat in sugar was Cam’s little sister. Again, probably no need for him to share that.

But if anyone could convince the McCafferys that this would be okay, it was Aiden. He really was their favorite son

—Camden could be a rebellious pain in the ass, and Henry had only had eleven years of charming them. Aiden could make them understand that this was a good thing. He and Cam were saving the town. Maggie and Steve could even end up *proud* of what Aiden and Cam were doing.

Of course, Zoe also needed a lot more sweet-talking before he dropped the, “Oh, by the way, I own your major competitor.”

The kitchen orgasms were a great place to start.

He could easily follow that up with, “I’m in love with you.”

Then maybe a, “Take your clothes off.”

Then, “I’m now your business rival.”

Sure. That would be a piece of cake.

Chapter Nine



Aiden grabbed another cup of coffee on his way out the door, feeling good about the meeting with the guys. With them on board with him, everything was going to work out. He'd written an email to Eric Lancaster as soon as he'd hung up with the guys, making the official offer. He expected the deal would be finalized by the end of the day.

On impulse, he pulled his phone out. It was still early. But he could leave a voice message.

Much to his surprise, Whitney Lancaster answered on the second ring.

"This is Whitney."

She didn't sound like he'd awakened her either. He'd grabbed her number from the company information before he'd left Chicago. He knew it was a cell number but wasn't sure if she used it for business only and what hours she kept. Still, he'd figured he was the best one to make the first contact. They knew each other. They'd gone to school together. He'd known her in kindergarten, and they'd walked across the stage to graduate together. He'd been a friend of the family that hated her family, but he'd also been the best friend of the man who'd been head over heels in love with her. Aiden had been the only one who'd known about Whitney and Camden for a very long time. He'd like to think, even with how things had turned out between her and Cam, that she would consider *him* a friend. Or at least a used-to-be friend.

Aiden had been plenty pissed on Cam's behalf when things had gone to hell between him and the woman he'd thought he was going to run away with, but they were all grown-up now.

He hoped.

"Hi, Whitney. It's Aiden Anderson."

He heard her take a deep breath. "Hi, Aiden."

"We should probably chat."

"Yeah." She didn't go on.

"Is this a good time? I know it's early."

"I'm not in the office yet, but yes, this is probably the best time actually." She paused. "I thought someone from Fluke would probably be calling. I'm glad it's you."

Aiden lifted a brow. "You thought it might be Cam?"

"He's your attorney. It wouldn't be crazy."

But it would be crazy to think he'd want to have personal contact with her. Camden would deal with her attorneys, but Aiden couldn't imagine Cam would want to talk to Whitney herself.

Then again, this was his never-back-down best friend. He loved to push buttons. He loved a good fight. He probably wouldn't get a better fight or bigger buttons to push than he would with Whitney Lancaster when he was helping Aiden buy out the business that had kept them apart once upon a time. The business she'd chosen over being with him.

Aiden hadn't *really* thought that through. Camden had been plenty agreeable to the idea of buying Hot Cakes, but Aiden had assumed Cam would continue to avoid Whitney at all costs. As he had for the past eleven years.

Aiden might have miscalculated.

"I heard that word's gotten out that you've got an offer and thought maybe we should talk before more information got out," Aiden told her. "Assuming your dad agrees to the deal I just sent over."

“He will,” Whitney said. “He’s very pleased with the idea in general. I can’t imagine what would stop him from agreeing.”

Aiden felt a rush of relief go through him. “That’s wonderful. I’m very pleased as well.”

“So yes, I suppose we should discuss how you want to roll this out.”

Aiden nodded even though she couldn’t see him. “I don’t want to roll it out. Yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“I need to keep the buyers, including me and Cam, under wraps for a little longer.”

“So it *is* you *and* Cam?” She didn’t sound surprised. Nor did she sound thrilled.

“And our other partners.”

There was a pause on her end. “The McCafferys don’t know yet?”

He blew out a breath. “How did you guess that?”

“Why else would Cam not already be here trumpeting in the town square about how he’s saving hundreds of jobs and pointing out to me that he’s saving my family from being even more hated and going deeply into debt?”

Well, at least she realized what they were doing for the town and for her. “Cam’s not...” But Aiden stopped mid-defense.

Cam would love to do all that. Camden had never had any trouble pointing out all the things he’d done for Appleby over the years and the chance to have something to hold over Whitney Lancaster’s head. Yeah, Cam might be older, a little wiser, and a tiny bit more mature than he’d been at eighteen, but maybe not *that* much. No one had ever gotten to him like Whitney had, and he’d never gotten over that. Or over her.

“We’re not ready to tell them everything yet,” Aiden amended. “But we knew we needed to step in with Hot Cakes

now rather than waiting. We're ready to move forward with the sale. We just need to keep the details private for a little longer."

"Fine by me," Whitney said. "I'm in no rush to admit that the town's favorite sons are once again saving the day. This time by bailing the Lancasters out."

"Your dad won't say anything?"

She laughed but didn't sound amused. "He honestly couldn't care less," she said. "He moved on a long time ago. I'm handling all this. He just wants it done. He doesn't need or want the details other than how much we're getting and when."

"Great," Aiden said. "We'll keep working on the details and keeping things moving. Just without any publicity. For right now." Cam would never go for keeping things on the down low for good. He'd want to make a splash, let Appleby know they were here, and that it was all going to be amazing from here on out. In their humble opinions, of course.

"Fine." She paused. "Will I be dealing with you, then?"

Unspoken was the question about when and if Cam would get involved. "For now." He hesitated. "Could I stop by later on and get a copy of employee manuals and all the compensation and benefits information?"

"Of course," she said. "Or I can just email it all to you. We wouldn't want someone to see you walking in over here."

Aiden almost heard the smile in her voice. This was complicated and just plain weird, but at least they could all acknowledge that. "That would be great to start with. Thanks."

"I'm happy to go over any of it with you. And we can do that off-site too. Of course, we'd probably have to go out of town."

He actually chuckled at that. "I promise this isn't going to be a secret for long."

It couldn't be. He had a lot to do. The business had been neglected by Whitney's father for some time now. He needed

to get the lay of the land and figure out how to bring it all back. And then some. Aiden knew Camden and Ollie well enough to know that by the end of the day, they would already have schemes to make Hot Cakes even bigger and better under their ownership. In fact, with Cam in Chicago with Ollie and Dax—the big idea guys—and without Aiden keeping track of them, God only knew what they might be cooking up. A bored Oliver Caprinelli was a dangerous thing. Egged on by a troublemaking Camden McCaffery... Aiden shuddered. The only good thing was that Grant was there and would put the kibosh on anything too crazy. Dax, of course, wouldn't stop a thing.

Aiden rubbed the middle of his forehead. He needed to get this thing with Zoe locked down, so he could dive into Hot Cakes before his friends bought a Hot Cakes blimp or something.

But he probably needed to call Piper first. She needed to keep even closer tabs on Ollie for a few days.

Did that mean he was going to instruct her to get into Ollie's emails and listen in on his phone calls and absolutely keep track of *anything* he and Cam did together? Hell yes, it did.

“Well, I know I'm listed as the VP of Sales and Marketing,” Whitney said to Aiden, returning him to their conversation. “But I really know the business inside and out. That's just... a title. I mean... I do marketing. Of course. I deal with all our accounts. But I do... more than that.” She sighed. “I feel like I'm applying for a job with you and failing this interview.”

Aiden knew that technically Whitney was put in charge of marketing mostly because she was beautiful and charming and smart and knew everything about the business. She could easily sell it to anyone. She hadn't actually gone on to get a degree, having been given her position as soon as she turned eighteen and having learned what she needed to know by working in the company alongside her father.

“You don’t have to interview, Whit,” Aiden said, reverting to the nickname she’d gone by with friends in high school. “You can be as involved with the company as you want to be for as long as you want to be. We want to preserve *all* the jobs there, and we know that you’re a valuable asset to us. We’ve all eaten plenty of Hot Cakes, but that’s kind of the limit to our knowledge about the company.”

“I doubt very much that Camden’s eaten plenty of Hot Cakes,” Whitney said. She sounded like she might be rolling her eyes. But she also sounded a little sad.

She was right. Cam avoided all snack cakes from the Hot Cakes company.

“Camden is only part of the ownership,” Aiden felt compelled to point out. “We’re equal partners. You don’t have to worry about him interfering with this going through or him firing you or anything like that.”

“I’m actually more worried about working for him than being fired,” Whitney said. “But I can’t not work for him. I don’t know how to do anything else.”

Aiden realized that Camden being her boss might be... interesting. Especially with their history and Camden’s propensity to provoke people. Aiden might need to especially review any sections in the employee manual about harassment. If nothing else, they would need to have a talk about how Camden was going to act with and treat Whitney.

“I’ve got your back, Whit,” Aiden told her. “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I’ll admit there are a few... complicating factors.”

Camden, for one. Definitely. But also Zoe.

Whitney laughed lightly. “That’s a nice way to say it.” Then she said, “But really, Aiden, thank you. I’m glad you called. I’ve been worried, and it’s good to know we’ve got a place to start.”

“You bet. And you can reach out to me anytime too. I’ll text you my email address.”

“Great. I’ll send all those materials over as soon as I get into the office.”

Yeah, Whitney and Eric might be the only people in Appleby who knew the names of the new owners at this very moment, but they couldn’t keep it under wraps for long. He needed to get to work on Zoe.

He grinned at that thought. That was hardly going to be *work*.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he said to Whitney.

“Sounds good.”

They disconnected, and Aiden headed for Buttered Up.

He parked in the back and started for the door. And ran into Jane.

“Uh, hey.”

She smiled up at him. She had on a hoodie, the hood up, and was dressed in running clothes. She was leaning against the bricks beside the back door. “Morning.”

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting for Zoe to bring me my breakfast.”

“By the back door?” Aiden grinned.

“I can’t be seen out front.” Jane shrugged. “Against company policy to shop here. It’s a gray area, since I don’t actually *pay*, so I’m not sure it’s really shopping, but you can’t be too careful when it comes to crazy family feuds.”

She was right. She was also about to be one of his employees and was breaking company policy right in front of him.

Yeah, that was the first policy he was going to look at when Whitney sent the materials over. They were axing that clause, first thing.

“Want me to go in and get her?”

Jane looked at her watch. “Nah, there’s another minute before our meet.”

“Does she pass it to you in an unmarked brown paper bag?”

Jane laughed. “She does.”

Aiden shook his head, smiling. “You’re both crazy.”

Jane shrugged again. “Don’t want to get fired but can’t live without my Buttered Up sugar fix. It’s a tough position to be in.” She gave him a mock frown. “You can’t tell.”

“Of course not.” He started to move past her to the back door but then slid her a glance. “So you haven’t seen Zoe yet this morning?” Did he want to know how Zoe was acting after their kitchen tryst? Yes, yes he did.

“Nope.”

“Huh.”

“Have *you* seen Zoe yet this morning?” Jane asked, clearly fighting a smile.

“I... have.”

“And was she in a good mood?” Jane asked.

“She was... after her... coffee.”

“Her... coffee.” Jane nodded. “Yeah, she hasn’t had any morning... coffee... from a guy in... a long time.”

He immediately turned to face her. “How long?”

Jane blinked at his sudden intensity. “Um.” It was clear she was trying to figure out how much to say. “Not sure.”

“Jane,” Aiden said, in his low, firm, I’m-not-fucking-around voice he had to use with Dax at least twice a week. “Get sure.”

“Well, if we’re talking about *coffee*...”

“We are *not* talking about coffee.”

Jane’s eyes got wide. “Are we talking about...”

He let her trail off and then lifted a brow. “Not quite. Somewhere between that and... actual coffee.”

Jane grinned. Aiden couldn't help but grin back. He liked Jane.

“You got up early,” Jane commented.

“Zoe gets up early.”

Jane nodded. “And if you wanted... coffee... with her, you'd have to be up early.”

For some reason Aiden laughed. “You missed the emphasis on *up*. I mean, as long as we're doing this insinuation and innuendo thing.”

She gave him a huge smile. “I'll bet *you* didn't miss the emphasis on *up*. Am I right?”

He laughed then shook his head. “You're not going to help me out at all here?”

“If you want to know something about Zoe and her coffee, you're going to need to ask her.” Jane pushed away from the wall and turned to face him. “But you do already know she takes her coffee very seriously.”

He did, actually. “Then why was she so pissed at me about not wanting Christmas coffee and wanting more serious coffee?”

Jane shook her head. “Because she had a recipe and now you're throwing new ingredients in, and she has no idea how this is going to end up... tasting.” She sighed. “I'm not going to give you the info you want, but I'll tell you this—because it's something you already know—Zoe is really good at what she does. But what she does is what she's always done. On purpose. Because she knows how that will turn out. She knows exactly how much butter and sugar and flour to put in and what temperature to bake it at and how long to leave it in the oven. She will have to really trust someone to change anything up and risk it turning out badly.”

Aiden thought about that. He glanced at the back door of the bakery. “She would also have to really trust someone to

change up her... coffee routine.”

“You’ve got it,” Jane said with a little nod.

“But I really need to—” He was cut off by the back screen door to the bakery whacking him in the back.

“Oh, geez!” Zoe gasped. “Aiden! You can’t stand right in front of the door.”

Soft light and the scent of vanilla and buttercream and cinnamon drifted out, like Zoe was an angel arriving on a glowing cloud of sugar and spice.

“Um—” He tried.

But all he could think about was how he’d had his hand in her panties and her moaning against his mouth just a couple of hours ago.

“Here you go.” Zoe handed a plain paper bag to Jane through the door. “Double chocolate muffin.”

Jane took a deep breath, her eyes sliding shut in bliss for a moment. “I love you so fucking much.”

Zoe chuckled. “Get out of here before someone sees you.” She shot Aiden a look. “Someone else.”

“See you later, babe,” Jane said. She gave Aiden a wink. “You too. Enjoy your next... cup of coffee.”

“Oh, I will,” he promised. He watched her jog down the alley and turn the corner. Then he looked over at Zoe. “She parks a couple of blocks away?”

“She jogs down here from home,” Zoe said, pushing the door open wider so he could step inside. “That way people think she’s just out for a run. She tucks the bag inside her jacket on the way home.”

“It’s so dumb she has to sneak around like that,” he commented.

“Of course it is,” Zoe said. “But I guess if Josie came in here munching on a Cinnamon Curl from Hot Cakes, I’d be a little annoyed.”

“You wouldn’t fire her though,” Aiden said, shutting the door behind him as Zoe moved across the kitchen.

Zoe shrugged. “I’d tell her I didn’t want it to happen again.”

“If you found a bunch of Hot Cakes wrappers in Jocelyn’s car, you’d be upset and have a talk with her with the expectation she stop eating them?”

Zoe looked at him across the worktable, and for just a second he flashed back to last night then to that morning in the kitchen. He could smell her, feel her, hear her all over again, and he lost his train of thought.

Damn. This woman. How had this all happened so fast? Suddenly, almost overnight, he couldn’t even keep track of a conversation while standing in a room where he’d kissed her.

Then she said, “By eating those, she’d be supporting my enemy. Yeah, I would ask her to stop.”

And he was right back on what they’d been discussing. He sighed. “Your enemy? That’s a little strong.”

She shook her head. “This again? Already? Everything was going so well between us too.”

He moved farther into the room. “You mean when I was making you come?”

She sucked in a quick breath. “Uh... yeah. I really liked you right then.”

He grinned. “I can make you like me a lot. Often. And even more.”

Her eyes were wide as he came around the corner of the worktable and into her space. She swallowed hard. “I would be okay with that.”

“I would be very okay with that too.” He lifted a hand and dragged his thumb along her jaw. She was so soft. He wanted to touch her all over.

“Aiden?”

“Yeah, Zoe?”

“You better never show up eating a Hot Cake in front of me.”

Dammit. This really was stupidly complicated. It shouldn't be. It didn't need to be. He really wanted to fix it. But right now, it was.

“You're saying that if I had one hand in your panties and the other holding a Mint Munchie, you would tell me to stop fingering you?”

She wet her lips. Her pupils were dilated. But she nodded. “Yeah.”

He braced his hand on the worktable next to them and leaned in. “You're saying that if I broke open a Hot Cakes cupcake, took that cream filling, painted it over your nipples and then licked it all off, you'd still push me away, because it was Hot Cakes cream?”

Her chest rose and fell with her deep breath. But she nodded again. “Yep.”

“And if I dipped my finger into a Strawberry Swirl and then *swirled* that strawberry filling over your sweet little clit and then wanted to suck it clean, you'd say no because it was Hot Cakes strawberry filling?”

It took her a little longer to reply that time. She cleared her throat. But then slowly nodded. “Yeah.”

Her *yeah* was very breathless.

He didn't believe her. He shook his head, making sure he looked regretful. “That's too bad.”

“But I make cream and strawberry filling,” she said quickly.

He grinned. There was no question Zoe's was superior to the Hot Cakes fillings. Those fillings were mass produced and needed preservatives, so they had a longer shelf life. Zoe's were fresh and made by hand in small batches. Which was the entire point. They weren't the same thing. They weren't competitors.

Though both would work for nipple and clit sucking.

“But I probably won’t have your filling in my glove compartment, convenient for when we’re randomly out parking by the river and the need to lick your nipples and suck on your clit comes up.”

God, he loved talking dirty to her. This was Zoe McCaffery. He’d known her forever. Five years ago, he would have *never* thought about talking to her like this. He would have never imagined anyone talking to her like this. Actually, if he had, he would have wanted to punch them in the face. Hard. Repeatedly.

But that was because he’d never seen her cheeks flush pink or her lips fall open or her nipples bead behind her light blue t-shirt.

She loved it too. Clearly.

“You can’t just lick my nipples and suck my clit without cream or strawberry filling?” she asked.

Aiden felt heat jolt through him. Zoe had just said *clit* to him. And talked about him sucking on hers.

“Oh fuck yeah, I can.” He started to lean in.

She gave him a smile. “Exactly. So you better not show up with any Hot Cakes, and you better not have any in your glove compartment.”

Then she slipped around him and headed for the front of the bakery.

Aiden dropped his head. She was such a brat.

And he wanted her so damned much.

Grinning, he turned, intending to follow her out to the front.

The back door opened just then, and he glanced over to see Josie coming in. She stopped, clearly surprised to see him.

“Good morning,” she greeted.

“Hey, Josie.”

She looked toward the door that led to the front of the bakery. “Zoe made you come in and work this morning?”

He chuckled. “No. Thought I’d steal your free Wi-Fi and maybe some coffee and muffins.”

She nodded, hanging her purse on the little hooks by the door and then grabbing an apron. She slipped it over her head and tied it behind her. Then she crossed to the sink to wash her hands. “Well, you better get out there, or there won’t be much of any of that left. Zoe’s fan club is about to arrive.”

“Her fan club?” Aiden felt his frown.

“Oh yeah. Mornings are our busiest time in the front.”

“But everyone is coming in for muffins and pastries, right?” he clarified.

Josie tossed him a smile as she dried her hands. “That definitely seems to make sense.”

He planted a hand on his hip. “But that’s not it?”

She lifted a shoulder. “I’m just saying that—as you know—the recipes for the stuff we sell here haven’t changed at all over the years, but since Zoe took over, business has picked up in the mornings. Especially with the males in the twenty-to-forty-years-of-age demographic.”

“Forty-year-old men are coming in here because Zoe is waiting on them?” Aiden asked, scowling now. “What the hell? They’re a little old for her, aren’t they?”

“Too old to start their day with a cute girl serving them sweets?” Josie asked. “Is any man too old to want that?”

Aiden narrowed his eyes. “You’re a cute girl who serves sweets in here too. What makes you think they’re not in here for you?”

She laughed and started toward the front. “I didn’t say they *all* come in here for her.” Then she pushed through the door, letting it swing shut behind her.

Aiden shook his head. These two girls. They weren’t above flirting and smiling and curling their hair to sell a few

additional muffins, huh? That was good. That was business. It was for good reason you never saw ugly, grumpy people doing commercials.

But he didn't like it.

Aiden followed Josie through the swinging door out of the kitchen. He came up short immediately. It was only ten past six. They'd just opened the front door for business. And there was a line. Literally out the door to the sidewalk.

And they were almost all men.

Josie shot him a glance that said, "Told you."

Aiden crossed to the coffee station, where the line was only slightly shorter. It wasn't until he was in line for coffee and scoping out the tables where he could set up his computer for the day to make Buttered Up his makeshift office, when someone noticed him.

"Aiden Anderson!"

He turned to find Jerod Carpenter and Carter Jackson behind him, smiling huge smiles. Jerod worked at the bank and was one of the two men—including Aiden—in suits in the bakery. Carter was a good friend of Jerod's and farmed his family's farm just north of town.

"Jerod." Aiden took the other man's hand. "Carter." He shook the farmer's hand next. "How are you?"

"We're just fine. Haven't seen you in a while," Jerod said. "How are things?"

Aiden glanced over his shoulder to where Zoe was bagging muffins and laughing and chatting with her long line of customers.

"Good. Really good." He was. He'd just had his hand in Zoe McCaffery's panties. It didn't get much better than that.

"How long are you in town?" Jerod asked as they all moved up closer to the coffee station.

Aiden assumed the other guys had already paid for their coffees, but the counter that held the tall carafes and all the

accompanying sweeteners and creamers just sat there opening inviting anyone to help themselves. He'd have to mention to her that she should at least store the cups behind the counter and hand them over only after they'd been paid for. Anyone could come in here, help themselves, and walk out with free coffee.

Like he was going to do.

But he was staying. He'd slip a twenty in the register or tip jar later. He'd been mooching off the bakery all his life. He hadn't paid for a cookie or cupcake in... ever. But now it felt strange.

The bakery had always been successful. As far as he knew. But he'd never really asked or paid attention, or hell, even thought about it, honestly. Now, overnight, this all looked different. Who repainted the trim when it chipped? Probably Zoe and Maggie and Steve. Had they always offered both a light and a medium roast? Had they always offered three kinds of cream? Who thought through the details of how many kinds of cream to offer so that people felt like they had a selection, but they didn't overdo on inventory? Maggie probably. They probably hadn't made hazelnut creamer when Letty had run the bakery. And Zoe didn't change things. Probably not even the creamer. He sighed even as he thought about how much he liked the stubborn little blond baker he'd known all his life.

She was stubborn, but it was born of a fierce determination to take care of her family and her family legacy. But it wasn't all pink sugar and frosting and sprinkles. Suddenly he was looking at all the ways it could be complicated and stressful.

"Aiden?"

He focused on Jerod and his questioning look. Then remembered the man had asked how long he'd been in town.

"I'm here for good, as a matter of fact. Just moved back."

Might as well lay that out there. Especially among the twenty-to-forty-year-old male demographic that seemed to be Zoe's most enthusiastic customers.

Not that anyone here would have any reason to think his moving back had anything specifically to do with Zoe. But once they all saw him with her constantly, knowing he was here to stay, people could start putting two and two together. He was fine with that.

“No kidding,” Jerod said, clearly a little surprised. “No more Chicago?”

They moved up another spot, and Carter reached for a coffee cup.

“Been there, did what I needed to,” Aiden said. “I wanted to get out there and try some new things, and I’ve had a lot of amazing opportunities.”

That was all certainly true. He and Camden had both wanted to leave Appleby and do something big. They both felt like they could honestly say they’d done something big and impressive.

But when they’d gotten the offer to sell, Aiden hadn’t balked for even a second. He’d been ready to move on. Even before Zoe had shown up half naked and turned everything in his mind in a new direction, filled with a new possibility, he’d been ready for something else. Something more.

His mom had told him to make something of his life, to make it matter. He’d been struggling with the idea of *Warriors of Easton* really *matter*ing for a while. It had given him money to donate to worthy causes. It had made lots of kids happy. Those weren’t nothing. But were they big enough?

They weren’t as big as Hot Cakes.

He didn’t mean monetarily or fame-wise. Saving the town, saving those jobs, *mattered*. Being someone who didn’t turn his back on his hometown, who used his good fortune—and his actual fortune—to make things better for people here *mattered*.

“Now there’s stuff here you need to do?” Jerod asked as he and Aiden took their turn at the coffee station.

Yes. There was. Save Hot Cakes—and the town. Convince Zoe to marry him. Just to name two.

He glanced over at the bakery counter where Zoe and Jocelyn were boxing and bagging treats for their long line of customers.

“Yeah. I guess I felt like it was time to come home,” he said.

Jerod followed his gaze and his eyebrows went up. “Jocelyn?” he asked. “I didn’t know the two of you were a thing.”

Okay, so now he had a choice. He could shake that off and insist he was just friends with both women—which was true enough—and downplay what was going on with him and Zoe. Especially considering she hadn’t admitted anything was really going on with them.

Then again, she had been more than fine with what had happened in her kitchen at home this morning.

Or he could use this opportunity to tell Jerod—one of the men within the exact demographic of guys who possibly came in for more than muffins—that Zoe was off limits now. That she was *his*. Jerod would probably spread that news around like it was butter on these muffins everyone loved so much.

“Not Jocelyn,” he said, reaching for the coffee carafe and pouring sixteen ounces of nice, strong brew into his cup.

“Ah. Zoe.” Jerod nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Does it?” He sure as hell thought so. Maybe he’d have Jerod go tell Zoe. Aiden added a top to the cup and turned to watch Jerod add cream to his and then a lid as well.

“You’ve known each other forever. You’re with her family and at her house whenever you are home,” Jerod said with a nod. “And she’s never been serious with anyone here. Guess I just never put that all together.”

She’s never been serious with anyone here.

Aiden knew the caveman part of him who liked that *very* much was over the top. But he couldn’t help it. He wasn’t 100 percent certain she was still a virgin. If he were a betting man, he’d say she was. But this was Zoe. She was goal oriented.

Annoyingly so. If she really wanted to get rid of that V-card, she would do it. That thought tightened his gut.

But the idea of her being emotionally close to, spending quality time with, talking and laughing with someone else as she would in an actual relationship, made his *chest* feel tight.

“That’s great,” Jerod said, clapping Aiden on the shoulder. “Welcome back, man.”

Jerod was now assuming Aiden and Zoe had an ongoing relationship that had been spanning a long period of time and was closer than the friendship that had been a part of him being so close to her family.

He was good with that.

They had a more serious relationship than she’d had with any other guy around here. He knew her. He knew her dreams and plans and likes and dislikes. He’d been there when her grandfather died. She’d been there when his mother had died. She’d been a kid, but they had that history. They were close. And dammit, they were now sleeping together.

Or would be.

Soon.

Very, very soon.

“See you around,” Aiden told Jerod.

“You bet.” He and Carter headed out of the shop.

Aiden went to stake out his table by the far window that looked out over the alley. He plugged his computer in, opened his email, and glanced over at Zoe, who was smiling and laughing and bouncing around behind the glass cases full of her homemade treats—though becoming less so by the minute—and sighed. He might have to become a morning person if he was going to be with her.

That was going to suck a little bit.

But then she stretched to reach up into a high cupboard behind the front counter, and his gaze dropped to her ass.

Yeah, sucking. He could get into *sucking* when it came to Zoe.

He quickly became aware, however, that he wasn't the only one enjoying the view. A couple of the guys in line at the register elbowed each other, and one actually leaned in to see around the two men in front of him.

Aiden's eyebrows shot up.

Then evidently not finding what she was looking for in that cupboard, she stepped back and bent over to search a lower cupboard.

A couple more men leaned to get a look.

Yeah, no.

Aiden got up, shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over the back of his chair. He pulled his tie off and tossed it over his computer. Then he headed behind the counter to join Zoe and Josie.

Looked like they needed some help.

He rounded the end of the counter to join the ladies.

He moved in behind Zoe and when she rose, put a hand on her lower back—yes, it was a possessive gesture especially for the guys watching from behind her—and said near her ear, “Let me get it.”

They were far enough away from the register and the line of customers-slash-admirers that no one could hear their conversation. But they could see.

She looked up at him, clearly surprised. Then her eyes narrowed. “You don't know what I'm looking for.”

“I know if it involves you stretching and bending in front of a bunch of other men, I'm going to get it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You want to just pee on me to mark your territory and get it over with?”

“I don't think that's necessary.” Then he leaned in and kissed her.

Chapter Ten



It wasn't deep or long, but it did the trick.

It also caused her to relax into him, her lips softening. For just a couple of seconds.

He pulled back before she could push him away, because he sensed she was about to. That wouldn't help with his narrative here at all.

She pressed her lips together briefly then shook her head. "My mom's going to hear about that."

"I don't care."

"What if I do?"

"Shove me. Slap me. Throw a cake in my face. Yell. Tell me to leave you the hell alone in front of all these people."

He could tell she was thinking about it for a moment, probably playing each of those out in her head and maybe enjoying them a bit, but she didn't do any of them. The surge of satisfaction and *hell yeah* was strong as he realized this was a big win.

"My mom would hear about that too," she finally said.

"Yeah."

"She'd be mad if I slapped you. Or wasted cake. Or swore in front of customers."

"Uh-huh." Those were all true. And not at all why she wasn't doing them.

“I need more plastic containers for a half-dozen muffins and cupcakes,” she said. “They’re not up here, so we’ll have to get them from the back.”

“You go,” he said. He glanced behind them. The line was still there. Most of them were staring with their mouths hanging open. “I’ve got this.”

“Oh, I don’t—”

“I can get cupcakes and muffins and scones out of the case.”

“Bet you don’t know how to run a cash register,” Zoe said.

“I... don’t.” Aiden frowned. He’d never run a register.

“Bet you also can’t smile and flirt them into buying double what they came in for,” Zoe said, giving him one of the smiles that probably got guys buying by the dozen.

Considering 90 percent of the line was male, that was a pretty good bet.

“Fine, where are these containers?”

She grinned, clearly pleased with herself. “Storeroom, second shelf, right-hand side.”

He went after them, returning with a huge stack only two minutes later. It was still enough time for Zoe to dive right into waiting on people again. With a big, bright I’m-so-happy-you’re-here, you’re-so-funny-and-charming-and-handsome smile.

“He’s back to stay, then?” Garrett Green was asking her.

Aiden set the containers next to her.

“I guess,” Zoe said, looking up at him.

“I am,” Aiden confirmed. “To stay.”

“I see,” Garrett said. He didn’t look happy.

Aiden didn’t really fucking care if Garrett was happy. About this or anything else.

“What can I get you?” he asked the next guy in line. The man looked familiar, but Aiden wasn’t sure who he was. It

wasn't like Aiden knew *every* person in Appleby. Even in a small town, if someone had been behind him in school four or five—or more—years, he wouldn't have been on any sports teams or in class with them, and he wouldn't have really known them. It was also possible, of course, people would have moved to Appleby since Aiden left.

“Need a blueberry and an apple cinnamon,” the guy said, making direct eye contact but without a smile. He looked almost annoyed.

“That it?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah.”

Aiden started to turn toward the case to grab the guy's order.

“Oh, Caleb, that will only get you through your first cup of coffee,” Jocelyn said, coming up next to Aiden. “Especially because Brian will take the blueberry if you don't eat it first.”

Caleb's expression softened and he smiled at Josie. “Yeah, you've got a point. I should eat that one first for sure.”

“Or get two and then tell Brian he owes you one when he comes in on Thursday,” Josie said with a wink.

A wink. Aiden rolled his eyes. He would put very good money down on the fact these men intended to buy more when they walked through the door but wanted Josie and Zoe to flirt with them before they increased their orders.

Dicks.

Caleb chuckled. “Yeah, okay. Two blueberry, an apple cinnamon, and you better give me a lemon poppyseed or Dan will be mad.”

Aiden shook his head. Transparent dicks.

Josie nodded, punching that into the register. “That's more like it.” She looked up at Aiden. “You know which ones are which?”

“Guessing the blueberry have blueberries in them and the lemon poppyseed have poppy seeds?” His tone was dry as he

moved toward the case.

Josie grinned and handed him a pair of thin plastic gloves to wear. “Wow, quick learner.”

He pulled the gloves on and grabbed all the muffins and a bag, wrapping them in the paper on top of the case before stuffing them in the sunshine-yellow bag that said Buttered Up on the side and handing it over to Caleb, who had moved down after paying Josie.

“Thanks,” Caleb muttered.

“My pleasure,” Aiden muttered back.

Had Caleb wanted to take Zoe out? Had he been flirting every morning, working up to asking her out? *Had* he taken her out? Had Caleb been the guy to make Zoe “good” with the virginity thing as she’d put it last night?

“Hey,” Aiden said to Caleb.

The other man turned back.

Aiden glanced over to where Josie and Zoe were waiting on new customers.

“You have a problem with me?” Aiden asked.

Caleb looked surprised. “Should I?”

“I’m here. Back in Appleby. And I’m with Zoe now.”

Caleb looked over at Zoe. “Okay.”

“You sure?” Aiden said. “You’re okay with that? No issues?”

“Issues like what?” Caleb asked.

“Issues like maybe you thought something was going to happen with her, and now I’m here fucking that up for you.”

Caleb shook his head. “You’re not fucking anything up for me.”

That wasn’t exactly a denial of him wanting something to happen. It also wasn’t a confirmation that he thought Aiden was a threat. Just that he wasn’t worried about Aiden being here. He could take that a few ways. “Good to hear.”

“Yeah, I’ve got what I want from Zoe.”

Caleb waited a beat—just long enough for a wave of rage to wash through Aiden and his blood pressure to spike—then he lifted his bag of muffins. But then he smirked. So obviously Aiden still wanted to punch him in the mouth.

“Fucker,” Aiden breathed.

“Um, calling our customers fuckers is really not the image we’d like to project here. Nor is the general body language that makes it seem like you want to fight them,” Josie said. Her voice was low as she reached past him for two scones, a muffin, and a cinnamon roll.

“Did they date?” Aiden asked, still glaring at Caleb’s back as the man exited the shop.

“Caleb and Zoe?” Josie said. She frowned. “No.”

“Is he the one she finally slept with or something?”

Josie frowned harder. “No.”

Well, that was something. “But he wants to.”

“Maybe,” she said with a shrug.

“That’s not okay.”

“It doesn’t matter, Aiden. If *she* doesn’t want to, then it doesn’t matter if he wants to.”

Yeah, okay, that was true. “Who was it?”

“Who was it what?”

“Who did she sleep with?”

Jocelyn shook her head. “You need to have *that* conversation with Zoe. And you know it.”

“She won’t tell me.”

“Then maybe you don’t get to know.”

“I should get to know.”

“Just because you want to?” Josie put a hand on her hip.

“Yeah. Because I care. Because she matters to me.”

Aiden looked over at Zoe. She was now talking to Lucy Scranton. Lucy was old enough to be her mother.

Or her mother-in-law. Her son, Luke, was about Zoe's age. Good-looking guy. He was the basketball coach and taught history. That was pretty great. Noble and stuff. The kind of guy that could marry the beautiful small-town, family-oriented, never-leaving-home baker.

Aiden shook his head and scrubbed a hand over his face.

He was losing it. A little. Luke wasn't going to marry Zoe. Neither was Caleb. Or anyone else in here. Or not in here. Except him, of course. He needed to cool it.

But again, when he looked at Zoe, the word *mine* went through his mind.

"Aiden," Josie said. "I think you need to do two things."

"Okay." Aiden squared up to her, ready for the advice.

"One, realize that Zoe is sugar *and* spice. Being in a relationship with her—of any kind—is dealing with her humor and intelligence and drive and willing to work her ass off for what she wants, but also her sass and her stubbornness and a lot of I'll-just-do-it-myself and I'm-always-right."

"A relationship like a friendship and working together too?" he asked with a slight smile.

"You've got it." Josie sighed but also smiled. "She's a lot. Of everything. You could try to give up the spice, but without her, life becomes a lot less flavorful."

That was all very accurate in his experience as well. Josie had known Zoe since kindergarten and now worked with her every day in this bakery. Just the two of them. It was probably safe to say Josie knew Zoe almost better than anyone did.

"And what's the second thing I need to do?"

"Stop threatening and insulting our customers."

Right. "You feel sorry for Caleb?"

"Nope. But you being annoying to the customers will be annoying to Zoe, and that will prolong the time it's going to

take you to get her naked. And that girl needs a release. More than beating eggs and whipping cream and kneading dough can give her.”

“Are those euphemisms?”

“I almost wish they were,” Josie said, then she took him by the arm and turned him toward the register.

“Are you saying...”

“Go wait on someone,” Josie said. “And if they don’t walk out with at least a dozen of something... you’re fired.”

Aiden did. But he couldn’t get it out of his head that if *kneading dough* was not a euphemism for sex—and Zoe needed a release—that meant Zoe definitely going to bed alone every night.

* * *

He was so distracting.

She’d known him all her life. She’d been ignoring him for a large portion of it. She’d been blocking out the sound of Aiden and Cam chasing each other with Nerf guns, playing video games, watching football on TV, and generally roughhousing and being boys in her house for years.

But at the moment, he was sitting at a table near the window of the bakery, quietly working on his computer while she frosted sugar cookies, and she could barely focus on what she was doing.

What the hell was that?

It was the kiss. Out of the blue. In front of everyone.

Okay, it was the kiss and having his fingers in her panties first thing that morning.

And how he’d looked in only his boxers, walking into that kitchen as if he was completely comfortable with them being half naked together.

At least it *should* have been all that. That was all part of it, for sure. But it was also the way he'd come behind the counter and started helping out that morning.

Staking his claim.

It had been clear as day that's what he'd been doing.

To everyone.

She knew because she'd already ignored two calls and three texts from her mother.

What happened this morning with Aiden?! Lucy said he KISSED you in front of everyone!

Zoe Marie! What is going on! Are you dating Aiden?!

WE WILL TALK.

Oh, she was sure they would. She just knew she needed to have some answers before they did.

Not answers from Aiden. He'd actually been very clear about what he was thinking and wanting.

She needed answers for *her*. If they were just going to sleep together, that would be one thing. Something they could keep between just the two of them. Something that wouldn't involve her entire family, all their friends, and the whole town.

More than that would... involve everyone.

Was that what she wanted? That wasn't a fair question. Until yesterday, when he'd waltzed back into town and announced he was back, to stay, and wanted to be with her—*with her* with her—she hadn't known that was an option. So she'd never thought about it.

The bakery was mostly empty during the day. Between the breakfast rush and people picking orders up later in the day, it was quiet with very few exceptions. There was a book club that met once a month and a group of young moms that got together every Tuesday and Thursday while their toddlers were at playtime at the preschool. There were occasionally people in and out, but for the most part during the day it was Zoe and Josie and George and Phil.

George was a retired banker who'd lost his wife about a year ago. He came every day at 10 a.m. in the suits he'd worn to work for forty-five years. He sat at the table closest to the coffeepots with his two newspapers. He barely said a word other than giving his muffin order. His snowy-white hair was a sharp contrast to his ebony skin and his kind, if slightly sad, brown eyes.

Phil was a retired over-the-road trucker. He, too, had lost his wife a little over a year ago. He came in wearing jeans and a t-shirt, also with two newspapers. He had leathery tan skin from years outside loading and unloading his trucks, and his long gray hair was always gathered in a ponytail.

The two men looked very different and had very different backgrounds. But they both liked coffee and muffins and reading the paper in the morning. They would sit at neighboring tables, not speaking, but after they each finished their first newspaper, they would pass it to the other.

Their little ritual always made Zoe smile. They clearly didn't want to chat in the mornings, but they also didn't want to have coffee and read the paper completely alone.

They hung out until about eleven thirty, then they both cleaned up their tables, tucked their newspapers under their arms, and headed out.

Zoe liked both men a lot, but she'd been antsy waiting for them to leave today so she could talk to Aiden.

The door had just bumped shut behind George. "You know —" she started.

Just as Aiden's phone rang.

He looked up at her. The phone rang again. "You okay?" he asked.

He was giving her the choice of talking instead of taking the call? That was nice. She waved her hand. "Go ahead."

He picked his phone up. "Hey." He was still looking at her. "Nice of you guys to finally get to work. I see what happens when I leave the office."

Zoe went back to applying blue frosting to the cookie flowers that Janice Murphy was coming to pick up later that afternoon, but she couldn't help but hear what Aiden was saying. Clearly, he was talking to his partners. Which probably included her brother.

"I'm going to tell her you're going to call. She can go over all that with you," Aiden said.

Zoe kept working, but with it being only the two of them in the front of the bakery, it was impossible for her to not hear him. There was soft music playing overhead, but that hardly obscured his voice. She could turn it up, she supposed, but at the same time, Aiden wasn't acting like he minded that she could hear him.

"Because I need someone else to take the lead on that," he said. "I can't do it, and I think you'd be the best for that anyway, Dax."

He was definitely talking to his partners.

"Fine, but Cam needs to stay out of it," Aiden said. "He knows why."

Zoe glanced over at her brother's name. Aiden was now standing and looking out the window, away from her.

She took a second to check him out. His jacket was still hanging on the back of his chair and his sleeves were still rolled up on his forearms, but he'd put his tie back on after helping behind the counter. Why? He was in here alone and obviously his work activities were all being conducted via computer and phone today.

Probably because he knew that tie got to her.

Then again, watching him moving behind the bakery counter, bagging muffins and scones, catching whiffs of his cologne whenever he passed her, had also gotten to her. She wasn't used to having that extra pair of hands. Or such a big body in that space. It had seemed he was always in her way. He'd been helpful though. Kind of. After Josie had had a little talk with him about the glowering he'd been doing.

Zoe wasn't sure what Josie had said exactly and Zoe hadn't asked. Aiden hadn't been *friendly* to the rest of their morning customers, and he was nowhere near the salesperson Josie and Zoe were when it came to talking customers into adding to their orders, but he hadn't messed anything up and hadn't scowled anyone out of the store. He had also seemed intent on keeping the line moving and none of the guys lingering too long at the counter with Zoe and Josie. They'd had the morning crowd taken care of thirty minutes earlier than usual.

Of course, they couldn't let him keep helping if that was going to be the case. When the guys lingered, they bought more. The bakery did better business when the customers had a chance to talk with Zoe and Josie, laugh a little, flirt a little, have a sample of the day's special, be reminded it was a coworker's birthday—cause for a surprise muffin—or that their assistant had brought them a cinnamon roll last Wednesday and they should repay the favor.

Yes, Josie and Zoe knew who their customers worked with, who got along with who, who didn't, who was allergic to walnuts, who hated anything flavored with pumpkin, who was likely to choose a cinnamon roll with more frosting, or one with less. It was good business. And inevitable after living here and waiting on these people for *years*.

Aiden didn't know those things. That meant this morning, Bud Wilmer had walked out with only one cream cheese Danish rather than the dozen he should have, considering it was his best carpenter's first day back on the job after his wife had given birth to their first daughter. Zoe could have easily convinced Bud to take Danish for the whole crew as a mini celebration. Travis Buckley had also walked out with a banana muffin for his partner, Dana. Dana hated banana muffins. That was going to be awkward.

Aiden definitely couldn't help anymore.

But he could sit his nice ass at one of her tables in his suit and tie and work with her Wi-Fi any time he wanted.

“Oliver, we need to know all about the benefits they have *now* so that Grant can look into improving their plans.” Aiden paused. “Yes, I want you to start comparing plans now.” He listened for a few seconds. “You can start with that, but we need to go bigger. I’m not sure we know enough.” Another pause. “Because we want to do better. We want to *improve* things.” He let out a sigh. “Sure. If everything is fine, great. But Dax will be able to tell us that. I don’t want bottom line and numbers and lists of services to be our only consideration, Grant. I mean it. I want Dax to talk to the employees. See what they want and need. Let’s show them they matter.”

He paused again and turned to pace to the front door of the bakery then back to the table.

Zoe kept icing cookies, but her mind was only half on her task. Not even half. Because her mind was 80 percent on Aiden. Which left only 20 percent for the... what was she decorating again? Oh yeah, flowers.

This was interesting. She’d never seen Aiden working. Not like this. Not real work.

She’d seen him mowing grass around town as a kid. That had been before he’d developed any muscles to speak of and long before she’d developed any appreciation for guys with muscles, so seeing him with his shirt off in the summer had done nothing for her.

She’d seen him serving ice cream and making milkshakes at the drive-in by the highway a couple of summers, mostly because her friends had thought he and Camden were *so cute* and always wanted to go there. What *she’d* seen was a couple of guys who laughed at fart jokes and who never left any mashed potatoes for her and who flirted with the same girls they said were bitches behind their backs. She had not been impressed by Aiden’s sundaes either. He skimped on the caramel and thought chocolate ice cream with marshmallow topping was the best combo, which was *not* true. Clearly he was not an ice cream sundae connoisseur, and she had no idea why all the girls thought he was so great behind that counter.

But what he was doing this morning in the bakery was real work. He was a grown man now. He made a lot of money. His company was very successful. Additionally, it was clear, even from just this side of the conversation, that he was kind of the one in charge. At least, he was the one making assignments for the rest of the guys.

Plus, dammit, he looked hot in that tie. And when he was talking business and bossing people around, his voice seemed deeper and firmer.

Zoe shifted a little as her nipples tingled. That was stupid.

“Great. Having you on-site would make it all even better,” he said into the phone. He slid back into his chair and tapped on his computer keyboard. “I need a few more days.” He paused and typed something in. “I know that.” More typing. “Fine, that will work. But not Cam.”

Zoe grinned as she finished off the petal on the last cookie. Cam was a stubborn ass and didn’t listen very well to many people. Aiden Anderson might be the one person who could get Cam to do what he wanted. Or to *not* do what Aiden *didn’t* want him to do.

“Call me when you know.” Aiden paused. “Okay, sounds good. Let’s get this done right.”

He disconnected, and Zoe glanced over to see him run a hand through his hair. She pressed her lips together, moving the freshly decorated cookies to the tray with the rest of the finished ones. She looked over at him again. He was typing on the computer, intent on the screen. Then he sat back, breathing out.

“You listened to Jane,” she commented.

He looked up, almost like he’d forgotten her for a moment. “What?”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear,” she said, gesturing toward his makeshift workstation in general.

“Oh.” He glanced at the phone then back up at her. “Right. Sorry.”

“Didn’t bother me,” she said. She propped her hip against the worktable. “But it sounds like the things Jane said last night made an impression.”

“What things?” he asked.

“About benefits and how nice it would be if management would just talk to their employees and listen.”

Aiden swallowed. “Oh. That. Yeah, I heard her.”

“I think it’s cool you would take something a friend tells you and apply it to your company. You’re using her to help you look at your own company through an employee’s eyes and experiences rather than as management.” Zoe lifted a shoulder.

She hadn’t really thought about the fact that her brother and Aiden had employees. She knew that, of course, but she hadn’t thought about them having people who actually depended on them and that they had to make decisions like benefits that could help or hurt the people who worked for them. That was very grown-up. Responsible. Probably stressful.

She only had one employee, and she was thinking about Jocelyn and how Buttered Up, and its successes and failures, affected her all the time. She worried about it and felt guilty she couldn’t provide her amazing employee—and best friend—with a robust, secure, awesome benefits package. The best she could really do was pay her a decent wage—for Appleby, Iowa—give her time off when she needed it, and keep her in cupcakes and pie for life.

She made great cupcakes and pie. But that didn’t exactly equal a 401(k) and dental. In fact, cake and pie kind of worked against a dental plan in some ways. Or maybe they made a dental plan even more important.

Aiden was watching her closely. “I want the people who work for me to be glad they’re working for me.”

“Well, the best way to know how to make them glad is to ask them,” she said. “That’s a great first step. Do you think the plan you have now isn’t good enough?”

“I have reason to think it can be improved,” he said. “And after listening to Jane last night, I’d like to know more about things like childcare needs and other benefits that could make a real difference in their lives.” He was looking at her with a strange expression. But he kept talking. “There are long-term things that matter. Things like retirement and life insurance and covering time off for jury duty, things off in the future or that don’t come up very often. But I’m aware there are day-to-day needs that impact people’s lives that can really make them feel taken care of on a more direct level.”

She thought about that. Childcare definitely seemed to fit that description. “Like what?” she asked.

“Transportation,” he said. “Some people are limited to where they can work, or what hours they can work, because of sharing cars or needing public transportation.”

Zoe nodded. She’d never thought about that. “What else?”

“The chance to go to school and advance in the company for additional training or certifications or degrees,” he said. “Pay advances or reasonable loans or even grants for emergencies like the furnace going out in January or a kid wanting to go to summer camp.”

Zoe’s eyes widened. “Really? You do that? You give an employee money to send their kid to summer camp?”

“Why not? Summer camp is awesome. Every kid who wants to go should get to.”

Wow. It turned out Aiden and Cam were not only grown-ups with employees who needed things like reasonable pay and medical coverage and a way to take Christmas off at least every couple of years, but they—at least Aiden—were realizing there was more to those people working for them than just product makers.

“So you’re the one who’s in charge? With your company? With the other guys?” she asked.

He’d definitely sounded bossy on the phone. And hot. She hadn’t seen that side of Aiden before either. He was generally easygoing. He would get a little worked up on the basketball

court or football field. He and Cam had definitely had a few fights—that got physical at times—over the years. Her brother was a stubborn, opinionated, cocky, not-really-easygoing guy, so he and Aiden had clashed at times. Usually when Aiden was trying to tell Cam to stop being a jerk or to pull his head out of his ass about something. But for the most part, Aiden wasn't *bossy* exactly. He didn't need to be. Things worked out for him without all that much effort.

"I'm... the organizer," he said, finally settling on a word.

"What does that mean exactly?" she asked, intrigued suddenly by how his company ran.

He and Cam had owned their company—she couldn't even think of the name of it at the moment—for nine years. She'd never been all that curious about how it all ran, what they each did day to day, or even how they really felt about it.

"The guys are each really good at specific things. They're very talented and they're very passionate," Aiden said. "When you get four strong-willed, talented, and passionate people together, it's a good idea to have someone else who can... steer the ship."

"You're not talented or passionate?" she asked. She gave him a teasing smile. He was definitely both of those things. There was no question about that.

He grinned. "Brat. I like to think I'm both. But I'm a good... offensive coordinator." His smile grew. "Like on a football team. You need a great quarterback. You need talented running backs. You need a solid offensive line, and you need gifted receivers. But you also need a coordinator who can put them all together. Who can come up with a game plan and put everyone where they're going to be the biggest asset and then make changes as needed as the game goes on. Someone needs to call the plays."

"You call the plays," Zoe said. "You're the one putting the plan in place."

He nodded. "Dax is definitely a receiver. He goes out, runs the route we need him to, always makes the catch. The flashy

stuff. The big yard gains.”

Zoe grinned, enjoying Aiden’s analogy. It worked for her. She’d grown up watching Cam and Aiden play as well as following the Iowa Hawkeyes. She knew football.

“Is Cam the quarterback?” she asked.

He laughed. “No. Cam is the offensive lineman. He’s the one knocking people down who get in our way, breaking open holes to help us get ahead.”

She nodded. “I can see that. Who else?” God, she couldn’t even come up with the other guys’ names. That was terrible. These were her brother’s best friends.

“Grant. He’s our money guy. He’s like the running back. He makes smaller gains, safer plays, not the flashy, go-for-it stuff like Dax. But he’s tough, and he’ll fight for every yard for us. And he’ll protect that football. Nobody will get it away from him.”

“Who’s the quarterback?” Zoe asked. “There has to be a quarterback, right?”

Aiden nodded. “That’s Ollie. Oliver. He’s the visionary. The one who sees the whole field, who is up for whatever it takes to make the biggest play. He looks at every play as a chance to make a touchdown. He’s also the one who will generally follow the game plan—my plan—but you never know when he’s suddenly going to tuck it and run himself or throw a Hail Mary pass. He’s smart and cocky, and you wish like hell you could bench him for his stunts, but without him, the whole thing falls apart.”

She smiled. Aiden wasn’t looking at her now. He was studying the cookies in front of her. Though she didn’t think he really saw them. He was thinking of his friends. Affectionately, clearly. But also with some exasperation.

“Sounds like a great team.”

“When we’re on the same page, we’re amazing,” Aiden said without any conceit. It seemed he was just stating a fact. “But we have our disagreements, of course. And…” He was thinking hard about something.

“And what?”

“I don’t know that we’ve ever *really* been challenged.” He looked up at her. “We’re talented, and we balance each other out, but the truth is, we’re all also pretty charmed.”

She nodded. “You always have been.”

He didn’t disagree. “We still have a lot to learn about running a business and being bosses. At least, being good bosses. Our company started out with just the five of us. We didn’t need childcare, and healthcare for young, single guys is different than for other employees. When I had to get my appendix out, our plan didn’t cover much of it, but I could afford the huge deductible and co-pay.”

“Wait a second,” Zoe interrupted with a frown. “You had your appendix out?”

“Yeah. Three years ago. Almost burst. The guys actually rushed me to the hospital from a basketball game.”

“You were playing *basketball* while you had appendicitis?” Zoe asked. She hadn’t known any of that and that bothered her. A lot. “That was stupid.”

“I didn’t *know* it was my appendix,” he protested.

“Did your stomach hurt? Did you feel like crap?”

“Yes. But...”

She lifted her brows. “But what?”

“We were in the finals in the tournament.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you have a life insurance policy that would have covered you if you would have *died*?”

“Yes.”

She stopped and met his eyes. She let out a breath. Of course he had a life insurance policy. He knew better than most that sometimes you needed that long before you planned on it. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said. “It’s fine. Yes, I have a life insurance policy. Also a will and lots of paperwork covering what

happens with the business if one of us dies or quits.”

It was a big-time business. A true corporation. They needed that kind of paperwork. Zoe... didn't. The bakery would probably go back to her mom, who might run it for a while and keep Josie employed. Maybe they'd sell to Josie eventually. Though she had no idea if her friend had that kind of money, and it would be very weird for Buttered Up to *not* belong to a McCaffery.

But if Zoe keeled over from a ruptured appendix, that whole thing would be up in the air.

Damn. She'd never really thought of that.

“If you're just going to stand there, distracting me, you could at least come back here and help me frost cookies,” she finally said.

He straightened, and his hands went to his tie.

She watched, almost mesmerized, as he unknotted it, pulled it loose from his collar, then tossed it to the table he'd been using.

That was hardly real *undressing*. He'd been a hell of a lot more naked in the kitchen at home that morning. But there was something about how he took that stupid tie off that made her stomach feel warm and twisty.

Wow, she really did need to get laid. It was *stupid* to get worked up about Aiden taking his tie off.

He came around the counter and stopped next to her at the worktable.

“You really want me to help with this?” he asked, looking over the cookies she'd already done.

He smelled so good. She took a deep breath then said, “Sure, why not?”

“Because I haven't frosted cookies in years.”

She smiled. “It's like riding a bike. And I'll let you do the easy stuff.”

This was all pretty easy. Josie did the *hard* stuff. Zoe was amazed by her friend's talents and knew she and Buttered Up were totally screwed if Josie ever left her. Zoe could do round cakes and square cakes. Period. She'd once tried an octagon for a stop sign cake. She'd ended up cutting the corners off to make it a round cake and had drawn a stop sign in the middle of it.

The largest area of the cookies were covered in blue icing, and then she added embellishments with other colors over the blue. Aiden could swipe blue icing on, surely. She showed him what she wanted him to do with one then picked up a tube of pink frosting.

She started adding pink piping around a few of the petals as she cleared her throat. "I have to admit I was surprised to hear you talking about childcare and having Dax go meet with people. I've always pictured you guys sitting around in beanbag chairs, playing games, and talking about your new t-shirt design as your biggest item of business."

"Well, we talk about the new diamond colors and monsters too. The princesses have to cut the heads off of *something*," Aiden said as he spread blue frosting over the cookies. He did so carefully, swiping the edges to make them even and smooth. Just the way Maggie had taught them all when they'd been helping in the kitchen as kids.

"Right," Zoe said. She watched him, a little distracted. "And childcare."

"That's actually a new thing," he said. "I hadn't thought of that until Jane said it last night."

He was clearly concentrating on the cookies, but he kept talking. This felt very natural. They'd helped with cookies and cupcakes and other things over the years, but Zoe didn't remember a time it had ever been just her and Aiden. This was nice.

It also occurred to her he'd always taken this seriously. He didn't take seriously her dislike of the Lancasters or the idea of Hot Cakes being a true competitor for Buttered Up, but he did take the bakery and their business and what they did seriously

—even down to making sure the blue icing on the cookies was smooth and even. She appreciated that.

He didn't have to. A lot of men in his position probably wouldn't. He was a millionaire, running an internationally known, highly successful business. That was all still very hard for her to remember. Which she supposed was a good thing. He didn't act like a guy with a lot of money. He didn't try to buy his way into or out of things. He didn't flaunt it, or take things for granted, or act like he was better than anyone else. He was the same guy she'd always known. More confident. More commanding. More experienced and smarter. But still the same guy deep down.

That was... important. It hit her squarely. The idea that Aiden was truly the same person, after all this time and after everything that had happened to him, really mattered. She was, after all, the woman who really liked things that stayed the same.

She took a deep breath and tried to focus on pink piping. It was difficult. Because suddenly she was distracted by how small the cookies were in his big hands, how delicate they were but how careful he was being, and how cute he was when he was earnest about a task. His brow was furrowed with concentration as he turned the cookie this way and that, making sure the icing was perfect. He wanted to get it right, and that made her... want to cover his naked body in blue icing.

She swallowed. "Really?" she finally said in response to his comment about daycare for his employees. "I think that's great you took that all so seriously," she said sincerely. "I mean, I've never given that stuff a lot of thought either. Jane talks about work at Hot Cakes some, but she doesn't need childcare, and the most we've talked about benefits is when she tells me I can no way match what she gets there so, no, she won't work for me." Zoe bent over a cookie, swiping a thin pink swirl on the tip of each petal of the flower. "I've only got the one employee, and I just..." She shouldn't say the rest of that sentence.

She knew a lot of people—okay, her brother and Aiden and Jane and Josie—thought she was a little stuck. They understood and supported her in wanting to keep her family’s legacy alive and to keep Buttered Up the Appleby staple it had always been. But they also thought her *strict* adherence to keeping everything the same always was a little crazy. But it wasn’t *their* shoulders where the family legacy rested. If she did something new and it didn’t work, it wasn’t just an embarrassment to her. It was the whole Buttered Up reputation at stake.

Why would she not stick to the recipes and routines that had been *proven* to work? She really had it pretty easy here. She *literally* had the recipe to success. More than one recipe, even.

Aiden stopped his knife and looked at her. “You just?” he prompted.

“I just keep doing what’s always been done,” she said, staring at the cookie. “I just keep doing what works.”

“But needs change over time no matter what stays the same inside this bakery—the paint colors and the recipes and the menu—the *people* change. Your customers change. And your employee will change.” He paused then apparently decided to go on. “I know Buttered Up has been run by a McCaffery woman and her best friend from the very start. But... if you think about it... Didi changed. Or something changed. That’s what started the whole feud between Letty and Didi.”

“Didi got greedy,” Zoe said with a frown. That was always the way Letty had told it. Didi saw a way to make more money, and instead of adhering to quality and tradition, she’d sold out.

“Or she was willing to take a chance Letty wasn’t,” Aiden said.

“She gambled her lifelong friendship on that,” Zoe said. “And lost it. She has snack cakes—had,” she corrected. “She *had* snack cakes. But now look at her. That business is being sold off to someone else. The Lancasters will no longer have

it, while Letty's bakery is still going strong. Just as it *always has*."

Aiden turned toward her and leaned a hip into the worktable. He waited until she looked up at him. Why? So he could see her eyes? Read her expression?

"Didi has made more money in one year with Hot Cakes than Buttered Up has *ever* made," he said.

He didn't say it cruelly. He said it matter-of-factly. Then seemed to watch her closely.

Zoe straightened too and faced him. "Yes, I know. But Letty had something Didi doesn't. Something worth even more."

"What's that?"

"Her integrity."

Aiden nodded slowly.

"And loyalty," Zoe went on. "Sure, Didi has people on her side, but Letty has *true* customers. People who come back over and over, for every occasion that matters to them, to *this* bakery. People send people they love our cakes and cookies and pies. People want our products to be a part of special days like weddings and birthdays. When people come in here they know exactly what they're going to get. With Hot Cakes... people stuff those in their lunch boxes and glove compartments—" She gave him a little frown. "No one sends those to their moms for Mother's Day or with engagement rings baked inside or with *It's a Girl* frosted on top. *We* have people's hearts. They just have their wallets."

Zoe felt her heart racing. Dammit. Why did he set her off? He knew all those things and how she felt about them. Why was he pushing these buttons?

"Remember what I said about defending Hot Cakes and getting into my pants?" she asked him crossly.

"I do," he said. He leaned in slightly. "So panties don't count as pants? Because I remember, distinctly, getting into your panties this morning."

Chapter Eleven



Zoe felt as if she'd just opened the industrial oven and had been hit by a wave of hot air. She swallowed. "I'm glad you remember it *distinctly*," she said somehow. "Because if you keep talking about how great Hot Cakes is, you're not going to have anything *but* a memory."

The corner of his mouth curled. "Well, you're right," he finally said. "No one would compare Hot Cakes to Buttered Up."

She narrowed her eyes. That wasn't exactly admitting Buttered Up was *better*.

"And I might only have one employee," Zoe went on. "But she knows I want to take care of her. She knows I'll cut into our profits to make sure she has what she needs. She knows I'll work extra if she needs time off. I really doubt the Lancasters have taken a cut in their own pay to increase the amounts in their employees' checks or ever rolled up their sleeves and done any of the work themselves. I'd be shocked if Whitney can even turn one of their machines on."

That actually got a frown from Aiden, but he looked more thoughtful than anything. "You're probably right." He straightened again. "But it's easier to take care of one person than three hundred-some."

Zoe shrugged. "Not if you have three hundred times the money and resources."

Aiden didn't say anything to that.

Zoe turned back to the cookies, feeling less defensive as he continued to seemingly think about what she'd said. "Your dad's job was pretty stable, right?" she asked. "Healthcare and vacation time and all that?"

Aiden also faced the worktable again and picked up another cookie. "Yeah. Very. And his seniority with the company mattered to them too. Even when he started drinking hard, they gave him a lot of chances. He had an assistant and coworkers who covered for him and a boss who was sympathetic."

Zoe swallowed hard. She remembered when Aiden's mom had died. She'd been devastated. She had only been ten and hadn't really realized moms *could* die. Not that young anyway. She remembered seeing Aiden torn up, sad, angry. She also remembered her own mother being almost manic—cooking, baking, cleaning, *doing* things because if she sat still she'd have to think about losing Julie. It had been an awful time all around.

Zoe also remembered the change in Aiden's dad. Dan had always been a wonderful guy. Happy, friendly, outgoing. He'd coached the boys in baseball from peewees until they started playing on the official school team. He'd been the one to allow a trampoline in the backyard and had assured Zoe and Josie that, no matter what the boys said, they were welcome to jump on it anytime they wanted. He'd been the one to pick Zoe up and carry her home after she'd fallen out of his tree and fractured a rib.

Then Julie died, and Dan had changed overnight. He'd been sad. All the time. Quiet. He didn't go out, didn't want to socialize. And he'd started drinking. Zoe hadn't really known what that meant, but he'd started snapping at the kids when they were around, so obviously, they'd stopped going over there.

She remembered one day Maggie had asked her to take some leftovers to him. Zoe hadn't wanted to go. Dan might bark at her. Or he might not even answer the door. She didn't know how to act around him. He was a different person than the man she'd known. But Maggie had seemed so tired when

she'd said, "Just do it, please," so Zoe had trudged across the yards.

She'd found Dan crying at the kitchen table. She'd seen her mom cry. There had been tears on her dad's cheeks at Julie's funeral. But she'd never seen an adult man sob. Dan had been sobbing as if... well, as if his heart was broken.

"There's a lot more to people's lives than work," she said, running her finger through a smudge of frosting on the worktable.

Aiden gave a soft chuckle. "How would *you* know?"

She looked up. "I don't work *all* the time." But she did. She worked all the time. Her work was her life. "Yeah, okay. But when you're the boss, it's different."

He nodded. "It really is."

She studied him. "You work a lot?"

"All the time."

"Really?"

He nodded again. "I make myself go to the gym and take time off. I make the other guys take time off too." He paused and smiled. "Okay, Dax makes us take time off. But I back him up. He's the one who reminds us when we've been at it for too long, and I always agree."

She smiled. "Dax needs a break more often?"

"He believes in a healthy balance between work and play," Aiden said. "He's got articles and everything. He's gone to conferences."

"In warm, sunny places?" she guessed with a grin.

"Of course," Aiden said with an answering grin. "Then again, a lot of our work feels like play. Kind of like making cupcakes and cookies for a living. But it's important—according to Dax—to not forget that just because you enjoy what you do, it's still work, and you need more in your life."

"You believe him?"

“I do. I haven’t been very good about it,” Aiden admitted. “I kept telling myself, in one more year I’ll take more time off. Or after one more project I’ll relax a little. Or that I would just know when it was time.” He met her gaze for a long moment. “I think that last one was the one that finally came true.”

Zoe felt her heart flutter. Actually flutter. This guy was the same guy she’d always known. The one who she’d thought could never surprise her, never be exciting, never be the kind of thrilling she wanted from her love life, and yet he was making her heart flutter. On a regular basis.

He was definitely surprising her.

“What?” he asked after she’d stared at him for a few long seconds.

“I’m just looking at you and seeing an adult businessman with responsibilities and people who depend on you and that you’re actually taking that seriously and... it’s just weird.”

It was hot was what it was. And kind of awesome. Okay, really awesome. She liked this side of him. It was a little discombobulating, maybe, but no more so than having him kiss her in front of the entire morning rush. Or finger her to orgasm before her second cup of coffee.

No, seeing him in businessman mode was *more* discombobulating than that. Because she’d imagined the other stuff before. Vividly. She hadn’t really thought of him as an employer and an in-charge corporate guy. At least not a kick-ass, in-charge corporate guy with a heart.

At times, she’d pictured him and her brother with their money from their online game buying stupid things like too-expensive cars and high-tech refrigerators that told them the day’s weather and stock market news, kept track of their grocery list, made perfectly round ice, and practically brushed their teeth for them. In other words, stupid shit no one actually needed.

But it turned out Aiden was taking his position as a boss seriously and was looking at ways to make things better for his employees.

That was, strangely, sexy.

He took that in and then gave her a low smile. His eyes dropped to the front of her apron. Her breasts, kind of, but then he said, “Well, don’t get too freaked out. I still like to play with food.”

She frowned and looked down. Her apron was streaked with frosting. Her body got a little warm and she looked up. “Whew, that was a close one.”

He reached out and ran his finger over the frosting that was smeared over the top of her left breast. It was about two inches from her nipple, but the tip hardened, begging for him to give it some attention too. Then he lifted the frosting to his mouth, sucking it from his fingertip.

Oh yeah, her nipple definitely wanted some of that action.

She had to get these cookies done. And she and Aiden were in the front of the bakery. The area with the *big* windows. And Josie was in back. And... those were the only excuses she could come up with for not stripping her clothes off right then and there. They were big ones, sure, but she was already thinking about how the front door was locked and how if they were on the floor behind the counter no one would be able to see them and how Josie could definitely have the rest of the day off.

“We need to frost the rest of the cookies,” she said. Maybe Aiden could help her out with some willpower here. “Mrs. Murphy will be here in about two hours.”

“We do,” Aiden said. With a smirk. He knew what she’d been thinking.

What else would they have been doing other than frosting cookies? No one had suggested anyone take any clothes off. At least not out loud. But he knew what she’d been thinking.

So she gave him a wink, took in his surprised reaction, and then bent over the cookies again. They frosted, side by side, in companionable silence for a few minutes. But her mind was spinning.

Finally, Zoe said, “You know, we’re actually a lot alike with our businesses.”

“Yeah?” he asked, nearly done with his cookies. He smoothed the edge of a final blue flower and set it with the others for her to decorate.

“Yeah, we both came into our jobs really easily. I took over my family’s bakery—where I’ve been working all my life—and you and Cam and the guys kind of accidentally made something that became popular.”

He gave a little chuckle, but he didn’t dispute that. He reached for one of the blue flowers he’d finished icing and picked up a tube of yellow buttercream with a star tip.

“And we were both young when we started in our businesses,” she continued. “And it seems we’re having to grow up and get more responsible and serious at the same time.”

“You’re right,” he said. He looked over at her. “I guess we’ve got something in common there. That’s pretty cool.”

“It is.” She smiled. “Maybe we could... talk more about it. I’d like to hear more about what you figure out with your employees. And maybe you could look at our books, and we could talk about some ways to make something work for benefits for Josie.”

He looked genuinely surprised and straightened slightly. “Really? You’d want my input?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know if I can afford anything at all, honestly. And I’m nowhere near the scale you guys are. But I wouldn’t mind having someone else looking at it with me. Mom never dealt with this stuff. Dad doesn’t look at this stuff from an employer standpoint. It would feel weird to let any other business person I know look at all my books. I definitely want to ask Josie what kind of stuff she would need, but I don’t know about really diving into all the numbers with her.” Zoe frowned. “I’m really the only one who deals with *all* of it now.”

But she could trust Aiden with it. The bakery didn't bring in millions of dollars, and there were good and bad months, but it didn't bother her to think about letting Aiden see that. Hell, he might have some advice. He'd said Grant was their money guy, but she was certain Aiden knew plenty about the financials of their company.

Aiden seemed to think that over, then he nodded. "I'd be very happy to help you with that. Of course. Whatever you need."

There was a huskiness in his voice almost as if her asking meant a lot to him. She felt another little flutter like before, but this one she felt in her stomach. It felt like a combination of anticipation and happiness because she'd have some help but also like pleasure because she'd made *him* happy by asking.

She smiled. "Thanks."

This felt really good and natural, actually. Talking to Aiden about the bakery would be completely comfortable. He was a businessman, but more, he knew this bakery and he loved it. He had a personal interest in it. He always had. When his mother had worked here and because he considered Letty a second grandmother and Maggie a second mother. But now, looking into his eyes, standing here frosting cookies, talking business, teasing about frosting, Zoe definitely got the feeling there was even more personal here. That he cared because of *her*. Not because he considered her a friend or a little sister.

It felt like more than that.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and the warm flutter of pleasure quickly turned to a hot jolt of lust. She felt her lips part and her heart trip. She really wanted him to kiss her. *Really* wanted that.

"We need to frost the rest of the cookies," he said. "Mrs. Murphy will be here in about two hours."

His attention was still on her lips.

"We do," she agreed. It was true, of course. But clearly, he was thinking about other things. And knew she was too. Again.

He leaned in and she held her breath. He brushed his lips over hers then said gruffly, “But we need to be a little stingy with the pink frosting, okay?”

“Why’s that?” she asked, breathlessly against his lips.

“Because I want nothing more than to put you up on that worktable in back and suck pink frosting off your nipples.”

She couldn’t help the little moan that escaped. “That back worktable? Not this one?”

“Gotta admit the idea of all the men in Appleby seeing that, and knowing you are now *mine*, is pretty fucking tempting.”

Zoe sucked in a quick breath. She’d *never* considered herself an exhibitionist, but she definitely liked having her baked goods on display and having people exclaiming over them. Maybe this would be the same. She giggled.

He pulled back a little to look down at her, smiling. “That’s funny?”

“I was just thinking about how much work I put into all the things I put pink frosting on and how much I like having people look at them.”

He laughed. “Forget it. You and your nipples and all the parts of you I can cover in frosting are all for me.”

Again, his possessiveness, even when it was playful, surprised her. As did how hot it made her.

Yes, Aiden Anderson was surprising her in many ways. Much to her surprise.

“Frost those cookies,” she said. “I suddenly want to close early.” She looked up at him from under her eyelashes. “And I *never* close early.”

“Well, your workaholic heart can relax a little,” he said, lifting a hand and running his thumb over her bottom lip. “It’s not like you’re going to be *leaving* the bakery early.”

She blew out a little breath. “I guess that’s true.”

He leaned back, giving her a little room. “But definitely ease up on the pink.”

“It has to be the pink we save?” she asked, amused by that.

“For some reason, yeah,” he said.

“You don’t know why?” She did.

“It’s my favorite color, and I’ve always associated it with this bakery and all the sweet stuff inside.”

So he did know.

He leaned in again. “And nothing’s sweeter inside this place than you.”

This time it was Zoe that stretched up on tiptoe and met his lips with hers in a quick, sweet kiss.

“You *are* kissing?”

They jerked apart at the sound of Maggie’s voice. They both swung to face the kitchen door where Zoe’s mother stood, staring at them.

“You’re just standing around in the front of the bakery, during business hours, when anyone could walk in, *kissing*?”

They hadn’t heard her come in because she’d come in the back. Of course she had. She’d been coming in the bakery through the back door all her life.

Zoe felt her cheeks heat. “Mom!”

“Zoe,” Maggie said. She looked at Aiden. “Aiden.”

“You already heard about that, huh?” Aiden asked.

Zoe looked up at him. He looked... amused.

“Of course I already heard about it!” Maggie exclaimed. “My daughter and the boy who’s practically my *son*, *kissing*, in my *bakery*, in front of the entire town?” There might have been a question mark at the end of that sentence, but she wasn’t asking a question. She was making an accusation.

“Mom,” Zoe started. But she really didn’t know what to say.

“It seemed like the fastest and easiest way to spread the news,” Aiden told her. Calmly.

He wasn’t embarrassed. Or worried. Or apologetic. At all.

Zoe looked at her mom again.

“Well, it was that,” Maggie said, her tone a little calmer. She crossed her arms. “So you *are* together?”

Suddenly Zoe realized she needed to be the one to answer that. She met her mother’s eyes directly. “Yes. We are.”

She felt Aiden’s hand slide across her lower back to her hip. He drew her closer to him and squeezed her hip. He was pleased. That was good. She liked that. He’d been staking his claim on her, and she could have been annoyed and angry and offended. Instead, she was glad because she wouldn’t have gotten there on her own probably. But now, she could give him some of that back.

“How long has this been going on?” Maggie asked. “How long since things changed?”

“Christmas,” Zoe answered honestly. Things hadn’t gone according to her plan on Christmas Eve, but that was definitely when things had changed. Or started to. Actually, things had *really* changed when Aiden had come back to Appleby and started surprising her. But Christmas Eve had started things in motion.

Maggie looked from one of them to the other. “And now what?”

“Now we’re together,” Aiden said. “I’m back in Appleby to make this work.”

Maggie looked at Zoe. All Zoe could do was nod. That’s what he’d told her too. Honestly, at this point, if he said he was leaving, she’d be... brokenhearted. Not angry and hurt and embarrassed like at Christmas, but actually heartbroken. Which meant in the span of a few hours, Aiden had made her at least start falling for him.

Of course, having a lifetime together already made that easier. Knowing him, him being a part of her life already,

made it so they could skip ahead several spaces on this particular game board. But now that she'd opened up to this whole idea, her feelings had started to change quickly.

Maggie just watched them both for a long moment. Then she nodded. "Wonderful. I love you both very much."

Stunned, Zoe nodded. "I love you too."

"Love you too, Maggie," Aiden said.

"Now, can you keep your hands off each other long enough to get your work done, or do you need some help?" Maggie asked, eyeing the cookies behind them.

"Well, since you offered, I can think of a few other things I'd rather be doing, as a matter of fact," Aiden said.

Maggie actually laughed at that.

Zoe elbowed him. "We're fine, Mom. Of course we'll get these done. And Aiden has actually been doing his own work." She nodded in the direction of his computer.

"All right," Maggie said. "Then I'll leave you alone. But," she said as she paused in the open door to the kitchen, "no more big news delivered via grapevine. I fed you chicken fettuccini, and you didn't tell me you were in love with my daughter," she said, pointing a finger at Aiden. "That means when you propose, I'd better be the second person to know after Zoe, or you're going to be cut off from pasta at my house."

Zoe felt a jolt go through her at hearing her mother say Aiden was in love with her then another at the mention of him proposing. Whoa. That was... not as crazy as it should be.

"But you can't cut me off indefinitely," Aiden said. "Wedding planning goes especially well with spaghetti and meatballs, and I'm sure your grandkids will *love* your lasagna."

Zoe saw her mother's face first register shock and then soften into a mix of emotions. Her eyes actually filled with tears. "Grandkids," she said softly. Then she shook her head.

“I never could stay mad at you anyway,” she told Aiden. “But that’s a pretty potent argument.”

He grinned. “I was always your favorite. Imagine once I’m the father of your grandchildren.”

Zoe’s breath caught in her chest. She honestly couldn’t have responded to that if she wanted to. She had no air. But damn, *grandkids? Her* kids. With Aiden. Wow.

Maggie swiped at her eyes. “You’re so much trouble,” she told him, but her loving smile told them how she really felt. She looked at Zoe. “I’m so happy for you both.”

Yeah, Zoe was feeling pretty... happy. Or something. Dang. This was going so damned fast. But it felt so good. Right.

Maggie headed back out through the kitchen, and Zoe watched the door swing back and forth behind her three times before it stopped.

Then she looked up at Aiden.

He was watching her. Probably waiting for her reaction. Him walking back into the bakery yesterday had gotten a reaction. Him declaring they were going to be together had gotten a reaction. Him kissing her in the bakery in front of everyone had gotten a reaction. This...

“We definitely need to save lots of pink frosting,” she said.

“Yeah?” He lifted a brow.

“I think *you* might look good with some pink in some sweet spots too.”

His eyes heated. “Let’s get to work.”

He let her go just like that and turned to the worktable.

She watched as he started decorating the cookie. Her heart was pounding from, just, everything. He was suddenly here, back in her life, and when she thought *in* her life, she realized *really, really in*. Her head kept telling her it should feel crazy, but it didn’t.

That was the crazy part.

Her eyes widened as she watched him place perfect frosting embellishments on the petals, then switch tubes to apply green piping down the stem and leaves the way she'd been doing.

He stepped back, and she glanced up to find him looking at it with satisfaction.

“Wow,” she said simply.

Aiden grinned, his eyes meeting hers. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

She knew he wasn’t talking about the cookies. She knew he knew *she* wasn’t talking about the cookies.

And her heart fluttered again. Much harder and for much longer this time.

Chapter Twelve



Dax Marshall drove a 1960 MGA roadster in Old English White with black leather interior and classic silver wire wheels. He also wore a dark gray felt fedora when he did it. But not just any dark gray felt fedora. This was the dark gray felt fedora that Frank Sinatra had worn in his last starring movie role as Edward Delaney in *The First Deadly Sin*. As he would explain. Ad nauseam.

He'd bought the hat at an auction with a winning bid of over five thousand dollars. Dax considered that a bargain. Wearing a hat that had once graced the head of one of his personal idols—fifth on the list behind Fred Rogers, Robin Williams, Tom Hanks, and Derek Jeter, in that order—was a true privilege worth any price. That he looked “fucking dashing as hell”—his words, *not* Aiden's—was simply a bonus.

Aiden was less enamored with the hat, but he had to admit the car was awesome. Classy, distinctive, extremely cool, the car turned heads.

Especially in a small town in Iowa that mostly saw pickups and SUVs. Practical vehicles. Vehicles that were used for work and hauling things and getting people from one place to another. Did the guys in Appleby pick out their favorite colors for their F-150s? Sure, sometimes. If their favorite color was black, white, silver, red, or blue. Did they take a little time over things like adding satellite radio and lining the truck bed and matching floor mats? Maybe. But that was as flashy as things got.

No one drove around in classic convertibles that seated two and had only enough trunk space to hold a spare tire and nothing else.

It wasn't practical. Iowans, especially those in Appleby, were nothing if not practical.

So when a white 1960 MGA roadster rolled past the Buttered Up bakery driven by a young guy in a dark gray felt fedora like Frank Sinatra would have worn, Aiden groaned.

Dax honestly didn't know the meaning of inconspicuous.

Dax believed in fun, living in the moment, and making the best of everything. In fact, he believed in making everything better. It was one of his best traits and the main thing that had drawn Aiden and Dax together initially. Aiden believed in doing big things, leaving the world better than he'd found it, making his life count. They'd seen that all very similarly, and Aiden still appreciated that about his friend.

Except, of course, when Aiden wanted to keep a low profile in his hometown regarding Hot Cakes.

A young guy cruising into town in a shiny, classic convertible with a fedora was going to stand out among the pickups and seed company caps, and people were going to want to know who he was and what he was doing here.

Which was fine. As long as Dax didn't mention Aiden. Yet, anyway.

Aiden kept from lunging out of his chair, barely, but he stood and frowned at his phone as if he'd just gotten an important text. Which he should have. One from Dax saying he was on his way and he'd meet Aiden at the hotel. In the next town. Where Aiden had specifically asked Piper to make reservations for both Dax and Ollie.

"Hey, I need to head over to Dubuque for a meeting," he said to Zoe.

She was the behind the main counter now, decorating cupcakes. They'd finished the cookies, and Mrs. Murphy had been thrilled with how they'd turned out. Josie was in back manning the ovens and sculpting a cake into a kangaroo. He

hadn't asked why. And Zoe was doing the basic cupcakes frosting and watching the front.

“Oh? Really? Why?” she asked, looking up.

He'd been settled at the table by the window on his computer working since finishing the cookies. Away from the smell of Zoe. And out of touching distance. Because neither of them had been getting much done—at least not very efficiently—when they were within touching distance.

But she'd told her mom they were together. *That* was productive.

Every time he thought of that, he felt like someone had sucked the oxygen out of his lungs. And he wanted to put Zoe up on that worktable and do all the naughty frosting things they'd teased about. He also wanted to add in sprinkles. He'd always loved sprinkles.

He also wanted to beat his chest like a caveman and take out a billboard down by the highway and maybe just stand in the town square with a bullhorn.

He wanted to buy a diamond ring.

Hearing her claim him, to her mother, and seeing Maggie's face when she registered that, had caused an avalanche of emotions to crash through him he'd been unprepared for. He'd had five months to think about Zoe and how he felt about her and what he wanted from her. He'd had five months to mentally restructure his life around everything and to imagine what it would be like to be back in Appleby with Maggie and Steve and everyone. But he hadn't given any thought to how it would feel to be on the receiving end of their words and emotions.

Or maybe he'd thought he knew what it would be like.

Zoe had come to him for sex. That had felt pretty damned good. After the shock, of course. But she'd wanted him. He'd thought *a lot* about how that had felt.

Maggie loved him. Steve loved him. Henry loved him. He'd figured there would just be, well, more of that.

He hadn't been prepared, at all, for how it would feel to see Maggie's absolute *delight* at the idea of him and Zoe together. To see her eyes well up with tears. To see her nearly overcome with the idea of grandkids.

Hell, *he* hadn't even thought of kids.

But now he wanted that. Them. Lots of them.

He also hadn't been able to truly imagine how it would be starting his morning in the kitchen with Zoe. Because he *couldn't* have imagined that. His attraction to her was real enough, but he couldn't have been prepared for how touching her, kissing her, hearing her, and tasting her would seep into him and become an addiction the very first time.

Even more, he would have never been able to prepare for the way it would feel to have her looking at him with admiration. Or how it would feel to have something like their businesses in common. Or how natural it would feel to hear her sharing things about her business, and asking about his, and talking about real things like employees and how they both wanted to be good to the people who depended on them. Sharing something like that with her, something that was new to him and that already meant a lot to him, something that was already giving him a little anxiety, truth be told, had felt... good. Different. New for them. He and Zoe hadn't talked about things like that before, but it had been effortless to slip into that conversation.

Now he wanted to talk to her about Hot Cakes. He wanted to tell her he was nervous about introducing new owners to a company that had belonged to the same family for over fifty years. He wanted to tell her how he wanted to find out what the employees needed and how he wanted to actually blow their minds with all the amazing things working for Hot Cakes would mean for them. He wanted her to look at him with admiration for his plans and goals and know they were about Hot Cakes.

But he was scared.

Of losing her.

More now than he had been before. Before he knew how much he really wanted her. Before he'd realized that, as much as he'd wanted to be with her, he hadn't fully realized all their relationship could truly be. Laughing and teasing in the morning, flirting fun even when she was annoyed with him, him helping in the bakery, sharing their thoughts and feelings and plans about their work.

"Yeah. I've got a meeting with a guy about a new business venture in the area," he told her. That was completely true.

She smiled. "You do?"

"Yeah." He crossed to the counter.

"You really are planning to stay," she said. "I mean, I know you said that. A few times. And I know you have plenty of money. You don't have to work. But that just..." She sighed. But it sounded happy. Not like the exasperated ones she so often gave him. "That just makes it feel really real."

He braced his hands on the counter between them and pinned her with a look. "It *is* really real, Zoe."

"I'm starting to get that."

Thank God.

He'd only been in town for two days. Really just short of twenty-four hours if they were being very technical. But there was no reason for them to tiptoe around here or take their time or be subtle. He was back in town. To stay. Because of her.

"Good. Because I'm way past *starting to*, and I'm pretty sure your mom is all in." He gave her a grin.

She rolled her eyes. "She snuck up on me. I wasn't prepared."

"So the truth came out because you didn't have time to cover."

Zoe just looked at him for a long moment. Then she nodded. "Yeah."

Everything in him went hot and hard. But she was still working, and he needed to make sure Dax went to the hotel

and they had a full plan for how to approach the Hot Cakes employees. And that he got a rental car. “I’ll be back around closing time.” His voice was a little gruff.

Her smile grew. “You’ll notice I’m not using any pink frosting on these.”

He had noticed. “Good girl.”

She bit her bottom lip. Right where he wanted to bite. And suck. He gave a little groan. “Lose the good girl thing by the time I get back,” he told her.

Her eyes widened.

He chuckled. “What?”

“I might regret admitting this, but... you’ve definitely been surprising me. The dirty talk in particular.”

He fucking liked that a lot.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please do.”

Again, he had to resist rounding the counter and saying to hell with his meeting with Dax. And the big windows at the front of the bakery.

Yeah, Zoe McCaffery had a few surprises as well.

She liked dirty talk? They were a better match every time they spent time together.

At least, until they got to talking about Hot Cakes.

With that not-so-pleasant thought in mind, he gathered up his stuff and headed for the Hilton in Dubuque. He put a video call in to Piper on the way.

“You need to get him a different car,” he told their assistant.

“He’s picking it up in about thirty minutes,” Piper said.

She was wearing her glasses, clearly still at work. She was only twenty-three, but she ran the office, and the guys’ lives—especially Ollie’s—like she was much older and wiser than any of them. Because she was. Wiser, anyway. More mature.

More practical. More capable. The woman was like Mary Poppins, Martha Stewart, and Super Nanny all rolled into one. She knew everything, was always two steps ahead of the guys, took care of things efficiently and effectively. Interestingly, she ran the office and their schedules like a drill sergeant, but she did it while dressed in what she called “pinup-girl dresses” that were always in bright colors and patterns and emphasized her curves.

She looked twenty-three though. She had long, dark hair, streaked with blond and red highlights that hung nearly to her ass when she didn’t have it up in a curly, tight ponytail or bun—which was 90 percent of the time. She had huge brown eyes, made even larger behind the large-framed colored glasses—coordinated with her outfits, of course—she wore in the office. She was short so she wore heels. Or maybe she just wore them because she liked them. She dressed smart and professionally but also gave off a fun, confident vibe. Everyone loved her, and Fluke, and Oliver Caprinelli specifically, would fall apart without her.

“Really?”

“Of course, he can’t be driving that roadster around,” she said. “I told him he could drive it to Iowa, to the hotel and around Dubuque, but *not* in Appleby.”

Aiden really liked Piper. “Well, he just drove it down Main Street.”

She sighed. “Was he wearing the fedora?”

Aiden chuckled. “Of course.”

“He better not have stopped,” she muttered. “We had a long talk about how it might not go over so well if five rich, hot, young guys come strolling into town, taking over the factory that’s been there for so long and employs so many people, thinking they’re all that and doing everyone a favor.”

Aiden nodded even though he had to admit that he’d been feeling a little bit like he might have been doing Appleby a favor. He didn’t like admitting that. Especially now after hearing Jane say that things at the factory weren’t quite hunky

dory. Now he wanted to fix it all. And he had no idea how to do that.

“Great, thank you,” Aiden told Piper. “Text me the hotel address?”

“Sure.” She paused, then Aiden heard his text notification ding. “Done.”

He grinned. “When will Ollie be here?”

“Tomorrow. He had to finish some things up for Grant before he could leave,” she said.

“I’ve got an in-office suspension until I get it done.”

Aiden heard Ollie’s voice but he was outside of the frame. Piper looked over to her right.

“Yes, you are. You’re staying right there until you’re finished. And no more meatballs until then.”

“He’s sitting by you so you can make sure he’s working?” Aiden asked. This wouldn’t be the first time.

“Yes. He’s on the couch with his laptop.”

They had a couch in the reception area outside of their main offices. Piper manned that desk. She was so much more than a receptionist, but all the other women they’d hired for the job had been too easily charmed by both Dax and Ollie. The guys’ schedules and to-do lists had gone out the window with just a grin and a wink. There were also a number of girls who delivered from nearby restaurants, the printing place they worked with, and a couple of PR firms they outsourced to that would come by to talk to Dax, Ollie, and even Cam at times. When the other, equally charm-susceptible receptionists were at the desk, they let those girls past or called the guys to the front, and suddenly the guys were missing phone calls and meetings and not getting shit done.

None of that was a problem when Piper sat there. She’d taken that desk back about a year ago, and things had been smooth sailing ever since. Though Cam grumbled about not getting free extra egg rolls, and Dax made excuses to stroll down to the print shop himself on a regular basis, now.

“She made sweet-and-sour meatballs, Aiden,” Ollie called. “She gave me one and then told me the rest had to wait until I’m done. They’re sitting on the edge of her desk mocking me.”

Piper was a hell of a cook, and her meatballs were Ollie’s favorite.

“It’s Aiden’s fault.” She looked back at Aiden. “You got him all riled up about getting to Appleby to save the day. He’s got two conference calls and a packed inbox he needs to deal with before he can leave and get all wrapped up in this new project. You know he’ll totally lose track of everything else once he’s there.”

“Well, I do need him,” Aiden said. “We need a plan for this new company. We have a lot of files to go over, and we need to research benefits and—”

“I already went through the files you sent to Ollie and Dax,” Piper said. “I highlighted the things you should review first. I also sent you a few articles I think you’ll find interesting. And I set up a call for the three of you tomorrow afternoon with a Duncan Prestor. He’s going to talk you through some employee benefit plans and help you with an intake survey to help you get a better idea about what you’ll need.”

Aiden blinked. Piper was a force of nature.

“I don’t think we can do an intake survey yet. We need to talk to the employees.”

Piper was already clicking on her keyboard. “I’ll let him know that. Do you still want to do the initial call with him to go over some plan options?”

“That... might be a good idea?” Aiden was aware that sounded like a question.

“I agree,” Piper told him.

Okay, then it was a good idea.

“I’ll let him know you’re going to wait on the employee survey.” She stopped and focused on Aiden. “Do you want me

to write up a more general survey? Maybe ask them about general satisfaction? Changes they might like to see?”

“That would be...”

“I think it could be a good place to start. Especially paired with the information I sent you about current benefits.”

“Then yes,” Aiden said.

“Great. I’ll tap into my network and see who’s done something similar and can give me some direction.” She was typing this up as she spoke to him.

“Hey, Piper?”

“Yeah?”

“Do we pay you enough?”

She paused in her typing and smiled at him. Then she glanced at Ollie. Then back to Aiden. She had a strange expression on her face when she said, “Working with you guys is a dream job.”

Aiden studied her for a moment. He’d always thought maybe, just maybe, Piper had a little thing for Ollie. But Ollie treated her like a sister at best. A nagging assistant at worst. Hell, she made dinner reservations for him and the women he took out. Aiden was pretty sure she’d sent flower arrangements and possibly even a birthday gift or two on Ollie’s behalf as well. Knowing Piper, *she* was the one who remembered there were birthday gifts that needed to be sent.

Oliver Caprinelli would be a very hard man to be in love with. His head was in the clouds 99 percent of the time. Getting his attention would be a feat. He would forget about you the second even the spark of a new idea came to him. He’d close himself in his office to brainstorm and not emerge for hours. He’d forget to eat. He didn’t always go home to sleep. He missed phone calls, dinners, and yes, birthdays.

It was even hard to be his *friend* sometimes. Aiden couldn’t imagine being a girlfriend. Or a wife.

And no one would know that better than Piper.

“That wasn’t really an answer to my question,” Aiden pointed out.

She grinned. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready for a raise.”

“No raises for wenches who dangle meatballs in front of their bosses,” Ollie groused from off camera.

Maybe she should try dangling other things in front of him, Aiden thought. Then frowned. Piper didn’t need to go out of her way to get Ollie’s attention. She was amazing and beautiful, and every other man who walked into their office noticed everything she had going on. If Ollie wasn’t smart enough to notice Piper, that was his own damned fault.

Besides, if they did hook up and Ollie pissed her off or broke her heart, then Fluke would lose Piper, and they *all* needed her. Aiden should be working to keep Ollie completely distracted from Piper as a woman. She was his nagging assistant. That was perfect.

“Just type the email, Oliver,” Piper said in a very old schoolmarm tone. In spite of her cherry-red glasses that matched the red cherries that dotted her white dress, she pulled off the I’ll-rap-your-knuckles-with-my-ruler attitude very well.

“Don’t give him the meatballs even when he’s finished,” Aiden said. “His attitude is crap.”

“It is,” she agreed.

“Don’t you have a cute cupcake baker you need to be covering in frosting?” Ollie called.

Aiden froze. “What?”

Piper frowned at Ollie. “Keep typing.”

“What’s he talking about?” Aiden pressed.

“Cam got a call from his mom a little bit ago,” Piper said. “She asked if he knew about you and Zoe.”

“Oh.” Shit. Aiden thought fast. Cam did *not* know about him and Zoe. Cam was protective of Zoe. To an extent. If

someone hurt her, Cam would absolutely hurt that person. But Cam wasn't the type to punch Aiden for kissing Zoe.

He didn't think.

"What did he say?" Aiden finally asked. Cam hadn't called him or Zoe about it. What did that mean?

Piper chewed on her bottom lip for a moment.

"Piper?"

"He didn't call you?"

"No."

"Text? Email?"

"No. No."

"Oh." She sighed. "All he said to me was to book him a room at the hotel too."

Aiden frowned. "He's coming to Iowa?"

"Yeah. He left right after Dax did."

"But he's staying at the hotel? Not in Appleby?"

Piper shrugged. "He asked me to book him a room, so I did."

What the hell? "Okay. Well, I guess I'll see him soon enough, and I can ask him what's up." Aiden wasn't looking forward to that reunion. "Did he seem... angry?" Aiden asked. He really liked this tie. If Cam was going to punch him, he didn't want to bleed on it.

"He seemed... resigned?" Piper said. She ended that with a question mark though. She looked at Ollie. "Didn't you think?"

"Determined," Ollie said. "Or... annoyed. Yeah, maybe a little annoyed too."

Great. A determined and annoyed Camden McCaffery. That wasn't as bad as a pissed-off, unreasonable one, but it wasn't great either.

Aiden reached up and pulled his tie loose.

Dammit.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, he strode into the lobby of the Hilton Hotel in Dubuque, Iowa.

He'd texted Dax that he was here, and Dax had replied with a simple, "1247."

Of course Dax was on the top floor. He did love a great view. And Dubuque might be in what some people considered a flyover state, but it was right on the Mississippi and definitely had a pretty view. If you were into rivers and bluffs and trees and rolling hills and stuff.

Aiden was. He'd missed his home state. Chicago was a great city, and he'd loved city life at first. Chicago and its many resources had been an important place for them to be as they got Fluke off the ground, and trusting Grant to take them back to his hometown had been a good move.

But Aiden was ready to be back in Iowa.

And yeah, he did have a cute cupcake baker to be covering in frosting as a matter of fact.

He thought about Zoe as the elevator climbed to the twelfth floor. Cam would get over it. Or used to it. Or whatever. Aiden and Zoe were together now, and Cam would just have to deal. That wasn't really Cam's strong suit—dealing with things he didn't like—but this was his best friend and sister. He wouldn't want to lose either of them, and if Aiden could prove he was the best thing for Zoe and that he really wanted to take care of her and love her, then Cam would be good with it.

He would definitely need to leave out the frosting stuff though.

The doors swished open, and Aiden blew out a breath. Cam was very likely in there with Dax. They'd probably already raided the minibar and had room service on its way up.

The thing about hanging out with Dax... he didn't let you let things like practicality and huge price tags and it being 2 p.m. keep you from enjoying yourself. Two p.m. on a weekday? Why *not* have a T-bone steak with the works? And dessert. Especially dessert. Dax was a dessert-first kind of guy. Not because of a sweet tooth exactly. More because of a life philosophy. Live life to the fullest. Get what you wanted when you wanted it. Always.

Aiden rapped his knuckles against the door to Suite 1247. The corner suite. Of course.

Dax opened it with a flourish a moment later. He was wearing one of the hotel robes. And probably nothing else. Aiden didn't need to know.

"Hey." Dax stepped back to let Aiden in.

Clearly room service was not on its way up. They'd already been there. Dax picked a french fry off the plate as he passed, tossing it into the air and catching it before settling back on the couch, propping his feet on the coffee table, and pointed to the remote and the gigantic television. He shut it off.

"I see you've settled in easily," Aiden said, taking the armchair perpendicular to where Dax sat. Dax's robe was loose around the waist, and he didn't want to accidentally catch a glimpse of anything underneath.

"I think best when I'm comfortable," Dax told him with a grin.

Dax was very rarely *uncomfortable*. Physically or emotionally. Zoe's assumption about the guys sitting around their office in beanbag chairs was true if she was referring only to Dax's office. He had two oversized beanbags in there, and he claimed he did his best thinking in them. As a group they never met in Dax's office. Grant refused to do serious work while sitting in a beanbag chair in an office with a cappuccino machine in the corner. Grant Lorre was very much a black-coffee kind of guy. Strong black coffee.

And yes, Dax claimed cinnamon sprinkles on top of his cappuccino helped his creative process. Just like the gummy bears in the glass candy jar on his desk did. Just like the music from the Rat Pack—played on vinyl on an old turntable—did. Just like the daily ping-pong game against Elliot, one of their best graphics guys, did.

But the truth was, bugging the shit out of and getting smiles out of Grant, helped Dax's creative process and all that—from the Rat Pack to the gummy bears—did *that*.

Yes, hanging out with Dax Marshall was a little like hanging out with a thirteen-year-old with a credit card and no limit. Or being stuck in one of *The Hangover* movies.

Still, the guy made a kick-ass video game and was the star at every con he'd ever been to. Aiden knew Grant would never admit it, at least not where Dax could hear him, but Dax and his YouTube videos and his appearances at conventions and his insistence on high quality, unique merchandise, had made them more money than anything Aiden and Grant actually did for the company.

Bottom line, *Warriors of Easton* wouldn't even exist without Dax. Ollie was the storyteller, the world builder, the visionary, but Dax made it all real. He took Ollie's ideas and made them come to life. On screen anyway. He put movement and color and sound to everything, and without him, *Warriors* would have never come to be. He worked his ass off, honestly, to make *Warriors of Easton* everything it could possibly be.

Aiden, Grant, and Cam were completely worthless when it came to all that.

They were the paper and money and regulations and business guys. Sure, the company needed them too, but Ollie and Dax could have found three other marketing and business majors just by throwing a rock. It was a good thing Aiden, Grant, and Cam had found *them* and had recognized brilliance when they saw it.

“Have you seen Cam?” Aiden asked, propping one of his feet up on the coffee table next to Dax's bare foot.

Dax also rarely wore shoes around the office. That also bugged the shit out of Grant.

“Yeah, he’s on his way. Went to upgrade his room.” Dax grinned.

“Upgrade?”

“Piper put him in the executive suite down the hall. Figured we’d want to be on the same floor to work. There’s only one of these deluxe suites on each floor. He’s down there working to get a deluxe on another floor. Can’t handle me having a better place than his.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. That sounded exactly like Cam. “He’s not planning to stay in Appleby?”

“Said he didn’t want to walk in on you banging his sister on the kitchen table.”

Aiden started choking. On nothing. He coughed hard and sent Dax a glare.

Dax waited for him to quiet then gave him a grin.

“Did he actually *say* that?” Aiden asked.

“I sure fucking did.”

Aiden looked over his shoulder at Cam. Who evidently had a key to Dax’s room.

Chapter Thirteen



“Uh, hey,” Aiden greeted Cam.

“Yeah, hey.” Cam dropped into the chair opposite Aiden. He glanced at Dax. “Jesus, cover your junk, Marshall.”

“You’re in *my* room,” Dax informed him, leaning to grab a package of M&M’s—that probably cost thirteen dollars—from the spread on the coffee table. “You don’t want to see all my glory, go to your room.”

Cam grabbed the throw pillow from behind him on the chair and tossed it at Dax. “This must be what it’s like to hang out with rock stars who think they’re hot shit and that everyone should just let them do whatever they want.”

The truth was, Dax was kind of their rock star. He was the face of the company—and it was, by all accounts, a good-looking face—and he was the freaking Wizard of Oz. The guy who made the magic happen. That was why Grant went along with all the stupid shit Dax claimed he needed to *be creative*. The same reason Grant often, and always, begrudgingly, accompanied Ollie and Dax when they traveled. Grant was protecting his investment.

Dax just nodded. “Probably.” He looked from Cam to Aiden. “I prefer to travel with Ollie. He gets me.”

“Translation, ‘Ollie is as *special* as I am,’” Cam said in his usual imitation of Dax. Which sounded nothing like Dax and completely like a California surfer dude from a bad beach movie. Dax was from San Francisco, actually, but was apparently a terrible surfer.

“You *say* I’m special, but I don’t think you mean it,” Dax replied, pretending to be hurt.

Cam rolled his eyes and slumped back in his chair. “Oh, I mean it. I just don’t mean that I think you slide to work on a sparkly rainbow or that your farts smell like cookies.”

Dax grinned at him. “Good thing millions of boys between the ages of ten and twenty-five, not to mention a fairly significant number of guys twenty-five to forty, think both of those things about me.”

“Metaphorically, anyway,” Cam said.

“Bet I could convince a chunk of them those things are actually true,” Dax said, almost thoughtfully.

It was never a good idea for Dax to get thoughtful when the topic of conversation was ridiculous. Thank God Ollie wasn’t here, or they’d end up with a fucking plastic rainbow running from the parking garage into Dax’s office window that he would literally slide in on every day.

“We need to talk about Hot Cakes,” Aiden said, trying to steer the conversation.

“Or we could talk about you banging Cam’s sister on her kitchen table.”

Aiden stared at him. They could find another computer genius, right? Surely there was another one in the world that could pick up right where Dax left off when Aiden killed him.

“The only thing I have to say about that—” Cam said, his voice deep and firm from across the coffee table and a pile of Dax snacks.

Aiden looked up at his best friend reluctantly. They’d done a lot of awesome things together. Not the least of which was harnessing Dax and Ollie’s brilliance. A huge, amazing, multimillion dollar business. They’d always been honest with one another and they trusted each other completely. He couldn’t lose Cam.

Unless it came down to Cam or Zoe.

The revelation hit him hard. He'd never thought about it. Had never let himself think about it. Cam was not an easygoing guy, but he also wasn't the type to get all riled up about his sister's sex or love life. If the guy treated her badly, then definitely Cam would make him regret it. But if Zoe chose to be with someone, Cam trusted her to make that decision.

Probably.

It had never really been an issue before. Aiden had never heard Cam talk about Zoe's dating life or any guys she'd ever been involved with. Then again, she hadn't dated much.

But yeah, if Cam was going to be a dick—and that was something Cam McCaffery did very well—then Aiden was going to lose one of his best friends and business partners.

Fuck.

“I'm never eating at that table again.”

“I love her, man.”

They spoke at the same time. Then stared at each other.

“What?”

“What?”

Again they spoke simultaneously.

Then Aiden took a breath. “I love her.”

Cam just nodded. “Good.”

“Yeah? That's it? Just good?”

“Yeah. I love you both, and I know you'll be good to her. And as long as I don't have to hear about your sex life... or *hear* your sex life.” He frowned. “Fuck. Where am I going to stay when I come home now? I can't stay at the house.”

“You can stay at the house,” Aiden said.

“I can't listen to the headboards banging or come down the hall knowing you're in the shower together.” He shook his head. “Dammit. I'll have to stay at Mom's.”

Aiden laughed. “When you stay over, I’ll sleep in my own room.”

“So what?” Cam asked. “That didn’t stop her from sneaking in there on Christmas Eve.”

Aiden froze. “What?”

Cam gave him a “come on” look. “Yeah, I saw her coming back out of your room.”

“You didn’t say anything,” Aiden said carefully.

“I thought maybe you were just screwing around that one night or something,” Cam said.

“And you didn’t care?”

“You’re both grown-ups,” Cam said with a shrug. “Who the hell am *I* to be judging other people about relationships?”

“That is a really good point,” Dax said.

“This from a guy who likes to bang chicks who dress up like fairies and princesses?” Cam asked. “That *he* created? That’s kind of creepy, don’t you think?”

“It’s fucking awesome,” Dax said. “I draw stuff in a notebook, and six months later that drawing is showing up in the flesh at cons and thinking my farts smell like cookies.” Dax crossed his ankles on the coffee table and grinned. “It’s like magic.”

He wasn’t wrong. Aiden had seen Dax’s creations walking and talking—and fawning all over him—at cons all across the country and at one in London.

“And by the way, my fairies and princesses and warriors really like it when I refer to my cock as my staff. What do you think of that?”

Cam looked like he was also wondering about finding a new brilliant computer genius to take Dax’s place.

“Anyway,” Cam finally said. “I figure if you do anything to mess up with Zoe, you’ve got my mom and dad and Josie and Jane to deal with, and they’re going to give you a lot more trouble than I ever could.”

Ugh. Aiden nodded. “Yeah.”

“Who are Josie and Jane?” Dax asked.

“No one you need to worry about,” Aiden told him quickly.

Cam laughed. “Oh, I don’t know. Josie and Zoe keep saying Josie needs a sugar daddy to take care of her.”

“I’ve got tons of money,” Dax said. “Who’s Josie?”

“Zoe’s best friend and assistant at the bakery,” Cam said.

“She bakes?” Dax asked. “I’m in. Set me up.”

“Hell no,” Aiden told him.

“Why not?”

“Because I like Josie,” Aiden said. “And you’re... a lot. Josie is too... sweet for you.”

“I’m a lot of fucking fun,” Dax said. He dropped his feet to the floor. “I’m a goddamned delight. Women love me. *I* am sweet.” He pointed at his phone. “I can get twelve women on the phone right now who would tell you I’m sweet as hell.”

“Yes. Until they need you to be serious about something,” Aiden said. “You’re allergic to serious.”

“I’m not *allergic*.” But Dax wasn’t nearly as emphatic now.

“You pretended to get into a car accident so you couldn’t make it to a girlfriend’s uncle’s funeral,” Cam said.

“Great uncle,” Dax said. “And it wasn’t pretend.”

“You braked for a squirrel, and a bicyclist ran into the back of your car,” Cam said.

“I had to be sure he was okay.”

“He was fine.”

“But I had to be *sure*.”

“And you broke up with a girl in college because she was homesick,” Aiden pointed out.

“She was going to drop out after the semester. The relationship was doomed.”

“It was September,” Aiden said.

“She wasn’t embracing all that college life had to offer. She never wanted to go and try to meet new people. She cried every day.”

“She was sad. And you broke up with her.” Aiden and Cam had been juniors when Ollie and Dax had been freshmen. Ollie and Dax had hit campus ready to live it up and have the time of their lives.

“We were clearly mismatched,” Dax said dryly.

“What did you see in her in the first place?” Cam asked.

“She was splashing around in the fountain in the middle of campus. I thought that seemed like fun. Like she was kind of a risk taker or something.” Dax sat back and put his feet up. “After I found out she was just in there to get her hat back after it had blown off her head, I thought I should at least give her a chance.”

Aiden and Cam both snorted. Dax grinned. “I like fun girls. That’s not a crime. Is Josie fun?”

“Josie is *sweet*,” Aiden emphasized. “And Zoe’s best friend and someone I care about, so you are not going to do anything with her.”

“Jane could handle you though,” Cam said.

Dax perked up. “Jane? Okay, who’s Jane?”

“Zoe’s other best friend,” Aiden said.

“But she’s not really *fun*,” Cam said.

“Jane’s awesome,” Aiden protested.

“She is,” Cam agreed. “But she’s... practical. Definitely serious. She doesn’t have time for video games and dressing up like fairies, and she’d think you and your beanbag chairs and gummy bears are all ridiculous. She’s not your type at all.”

The thing was, Dax probably needed a girl like Jane. Someone to keep his feet on the ground. Grant did that for him, in a fatherly or annoyed-big-brother way. Dax probably needed a long-term relationship with a girl like Grant. Someone who appreciated his brilliance but didn't let him get too full of himself. Which actually made Aiden instantly turn back to the entire reason for his visit to the hotel.

“Okay, about Hot Cakes,” he said, sitting forward in his chair. “You can meet Jane, actually. She works at the factory, and we need to talk to her more about employee satisfaction and benefits and the things we can do to improve things there.”

Dax dropped his feet to the floor again and sat up straight. “Go into the factory and make it more fun to work there.”

“That’s not what I said,” Aiden told him.

“Are you sure?”

“The factory doesn’t need to be *fun*,” Aiden said. “It needs to be safe and efficient and...” He shrugged. “It would be great if it was pleasant. Or at least didn’t suck.”

“Pleasant, fun, unsucky. All kind of the same thing,” Dax said.

Yeah, well, Aiden had seen Dax in fun-mode. It was his default mode, actually. “We don’t need plastic rainbow slides inside or a candy bar. We need...” Aiden trailed off. “Fuck. I don’t know what we need. That’s the point. I haven’t even been inside the factory we now own. I know we need to do some work on the benefits and making the workers more stable and happy, but I can’t do it. And Cam can’t do it.”

“I’d love to do it,” Cam said. His voice was low and didn’t sound joking. At all.

“No.”

“Let me go in and find out from the horse’s mouth all the ways they’ve failed,” he said. “Now *that* sounds like fun.”

“What’s going on?” Dax asked.

“Whitney is the VP of sales and marketing at Hot Cakes,” Aiden said, watching Cam.

Cam’s jaw ticked at the mention of her name.

“Whitney the ex?” Dax asked. “That’s right.”

“So Cam can’t go in there,” Aiden said again.

“I can’t go inside the building that houses the company I now own twenty percent of?” Cam asked. “That sounds like bullshit.”

Aiden rubbed the middle of his forehead. “One thing at a time. You can’t go because everyone knows you.” Aiden blew out an exasperated breath. “Look, I know I can’t keep you and Whitney apart forever. Hell, she knows that too.”

Cam’s eyes snapped to his. “She said that?”

“Pretty much. She’s resigned to this. Not happy, of course, but she is grateful the company isn’t going out of business entirely and that we’re saving the jobs. She was honest about the fact her dad has let things go because he doesn’t care about Hot Cakes anymore, and things aren’t how she’d like them to be. She’s also grateful we’re keeping her employed. She acknowledges we don’t have to do that.”

“Good,” Cam said simply.

“But let’s not rub it in,” Aiden said.

“Oh, I’m rubbing this in,” Cam said. “Sorry, buddy, but there is no way I’m not going to gloat over the fact that the fucking company she chose over being with me is now only staying afloat because of me. That is definitely going to come up in conversation.”

Aiden sighed. As much as he wished Cam could get past all that, he couldn’t completely blame his friend for his bitterness. Whitney *had* chosen the business and her family over Cam. And now he was a huge success and that company and family needed bailing out. By Cam. It was kind of beautiful in a way.

“You can’t go in there *yet*, then,” Aiden said. “We need more information and a plan before we announce anything and

let everyone know who we are.”

“You haven’t told Zoe and my mom and dad yet, have you?” Cam asked.

“No.”

“You waiting for the engagement party or what?”

“I’m waiting to have a *plan*. I want everyone—including them—to fully understand our intentions.”

“Our intentions are to keep Hot Cakes open. And successful. Even more so than they’ve been up to this point,” Cam said. “That’s *my* intention anyway. I want to make that company bigger and better than it ever was under the Lancasters.”

“I want something new to do,” Dax said, shrugging. “I need a new challenge.”

And Grant and Ollie fell into those two categories as well. Grant would want to build this investment into something even bigger. Ollie needed a new place to put his creative energy.

“Great,” Aiden said. “But we need to be able to show the employees that things are totally stable *and* going to improve. And we need the town”—he looked at Cam—“including your family, to understand that what we’re doing is *good*. That it’s important to the town, and we’re doing it for noble reasons.”

“Fine. Then how do you want to do this?” Cam asked, giving in.

“We need to talk to the employees, get a feel for the physical plant, meet everyone from the factory workers to the office staff. You and Grant and I need to go over the financials, the benefits, look at the suppliers. Anything we can do that doesn’t involve someone local. If it has to do with the banks or anything, we’ll get Grant to do it. Just for a few more days. I just need to have a clearer direction before I let Zoe and Maggie and Steve in on everything. I want them to all know that I’m serious about this and to know our goals and plans so I can prove this isn’t a threat to Buttered Up.”

That all sounded great. Practical. Reasonable.

But those were things Zoe was *not* when it came to the bakery and her family legacy.

“Okay, I’m going to meet with Whitney. Alone.” He slid a look at Cam as he got to his feet. “For now, you guys read up on everything. Start thinking about how you think we should roll this out.” He pointed at Cam. “Maybe take the chip off your shoulder for a second and think about how we should best approach this with Appleby.”

Cam frowned, but he didn’t dispute the chip on his shoulder. “Okay. I’ll talk to Dad about it. He’ll have some ideas.”

“Cam,” Aiden said with a sigh. “He doesn’t know.”

Cam rolled his eyes. “*Fuuuuuck*. Can you get that taken care of?”

“Yeah. I’m... working on it.” His thoughts went directly to Zoe.

Zoe who had told their mom she and Aiden were together. Zoe who had let him touch her in the kitchen that morning. Zoe who had let him kiss her in front of everyone at the bakery. Zoe who had liked hearing that he had business nearby that meant he really was staying.

Yeah, he was working on it. He was making progress.

But dammit, the closer he got to her, the more he realized that messing this up and losing her was not an option. He wanted her even more than he’d known, and he had to make her see that they could have it all.

“You guys work on this stuff, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” he said. He started for the door but turned back. “And stay out of Appleby.”

“They don’t know me there,” Dax said.

“You don’t need anything in Appleby,” Aiden said. “Dubuque has everything Appleby does and much, much more.”

“We’ll go to the brewing company downtown,” Cam said. “Awesome beer and pizza.”

“Fine. I just thought I could look around the town,” Dax said.

“You can’t drive the roadster if you do. Or wear the fedora.”

Dax looked at Cam. “Can we take the roadster downtown?”

“Fuck yeah,” Cam said.

Dax looked at Aiden. “Fine, I’ll stay away from Appleby for now.”

“Thanks,” Aiden said dryly.

He pulled his phone from his pocket as he crossed the lobby a few minutes later, preparing to call Whitney and see if she could meet briefly, but the phone dinged with a text before he could dial.

It was Zoe.

Got an emergency order for butterfly cupcakes. Pink. I’m out of pink frosting. She included a sad-faced emoji.

But her second text made him feel a hell of a lot better.

But they’re cream-filled cupcakes, so I’m making extra filling. Maybe we can make do with that. For tonight.

He stopped walking, nearly getting plowed over by a woman rolling two oversized suitcases toward the front desk.

“I’m so sorry,” he apologized, stepping out of her way.

But Zoe had just propositioned him. With cream filling. How had the rest of the world not stopped and just observed a moment of awe like he had? When they’d talked about cream fillings, it had included the word clit.

That meant Zoe McCaffery had just invited him over to suck on her clit.

That’s what he’d read in that text anyway. He would be very happy to explain that to her too, when he saw her.

But before he could text something back, his phone rang. It was Whitney. She was available to meet right now.

He blew out a breath. Fuck. He really needed to talk to Whitney. Hot Cakes was depending on him.

The cream filling was going to have to wait for a few hours.

He'd survive.

Probably.

Chapter Fourteen



Could a woman get blue balls?

Obviously not, but what was the equivalent? Blue clit? And what was the appropriate reaction to—or punishment for—a guy causing it for the same woman *twice*? A woman he claimed to want a relationship with? After he'd already proven that the orgasms he could give were so much better than the DIY ones she was used to?

These were the things Zoe contemplated as she kneaded dough, chopped fruit, and whipped frosting over the next three days.

Three. *Days*.

None of it had worked off her frustration.

Aiden had texted her from Dubuque the day Maggie caught them kissing to say he was so sorry, but his meeting was going to go late. She'd thought he meant maybe seven or eight. She'd stalled at the bakery—with the cupcake cream—until seven thirty. She'd fallen asleep at home at ten. An hour later than she usually went to bed so she could be up at 5 a.m. She hadn't heard him come home and only knew he was there the next morning because his car was in the driveway.

The same had happened the next two nights.

He'd come to the bakery around six thirty, looking like he'd barely gotten any sleep, and parked his tight, suited-up ass in one of the chairs and supervised the morning rush. He didn't help, but he kept his eye on the guys in line.

When they'd cleared out, he'd come to her, kiss her until her toes curled, and apologize with a "this new project has just gotten crazy." Or something similar.

She said she understood. She did. This was the job that was going to allow him to be in Appleby with her. She understood how much owning a business could take out of a person. At Christmastime she was sometimes at the bakery until midnight and then back by 5 a.m. to fulfill all the orders. She actually liked seeing him working hard and taking it all so seriously. She liked that they had a devoted work ethic in common.

She just didn't like going without orgasms. Now that she'd *really* had a taste, she felt itchy and hot and jittery all the time thinking about it. One definite disadvantage to being able to do all her work on autopilot by now was that it left a lot of time for thinking about other things.

Like the fact they hadn't had time to sneak in anymore hands-in-panties time. The morning rush kept her and Josie on their toes and then George and Phil were at their tables. Aiden was busy on his computer and phone almost nonstop anyway. Then around four o'clock, he'd pack up and head to Dubuque. Apparently, the guy he was meeting with also worked during the day and could only meet after hours.

Aiden had, however, given her a folder with some small business resources for employee benefits and had asked her to send him her books for the past two years. She appreciated he was still thinking of her and Buttered Up in the midst of the project that had caused him to miss dinner at her mom's house last night and her invitation for pizza and beer with her, Jane, and Josie the night before. The project that was also making him look constantly worried and down four cups of coffee every morning.

She glanced up as he sat back in his chair with a sigh and scrubbed a hand over his face, putting his phone down for the first time in almost an hour. He'd mostly been listening to whatever was being discussed, but he'd been frowning a lot. She'd never seen him so... bothered. Things usually worked

out for Aiden. He really had always seemed to have a golden touch.

Maybe this was good for him. Humbling, perhaps. Though the only two things he'd seemed totally confident about since coming back to Appleby was that she would open her arms—and legs—for him. And that she had no reason to hate Hot Cakes. Well, he'd been right about one of those.

“You know,” she said, piping vanilla frosting onto the strawberry cupcakes and tiny strawberry pies on the table in front of her. “You don't have to come in here so early every morning.” She looked up to find him watching her. “You could sleep in.”

George and Phil had left a while ago, and they were alone in the front of the bakery.

He gave her a smile that looked tired but sincere. “I like being here,” he said simply.

“You mean you like staking your claim,” she said. She liked him doing that too.

“That too,” he agreed.

She ignored the curl of heat in her stomach. “I think you've done that. Mom and Dad both said people have asked them about us. Jane and Josie too.”

“I like being here with you,” he said. He rose and approached the counter. “I like watching you work. I love the smells and sounds here. They're... comforting. I like you filling me in on everyone as they come in and out.” He braced his hands on the counter. His dress shirt was rolled up on his forearms, and his tie was present but loose.

It was probably the tie that was making it hard for her to not be constantly horny.

“But mostly I like watching you work,” he said again.

She felt warm—even though she was frustrated. “You're not watching me. You're on your phone and computer.” She hoped he wasn't watching *too* closely. She was trying something new, and she didn't want him to notice and ask her

about it. It was probably a dumb idea and wasn't going to go anywhere anyway.

His gaze went over her. "I'm watching, Zoe. I'm aware of every move you make."

She smiled. "Okay."

"Did you know you make this little growling sound when something doesn't turn out?"

She frowned. "No, I don't."

"You do." He growled softly, clearly mimicking her.

"And 'son of a damned fudge stick' is your favorite curse while you're working and you don't think anyone is listening."

Okay, that she did say. A lot. Under her breath. Or so she'd thought.

"And when something turns out well, you give this happy little sigh that sounds like the sigh you make when I kiss you."

She frowned at him. "You can't talk about kissing me."

"Why not? All this—the little frown you wear when you're decorating, your smile when one of your customers compliments you, the way you and Josie talk and joke, the way you look in that damned apron—" Again his gaze went over her. "It all makes me hard. All day long. I love just being here with you in your element. Working side by side."

She liked that too. But she gave a little half sigh, half groan. "*Aiden.*"

"What, Sugar?"

"You can't talk about being hard and kissing and stuff." She glanced toward the kitchen where Josie was working on a wedding cake with five tiers for that weekend. "If you're not going to do anything about it, you have to stop turning me on."

His smile was slow and sexy. "I'm sorry you're all worked up, babe." He didn't really look sorry.

"After all the frosting and cream-filling talk the other night?" she asked. "And the kitchen the other morning?"

He nodded slowly. "I'm *very* sorry. This has all kinds of blown up. Our timelines got sped up, and there are more issues than we expected."

"I get it. I do understand," she said. Then she dropped her eyes to study the flecks of icing on the tabletop. "But the other morning didn't take very long."

Suddenly Aiden was around the counter and crowding her against the worktable. Her breath caught as she looked up at him. He looked hungry and as wound up as she felt. "You need some relief, Sugar?"

She nodded mutely.

"Tell me what you need, Zoe," he said, his voice dropping to a husky drawl.

She wet her lips. "Well, you're kind of the expert."

He gave her a half smile but shook his head. "I think you know what you want." He dragged his hand from her shoulder to her wrist, brushing his finger over her pulse point. "And I'll do whatever you need. Can't have my girl unsatisfied."

"I'm definitely that," she told him, liking the *my girl* thing more than she would have expected. "I've been so..."

He lifted a brow when she trailed off.

She lowered her voice. "Horny."

Aiden's eyes flared with heat even as his grin grew. It was surprised and cocky at the same time. He leaned in. "I'm sorry." He seemed sincere now. "You're so busy when we're here together, and our schedules have been so off. But hopefully not for much longer."

"You could wake me up when you get home," she said, hopefully.

He gave a soft laugh. "The first two nights were way too late. And I tried last night."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

He nodded. "I came in, gave you a kiss, hoped you'd wake up."

“You did not.” But it was possible. She slept like the dead, and she definitely had a hard time even seeing nine thirty most nights.

“Totally did,” he said. “And I tried to meet you for... coffee... the last two mornings, but girl, you get up early.”

She smiled. Aiden and Cam had never been morning people. She’d been surprised and pleased to see him at the bakery as early as he’d been coming in the last few days.

Zoe lifted a hand to his face. “It’s okay. It really is.” She’d gone this long without sex. She could wait until he had this project under control. Probably. “I’ll wait for you.”

He took her hand and turned his head to press a kiss to the palm. “It’s not okay,” he disagreed. “We’re both busy, and you’re on deadline when we’re here, so I haven’t wanted to interrupt. And I’ve been busy every evening. But if you need me to help you take the edge off, I’m more than happy to take you into the storeroom and give you some relief.”

She wanted that. So much. “Sex in the storeroom?” she asked, her mind spinning with images. “There’s not really a flat surface or empty wall. It’s all shelves.”

He chuckled. “Not sex. Not like that. Yet,” he added. “But I can get my hand in your panties in the storeroom and have you coming hard and fast.” He ended the offer with a hot, deep kiss.

She wasn’t too proud to not grind against the hard length behind his zipper before pulling back. “Why not sex?”

Aiden dragged his thumb over her bottom lip, his pupils dilated. “Not your first time.”

“Oh.” That made sense. That was sweet.

“The first time calls for lots of space—and lots of *time*,” he said huskily. “I’ve got a very long to-do list for that.”

“Okay.” She was breathless.

And when a glint of satisfaction flashed in his eyes, she realized what she’d kind of admitted. Or what she hadn’t

denied. This would be her first time. “The first time for *us* together, you mean,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

She grinned. She wasn’t confirming a thing. Because she loved seeing possessive Aiden rear his head once in a while.

He shifted back, a “got ya” look on his face that made her feel very warm.

Then her gaze dropped to the worktable, and another surge of warmth went through her. She’d been trying something new. Because of him. And she wanted him to know it.

“Would you... try something for me?” she asked.

“Of course.”

She leaned to pick up one of the little mason jars and held it up.

“What’s this?” He took it from her.

“Cupcakes in jars. And pies,” she said.

She watched him lift it up, studying it.

“Is this... strawberry?” he asked. His eyes went to hers. Questioning.

She nodded. “Yeah.” Because those were his favorites. She hadn’t intended to show him this. Certainly not to have him try the cupcakes. But she’d still made it with him in mind. “It’s a thing. People do cupcakes and pies and cobblers in jars. Makes them into instant individual servings. Very easy to ship and transport.”

He picked up a strawberry pie in a jar as well. “You haven’t done these before.”

“No.”

“Why now?”

Her eyes dropped to the deep-green silk of his tie instead of his gaze. “I guess I was thinking that if people *were* to buy things that had real frosting or cream topping—not the plastic, preservative-filled crap *some* people put on their cupcakes—to

put in their lunches or maybe even their compartments—not that they would last too long, but people would *want* to eat these right away and wouldn't forget they were there or whatever—then jars might be better than boxes or plastic containers. Because you can bake them right in the jars. Then they're not loose inside the container and sliding around and getting smooshed. Plus that saves us work and time, because we don't have to cut them and transfer them to new containers. And jars are different from what anyone else is doing around here. And they're reusable and recyclable. We could even have people bring them back in for 'refills' for a little discount or something. Or just to be used again. I mean, once you wash and sanitize them, there's no reason to not use them again, so that could allow us to keep costs down and..."

She trailed off realizing that he was just standing there. She lifted her eyes to his. He was staring at her. But grinning.

She crossed her arms, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. She'd been rambling but it was because she had a lot to say about the jar pies. Evidently. "What?"

"That's amazing, Zoe." He was practically beaming. "This is a fantastic idea. For all those reasons. You're thinking about ways to expand. That's so great. Are you going to go talk to Tom down at the store about shelf space? I'd go with you. I bet you could even talk to the convenience store. And you could do something at the farmers market. You could maybe even set up some kind of profit-sharing fundraising thing with the school. These would be amazing things to sell for something like that. Unique but something that everyone would want."

Now she was the one to stare at him. But she *wasn't* grinning.

"No." She shook her head. "No. No. Definitely not. I just tried it. This one time. This is the first batch of anything I've made."

"Did it work?" he asked.

"Well... yes. I mean. They turned out."

He set the jar down with the pie and then looked around. He grabbed a fork from the counter and then dug into the cupcake. He took a huge bite, watching her while he chewed. But suddenly he stopped and swallowed with some difficulty.

Her eyes grew round. “Oh my God! Is it horrible? Did I mess it up?”

He swallowed again and set the jar down, wiping a hand over his mouth. “No.” He cleared his throat. “No, definitely not. It’s... perfect.”

“Then why do you look like that?” Not believing him, she picked up the fork and took a bite for herself.

But he was right. It was perfect. Delicious even. Moist, fluffy, wonderful strawberry flavor, perfect creamy icing.

“It just... tastes exactly like the ones my mom made here,” he said, his voice gruff.

Her eyes flew to his face.

“It just hit me. Hard. All of a sudden,” he explained. “The smell and the taste and everything at once.”

She swallowed, also with difficulty, and nodded. “I know they’re your favorite. I always associated them with you.”

“They are. Were.”

Zoe suddenly felt tears stinging her eyes. Maybe she shouldn’t have picked strawberry. “Have you had one since she died?” she asked softly.

Aiden shook his head and cleared his throat again. “No.”

“I’m... sorry. I guess, for some reason, that was just the one I started with when I was trying this out. And strawberry pie for Jane.”

He smiled and reached out, pulling her in. “It’s delicious. And perfect. And I fucking love that the first thing you do when you’re trying something new is something that makes you think of me.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Well, you *are* the one who gives me the hardest time about not trying new things.”

He hugged her tight for a moment. Then his hands slipped to her hips, and he pressed her against him. She could feel he was partially aroused.

By strawberry cake in a jar.

God, he was easy. She grinned, rubbing her cheek against his tie. Then she wiggled her hips against his.

He gave a soft growl. “Yeah, I’ll give you a *hard time* trying new things later on, Sugar,” he teased huskily.

“Thank God,” she said sincerely.

He chuckled. Then he kissed the top of her head and let her go. “I’m proud of you for trying this.” He nodded at the jars of cake and pie.

She sighed. “I’m not really trying anything, Aiden. They’re the same recipes I’ve always used.”

“You put them in new containers. That’s actually pretty huge. Around here anyway.”

She laughed. “Well, maybe. A little huge.”

“And did you have to adjust the baking time at all?”

“A little.”

“There you go. You’re doin’ it.”

Lord, he really did seem proud. “But I’m not ready to go to the stores with them or do fundraising drives or any other crazy thing you have spinning in your head,” she warned him. “I’m going to put these out here in the bakery for now and just... see.”

“What’s the difference?” he asked. “Except if they’re in the store, people can get them more conveniently, grabbing them off the shelf while they’re also picking up chicken and potatoes for dinner. Or they can grab them on impulse while they’re paying for gas and lottery tickets at the convenience store. Or they can be talked into buying them by their grandchildren who need new soccer uniforms. Expanding your audience, getting more people to taste your products, taking it to them so they don’t have to come to you, making it available

at eight o'clock at night when you're already closed. I mean... other than all those things... what's the difference?" But he was grinning.

She shook her head. "Okay, I can kind of see why your gaming company is so successful."

He laughed. "And Dax is even more charming than I am."

"Lord help us all."

"I could take him some cupcakes in a jar..."

"No." She slapped his hand away from the jars. "Just... I'm not ready."

"Why not?" He seemed sincerely curious.

Zoe blew out a breath. "Because if the jars are sitting on shelves in other stores, in public, then everyone can see them *not* selling. Just sitting there. People can see other people reaching past them for Strawberry Swirls from Hot Cakes instead."

He sighed. Then he nodded. "If it doesn't go well or take off then everyone knows. If you keep it in here you can control that."

"Of course. I can display just two or three items and make it seem like we're almost sold out. I can dump the stuff that doesn't sell. And no one is reaching for anything else in here. If they come through the door, at least I know they're here because they want my stuff."

"Got it."

That surprised her. "Really?"

"Sure. I understand. That doesn't mean I don't think you should take a chance."

"Yeah, well... taking chances and making cakes of any shape other than round or square are *really* not my strong suits."

He gave her a very affectionate look. "You take your time with this. But," he added, grabbing the cupcake-in-a-jar he'd

already sampled, “this is fucking delicious. The second-best thing I’ve had on my tongue. Ever.”

“What the first best thing you’ve had on your tongue?” she asked. He really liked her chocolate pie.

“*Your* tongue.”

Before she could respond, the door to the bakery opened with a little jingle. They stepped apart, and Zoe took a deep breath before turning to greet her new customer.

It was Jane. She was dressed in her work clothes—jeans and black polo shirt with the bright pink and white Hot Cakes logo on the left side—and she was coming through the front door. Jane never came through the front door. Hell, she never came through any door to the bakery.

Zoe was immediately concerned. “What are you doing here? And coming in the front?”

Jane waved that away. “The new owners got rid of that rule.”

“Wait, what?” Zoe asked. “You mean, you can shop here now?”

“Yep. No problem.”

Zoe felt a jolt of surprise, then excitement. “Really?” Wow. That was a lot of potential new customers.

“Really.” Jane braced her hands on the counter. She was frowning.

Which distracted Zoe from the thought of needing to up the muffin inventory. “What’s wrong?”

“Can I talk to you?” Jane asked. But she was looking at Aiden.

Aiden straightened. “Um... of course.”

Jane nodded and headed for the table where Aiden’s computer was set up. Aiden shot Zoe a puzzled look. She shrugged. But she moved to the bakery case as Aiden started for the table. She grabbed a jar with a strawberry pie in it and a fork. Jane looked curious when she set it down.

“Trust me. You’ll love it,” Zoe told her. At least she knew that was true.

Zoe grabbed a cup at the coffee station and filled it with a dark roast and a splash of cream. She set that down for her friend too. Jane gave her a grateful smile.

“You okay?” she asked, her hand on Jane’s shoulder.

Jane nodded. “Yeah. I’m... pissed off and worried.”

“About what?” Zoe asked.

“The new owners,” Jane said with a frown. “They sent out a big welcome email to everyone, but all it really said was there were going to be some big changes. Everyone’s freaking out.” She played with her fork but had yet to take a bite.

That was a sure sign things were not okay.

“They want me to go talk to the new owners on everyone’s behalf. I don’t want to, but everyone is so worried, and no one else is really willing to confront them.” She sighed. “I feel like I have to.” She focused on Aiden. “I was hoping you could coach me.”

“Coach you?” he repeated. “What do you mean?”

“On how to talk to management. How to get them to listen? Do I act meek and submissive and beg for mercy? Do I go in guns blazing, demanding they listen? What?”

Aiden grimaced. “Somewhere in between those. Even if I thought you could actually pull off meek and submissive.”

That got him a tiny smile and Zoe felt relieved. Jane didn’t need any more stress or people to worry about. But Aiden would help her through this. That was also very sexy.

Chapter Fifteen



“Night, Zoe! See you tomorrow!”

Zoe looked to where Josie was leaning through the swinging door to the kitchen. “What?”

“I said, good night. I’ll see you tomorrow. You almost done?”

Josie glanced toward the table where Aiden and Jane were still sitting. Typically he left for his meetings by now, but he’d either canceled them or at least pushed them back to stay with Jane.

“Not quite,” Zoe told her.

“What’s going on?” Josie asked, stepping out from the kitchen.

They’d been talking for over an hour. Zoe had tried to give them space. She’d waited on a couple of customers. She’d even decorated some more cake pops. But she’d been very interested in Jane and Aiden’s conversation. Evidently several employees had come to Jane with concerns, practically begging her to talk to the new owners. They thought, and Aiden agreed, that they should bring up the things they loved and the things they didn’t about working for Hot Cakes before the owners started making changes. She’d apparently sent an email requesting a meeting to someone higher up and they’d agreed. Now, Aiden was coaching her in how to approach the whole thing.

“Aiden’s giving Jane advice about the new Hot Cakes management.”

Josie nodded. “That’s good.”

“Is it?” She was truly interested. “You think he’ll have good advice?”

“Sure. But mostly she just needs someone to tell her she’s right to ask for everything she wants. You know Jane. She’s kind of a cynic. She’ll assume they don’t care and won’t tell them everything.”

“Aiden will help her with that?” Zoe asked, looking over at them again.

Jane was smiling now. That was good. Josie was right. Jane was a natural pessimist. Her dad’s illness and her stepmom’s attitude toward it had changed Jane. Her stepmom, Cassie, had decided Jane’s dad would be better off in a nursing home as his condition progressed and he needed more help. The truth was, being a caregiver got in her way. She couldn’t take her girl trips or go to four-hour-long coffee dates or on all-day shopping sprees if she had to be at home taking care of him.

Jane had never liked Cassie, but that had made it all so much worse and had made Jane a little depressed and a lot pissed off. She’d looked into moving her dad in with her, but her work schedule kept her from being able to be the caregiver he needed. So she also felt guilty.

But Jane was strong and smart and had a huge heart and if her fellow employees—many of them friends after working together for so long—thought she’d be the best one to represent them all, she’d take that seriously and would want to do a good job. If Aiden could make her feel more confident and even hopeful about the meeting, then he’d be a hero. Something he was really good at. Something he really liked to be.

Seeing him reassuring Jane and building her up, giving advice as a person in a powerful position, trying to truly help, did something to Zoe. Something that felt stronger than turned on. That was there too, but this was more.

I love him.

It hit her squarely as Jane pushed her chair back, smiling.

Jane gave Aiden a quick hug and he said, “You’re going to be great.”

Yep, Zoe loved him. She’d loved him in a brotherish way for a long time, but now... this was different. It was deeper. More. *He* was more. She wanted him badly.

“Bye, girls!” Jane called to Zoe and Josie.

“Bye!” Josie returned.

Zoe waved, but her attention was on Aiden. He’d followed Jane to the door.

Aiden held the door for Jane, then shut it behind her, twisted the lock and turned the sign to closed.

“Yeah. Okay,” Josie said, backing toward the kitchen door. “So I’m going to... just go.”

Zoe didn’t look toward her friend. She knew Josie was already gone. The look on Aiden’s face said it was time for them to be alone.

Her whole body flushed with heat, and her heart started pounding even harder and louder.

She’d talked big in her text three days ago. She’d flat out told him she was horny a couple of hours ago. Now he was here, looking at her like he definitely wanted to eat her up. She was suddenly feeling jittery, and she had no idea what to do.

He rounded the counter and came straight for her. Zoe turned, the edge of the worktable against her lower back and held her breath just waiting for whatever was about to happen.

He crowded close. He didn’t touch her. He just looked down at her for a moment. Then he said, “You ready?”

Oh, God. She was ready. She was so *not* ready. She wanted this so much. She wanted him. She wanted this. That was the only thing she knew for sure.

“I think so,” she said softly.

He leaned in, bracing his hands on the table on either side of her. His lips were nearly against her. “Need you sure.”

He was giving her a chance to say yes. Or no. To really decide. He wanted to make sure everything about this was intentional on both their parts.

That was really sexy.

“I’m sure that I’ve been thinking about this for days. And I’m very hot and wound up about it. But I’m also jittery and a little nervous about it.” She could be honest with him and it felt amazing. This was Aiden. He’d never tease her. Not about this. Not in a mean way anyway. Maybe in a really hot way. But he’d never make her feel bad or silly about being nervous.

He shifted, running a single finger over the back of her hand where she was gripping the edge of the worktable and then up over her wrist and up her arm. Goose bumps broke out, tripping up her arm and down her body.

“I like that you’ve been thinking about it. I like that you’re hot. I even like that you’re a little jittery and nervous,” he said, watching the goose bumps.

“You do?”

He met her gaze. “It means this matters to you. And I love that. Because this matters so damned much to me, I don’t even have the words.”

She read his sincerity in his eyes. He really meant that. “This definitely matters to me,” she said, putting as much earnestness into her tone as she could.

He ran his finger up and down her arm, the corner of his mouth curling. “Because you’re a virgin? Or because you’re a cream-filling-on-your-clit virgin?”

She sucked in a sharp breath as heat arrowed through her. “Well—” She swallowed hard. “Both. But because it feels like this, with you, with us, is more than just sex.”

His grin was sexy, and cocky, and triumphant all at the same time.

Triumphant? She tilted her head.

And then it hit her.

She'd just confirmed she was, in fact, still a virgin.

"You're such a jerk," she said.

But he pressed in closer, his big body giving her not an inch of air that wasn't filled with the smell of him. The *heat* of him.

"You have no idea how fucking hot it is that I get to be your first, Zoe," he told her, his voice gruff.

She felt like he was touching her, running rough palms over her skin, but he wasn't even touching her arm anymore.

"You have no idea how much I want you. No matter what. But to know that I get to take you through this for the first time..." He pulled in a deep breath. "I have never wanted anything more in my entire life."

Suddenly she didn't care he was so smug about her not getting rid of her V-card between Christmas and now. She didn't care if he thought it was all about him—it was mostly all about him anyway. She didn't care if he thought she'd been sitting around, just waiting for him to come home again. Maybe deep down she had been.

None of that mattered now. He was here. She was a virgin. And she really, really wanted him to change that. Right now. Right here.

Well, maybe in the kitchen away from the front windows.

"I don't know what to do," she said, almost in a whisper.

He swallowed hard. He clenched his jaw.

She lifted her hand to his face, frowning slightly. "What? Are you okay? I'm sorry. I mean, I know the basics but..."

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand to his mouth. He pressed a hot kiss to her palm again and then put her hand over his heart, his hand covering it. "I was going to say, 'You just do whatever I tell you to do' in some attempt to be really hot and sexy and dominant," he said.

She widened her eyes as tingles went from her nipples down her belly to her clit. “That would have worked.”

He gave her a little smile. “But the truth is, you can’t do this wrong, Zoe. Not with me. Whatever you do, however you do it, as long as we’re doing it together it’s going to be amazing. You have to know that. I want you to do whatever feels good, whatever you want to try, whatever you’ve fantasized about. I’m all yours.”

Her eyes widened even farther. Yeah, that was even hotter. Her nipples, belly, and clit were suddenly on fire. Throbbing. Wow. Suddenly her mind was spinning through a whole reel of fantasies and things she’d read about like a movie reel going double time.

“Aiden?” she said, her voice breathless.

“Yeah?”

“I’m *totally* ready.”

This grin was big. Immediate. Wolfish. A shiver of hot anticipation went through her.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her after him, into the kitchen. He stopped by the worktable and tossed two things onto the top.

One was a package of chocolate cupcakes. The other was a strawberry pastry. From Hot Cakes.

She narrowed her eyes. “Those were in your glove compartment?”

“Oh, no, I stopped for those special three days ago on my way home.”

She looked up, ready to tell him that this was *really* not the way to get on her good side. But he’d just pulled the knot loose from his tie and was sliding the tie from around his neck. He tossed it next to the snack cakes and then flicked open the top button on his shirt. He was watching her, and she could tell he expected her to say something sassy.

Instead she turned on her heel and marched to the fridge. She pulled it open, reached for the bowl of extra cream filling

she'd made—also three days ago—and then bumped the door shut with her butt. She brought the bowl to the center island and set it next to the snack cakes.

He'd untucked his shirt by the time she got there.

Unfair.

She looked up at him.

“Battle of the cream filling,” he said.

She lifted a brow. “Oh yeah?”

“Bet I can make you *love* this stuff.” He pointed to the chocolate cupcake.

A Cupette. That's what Hot Cakes called their bite-sized cupcakes. It was such a stupid name.

“Not more than this.” She pointed to her bowl.

“Let's find out.”

And just like that, all the butterflies and jittery feelings were gone. She was in her kitchen, teasing and flirting with Aiden. This was familiar. Fun. Hot. This was the stuff that had been surprising her since he'd returned to Appleby but that she was getting used to very quickly.

“Yeah, let's find out,” she agreed.

His eyes were hot, and he started unbuttoning his shirt. She felt her pulse start racing, but she nonchalantly dipped her finger into her bowl of cream filling and then lifted it to her lips, sucking the sweet concoction off while watching him.

He shrugged out of the shirt, letting it fall to the floor.

Then he unbuckled his belt and pulled it through the loops. Zoe caught her breath as the buckle hit the tile with a clank. This was getting real. He popped the top button on his pants. Then stopped.

He reached for the cupcake. Zoe felt her nipples tighten as the package crinkled. Oh, boy. He could *not* train her body to respond to Hot Cakes. That would be so unfair. She couldn't get hot and bothered when faced with their bright pink and

black logo or their fake, plasticlike frosting. That would be so bad. He couldn't buy them in bulk and bring them home to sexually torment her. She couldn't contribute to their bottom line because Aiden Anderson...

He broke the cupcake open, revealing the white cream inside. Then he lifted it to his mouth and licked the cream out with a swirl of his tongue, his eyes pinned on hers. He licked the dab of cream from the pocket of chocolate cake with a confidence and skill that she didn't have to be experienced to understand.

Her clit ached. She wanted his tongue doing that to *it*. She'd never had anyone's tongue do that to *her* before, yet she knew Aiden's tongue doing *that* right *there* would be freaking magical.

Dammit. She was going to give Hot Cakes money. Because they were now a part of this.

She swallowed.

"You want some of this?" he asked. Taunting. Teasing. But with a smile that was full of affection and heat.

"The cupcake?" she asked. "Looks like you got that pretty well taken care of."

There was no cream left in that half of the cupcake. None. He'd licked it clean. She felt a little shiver of desire go through her.

"Well, the beauty of eating cupcakes—" he said.

And yes, *eating cupcakes* sounded totally dirty and made her hotter. Zoe shifted her weight as she felt the urge to grab him and beg him to put his tongue on her.

"Is that there are ways to get more cream as you go." He reached for the bowl in front of her, took a huge dollop of cream on his finger and then spread it into the middle of the cupcake he'd just licked. With his big, long finger. Slowly and with a little extra circle at the top.

Holy crap. Zoe felt her face flood with heat. He hadn't used any specifically dirty words. He hadn't even touched her.

But that was the dirtiest thing anyone had ever said to her.

She was never going to be able to look at half a cupcake with cream filling without thinking about female body parts and sex. Great. That was going to make her job as a baker of cupcakes with cream filling a little difficult. Or at least uncomfortable.

“I’m going to be blushing every time someone wants cream-filled cupcakes forever now, aren’t I?” she asked. “I’ll be making chocolate cupcakes with green cream middles for Halloween and *still* thinking dirty thoughts.”

He gave her a wicked grin. “Oh yeah.” Then he licked the cream he’d just added out of the cupcake.

Zoe felt her inner muscles clench. Damn, he was good at that. Or seemed good at that. *Looked* good doing that. She’d love to know if he was as good as he appeared to be.

“And you’re right,” he said. “You do have the best cream in town.”

She swallowed hard. “Wow.”

“What?”

“I would have been even more pissed at Christmas if I’d known this about you.”

“What about me?” He licked a chocolate crumb from his finger.

“How dirty you are. How good you seem to be with your tongue.”

He put the cupcake down and came around the edge of the table to her side. Zoe had to force her feet to stay put. She wanted to bolt. Which was stupid. She *wanted* this. Him. His hands and mouth and tongue on her. She wanted him talking more. A lot more. Dirtier. But for a second there, she felt like she should run.

Everything was about to change.

She didn’t like change. Change meant she might make a mistake.

Until now. She wasn't going to mess anything up here. She could *feel* it.

“*Not* showing you how good I am with my tongue and how dirty I can be was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life,” he said. His voice and expression were dead serious. He lifted a hand and ran his thumb over her cheek. “I'm still not entirely sure how I managed it. I've been thinking about you nonstop since Christmas. I've been waiting to get back here every fucking day. I've never needed someone like this.”

Zoe felt her breaths coming in fast little pants. She was staring at him but she couldn't make herself stop. The look in his eyes was too good, too delicious, to interrupt with even a quick blink. He looked, yes, hungry. Needy. A little pained. Like the past five months really had been difficult.

“I haven't been with anyone since that night,” he said, his voice gruff, his thumb now dragging along her jaw, his fingers sliding into her hair. He tipped her head back. “There's no one else for me anymore, Zoe.”

She pulled in a breath. He meant it. She could see it. Hear it in his voice. He had his shirt off and was touching her now, but they weren't really *doing* anything, and yet she felt like he was already making love to her.

Holy crap, this guy was good. She was so out of her league. In over her head. In way too deep.

And she loved it.

“Please let me cover you in cream and lick you like a cupcake,” he said.

There it was. Dirty and sweet, teasing and serious, just like she wanted it, just like she knew Aiden would give it to her.

“If you don't, I can't be responsible for what I'll do to you with my rolling pin.”

He gave her half a grin, but his fingers tightened in her hair and he tugged slightly. Her nipples tingled sent sparks to her clit and she gave a little gasp.

“I'm going to need you up on this worktable.”

“We’re going to have to really sanitize this thing after,” she said, already bracing her hands on the edge, preparing to lift herself up.

“I’ll buy you a whole new one if necessary.” His big hands settled on her waist and he lifted her, practically tossing her onto the tabletop. “Maybe we need two. One for baking and one for sex.”

She smiled. “We could go back to the house.” There were, after all, four beds, two huge couches, a couple of tables, and several countertops there.

“I need to taste you here for the first time,” he said without even considering her offer.

She and Aiden had history in a number of places. If they were going for some kind of nostalgic, meaningful moment, there were several choices, probably. Most importantly, they could have a redo of Christmas Eve in his bedroom at the house. Get it right this time.

But maybe—just maybe—they’d gotten it right last time. Not that she’d ever admit that to him, but he’d turned her down because it couldn’t be just a quickie, just a practice run for her with other guys, just a one-night thing. And he’d known that. Even half asleep and totally ambushed.

That made her love him even more.

Aiden had done it right at Christmas.

Now, here in the bakery, this felt right too, and if he wanted to associate her and sex with cream filling and pink sugar and candy sprinkles and the smell of vanilla and cinnamon and buttercream, she wasn’t going to argue. Because this was a part of her life. Would be a part of *their* life. They might move to another house. She’d get new lingerie. There would be many holidays. But this bakery would always be a part of their life.

He moved to stand in front of her and she parted her knees. He immediately moved between them. She took his face in her hands and looked into his eyes. She nodded. “Yeah.”

His eyes heated, and he reached for the back of her neck where her dress tied. It was a halter style, so when he pulled the string, the bodice fell away, baring her breasts. Her breasts were small. Something she'd always hated. But her friends had assured her that not having to wear a bra unless she wanted to was the luckiest thing in the world.

At the moment, with Aiden's hot gaze on her, she felt pretty perfect.

"Damn, you're gorgeous." He lifted a hand and ran a thumb over her nipple.

She shuddered, her whole body reacting to the touch.

He leaned in and took her mouth in a deep kiss as he played with her nipple, making her wiggle on the table, the heat between her legs building. Her eyes were closed, and she was so lost in the feelings, she didn't notice him reaching for the other half cupcake that was just behind her. But she felt it.

She pulled back as she felt him pressing the cupcake to her other breast, the cream center over her nipple. She looked from it up to his face, but he was watching as he smeared white cream and chocolate cake over her breast.

Hot Cakes cream and cake, to be exact. She opened her mouth to protest. Probably. Though protesting anything about being half naked and having Aiden touching her seemed like a stupid idea.

Then he lowered his mouth to that breast, licking and sucking, and she didn't care about anything but his hot mouth and tongue doing *exactly* what they were doing. He was absolutely going to win this argument. She didn't care about that either.

"*Aiden.*" Her hand went to the back of his head. Just in case he thought about stopping. Ever.

But he did stop. Kind of. He switched sides anyway. That cupcake half was pretty smooshed, but that didn't slow him down. He swiped his finger through the bowl of cream she'd made. He painted it over her other nipple and then licked and sucked it clean.

She was officially needy and hot and wet and wriggling by the time he finally lifted his head. He took her mouth in a greedy kiss, and she put both of her hands on his head, fingers deep in his hair, holding him still. She arched closer, wanting to be against him, to rub and grind.

“God,” he said, his voice almost pained as he spoke against her mouth. “I want you so damned much. You’re so sweet. And we’re just getting started.”

“Started?” she asked, trying very hard not to pout. “I’m so ready, Aiden.”

“Oh, but there’s so much more.”

“I can’t take any more.” She arched, rubbing her naked breasts against his chest.

“You can,” he told her. Firmly.

“I’m *so* ready,” she insisted, kissing him. She stroked her tongue along his, wrapping her legs around him, pressing against his hard fly.

He kissed her back. He gripped her hips, grinding into her. Then he pulled his mouth away. “So. Much. More.”

“I’m almost there now,” she said, definitely pouting now. “I swear I could come just like this.”

He gave a little growl, that yes, pushed her even closer to that edge, and kissed her again. Deep, hot, hungry. But he pulled back *again*. “Then come. I’ll get you there again.”

“Oh God, Aiden,” she half gasped, half groaned.

“Yeah, I’m going to be needing to hear a lot more of that.”

Suddenly Zoe found herself tipped back onto the worktable and her skirt up around her waist.

“Pink panties. Thank you,” he said. He ran his big hand, brazenly over her hip and around to her ass, then down to the back of her thigh. He lifted her knee toward her chest. The whole time he was studying her panties and everything they covered, and the stuff they didn’t.

“Thank you?” she teased.

“Pink is your color, Zoe,” he said sincerely.

She tried to respond, but he ran his finger under the edge of her panties and over her bare skin. The hottest, wettest bare skin on her body. Her breath rushed out of her lungs in a long breath.

“Grab the cream,” he told her gruffly.

Blindly, she grabbed the bowl with one hand and the edge of the table with the other. Her eyes were squeezed shut as he stroked the pad of his finger back and forth over her slick center. She didn't even really know what she was doing. She just knew that as long as his finger stayed right there, she was happy to comply.

“Need some right here.” He circled her clit.

She picked the bowl up and held it for him.

“Nope. You.”

Her eyes flew open. One knee was nearly to her chest, the other leg hung off the edge of the table. Her dress was bunched at her waist. She was still wearing panties, but it did not matter considering where his finger was.

This was already the most shameless she'd ever been. Especially under fluorescent lighting. And she had a feeling this was truly just the start.

“Me?”

“Yep.” His finger brushed over her clit again. “Right here. Let's get you nice and creamy.”

She gave a little laugh that was partially amused, partially scandalized. Still she heard herself say, “I'm not good enough yet?”

Wow, where had that come from.

He gave a groan. “Jesus, Zoe.” Then he bent his head, pulled her panties to one side, and took a long lick, right up the middle and over her clit.

She cried out, arching up off the table. That was the most incredible thing she'd ever felt.

“More.”

Yeah, that was her voice too. She felt her cheeks heat. But she definitely didn't take it back.

He licked again and then gave her clit a little suck.

She felt the tightening of an orgasm, already. Wow.

Then he lifted his head.

Her eyes flew open again, and she lifted her head off the table. “Wha—”

“I almost forgot.”

“Forgot? You didn't forget anything! You're doing great! It's *so* good.”

He chuckled and reached past her head. “I almost forgot I'm supposed to be proving to you that you can love Hot Cakes.”

Her head thunked back onto the table. “You did *not* just say those two words to me while I'm like *this* and you're doing *that* to me.”

He grabbed the Strawberry Swirl, letting her panties slide back into place. That was *not* okay. Of course, she couldn't quite bring herself to move. Because spread out, half naked, on her worktable with Aiden Anderson half naked and really, really good with his fingers and tongue, she could stick around for a little longer and see what he had in mind she supposed.

His eyes were still hot and on her as he lifted the package to his teeth and tore it open. Okay, that was a little hot. And he couldn't have done that with one of her cupcakes.

Then he bit into the Strawberry Swirl. Whatever it was. It wasn't really a cake. It wasn't a pie. It was a weird pastry thing with strawberry filling and a white icing swirl over the top.

His bite exposed the bright red filling—probably containing artificial coloring—and he dipped the tip of his finger into it. She remembered exactly what he'd said he was going to do with it. She probably shouldn't want that

artificially colored and flavored stuff on her body, especially her most sensitive, private parts. But then he pulled her panties to the side again and ran his finger over her clit.

Yeah, she didn't mind. It was fine. Totally fine. Better than fine.

He lowered his head to suck the strawberry filling off, adding a lot of licking to it, and Zoe felt everything in her suddenly tighten, and then Aiden slipped a finger into her.

Just one. One finger. One slide. One little hook with the tip. Another suck.

And she was flying. Her orgasm crashed over her and she cried out.

"Fuck, yes," was all she heard from Aiden, before he was pulling her up and crushing his mouth to hers.

Dammit. He'd made her come with Hot Cakes strawberry filling.

But she kissed him back as if he was her favorite person on the entire planet.

Because he was. He *so* was.

She reached between them and pulled his zipper down, slipping her hand into his pants and wrapping her fingers around his cock.

His breath hissed out, and he pressed his forehead against hers. "Zoe."

"Now I need to prove how good my cream filling is."

He pulled back and ran a thumb over his bottom lip giving her a very sexy grin. "Oh, I know very well."

She'd been expecting that. She reached for the bowl of cream and scooped out a dollop with two fingers. "You're telling me you *don't* want me to cover your cock in this and then lick it off?"

His grip on her hip tightened. "You have no idea how much I want that."

“Then back up.”

He looked at her for a long moment as if weighing his options. Finally, he sucked in a breath. Then stepped back.

Zoe’s heart skipped. She hadn’t done this before. But wow, did she want to. She started to pull her dress back up but he shook his head.

“No way.” He reached for her and slid her off the table. When she was on her feet, he pushed the dress to the floor to pool around her shoes.

She lifted a brow, and stepped out of it. Then she slipped her panties off too.

“You are... everything,” he said.

Her heart turned over again. His words gave her the little push she needed to go to her knees and reach for his fly.

He helped her push his pants and boxers out of the way, and she took a moment to just drink in the sight of him. The first time she’d seen him naked. Fully aroused. All hard, hot man. Right. In. Front. Of. Her. Face.

She did the only thing she really could.

She reached out and touched him.

He groaned and Zoe looked up at him. He looked like he was in pain, but he was watching her intently, not making a single move to stop her. She stroked her hand up and down his length, watching his face.

His jaw tightened, and he didn’t seem to be breathing.

She squeezed.

“Fuck, Zoe,” he said softly. Gruffly.

The sound made all the happy sensations that had just been coursing through her with the orgasm come to life again. Her nipples tightened, her belly got hot, and her inner muscles clenched.

She squeezed and stroked again and then leaned in to taste him. First without the cream. She wanted to know what *he*

tasted like. Purely Aiden.

She licked up the length of his cock and then over the head.

“Christ.” It was almost as if he were talking to himself.

He only moved a hand and that was to bring it to her head, tangling his fingers in her hair. Maybe he was going to help? Show her what to do? But he did nothing but rest it there, a hot weight against her scalp that sent tingles clear to her toes.

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking up at him.

He gave a bark of laughter. “I can honestly say that there is only one way I could be better than I am at this moment.”

“What’s that?” She wanted that. Whatever it was.

His gaze heated, and his fingers tightened in her hair. “If I was buried balls deep in your sweet pussy.”

Zoe felt her mouth drop open. She was really going to have to get used to this side of the Aiden she knew. The Aiden she thought she knew. The Aiden she was discovering now. Then again, she loved the ripple of surprise followed immediately by the wave of heat.

“Oh,” she said. Or almost said. It was so quiet she wasn’t sure it counted as actually *saying*.

“How about you get back up on that table?” he asked, his gaze pinned on hers.

“Just a minute.” She wiped the cream, that was starting to melt in her fingers, along his shaft, then leaned in, licking and sucking the way he’d done to her.

“Zoe.” His voice was gravelly, his body tight, his fingers curling into her scalp.

He definitely wasn’t pulling her away.

She looked up at him and then took the head of his cock between her lips. She really had no idea what she was doing. She’d only read about this. But it seemed kind of common sense. When he’d been using his tongue and mouth all over

her it had felt amazing. It stood to reason that the same would be true for him.

She licked him and then sucked him into her mouth.

“Fuck,” he said tightly. Then he pushed forward. Just slightly. Slipping farther into her mouth.

That ignited a flame in her belly. She could just follow his lead. Do whatever made him sound like that again and again.

She sucked and drew him farther into her mouth, the hard, hot length of him sliding over her tongue. He was big, and she had to open farther to take him in. There was no way to take all of him, but he didn't seem to mind. He pulled back a little then eased in again. Slowly and easily.

She loved the sounds he was making, the feel of him taking pleasure from her like this.

“Fuck, Zoe. That's... so good. Too good.” He pulled back, slipping out of her mouth.

She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. She tasted the cream but also Aiden. She wanted more.

He was staring at her, breathing fast. “You don't even know, do you?” He shook his head.

“Know what?” Had she done something wrong? Was she supposed to be doing something now?

“How fucking hot you are right now. What you're doing to me.”

“Oh.” She couldn't help the slow smile that lifted her lips. “What am I doing to you right now?”

He leaned over and grabbed her by the waist, lifting her and turning to set her on the edge of the table. “Making me lose my fucking mind,” he growled, before kissing her. It wasn't a slow, romantic, sweet kiss. At. All. He *took* her mouth. It was all tongue and lips and even a little teeth. It was like everything he'd done between her legs.

She wrapped herself around him, arms around his neck, legs around his waist, pressing close, opening for him,

returning his strokes, needing to be closer. They were both totally naked now. His cock was rubbing against her clit every time she pressed forward and she wanted *more*.

“Please, Aiden,” she said against his mouth, running her hands up and down his back.

“I can get you off again. Tongue, fingers, whatever. We don’t have to do... this,” he said, his voice gruff.

“This?” She pulled back. “You mean sex?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “Well, some people would consider all of this sex.”

“What you’re saying is that we don’t have to have *actual* sex. Where you put your cock inside me?” she asked. That didn’t sound sexy. Or romantic. But they really needed to be on the same page here.

His eyes were hot anyway. “That’s what I’m saying. I don’t have to be inside you tonight.” He gave a little laugh that didn’t sound at all amused. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m saying. I’ve never wanted anything more. But this is a big deal. Your first time.” For a second he paused, their eyes locked.

Finally, she realized he was reveling in that. She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Aiden. My first time. You will be my first.” She leaned in, putting her lips against his ear and squeezing his ass. “Please be my first. Right here. Right now. In my bakery. With us both covered in cream—of all kinds.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath and then reached up to cup her face in both hands. “I had to give you one more chance to back out. Because this *is* a big deal.”

She nodded. Kind of. With him holding her she couldn’t do much more than just stare back at him. “It is.”

“Because I’m also going to be your last,” he said, his voice thick with promise. And lust. And maybe something else. Like love.

A shiver went through her. Heat, need, and a sense of *oh, yes* that she realized in that moment was exactly what every

woman should feel the first time—every time—she had sex. *Oh, yes, this is right. Oh, yes, this is the one. Oh, yes, this is what I want. Oh, yes, I have power here and I'm choosing this for me.*

“Oh, yes,” she finally said. “I want this.”

There was a beat of silence. Then he nodded, stepped back, reached for his pants, and pulled out a condom. His gaze was back on hers immediately as he ripped it open and rolled it on.

Wow. Even that was sexy. She hadn't thought much about condom donning and doffing. She knew it was important, and it would be something that needed to happen, but she hadn't really thought about who would do it, how it would look. She'd definitely never thought watching him do it could make her whole body get even hotter and tighter.

Aiden stepped back between her thighs, putting a hand on each knee and spreading her legs. He swept his gaze over her, then ran a finger over her clit and then down into her wetness. He slid a finger deep. “You ready?”

“I've *been* ready,” she told him. “Since Christmas,” she added.

He gave her a you're-such-a-brat look. “Okay, time for me to make up for that.”

“Damn right it is.”

Chapter Sixteen



Aiden cupped her ass and pulled her to the edge of the table. He kissed her. “Wrap your legs around me,” he told her huskily.

She did. Her heart was pounding. She was very glad she was on a steady surface and that Aiden had a good hold of her. She *was* ready, but she wasn’t positive what to expect, how this would feel. She had an inkling it might hurt.

He reached between them and took hold of his cock. He slid the head through her slickness, teasing her opening and rubbing over her clit. “We’ll take it slow,” he told her.

“Okay.”

“Zoe.”

“Yeah?”

“Open your eyes.”

She hadn’t realized she’d squeezed them shut. She opened them and looked at him.

“Watch,” he told her, looking down.

Oh, God. Could she watch?

“It’s hot,” he told her. “I’m definitely going to watch as I ease into your sweet body for the first time. I can’t wait to stretch you, nice and slow. Feel your pussy tight around me. Feel your muscles gripping me. Feel you come all over me.”

His words made her melt, heating her up, and relaxing her. With her hands on his shoulders, she leaned back a little so she

could see. He pressed forward, the head of his cock pushing into her. She felt a little stretch, a little pressure, and she felt her body responding, wanting to pull him deeper. She wanted this connection, wanted the fullness that seemed *right there*.

She put a hand behind her, bracing herself on the table and leaning even farther. He grinned. “Nice.”

She looked up. “Yeah?”

His gaze swept over her face, her breasts, her belly, down to where they were joined. “Fuck yeah.”

She leaned a little more. But not so far that she couldn’t see. “More,” she told him.

“Gladly.” He pressed forward, sliding a few more inches inside.

She felt her body stretching, the fullness amazing, her nerve endings singing. “Oooh,” she said softly. “Yes.”

“Tell me if you’re not okay,” he said.

She looked up. His jaw was tight. “Are *you* okay?”

He laughed lightly. “Sugar, it’s taking everything I’ve got not to thrust hard and pound into you. I want you so fucking much and you feel like heaven. You’re every damned fantasy I’ve had.”

“You’ve had *this* fantasy?” she asked. “Me and this worktable? Right here?”

“About a hundred times.”

She liked that. A lot. A burst of confidence went through her and with it came the uncontrollable urge to tease. “Did it include going slow and gritting your teeth and holding back?” She wiggled her hips against him and felt him sink in another inch. Oh, that was nice.

He gritted his teeth harder. Then managed, “It most definitely did not.”

“Then this isn’t really a fantasy come true, is it?” she asked. She wiggled again. Another inch.

“Zoe,” he said firmly. “You gotta let me take the lead here.”

“Why? Because you’ve done this a million times? Because you’re the expert? Because you’re the big, strong man who’s taken so many virgins?”

His teeth were grinding now. “Because I might hurt you.”

“Oh, wouldn’t you love that? For me to tell my friends how big and rough you were and how you did me so hard I could barely move after.” She wiggled again, arching her back slightly.

He slid deeper, and she felt pleasure ripple through her.

“Dammit. Don’t mess with me. I’m trying to be a good guy here,” he said, frowning. “Considerate and sweet and gentle and shit.”

She laughed, feeling a euphoria she hadn’t expected to come from something other than an orgasm. She and Aiden were doing the most intimate thing imaginable—under very bright, hide-nothing lights, in a place where they would both be frequently, unable to forget—and they were still laughing and teasing and taunting each other.

It would never be like this with anyone else.

She tightened her muscles around him and he groaned.

“I’m not delicate, Aiden,” she said. “I want you as much as you want me. If I’m a little sore tomorrow, then I’ll just be thinking about you even more.” She squeezed him again. “Every time I move just right or sit down or—”

Aiden suddenly gripped her hips and thrust, burying himself the rest of the way inside her.

Zoe gasped and for just a second thought she’d made a huge mistake. Emphasis on *huge*. That did hurt. That was a *really* tight fit. This was obviously very new.

But then he pulled back and thrust again. Then again.

Maybe the idea of making her think about him with every step around the bakery tomorrow was what did it, but

whatever it was, Zoe was pretty quickly thinking she was brilliant for teasing him. Because This. Was. Amazing.

He filled her up in a way her fingers, her favorite vibrator, nothing ever had or could. He was hot and hard and huge. The friction was unmatched, the angle was perfect, the... everything was unlike anything before. Especially the way he was watching her, still with jaw clenched, his eyes on hers.

“God. Aiden. I—” She tipped her head back and opened her legs even farther.

“Zoe,” he bit out. “Dammit.”

It was a good, dammit. Somehow she knew. She arched her back. Hot sparks shot through her body from where Aiden was buried, to deep down to her toes and up to her scalp.

“This is so good,” she panted.

“Fuck yeah, it is.”

She liked that. She knew *he* was no virgin, and she wanted this to be good for him too. She had no idea how to really make that happen, but she wanted it. She looked up at him. “Tell me what to do.”

“Just fucking lie there, and look like a damned goddess, and let me worship you.” His voice sounded different as if he was feeling a whole bunch of stuff that was all trying to come out at once.

She knew the feeling.

“Just lie here?” she teased. “Easiest gig ever.”

He ran a hand from her belly up between her breasts to cup one. He plucked at the nipple as he thrust then circled his hips.

“Oh, God,” she moaned.

“Yeah, just lie there,” he said, his grin cocky.

Well, she'd let him be cocky with this. He was earning it.

He ran his hand back down and rubbed his thumb over her clit. She shuddered. “Oh, more of that.”

“I love that you’re vocal,” he said. “But I could tell that was good.”

He did it again, and she felt her muscles tighten around him.

“Yeah, milk me with that gorgeous pussy,” he muttered as he worked her clit again.

As if she could help it. Her head fell back again. She was all his. She didn’t have a ton of leverage here anyway, and she was quickly losing the ability to function beyond remembering to breathe. Even that was becoming secondary to chasing the orgasm that was tightening low and deep.

“I’m never going to get enough of you,” he said.

“I hope not. I’m going to need a lot of this,” she said, breathlessly.

He groaned. “I might have created a monster.”

“Yeah, you did,” she told him as he did some magical swirling thing over her clit while pumping deep.

“But you’re *my* monster,” he told her. He thrust again. “Only mine. All mine.”

“Oh my God, yes.” She couldn’t imagine being like this with anyone else. Letting someone else see her, touch her, *taste* her the way Aiden had. “Only you.”

That made him give a growl that shot straight through her and her muscles tightened. He picked up his pace, still circling her clit. She lifted her head as she felt everything begin to coil.

Their eyes locked.

“Let go for me, Zoe,” he said roughly. “Let me feel it.”

She couldn’t have held it back if she tried. “Aiden!” she cried as the orgasm seemed to start in her toes and work its way up to where he was buried deep. She clenched around him, gripping his shoulder with one hand, trying to grip the tabletop with the other, but finding no purchase.

Which was no problem at all. Aiden was holding her so tightly she wasn’t getting even an inch away from him. He

clutched her hips, pulling her against him as he pumped deep and then came, shouting her name, pulsing inside her.

Add that to the list of never-befores. Feeling Aiden's climax, feeling him coming apart inside her was almost as good as feeling her own.

Almost.

Because her own orgasm with Aiden deep inside her was absolutely the best thing. Ever. Full stop.

"I can *not* believe I waited so long for that," she said, sitting up and throwing her arms around his neck giving him a big hug.

The change in positions, shifted him inside her and she felt ripples of pleasure even from that. She wiggled.

"Wow, could we go *again*?" she asked.

He laughed, the sound rumbling against her ear, and squeezed her ass. "Give me a little bit. But yeah. We're *going to go again*."

Her inner muscles responded to that with their own little, "yay!" He must have felt it because he groaned.

"Monster. Definitely created a monster."

She pulled back. "That was *so* good." She frowned. "You denied me *that* at Christmas? You are such a jerk!"

He shook his head. "That was unbelievably good. I can't believe I denied us both *that*."

"But—" She thought about that. "Are you saying it was only that good because it was us?"

"That's what I'm saying." The look in his eyes was softer now. Affectionate. Sweet.

She smiled. "Oh." Then she frowned. "You still have kept that from me for *five months*!" She slapped him lightly on the chest.

"Can you imagine having this and then having to wait five months to have it again?" he asked. He shook his head. "I

wouldn't have survived. I had to wait until I was here and could give it to you over and over again."

He kissed her. It was deep and slow but sexy as hell.

"You knew it would be this good?" she asked when he lifted his head.

"I had a pretty strong inkling," he said, seeming totally sincere.

"How?"

He shrugged. "It's you. Even kissing you. Seeing you in that lingerie. It was stronger than anything else I'd ever felt."

That was a pretty good answer. "Maybe you would have been inspired to come back sooner. Maybe it wouldn't have taken five months."

He seemed to think about that for a second. He frowned slightly. "Maybe. This business opportunity just really... made sense now."

She lifted a brow. "I wouldn't have been enough to bring you back?" She was teasing. Mostly. But it did occur to her that it was a fair question. Sure, the guy needed to have a job. Well, he didn't *need* one like most people did. But he probably needed something to do. Still, he claimed he'd come back because he was ready to be *with* her. He'd made it sound like Christmas had started him thinking about them as a couple, and he'd decided he was ready for that to happen so had come back to Appleby for her.

"Come back and be your sex slave?" he asked as he pulled back. "That does sound like my kind of gig."

She watched him take care of the condom, even taking the bag out of the trash can by the back door and tying it up, presumably to take it out with them when they went to their cars.

She supposed she wouldn't want Josie to find that. Not that she didn't have *every* intention of telling Josie what had transpired here. After she reassured her she'd fully cleaned

and sanitized everything. Which reminded her she needed to do that.

Zoe slid to the floor and grabbed her panties and dress, pulling them back on. Aiden started dressing as well. She took the bowl of cream filling to the sink, giving the Hot Cakes wrappers and leftover cakes a little frown.

Dammit. He *had* made her think more fondly of them. She'd see them in a gas station now and probably get a little hot and bothered.

“So what is this business thing you're working on?” she asked as she washed the bowl out and loaded it into their industrial dishwasher. That was definitely something they'd added over the years. Letty was still jealous of the thing. She had come down occasionally to do dishes, just so she could use it and be in awe.

“We're... acquiring a local company,” he said.

Zoe looked over her shoulder. “Really? Local like Dubuque?”

He blew out a breath. “Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you about it.”

She shut the water off and grabbed a towel, drying her hands and turning to face him. “Okay. I'd love to hear about it.”

“The guys and I—” Just then his phone rang. He hesitated, clearly debating about answering it.

Zoe waved her hand. “Go ahead.”

He was still watching her, a strange expression on his face, as he reached for where he'd evidently set his phone earlier on the counter near the ovens. He glanced at the number then frowned, lifting it to his ear. “Hey.” He paused, listening. Then he looked surprised. “Now?” He glanced at Zoe again. “This is *not* a good time.”

She smiled. “I'm okay.”

She was. She was *so* okay.

“Hang on,” he said into the phone. He lowered it. “What do you mean you’re okay?”

“I mean, I’m spectacular. I’ve never been better. I feel so damned good I think I’m going to be able to float home.”

He gave her a bemused grin. “Yeah?”

“Dude, I just had *sex* for the *first time*.”

His grin grew. “I’m aware.”

“And it blew my mind.”

“Yeah?” he asked again.

“Definitely. I probably need a little recovery time. You know from all the big, hard thrusting and pounding and stuff.”

His gaze heated but he did say, “Are you sore?”

“In such a very, very good way,” she assured him.

He blew out a breath. “We need to talk about a few things.”

“You know where to find me. If you need to go do something with this fabulous new company takeover or whatever you’re doing, then go.” She crossed the tile to where he stood, lowering her voice a little so the caller wouldn’t happen to hear her. “If I go to bed before you get home, I’ll go to bed naked. You know which door is mine.”

His gaze heated. “Open invitation?”

“Oh yeah.”

He lifted his hand to her face. “I’m crazy about you. I really need you to know that.”

Her heart flipped in her chest, and she felt another of those surges of, *oh, yes*. She turned her head and kissed his palm. “I do. And same.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m all in. I know I gave you a hard time at first and I know I said this was too boring and cliché and all that but... you’re the one, Aiden. I think you’ve probably been the one for a long time.”

Emotions swirled through his eyes. Surprise, heat, affection, lust, and something else. Something that looked like concern. But that didn't make sense.

He lowered his head to kiss her before she could really study his face. The kiss was hot and sweet, longer than she'd expected. He lifted his head reluctantly.

"Okay, I'm going to go take care of this," he said. "But I'll see you later."

"For sure," she said. "We have a lot of laters, Aiden."

He gave her a smile that looked like he couldn't quite believe she was saying this stuff.

Well, he'd convinced her. What could she say? She could admit when she was wrong. And when she'd thought a relationship with Aiden would be predictable and boring, she'd been *very* wrong.

He kissed her again. "God, I don't want to go."

"Then hurry up so you can get back. Text me when you're on your way. I'll probably be at Jane's. Or Josie's."

"I didn't know you had plans with the girls. What if I was going to take you home and ravish you all night?"

"I didn't have plans. Until now."

"Now that I'm leaving you alone?"

"Now that you're leaving me alone and I have a huge story to tell them!" She laughed. "But even if I did have plans with them, I would have canceled. No problem. I would have sent them a message that said, 'Can't make it' and an eggplant emoji." She grinned. "They would have been fine with it."

He laughed. "That's all it would have taken?"

"Totally. I would have gotten high-five emojis back. Or maybe the one that looks like a noisemaker with confetti. Or maybe the honeypot emojis. You know what those mean, right?"

He nodded with a half grin. "I definitely do."

“Of course, after I tell them our story, we’re going to start using the cupcake emoji.”

He lifted a brow. “You’re going to tell them our story?”

“That’s why I’m going over there,” she said. “I’m *definitely* telling them this story.”

“*All* of it?”

“Well, the highlights. And that the cupcake emoji definitely needs to be added to the sex emojis.” She grinned and couldn’t help but hug him again. “It was so good, Aiden. Oh my God, I’m getting hot again just thinking about it.”

He squeezed her ass. “Same.”

“Good.” She gave him another quick peck. She wanted to do so much more than that, but she stepped back. “Now I have some deep scrubbing to do on this table,” she said with a grin. “Go.”

He blew out a breath. “Okay.” He lifted the phone back to his ear. “I’ll meet you in twenty minutes.”

Then he was gone.

Zoe had never grinned so much, or gotten so horny, cleaning up her kitchen.

She really hoped he’d hurry home.

* * *

He shouldn’t have slept with her before he told her about Hot Cakes.

Aiden realized this insight was one, too late, and two, probably shouldn’t have been a huge revelation actually. It seemed obvious now. After the fact. He should have definitely told her before taking her on her worktable. With Hot Cakes cupcakes. Definitely.

Dammit.

But he hadn't had a real *plan* for when to tell her. He hadn't had a specific plan for sleeping with her either. Not one that went beyond *I'm definitely going to do that*. Well, and okay, the cupcakes. Those had been part of the plan from the day he'd promised to make her love that cream filling.

But he should have told her he was now in charge—sort of—of the production of that cream filling. Before he'd smeared it on her breasts.

That did seem obvious. Now.

The last few days had been so damned nuts that both of those things—confessing his new business deal and finally making love to the woman he was falling more in love with every day—had simply been “Get to that ASAP” in his mind. They hadn't been really related.

Except now he could see that one should have definitely come before the other.

If just one damned thing with taking over Hot Cakes would have gone smoothly, then he might have gotten it right. If things had fallen into place the way he'd expected, he could have gone to her and said, “So there's this thing I've been working on” and told her everything, *before* getting the best blow job of his life.

“We should have a town hall.”

Aiden looked up at Dax, refocusing on the conversation.

“I was nearly driven out of the building with pitchforks,” Ollie reminded him. “So naturally, you want to call even *more* of our new employees together in one place and ask them how they feel about things?”

Ollie had gotten to town about an hour ago. He'd flown. Using the private jet they owned but rarely used. He'd then gone straight to the Hot Cakes factory. Because he could never just fucking chill.

Apparently, his arrival had not been met with a red carpet and champagne toast.

Now he, Dax, and Cam were all checked into the hotel in Dubuque, and the four of them were sitting around Dax's suite with Grant on Skype trying to figure out what to do next.

"Pitchforks?" Dax asked. "Come on. People found out the new owner was in the building and they had some questions." He shrugged. "Makes total sense to me. Besides, it was only the business office people and one of the foremen, right?"

"Forewoman," Ollie corrected. "Though she's also the new union leader, I guess. Gorgeous redhead. Riled up, gorgeous redhead."

"That's the best kind of redhead," Dax said.

Ollie shook his head. "She had a ton of questions, and I think she kind of hates me now."

"Why?" Aiden asked. It was Jane. It had to be Jane. She'd gone in to talk to Ollie. Good for her. "What did you say?"

"That I didn't have any answers," Ollie said. "Which is true."

Aiden could understand why that would have frustrated Jane. The employees were already worried about this change, and to hear the new guys in charge didn't have a clue, wouldn't make anyone feel better. "You should maybe let Whitney handle this stuff for a little while," he said. "She's at least good at PR."

"I'm good at PR," Ollie protested.

"Standing on a stage at Comic-Con and throwing t-shirts out to the crowd isn't really *PR*," Aiden said.

"Public relations," Ollie said. "Our relationship with our public is great."

"But we're talking about relationships with our *employees*," Aiden said. "That's different. They want us to be serious. And knowledgeable. And reasonable."

"Maybe we should make t-shirts and take them to our next employee meeting," Dax said. Aiden shot him a look. He put his hands up. "Just kidding."

He had maybe been *half* kidding.

“They want benefits and time off and fair overtime pay,” Aiden said. “Not t-shirts and cappuccino machines in the break room.” Yes, Dax had suggested that as well. “These aren’t kids blowing off steam by chopping troll heads off and earning purple diamonds. These are real people with real issues that they’re counting on us to solve.”

What had he gotten into? Aiden wondered for the forty-seventh time over the past two days. What the hell was he doing buying and trying to run Hot Cakes?

“By the way, we’re promoting Whitney,” he said firmly. “To VP.”

“She’s already a VP. What’s she going to be VP of, now?” Cam asked.

“Everything,” Aiden told him with a scowl. “VP of Every.Fucking.Thing. We need her. She’s the only one with a clue about how that place runs.”

“Yeah, sounds like her family did a hell of a job,” Cam said dryly.

“She wants to do things different. She’s on board with what Ollie and I have discussed with her.”

“You’ve met Whitney?” Cam asked Ollie. Then looked like he regretted letting that slip.

Ollie nodded, giving Cam a grin. “Now I see why you date the girls you do.”

Dax looked from Ollie to Cam and back. “What’s that mean? From what I can tell, Whitney is nothing like the girls Cam dates.”

“Exactly,” Ollie said. “You like them a little more... submissive now, don’t you, Cam?”

“Fuck off, Ollie.”

Which was *you’ve got me all figured out* in Cam language.

This was getting so complicated. Aiden scrubbed a hand over his face. He’d just given Jane a pep talk and advice about

confronting her new bosses. Including *him*. She'd told him about Heather, who had the perfect work hours to allow her to pursue her paralegal degree. She'd told him about Albert, who was seventy and had a bad knee but still had to work to afford to support his wife and their developmentally disabled adult son who lived with them. She'd told him about Mathias, whose wife was a nurse who picked up all holiday shifts so she could get extra holiday pay. That meant Mathias needed to be off on those holidays to take care of their two kids.

None of them *loved* Hot Cakes, but they had worked out their schedules and the jobs they could each do so they could be there for their families and work on improving their lives.

Apparently, Whitney had been the go-between for the workers and management so her father was never aware there were jobs Albert couldn't do because of his knee or that Mathias and three other men often traded shifts without formally being approved.

They were all worried about the idea of changes. They were all in precarious positions, balancing their work and their lives, and fearful their new bosses wouldn't be as understanding and flexible.

Aiden rubbed the center of his forehead where a headache was definitely brewing. He'd left the guys alone for a few hours, and already things were more complicated than they had been that afternoon.

"Full steam ahead," Cam said. "There's no reason to mess around. Let's just do this. Let's get in there and do things and not talk it to death."

Full steam ahead should be fine. There was no reason to be taking this easy or rolling this out slowly. Hot Cakes needed overhauling. They all needed something to do, and hell, Aiden was all in. He was madly in love with Zoe and was moving his life back to Appleby. Might as well jump into his new business venture with both feet.

Too bad he hadn't told her about it *before* he'd fucked her on her worktable, had the most amazing sex of his life, and basically convinced her she was in love with him and ready to

say *I do*. He hadn't proposed, but she'd said she was all in. She'd said he was the one.

Fuck, she thought he was the one.

He knew *she* was the one, and he wanted to be the one for her.

But the one didn't go behind her back to rejuvenate the company she thought was standing in her way of being more successful.

Even if it wasn't true.

"Fuck." He pushed himself up from the chair in Dax's suite and paced to the sliding door that led to the balcony.

"We *have to* talk about it," Dax said.

"We do," Ollie agreed. "I wasn't ready for that today. That's on me. But these people are worried."

"Of course they're worried," Aiden said. "They've never worked for anyone else. Whether they love or hate the Lancasters, that's who they know and who they're used to. I doubt anything in that factory has changed in ten years. The employees may not like it, but at least they know what to expect. People, by nature, don't like change. If they've had a hard time getting management to listen to them, then they're not going to trust us when we say not to worry and that it's all going to be all right."

"Then you think a town hall is the right thing to do?" Ollie asked.

Damn. A town hall. Inviting everyone who wanted to come to see them. Meet them. Talk to them. Pummel them with questions.

"We have to be open with them." This came from Grant. "They're not going to trust us if we keep things hidden or make it all a big secret."

Aiden winced. Exactly. Hiding things and keeping secrets was a really bad idea.

“Then we just go in and prove it will be different. We make the changes and *show* them it’s better,” Cam said. “They’ll balk at the start, but once it’s all in place, they’ll see it’s fine.”

“What if they quit? Or picket or something?” Dax asked.

“They’re not going to quit,” Cam said. “Where would they go? There aren’t that many jobs around here. They’ll stay. They’ll bitch, but they’ll stay.”

“You really think bulldozing them is the way to go?” Ollie asked. “Wouldn’t it be better to talk and listen and negotiate? Long term, that will build trust. We ask what they want. We tell them what we can do—and we’re honest about what we can’t—and then we deliver. That will build trust. And loyalty.”

“It will also take forever,” Cam said. “People can adjust. The faster we get it done, the sooner they’ll see it’s better, and the sooner the complaining will stop.”

“That will be cheaper too,” Grant said. “Drawing it out, doing focus groups and town halls and whatever will take time and money. If you just go in, implement things, and hang on for a few months, it will be more efficient.”

Aiden took a second to appreciate how even this meeting highlighted how each of his partners was different and how their varying perspectives worked to make the bigger picture more complete.

Ollie shook his head. “This is a small town. This is Iowa. Honesty and integrity are really important if we want to get anywhere. If we want to be here long term—and I assume that’s our goal here—then we need to do this well.”

Yeah, yeah. Okay, Aiden thought. He got it. Honesty and integrity mattered for long-term relationship building. Aiden looked skyward. If the universe or God or whatever was trying to drive home that point, *it-slash-He* was doing a great job.

“Fine.” Cam shrugged again. “I think it’s going to be a bigger pain in the ass that way, but whatever.”

“And you’re going to come back to Chicago with me and Grant and observe all this from afar, right?” Dax asked,

eyebrows up. “You sure? Because you sure seemed interested in the reports and articles you were reading earlier.”

“Only to the extent that I want to see the Lancaster empire taken completely apart and everyone saying what we’re doing is four million percent better than anything they ever did,” Cam said. Without a single ounce of humor.

“Four million percent?” Grant echoed, though his tone was dry. “In year one or by year five, or what are we talking here?”

“The sooner the better,” Cam said, again without even a curl to his lip.

Ollie gave Aiden a wide-eyed look. Yeah, it was really better that Cam stay in Chicago as they took over Hot Cakes from the Lancasters. And worked with their new VP of Everything, Whitney Lancaster.

Grant sighed from the computer screen. “Which means, as usual, I’m the only one considering cost? Because it sounds like, as long as whatever you do is four million times better, Cam isn’t going to blink at spending money.”

“Oh, we’re spending money,” Cam said. “Benefits, gutting the plant, new technology, fucking new name tags, if needed. Whatever it takes to make Hot Cakes bigger and better and *the* best place anyone has ever worked and the product the best fucking thing anyone has ever eaten.”

Everyone seemed taken aback by how adamant he suddenly was.

He looked around. “Reading everything over the last few days shows me there are a *ton* of improvements that can be made. There are a lot of holes. Things they’ve half-assed. Because they were the only game in town. In the area really. But they haven’t expanded their products in years. They haven’t gone after any new markets. They haven’t done any upgrades in almost a decade. There’s a lot of potential.”

“And you want to make these improvements because...” Ollie prompted.

“Because I want everyone to know that the second a McCaffery got involved, things got better. That a McCaffery

will do things the Lancasters never did. That a McCaffery is the one who gives a shit.”

Ollie nodded. “Got it. But *we’re* the ones who are going to be here dealing with it all in person while you’re in Chicago?”

Cam shrugged. “I might hang out in Appleby more than I thought.”

Oh. Shit.

Aiden stared at his friend. “Really?”

“If we’re having a town hall and having the entire town show up to see what we’ve got planned and who’s involved, I’m going to be there,” Cam said.

Aiden blew out a breath. He needed to talk to Zoe. She had to hear this from him. Before there was a fucking town hall.

“I need twenty-four hours.” God, he was going to need more than that, he had a feeling. “No announcements of any kind for at least that long,” he told his partners.

“Whitney thought Thursday next week would be good,” Ollie said. “And she thought having it at the plant would be perfect. Plenty of room. She said we can bring in chairs and refreshments. We open it up to everyone, even people who don’t work there. They meet us. We present our plan. We take questions. Then everyone is talking about it over the weekend.”

“You want them talking about it?” Grant asked.

“Of course. Because we’re going to wow them,” Ollie said, clearly fully on board.

Aiden’s stomach was in a knot. He cast a glance at Camden. This was it. Soon everyone would know. They’d see them as heroes. Or villains. Depending on who was looking at the situation.

“You worried about your family’s reaction?” he asked.

“Sure,” Cam said. “They’re totally stubborn and unreasonable. But we’re in too deep now.”

“You don’t believe Hot Cakes is a competitor of Buttered Up, do you?” Aiden asked.

“No.”

“You think you can convince your mom and sister of that?”

Cam snorted. “No.”

Aiden sighed.

“But hey, now that you’re sleeping with Zoe, they can’t stay pissed at us forever, right?”

Fuck. He hoped that was true.

But that sounded horrible. That wasn’t why he’d slept with her.

Was it? The knot tightened further. It wasn’t. Of course. He’d wanted her long before he’d thought about taking on Hot Cakes. He’d decided to buy Hot Cakes because it was a way for him to come home and be with her. *She* was the reason he was home. Hot Cakes was secondary to that.

But he’d definitely slept with her *before* confessing about the business. That could have easily been his subconscious trying to hedge his bets.

Dammit.

He had to tell her. Tonight. Right now.

“You better sit down,” Grant told Aiden. “We need to hash out this town hall.”

Well... shit.

This was going to be bad.

Chapter Seventeen



“I can’t believe you never told me sex was *that* good,” Zoe said. For the fifth time.

Jane laughed and leaned over to fill Zoe’s wineglass again.

They met at Maggie’s for dinner at least once a week, but it was nice to hang out at Jane’s and Josie’s sometimes instead because they could drink without Mom’s looks. And they could talk about sex.

“I really feel like we were quite honest about sex being good,” Jane said, setting the bottle on the coffee table.

Josie was in the armchair and had her feet tucked up under her butt. She nodded. “We really were. Though in my defense, I haven’t had *that* much, and I don’t think I’ve ever had sex I couldn’t shut up about.” She grinned at Zoe. “But I’m very happy for you.”

Jane nodded. “I haven’t had like a million experiences, and none were *this* gushworthy, but yeah, it’s pretty great. I can’t believe you waited this long.”

Zoe gave what was surely a swoony sigh. She wasn’t sure she’d ever been swoony before. She was pretty sure she’d never swoony-sighed. But that’s how it felt when she thought of Aiden. “Well, it was *so* good.”

“Yeah, yeah, cupcakes and cream filling and all that,” Jane said taking a swig of wine. “I’m totally jealous.”

“And now you’re getting married or what?” Josie asked. “I mean... it’s Aiden, so you are, right?”

Zoe felt her stomach flip. “Yeah. I guess we probably are.” That didn’t feel as weird to say out loud as it maybe should have.

Josie laughed. “That’s great. He’s an amazing guy.”

“He’s got some business thing going, and he’s definitely moving back. He’s been pretty clear about that. And I told him I’m all in. That he’s the one.” Zoe sat back in her chair feeling warm and happy. “My mom knows and is thrilled. My dad surely knows by now too and I’m sure he’s happy. Everything is perfect.” She thought about that then gave a little laugh. “Wow. I mean this has all happened so fast, but it feels so good.”

“It hasn’t been all that fast,” Josie said. “You’ve known him forever. You’re a friends-to-lovers story. Those are the best.” She gave a swoony sigh too. “I love romances like this.”

Jane snorted. Josie was definitely the romantic of the three of them.

“What? You don’t think friends becoming lovers and then falling in love is romantic?” Josie asked.

“It is,” Jane said. “It makes total sense, actually. I’m just thinking of the guys I’ve known my whole life and... well, I’ve kissed a few of them but can’t imagine spending the *rest* of my life with any of them.”

“Well, a handsome stranger coming to town and sweeping you off your feet is a possibility too,” Josie said with a grin.

Jane frowned.

“What?” Zoe asked.

“There are strangers coming to town all right. And two of our new bosses were in today.”

Zoe leaned in. “Really? They’ve already come to town?”

“Yep. I was on my way home after talking to Aiden, but I got a call from Danny. He said I needed to get my ass back down there. The new guy was in the office. Just waltzed in like he was big shit.” She was frowning. “He was, of course, meeting with Whitney. God knows what she’s going to tell

him. If they keep running things as they have been, it's really going to suck."

"But what if they change a bunch of stuff and that sucks worse?" Josie asked.

Jane nodded. "I have a ton of really worried people."

"Is this the guy who agreed to meet with you?" Zoe asked.

"I don't think so. He didn't seem to recognize my name." Jane grimaced. "I'm not sure I made a very good first impression though. Instead of waiting for that meeting, I stomped in there today. I was riled up after meeting with Aiden."

"Oh... no," Zoe said.

"No." Jane shook her head. "Aiden gave me the confidence to go in there. That was good. I just might have gotten a little loud."

"How did the new guy respond? Are you in trouble now?"

"No." Jane chewed on her bottom lip for a second then said, "He seemed surprised. Which makes me nervous. He didn't seem to know there were any problems."

"Well, the Lancasters probably wouldn't admit that, right?" Josie asked. "They're not going to tell the new buyers they're inheriting a bunch of trouble."

"It's more that the Lancasters didn't care there were problems," Jane said.

Zoe frowned. She hated seeing her friend worried like this.

On one level she'd definitely hoped that Hot Cakes would bite the dust. But she knew that was selfish. Aiden had made her face that. He'd seemed almost frustrated with her when she'd refused to admit they weren't her competition.

But they were. She'd been taught that from birth.

So why did Aiden have her doubting things?

They made different products. Their products were for different purposes.

Hot Cakes might have started with Letty's recipe but even the Butter Sticks, their original cake, was different now than when Didi had started out. Nothing else they made even came close to resembling Zoe's cakes and pies and cookies.

If the new owners made Hot Cakes a miserable place to work—or an amazing place to work, for that matter—how did that affect Zoe and Buttered Up?

Not at all.

Except for her friend being unhappy.

That bothered her far more than thinking about the money the Lancasters had made over the years or Didi stealing Letty's recipe. Yes, that had been a betrayal of their friendship. But it was *her* friendship with Jane that was Zoe's concern now.

She wanted her friend happy and fulfilled. She didn't want Jane stressed and worried. She didn't want Jane driving to another city for work. She didn't want Jane losing sleep. She also loved seeing Jane getting a little feisty and more involved. Jane tried hard to keep work just work. She really did just want to go, do her job, and go home. There was nothing wrong with that. Zoe supported it fully, if that was how Jane would really be happy. But Zoe suspected having a bigger mission at work, something more to do when she was there than—as Jane put it—push buttons and pull levers, would make her even happier.

Zoe's phone dinged with a text just then.

Very distracted by all her thoughts, she glanced down. It was Aiden.

I'm going to be late again. I'm so sorry.

As much as she wanted to see him, she didn't mind. She knew she couldn't leave Jane right now.

It's okay, she sent back. Jane needs more jar pie and wine anyway.

I'm glad you're able to provide for her. See you later.

She sent him a heart emoji in return. Then she sat back, feeling strangely satisfied. She was happy to think it was *her*

strawberry pie that made Jane feel better. Jane claimed it was even better in the jar. Zoe wasn't so sure about that, but Jane wasn't eating Strawberry Swirls from Hot Cakes, was she?

But Zoe knew it was her and Josie, just being there for her, that was actually helping. And that mattered even more than baking the perfect cake or pie.

Maybe Letty and Didi had screwed up. Didi shouldn't have stolen from Letty, but maybe Letty should have talked it out. Listened. Realized that a true friend was more important than butter and sugar.

Zoe couldn't really judge all that, but she did know that if Jane wanted and needed Hot Cakes to be okay, then Zoe wanted Hot Cakes to be okay.

* * *

"I, um, wanted to tell you I've heard everything you've said about Hot Cakes not being my competition and... I agree."

Zoe continued to cut heart shapes out of the rolled-out cookie dough, but she knew Aiden heard her.

It was him, Phil, and George in the shop. Aiden hadn't gotten home until late again last night, but Zoe was sound asleep by then anyway. She'd had more wine than she probably should have, and she'd been up talking to Jane and Josie until nearly eleven. But it had been worth it. Jane had decided she didn't regret stomping into the office to talk to the new boss and that it was a good thing he saw her as feisty and willing to stand up for herself and the other employees.

Of course, this morning, a little hungover, very tired, and pre-lemon-scone-sugar-rush, Jane had been less optimistic that being feisty was the right move. Zoe and Josie had given her a pep talk and a couple of extra scones to share with her new boss. They'd lifted the ban on employees buying from Buttered Up, so she didn't even have to put Jane's breakfast in a plain paper bag today. That had been nice.

"You agree?"

She lifted her head to find Aiden watching her from his usual seat by the window.

“I do. We offer very different products, and what they do with their business doesn’t really affect mine either way.”

He was up out of his chair and around the counter in a second. “I’m so happy to hear you say that.” He moved in close but didn’t touch her.

She looked up at him. “Yeah. Well, I realized I do want Hot Cakes to succeed. Jane needs it to.”

“So do a lot of other people,” he said.

“Yeah. I know.” She went back to pressing the cookie cutter into the dough. “I hated you thinking I didn’t care about that. I’ve just been so conditioned to think of Hot Cakes as synonymous with the Lancasters that I don’t really think about the other regular people working there. What happened with Didi and Letty wasn’t their fault at all.”

“It wasn’t really Whitney’s either,” Aiden said.

Zoe looked up with a frown. “Now you want me to be best friends with Whitney?”

He shrugged. “Not best friends. Maybe just not adversaries?”

“Why do you care about that?” she asked. “Have you forgotten what she did to my brother?”

Aiden gave a short laugh. “As if I could.”

“It’s okay for me to not like her for that, isn’t it?” Zoe lifted the cookies onto a baking sheet with a spatula.

“You have a lot in common, you know,” he said.

Zoe looked up again. “What do you mean?”

“She’s just trying to keep her family legacy alive too.”

Zoe opened her mouth but then shut it and swallowed. Okay, he had a point. Another point. Dammit. Finally, she gave a little nod. “I’ll keep that in mind.” She picked up the huge cookie sheet and turned toward the kitchen.

“Thank you.” His smile was wide and bright. “I’m so glad you’ve given this some thought, Zoe. That means a lot to me.”

She cocked her head. That was a strange thing to say. “It means a lot to you? Why?”

He seemed to realize what he’d said. His grin died. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

She set the cookie sheet back down. She didn’t like the way he’d said that. “Okay.” She felt nervous suddenly.

The bell over the front door jingled, interrupting them. She sighed and looked over.

It was Jane. Again. And she wasn’t alone. She had a Hispanic woman by the hand, clearly pulling the woman through the door behind her.

“Jane?” Zoe asked. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t look okay. She looked worried. Again.

“Aiden, I need to talk to you,” Jane said, barely giving Zoe a glance.

Aiden started around the counter, frowning. “Of course. What’s wrong?”

George and Phil even put their papers down.

“This is Maria,” Jane said, putting her arm around the other woman’s shoulders. “We work together.”

“Hi, Maria,” Aiden said, offering his hand.

The woman took it tentatively.

Zoe wiped her hands on a towel and moved closer, still behind the counter, but near where they were standing just inside the door.

“How can I help?” Aiden asked.

Zoe felt warmth spread through her chest. He would help anyone who came to him. She hoped Maria felt as comforted by his confident presence as Zoe did.

“Maria’s daughter was taken to Dubuque to the hospital last night,” Jane said when Maria looked at her. “They think

she has meningitis.”

“I’m so sorry,” Aiden said. “But I don’t understand how I can help with that.”

“She came into work this morning even though her fourteen-year-old is *in the hospital* with a serious condition,” Jane said. “Because she’s out of sick and personal days, and she can’t afford to be docked pay or possibly even fired.”

Aiden shook his head. “Oh, hell, you should absolutely go, Maria. Your daughter should be your only focus here.”

“I told her she should just go and worry about the consequences later, but”—Jane looked at Maria again and gave her a little one-armed hug—“she doesn’t feel like she can, and I totally understand that. I’m a little more able to say that since I don’t have any direct dependents. I can’t really get fired either, but it’s a much bigger problem for Maria.”

Aiden took a deep breath. “You need to go be with your daughter. You should never have to put work above your family.”

“I can’t lose my job,” Maria said. “My husband’s paycheck isn’t enough. We have three kids. My older daughter is with my little one.”

Jane nodded at Aiden. “Her oldest daughter is a junior in high school. She’s missing school today to be with her sister because her mom can’t be.” Jane sighed. “Please tell us how to handle this. Do you know if there are employment laws or anything that could protect her job in this situation? I know I need to learn this stuff, but I thought coming to you would be faster than looking it up.”

Aiden didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then he said, “I’m not sure, but I’ll make a couple of calls. *But—*” he said firmly, looking at Maria. “I can assure you that your job will be there tomorrow, or next week, or next month. Whenever you come back, when your daughter is healthy again. Don’t worry about that at all. In fact...” He turned on his heel and headed back to the table where his computer and phone were still sitting.

“Aiden, what are you talking about?” Jane asked.

“Just a second.” He rummaged in his computer bag and pulled out what looked like a checkbook. He bent over it, scribbling, then tore the top check off and brought it back to Maria. He handed it to her. “This should get you a couple of hotel rooms close to the hospital. If you need more, please let me know.”

Jane and Maria looked at the check then at each other.

“Oh, we can stay at the hospital. And they have a Ronald McDonald House,” Maria protested, handing the check back.

Aiden held his hands up, refusing to take it back. “Leave those rooms for people who can’t afford the hotel.”

Maria started to cry. Jane looked up at Aiden, her eyes wide. “Aiden, I didn’t mean for you to do that. We just need some coaching.”

He let out a long breath. “No, you don’t. All you should have to say is, ‘I need time off because my daughter is sick,’” he told them.

“Well, sure, that would be ideal, but that would require bosses that felt the way you do,” Jane said.

Aiden nodded. “Good thing you have that now.”

Jane lifted both eyebrows. “You think the new guys feel that way? How do you know?”

“Because I’m one of them.”

Chapter Eighteen



There was total silence in the bakery. Total. For several long seconds.

Then George set his coffee cup down on the table with a small *clack*. And Phil said, “About time you told them.”

Aiden glanced over. “You knew?”

“We’ve been here every day listening to you on the phone. We figured it out.” Phil looked at George. George nodded his agreement.

Aiden pushed a hand through his hair. Well, okay, so Phil and George had known. But he was certain no one else had.

Until now.

“Wait, *what?*” Jane demanded.

Aiden nodded. “I’m one of the new owners of Hot Cakes. Me and my partners from Chicago. The guy you met is Oliver. There’s also Dax, Grant, and”—he took a deep breath—

“Cam.”

“But...” Jane shook her head, frowning. “All the time you spent telling me how to talk to my new bosses...” She blinked several times. “*You* were one of them?”

“Yeah.”

“You were telling me how to talk to *you* about all this?”

“Yes.”

Jane opened her mouth. Then she looked at Maria. The other woman had tears tracking down her cheeks, and she was clutching the check to her chest like he'd just given her everything she'd ever dreamed of.

People shouldn't feel that way. People shouldn't be so desperate that a one thousand dollar check made them look so amazed and grateful. Dammit. He was happy to give the money. Even if he hadn't been Maria's boss, he would have written her that check. But the idea that this woman now worked for him and had been terrified of asking for time off even though her daughter was sick made his gut clench. Yes, of course people needed to be at the factory on a regular basis to make the Hot Cakes products. That's how it worked. People ran the factory. But *that* was the part that got to him. *People* ran the factory. And there were more important things in their lives, bigger things that would happen, things that made their lives worthwhile, that had nothing to do with the factory.

"When were you going to tell us?" Jane finally asked softly, looking back to him.

He swallowed. "Soon. I've been wanting to tell you all for a while. From the start. But..." He didn't want to look at Zoe. She was going to be so angry and hurt. But she'd told him, just a few minutes ago, that she understood Hot Cakes was not her competitor and that she wanted it to succeed. Maybe she would see what he was doing as a good thing. Maybe she'd be fine...

The sound of metal pans crashing together and then hitting the hard tile floor of the kitchen told him she was no longer at the bakery counter. And that she was *not* just fine.

Jane grimaced. "Right. She wouldn't have taken it well."

"No. And..." He was finally going to admit it out loud. "This is one game that isn't going according to the playbook. At all."

"No TD on your first long pass of the game this time, huh?" Jane asked.

"Not even close."

“Well, just be sure you’ve got your nut cup on when you walk into that kitchen.”

Zoe’s best friend didn’t seem all that sympathetic really.

Aiden sighed. “You want to coach *me* on this one?”

Jane shook her head. “Not sure how. I think just... apologize?”

“I’m not sorry for buying the factory and keeping it open.” He really wasn’t.

In spite of the challenges he hadn’t expected and the stress of the last few days, he felt good about what he was doing. Hot Cakes needed him. He was going to do right by these people, and it was going to be damned fulfilling. Even if he didn’t make a lot of money and people were suspicious for a while, he wasn’t sorry about taking over Hot Cakes over. He needed to help Zoe see that.

“Maybe don’t lead with that,” Jane said dryly. “Hear her out. Tell her you love her.” She shrugged. “Tell her that *I*, for one, am happy it’s you.” She paused. “Though you could have told us.”

“I needed to have a handle on things. I needed to know what I was doing first.”

“You needed to be sure it was going to be a win.”

He frowned. “What’s that mean?”

“It means that you’re very good at being a hero, and you aren’t very good at not being good at things. You and Zoe have that in common.”

“Well, that’s—” He thought about it. Then sighed. “True.”

Jane grinned. “You’re a good guy, Aiden. But you need to figure out that people will give you points for *wanting* to do the right thing and for trying even if you don’t get into the end zone every single time.”

He nodded. “Thanks. I’ll try to remember that.”

“Now, go make up with Zoe.”

His heart squeezed. Dammit. This was not how he'd wanted her to find out. He had *not* wanted to hurt her. This had all gone so crazy so fast. He'd been about to tell her just before Jane and Maria had walked in. Hell, he'd been about to tell her a dozen times since he'd come home. But he just hadn't made the words come out of his mouth.

That was on him.

He hadn't told her because of the touchdown-big-hero thing. Jane and Josie were both right.

"Thanks." He focused on Maria. "Go to your daughter. And please keep Jane updated, so she can let us know how things are going."

Suddenly the woman threw herself at Aiden, squeezing him tightly around the waist. "Thank you so much."

It took Aiden a second to recover, but he put his arms around Maria and hugged her back.

This was important. This was big. This was what his mom would have wanted him to do.

Zoe needed to be okay with this. He really needed her to be okay with this.

But he was going to have to go into that kitchen and talk to her about it.

He really didn't want to go into that kitchen.

Maria released him, smiling up at him like he was her best friend.

His chest tight, Aiden watched Maria and Jane until the bell jingled over the door as it shut behind them.

Now... the kitchen.

He stopped outside the swinging door. "Zoe! I'm coming in!"

He wasn't sure that giving her a chance to pick up a sharp utensil was a great idea, but he didn't think surprising her was a good call either.

“Um... hey.” Josie peeked out the door.

“How bad is it in there?”

“Hope you still have good athletic reflexes.”

“What?”

Josie didn't answer. She slid past him and headed toward the register, presumably to watch the front while he and Zoe did... whatever they were going to do.

Fuck. He shoved his hand through his hair and then pushed the door open. He didn't see her at first.

“Zoe?”

She didn't answer, so he stepped the rest of the way into the kitchen.

He ducked as a cake ball came whizzing past his ear.

She was standing at the worktable, a tray of cake balls in front of her.

“Zoe.”

He wasn't as quick the second time. The cake ball hit him right in the chest.

He let the door swing shut behind him. “Come on. Let's talk.”

“Talk? *Now* you want to talk? Tell me all about Hot Cakes and everything?”

“Yes.”

The next cake ball hit him in the cheek. He sighed.

“You could have been talking to me about this for *days!* Am I the last person to know about you and Hot Cakes?” she demanded.

“No. Hardly anyone knows,” he said. “We've kept it quiet.”

“Why?”

She was glowering at him, a cake ball smashed in her hand.

“Because...” He hadn’t wanted the McCafferys to find out. Shit. That was going to sound bad.

“Why, Aiden?”

Something in her tone told him she already knew.

“I wanted to have a chance to break the news to you and your family myself.”

“And when were you planning to do that?” she demanded. “You’ve had plenty of opportunities.”

“Right after I told you I was in love with you.”

That seemed to catch her off guard for a second. She blinked then frowned. But she shook her head. “That’s a *terrible* answer.”

“*Seriously?*” he asked. “You don’t think it was important that I lead with the main reason I was back in town *before* telling you I’d bought Hot Cakes—the thing you hate most in the world?”

“Yes! God!” She threw the mashed cake ball at him.

He dodged this one. Aiden stared at her. “I should have come back to town, said ‘I’m buying Hot Cakes, but don’t worry I love you’? *That* would have been better?”

“Yes!”

“You would have been pissed! You never would have listened to me tell you that I loved you and want to be with you and was back *for you!*”

“You should have kept trying, then! You should have *worked* to *make* me listen. To convince me. You could have put as much work into that as you did into convincing me over the past few days that *Hot Cakes* was important. You have been doing an *amazing* job convincing me that I needed to look at Hot Cakes differently and open my mind to that and give it a chance. You should have been willing to do that for us. For us being together.”

“I *did* do that,” he insisted, taking a step forward. “You gave me a hard time the minute I walked in here.”

“I fought you on it for what? Thirty minutes? Isn’t that about how long it took you to get me up against the fridge?” she asked. “You had to do a little talking and flirting and kissing, but you didn’t have to fight. Because there wasn’t *really* an obstacle. And you know why that was? Because you didn’t *tell me* about the one thing that would have made me really shut you down. You didn’t have to try to convince me that this”—she wagged a finger back and forth between them, clearly indicating “this” was their relationship—“was more important than my grudge against Hot Cakes. You would have had to work for it, yes, but you should have been willing to do that.”

He took another step forward. She was within reach now, but he didn’t try to touch her.

Her arms were crossed, and she didn’t reach for him either.

“I’m so sorry. I know you’re angry,” he said.

She shook her head. “I’m not angry, Aiden. I... feel like a fool.”

He flashed back to the first night he’d been in town, expecting her to be mad about Christmas Eve only to find out she’d been embarrassed about that night instead.

His gut tightened. He fucking hated that he kept doing this to her. And he didn’t even realize it. “Why would you feel like a fool?”

She took a deep breath. “Because I didn’t just have sex. I had sex with cream filling on the worktable where I learned to make *cookies* with my *grandmother*. Because—” Suddenly she pivoted and stomped to a cupboard. She threw the door open. “Because of this.”

The shelves inside the cupboard were completely full. Of mason jars.

“I ordered five hundred of them,” she said, slamming the door shut again. “Before I’d even made one cupcake or pie in one. Because... of *you*. Because, even though I fought it, you got into my head. And my heart. And I knew, deep down, that

you would help me figure out a way to do this. Or you'd help me fix it if I messed it up. I—”

She threw up her hands. “*God*, I even opened my mind up and actually thought about *not* hating Hot Cakes. I worried my dead grandmother would come back and haunt me, but I still did it. I realized I *want* Hot Cakes to be saved and to stay in business, and I’ve spent the last couple of days hoping so hard that the new owners will be amazing and treat Jane and everyone well.”

She glared at him. “I’ve been fucking *vulnerable as hell* with you. And because of you. Because I trust you. Because I believe in you. Because I thought you believed in me and wanted me to be... everything. Happy and fulfilled and open-minded and forgiving.” She shook her head. “Over the last couple of days I’ve realized you were the *only* one who could have ever put cream filling where you put it on me, and you’re the only person who could have gotten me to bake a damned cupcake in a jar. I listened to you about my business. Even the stuff I didn’t want to hear. I... showed you my jar pies. And you couldn’t even show me your Hot Cakes.”

It flashed through his mind that that should be funny.

But it really fucking wasn’t.

She was so damned amazing. And she was right. She *had* been vulnerable as hell with him. He was so damned humbled by that. He’d realized it, of course, on some level, but hearing her say that, admit it, *own it*, was incredible.

“I *do* want all those things. Zoe, I—”

“You haven’t done *any* of that with me,” she said, holding up a hand to stop whatever he’d been about to say. She clearly wasn’t done.

“You didn’t trust me enough to tell me about Hot Cakes and to let me be mad at you. You should have been willing to have those fights with me, Aiden. To have me tell you that you were wrong and selfish and greedy... or whatever I would have said. You should have been willing to take that. To not be Mr. Perfect Golden Boy for a few days.”

“*And—*” she went on, when he opened his mouth. “You should have still *trusted* that you could convince me it was a good thing. You didn’t even try. You’ve been trying to get me to be open-minded and think of Hot Cakes differently, not to help *me* be a better, more forgiving, grudge-free person, but because you thought it would make it harder for me to be mad at you when I found out.”

He swallowed hard, his gut tight, his heart pounding so hard he could feel it through his whole body. “I wanted you to let go of that grudge so you could be happier and more confident in what you do here. You have to believe that. I *do* believe in you. I love you. I think you’re amazing, and it kills me that you’re afraid of *anything*.”

“What I’m afraid of right now is that you won’t ever really be vulnerable or let me see you not succeeding at something. You think I don’t know what it’s like to always want to throw touchdowns? I bake touchdowns in here every single day. I have a playbook that has never failed me. I hate the idea of not being good at something. But... I was willing to show *you* how that looked.”

She had. That knowledge rocked through him. He and Zoe had a lot of things in common. Wanting to be the best at what they did and being damned stubborn in their determination to make that true were two of them. Her letting him see her not the best at something, worried about something, trying something she might fail at, was big.

His heart in his throat, he stepped forward again, right in front of her. He was scared. More scared than he’d ever been. Scared she’d reject what he was about to say. Scared he’d messed this up beyond repair.

But he had no other plays here. There was no other plan. There was no alternative. He had to say it anyway.

“Okay, I’m going to try this again. The way I should have done it before. Zoe, I’ve bought Hot Cakes. The people there need us. The town needs us. And I love you. I want to be with you. I’ve wanted that for a very long time. I want to move

back to Appleby and make a life with you. A life that includes Buttered Up *and* Hot Cakes.”

She didn't say anything. She just swallowed hard.

“Hot Cakes is really important to me, Zoe. This is the kind of business owner I want to be.” He took a deep breath. “It's the most challenging thing I've done. It's the hardest. It's probably the first thing that hasn't just fallen into place because I wanted it. And it's also felt the best. I think *because* it's been hard. So you're right. I need to learn to be okay with not always having the answers right away or everything working out from the very first minute. I have to be willing to work at it.”

He looked at her, his heart full of love but also pride. He was proud of her. “*You* are figuring all that out—with the jar cake and pies, with opening yourself up to the good things about Hot Cakes. You're willing to say that maybe you're not right all the time. Maybe you won't always like every part of everything that's happening. Maybe you won't always feel confident in every bit of it... but you're still willing to try. And I want to be like you in that way.” He took a deep breath. “I should have told you. All of it. Day one. Minute one. I'm sorry. I really am.” He swallowed. “And I do love you. So fucking much.”

She didn't say anything for a long moment. Her eyes were wide and shiny. She was biting her bottom lip, and her arms were crossed. Nothing about her body language said she wanted him any closer to her right now. And she definitely wasn't *saying* that.

“I think you need to go,” were the words she did finally say to him.

Aiden felt that like a punch straight to his chest. He sucked in a breath. He went through a million things he could say. But he'd come barging back into her life, swept her up, made her vulnerable, made her open up. Now it all had to be her choice.

If she wanted him.

Or if she didn't.

“Okay,” he finally agreed.

“And maybe you should go stay in Dubuque tonight,” she added.

Fuck. He blew out a breath. And nodded. “Okay.”

For now. That was okay for now. He’d give her time and space. But this wasn’t over.

He knew she knew that.

He headed for the back door of the bakery, but he paused with a hand on the knob. He turned back. “I love you, Zoe.”

She met his eyes and held his gaze for a long, heart-wrenching moment. Then she gave him a single nod. “I know.”

Aiden took a deep breath. God, he hadn’t realized how tight his chest was until she’d said those words. He blew out the breath, nodded, and left the bakery.

* * *

After three minutes of just staring at Buttered Up’s back door, Zoe told Josie that she needed to leave. Her friend had given her a sympathetic look, a hug, and assured her that she could handle the bakery until closing.

Zoe had headed to her car, but she’d just sat, replaying everything, expecting to cry. Or to feel angry. To want to rage bake. Or to go after Aiden and yell at him some more. Or to text Josie and Jane and insist they meet her at Jane’s with lots of liquor.

But none of those things happened. She just sat there, thinking.

And feeling there was only one person she really needed to talk to right now.

“Hey, Mom.”

Maggie looked over from where she was stirring something on the stovetop as Zoe let herself into the house

through the back door.

“Zoe. Hi, honey.”

Maggie must have seen something in Zoe’s face because she put her spoon down and turned fully.

“Aiden is one of the new owners of Hot Cakes.” No sense in beating around the bush about it.

Maggie seemed to need a second to process that. Then her eyes widened. “What?”

Zoe slumped into one of the kitchen chairs. She was suddenly so tired. “Aiden, Cam, and their partners bought Hot Cakes.”

Maggie took a deep breath. She turned back and started stirring again.

Zoe frowned at her mother’s lack of response.

“Mom?”

“Two minutes,” Maggie said simply. She kept stirring. “I need two more minutes.”

“He didn’t tell me because he wanted to make sure I knew he was in love with me first,” Zoe went on anyway. “You know, before he told me he’d done something horrible.”

But now, knowing that all the things Aiden had been working on over the last few days was for Hot Cakes, it didn’t seem like he’d done something horrible. He was doing something pretty great, actually.

“And he doesn’t think Hot Cakes is—or really ever has been—our competition.”

The timer on the stove went off, and Maggie removed the pan from the burner. She shut the timer off then turned to pour the liquid from the pan over whatever was in the casserole dish on the counter next to the stove.

She covered the dish with aluminum foil, opened the oven, and slid it in. She reset the timer, wiped her hands, took a deep breath, then joined Zoe at the table.

“What you’re saying is, he came back and made you fall in love with him before he told you all this,” Maggie said.

Zoe shook her head. “He says he wanted to come back for me. Hot Cakes made that possible.”

“Aiden is very rich. If he wanted to come back and settle down here, he could have bought any other business. Or started a new one.”

Zoe studied her mother’s face. Maggie looked upset.

“He could have,” Zoe agreed.

“Knowing Aiden and Cam, they’ll make it even better,” Maggie said. Clearly, she was referring to Hot Cakes.

Zoe nodded. They would. That was just who they were. They were dreamers, but driven, smart, dedicated dreamers. Hot Cakes would grow and be even more successful with them at the helm.

“What are you going to do?” Maggie asked, meeting Zoe’s eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to break up with him?”

“I...” She supposed that made sense. He had lied to her—or at least kept the truth from her. He’d gone behind her back, for sure. He’d talked about their future without ever mentioning his future was Hot Cakes. He’d slept with her with all that between them.

“Well, those are your options, right?” Maggie asked. “You either forgive him and stay together and figure out a way to make it work, or you break it off and go back to how things were before he came back.”

Zoe immediately knew that wasn’t possible. She couldn’t go back. Aiden had known back at Christmas—way before she had realized it—that if they slept together, let themselves fall, imagined a future together, there would be no going back.

Everything would change.

Everything *had* changed.

And she liked a lot of these changes. Seeing him every day. Smelling his soap in the bathroom. Having chunky peanut butter in her cupboards for his toast in the morning. Kissing him. Talking business with him. Having his input and help whether it was decorating cookies or looking at tax deductions. Watching him work and lead and grow.

She'd always looked at change as risk. When something was working, if you changed it, you risked it not working. You risked something going wrong, looking bad, being made to look like a fool.

That had happened with Aiden too. She'd let him change her mind. She'd opened herself up. And now she was...

Zoe frowned. What was she?

She'd told Aiden she felt foolish, and yes, she now blushed whenever she made cream-filled cupcakes, and she had a cupboard filled with mason jars, but... so what? Was any of that bad? She'd also had amazing sex, fallen in love, and made cake and pie in a jar that were, if nothing else, pretty cute with a big yellow bow and a Buttered Up sticker on the top. Nothing was hurt by being vulnerable with Aiden in those ways.

And she'd even decided that Hot Cakes needed Aiden. Before she'd known Aiden was the new boss. The way he'd helped Jane and Maria had been exactly what she'd been hoping their new bosses would be like. And... he was.

"I can't go back to how things were before he came back to Appleby," she finally said.

"You're going to forgive him for this? *He* is now your competition, Zoe." Maggie frowned. "And Camden. I'm going to have to have a word with my eldest son."

"He's..." Zoe swallowed. "He's not, Mom. He wouldn't do that to us. *They* wouldn't do that to us."

"But he kept this from you. He wasn't honest with you."

Yeah, Zoe hated that. But... She shrugged. "I didn't make it very easy for him to confide in me. I've always been so focused on hating Hot Cakes and feeling threatened that he

couldn't trust me to look at it from his point of view." The more she thought about that, the worse she felt. She'd been so hardheaded. Whenever he'd brought Hot Cakes up, she'd complained and insulted it.

Now Maggie's frown was trained on Zoe. "I'm sure the sex is great, but don't let that mix all this up. This is business. Our family business."

Zoe stared at her mother. That was very unlike Maggie.

"That's not what this is."

"You weren't this big of a fan of Aiden's before you slept with him."

"Mom!" Zoe frowned. "That isn't true. I've always loved Aiden."

She heard her words out loud, and her heart thumped in her chest.

"I've loved him for a very long time. Yes, as a friend and pseudo big brother at first. But that... changed... at some point and became more. I don't even know when."

Huh, so not all change was earth shattering and scary. Sometimes it happened slowly. And ended up as something new and wonderful. Without you even realizing it until you really thought about it.

"And I trust him," she went on. "If Aiden had thought for a second that Hot Cakes would actually hurt us, he would have never gotten involved. He would probably work to shut it down even faster."

Maggie's frown didn't ease. "Your grandmother would be so disappointed. She's probably rolling in her grave."

Zoe reached out and squeezed her mother's hand. "I know she'd be upset." Zoe's chest felt tight. "But wouldn't she want me to be happy? Wouldn't she be happy that I had found love and a man I admire and respect and trust? Who feels the same way about me? Someone who cares about Buttered Up and will work to make it successful too?" Zoe swallowed. Aiden had done that. Even while he was in the process of buying Hot

Cakes, he'd been helping her grow and make Buttered Up more. Better. "Or would she only see Hot Cakes as her enemy and not be able to look past that to all the good things Aiden means to me?"

Maggie swallowed. "I..." Maggie sighed. "I think she would have had a hard time seeing past her feelings for Didi and Hot Cakes."

Zoe's stomach knotted. "That's really sad." She looked into Maggie's eyes. "I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be bitter like that. Anymore. I don't want a grudge, that's not even mine, to make me miss good, happy things."

Maggie studied her face. Then slowly, she nodded. "He loves you. And you love him."

It wasn't really a question, but Zoe nodded. "Yes."

"Aiden loves our family."

"He does."

"So we're going to trust him?"

"Well, we have no reason not to," Zoe said, her heart feeling lighter. Maggie was coming around already. She loved Aiden too. That mattered a lot here. "He's never given us a reason to doubt him. He's trying to save the town. And... I think he's actually doing that."

She told Maggie about Maria and her daughter and how Aiden had been coaching Jane, how he'd been on all the guys to get things done, how hard he'd been working, and how much he'd been worrying.

Maggie was frowning again by the time Zoe finished. But she shook her head and laughed softly.

"What?" Zoe asked.

"Even knowing what he's working on and what he's worried about, now *I'm* worried about *him*. I want to make him a casserole and some of this new lotion I found a recipe for on Pinterest. It's supposed to help with relaxation. And I want to give him a pep talk and a hug and tell him it's all going to be okay."

Zoe felt her eyes stinging. “I know what you mean. This is really important to him.”

“And he’s really important to us.”

Zoe nodded. “Yeah. He is.”

“And he’s doing it for the right reasons.”

Zoe nodded again.

“Then we have to support him,” Maggie said resolutely. “Because we love him.”

Zoe agreed. Wholeheartedly. “Even if we think Grandma would be upset?” she asked.

Maggie smiled. “Well, the truth is, Grandma wasn’t right about *everything*. I mean, she never put enough peanut butter in the peanut butter cookies and her lemon meringue pie was always too tart. And the stubborn woman wouldn’t change those recipes even when I told her that.”

Zoe sniffed, aware that her eyes were even more watery now. But she laughed. “Maybe that’s why Didi didn’t steal those recipes.”

Maggie chuckled. “Maybe.” She leaned over and cupped Zoe’s cheek. “I *am* very happy about you and Aiden.”

“Thanks. I am too.”

“But I am still never going to eat a Hot Cakes snack cake. Don’t even think of bringing any of those over here.”

Zoe just nodded and smiled. She was *never* going to tell her mother that she’d cheated on the Buttered Up’s cream filling with not one, but two, different Hot Cakes.

Chapter Nineteen



Aiden was very grateful that it wasn't winter. It got damned cold in Iowa.

Fortunately for him, it was a very pleasant sixty degrees as he approached the front door of Buttered Up in bare feet and nothing but a pair of pink silk boxers—the same pink as the teddy Zoe had worn on Christmas Eve—and a matching tie.

She did love him in ties.

Aiden turned the corner and hesitated for just a second when he saw the usual morning line spilling out of the front door of Buttered Up.

Then he took a deep breath and kept going. This was why he'd decided to do this now. The bigger the crowd the better. He needed to be vulnerable, take a risk, show her that he was willing to put himself out there even when he didn't know what the outcome would be.

A huge crowd of Appleby residents, mostly men, witnessing his apology and declaration of love in nothing but boxers and a tie was appropriate.

"Excuse me," he said, stepping through the line toward the door.

"Uh, line starts back there, man," someone Aiden didn't recognize said.

"I'm not here for the muffins," he said.

He got a couple of wolf whistles and heard someone behind him say, "I didn't realize this was a clothing-optional

place.”

Another voice responded, “I hope that applies to the bakery staff too.”

Aiden thought for one second about stopping and turning back and explaining very loudly and very clearly that he would pummel anyone who said anything else like that. But he didn't have time. They didn't matter. Only Zoe mattered.

“What are you here for, then?” Zach Miller was the guy currently standing in the doorway, propping the door open, and more or less, blocking access to the bakery. His eyes scanned over Aiden.

“I'm here to make an ass of myself.”

Zach nodded. “Well, then, so far, so good.” He moved, giving Aiden a space to step through the bakery door.

“Thanks.” Aiden hoped that none of the men in heavy work boots stepped back and onto his toes before he could get to the counter.

His arrival wasn't announced by the little bell that tinkled every time someone came into the bakery. But it didn't matter. The crowd parted for him as one after another of the men noticed the mostly naked guy in pink.

Aiden took a deep breath. This was definitely going to get around town. He doubted too many of these men had Instagram or Snapchat accounts, but he wouldn't be surprised if there were some photos and maybe even a video or two popping up after this.

That was all good.

Being vulnerable with Zoe was going to take him some time. And practice. He wasn't especially good at that. But he needed some gesture to show her that he'd heard what she said, understood what she needed, and was willing and able to deliver.

The guy checking out at the register was the only one who hadn't noticed him. Well, that guy and Zoe, who was ringing up his purchase and chatting about his new granddaughter.

She looked so damned gorgeous.

Aiden had given her space last night. He hadn't called or texted, though he'd started to about twenty times. He'd hoped she'd reach out to him, but she hadn't.

He'd crashed on the sofa in Dax's suite. He'd also emptied six of the little bottles of liquor in Dax's mini fridge then borrowed several ibuprofen and charged room service to Dax's account this morning. But Dax had been the one to help him come up with this plan, and Dax had been the one to go out with him on the hunt for pink silk boxers in Dubuque, and Dax had been the one to sweet talk the sales guy at the trendy men's clothing store into rummaging through their storeroom even though it was closing time.

Aiden swore that Dax could charm a charging bull if he needed to.

Finally, the guy at the register moved, and Zoe looked up to help the next customer.

Him.

She froze. Then her eyes tracked over him, widening as they did. Her mouth dropped open.

"You were right," he said, before she could say anything.

He was aware of the crowd pressing in and spreading out, leaving the line so they could move farther into the bakery for a better view. And to better hear what was going on.

Josie came through the door from the kitchen with more to-go boxes in her hands. She froze, her eyes going wide, one box sliding off the top of the stack and hitting the floor.

"I'm not good at being vulnerable," he went on, focusing on Zoe. A draft of air brushed past his legs, reminding him of how little he had on. He ignored it and went on. "I always want to know the game plan ahead of time, and I want a sure thing. But I shouldn't have done that with you. I don't *need* to do that with you. I don't need a game plan that includes anything more than knowing you're on the field with me. I told you last night that I want to be like you. You've learned to

take a chance, to put yourself out there, even when you're scared and have no idea how it's going to turn out."

He swallowed hard. His heart was thundering. Not because he was half naked in public in Appleby, but because he was about to give Zoe the chance to make a fool of *him*. He'd rejected her when she'd come to him in pink lingerie. She'd put herself out there with him and he'd shot her down. That had been behind closed doors, but that had been a very vulnerable moment for her. Then she'd come around and given him a chance to see her vulnerable again. More than once. She'd trusted him and he'd screwed it up.

Now she could get back at him for that. She could give him a taste of feeling like an idiot. She could shoot him down in front of all these people.

She was currently staring at him with an unreadable expression. But she wasn't trying to stop him.

"I have no idea how *this* is going to go right here and right now," he said. "I have no idea if this is going to be a touchdown or if I'm going to get knocked on my ass." He spread his arms wide. "I'm not good at not being good at things, but even if this turns out horribly, here I am. I'm ready to be vulnerable with you. To give you everything you've given me. I know this is small compared to what you've done, but this is the start."

Her expression softened, and he thought he saw a little sparkle in her eyes, but she crossed her arms and propped her hip against the counter, clearly waiting for him to go on.

So he dropped to one knee and held out the tiny velvet box he'd been clutching in his hand. Unfortunately, that move put him down in front of the register, blocking her view.

He still went on. "Zoe McCaffery, I love you. I want to be with you, no matter what. I will give up Hot Cakes for you. I will work in this bakery for you frosting cookies and running the register if that's what you need from me. But whatever else, I just want to be with you and make you happy and remind you every single day that you're amazing and funny and smart and brave. Please marry me."

It felt like the entire bakery was holding its breath. No one said a word. No one even shifted their feet or cleared their throats.

Finally, Zoe shifted. She moved to the register and peered down at him over it. She took in the sight of him, kneeling on the bakery floor, in pink silk, holding out a ring box.

She drew a deep breath. Then she turned to grab something lying on the worktable before coming around the end of the counter to stand in front of him.

“You can’t give up Hot Cakes,” were her first words to him. She reached down and tugged on his arm, making him stand. “This town needs you to save Hot Cakes. And you need to do the town hall, and tell everyone that you’re involved because it will reassure them that everything is going to be okay. Because you always make everything okay for the people you love.” She held up the item she’d grabbed from the worktable. It was a tube of frosting. She uncapped the end and held it up. “And I’ll be right there with you—and so will Mom and Dad and Henry—reassuring everyone that everything is fine, that the feud is over, and we are going to make both of these businesses a huge success.”

She reached for his tie, ran her hand down the length of it from the knot at his throat to the end, where it rested on the waistband of the boxers. She smiled and flipped it over his shoulder.

“As for the rest of it, yes Aiden, I will marry you.” She put the end of the tube of frosting against his chest and started drawing with it.

Aiden felt his heart thundering as relief and love and a definite feeling of holy-shit-I-don’t-deserve-her-but-thank-you-God rushed through him.

“I can’t imagine being with anyone else. Especially after everything you’ve taught me about frosting and cream filling.”

She stepped back. Aiden looked down at his chest. She’d written MINE in pink frosting. On him.

“And no one will ever look better in pink than you do,” she said, smiling up at him.

He reached for her then, pulling her in, tipping her back and putting his mouth against hers. “Except for you.” Then he kissed her. Hot and deep and sweet, full of promises and apologies and gratitude.

The bakery erupted with applause and laughter, and Aiden felt people moving in closer, congratulating them and saying things like, “Well, damn, you don’t see that every day,” and “I’m going to need a dozen cupcakes with that pink icing to take home tonight,” and “Hell, do you just sell the icing by itself?”

Aiden let her go after several long minutes.

The front of her apron was covered with sticky pink smears, but it was clear she didn’t mind. She was looking up at him with a bright smile that was full of love and humor, and he knew that he was forgiven. Not that he was completely done making it up to her.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice gruff and soft under the noise around them. “God, Zoe, thank you. Thank you for believing in me and trusting me. I love you.” He shook his head, still overwhelmed himself over how he felt about her. “I love you so damned much.”

“I love you too,” she said. “I’m sorry I’m so stubborn and set in my ways.”

“You act like I didn’t expect it,” he said with a smile. “Remember, I’ve known you for a very long time.”

She nodded. “You have. You know me almost better than I know myself.”

“I do,” he agreed, relief and love and anticipation and a happiness he almost couldn’t believe, rushing through him. “Like right now, I know that you really want to take the rest of the day off. With me.”

She gave him a slow, sexy smile. “I really do.”

“It’s the tie, right?”

“It’s definitely partly the tie.” She took his hand and turned, starting for the kitchen.

“Hey, we need cupcakes and shit!” someone called.

“I can help with that.”

Zoe and Aiden looked over to find Whitney standing to the side, in front of the bakery cases.

“Whitney,” Aiden said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Dax called and told me what you were planning. I wanted to come down and beg Zoe not to make you choose between her or Hot Cakes. Because I know we’d be the ones losing out on that one.”

“But... you want to help wait on customers *here*?” Zoe asked.

“I think I can handle it,” Whitney said, eyeing the bakery case. “Josie might have to run the register. I haven’t done that in a really long time. But I definitely know the difference between scones and cookies, and I’m happy to serve them up to people.” She looked up at Aiden. “I *really* want Aiden to stay in charge at Hot Cakes. We do need him. We all need him.” She focused on Zoe again. “So I’m happy to help with whatever it takes to keep *you* happy, so he doesn’t have to choose. And it seems that maybe having him take you home right now—with that tube of frosting—is a good way to keep you happy.”

Zoe laughed. And did not disagree. She looked up at Aiden. “You would really give Hot Cakes up for me?”

“I would.” He didn’t even have to think about it for a second.

“But that would be stupid. They need you and you love it.”

“I love you more.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to give stuff up, Aiden. Not stuff that’s important to you. You just have to be willing to talk it out with me and convince me of your side.”

“I’m so fucking glad you’re willing to let me do that.”

“Well, just keep the glove compartment in your car stocked, and I think you’ll have plenty of negotiating power,” she said with a sexy little smile.

God, he loved her. He held out the ring. “Put this on.”

“My pleasure.” She slipped the ring onto her left hand.

Aiden wasn’t sure he’d ever felt as happy or possessive as he did seeing his ring on her hand, binding them together.

He bent and swung her up into his arms. They were done here for today. “Thanks, Whit. Just follow Josie’s directions and you’ll be fine,” he said. “Oh, and you can talk to Josie about the cake pops.”

Zoe looked back over his shoulder as he pushed through the swinging doors and into the kitchen. “You think she’ll be okay?”

“The men come here for pastries and to flirt with pretty girls before work, right? Yes, I think Whitney will be just fine,” Aiden said.

Zoe laughed.

“Oh, and by the way, last night we decided we should ply everyone with champagne and cake pops at the town hall. So you’re about to get a huge order,” Aiden said.

“Well... great,” she said, clearly a little surprised, but also pleased. “But you’re going to serve cake to people who *make* cake all day?”

“You think bartenders never crack open a beer after work or that plumbers never have to fix pipes at home? I think the people who work at Hot Cakes probably eat cake at parties.”

She shrugged. “Good point.” Then she added, “And since you know me *so* well, you probably know that I’m going to charge Hot Cakes double for those cake pops.”

Aiden chuckled. “That’s my girl.”

* * *

The second they got through the door to the house, Aiden kicked it shut and backed her up against it. He took her face in his hands, looking into her eyes.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He kissed her, long and hot and sweet. Then he lifted his head. “You really will marry me?”

“Of course.”

He kissed her again. Then said, “Get naked for me.”

“Definitely.” She reached behind her for the zipper of her dress.

He stopped her. “My bedroom.”

“Christmas Eve do-over?” she asked, one eyebrow arched.

“The rest of our lives beginning,” he said.

Her expression immediately softened. “Yeah.”

He watched her for several seconds. “Zoe?”

“Yeah?”

“Naked. My bedroom. Now.”

She took a deep breath. “I really love the bossy, dirty side of you.”

“Good.” He very much intended to keep up with all that. “But,” he added. “I might be out of surprises.”

“That’s too bad. I was just starting to think about how much I like your surprises. And how much I like surprising myself.”

Aiden’s heart swelled. They’d known each other forever, but they were still getting to know one another. And themselves. And that would never really stop.

“You know, scratch that,” he said. “I think there are more surprises ahead. Neither of us is the person that we were even on Christmas Eve. Or when I walked back into the bakery a few days ago. Or when I walked in there this morning. Or who we’ll be a year from now. Or ten years from now. Or even who we’ll be after this town hall.”

Her eyes were shiny as she smiled up at him. “That is a really good point. I love that,” she added softly.

“Me too,” he said, reaching for her zipper himself and drawing it down. “And promise that if I ever stop surprising you completely, you’ll call me on it.”

“Deal. And ditto,” she said as her dress slipped down her body leaving her in only a tiny pair of panties.

Pink panties.

“And if I ever bitch about not wanting to change something, you remind me that if I hadn’t changed, I wouldn’t have you.”

He skimmed his hands down her sides, resting them on her hips. “You’ve always had me. Even before I realized it.”

She looped her arms around his neck. “You made me want to be better. More open. Thank you for that.”

His breath stuck in his throat for a moment. He swallowed hard. “I came back for you. And because of that I’m so much better too.”

She smiled. And hopped up into his arms. Aiden caught her with his hands under her butt. He started for the stairs immediately.

He nudged his bedroom door open and went straight to the bed. He laid her down and stripped her panties off in one smooth move. Then he pulled his tie loose and tossed it away before shedding the boxers. This was one definite advantage to not having more clothes on. He climbed up on the bed with her, covering her body with his, kissing her deeply.

Their hands were everywhere, stroking, squeezing, teasing. They licked frosting off of each other’s skin. He kissed her

neck. She arched into him. He sucked on her nipples. She ran her hands to his ass, pressing him close. They rolled and shifted, touching, kissing, nipping until Zoe was panting and begging, and his heart was thundering so hard he was sure she could hear it.

“You ready?” he asked, bracing himself above her, taking in the flushed pink of her skin, the rapid rise and fall of her chest, and her dazed, heated gaze.

She shook her head. “Not like this.”

His eyes widened. “Uh... okay.”

She shifted suddenly, rolling him to his back, and straddling him. Aiden drank in the sight of her. She looked like a goddess, and she felt like heaven as she moved, sliding up and down his hard length, letting him feel how hot and wet she was for him. Then she took his cock, stroking him firmly before positioning him and sinking down, taking him deep.

They moaned together, and Aiden’s fingers dug into her hips. He gritted his teeth, giving her body a few seconds to adjust.

But it truly only took a few. Zoe started moving almost immediately, riding him as if she’d been doing it forever.

Dirty, loving words fell from their lips. “More.” “I love you.” “You feel like heaven.” “I’ll never get enough.” “Deeper.” “Harder.” “Faster.”

When he felt her inner muscles tightening, he thumbed her clit and sent her flying. The look on her face, and the sound of her calling his name was all he needed to follow directly behind, his body shuddering with the intensity of his climax.

After she’d slumped against him and they’d just concentrated on breathing for a few minutes, she said, “I’ve been dreaming about that. Doing that exactly that way.”

Aiden stroked his hand up and down her back. “Since Christmas Eve?”

“Oh, before that. I was planning Christmas Eve for a couple of months.”

He chuckled. “Dirty girl. Well, I’ve been thinking about this since I caught you ironing in your underwear.”

She rolled to the side and propped herself on her elbow. “That’s when I started thinking about you too.”

Aiden lifted an eyebrow. “Really? Damn, all this time we could have been messing around.”

She laughed lightly, but then she quieted, giving him a long, loving look. “Actually, I think our timing is perfect.”

Her words hit him directly in the chest. They’d known each other forever, but *this*—this change, this shift, this new direction, could have only happened when they were both ready. Ready to think of their lives in a new way. Ready to change.

He nodded, nearly overwhelmed by the mix of emotions—lust, love, nostalgia about their past, excitement about their future. “You know, you’re not so bad at the sweet talk.”

She leaned over and kissed him then said against his lips, “Well, you do call me Sugar.”

He nodded. “Sugar and spice. And I need both in my life.”

“I’m both? You’re not the spice?”

He laughed. “Uh, no. You’re definitely the spice too.”

“And what are you, then?” she teased.

He gathered her close and put his lips against her neck, feeling her shiver of pleasure and the way she arched into him. “Well, what else does baking need?”

“Cream?” she asked, giving a little gasp when he nipped her earlobe.

He squeezed her ass, rewarding her innuendo. “Only some recipes.”

“Firm peaks?” she teased, rubbing her breast against his bicep.

He cupped one appreciatively. “Well, only sometimes and not what *I’m* bringing to the table.”

“Moistness?” she asked, wiggling some more.

He laughed. “Not what I was thinking.”

She giggled. “Then what?”

He rolled until she was under him, spreading her thighs.
“Heat.”

“Oh... yeah.”

Epilogue



Three days later...

“Excuse me.”

Jane froze in mid chew. She had an entire cake pop in her mouth and one in each hand. And now someone wanted to talk to her. Of course.

But it was even worse. This wasn't just someone. It was a male someone. A male someone who had come up behind her while she was perusing—and sampling—the dessert table. Whose voice she knew immediately.

Dax Marshall.

One of her new bosses. And the first man to actually make her heart trip by just smiling. Ever.

Jane was a little fascinated by that. But not fascinated enough to go up and talk to him. Or to put down her cake pops.

She didn't need anything making her fascinated or distracted. She just wanted to eat cake and not talk to anyone.

Dammit.

She chewed fast, wishing she hadn't put the entire thing in her mouth. Wishing Zoe didn't make such amazing cake. Wishing she was the type to nibble on carrot sticks. Then realizing she did *not* wish that at all. And finally swallowing, wiping her mouth, and turning to face him.

“Um, hi.”

He didn't just have a great laugh. He had a great... everything. The man was gorgeous. He had dark hair that was a little long on top and flopped over his forehead. He had deep-green eyes that had an actual, no-shit, twinkle in them. He also had a quick smile that had an edge of I'm-up-to-something. In addition, he was wearing a cake tie. A necktie that had pieces of various kinds of cake on it. It was entirely appropriate for the town-hall-slash-meet-your-new-bosses party for Hot Cakes while also being one of the most ridiculous things she'd ever seen. She loved it.

"How's the red velvet?" he asked.

"Um." She swallowed again. She probably had red velvet cake crumbs in her teeth. "Great. They're all great."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for it. Since you took the last one."

Jane glanced at the empty tray that had a tiny sign that said "Red Velvet" next to it. She reached over and knocked it facedown. "Sorry." She wasn't at all.

"I don't think you are. You ate two of the last three and have the third in your hand." He gave her a grin.

He'd been watching her eat cake pops? That was creepy.

She almost sighed with relief. He was creepy. Good deal. She could forget about him then and not worry about being fascinated or distracted.

"Sorry is just the polite thing to say." She swiped her thumb over her bottom lip. "I don't mean it."

He lifted an eyebrow. "I'm going to assume that means you're not going to share the strawberry one you're holding either. It's the last one too."

She lifted the strawberry cake pop to her mouth and took a bite. They really were two- or three-bite treats. Not stick-the-whole-thing-in-your-mouth-at-one-time treats. But you couldn't get through as many if you took the time to take three bites of each. "Nope."

His mouth dropped open in mock outrage. "Wow."

“I know. I’m the worst. You should definitely go find someone else to talk to.”

But he didn’t. He didn’t move away. Or step back. He stepped forward. He also lifted his hand toward her breast.

She didn’t so much as flinch away. *That* was fascinating too. She was pretty protective of her personal space. And her personal life. And her personal habits—like her cake addiction.

She did *not* want to be fascinated. Or stalked. Or fondled.

Still, she stood there, not moving, not kicking him in the balls as he lifted his hand, picked something off the front of her dress just above her right breast—it was definitely her chest, but her nipple didn’t quite believe that because it tightened—and then lifted it to his mouth.

She watched as he licked the tip of his index finger.

“Mmm, the red velvet *is* good.”

She looked down to where there was another crumb on the front of her dress. Her cheeks heated, and she looked up at him quickly. But why was she embarrassed? *He* had just picked a crumb off of *her* dress. That was very... presumptuous... or something... of him.

She stuffed the rest of the strawberry cake pop into her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and smiled. “Very good.”

“Not the slightest bit apologetic?” he asked.

“Nope.”

He grinned. “Good. Never apologize for stuff that makes you feel good.”

Yeah, her nipples—and other parts of her—did *not* think “cake” when he talked about things making her feel good.

It was time to leave.

For one, she didn’t need... any of whatever this was. People talked about having full plates and lots of balls in the air. Jane had *platters* flying around with those balls, and she

knew that any second it all could come crashing down. And it would. It was just a matter of time.

She definitely didn't need to add this guy's balls to any of this.

"I'm just going to go," she said, taking a half step away from the table.

"I'm Dax."

Yeah, she knew that. Everyone knew that. He'd just been up on stage with Aiden and Whitney and Cam—the new owners of Hot Cakes, the company that 90 percent of the people in the Appleby Community Center tonight worked for.

He was a millionaire. A sexy, good looking, charming millionaire.

She really couldn't think of a guy she would *less* like to have picking crumbs off the front of her dress.

Okay, that wasn't true. There were way worse choices. There was also a lot to like about standing this close to Dax Marshall, and parts of her would very much like to have his fingers back on them. But he was the last type of guy whose fingers she should even be thinking about. Dax was rich. That was enough for her to know that they had zero in common.

Not that she was interested in any of the guys she had a ton in common with either.

She just didn't need any more balls. Of any kind. Period.

"I'm... late," she said. She grabbed one of the vanilla cake pops and started to slip around him. Then she thought about the three cake pops she held, turned back, grabbed another chocolate, *then* slipped around him.

"Do you work for Hot Cakes?" he asked, turning to watch her go, with a grin.

She didn't care what he thought of her cake addiction. Sugar wasn't the *best* thing she could be addicted to. She could be addicted to running or asparagus or meditation or herbal tea. Except... no one was addicted to those things, were they? Asparagus? Come on. The truth was, she did run. So she

could eat more cake. She also ate asparagus, on occasion. She even meditated once in a while. But that was also to balance out the cake. And pie. And cookies.

She needed sugar in her life. There wasn't much figurative sweetness in her life so she substituted *actual* sugar.

She was thankful that one of her best friends owned a bakery.

She was also thankful that diabetes did not run in her family.

Bad decisions and progressive neurological disorders seemed to. But not diabetes.

Jane was very aware that her relationship with sweets wasn't healthy.

She didn't care.

“Are you okay?”

She'd been staring at Dax for thirty seconds.

Half a minute didn't usually seem like a long amount of time, but when you were staring at a stranger without making a sound, it was ridiculously long.

“Um, yes.” She nodded. She was okay. Mostly. Right now. As far as he was concerned.

“You're sure?”

“Yes.”

“You don't need another cake pop, then?” he asked, eyeing the four she held. “If I go for one, I'm not going to lose a finger or hand?”

“Nope, you're safe.” She gave him a fake smile. He was flirting with her. She liked that. She wanted to flirt back. Instead, she took a bite out of one of the cake pops. The chocolate one. Thank God for chocolate.

He picked one up. Also chocolate. “So do you work for Hot Cakes?” he repeated.

She sure did. But he didn't know who she was. And that was... nice.

She lived in a tiny town where *everyone* knew who she was. They knew all the reasons she worked for Hot Cakes. They all sympathized that this was how everything had turned out for her.

She really, *really* hated that. She took another bite of cake.

Should she tell him she worked for the company? He'd probably want to ask her questions about it if she did. Dax had been talking with the employees about what they liked and disliked about working for Hot Cakes, what changes they'd like to see, what they needed to make Hot Cakes their dream employer. The company had never been owned by anyone other than the Lancasters. This was a huge change that had everyone in the factory worried.

Until tonight. Tonight the new owners had held a town hall to introduce themselves, tell everyone their big plans, and feed everyone cake and champagne.

The smiles and laughter in the room told Jane this initial step had worked. Having Aiden and Cam in charge had also worked. Aiden and Cam were hometown boys. They'd left and made it big in Chicago, but they'd come back to save the factory, the three hundred-some jobs, and the town by buying Hot Cakes.

Knowing Aiden and Cam were at the head of the new ownership team definitely made everyone feel better.

She was proud of them. Happy for herself and her friends and coworkers. A little anxious about her new role as union leader. And really wishing she could take her bra off, kick off her shoes, and eat the rest of these cake pops on her couch.

"I'm... a friend of Whitney's," she said rather than confessing she'd been in his friend Oliver's office within five minutes of him stepping foot inside a Hot Cakes building. She'd demanded to see the new owner and had gone off about everyone's concerns and worries, demanding to know what he was going to do and how the transition was going to happen.

She knew they'd listened and taken everything she'd said to heart. She knew this town hall was partly a response to her first meeting with Oliver.

And that had been so out of character for her that she was still worked up about it.

She'd worked for Hot Cakes since she'd been in high school. It was all she'd ever done. But she'd done it as an aside in her life. She didn't want a job that demanded a lot of her energy or emotion. She wanted to go to work, do her job, and go home at the end of the day. She didn't want to meet with the owners and champion her coworkers and dress up for parties like this.

Yet, here she was. The main contact between the employees and the ownership. In a dress.

She did *not* want to talk about Hot Cakes with Dax. Or anyone. She felt like she'd been talking about it nonstop for days.

"Oh, Whitney's great," Dax said, finishing off the chocolate cake pop and reaching for another.

Good looking, rich, and had a sweet tooth.

Nice.

"She is." Jane nodded. It wasn't a lie that she and Whitney were friends. That just wasn't the reason Jane was here tonight. "So... it was nice to meet you. I need to go."

"You know if you don't tell me your name, I'm going to have to refer to you as Red," he told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Real original." She shook her head, her thick, wavy red hair swishing against her mid back.

"Because of the red velvet cake, of course," he said.

She actually laughed at that. "Oh, of course."

"Just that one little crumb, and it's all I can think about." His eyes and half smile said he wasn't talking about cake.

Dammit, had she given him a crumb? Of flirting? She had *not* meant to.

But the guy was clearly used to having women welcome *his* flirting.

“Zoe can totally hook you up with as much as you want,” she told him, not sure why she wasn’t just walking away.

“You’re really not going to share that last one with me, are you?”

She glanced down, having forgotten that she still had one red velvet in hand. “Um...” She looked up at him. “No.”

“Not even if I say please?” He leaned in a little.

“There are maybe two things in the *world* that could get me to part with a red velvet cake pop,” she told him. “And hot millionaires with sexy smiles are *not* one of them.”

His grin grew, and his freaking eyes seemed to twinkle again.

Oh crap. She’d just said he was hot *and* that he had a sexy smile. Either of those things alone would have been embarrassing, but of course, she’d said both.

“What *can* hot millionaires with sexy smiles get you to do? Because I’m thinking that cake pop may not be the most interesting thing you can give me.”

Her eyes widened. He had *not* just said that.

“Are you seriously thinking I might give you a blow job? Does that happen a lot? You just meet a woman, know her for like five minutes, and she ends up on her knees?”

Now his eyes widened, and he nearly choked on the quick breath he took. “That is... damn... that’s *not* what I was thinking.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “It’s a blow job. Guys think about those like twenty-seven times a day.”

He half laughed, half choked again. “Wow, who are you hanging out with?”

“You *don’t* think about blow jobs twenty-seven times a day?” she asked. She really should just walk away.

He seemed to be seriously considering her question. Jane felt the corner of her mouth quirk and fought to keep her smile under wraps.

“No,” he finally said, shaking his head. “Maybe fifteen.”

“Wow, that’s it?”

“Well, I think about *other* things too. I’m a ladies-first kind of guy. And blow jobs are great, but they’re not the *best* thing to be thinking about.”

She had to fight her grin again. And to ignore the tingles that suddenly danced over her with the “ladies first” thing. “You’re right,” she said, nodding. “I mean, there’s also cake.”

“Right. Blow jobs and all the sweet stuff I like to put in *my* mouth.”

Whoa.

“And by the way, that would all add up to *way* more than twenty-seven.”

Jane shook her head and then held up the red velvet cake pop for him.

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Honestly, you have to, now,” she said. “You have to add these to that list of sweet things you like to put in your mouth that you’ll be thinking about tomorrow.”

His grin huge, he took the cake pop from her. “Yeah, I’ve definitely got a couple of new things to add to those daydreams.”

She felt a hot flush from her scalp to her belly.

“And *now*, I need to go,” she said, taking a deep breath.

He bit into the red velvet cake pop then ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

“Still no name?”

“Definitely not.” She hadn’t meant that to sound quite so adamant.

But no, this guy did not need to know who she was. Or that she was going to be working just downstairs from the executive office suite.

“I don’t think it will be that hard to find out in Appleby,” Dax said. “Gorgeous redhead with a big sweet tooth. It will probably take me two minutes.”

He was right. Especially if he asked Zoe or Whitney.

“You don’t need to know,” Jane told him. “Zoe can keep your mouth full of all the sweet stuff you could possibly want.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” he said, his voice a little husky and his gaze on her mouth.

She needed to stay away from this guy.

Because she didn’t need any more balls in her life.

She started to turn, planning to hightail it out of the community center and away from the hot millionaire with the sexy smile. But she stopped, quickly grabbed another cake pop, and *then* hightailed it out to her car.

Cake balls were the exception to her no-balls rule.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you loved Zoe and Aiden’s story in *Sugarcoated!*

Dax and Jane’s story is next in **Forking Around!**

A Cinderella story with a hot boss so charming even a fairy godmother couldn’t do better!



Forking Around

ERIN
NICHOLAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

About Forking Around

A Cinderella story with a hot boss so charming even a fairy godmother couldn't do better.

Everyone thinks Dax Marshall is a prince of a guy. And he's definitely charming.

But Jane has enough going on without adding a torrid fling with the boss to her life. Between her father's illness, her wicked-ish stepmother, her little sister's teenage drama, and the co-workers who depend on her—she can't handle another mess.

No matter how tempting and gorgeous the mess may be. Or how messy he wants to get with her.

Dax has spent his life being very serious about only one thing: proving you can be successful while still having a helluva good time. But he's just met the one woman who might break his I-can-charm-anyone streak. She's actually taking him seriously...and she seriously thinks they have nothing in common and can't be together.

Maybe he's the one who needs a new view of happily ever after. It's time to stop forking around.

Prologue



He could watch this woman eat cake all night.

That was a weird fetish he hadn't been aware of until now, but he was totally okay with it. As fetishes went, this one seemed on the tamer end of the spectrum.

The curvy redhead put her third cake pop in her mouth. The mouth he was now going to have major fantasies about. She had full lips that matched the pink icing on the vanilla cake pops, and every time she ran her tongue over that bottom lip, his body tightened. And she was running her tongue over her lip a lot with all the cake eating she was doing.

She'd eaten the first two in a couple of bites each. But she'd just stuck the entire third cake pop in her mouth. The girl liked cake. Man, he loved people who were enthusiastically open about the things they enjoyed.

People should never apologize for loving what they loved. Especially if they were gorgeous redheads who loved putting balls in their mouths. He grinned. He was totally going to use that line. It was just the right amount of immature and dirty and playful that he appreciated.

He definitely knew there were times when lines like that were inappropriate. Knowing that wouldn't keep him from using the line, of course, but he did know he couldn't expect an equally playful, good-natured response from just everyone. That was why it was perfect. It was a great way to find out if he was talking to someone he could have fun with or not.

He definitely needed to talk to her.

“Excuse me.”

He'd moved around the table so he was slightly behind her now, but he saw how she froze. Then she started chewing faster, then swallowed, wiped her mouth, and turned to face him.

“Um, hi.”

He chuckled. “How's the red velvet?” he asked. She had a few red-velvet crumbs on the front of her dress, the red pieces standing out against the teal fabric.

“Um.” She swallowed again. “Great. They're all great.”

“I guess I'll have to take your word for it. Since you took the last one,” Dax said, looking pointedly at the now empty tray with the tiny sign next to it that read RED VELVET.

She glanced down and knocked the sign over. “Sorry.”

“I don't think you are. You ate two of the last three and have the third in your hand.” He gave her a grin.

She looked startled for a second. She probably hadn't been expecting him to have been keeping track of her cake-pop consumption.

“Sorry is just the polite thing to say.” She swiped her thumb over her bottom lip. “I don't mean it.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I'm going to assume that means you're not going to share the strawberry one you're holding either. It's the last one of those, too.”

She lifted the strawberry cake pop to her mouth and took a bite. “Nope.”

He definitely liked her. His let his mouth drop open in mock outrage. “Wow.”

“I know. I'm the worst. You should definitely go find someone else to talk to.”

There was absolutely no one else he wanted to talk to more than he wanted to talk to her. He also wanted to kiss her. But he'd wanted that even before he'd known she'd taste like red-velvet and strawberry cakes. He stepped forward.

She didn't even blink.

He lifted a hand and picked a crumb of cake from the front of her dress. It wasn't on her breast, exactly. It was just below the scooped neckline. It wasn't like he was feeling her up. But it was safe to say he hadn't missed the fact she had some very nice curves. Without them, those crumbs might not have gotten hung up during their fall to the floor.

He met her gaze as he lifted the cake crumb to his mouth. She watched as he licked the tip of his index finger.

"Mmm, the red velvet *is* good," he said.

She looked down to where he'd touched her. But she didn't slap him or shove him away. Her cheeks got a little pink. Then she stuffed the rest of the strawberry cake pop into her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and smiled. "They're all very good."

"Not the slightest bit apologetic?" he asked, incredibly amused and very drawn to her.

"Nope."

The strawberry cake pops were coated in white icing and she had a streak of it just to the side of her mouth.

He wanted to cover her in that icing.

He grinned. "Excellent. Never apologize for doing stuff that makes you feel good."

Her eyes widened slightly and for just an instant, her gaze dropped to his mouth.

He definitely made a note of that.

"So I'm going to go," she said, taking a half step away from the table.

"I'm Dax." He needed to know who she was.

Appleby, Iowa, the town where his best friends—and business partners—had decided to buy a snack cake factory, was tiny. It wouldn't take him long to find out who she was. But he wanted her to tell him. And give him her number. And agree to have dinner with him tomorrow. And eat cake pops in bed with him.

Not necessarily in that order. But giving him her name would be a great start.

“I’m... late,” she said.

She grabbed one of the vanilla cake pops and started to slip around him. Then she paused, turned back, grabbed a chocolate, *then* slipped around him.

“Do you work for Hot Cakes?” he asked, watching her go with a grin.

She turned back and met his eyes. But didn’t say anything.

For nearly thirty seconds.

She just... looked at him.

Finally, he asked, “Are you okay?”

She blinked, seeming to realize she’d been staring. She nodded. “Um, yes.”

She didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t need another cake pop, then?” he asked, eyeing the four she held. “If I go for one, I’m not going to lose a finger or hand?”

He really wanted her to smile again, instead of the way she’d been looking at him as if she’d gotten lost in her thoughts. Thoughts that weren’t especially happy.

He wanted her to be happy. That was a strange instinct. He didn’t know this woman at all. He loved her curves, and her lips were going to star in some of his dreams, he was sure. He was newly addicted to cake pops because of her. But the urge to make sure she was actually, legitimately happy was a little out there.

Sure, in general, he liked hanging out with happy people. His friends were, for the most part, optimistic, driven, happy guys.

Dax worked hard to make their company—Fluke Inc.—an upbeat, positive, relaxed place to work. He also refused to do work that didn't fulfill him.

But a lot of his... penchant for fun... was about proving to his father that you didn't have to be an overbearing, micromanaging, superficial asshole to be successful. You could laugh and enjoy your work and make the world a better place and still make money. Lots of it. Dax and his friends had proven that repeatedly over the past nine years.

“Nope, you're safe.” The redhead finally gave him a smile. But it was clearly forced.

She did, however, take a bite out of the chocolate cake pop she now held.

He picked one up. Also chocolate. “So do you work for Hot Cakes?” he repeated.

He really needed to know who she was. If this woman worked for his new company, Dax could easily see her again.

This party was step one in their plan to make Hot Cakes bigger and better than it had ever been. They'd had a huge town hall meeting where they'd introduced themselves to the employees and the town at large. They'd presented their new ideas, taken questions, and rolled out some new benefits programs. Then they'd given everyone cake and champagne.

Judging by the smiles and laughter—and the need to open the second case of champagne—it was going well. That, or everyone had just decided to drink their worries away. Either way, the guys were determined to make this work, and Dax's specialty was making things better.

He'd never met a situation he couldn't make more fun. Not that he knew anything about factory work, but they made *cake*. They literally dealt in sugar and chocolate and frosting. It was, if he did say so himself, a sweet gig.

Hot Cakes snack cakes were sold in grocery stores and convenience stores throughout the Midwest. There were very few people who hadn't had a Peanut Butter Pinwheel or a Strawberry Swirl, or the original and best-known Butter

Sticks, in their lives. Mass produced, individually packaged, available anywhere chips and beef jerky were sold, Hot Cakes was a multimillion-dollar business.

And he, Aiden, Cam, Grant, and Ollie were going to make it even better.

“I’m... a friend of Whitney’s,” his cake-pop goddess finally said.

Whitney was Whitney Lancaster, the granddaughter of the founders of Hot Cakes who had served as the vice president of marketing for the past nine years. She was thankfully staying on to work with the guys now that they’d taken over.

“Oh, Whitney’s great,” Dax said, finishing off the chocolate cake pop and reaching for another. Damn, these were amazing. He would have eaten four hundred brussels sprouts if it kept this woman here talking to him though. And that was saying something. He was incredibly grateful he didn’t have to prove his devotion via brussels sprouts.

Zoe, Aiden’s girlfriend, and the owner of the town bakery, Buttered Up, had made the cake pops for the event. Apparently, Buttered Up and Hot Cakes were longtime rivals. The grandmothers, Didi Lancaster and Letty McCaffery, who had started each business, had been best friends at one time. Until Didi allegedly stole the recipe from Letty that would go on to become the beginnings of Hot Cakes.

For over fifty years, the two women had hated each other, and the town’s loyalties had been divided. Now, with Aiden taking over Hot Cakes, and he and Zoe falling in love, things were starting to heal.

Hopefully.

At least, that was the plan.

“Whitney *is* wonderful,” the cake-pop goddess nodded. “So... it was nice to meet you. I need to go.”

“You know if you don’t tell me your name I’m going to have to refer to you as Red,” he told her.

She rolled her eyes. “Real original.” She shook her head, her thick, wavy red hair swishing against her mid-back.

“Because of the red-velvet cake, of course,” he said. Though, damn, he loved her hair. It was a deep, rich medley of gold and auburn and copper and crimson. And that was pretty damned poetic for a video game designer who loved Ping-Pong and gummy bears.

She actually laughed. “Oh, of course.”

“Just one little crumb, and it’s all I can think about.” He wasn’t talking about the cake. She’d given him a few little crumbs of flirtation and humor, but he was already addicted.

“Zoe can totally hook you up with as much as you want,” she told him.

He didn’t want anything from Zoe.

Okay, not true. He suddenly fucking loved Zoe’s cake pops.

But everything else he needed in this moment, he needed from Red.

Yeah, that wasn’t original at all. He was going to have to come up with something else.

“You’re really not going to share that last one with me, are you?” he asked.

She glanced down. “Um...” She looked up at him. “No.”

“Not even if I say please?” He leaned in a little.

“There are maybe two things in the *world* that could get me to part with a red-velvet cake pop from Buttered Up,” she told him. “And hot millionaires with sexy smiles are *not* one of them.”

Ha. He felt victorious in that moment. She’d called him hot and said his smile was sexy. She’d also called him a millionaire. That meant she knew who he was. Maybe not from his YouTube videos like his millions of adoring fans did. Those were mostly boys between the ages of ten and twenty-five who were crazy about *Warriors of Easton*, the video game

he and his friends had developed in college and that had accidentally turned into the biggest online gaming phenomenon of the past decade. But she knew who he was, and she was still here flirting—kind of—with him.

“So what *can* hot millionaires with sexy smiles get you to do?” he asked. “Because I’m thinking that cake pop may not be the most interesting thing you can give me.” He really wanted her name and phone number.

Her eyes widened. She actually looked shocked. And maybe mildly amused. But mostly shocked.

“Are you seriously thinking I might give you a blow job?” she asked.

Dax’s eyes widened as well. They were now talking about blow jobs? How had that happened?

“Does that happen a lot?” she asked. “You just meet a woman, know her for like five minutes, and she ends up on her knees?”

He sucked in a quick breath that made him cough. Holy shit. “That is... damn... that’s *not* what I was thinking.”

Once in a while... okay, more often than he could even believe... he got blatant offers very quickly at Comic Con. The ladies—not *all* his fans were boys between ten and twenty-five—who played *Warriors of Easton* were also big admirers of the game’s creator.

Red rolled her eyes. “It’s a blow job. Guys think about those like twenty-seven times a day.”

He half laughed, half choked again. “Wow, who are you hanging out with?”

“You *don’t* think about blow jobs twenty-seven times a day?” she asked.

He actually thought about her question. He was sure he saw the corner of her mouth twitch as if she was fighting a smile.

“No,” he finally said, shaking his head. “Maybe fifteen. I mean, if we’re talking averages anyway.”

“That’s it?”

“Blow jobs, yes. But there’s all the sweet stuff I like to put in *my* mouth to think about too.”

It wasn’t a quip about her putting balls in her mouth, but it still checked all the boxes—a little dirty, kind of funny, would definitely reveal what kind of sense of humor she had.

He was rewarded for it when she lost the fight to not smile and grinned.

She held up the red-velvet cake pop toward him.

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Honestly, you have to now,” she said. “You *have* to add these to that list of things you like to put in your mouth. You’ll definitely be thinking about these tomorrow.”

She was rolling with it. Awesome. His grin huge, he took the cake pop from her. “Yeah, I’ve definitely got a couple of new things to add to those daydreams.”

She took a deep breath. “And *now* I need to go.”

He bit into the red-velvet cake pop then ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

She watched and his body heated.

“Still no name?” he asked.

“Definitely not.”

Huh, that was very adamant. Now he really needed to figure out who she was.

“I don’t think it will be that hard to find out in Appleby,” he told her. “Gorgeous redhead with a big sweet tooth. It will probably take me two minutes.”

“You don’t need to know. Zoe can keep your mouth full of all the sweet stuff you could possibly want.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” he said, his voice a little husky and his gaze on her mouth. Aiden would kill him for thinking the things he was thinking right now if they were about Zoe.

But the redhead started to turn, then stopped again, quickly grabbed another cake pop, and *then* headed for the doors.

Grinning, he just watched her go. This time.

He *was* going to find her again.

Later, on his way out to his car, he saw a chocolate cake ball on one of the steps leading from the main doors to the sidewalk. He stopped and picked it up.

It had to be hers.

He smiled as he studied the little bite taken out of it.

Well, it wasn't midnight, and this wasn't a glass slipper, but he was feeling the urge to comb the town to find this girl.

He could probably even rent a white horse.

Move over, Prince Charming.

Of course, he didn't need the ladies of the village "trying on" any cake pops. He'd recognize her immediately. He'd never mistake another woman for the redhead with the flashing blue eyes and the full lips he wanted to see curve into a sexy, mischievous smile almost as much as he wanted to taste them.

He really thought there was some mischief in her. He really thought he was the one who could bring it out.

He pulled his phone out and started to search for white horse rentals in the area. Then he sighed. Dammit, he could hear a voice in his head telling him he should probably start by asking Zoe who she was. That was a lot less fun, but it might be faster. And God forbid, more practical.

That voice definitely sounded like Grant's. The bastard.

Still, Dax was grinning as he headed for his very impractical 1960 MGA Roadster in Old English White with black leather interior and classic silver wire wheels. It wasn't a terrible replacement for a white horse.

He plopped his dark gray felt Frank Sinatra fedora on his head—the thing had seriously been worn by Frank in the movie *The First Deadly Sin*—and headed for his hotel.

Practical wasn't his strong suit, it was true. But maybe the cake-pop goddess could use a little more impracticality in her life. In his experience, that was true for about 96 percent of the adult population in the United States.

He was just the guy to help.

Chapter One



“Is that a bouquet of cake pops?”

Jane was staring at the small silver metal bucket that had a dozen sticks poking out from it. Each stick had a red or white ball on the end. She felt a mix of resignation, amusement, and horror.

It was, indeed, a bouquet of cake pops.

Dammit.

“Seems to be,” she agreed with her friend and coworker, Max.

Max plucked one out of the bunch—they were close enough friends that he felt safe touching her sweets without permission—and bit into it. “Damn, these are good. Must be Zoe’s.” He grinned and took another. He popped the whole thing into his mouth.

“I found that putting a whole one in your mouth at once makes it hard to talk,” she said absently, thinking back to three nights ago.

She should probably be sick of cake pops by now, but she wasn’t. She so wasn’t. That was in part because her best friend was magical in the kitchen. It was also because cake balls now made her think of flirty, charming millionaires.

Max grinned around the cake. “When you’ve got a ball in your mouth, talking shouldn’t be your first priority.”

Jane snorted. She should have been expecting that. She clearly wasn’t fully focused this morning. “Well, you know

more about having balls in your mouth than I do. It's been a while."

Max swallowed and wiped a hand over his beard to brush away any crumbs. "Yeah, well, I've gotta drive to find balls. *You* could have a set just by walking down the street."

Being an openly gay man in a small Iowa town did have its drawbacks. Primarily that Max was in a *very* small minority.

Jane loved him like a brother. She did, sometimes, wish he had more of a filter though. He had an active, fun sex life he enjoyed immensely. And told her about in great detail. Which made her incredibly jealous. She loved sex. She wanted to have more of it. She just needed no-strings-attached sex and *that* was as hard to find in her small Iowa hometown as openly gay men.

The guys here who were her age wanted to settle down. They wanted wives and kids. Most of them already had jobs they were going to hold until they retired. They had homes. Many of them had farms and livestock, and a social life, and a support network made up of family and friends they'd had since grade school. They just needed a wife to plug into the equation.

That's what people did here. They settled down. Made lives. Raised families. Jane had no desire for that. She was plenty settled down with her father's illness and trying to help her little sister not follow in the footsteps of their stepmother and stepsister. She didn't need a husband. She definitely didn't need children. She needed no more people who needed her.

But sex? Yeah, she kind of needed that.

Okay, she very much needed that.

"I want to go with you next time you drive to find balls," she said to Max. "I need long-distance balls. The local balls, while plentiful, are way too serious."

Max eyed the cake-pop display. "Did you send yourself this bouquet?"

Jane's mouth dropped open. "I wouldn't do that!" But her protest lacked conviction. She would do that. She'd just never

thought of it.

“You’ve been substituting sugar for sex for a while now,” Max said. “Thought maybe you’d graduated to substituting cake balls for real balls, since we’re on the topic.”

She started to protest again but then looked at the cake pops. It wasn’t a terrible idea.

“No,” Max said. He grabbed the container of cake pops and held it out of her reach. “That’s a terrible idea.”

It was annoying how he could read her mind at times. A lot of the time, actually.

“Is it?” she asked. She started to reach for one. “I’m not so sure.”

“It is,” he said.

“You’re just afraid I’ll put on weight,” she said.

He looked her up and down. “Lady, I love your curves. Every man who meets you loves your curves. I’m not one bit worried about that.”

She smiled. She’d never been skinny. Or even thin. She had boobs and a butt and hips and, well, a deep and abiding love for baked goods. She’d never been apologetic about it either. She ran but not for her weight—though it did give her more wiggle room for treats—but because she was scared of getting sick like her dad.

The doctors assured her his progressive neurological condition, which they didn’t even have a specific name for, was most likely caused by pesticides and other environmental factors rather than genetics. But she couldn’t shake the anxiety around it. Or the idea that while she didn’t work directly with the chemicals like he had, she’d grown up in the area where they used those chemicals on the fields and knew they were in the air and probably in the water.

Exercise and eating well and all that seemed like a good idea whether his illness was because of genes or environment. So she ran. And ate vegetables. And then didn’t feel one iota

of guilt about her daily dose of sugar and fat from Buttered Up.

“I’m more worried you’re going to forget how great the endorphins from sex feel,” Max was saying, pulling her away from her thoughts and back to the topic at hand. “And you’re going to be content with the sugar high instead.”

She nodded. “The sugar high is nice.”

“It’s nothing like the high that comes from a good hard fucking,” Max told her bluntly.

Jane sighed. It was true. She had vague memories of that being true anyway.

“So yes, I’ll take you with me next time,” he said. “But if you didn’t send yourself these cake pops, who did? Zoe? Please tell me it wasn’t Zoe. She does *not* need to be supporting this addiction.”

“She’s thrilled Hot Cakes employees can now buy from her,” Jane said. Maybe Zoe *had* sent them. That actually made a little sense. “Maybe this is a little advertising gimmick. Send these over so everyone here sees them, and a few people sample them and talk about how amazing they are.” That was actually a great idea.

“Oh, okay,” Max said, putting the bouquet back down on the break room table. “But that means you can’t eat them all. You should leave them here for other people to taste. It would be good for her business.” Max even put the second cake pop he’d grabbed back into the bouquet.

Because of the rivalry between the Lancaster and the McCaffery families, Hot Cakes employees had been banned from buying from Buttered Up, the local bakery. Wedding, birthday, and other special occasion cakes, along with muffins, scones, and other everyday bakery items had to be purchased in the next town. And they were nowhere near as good. But Hot Cakes was now under new management.

The new owners had rescued the company from closing its doors, had saved over three hundred jobs, and were, more or less, considered heroes in the town. Two of them were also

hometown boys. One was Zoe's brother, Cam. The other was the man she was madly in love with, Aiden.

It had been a rocky few weeks.

Now, though, the bakery ban had been lifted, and things were starting to improve. The guys really seemed intent on making things at Hot Cakes better. Not just business-wise, but also for the employees.

As Zoe's best friend, Jane had Aiden's ear and she'd been taking advantage of that. Now they just had to wait to see if the guys could pull off this big makeover.

Considering they had, more or less, accidentally become millionaires and learned all about business management as they went along, Jane had her doubts.

But she was keeping those to herself.

Mostly.

"Though," Max mused, "it seems she should have sent a sampling of all her cake pops, right?"

Jane frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if Zoe wanted to use this to advertise, why not send a bunch of different flavors? Why are they all red velvet?"

Jane's gaze flew to the bouquet, and her heart flipped in her chest. "They're all red velvet?"

"Yep." Max picked another one out of the bunch and bit into it, then held it up.

It was definitely a deep-red cake, surrounded by a white icing coating. Jane groaned. Those were not from Zoe.

Dax Marshall had figured out who she was.

It wasn't like it would have been hard to find out or would have taken long at all.

She just hadn't been convinced he'd care enough to try.

Or what he'd do with the information once he had it.

The cake-pop bouquet was nice. And funny. She felt her mouth tipping up at the corner.

“Is there a note or anything?” she asked.

Max turned the bouquet and then reached into the middle. Jane felt her heart rate pick up as he withdrew a card.

“See you in my office at one. Looking forward to—dot, dot, dot—working with you.” Max lifted his gaze. “What the hell is that about?”

“There’s actually a dot, dot, dot before working?” Jane asked.

“Yep.” Max turned the card to face her.

Why did that ellipsis make her feel a little warmer?

“You’re going to Aiden’s office at one?” Max asked. “You should tell him the dot, dot, dot thing makes that seem dirty. I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way, but that’s definitely how I read it.”

Jane did too. She snatched the card from Max’s hand. “It’s not from Aiden.”

She wasn’t sure she should share that information, even with her best work friend. Dax was their boss, but he was here temporarily just to get things with their new ownership smoothed out. He’d be going back to Chicago. He was a computer geek. A game designer. He went to Comic-Con on behalf of their gaming company. He was originally from California. He owned a fedora that had once been worn by Frank Sinatra in a movie.

Yes, okay, she’d looked him up after their tête-à-tête at the party.

So he was her boss, but he hadn’t done anything *wrong* she supposed. Him being a little flirty with her was okay as long as *she* was okay with it.

Which she was. She definitely was.

He was not in possession of local balls. He wasn’t going to be taking her to Sunday dinner with his mom and grandma on

date three. Yes, that had happened to her. He also wouldn't consider a tailgate party and hometown football game a date. That had also happened to her. Nor would he think they should roll out of bed on Saturday morning after a night of not-too-terrible sex to do farm chores. She wasn't above getting a little muddy or feeding chickens. It wasn't that. It was that she'd really just been in it for the sex and maybe some pancakes in the morning. Feeding chickens together seemed, stupidly, more serious than pancakes.

Dating guys she'd known forever in her hometown was tough.

Dax Marshall was... none of the above.

And she didn't want to date him. At all.

But she wouldn't mind eating cake pops in bed with him.

"Who's it from?" Max asked.

"Dax Marshall."

Max lifted a brow. "Oh."

Of course he knew who Dax was. Dax had been at the town hall that preceded the party the other night.

"He's hot," Max said, nodding.

Jane sighed. He was. "And funny and charming," she added.

"And he knows about your cake addiction?"

"He does."

"You're in huge trouble," Max decided.

Yeah, that's what she figured.

But maybe Dax Marshall could be the kind of trouble she needed. Fun trouble. Sexy trouble.

And most importantly, *temporary* trouble.

* * *

At one, Jane stopped at the desk outside the suite of executive offices. There were six. The Lancasters had been all about big, fancy offices. She had no idea which one Dax was using.

There was a new woman standing behind the reception desk today. She was watering the plant that sat on the tall filing cabinet just to the side of the receptionist's desk, and Jane actually stopped in her tracks as she took the woman in.

The woman was stunning. She had long, dark hair and curves like crazy. And she was *celebrating* those curves. She was dressed in a fitted white sweater with tiny pearl buttons that started just below a not-inappropriate-but-very-tantalizing glimpse of cleavage. She had a thick black belt cinching her waist above a pink skirt that flared out, hitting just below her knees. On her feet were pink wedge heels with a huge white bow above the toes. Most interestingly, her long hair—which had to hang nearly to her butt when let loose—was up in a high pony tail with a pink scarf wrapped around her head and tied in a huge bow. She also wore horn-rimmed glasses. In pink.

For a second, Jane felt like she'd possibly stepped into the 1940s.

The woman looked over just then. “Oh, hi! You must be Jane.” She gave Jane a big smile, setting the watering can down.

Jane blinked and made herself cross the space to the receptionist desk. “Yes. Hi.”

“I'm Piper.” She extended her hand.

“Hi. Jane. Obviously.” Jane took her hand, feeling stupid. She wasn't used to going to executive offices or introducing herself by handshake.

That just wasn't necessary when you knew everyone you worked with and had worked in the same place since you'd been sixteen. She'd been hired by filling out online paperwork, showing up at the factory one day after school, saying “sure” when Bruce, the then foreman, had asked if she could work every day from four to eight, and then going to the women's

locker room to change into her Hot Cakes polo shirt with her jeans. She'd trained on the job for about a week, and then she'd been a full, regular employee.

"I work with the guys in Chicago," Piper explained. "I was technically hired to be Ollie's executive assistant, but I help all the guys. Between you and me, I keep things organized and on schedule."

Jane gave her a little smile. "It's nice to meet you. Did you replace Sandra?" she asked of the former receptionist.

"Oh no." Piper waved that away. "Sandra is in her own office." She pointed at one of the doors. "She's doing everything she normally does. She's still working closely with Whitney and is helping a lot with the transition. I'm here to... keep the guys in line," she said. Her pink lips curved into a warm, sincere smile. "No one else should have to deal with them. Especially when they're in this state."

"This state?" Jane asked.

"All excited and wound up about a new project," Piper said. "They're brilliant, and they all have big hearts and mean well, but honestly, when they get together on something like this, they're like a bunch of twelve-year-olds with too much sugar and too much allowance money." Her expression was a mix of affection and exasperation. "They do big things. And to do big things, they have to think big and be willing to take risks. But someone"—she pointed to herself—"has to say things like, 'That's going to take three weeks even if we pay triple and call in favors,' and 'You tried that four years ago and it was horrible,' and 'If you do that, I'm quitting.'" She lifted a shoulder. "I'm the voice of reason."

Jane laughed. She liked Piper. The woman obviously knew the guys well and cared about them. But she was also clearly under no illusion that these handsome, charming, rich men were perfect.

"So Sandra's job is very intact. My job responsibilities are very specific—babysit the hot millionaires and keep Oliver's feet on the ground. At least some of the time."

“Oliver is the biggest problem?” Jane asked, entertained and intrigued.

“Oliver is definitely the biggest problem,” Piper said. “He’s the dreamer, and he hates the words ‘no’ and ‘can’t.’ The rest of them are at least slightly reasonable.”

Jane couldn’t help herself. This woman clearly knew these guys well, and if she was going to get a scoop, this was the perfect opportunity. She opened her mouth to ask, “Dax too?”

But before she could say it, Piper added, “Well, except Dax, I guess.”

Jane snapped her mouth shut. She should not be this interested in Dax Marshall. She just shouldn’t. Maybe it was because Piper had just filled her in on Ollie a little, and Jane already knew Aiden and Cam.

Of course, she knew nothing about Grant.

And she definitely hadn’t been Googling Grant or Oliver last night. Nope, her searches had all been about Dax.

“Dax—Mr. Marshall—isn’t reasonable?” Jane asked, really hoping she sounded even one tiny bit casual. She didn’t think she did. She was pretty sure she sounded as casual as a little girl bouncing on her toes and asking Santa, “You brought me a puppy? For *reeeeal*?”

Piper gave a little laugh. “No, that’s not a word I’d use for Dax.” Again, her smile was clearly affectionate. “Dax is an enabler of the first order for Ollie. He loves big ideas. He loves big plans and adventures. All Oliver has to do is say is, ‘Hey, do you wanna...’ and before he’s even done asking, Dax is saying, ‘Hell, yes!’”

Jane smiled. Then frowned. “So he’s a flake?”

Piper looked surprised by Jane’s comment. “No. That’s not the right word. He’s... fun. Spontaneous. Always up for something new. And he makes sure the other guys have fun and don’t work all the time.”

“Ah,” Jane said. “He’s the life of the party.”

Piper smiled. “Yes.” Then she frowned, clearly realizing Jane hadn’t meant that as a compliment. “Dax is the one who makes sure things stay balanced. The guys work really hard. They’re very driven. Without him, they’d all have ulcers and insomnia and no personal lives.”

Jane nodded. Uh-huh. Sure. Dax was their personal party coach.

That was fine. Whatever worked for them. She certainly couldn’t argue with their success. She wasn’t the one he was nagging about working too hard and taking things too seriously. But this was good to know. She couldn’t hang out with a guy who thought life was just one big happy hour. Happy hour was supposed to be just that. *One* hour. Compared to the *eight*—or more—hours people spent at work.

“I feel like I’ve given you the wrong impression of Dax,” Piper said, worrying her bottom lip.

Jane met the other woman’s gaze. “Have you?” she asked seriously.

Piper’s brow creased. Then she sighed. “I mean... not really. He is definitely the fun one. But he works...” It was clear she *wanted* to say that he worked hard. But was unable to.

“He works. He does his part,” Jane filled in.

“For sure,” Piper said adamantly. “I mean, he’s the heart of Fluke. Without him, we wouldn’t have a game at all. The idea and story for *Warriors of Easton* were mostly Oliver’s,” she went on. “But Dax made it all actually happen. He’s designed every part of it and oversees the team of designers now.”

Jane nodded. She believed all that. Hell, she knew most of it from her online search from last night. “But he doesn’t have to really work at it,” she said. “That’s all really easy and natural for him, right?”

Piper looked like she regretted getting into this, but she nodded. “His greatest gifts are having fun and thinking outside the box and being big and over the top.”

Jane couldn't judge him for that. Dax had found Oliver, and they'd been given the chance to do something big, and it had turned out amazing.

"So, um... the guys are just finishing up a call with Grant, but it shouldn't be too much longer," Piper said. She was maybe feeling the sooner she and Jane stopped talking, the sooner she'd stop saying things that made Dax look bad.

"Okay, I can wait. I guess." Jane shrugged. "They're my bosses now. I suppose they can't yell if I'm not down on the floor."

"Well, I'll cut them off in another few minutes if they keep going," Piper said. "In my experience, they can stay on track and be productive for about forty-five minutes. We're at..." She glanced at her computer. "Thirty-three. So they're going to veer off into crazy territory if it goes much longer,"

Piper said with a totally straight face, and Jane, again, found herself mildly intrigued by the way this company worked and the way the people in it kept it going smoothly.

"Do you want to sit and wait? Do you want coffee or anything?" Piper asked.

"Um..." Jane looked around and noticed a sitting area along the far wall across from the desk. There was a couch and two chairs around a coffee table. "No. I'm fine. I think."

She honestly had no idea how she was.

She'd been surprised for only about five seconds that Dax had found out who she was and wanted to see her again. Then her imagination had definitely wandered into dirty fantasies about bosses and suits and desks. There had been a spark between them the other night. She hadn't wanted it. Or so she'd thought. But she hadn't been able to forget it.

Then all it had taken was a bouquet of cake pops to get her thinking that seeing him again was a *great* idea.

And now she was sitting outside his office, talking with his assistant, and realizing they had *nothing* in common.

Jane made her way over to the couch and took a seat on the leather couch that probably cost more than all her living room furniture combined. Hell, she could throw her kitchen table and chairs into that total too. She looked around.

She'd never been up to these offices until two weeks ago when all her coworkers had been freaking out about the new owners. She'd worked with some of these people for twelve years, and they'd been terrified of things changing. They were working moms and dads, grandparents, people supporting their families. Some of them had sick kids, or disabled spouses, or were just regular people who lived paycheck to paycheck. None of them had loved the Lancasters, but they'd known what to expect from the family that had owned Hot Cakes as long as it had been in business. The idea of change had sent a wave of panic through the workforce.

So before she'd realized that two guys she'd gone to high school with and knew pretty well were their new bosses, Jane had stomped into the CEO's office and confronted Oliver Caprinelli. She'd demanded to know what was going on and what their plans were and when they intended to tell the workers about what was going to happen with the transition process.

He hadn't had any answers.

That was when she'd gotten riled up herself. She'd been a little anxious before. It wasn't like she had any other true skills, and she hadn't gone to college. Her dad had been sick before she'd even graduated high school, and her stepmother had been horrible and had been trying to control Jane's little sister, Kelsey, even before that. Jane hadn't felt like her family would be safe if she left, honestly.

Hot Cakes had always been fine. It hadn't been something she'd been all that excited about, but she hadn't dreaded going to work either. It had been... work. It had been exactly what she wanted it to be—a paycheck. And benefits. Those she definitely needed. But otherwise, it was just a place she showed up to for a few hours, did work that was pretty easy with people she generally liked being around, and then she went home. She didn't have to think about anything too hard.

She didn't have to *do* anything that was too hard. She didn't have to really get too invested. It wasn't dramatic or emotional. Which was fantastic, and she didn't apologize for it because, good Lord, things were plenty dramatic and emotional *outside* of work.

The door to one of the offices swung open, and Aiden stuck his head out. "Hey, Piper—" He spotted Jane and straightened. "Jane. Hi." He stepped fully out the door. "Everything okay?"

Jane got to her feet. "I have no idea." Well, she had an *idea*, but she wasn't going to tell Aiden she was here so Dax could ask her out.

"Dax requested a meeting with Jane," Piper said smoothly, handing Aiden a folder.

He glanced down at it, read the front, then looked at Piper. "How did you know this was what I needed?"

She smiled. "You guys are so cute when you forget how good I am at my job."

She rose and came around the other side of the desk as Aiden continued to stand there looking impressed.

"Right in here, Jane." She took Jane by the elbow and steered her around Aiden and toward the door to the office he'd just emerged from.

"Huh." Piper paused just outside the doorway. "Dax is wearing his lip tie today." She said it almost thoughtfully as if something was just occurring to her. "He might have decided this should be a surprise to everyone."

Jane felt something that was a very weird mix of dread and excitement flutter through her stomach. "This?" she repeated, her voice a little squeaky.

Piper nodded. "Whatever he's got in mind."

That didn't make Jane feel calmer. Even before she'd realized that Dax was probably the one voted Most Likely to Take a Stupid Road Trip on Ten Minutes' Notice *and* Most Likely to Blow Four Million Dollars on an Idea Written on a

Bar Napkin, she'd had an inkling that Dax Marshall would be a handful.

But the idea of him being a temporary handful—and being a *literal* handful—involving cake and icing and mouths and dirty talk and *nothing else*, had been okay. More than okay. Enticing. Tempting. Doable.

This... whatever this was... was going to be too much. She could feel it.

“Mornin,’ Red.” Dax rose from the bright red beanbag chair he'd been lounging in.

She was distracted for a moment by that beanbag chair. The thing was huge. More like a chair than the type of kids' beanbag she typically thought of. But it was still... a beanbag chair.

Then she was distracted by the rest of the office.

The big desk had been pushed to the far end of the room with the swivel leather chair, and the beanbags had been grouped in the middle of the office.

The whiteboard on the wall was covered in words and a few diagrams done in multicolored marker. Then she looked closer. Some of the words and numbers looked like official business, but on the one edge there was definitely a completed game of hangman.

She looked back at Dax and realized he'd called her Red. That immediately gave her the surge of *hell no* she needed. She narrowed her eyes. “No,” she told him.

He just grinned. “Ms. Kemper?” he asked.

“How about in between? It's just Jane,” she said.

“Jane,” he repeated, his smile still in place but softer now. Less teasing. “It's nice to see you again.”

She took him in as he came toward her. He was in black dress slacks, a black button-down shirt and a white tie with red lip prints all over it as if a woman wearing bright red lipstick had kissed her way up and down the length of the tie—from

the base of his throat, down his chest and abs, to the middle of his belt buckle.

Jane felt herself grow a little warmer. She didn't have red lipstick like that, but she suddenly wanted to buy some.

"Hi," she finally managed when he stopped in front of her.

"Thanks for coming up."

"I didn't realize I had a choice."

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "Of course you did."

"The cake pops would suggest otherwise."

"You'd do anything for a dozen cake pops?" he asked, one eyebrow going up in a way she found sexy, distracting, and annoying all at the same time.

"In my world, a dozen cake pops are a serious gesture. Someone must really need my attention to send those."

"Duly noted."

He hadn't expected her to show up here? Right. "I don't remember the note with the one o'clock meeting on it including a question mark," she said dryly.

"I'll admit I'm not used to people not wanting to spend time with me," he said in a flirty, self-deprecating way she was sure he thought was adorably sexy.

He was kind of right.

"Well, here I am, so I guess your ego can pretend that your record is intact," she said. "For now."

His grinned at her add-on. "For some reason I have no question that my ego will always know exactly where it stands with you around."

"I think that's a fair assumption," she admitted.

"Want to share what's going on with the rest of the class?" Oliver asked, coming up next to Dax.

She'd been vaguely aware that he'd been sitting in the green beanbag. But honestly, Dax—and the presence of

beanbags in the first place—had sidetracked her from many of the other details of the room. Like other people.

And like the narrow table that was sitting under the window along the west wall. The table that held a collection of glass jars that were full of what appeared to be gummy bears and M&Ms.

“I have a sweet tooth,” Dax said, noticing her gaze.

“I remember,” she said before she thought better of it.

He gave her a sexy grin.

Ollie interrupted, extending his hand. “Hello, again.”

“Hello, Mr. Caprinelli.” She took his hand a bit sheepishly. The last time she’d talked to him, she hadn’t been especially friendly. Or professional.

“Good God, call him Oliver. Or Ollie,” Dax said. “When I hear Caprinelli, I look around for his grandmother and a plate of cannoli. Then I’m disappointed when I realize someone is talking about the guy who thinks Hamburger Helper can technically be considered pasta.”

“It can be,” Ollie insisted. “It’s got pasta in it.”

“How do you even face your grandparents?” Dax asked him. “How do you not feel your Italian ancestors stabbing your soul with their ravioli cutters from their graves?”

“Ravioli cutters aren’t really appropriate for stabbing,” Oliver said. “They’ve got rollers and they’re for cutting ravioli out of rolled out sheets of pasta.”

“Are there special forks for making pasta? Or for eating pasta?” Dax asked. “Because they’d be stabbing you with those.”

“We always just used regular forks,” Oliver told him.

Dax shook his head as if disappointed. “Well, at least I know you used a spoon with the forks to twirl the spaghetti.” He looked at Jane. “His grandmother taught me how to do that.” Then he looked back at Oliver. “Your ancestors’ spirits are stabbing you with regular forks.”

“Weird, I don’t feel a thing,” Oliver said.

“Is Hamburger Helper a pasta?” Dax suddenly asked Jane. “And be honest. You don’t have to worry about hurting his feelings.”

Jane had been watching and listening to this exchange with a mix of amusement and a touch of they-can’t-be-serious. But they’d seemed serious.

“Uh...” She looked at both men then decided to actually think about what they were asking. Finally, she shrugged and answered honestly. “Yeah, I guess I would have classified it as a pasta dish. I mean, most of them have noodles or something in them.”

Dax’s eyes widened and he slowly shook his head. “Wow. I almost don’t want to sleep with you as much now.”

Jane felt her mouth drop open. That was... kind of funny. She was definitely realizing that thinking she knew what to expect from this guy was a big miscalculation. “Almost?” she finally said.

“Well, now I have to make you pasta and show just how far from the real thing Hamburger Helper is,” Dax said.

“What does that have to do with us sleeping together?” she asked. Probably stupidly.

“Once you’ve had my homemade pasta, you’re going to be all over me,” he said very matter-of-factly. “And I won’t be able to resist you offering to do all the dirty things with those cake pops.”

She felt warmth flood through her. It was maybe because she hadn’t pegged him for the type of guy to make homemade pasta. It was probably because the charm and confidence just dripped from him like the sugary syrup that dripped out of the icing machine downstairs. It was definitely *not* because he kept surprising her. She didn’t want to hang out with a guy who kept her on her toes. Her toes were very tired from all the time she spent on them.

“The cake pops you sent are going to get very stale,” she said. Unless he wanted to make her that pasta tonight...

“Well, obviously you’ll have to bring new ones over when you come to dinner.” He gave her a wink. “It’s the least you can do when I’m making you dinner and rocking your world.”

Yeah, that confidence was *oozing*.

She looked at Ollie, who had been standing there just watching the entire exchange. “Isn’t this sexual harassment or something?” she asked.

He looked at Dax. “Do you feel harassed?”

“Not a bit.”

“I meant *me*,” she said, fighting a smile.

“Oh.” Ollie tried to look concerned. “Are you feeling harassed? I mean, you don’t have to do a single thing he says, and if you knee him in the balls, all I’m going to need is a little warning, so I can get my phone out to record it, but if you’re feeling harassed I’ll... do something about it.”

She shook her head. She could not smile about this. She was definitely not feeling harassed, and she had a feeling pasta and cake pops were in her and Dax’s future—she’d worry about what that meant later—but she couldn’t pass up this opportunity to make a point.

“You should probably figure out what you would do if someone came to you with an actual sexual harassment complaint,” she said.

Ollie nodded and went to the door and pulled it open. “Piper?”

“Yeah?” Jane heard the other woman answer.

“Do we have a sexual harassment policy?”

“We do,” she said. “It’s don’t sexually harass people.”

Ollie looked back at Jane. She shook her head. “More.”

“We need more than that,” he told Piper.

“No shit,” Piper retorted. “It’s in the file on your computer.”

“Which file?”

“The one labeled Sexual Harassment Policy,” she said, her tone long suffering. “I apologize for hiding it like that.”

Oliver grinned. “Want to go over it with me at lunch?”

“You mean, read it to you while you eat?” Piper asked.

He glanced over at Jane and winked. “That would be great. I’d love a chicken salad sandwich.”

“You bet, boss.”

He shut the door and turned back.

“Wow,” Jane said. “She’s very... patient.”

Oliver chuckled. “Well, I’m sure I’m getting ham and cheese. Or a salad. Likely with kale. And when she reads it to me it will be with embellishments like ‘... and if some dumbass thinks he can touch your ass while at work, you have every right to stab him in the back of the hand with a letter opener,’ but it will be far more entertaining than reading through it myself.”

“Ollie is basically a huge child, and he doesn’t like to work alone at his desk,” Dax said.

“Oh, hey, pot, I’m kettle,” Ollie said.

Dax just shrugged.

Jane wondered how Piper managed to not stab both of them with letter openers.

“So... can we get on with... whatever this is?” she asked. After witnessing all this, she wasn’t at all surprised Dax would be asking her out in front of Ollie. “I really do have work to do downstairs.”

Aiden came into the room just then. “So what’s going on with this meeting with Jane?” he asked.

“Just waiting for you,” Dax said.

They’d been waiting for Aiden? Jane frowned. He wanted Aiden to witness this too? Dax definitely seemed like the grand-gesture type, but this was a little ridiculous.

“He hasn’t been at all,” Ollie told Aiden. “He’s been sexually harassing Jane.”

Aiden looked at Jane quickly. “What?” He frowned. “He has?” He turned his frown on Dax. “What the hell?”

“He hasn’t,” Jane said quickly. She was sure Aiden knew Dax well and surely wouldn’t believe that of his friend, but she also knew Aiden would be protective of her.

Aiden was a good guy. And Dax was clearly... a goofball? That wasn’t exactly the word she wanted to use. He was fun, as Piper had put it. He was playful and irreverent. Those were maybe more accurate. She also knew Aiden was trying very hard to make this new shift in management at Hot Cakes a good move for everyone, and he was taking it seriously. Someone like Dax could probably be annoying to someone who took things seriously and wanted to buckle down and just focus on work.

Or maybe that was just her.

Aiden looked at her. “Everything is fine?”

“Totally fine.” Then she looked at Dax. “At least, so far.” She still wasn’t sure how she was going to handle Dax asking her out. She should turn him down. For sure. But she didn’t really want to.

Aiden looked at Dax too. “So why is Jane here?”

Oliver also looked at Dax. “Yes, Dax, please fill us in.”

“I invited Jane up to discuss an idea I had,” Dax said.

Oh boy. Half of her was very nervous about this. The other half really wanted to know *all* his ideas that involved the two of them. That was trouble.

Though she really wasn’t sure she needed Oliver’s and Aiden’s input on any of those ideas.

He was a hot, charming millionaire who clearly got his way a lot of the time. What the hell was she doing even thinking about flirting with him? Not to mention *actually* flirting with him? Because she had been. A little. And entertaining the idea of pasta and cake pops.

Damn. Just an hour ago she'd been entertaining the idea of cake pops with him, even while knowing that was a bad idea, and now she'd added pasta to it all.

"What idea?" Jane asked when no one else did.

Really, wasn't that where Aiden or Oliver could have jumped in?

"I want *you* to be *my* boss for a week."

She lifted a brow. Was that an innuendo about the bedroom? He wanted her to be a dominatrix or something? Because she wasn't doing that. She had no energy for leather and whips and sex swings. "I don't think so."

"No, really, it's great," Dax insisted. "You show me up close and personal how the factory works."

"The factory?" She frowned. "Wait, you want to *work* in the factory?"

"It's the best way to learn all about the company from the inside out," Dax said. "I need to get down there with the people who do it every day. Reading reports and listening to management can only get us so far."

"And you want *me* to be your boss on the factory floor?"

"Absolutely."

Yeah, he might not have meant it in a dominatrix way initially, but there was something flirtatious and innuendo-ish in his tone now.

But in regards to the factory, this was a terrible idea.

Well, it was a terrible idea in the leather-and-whips way too. Actually it was an even worse idea in the whip way. She *really* didn't have the energy for that.

She was pretty sure she didn't have the energy for Dax, period.

But she couldn't have him work in the factory with her. She wasn't anyone's boss. No one freaking listened to her. Not her father when she told him he had to go to physical therapy every day. Not her stepmother when Jane told her to lay off

her little sister, Kelsey. Not Kelsey when Jane told her a C in English wasn't good enough. She didn't even try to boss anyone around at work.

"In other words, you're tired of sitting in an office and talking to only us all day," Aiden said to Dax.

"There's that too," Dax agreed, without looking the least bit sheepish.

"This isn't a terrible idea though," Oliver said, nodding thoughtfully.

Oh, it was a terrible idea.

"He's got a point," Ollie went on. "We do want to know how everything works. We know everything about Fluke because we built it from the ground up. Everything that happens is there because we made it happen as we went along."

"What's Fluke?" Jane inserted.

"Our company name is Fluke Inc.," Aiden told her. "That's the parent company our game and all the merchandising and everything falls under."

"We called it that because it was a total fluke that the game took off and that we were even remotely successful," Dax said with a grin.

"It's a constant reminder that we basically got lucky, and we still have to work to keep things going," Ollie added.

She liked that.

"Ollie's right," Dax said. "We know everything about Fluke because we created it. We need to know Hot Cakes that well."

"The Lancasters owned this company for fifty years, and they didn't know all the ins and outs," Jane said. "I can promise you Eric Lancaster has never pushed one button or pulled one lever in that factory or in the warehouse."

"Well, we want to be better than the Lancasters," Aiden said firmly. "We *will* be better." He looked at Dax. "This is a

pretty good idea.”

Oh, it *really* wasn't.

“I know,” Dax said.

Jane gave a little snort and shook her head. He said it as if it was the most obvious thing that his idea was good.

“It is,” Ollie said. “I wouldn't mind learning a few things about how the factory functions and getting to know some of our new employees.”

“No,” Dax said. “I've got this.”

“Has to be you, huh?” Ollie asked. He was watching Dax thoughtfully.

Which made Jane look at Dax thoughtfully. He was watching *her*.

“Yes. I have a specialty that can help a lot in this area of the business, and a particular interest in this project, so my time would best spent in the factory,” Dax said.

“You have a particular interest in the factory?” Aiden repeated.

Dax was still looking directly at her when he said, “Definitely.”

Aiden nodded. “Ah.” His tone indicated he suddenly understood everything.

Shit, Jane thought maybe she did too.

She looked at Aiden. “Do I want to know what his specialty is?”

“That's probably a no,” Aiden told her.

“Oh, ask me anyway,” Dax said, giving her a grin that was playful and sexy, heavy on the sexy.

She wet her lips and thought very hard about *not* asking him. She even pressed her lips together and shook her head.

He leaned in slightly. Not enough to come even close to any kind of potential sexual harassment—dammit anyway—and said, “Come on, ask me, Jane.”

She swallowed. Ugh, she was dumb. She'd never been dumb about a guy before. This was uncomfortable. "What's your specialty?"

"Getting women to tell me all about what they want and need."

Yeah. She'd asked. And she was glad.

That was super dumb.

She stared at him and had the definite urge to tell him she needed *him* covered in strawberry pie filling.

She loved cake, but if they were going for what she *really* wanted, it would always be pie. Strawberry pie.

"Jesus," Ollie said, laughing. "I need to get Piper to fill me in on the sexual harassment policy and get me the forms over lunch today, for sure. I have a feeling we might be needing them soon."

Aiden looked from Jane to Dax and back to Jane. "I absolutely will keep him as far away from that factory floor as possible. Just say the word."

Jane studied Dax. Okay, so he was definitely flirting. But he was also serious about working in the factory. Was this his way of... spending time with her or something?

This was definitely him being funny. He probably thought it would be hilarious to spend the week at the factory learning how the humongous mixers worked and how to set the machines to get the right coloring mixtures and how they sorted through the damaged products. Lord knew the tours of kids they brought through on a regular basis thought it was all pretty cool. Dax Marshall definitely had a kid-in-a-man's-body vibe.

A very hot, hard, leanly muscled, sexy-beard, piercing-green-eyes, big-hands body...

Jane shook herself. This was clearly a lark to him. He probably thought he got to eat free cake all day. And he did. That was one of the perks working here. Employees could eat as much of the products as they wanted whenever they were

on shift. Everyone took huge advantage. For about three days. New workers, surrounded by sugar and vanilla and sweet smells and sights all day, gorged themselves with free treats on their breaks. Then most of them never wanted to put another Hot Cakes snack cake in their mouths ever again. Being around it every single day just almost made you numb to it.

But in the midst of feeling her very-neglected-for-far-too-long girl parts reacting to his flirty smiles and sexy innuendos and doesn't-make-sense attention, she was aware this could be a good thing.

The hot millionaire game designer thought it would be fun to make cake all day? Sure. She'd put a hair net on him and make him stand on his feet all day and show him how to work machines that would make his shoulders scream from the repetitive pulling for hours.

This really could be fun.

“Let's do it,” she said.

If nothing else, he could report back to his friends, her other new bosses, what it was really like down in the factory.

“Yeah?” he asked, his eyes lighting up.

And maybe she could show the laid-back charmer that most people didn't get to coast through life on flukes. Raising his awareness of real life for real people could be a nice side effect to educating the new management about their workforce.

“Sure. Why not? We can always use some extra hands.”

She was 1,000 percent positive his hands would be completely worthless to them as far as their efficiency and productivity numbers, but hey, that would give her a chance to talk to Aiden and Oliver about those very measures and how they should actually look at what was going on in their factory.

“Great.” Dax looked at Ollie and Aiden, clearly pleased with the decision.

Ollie was smiling too, seeming completely agreeable.

Aiden, on the other hand, looked slightly suspicious. Of her. But the look he was giving her was also amused. Because Aiden had known her since high school, and he knew that she might tolerate cockiness and charm, but she saw right through it.

Aiden was wondering what she had planned for Dax.

She gave him a wink. He should definitely be wondering about that.

Chapter Two



“I *promise* everything is fine,” Jane told her dad for the fifth time.

“Cassie j-j-just said K-K-Kelsey hadn’t been home m-m-much,” Jack said in his stilted speech.

“She’s been working on a school project,” Jane said, moving a stack of books and a pair of shoes so she could get his walker closer to his chair. “She’s been over at friends’ houses getting that done. Come on. Let’s go for a walk.”

“C-C-Cass thinks K-K-K doesn’t like her.”

He sometimes shortened their names to the first letter because it was easier to get out.

Jane put a hand on her hip and regarded her father. Jack had always been a strong man. He could do anything, in her eyes. Lift anything, fix anything, build anything. He’d always been the one helping others, never the one needing help. She knew he hated it now. He often stalled when she was here and trying to get him to do something. He was fine if she’d just sit and chat, but if she wanted him to walk or show her his therapy exercises or even go out of his room, he balked and would try to distract her.

“If I confide something in you, will you stand up and walk out into the hall with me?” she asked him.

“B-br-bribery?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.”

She smiled. “Okay. I don’t think Kelsey likes Cassie all the time, no.”

She had to be honest with him. He would know if she was lying anyway, and the more sincere she was, the better the chances he’d follow through on his end of this bargain. The nurse said he hadn’t walked more than a few steps to and from the toilet in the past three days. That was not okay. It was difficult, for sure. She understood that. But he had to do it.

“But,” she went on. This was the part that was partially true and partially sugarcoated. “She’s a teenage girl, and Cassie tells her to do things like clean up the kitchen and do her homework and to be home by curfew.”

Jack thought about that then nodded. “M-makes sense.”

Jane nodded. It did. Most teenage girls didn’t like their parents all the time. Of course, she wasn’t telling Jack the *whole* story.

The things she’d told him were all true, but she’d left out the part about how Kelsey was expected to clean up the kitchen *all* the time, no matter who had last dirtied it up. Or that the homework she was supposed to do was “tutoring” Aspen, their stepsister, in English *and* math, both of which Aspen was horrible at, though it was Kelsey who got blamed when Aspen’s grades were poor. Or that the curfew was 9 p.m. whenever she went out with friends and didn’t take Aspen along. Most of Kelsey’s friends couldn’t stand Aspen, for good reason in Jane’s opinion, so that was almost all the time.

It wasn’t the worst thing any kid had ever been through, that was for sure, but Kelsey was unhappy a lot of the time. Jane wasn’t above taking Kelsey on a sister outing and then letting her go hang out with friends. Jane also helped with the chores around the house because there was too much, and it was ridiculous to expect Kelsey to pick up after Aspen. Jane had also talked to Cassie, repeatedly, about the tutoring. When she did, it would lighten up for a few weeks, but that didn’t mean Cassie wasn’t a complete bitch to Kelsey the whole time.

If Cassie wouldn't run straight to Jack and stress him out and make him miserable, Jane would move Kelsey out of there and into her apartment in a hot second. But Cassie knew Jane and Kelsey both worried about Jack, and she used that to get free housekeeping and to help her daughter get good grades and friends she couldn't get on her own.

Two more years, Jane thought to herself. *Just two more years...*

"Okay, come on. You promised me a stroll through the building." She held out her arms.

"Hallway," Jack corrected.

"But once we get to the hallway, we should keep going," Jane said.

Jack shook his head. "Too f-far."

"Dad." Jane sighed. "You know you need to do this."

He studied her for a moment. His body was failing him, and far too quickly, but his mind was there and finally he said, "We'll t-t-try."

Jane smiled. "Okay." She'd take what she could get.

Forty-five minutes later, which felt like five minutes and also like four hours at the same time, they were back in his room, watching his favorite police drama on TV, him in his recliner, her on the love seat, her feet tucked up under her.

She'd worn him out. He'd walked into the hallway, as promised, then to the end of the long corridor, but they'd needed one of the nursing aides to get his wheelchair as he'd been too tired and shaky to make the trip back. By the time they got to his room, he was ready to relax for the evening, and frankly, she was beat. She was happy to watch TV for a little while and just chat too.

She didn't like pushing him like that physically. It truly was one of the things about him being in the nursing home she was good with. *They* were supposed to make him do the hard stuff. It just didn't always work that way.

* * *

She was nervous.

That was so stupid. She was showing a guy around the factory she'd worked in for as long as she'd been employed. That was it. It was something she'd done dozens of times before with new employees and with various tours. But she'd been thinking about this almost nonstop since leaving Dax's office.

Twice last night at dinner, Zoe had needed to repeat a question to her. Jane and Josie—Zoe's partner and Jane's other best friend—joined Zoe and her mom, dad, and little brother, and now Aiden, for dinner at the McCaffery house. It was a lot of fun, and Zoe's mom was a fantastic cook, so usually it was a highlight of Jane's single-girl-cooking-for-herself week.

But last night she'd been completely distracted by the guy who sat in beanbag chairs in his office and displayed gummy bears where most people in executive offices would have flower arrangements their assistants took care of or expensive art pieces a decorator picked out or leather-bound books they never actually read.

She had a feeling Dax definitely dipped into those candy jars and had to refill them regularly.

She'd waved off the questions about if she was okay, though, using her sister as an excuse for her clear preoccupation. Everyone around the table knew about Jane's chaotic personal life, so they accepted that excuse without question.

And she hadn't been totally lying either. Not that there had been anything specific going on with Kelsey at *that* moment, but it was only a matter of time.

After dinner, because she felt guilty for using Kelsey as an excuse when really it was a perpetually happy and flirty millionaire Jane couldn't stop thinking about, Jane had swung by her childhood home to see her little sister—and be sure she was studying for the chemistry exam she had the next day.

Thankfully, Kelsey had been at a friend's studying, and Jane had been able to limit her time with her stepmother to a ten-minute conversation about Kelsey's bad attitude and how Jane needed to pick up some more toilet bowl cleaner before she came over tomorrow.

Yes, Jane cleaned the toilets at the house every week. Well, she *helped*. She helped Kelsey clean the whole house, mow the lawn, and do other basic chores and errands—replacing light bulbs, picking up the groceries Cassie ordered online, things like that.

Jane put up with it. It just made life, for everyone, easier. Kelsey had to live there for only two more years. The situation was complicated and not perfect, but Cassie was her legal guardian, and well, if Jane moved Kelsey in with her permanently, Cassie would throw a fit. The role of young woman who'd gotten out from an abusive relationship and fallen in love again only to have her new partner fall seriously ill and put her in the position of caregiver who was now raising two daughters alone, was one she played well for the community. She had the martyr thing down. Everyone thought Cassie was amazing. No one blamed her for finally moving Jack into the nursing home. She'd done her best. It tore her up. It was a horrible decision no one should have to make.

Yeah, Jane had heard all the bullshit.

She blamed Cassie for it. Kelsey blamed Cassie for it. But neither of them were in a position to do anything about it except support their father as much as they could and *not* let Cassie make his life miserable.

Which was why Jane helped Kelsey with her chores. It kept Cassie from complaining to Jack about having Kelsey living with her. The last thing Jack needed was any kind of stress. Stress and worry made his neurological symptoms worse, and the fact he couldn't be there for his family made things emotionally harder for him.

Kelsey and Jane doing those things to make Cassie's life easier also just kept the peace. Sort of. Mostly. At least, it was

better than it would have been if, God forbid, Cassie had to scrub something or run out for more eggs.

Jane didn't know if Cassie would do anything truly horrible to Kelsey or Jack, or even what that would be exactly, but Cassie was a selfish bitch, so she wasn't going to take any chances.

And then there was Aspen. Cassie's daughter. She was only a year younger than Kelsey, and she was truly the epitome of a spoiled brat. She did nothing around the house and not only delighted in having Kelsey essentially be her servant, but made a point of making the biggest messes she could and always needing stupid crap from the store when Jane or Kelsey had just gotten home.

Aspen was a nightmare.

But it was only two more years. Two more years until Kelsey went off to college and could spend her breaks at Jane's, and neither of them had to ever see Cassie or Aspen again.

Okay, that probably wasn't realistic in Appleby. But they sure as hell wouldn't have to be friendly when they did.

Except that would probably stress Jack out.

Jane sighed. Hiding this from him was really the hardest part. It was in his best interest to believe his girls got along famously and were doing fine even though he couldn't be there.

Good God, she was probably going to have to keep having Christmases with Cassie and Aspen for years. And pretending to be happy about it.

With that depressing thought, Jane turned around the corner that would take her to where she was meeting Dax this morning. Yeah, she *really* didn't need any beanbags and gummy bears in her life. She had progressive neurological disorders, toilet bowls, and a stepfamily she disliked intensely—not necessarily in that order—to worry about. Dax was... a lot. She so didn't need a lot.

“No, that one's a *white* mocha. Here, this one's chocolate.”

She came up short as she came to the end of the hall where everyone gathered for their quick morning meeting around the time clocks.

Dax was already there. And in the middle of the cluster of people, seemingly holding court.

He saw her immediately. “Hey, Jane.” He plucked a wrapped square from the cardboard cupholder, Jim, one of her coworkers, was holding and passed it to her. “I was going to get you coffee, too, but Josie told me not to bother, that *this* was what got you going in the morning.”

Jane knew immediately what it was as she took it from him. A strawberry cream cheese bar. Her second favorite thing in the Buttered Up bakery.

Josie had given Dax ammunition. He thought she’d do anything for a dozen cake pops. That wasn’t true. There were some restrictions.

There were no such limitations on what she would do for one of Zoe’s strawberry-cream cheese bars.

She thought, for about a second and a half, about thrusting it back at him and refusing it. But she was simply not strong enough for that even on a good day. This was really not an especially good day.

“Thanks.” She even said it sincerely. Because so what if he knew she loved these damn things and kept bringing them to her? How could that possibly be a bad thing?

She immediately unwrapped and bit into it. Why would she wait? She closed her eyes as the first bit of creamy strawberry goodness caressed her taste buds like a long-lost lover intent on bringing her to orgasm. And honestly? As far as she remembered, the wave of pleasure that went through her and the moan she couldn’t hold back were very close to that.

It had been a while.

She opened her eyes as she swallowed. Dax was staring at her.

She licked her bottom lip and watched as his gaze followed her tongue.

“I want one of *those* tomorrow,” Sarah, one of her favorite coworkers, said. Sarah looked around the little crowd. “Seriously. Someone bring me one of *those*.”

“I’ve totally got you covered,” Bryan, one of their main bakers—or one of the Master Bakers as they liked to refer to themselves—said with a nod. He looked from Jane to Sarah. “Just promise I get to watch you eat it.”

Sarah and Bryan had been sleeping together on and off for about two years. Everyone knew it and everyone was completely cool with it. Including Sarah and Bryan. They were truly the poster children for friends with benefits. It was pretty awesome.

Jane’s gaze went back to Dax. Who was still watching her. She took another bite. As unapologetic as she’d been at the cake-pop table the first night they’d met.

So what if he thought bringing her these bars would lead to her taking her panties off? He could think that.

And hell, it might be true. Taking her panties off with Dax might not be the worst idea she’d ever had. As long as his beanbags and gummy bears stayed in his office across town, *he* could be in her bedroom a couple of times.

She chewed and watched Dax and wondered what he thought about friends-with-benefits casual sex.

“Well, Boss, you ready for this today?” Max asked Dax.

Jane almost swallowed her bite of strawberry bar down the wrong pipe. She coughed hard and swore silently. First of all, sucking that thing into her lungs would have been a huge waste of Zoe’s magic. Jane’s stomach needed every bite. Second of all—and this probably should have been first of all—Dax was her *boss*. Dammit. How had she forgotten that? She shouldn’t take her panties off with him. Regardless of his beanbag and gummy candy situation.

Wow, she could *not* forget that. And honestly, that probably meant not having him bring her any more strawberry

cream bars. Those things made her stupid. Clearly.

She finished hers off—no sense letting this one go to waste—and brushed her hands off on her pants. “Yeah, let’s get things going,” she said as if she hadn’t just been thinking about getting naked with Dax and a strawberry cream bar.

Seriously, she’d really want that bar there too.

Everyone, besides Dax, Max, and Jane, moved off, getting ready for their day, heading to their stations.

“I’m ready.” Dax tucked the cardboard coffee tray he’d been holding into the recycling bin behind him.

It occurred to Jane that he’d apparently brought coffee in this morning. For everyone on this shift. That was nearly eighty people.

Then she decided she did not want to know how he’d pulled that off. Dax gave off a vibe of just making things happen, and while that could be a very admirable trait, she suspected some of the things he pulled off were, well, ridiculous.

“And for what it’s worth,” Dax said to Max, turning around and rubbing his hands together, “Jane’s the boss today. Totally in charge of me.”

“Is that right?” Max shot her a look with one arched brow.

She didn’t give him any kind of reaction. Max didn’t need a reaction. He already knew about the cake pops from Dax. Giving him anything more would be a very bad idea. Plus it wasn’t true that she was the boss. Exactly. *Dax* was the boss. *Dax was the boss*. That was her mantra for the day. Hell, probably for the whole time he was here.

“Here’s your shirt. I’ll get you a couple more for the rest of the week, but I assume you can do laundry so you don’t need five?”

She tossed Dax the Hot Cakes shirt she’d grabbed for him. Everyone wore the black shirts with the pink and white Hot Cakes logo on them. There were also polos, but no one on the floor wore those. In fact, most of the employees in this area—

where the treats were all mixed and baked—wore aprons, hair nets, gloves, and covers over their shoes, so it didn't much matter what they wore. But the company supplied the t-shirts, so most employees wore them to work under their outer protective gear.

“Hey, thanks.” He actually looked thrilled by the shirt. “Are you asking if I can do laundry as in, do I have facilities available or as in, am I capable?” He shot her a grin.

She tipped her head. “I guess... both.”

He chuckled. “Well, the answer is yes. To both.”

He loosened the tie he was wearing—it featured Rosie the Riveter and said “We Can Do It” which, she had to admit, was kind of funny considering this was his first day in a factory—and pulled it from his collar. He rolled it up and tucked it in his pocket. Then he started to unbutton the shirt he was wearing. It was a pale-blue button-down he'd rolled up to his elbows, and for a second, Jane was mesmerized by his fingers working the buttons and the slow reveal of skin and dark chest hair.

It wasn't until it was completely unbuttoned and he started to shrug it off, his pec, shoulder, and ab muscles flexing tantalizingly with the movements, that she snapped out of it.

Actually, it wasn't until Max shifted to the side, clearly to get a better view himself, that she snapped out of it.

What the *hell*? He was just undressing right here like that?

“There's a locker room *literally* five steps away,” she said.

“Shh... honey...” Max said, waving a hand in her direction.

She frowned at her friend. But he had just stuck his hand out with a, “Here, let me hold that.”

“Thanks.” Dax handed his button-down shirt to Max then shook out the t-shirt and held it up to study the front.

All the while, of course, he was half-naked, his muscles and tanned skin—and no, there was no farmer's tan on this guy—all rippling and tempting and ogle-worthy.

She blamed the strawberry bar.

Dax grinned and moved to pull the t-shirt over his head. While his face was covered, Max lifted the button-down to his nose and breathed in.

“Oh my God!” she hissed, swatting him.

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Not sorry.”

She was totally jealous of that little whiff Max had just taken.

She shook her head and looked at Dax again. Yes, she’d noticed Max and Dax rhymed. That could not be a good sign. Max was a bit of a handful. Not usually for her, but he had every potential to be. Like getting her into trouble by encouraging her to lust after her boss. And Dax was definitely a handful. She didn’t even know him very well and it was already very clear.

“You okay?” she asked as Dax slowly pulled the shirt down his body. “Does it fit?” He was taking a very long time putting that shirt on.

Was it hot in here?

“Yeah, fine.” He finally pulled the bottom down over his stomach and smoothed a hand over his chest. “What do you think?”

“Looks great,” Max told him without pause.

It did. It really freaking did. The guy was good looking. That was just a fact. In his shirts and ties and everything, he was definitely a guy who made women look twice. But in that black t-shirt? The soft cotton molding to his pecs and shoulders, emphasizing his flat stomach, wrapping around those biceps? She wanted to strip it right back off of him.

She literally saw dozens of men in those shirts every single day, and she’d never had *that* reaction before.

“I should get you a baggier one,” she decided.

Max gave her a frown. “Don’t be crazy.” He turned back to Dax with a smile. “Wouldn’t want it getting caught in the

machinery. The fit of this one is perfect.”

Dax stretched his arms overhead, the bottom of the shirt inching up on his stomach. His flat, hard, tanned stomach with the very start of the trail of hair that would lead...

Jane blinked. Somehow. “What are you doing?”

“Checking the fit.” Dax bent side to side and then twisted right to left. “What do you think?”

“Yep. Absolutely perfect,” Max said appreciatively.

In much the same tone Jane would use to praise Zoe about her strawberry pie.

She watched Dax twist and turn and bend for another twenty seconds. Then asked, “Are you going to be done anytime soon?”

“You get a good look?” Dax asked Max.

Max shrugged. “I mean. Yeah. I looked. But I’m not going to say there’s really a time limit on something like that.”

Jane crossed her arms. “What are you doing?” she asked Dax.

“Well, I figured I needed him to take a full inventory of my assets,” Dax said, finally dropping his arms.

“You wanted *Max* looking at your abs?” she asked. She frowned and looked back and forth between the two men. “I’m missing something.” Like the fact that Dax swung in Max’s direction, possibly.

She’d like to say she’d be happy for her very good friend, but she wasn’t sure she was going to be able to pull that off, honestly.

“I figured Max was going to be talking to you about me later, and I wanted to be sure he had plenty to gush about,” Dax said, tucking his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “I mean, I intend to dazzle him with my wit and charm and intelligence, of course, but if I’m lucky enough to have him also appreciate my abs, then I’m not above using that too.”

Max nodded. Then looked at Jane. Then back to Dax. “I’m fully on board with this.”

Jane sighed. Of course he was. Yeah, she’d been completely right about them each being a handful and together being *way* too much for her.

“Maybe Max will just talk to his guy buddies about you,” she said, noting that not only had Dax clearly figured Max out right away, but he was obviously not threatened by Max’s sexuality at all. She liked that about him, she had to admit.

“Hey, you say whatever you want to your guys, but be sure you go on and on about me to *her* too, okay?” Dax asked, pointing at Max.

Max eyed Dax’s bicep. “You got it. Not a problem.”

“And be sure to check out my ass later too.” He shot Jane a smirk. “Elliot says that’s my best feature.”

Max nodded. “Can do.” Then he paused. “Elliot?”

“Best programmer I know,” Dax said. “Not bad at Ping-Pong either. But don’t tell him. There’s not room enough in my office for both of our egos as it is.”

Max thought about that for a moment. “Is Ping-Pong a euphemism? I’ve never heard that one before.”

Dax shook his head. “Just Ping-Pong. Actually Ping-Pong.” He mimed swinging with a Ping-Pong paddle.

Jane sighed.

“So Elliot says your ass is your best feature,” Max clarified.

“Right.”

“And he’s seen your abs?”

“He has,” Dax confirmed as if they were discussing what he was having for lunch rather than what other men thought of his body. “But tattoos are *really* his thing.” He looked pointedly at the tattoo wrapping around Max’s right bicep and the one that extended down his left forearm.

“Yeah?” Max looked very interested. “Is Elliot single, and is he coming to visit you any time while you’re in Appleby?”

Dax nodded. “Yes and yes. But I should warn you, Elliot is only twenty-three and is definitely looking for a... daddy.”

Max, with a little gray at his temples and in his beard, slapped a hand over his heart. “Stop it.”

“Seriously.”

“This is going to be a good day,” Max declared.

Jane rolled her eyes. “Max, you realize he’s just kissing up to you to get to me,” Jane said. Not that she thought Max would care. Dax was obviously heterosexual. But if he was cool talking about this all openly and didn’t have a bit of discomfort when Max checked him out, then Max wasn’t going to pass up the chance.

“I’m okay with that,” Max said.

She blew out a breath and shook her head, looking at the two of them. Dax was grinning at her as if he’d just won some kind of victory. And maybe he had. Max would definitely talk her ear off about Dax. He was, actually, kind of Max’s type. Muscled, short beard, funny, confident, comfortable in his own skin, friendly, and charming. Max was a bit older and gruffer, had a lot more tattoos and probably more piercings—she sure hadn’t seen a nipple piercing on Dax, and she had definitely studied his naked torso thoroughly in the few seconds she’d been given—but he was also funny and didn’t have many personal boundaries and loved to have a good time.

“The good-looking ones who *know* they’re good looking are such pains in the ass,” she finally said.

“Are we?” the two men said in unison.

Then they laughed.

Jane groaned. “This is such a bad idea.” She pivoted and started walking away. Really, that was her only choice.

Dax and Max could bond all day. Max would tell her all about it. She’d think Dax was great and be even more attracted to him. Fine.

But none of that changed the fact he was *her boss*. And had a candy station in his office.

“Hey, where are you going? Don’t we have work to do?” Dax called.

“We do. And I’m late. So I need to get going.”

“Don’t you work *here*?”

She turned around but kept walking backward. “I work for Hot Cakes. But not in this area. You want to get to know how the factory works and really see the place in action, then you need to see how all the areas work. There are several. We figured we’d take you through the process from mixing and baking”—she gestured toward Max—“to decorating and packaging to shipping.”

“Where do you work?”

“At the end of the line. In the distribution and shipping center.”

“So I’ll be there...”

“Not for several days.” She grinned at his narrowed eyes. He’d just realized she was going to be able to avoid him all week.

“She drives a forklift,” Max offered.

That made Dax perk up though. He looked impressed. “No way.”

“Yep,” Max confirmed.

“That’s awesome.”

She laughed, in spite of herself. “I don’t know about that. And I don’t drive one all day or anything.”

“But you *do* drive one.”

“Yes.”

“So you kind of *fork around* at work.”

“Yeah, I gotta go.” She pivoted and started in the opposite direction from Dax Marshall. A direction she needed to keep

going even figuratively. But once her back was to them, she didn't have to fight her smile.

“Don't worry, Dax, this is the best area to be in. Lots of sugar and *cream*,” she heard Max say.

Dax actually cough-choked at that.

Jane's grin grew. Actually, this might be fine. It was possible Dax had just met his match.

Chapter Three



“What the...”

Dax looked up, the Ping-Pong ball sailing past his left shoulder.

“Yes!” Bryan pumped his fist in the air. It was the first point he’d gotten off of Dax in three rounds.

Dax was *very* good at Ping-Pong. Practice made perfect after all.

But Jane had just walked into the break room, so he didn’t care a bit about Ping-Pong.

She was standing just inside the break room doorway, staring.

He grinned and set his paddle down. “Forfeit,” he told Bryan.

“I actually won one?” Bryan asked.

“Well...” Dax shrugged. “I mean, if winning ’cause the other guy quit makes you happy...”

Bryan chuckled. “Twenty bucks is twenty bucks, man.” He swiped the twenty-dollar bill off the table where their cups of cappuccino sat and sauntered across the room to join his other coworkers for the rest of their break.

Jane made a beeline for Dax. Just as he’d expected she would. Two days ago.

All the work had been finished Tuesday night, but she’d been avoiding him, and the break room, so this was probably

all a huge shock to her today.

“You did this, right?”

He looked around with a big smile. “This has me written all over it.”

“There’s a coffee bar.”

He’d thought about going for just a cappuccino machine but in the end decided to go all out and cover all bases. It was crazy to him, but not everyone liked cappuccino. So their machine did everything from plain hot water to hot chocolate—three flavors—to Americanos to white mochas. Of course, a machine alone did not a coffee bar make. There were syrups and toppings too. So as not to be wasteful with paper cups, everyone had been encouraged to bring their own cups in from home and keep them on the hooks he’d also had installed. It was very cool.

“Want a cappuccino?” he asked, moving for a refill himself. He wasn’t sure he could date a woman who didn’t like cappuccino.

“Um...”

He glanced back at her to find her studying the rest of the room.

“Jane?”

She looked at him.

“Cappuccino?”

“No. Thanks.”

He hit the button to fill his cup. “Because you just don’t want one or because you don’t like them?” he asked.

“A Ping-Pong table *and* a Foosball table?” she asked instead of answering.

“Not everyone likes Ping-Pong.” Also crazy. Ping-Pong was the best. It took great reflexes and hand-eye coordination, but you didn’t have to strategize or concentrate fully, so you could think about other things while you played. It was the best way through a creative block.

“You... knocked a wall down.”

He grabbed his cup from under the dispenser and headed for a table on the far side of the room from the others that were occupied. He'd spent the last few days talking to as many people as he could and encouraging everyone else, by example, to gather together. But right now he wanted Jane to himself.

Not just right now. He'd really like to get this woman alone. But right now for a particular reason.

“Needed more space,” he said of the missing wall.

It had simply been a dividing piece of drywall between this room and a storeroom next door. He'd asked the maintenance guys about the storeroom and its contents, helped them relocate everything, and then helped them demolish the wall after hours. It had really been that simple.

“We needed to have three couches and a seventy-inch TV in here?” she asked.

She seemed a little dazed.

“Seventy-five,” he said, nudging her into the chair he'd pulled out at the table.

She sat. “Right. Sorry. We needed a seventy-five-inch TV?”

“Well, it makes *Family Feud* at three a lot easier,” he said, taking the chair beside her and sliding in close.

Jane blinked at him. “*Family Feud* at three?”

“We gather in here to watch *Family Feud* at three. Everyone picks a team, and we have a pool about who will win. People also get bonuses for answering before contestants do.”

She just stared at him.

“And a few people have asked if they can use their breaks to watch some old soap opera. Some of the older girls who watched religiously are enjoying introducing the younger people—some of the guys too—to the show. And then Maria

and Adelina have a Spanish soap they want to watch and Lexi and Morgan are watching with them.” Lexi and Morgan were two young moms in their twenties. “They took a bunch of Spanish in high school and say it’s fun to practice what they learned that way. And then a couple of the high school girls have introduced a whole group to *The Bachelor*. Which is awful, of course, but Linda and Kevin and Terrell think it’s hilarious.” He paused. “It’s amazing what you can find on the streaming services.”

She said nothing.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you about something I’ve been thinking about.”

“I know nothing about *The Bachelor*.”

He gave her a smile. “If anyone asks, just say Amber. She’s the one.”

“So you’re buying Ping-Pong tables and TVs and cappuccino machines to get out of doing actual work?” she asked. “I thought you wanted to know how the factory worked?”

“I’ve been working,” he told her, mildly offended. “You haven’t heard everyone gushing about me?”

She lifted a brow. “I guess not.”

“Because you haven’t been taking your breaks in here.”

“I’ve been... busy over my breaks the last couple of days.”

Dax started to say something about her avoiding him, but he looked more closely. She seemed to mean it. In fact, her lips were pulled tightly at the corners, and her eyes were filled with fatigue.

“Is it your dad?”

Startled, Jane’s gaze met his. “My dad?”

“Max said he’s sick.”

She frowned. “You and Max have been talking about me?”

“Everyone talks about you,” Dax said. He gave her a little smile. “I fully intended to ask about you, but I didn’t have to. People love you. And they know a lot about you.”

She was still frowning when she said, “These people know me too well.”

“And love you,” he said again. He wanted to be sure she heard that part. They might not have been gushing to her about him, but they’d all had a million great things to say about her, and it seemed they were thrilled to have someone to say them to. Since everyone knew Jane so well, they probably didn’t have reason to talk about how wonderful they thought she was.

“Yeah, well, they don’t get out much. Their bar for greatness is pretty low,” she said. She reached for his cup and took a drink of his cappuccino.

He grinned watching her. “Well, they haven’t said great,” he told her.

She looked up at him. “No?”

“Nope. Not one person has used the word great.”

“What word have they used?” she asked. Her eyes were lit with something else now—sass, spunk, something other than exhaustion and the touch of sadness he’d thought he’d glimpsed too. This was much preferable.

She sat back in her chair, folded an arm over her stomach, propped her heel on the chair on the other side of her, and kept drinking his cappuccino.

He leaned in, pretending to think. “Let’s see. I’m trying to remember if there were any specific adjectives.”

“Hard working?” she asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “I mean, it’s clear you know everything there is to know about this place, but nothing they told me was about the factory.”

She lifted a brow then lifted the cup. She was intrigued but trying to hide it. He was going to draw this out, not give her what she wanted right away. It would keep her with him longer. He’d felt like he’d missed her. It had only been two

days, and he barely knew her, but he'd been disappointed to not see her over the past couple of days. Now it was bugging him that she'd clearly been dealing with something unpleasant.

He'd also noted she hadn't answered him about what that was and if it had to do with her father. No one had given him specifics, but knowing he was sick and in a local nursing home made Dax want to know everything.

She swallowed her drink and said, "So what did they tell you about if not the factory? All I really do is work and go home. I'm not interesting at all."

Uh-huh. He'd be the judge of that. She was very interesting if for no other reason than she was completely the opposite of the last several women he'd dated. She was a blue-collar worker from small-town Iowa where she'd spent her whole life. Her wardrobe, at least her daily work clothes, consisted of denim and t-shirts. She had gorgeous eyes and lips and skin and hair and not one bit of it was adorned with makeup or jewelry. She drove a forklift, for fuck's sake.

"Let's see, well, Alecia told me you came over and slept on her couch and took her two little girls to school for three days when her baby was sick with RSV and she was up all night with him."

Jane paused with the cup halfway to her lips. She looked at him with surprise. "She did?"

"Yep. And you puppy-sat for Daren and his wife when they took their first vacation in five years last summer. He said if you hadn't been willing to take their *three* dogs to your house for a week, they wouldn't have been able to go because no one else would take them, and they couldn't afford boarding, but you insisted they deserved to get away."

Jane set the cup back on the table and crossed her arms. "Well, they did."

He nodded. "And Marsha said you stayed an extra two hours every day for ten days, so you could give her a ride home after her shift when she was in a car accident, and it was

taking the insurance company forever to get her the money to fix it.”

“I got paid overtime,” she muttered. But she was studying the cup on the table instead of looking at him.

“I guess that one was kind of about the factory,” he said.

And it occurred to him that none of them had said they loved her; it had just been very clear.

“Other people do that stuff too,” she said.

That was true. They’d told him those stories too. The stories about Jane had come up within conversations about how the factory workers felt like a little family and how they all helped each other out. He just homed in on her and what kind of person that clearly made her. Because he was incredibly attracted to her, and he’d never dated a woman who would have done any of those things he’d just talked about. Though to be fair to the women he’d dated, none of them worked with people who couldn’t afford to board their dogs or get their cars fixed right away.

“I buy cappuccino machines and subscribe to streaming packages that have classic game shows on them to make people happy and feel a little lighter about their work,” he finally said. “You actually *help* make things a little lighter for people.”

Her gaze came back to his, and he felt the connection in his gut. He hadn’t intended to say that, but it was true. He admired her. He took seriously his desire to make people happier and add some frivolity to life. Life was hard. It was serious no matter how hard you tried to have fun. So having moments, here and there, where it was *just* about fun and laughter were important. But Jane made people’s lives a little easier by *doing* things, getting in there and sharing their loads, and he really fucking liked that about her.

“I think this cappuccino is pretty delicious,” she finally said, her voice a little thick.

He smiled. Coming from her, that was huge. He’d take it.

“Can I ask you about an idea I had? I’d love your input,” he said.

“I know nothing about air hockey.”

He cocked his head. “What?”

“If you want to know what other tables to put in here, I’m not the right girl.”

He laughed. “Not that.” He paused. “And I think you are the right girl.”

Their eyes locked again, and the moment seemed heavier somehow. The right girl for what? Yeah, that was a good question. One he kind of wanted the answer to. A lot.

She pressed her lips together, and Dax realized he really was obsessed with that part of her body. He’d thought maybe that had been about the cake—then the strawberry bar—but no, it was the lips. The strawberry bar had been something. She’d gone right in on it and he’d loved that. This woman might not think she was into all his shenanigans, but when she had something that made her feel good, she dove right in. Now to show her that not all those things had to have sugar...

Or maybe they did. He had some ideas about him and her and those bars and his silk sheets...

“What’s your idea?” she asked.

He shook himself. Right, he wanted to ask her about... work. Something about Hot Cakes. And the employees. Something that had occurred to him over the past couple of days. But he bet her lips tasted like the strawberries she liked so much. And he did intend to find out.

“Right.” He leaned in as the thoughts came flooding back. “I have an idea about employee scheduling and stuff.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Oh.”

Her surprise was fair. So far he’d been more the air-hockey-table type. Dax actually smiled at that. He *was* more the air-hockey-table type. But this was a great idea. He knew it.

“I was reading about companies where employees set their own hours. They’re given a base salary based on their type of work. Expectations are set about what they’re going to produce in exchange for that salary. But how and when they do it is up to them. As long as the outcome is there, no one cares when they do the work.”

Jane frowned and sat forward in her chair. But she didn’t say anything.

“There’s a lot of research behind employee happiness and satisfaction being tied to autonomy,” Dax said, feeling the need to keep talking. “There’s also *a lot* of research showing that happy employees are more productive and are more loyal to their companies and their output is higher quality.”

Jane held up a hand. “Just give me a second,” she said. “I need to switch gears. You’re actually being serious here.”

Now his eyebrows went up. “I can do that sometimes.”

“I’ve seen zero evidence of that,” she threw back.

He opened his mouth then shut it. That was fair. He *could* be serious, but he preferred to leave that to Grant and Aiden. They were a lot better at it, for one thing. But he couldn’t deny it made him itch a little to know Jane had no clue that he could take things seriously when needed.

“You’ve been reading about this?” she asked.

“I *can* read,” he said. That was a little more defensive than it needed to be. *Relax, man*, he told himself.

“Good to know Piper doesn’t have to read things to you like she does Ollie,” Jane commented dryly.

Dax grinned. “He only does that because Piper has the prettiest eye roll on the planet and her sarcasm is magical.”

Jane actually smiled at that. “I can’t imagine keeping you all in line.”

“And she does it all without breaking a nail. Thank God. Because, holy shit, the one time she *did* break a nail... we heard about that for a month after. Do you have any idea how

expensive manicures can be? She's written those into her employee benefits package."

Jane wiggled her fingers at him. Her nails were unpainted and short. "I actually have no idea."

He smiled. He'd never talked about factory work shifts with his past girlfriends, but he'd had a few conversations about manicures.

"I don't see how what you're talking about could work here," she said, switching gears back to the idea of self-scheduling and salaries. "In offices where people are doing marketing projects and things, maybe. But how would that work here? You need a certain number of people to complete a process. And we need to turn out a certain amount of the product every day for the bottom line. It's not an advertising campaign. There is actual inventory that needs to get loaded onto a truck and shipped out before people can buy it."

He nodded. "But the *concept* could work. I was thinking about it after Alecia and Marsha told me about you switching up your schedule to help them out."

Jane blinked at him again the way she had when they'd been talking about the game shows. "You were thinking about this because of me?"

"I was thinking about you, and then this idea came to me," he corrected.

"You were thinking about me?"

"I've been thinking about you since I saw you fit an entire cake ball in your mouth," he told her.

Her cheeks got pink but she snorted. "Not my finest moment."

"I disagree. That told me so much about you in one little action."

She arched an eyebrow. "All about my oral capacity and willingness to stick a lot in there?"

Surprise hit him in the chest, and he tried to suck in a breath while also saying *something* and he ended up coughing.

She grinned. He shook his head.

“You’re... unexpected.”

Her grin grew. “Good.”

“What I *meant*,” he said, shifting on his chair as his body was still responding to ideas about her sticking a lot in her mouth, “was that you were going for it because you wanted it and didn’t care what anyone else thought.”

“Well, if someone judges a grown-ass woman, who can clearly make her own decisions, for something as harmless as eating cake, that person is an asshole.”

“Absolutely.”

They just grinned at each other for a long moment.

“Tell me more about this idea,” she finally said. “I don’t think I’m getting how it can work here, but I’m listening.”

Dax was shocked by how much that made him want to kiss her.

Eating cake pops? Licking frosting off her fingers and lips? Checking out his abs? Being sassy and sarcastic? Pitching in to help the people around her and then being surprised when someone thought that was really great? Driving a forklift? Sure, that all made sense. But her wanting to hear more about his idea? Taking it seriously enough to sit and listen? It made him want to kiss the hell out of her. And then impress her. With more than his tongue.

He cleared his throat. He had to talk first. Then kiss. Maybe. If he was lucky. “The people here know what they’re doing. Hot Cakes is fortunate as hell to have a ton of people who have been here a long time. Even when new people come in, the current employees are very capable of training them and demanding good work.”

“They’ve been demanding good work from you?” she asked. “Really?”

He nodded. “They have. They’ve been... deferential because, I guess, I’m kind of the boss, but yeah, they correct me and make me do things over if I mess it up.”

She laughed. “You *are* the boss. Period. There’s no guessing or kind of about it.”

He sighed. “I don’t feel like a boss.”

“You’re new here. This is all new,” she said.

He shook his head. “Ever.”

“You never feel like a boss?”

“I’d much rather just work *with* people. I’m only a boss because I have money. There are a lot of people who know more than I do, who are more talented than I am, who have better ideas than I do.”

She gave him a funny look.

“What?”

“Yeah, you’re not a very good boss.”

He laughed.

“Seriously, that is not any kind of boss attitude I’ve ever seen before. You need to be full of yourself and certain that you know more and that you’re always right.”

“And certain that my farts smell like cookies?”

Her eyes widened. “Pardon me?”

He chuckled. “Cam says he doesn’t believe that my farts smell like cookies, but that I walk around as if they do.”

She narrowed her eyes. “But you walk around like that because you’re trying to convince everyone that cookie farts are all you’re really concerned about.”

He narrowed his eyes back at her. “You think you’ve figured me out?”

She looked mildly surprised but she nodded. “You don’t think of yourself as a boss because you don’t want to be a boss because you think people don’t like bosses.”

Damn, she maybe *had* figured him out.

He liked the idea of her knowing him. Jane knowing him made him think she could also help him be better at all the

things he wanted to do. Which meant that maybe he was figuring her out too. She wouldn't put up with his bullshit.

She'd be like Grant. Except she had gorgeous lips and curves and he wanted to get naked with her.

Actually, she'd be better than Grant in another way too. Grant actually gave him a long leash at times. Grant told him when he was being a dumbass and definitely got pissed off at him, but Grant cleaned up his and Ollie's messes and just took care of things he didn't want them dealing with because they were business partners, and he had to keep Dax out there doing his thing.

Dax definitely liked the women who would show up in fairy or princess costumes to cosplay characters he'd created. That was huge for his ego, no question. He loved having fans. But in spite of the fact that he resented every time his father tried to get him to stop messing around, he knew he actually needed someone who would say, "Your farts do not and never will smell like cookies, so knock it off."

Jane wouldn't care about his ego staying big enough that he could entertain a crowd of thousands at Comic-Con. In fact, if things went well and progressed the way he'd like, they'd get to a place where she would prefer he *not* hang out with hot cosplaying princesses.

He'd also bet a million dollars she'd make him clean up his own messes.

"You think I need people to like me?" he asked. That wasn't exactly it.

"You brought coffee to *eighty* people your first day of work."

Fair enough. "Well, of course, I like when people like me. But actually, I want people to feel... better off because I'm around."

Her expression softened. "I think you're pulling that off."

He liked that. "Yeah?"

“Well, you’re down here learning about how this place works and what the workers think even two days after realizing you’re not going to be around me enough to *try* to seduce me. And you brought in a TV, not to win people over or help people kill time, but to help them actually interact with each other outside of what they’re doing at work. And you appreciate the fact that these people are correcting what you’re doing even though you *are* their boss.”

He basked in that for a moment. He couldn’t help it. Jane Kemper was a tough girl with a heart of gold, and her giving him five minutes of consideration—and deciding he wasn’t a total fuck-up—was pretty damned great.

“Wow,” he finally said softly, looking right into her eyes. “I am pretty awesome.”

She blinked once. Then again. Then rolled those gorgeous eyes—Piper might not actually have the prettiest eye roll after all—and blew out a breath. “Okay, boss man, tell me the rest of this brilliant plan.”

Boss man. Huh. Maybe he could be a boss. Maybe being a boss didn’t mean being a hard-ass and someone people hated or were intimidated by. Maybe the things he did were boss-like.

“Okay,” he said, filled with a confidence that was unlike the kind he was used to. This wasn’t cocky confidence. This wasn’t I-just-nailed-that-design confidence. This was this-could-*really*-matter confidence. He liked it. “The factory already works because the employees are divided up into various areas that specialize in certain parts of the production. There are managers and so on. But they have specific work hours, and people are paid based on how *much* they work, not *how* they work.”

“Okay,” Jane said. “Go on.”

“But *how* they work and how they feel about their work matters. It shouldn’t just be punching a time clock. It should be about being a part of a team. I get that we can only care so much about snack cakes,” he said. “But we can care about the

people around us, the people we're working with, and how they're working."

She nodded. "I think most of us already do."

"I do too. I've already seen it. Which means, this will be an easy adjustment and one people will embrace. It will reward them for what they're already doing. Working as a team." He scooted his chair forward, leaning in, excited the more he talked. "Each area becomes a team. There's no manager. There's no hierarchy. Everyone is the same. You work together to figure out when everyone works and what they do. Someone needs longer breaks because their carpal tunnel is flaring up? That person takes those breaks and works a longer day. You need shorter breaks more often? Take them. You need shorter days but want to work six days a week? Or longer days and work only four? You want to come in later on Fridays or earlier on Tuesdays? Great. Everyone knows what they need to get done and then they're in charge of making it happen."

She was frowning but she was listening. "But no one keeps track? How do they get paid?" Jane asked.

"The team is given a percent of the overall company earnings. Every piece of the factory is important. Equally so. We couldn't run without the mixing and baking area, but we also need packaging and shipping. We need the maintenance crew and the business office and... everyone. We all rise or fall based on how everyone else does."

She watched him, her wheels clearly turning. Finally she nodded. "Okay."

"Really?" He was a little surprised. "You think it's good?"

"I didn't say that." She pushed back from the table. "But it's not *bad*. As a *starting* point. It will never work exactly like that, but I like the thought you've put into it."

"Yeah?" She didn't think it would work, but she liked the general idea. For some reason that made Dax feel downright triumphant.

She stood. “I think that you’ve really thought about this a lot and clearly researched some things, and obviously, you’ve been paying attention around here.” She pushed her chair in. “And *that* is all great.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“And I think you just need to do a lot more of it. Ask questions. Talk to people who have been doing this work for a long time. Don’t assume anything.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

She started to turn away but then faced him again. “And... you made me realize something.”

“I did?”

She nodded. “I’ve thought for a long time I could just come to work, put in my time, and then go home. I thought this was just a job and that’s what I wanted because I have so much going on outside of work.”

He nodded.

“But...” She paused, then went on. “Some of the guys built a ramp at my dad’s house for his wheelchair when it got to the point he couldn’t do the steps with his walker anymore. They just showed up one Saturday and did it. Just like that.” She swallowed. “And when my sister needed her tonsils out last fall, they covered my hours, but then they went even further, and a bunch of people from my department brought her ice cream and magazines, and they didn’t forget to bring me strawberry cobbler and wine.”

He chuckled.

She took a breath. “I guess I do leave the work here when I leave, but I don’t leave the people here. And neither do my coworkers. So...” She looked at him, her bottom lip between her teeth. “Thanks for pointing that out to me.”

Then she did fully turn and walk away. Back to work.

Dax sat at the table by himself for a long time after she left. Thinking.

Dax almost never sat—or did anything alone anywhere—for any extended period of time.

But the true sign his world was tipping on its axis?

He didn't even really want to play Ping-Pong.

Chapter Four



Jane approached the door to the break room on Monday with trepidation. She'd avoided it Friday and had been off for the weekend. She was always glad to have the weekend off, but she'd welcomed the time away from Hot Cakes even more than usual. After her sit-down with Dax the day before that, she'd been shaken. By him. By his ideas and his sexy smile and his desire to make things better for everyone and the way he'd gotten her thinking about things.

The guy with the gummy bears in his office wasn't supposed to make her *think* about things.

But today she was going in there. Because... she wanted a cappuccino.

No, that wasn't true. Entirely. Those were pretty damned good. Especially the way Dax put cinnamon on the top of his. But that wasn't what was drawing her toward the break room today.

She'd been at the nursing home yesterday, and the nurses had told her that her dad had been in his room and hadn't wanted to come out for the last couple of days. He wouldn't come out with her either. He said he had no interest in doing anything that was happening outside of his room, so why would he come out? Which was logical. Though sitting in his room all day wasn't great either. Jack's mind was fully functional except for the foggiest one of his medications caused at times. But he took that at night, so during the day, he was mentally functional. It was his body that was failing him. And none of his nurses danced around the fact. His condition

wasn't going to get better. The best they could hope for was to treat the symptoms, like the tremors and muscle tightness, and hope the disease could be slowed. But all the experimental programs were happening in bigger cities, and they simply couldn't afford for Jack to participate in any. It was one of the truths of living in a rural area. Medical advancements didn't get here as quickly and specialists were spread thin.

Which left relatively young men, whose minds were still intact inside of failing bodies, living in nursing homes with people who could be their parents and who needed a different type of care.

Jack just didn't want to do the activities offered at the home a lot of the time.

Jane was so frustrated. She felt guilty he had to live there but knew she couldn't care for him herself. He'd be sitting in her apartment alone all day if he lived with her. And there'd be no one there to help him with even the simple things like getting up to the bathroom or eating. Things the tremors and muscle spasms made impossible for him to do on his own.

He needed another person to physically help him up and down, and as the psychologist had explained to them while they'd been dealing with the move to the nursing home, it really was easier for everyone most times if that person was a professional. Not only because they knew safe techniques for helping but also because helping your father use the toilet was just something that was difficult emotionally for both the child and the parent.

Still, when Jack said he spent his day reading and watching television for days on end, she felt terrible. She visited three times a week, but it was so hard to get there more often. She had to check in on Kelsey too. She had friends and coworkers—with sick kids and dogs that needed sitting—that needed her too and... frankly, she sometimes just needed time to sit in her apartment alone.

She understood the beauty of alone time. She really did.

If that's all Jack was going for, it would be different.

“Yes!”

The shout came from the break room and jerked her out of her thoughts.

Last night had been really hard. Typically she would be out in her car, eating a sandwich in total silence, just breathing, not up for being with people.

Today, though, she was standing in front of the break room door, knowing Dax was inside, and hoping he could distract her.

Actually, she knew he could.

She wanted that.

But she was worried. Worried she'd get really addicted to that. Addicted to *him*.

She couldn't just ignore all the stuff going on in her life. She couldn't make a habit of letting Dax take her mind off everything. She needed to *deal* with everything. She should probably be on the phone with the nursing home administrator or Zoe and Josie, someone who could give her advice.

Instead, she wanted to drink cappuccino and flirt.

“Hey, you joining the tournament?” Gabe, one of the other guys in the shipping department asked, passing her on his way to the break room.

“The tournament?” she asked. She started after him. Now that someone had seen her in the hallway, she had to go in. Not going in would be silly.

Just today. Just this one time. Just one hour of distraction.

“The UNO tournament,” Gabe said, pushing the door open. “It's Monday.”

She assumed that was supposed to make sense. It didn't, exactly, but she knew Dax was behind it, and that was really all she needed to know to know it was something fun and popular.

Honestly, the employees really had been talking about him a lot. How funny he was. How enthusiastic he was to learn

everything about the factory. How self-deprecating he was about getting a lot of it wrong. Apparently, the mixer had “somehow” gotten switched to high with very few ingredients inside and had sprayed runny pink batter everywhere yesterday. He’d been coated in it.

Jane was suspicious. She wouldn’t put it past Dax to mess a few things up on purpose just to help everyone around him relax and to give them a good laugh at his expense.

But she wasn’t going to ask him about it. It made her like him more, and if he confirmed it, she might have to admit she had a little crush.

The noise from inside the room rose as she and Gabe stepped inside and she took in the sight. The tables were full. Four to six people sat at each one and they were all playing cards. It looked like a poker tournament. Other than the brightly colored cards and lack of cigar smoke and bourbon, she supposed. Instead, they had glasses and cups beside them. She assumed those held soda and cappuccino. Bowls of pretzels and M&M’s and chips sat around as well, and yes, gummy bears. Seeing those made her smile and she searched the room for Dax.

She found him lounging at a back table watching the whole thing. His chair was tipped back on two legs and he looked pleased. Happy. Almost proud. And looking at him just then, simply watching other people having fun, she realized this really was him. He really did like to make other people happy.

And if she’d had a crush on him, it would have grown a little then.

Or a lot.

She needed this. Just today. Just for this hour. Not for good. But yeah, for right now, this seemed like a great idea. Not the card game. She didn’t want to play UNO. She wanted to talk to Dax though.

His gaze found her when she was halfway across the room. The front legs of his chair hit the floor with a thump and his

grin grew. It made her heart thump hard in her chest. The last time someone had looked that happy to see her had been last night when her dad had seen her come through his door. But that thump had been accompanied by sadness and guilt and anger about how unfair the whole situation was.

This thump, the one Dax caused, was all about fun and anticipation and how good that Hot Cakes t-shirt looked on him.

“Well, hey there, Ms. Kemper.”

“Hi, Boss Man,” she returned.

He chuckled but shook his head. “See, I can think of some ways that could sound hot as hell, but not here and not like that.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “That could sound hot as hell?”

He pushed out a chair at his table for her. “Sure. ‘How can I help you today, Boss? What can I do for you, Boss? Would you like me to clear out the conference room, Boss?’”

Jane took the chair, avoiding his eyes so he wouldn’t see she was actually unable to smile at any of that or come up with a sassy comeback. Because she was breathing a little faster, and she was afraid her fair skin would give away that she was a little hotter now than she’d been a few seconds ago.

“But no,” he said, sitting forward and shaking his head. “I think it would be better with ‘sir.’ As in ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘Whatever you want, sir.’”

Dammit. How had she gone from “Oh, he’s so fun and flirty and I could really use a diversion today?” on the other side of the room to “Holy hell, he’s hot, and I really need to lose a few articles of clothing” now that she was sitting next to him?

“What do you think?” he asked.

She finally looked directly at him. “About?”

“Would you rather call me Boss or Sir?”

She swallowed. “Am I saying it sarcastically or seriously?” she asked.

He gave her that half grin that sometimes seemed very knowing. “Breathlessly.”

Well, at least the diversion thing had been accomplished. All she could think about right now was how green his eyes were and how she wanted to run her hand over his beard and how big his hand was where it was wrapped around his cup.

“Probably Sir,” she answered, deciding to be honest. Maybe it would at least throw him off his flirty game a little. “Boss reminds me that you’re, you know, my *boss*.”

And she might want to forget that once in a while.

That thought surprised and bothered her, but it was true.

His eyes flashed. “Sir, it is.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“For letting you call me Sir? Absolutely no problem.”

“For distracting me.”

“You need distracting?” His gaze dropped to her lips.

She pressed them together as they tingled. She nodded. “Lots on my mind.”

“Stuff you don’t want to talk about.”

“Right.”

“Want to play Ping-Pong?” he asked. “Best game for thinking things through. If you don’t have a solution by the time we’re done, I’ll give you twenty bucks.”

She laughed. “You and throwing money around.”

He shrugged. “I’m good at it.”

She couldn’t argue with that. “I don’t play Ping-Pong.”

He slapped a hand over his heart. “And I thought you were the perfect woman.”

Hardly. She was a woman juggling a bunch of balls that were starting to fall and bounce around all over the place.

“Ping-Pong requires another person. I need something I can do alone.”

“Some of the best things in life require another person,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes. Oh yeah, he’d meant that dirty. She wasn’t just making it sound that way in her head.

“But all those things can be done by yourself too, and not dealing with another person can be worth it sometimes.”

“So you want to scoot the Ping-Pong table against a wall and play by yourself?” he asked, pretending to be confused, but one corner of his mouth was definitely curving up.

She actually chuckled. “Figuratively.”

He studied her for a second then pushed back from the table. “Stay here. I have an idea.”

Jane didn’t stay there though. She headed for the cappuccino machine. By the time she’d returned with her cup—topped with a sprinkle of cinnamon—Dax was there. With two coloring books.

“Seriously?” she asked as she took her seat.

“Yep.” He pushed one toward her along with a pack of colored pencils.

She looked at it. And grinned. “A coloring book of swear words.”

“Well, of course,” he said as if that should have been obvious. He reached for the book in front of her and flipped it open. “Nothing is quite as good for the soul as coloring a page that says *This Is Horseshit* surrounded by beautiful flowers.”

She laughed. “I have to say, the idea has merit.”

“So dive in.”

He opened the book in front of him as well. Hers was called *Fuck Off, I’m Coloring*. His was *Chill The Fuck Out*, and his page was a squirrel and said *I Have No Fucks Left to Give*.

She pulled an orange pencil from the pack unable to help thinking that Dax's page didn't fit him as well as hers fit her. Everything going on with her dad *was* horseshit. Dax, on the other hand, did give a fuck. About a lot of things. Lots of fucks. Even when it seemed he didn't.

They colored without talking, surrounded by the sounds of the UNO tournament, for a few minutes.

Then Dax said, "So my dad thinks that all I do is fuck around."

She glanced up but he was still coloring. She returned to the S in HORSE. "Why's he think that?" But she had an inkling.

"Beanbag chairs," Dax said wryly. "The fact that I make a video game for a living. The fact that I'm in business with my best friends and go to Comic-Con and am a hit on YouTube and collect Frank Sinatra memorabilia."

"You collect Frank Sinatra memorabilia?" she asked, momentarily distracted.

"I do. Frank was the man. Suave, sophisticated, successful, but widely admired."

"And sexy," she added.

Dax looked up, at first surprised, then he smiled. "Sexy, huh?"

Jane nodded. "That voice? All the singing about love?" She'd never given Frank Sinatra a lot of thought beyond liking his music, but yeah, he gave off a sophisticated, bad-boy air. A lot like Dax. She shrugged. "I mean, he was just cool, you know? He just had this... attitude. Like life is short so you gotta live it your way." She paused then couldn't help but give Dax a smile. "I think he even sang a song about that."

Dax chuckled. "One of my favorites."

"So, yeah, there's something sexy about a guy who just lives life on his own terms."

Dax eyed her for a moment. Then said, "Sinatra was friends with mob bosses and had a temper. He hated

reporters.”

Jane thought about that. “Well, they were probably all up in his business. The reporters, I mean. That probably gets old.”

Dax nodded. “What about the mob ties?”

“I know he was also a strong advocate for civil rights. Back when that was not popular or common for celebrities. He forced casinos and clubs to hire people of color on their staffs and wouldn’t stay at a hotel that didn’t let blacks stay there.” She wasn’t sure how she knew all that, but she definitely remembered learning that about Sinatra and being impressed.

Dax nodded again. “True. So that makes up for being friends with bad guys?”

Jane lifted a shoulder. “We’re all complicated and have layers. Who knows why he was friends with those guys? We all have stories that other people only know pieces of.”

Dax had put his pencil down. “That’s true.”

“Which brings us back to the thing about your dad. How can he think you’re fucking around when your business is obviously successful, and you’re clearly happy, and Sinatra memorabilia is very cool?” She concentrated on filling the S of SHIT in with green, not wanting Dax to see how very interested she suddenly was in any and every story of his.

Yes, every story.

It was true everyone had stories that others only knew bits of, but she wanted to know all Dax’s stories. That was crazy.

“He assumes the success is because of the other guys. Though he does give me credit for picking good friends and not pissing them off enough to dump me.”

She glanced up. “He actually said that? That way?”

“Oh yeah.” Dax grinned. “*He* can’t imagine the patience it must take to be Grant and Aiden, in particular. He knows that Ollie fucks around a lot too.”

She thought about that. Then about her first impression of Dax. “Do you have beanbag chairs and gummy bears in your

office in Chicago?”

“I do. Of course.”

“And Ping-Pong table and cappuccino machine?”

“Yes.”

“And has your dad been to your office?”

“Yes. He comes to Chicago about every other month on business and always stops by.”

“If your dad *didn't* stop by, would you have those things in your office?”

“I...” He stopped and studied her. “I’m going to tell you something I’ve never admitted out loud and the guys know only because they’ve known me a long time.”

She smiled, put her pencil down, and leaned in on her elbows. “I’m ready.” She really was. This guy was interesting. He was sexy and funny and charming, but he was also surprising. He seemed to be easy to understand on the surface, but there was more there. Somehow, she could just tell. And in spite of her wanting to keep a nice buffer between her and anything that could require more energy and time and work in her life, she was drawn to him.

“I put that stuff in my office when we first started because it was symbolic of something that’s been going on with me and my dad since I was fourteen.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve been trying to prove to him that you can have fun *and* be successful.”

Jane arched an eyebrow. “And that means gummy bears?”

He grinned. “At first, the gummy bears were symbolic. They’re one of the silliest candies. Not just candy. Not just bright colors. But *bears*. Little, cute teddy bears.”

She laughed lightly. “Okay. So you symbolically displayed the silliest candy to remind your dad you were having fun making your millions.”

He nodded, smiling. “And I found the silliest office furniture and painted my office yellow—like bright sunshine yellow—”

“The silliest color for an office?” Jane guessed.

“Well, one of them. Hot pink might have been worse.”

She laughed. “And the Ping-Pong?”

“Silliest way to conduct a meeting.”

“You have meetings that way?”

“With my interns and my designers,” Dax said.

She shook her head. “Cappuccino isn’t really *silly*, is it?”

“To a guy who drinks his coffee straight up black, coffee with foam on it and chocolate or cinnamon sprinkles is silly,” Dax told her.

“Ah,” she said. “Okay, so you did it all to annoy your dad and make a point.”

“I did. And it worked,” he said. “But...”

Jane found herself actually leaning in. “His first trip out got canceled. After I had all that stuff in my office. So it was a month before he showed up. And by then, I liked it all. A lot.”

She laughed at that. “Really? And you were surprised?”

“The cappuccino was delicious. The beanbag chairs were comfortable, and I got a lot of brainstorming done in them. I loved the yellow office walls and the gummy bears were... well, gummy bears. There’s nothing bad about gummy bears.”

He gave her a grin, and Jane had the sudden impulse to kiss him. It was just a sudden flash, but he was just so damned attractive right then. Happy, amused, a little cocky, and so genuine. She blinked.

“And, I kid you not, the Ping-Pong was amazing. We had great brainstorming sessions while playing. And I’ve deduced that when people are doing something a little silly, something that is just fun and totally unrelated to their work, it frees up their brain and lets the creativity flow.” He looked around the

room grinning. “It just makes people happier and their work gets better.”

Jane also glanced around. That was more appropriate than staring at Dax’s lips. Her *boss’s* lips.

Everyone definitely seemed happier. “So you’re brainwashing us all into working better and harder but using silly games to relax us?”

He chuckled. The sound was low and deep. “I’m just making people a little happier. What happens as a result of that is just a nice consequence.”

“You’d be encouraging Ping-Pong games and UNO tournaments if it made them work less efficiently and productively?” she asked.

“If it did that, then I’d know those were the wrong activities,” he said. “Happy people just naturally work better. If the work suffers, then the activities aren’t making them happy. The work is just a measure of the happiness though,” he added. “Obviously, there are lots of other ways to tell. Laughing and smiling, opening up, talking, sharing.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’re trying to get people opening up and sharing?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

“So I can get to know them.” He leaned in. “So I can figure out what they need.”

“You want to get to know them?” she asked, her eyes finding it hard to stay off his mouth.

“I do. Some more than others.”

She pulled in a breath. “That’s a lot of people to play Ping-Pong with.”

He gave her a knowing smile. “It is. But I’m up for it.”

Jane turned her attention back on her coloring page. She filled in all the words and started on the flowers. But then she said, “I have a wicked stepmother.”

She didn't really see Dax stop coloring so much as sense it. But he didn't say anything. There was something about the fact that he wanted to know more about her that she liked. A few days ago, she would have assumed he'd want to "get to know her" in the sense that he'd want to know how best to get her out of her panties. And that had been appealing for sure. In a way. If he wasn't her boss.

But now, she thought he really did actually want to get to know her. Dax was clearly a people person. He liked people. He liked interacting, knowing how things worked, how people thought.

"So the wicked stepmother makes sense," he said after a moment.

"Yeah?" Cassie very rarely made any sense to Jane.

"I mean, it's no wonder a charming prince came riding into town to sweep you off your feet."

That caused her to look up at him. "Wow."

"I know. Irresistible, right?"

"I just don't know if it's charming to call *yourself* charming." But he was. He really was.

He grinned, clearly unconcerned about her doubting his charm. "Do you get along with your biological mother?"

"She died before I was even two. I don't remember her at all."

His grin fell. "Oh damn. I'm sorry, Jane."

She shook her head. "Don't be. You didn't know. And it's weird... It feels sad I didn't know her, but I'm not really sad from missing her because I didn't know her." She took a breath. "It's just weird."

He nodded. "So your stepmom's been around a long time? Wicked all along?"

"Wicked as long as I've known her," Jane said. Then she shrugged. "That's not entirely true. She's not really evil or anything. She's superficial and self-centered. She took a vow

to love my father in sickness and in health, and now he's in a nursing home because she doesn't want to take care of him. But I know I'm being a little unfair to her. Still, she's mean to my little sister, and she's a bitch to me, and we have nothing in common—except my dad, I guess—and I have a very hard time understanding what he ever saw in her. She's beautiful and about ten years younger than him, and, well, I guess she makes me face the fact that my father really does have horrible taste in women, and it makes me wonder about my mom.”

Dax took that in, just watching her, and not saying a word.

“But no, she hasn't been around that long. About seven years. There have been many others though. My dad isn't very good at being alone. But they haven't all been wicked. Like Amanda. That's Kelsey's mom—my little sister. She was pretty cool. She got pregnant, and Dad had her move in with us, and she lived with us for about three years before she decided her dream was to be a flight attendant. She and Kelsey stay in touch, and when she's in town we all go out. But she's a much better once-in-a-while-girls'-night-out person than a mom.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Maybe he'd understand why she had more than enough drama, thank you very much, without adding a Sinatra-loving-gummy-bear addict to the mix.

But dammit, the more they talked, the more she wanted to find out if his kisses were fruit flavored.

She looked down at her coloring page. It was mostly done. It had also been fun. Even though she'd ended up talking about some of the craziness in her life, she didn't feel wound tight like she normally did.

She set her pencils down and closed the book. “I'd better get back to work,” she said, pushing back from the table.

“Okay.”

She smiled and stood.

“Go out with me Saturday night.”

She stopped and stared at him. “I... can’t.”

“Why?”

“You’re...” She should say “more than I can take on right now,” but instead she said, “my boss.”

“That’s a no-no?”

“Probably?” She shrugged. “I’ve never looked it up because there’s never been even the slightest need.”

“I’ll have Piper look it up. And I’ll convene a meeting of the board to rewrite any policies that are a problem.”

“The board?” Jane asked. “You mean, your four best friends?”

“Well, sure, if you want to get technical.”

She smiled. “There’s another I-word that applies to you, that’s not irresistible.”

“Oh?”

“Incorrigible.”

“Not familiar with that one,” he said, frowning in pretend confusion.

“Have Piper look that up for you too.”

He grinned, and she headed out to work.

It occurred to her about ten minutes later, that she hadn’t actually said no to him.

* * *

Her phone vibrated in her pocket halfway through her third episode of *Schitt’s Creek*.

Please God, let it be anyone but Kelsey. She felt immediately guilty for that, of course. She knew her sister was struggling. She was living in a less-than-ideal situation that really sucked. Cassie didn’t really mean her *harm*, but she wasn’t really doing much to make her happy and well-adjusted either.

Kelsey's biological mom hadn't been back for almost eight months, and when she was in town, it was a day or two layover at the most. They spent the time together shopping and eating and going to movies, like girlfriends. She wasn't someone Kelsey could really confide in. Not that it would matter. Her mom wasn't going to swoop in and save the day.

Nor did Jane want her to. The last thing she wanted was Kelsey being packed up and being moved God knew where. And the last thing she *needed* was someone else in her life doing... anything at all that required a single brain cell or emotion from Jane, including winding Kelsey up, for better or worse.

She pulled her phone out and looked at the screen, holding her breath even as she felt like the worst sister in the world.

It was Max.

With a huge sigh of relief and an actual smile, Jane declined the call and then texted him. *Hey. What's up?*

Max was someone who never needed anything. Not beyond, "What do you think of this shirt?" or "Go with me to see *Frozen II* so I don't feel like a creeper." Those were things she could give.

Come down to Granny's. A bunch of people are out tonight.

Granny Smith's was the local bar. Yes, it was a play on Granny Smith apples, and yes, the last name of the family who owned it was Smith. The interior, like most businesses in Appleby, was decorated with an apple motif, and Granny's specialty was hard ciders served in little wooden barrels.

Don't think so. Sorry. I'm exhausted.

Trust me. You need this.

Maybe next time. She was already in her pajamas.

Her phone rang again. It was Max.

She frowned. If she picked up, he might talk her into stopping by Granny's.

Then again, she was a little hungry, and it wouldn't take much to slip on some jeans. She supposed she could have one cider while she waited for a pizza to go. Specifically, a small Squealer. All to herself. The Squealer was a pepperoni, sausage, ham, and bacon pizza, and she didn't even pretend to apologize for how much she loved it. It was worth a clogged artery or two.

The call ended and he texted. *Pick up.*

She sighed and called him back.

"Get your ass down here," Max said, far too loudly, when he answered.

"*One* cider, and I'll order a pizza to go," Jane said.

"Oh no, you have to stay tonight, babe. I think you need this."

"Need what?"

"A night out. Some fun," he said.

"I don't think I'm in the mood."

Not that you had to be at Granny's. That was the nice thing. It was laid back and very come as you are.

"How is he?"

She sighed. She knew Max was asking about her dad. "Yesterday was a little rough. I need more *Schitt's Creek* and to go to bed early."

"Well, hey, it's very hard to beat a dose of David and Patrick," Max said of two of the main characters. "But I'm sorry."

She smiled. She had really great taste in friends. "It is what it is."

"It is," Max agreed. "But I might have something for you that's even better than *Schitt's Creek* and a Squealer."

Of course Max would know what pizza she planned to order.

“*Hart of Dixie* and strawberry pie?” she guessed. Because Zoe’s strawberry pie was harder to get than a Squealer. Even though the baker was one of her besties. She sold out of that pie every day, so if Jane didn’t get a piece in the morning, she was out of luck until the next day. Pie took longer than pizza. It was science. Or something.

“There is no policy against sleeping with the boss,” Max said.

Jane sat up straighter on her couch before she even realized what she was doing. “Excuse me?”

“Looked it up. And also talked to Monica in HR just to be sure. There are no fraternization policies at Hot Cakes. Employees can date whoever they want. Banging for everyone!” he announced. Again, far louder than necessary into the phone.

She winced and pulled the phone away from her ear.

Clearly Max had had a couple of beers already. Or four.

“And you looked this up and talked to Monica in HR about this for what reason exactly?” Oh my God, he’d talked to Monica in HR.

“About you and Dax!” Max laughed. “Of course!”

Well, now she probably had to stop by Granny’s. Because she had to kill her best friend and really, tonight, when she could bury the body in darkness, was probably better than waiting until daylight. Though she was really tired tonight. Digging a hole and dragging Max’s body to it seemed like a lot of work.

“Max,” she said through gritted teeth. “Did you *tell* Monica in HR you were asking about me and Dax in particular?”

“Of course not,” Max said, sounding perfectly sober suddenly. “But I did clarify that ‘no fraternization policy’ applied to bosses too.” He laughed. “I’m sure she thinks I have the hots for one of them.”

Okay, well, that wasn’t so bad.

“She did say that there could be power dynamic issues, blah, blah,” Max went on. “But I just wiggled my eyebrows and said, ‘I hope so’ and then walked out. And,” he said, totally serious now, “I *do* mean that. If anyone ever needed someone to just boss her into letting go and having an orgasm, it’s you.”

Jane felt her mouth drop open. This was Max. She should be used to him being very unfiltered. But this was... beyond. She felt her cheeks heat, and, well, the rest of her heat. Dax Marshall didn’t really seem like the bossy type, honestly. But putting him and “orgasm” in the same thought definitely had an effect.

“Max,” she said, trying to sound pissed off. “You stepped over the line.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, obviously not the least bit sorry. “But you needed to be yanked over that line, and if I had to go first and pull you with me, I’d be willing. That’s how good a friend I am.”

“I don’t want to go over this line.”

“Yes you do.”

“I really don’t.”

“You totally do.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Well, hey, thanks for checking into that,” she said, changing tactics. “I will file that under ‘things I’ll never need to know.’ Right beside the info you dumped on me about sea urchins and about the best places for biscotti in Rome.”

“I already have my ‘told you so’ GIF ready for when you send me a selfie from Rome, eating biscotti,” he told her. “Oh my God!” His voice went up an octave. “Dax would totally take you to Rome! Holy shit, Jane! This could happen! He’d take you diving where you could see sea urchins too, I’m sure of it!”

She pressed a finger against the middle of her forehead. “Max,” she said calmly and coolly.

“Yes, baby?”

“I’m not going to Rome with Dax.”

“We’ll see about that.” He sounded way too smug.

And then, suddenly, a bunch of things clicked into place, like Legos snapping together. “Is Dax there with you tonight?” she asked.

Her stomach flipped and twisted at the same time.

“He sure is. And lookin’ *good* too,” Max confirmed.

Well... fuck.

“See you in ten minutes,” Max said.

“I really shouldn’t—”

But Max had already disconnected.

Jane sighed and squeezed her phone. Max knew better than to think this conversation was really over.

She tipped her head back and looked at her ceiling.

So there was no fraternization policy at Hot Cakes, huh? She supposed that shouldn’t surprise her. Employees had been dating each other as long as she’d been there. There were three married couples—they worked in different departments—that she could think of, and at least one of them had met at work. It was the major employer in a small town. It stood to reason that people would meet there, and occasionally anyway, get involved. And maybe fifty-some years ago it hadn’t occurred to anyone, but maybe now there *should be* a policy.

She should discuss that with someone. Like one of the new bosses.

And she might as well go down to the bar where he was hanging out with a bunch of people she knew and do it now.

That wasn’t “going out” with him. That was meeting coworkers for a drink. And talking about how employees shouldn’t date the boss.

Big difference.

Chapter Five



Five minutes later, she slid behind the wheel of her car. She took a deep breath. And hit Josie's number to FaceTime.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she asked when her friend answered.

"Just taking cookies out of the oven." Josie's phone was resting on her phone stand on the countertop, and she bent and pulled a cookie sheet from the oven as she spoke.

Jane smiled. Josie was always baking. At the bakery all day long and then at home. She was the emergency cookie and bar and brownie lady in town. She always had some in her freezer for the moms who had a kid tell them, at eight o'clock at night, that they needed treats for their classroom... tomorrow.

It was a tiny side gig for Josie, and the parents in town with elementary-aged kids kept it a very strict secret. Zoe didn't know and it killed Josie to keep it from her, but it was extra cash and it really helped the parents out.

It had started innocently. A recently divorced dad who had never navigated treat day at school had called her one night, desperate, and she'd happily baked for him.

Then a couple of moms had called two weeks later, begging for help with a last-minute bake sale to raise money for a little boy at school who had been suddenly hospitalized. Josie had, of course, been happy to pitch in.

Then a couple of moms had asked if they could pay her to do their baking for a church potluck because they just did not

have time. Another had asked if Josie would do the brownies she needed for the football team's tailgate because she was going to be out of town for work.

Every time, Josie made the treats and the moms put them in pans from home and passed them off as their own. Though every woman with kids between the ages of three and eighteen knew the truth.

It was a secret society of overscheduled moms, and Josie was their baked-goods dealer.

She drew the line at birthday cakes and other things people could get from Buttered Up, but last-minute treats or items for fund-raising were different.

It still bugged her that Zoe didn't know.

"Do they need frosted or decorated or anything?" Jane asked of the cookies.

"Nope, just good old chocolate chip."

"Great, then I need you to come to Granny's with me."

"Oh." Josie paused with a spatula in hand. "Um."

Jane smiled. "I know your hair is up. You have flour on your face. You're in your blue fuzzy pajama pants and have your glasses on, but I need you."

"What's going on?"

"I might, kind of, want to sleep with my boss."

Okay, well, there it was. Out loud. Out in the universe.

"Oh." That was a much more interested "Oh." Josie moved closer and peered into her phone.

"Yeah," Jane said.

Josie smiled and sighed. "That's so great."

Jane caught herself smiling at her romantic friend. Then she frowned. "Wait. What? No, it's not great."

"It's not? He's one of Aiden's friends, right?"

"Yes, Dax."

“Oh, the fun one!” Josie said enthusiastically. “He’s so cute too. He’s got that smirky smile and that charm.” She sighed again. “God, you deserve that, Jane.”

Jane shook her head. “You’re supposed to talk me *out* of this.”

Josie blinked. “Why?”

“He’s my *boss*.”

“That’s hot.”

“That’s illegal.”

Josie laughed. “It is not. You’re both consenting adults. Unless he’s blackmailing you or something. Is he blackmailing you?”

“Well, no.” Jane felt flustered suddenly. “Okay, it’s not illegal. It’s unethical though. He’s my *boss*. There’s a definite imbalance of power. He could coerce me or threaten to fire me or something.”

Josie nodded. “Okay, that’s true. I mean, technically. You’re right. That’s not cool. But...”

“But what?”

“Well, for one, it’s *you*. You don’t want to be promoted.”

“Oh *God*,” Jane said. “I so do not want to be promoted.” Promoted might mean more pay, but it also meant more responsibility which meant more headaches.

“Exactly. And if he tried to fire you or whatever, you’d tell everyone about it, and that whole place would walk out. You know that.”

Jane thought about that. She didn’t think the *whole* place would walk out. But several would. She’d never really given anything like that any thought, of course, but Josie was probably right. Her friends at Hot Cakes would have her back. Just like she had theirs.

Dax and Aiden and the others would have no idea what to do.

Though Aiden would never let that happen. If she told him Dax was doing something like that, Aiden would throw *him* out. She knew that. She trusted Aiden completely.

But... she trusted Dax too. It was weird. She hardly knew him. But Dax would never make her job contingent on anything sexual between them. Or contingent on anything at all, other than her showing up and doing her work, as it should be.

“Or you could sue him for everything he’s got,” Josie said.

A jar of gummy bears and a beanbag chair? was Jane’s first thought, but that was stupid. He was rich. She could sue for part of his gaming company. Hell, she could sue for his part of Hot Cakes. Wouldn’t *that* be ironic?

“I so don’t want to sue anyone,” she said, feeling tired just thinking of it. Or walking out. Picketing. Protesting. Who had the energy for something like that?

“Well, and it’s Dax,” Josie said, waving that all away. “I don’t see him saying that you’re fired if you don’t sleep with him.”

Yeah, okay, that was true.

“It’s still the principal of the thing,” Jane said. “I can’t sleep with the boss.”

“All right, I’m with you,” Josie said. She started lifting cookies from the cookie sheet to the cooling rack. “I just...” She sighed. “Wouldn’t it be great? Just for a little while? To have some fun like that? Some excitement? Not the boss thing, specifically, but to be swept up by a guy you haven’t known your whole life? To travel and try some new things? Things we never see or get to do here in Appleby?”

Jane watched her friend through the phone. She smiled. Josie was a romantic at heart, and while she loved their little hometown, she, like everyone they knew, had spent her whole life here. As had her parents. And her grandparents. And all her aunts and uncles and cousins. Her older sister was settled down with her high school sweetheart. Her parents were high school sweethearts. Her grandparents had not only met in high

school but had eloped at age sixteen, forging their IDs so they could get married before they were even old enough. They'd kept their parents from breaking it up by getting pregnant.

It had been quite a scandal.

A scandal that had resulted in seventy years of marriage, five children, and twenty-five grandchildren.

Josie loved all that. But she was also very intrigued by the idea of her handsome prince being someone she hadn't met at age five and who could show her more of the world than Dubuque County, Iowa.

Her grandfather and father had wanted to show their wives more. They just hadn't been able to afford to.

"So I should become his short-term mistress because he's rich? Get him to jet me around the world and buy me expensive trinkets? Let him pamper me for a little while?"

Josie sighed, her spatula against her heart. "Yes."

Jane laughed. "Come on."

Josie grinned at her. "Okay, not because he's rich. Just... for fun. A little adventure. A little excitement. Wouldn't it be fun to take a carriage ride in Central Park or go to Griffith Observatory in LA or have a cozy, romantic night in a cabin in the Rocky Mountains, or stay in a bed-and-breakfast in Vermont?"

Jane wanted to hug her friend and would have if they'd been talking in person. Josie wasn't interested in money beyond the idea of travel and having some new experiences. None of those ideas were extravagant nor did they require being a mistress for a millionaire. But they were things that Josie's salt-of-the-earth, blue-collar dad had always wanted to do for her mom and had never been able to afford.

"So just something different," Jane said.

"Different and *fun*," Josie emphasized. "And the pampering sounds pretty good. Massages, foot rubs, long bubble baths, decadent desserts I didn't have to make

myself..." She laughed lightly. "Or, you know, whatever turns *you* on."

Jane grinned. "Wipe the flour off your face. Take your apron off. Put on some jeans, and meet me at the bar."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Josie said.

Jane smiled. She really did have good taste in friends. "Thank you."

"But just to be clear," Josie said. "I'm supposed to keep you *from* sleeping with him, right?"

Jane actually paused. "I think so," she finally said.

"Okay." But Josie didn't sound convinced.

Yeah. Jane wasn't so sure she was either.

Dammit.

* * *

Dax was shocked by the way his heart thumped when Jane Kemper walked through the door of Granny Smith's.

Max had told him Jane spent Thursday nights with her dad, so he'd resigned himself to not seeing her. He'd been enjoying his time with the rest of the Hot Cakes employees that had come out tonight though. He'd bought a few rounds and some pizzas. He'd played a few games of darts. He'd learned at least two new facts about every one of them and met four spouses.

It had been a good night.

Now it was a fantastic night.

Because she was here. They hadn't even spoken yet, but everything in him felt happier.

That was the weirdest thing that had ever happened to him.

Because he was happy 90 percent of the time. He *made* the happiness happen, for himself and others. To have another person able to make him feel like that, so strongly, just by showing up, was new.

But he fucking liked it. A lot.

“So anytime you feel a little... hungry... just let me know.” Dax focused on the woman sitting on the tall stool next to him. He’d taken over one of the small round tables that was situated conveniently between the bar, the front door, the pool tables, and dart boards. That way he could see and greet everyone, no matter what they were doing, and could make sure everyone had plenty of food, drinks, and laughs.

“Hey, thanks, I’ll do that,” he told Danielle. She was one of his employees. A cute, bubbly blond who had come right over to thank him after he’d bought a round for the place. She’d been hanging at the table for about ten minutes now.

He hadn’t missed her invitation. For dinner at her place. For more at her place. He got propositioned all the time. In fact, Danielle was being pretty subtle compared to some of the offers he got.

But he wasn’t interested.

And the reason had just walked in. He’d known Jane was the reason even before she’d come through Granny’s front door. But now, seeing her here, her long red hair down around her shoulders rather than in the ponytail or French braid she wore at work, in blue jeans and a pale-blue top that fell off one shoulder and did not say Hot Cakes on it, wearing canvas tennis shoes instead of work boots, he realized she was different from his usual type but very much like Danielle.

Danielle was blond and shorter and way more OMG-Dax-you’re-amazing than Jane was. But she was a small-town Iowa girl who partied in blue jeans and did actual work with her hands. She probably saw her grandmother regularly and still went to church with the same people she’d known since preschool and probably gave directions by using things like “Take a left at Bill Reynard’s old place. You know, the place where Tom and Mary live now” instead of “Go north for two blocks.”

He’d figured out that he and Ollie were probably the only humans in the town who didn’t know where Bill Reynard had lived for fifty-two years. But he *hadn’t* figured out why they

couldn't just say "Take a left at Tom and Mary's place." Though he didn't know Tom and Mary either. And he was amazed there was only one "Tom and Mary" in the town in the first place.

Still, Danielle had everything Jane did as far as just being a new type for him. If that was the draw he felt to Jane.

He was starting to figure out that it definitely wasn't.

"Danielle, I need to talk to Dax. Alone."

Suddenly Jane was there beside the table, standing between his stool and the one Danielle occupied. She didn't look at him or greet him. He considered greeting *her* but decided something more interesting was going on between the women when Danielle arched a brow. She looked surprised but also annoyed.

"Well, I'm not *done* talking to Dax yet," Danielle said.

Dax lifted his glass of cider, hiding his smile. Far be it from him to interrupt two beautiful women who both wanted to talk to him. Alone.

"It's about the employee manual. Specifically, Section 47C," Jane told her, putting a hand on her hip.

Danielle paused with her bottle of beer halfway to her lips. "It is?"

"It can be," Jane said.

"But it's not?" Danielle asked as if clarifying an important point, setting her beer down.

"Not yet," Jane told her.

Danielle narrowed her eyes. Then she looked at Dax, gave him a smile, and said, "I guess I need to go."

"Well, thanks for the invitation," Dax said. "It was nice talking to you."

"Sure. Anytime." Danielle's smile was gone instantly when she looked back at Jane. She spun on the stool and slipped to the floor. "You're kind of a bitch."

Jane shrugged. “Heartbroken as always to see you go.”

Danielle flounced off and Jane took her stool.

“So, hi,” Dax said, giving her a grin.

“Hi.”

“Employee manual, Section 47C?” he asked.

“Danielle knows that section well. It covers theft of company property.”

“She steals?” Dax asked.

“Not anymore.”

He grinned. “What did she take?”

“Plastic cookie boxes and tape.”

His eyebrows rose. “Like a million dollars’ worth?”

“I think it came to like a eighty-four dollars.”

“And that was a big deal?”

“Not really. I mean, she got her hand slapped for it. She was on probation for a while. But obviously kept her job.”

“Good.”

Jane tipped her head. “And for the record, I would never turn someone in for that. I do understand stealing from your employer is wrong, and I’ve disliked Danielle since eighth grade, but I thought the whole thing was ridiculous.”

“Okay. And you’re making sure I know that because?” he asked, sensing something in her tone.

“Because you should definitely *not* promote someone who would *not* turn someone in for stealing.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “I’ll be sure to put that in your employee file.”

She sat up straighter suddenly. “No. I mean, you don’t have to do that. Theoretically—”

He chuckled. “Jane.”

She stopped. “Yeah?”

“Do you really think I even know where the employee files are kept?”

She thought for two seconds and then nodded. “Good point.”

He laughed. “So if you didn’t want me to specifically know about Section 47C and Danielle and that you would be the most diligent, rule-abiding person we could promote, what was that about?”

“I was getting rid of her.”

“Because *you* wanted to talk to me?” He liked that. He didn’t even care what she wanted to talk about. They could talk about asparagus for all he cared. He loved making this woman laugh. He loved that she seemed to know who he was, and that she still wanted to talk to him.

“I did. I just—” She stopped and her eyes went wide. “Oh crap, she wasn’t telling you about her grandmother, was she?”

He frowned and shook his head. “No.”

Jane sagged a little with relief. “Oh good. God, I just thought of that. That maybe she was telling you how her grandmother is sick. She and Danielle are close.”

“Why would she be telling me about that?”

“Well, you...” She frowned at him, almost puzzled. “Well, you make people feel better. You get them talking. And you’re very concerned with people being happy. I just thought maybe she was kind of drawn to you and wanted to tell you about it because she knew you’d make her feel better.”

Dax honestly didn’t know what to say to that for several seconds. He leaned in. “Well.” Then he blew out a breath and shook his head. Shit, now he absolutely wanted to make everything better in this woman’s life. “I’ll be honest with you... people do feel better after they hang out with me, but they don’t always come to me intending to spill. They come to play Ping-Pong or grab a beer or to hear one of my stupid stories. They usually come to me to forget about things. They don’t usually fill me in.”

He hadn't thought about that in a long time. But he knew it was true and he was okay with it. Ping-Pong, beer, and stupid stories were easy.

"Huh." She was watching him but clearly thinking something through. "So what was she telling you about?"

"How good her pot roast is. And that I should come try it sometime."

Jane frowned and glanced in the direction Danielle had gone. "I knew it."

"You did?"

"I knew she was hitting on you. For a second, I panicked about her grandma, I'll admit, but I was right in the beginning." She narrowed her eyes. "And did you want to hear about her pot roast?"

She was asking about more than actual pot roast. Dax grinned. "Not even a little."

"Good." Then she realized how that sounded. "She's... made pot roast... for a lot of guys."

Dax chuckled and took a drink of the amazingly good hard cider he'd ordered, suddenly feeling really good about, well, a lot of things. "You realize what you've done, don't you?" he asked.

"What?"

"You staked a claim."

"A... claim." But her eyes flickered with realization.

He nodded seriously. "You basically told another woman to back off. From me. In a very social situation. So... guess I'm all yours now." He was so fucking incredibly okay with that, he was a little rocked by it.

"Oh, I..." She glanced toward the bar again, where Danielle was gathered with other women about their age from Hot Cakes. Then she looked back at Dax. And sighed. "Shit."

He laughed. "I assume you know how to make pot roast?" Somehow "pot roast" had turned into a flirty euphemism.

“I am not making you pot roast,” Jane said. But the corner of her mouth was twitching.

“Well, you *have* to now,” he insisted. “You can’t scare another pot roast maker off and then not do it for me yourself.”

She lifted a brow. “What if I can do something way better than pot roast? Maybe I saved you from *just* pot roast.”

He really did like this girl. “Absolutely wouldn’t surprise me,” he said honestly. “And knowing you as I do, I’m guessing whatever *you* ’ve got has a lot more sugar.”

Yeah, dirty sounding and true. He loved it.

She laughed lightly. “Good guess.”

He hoped that was true for any actual food she might make and for well, anything else she was offering.

“So what did you want to talk to me about? If not Section 47C of the employee manual?” he asked. As intrigued as he was with Jane and any sugar she might give him—literal and otherwise—he was equally interested in her wanting to talk to him. He wasn’t being self-deprecating when he said people didn’t come to him to spill their guts. To have fun, be distracted from their problems, just let loose? For sure. And that was great. But people didn’t really seek him out for conversation. Other than his closest friends, of course. That Jane would assume someone would come to him for that was really... pretty damned awesome. Because it meant *she* thought maybe she could do that.

“I was just feeling... kind of... yuck,” she said. “And I knew you’d make me...”

She stopped, pressing her lips together.

“What?” he prompted.

“I just realized it might sound a little dirty.”

“Love a little dirty,” he said. “Love a lot dirty too.”

He’d give a million dollars, cash, right now to hear a lot of dirty from this woman, in fact.

She took a deep breath and let it out. “Okay, I knew you’d make me feel good.”

Yeah, he would. And he only kind of meant that dirty.

He leaned in, forearms on the table. “Okay, well, I really want to. Make you feel good.”

There was a flicker in her expression that said it sounded dirty to her. But that she didn’t mind.

“So is this like you’re hungry and need food to feel good? Or you had a bad night with your dad and need to feel good?”

She looked surprised by that.

“Max mentioned you spend Thursday evenings with your dad,” Dax told her.

“Oh. You asked?”

“Asked where you were? Of course.”

She smiled softly at that.

He went on. “Or is this a thing where you need a bunch of liquor to feel good and so also need to know you have a ride home? Or is this horniness and need to feel good in every single way I’ve been thinking of since I met you?”

Yeah, he’d dropped that last one in there as if it were like everything else on the list. In a way, it was. He’d do whatever she needed, from feeding her to driving her home to stripping her naked and making her forget how to even spell Hot Cakes. But he also really did want her to know, boss or no, inappropriate or gray area, he had been thinking those things. They needed to be very much on the same page there.

She blinked at him. Without saying anything. For a long time.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Just wondering,” she said.

“About?”

“If it can be all those things at once.”

He felt his grin. Wide and instantaneous. “Oh yeah, it can.”

“Then... yes. It’s... that.”

Thank God. He knew how to fix three of those for sure, and if he was good at those, that fourth one—the one about her dad—might be easier. He had to admit, he was a little intimidated by her actually having real problems to deal with and wanting to talk to him about them. None of his close friends had *problems*. They were all young, vibrant, highly intelligent, good-looking, rich guys. They pretty much had it made. People came to Dax to forget about their problems, not to hash them out.

But he wanted to help Jane. He’d try for her. And if he sucked at it... well, hopefully the liquor would take the edge off that.

And the sex, of course. He knew he was good at that, at least.

“Now I just need the order,” he told her.

“Oh, a small Squealer. With extra marinara for dipping,” she said. “And a shot of tequila. Just one though, I’ll switch to soda after that. But yeah, one shot for sure.”

He cocked his head. “I meant the order you wanted those things taken care of, but I guess you answered that.”

She laughed. “Oh yeah, sorry. I’m starving.”

He chuckled, lifting his hand to signal the waitress to come by to grab Jane’s order. “What’s a Squealer?”

“Oh my God, their best pizza. Sausage, pepperoni, ham, and bacon.” She sighed happily at the thought. “I am unapologetic about how much I love it.”

God, there was something about the way this woman ate that he really, really loved. “Sounds amazing.”

Her eyes went round. “Are you eating with me? Because if so, we’re going to need a bigger pizza.”

“How many slices in a small?” he asked as Riley, their waitress, arrived.

“Six,” Riley said.

“They’re small though,” Jane inserted. “Seriously, dude, if we’re ordering a small, you can’t have any.”

He smirked.

“And don’t you dare judge me for that.”

“Absolutely not.” He looked at Riley. “A medium.” He glanced at Jane. “Medium?”

She shrugged. “If four is your usual number of pizza slices.”

“There are ten in a medium?”

“There are eight. But they’re bigger slices than the six in the small,” she explained. “I will totally eat four of the medium.”

“Huh.” He did love a great pizza. “Large, then.”

Jane seemed relieved. He laughed. “And two shots of tequila. With salt and lime.”

Jane nodded. “And water,” she said.

“Got it.” Riley moved off to put their order in.

“So, do you need to eat before you tell me about your dad? Or do you want to go into the storeroom while we wait for the food?” he asked.

“The storeroom?”

“The horniness,” he reminded her.

“Oh right.” She nodded. “So you’re offering me a quickie in the storeroom?”

“Absolutely. I’m here for you.”

She snorted. “Well, thanks, but if you think I’m going to have sex with a *millionaire* for the first—and probably last—time in my life, in a dingy bar storeroom, you’re nuts,” she told him.

He grinned. “Tell me more.”

“Oh, there better be a huge hotel suite involved, massive king-sized bed, ridiculously high-thread-count sheets, Jacuzzi

tub, room service, on-site spa with massage therapist included, one of those fluffy bathrobes to lay around in..." She trailed off. "Tell you what, let me watch *Pretty Woman* again quick, and then I'll let you know if I missed anything."

Dax pulled his phone out and tapped on his Netflix app icon. "Do it now."

She laughed.

Riley set down their shots and two glasses of water.

Jane looked at him. He looked at her. Then they both licked the backs of their hands, she shook salt on both of them, and they clicked their glasses together. Then they licked the salt, shot the tequila, and sucked the lime wedges simultaneously.

Jane didn't even shudder as she swallowed the strong liquor.

"Okay," he said. "Since the hotel suite and all the perks are over in Dubuque and the amazing pizza is here—"

"You really have a hotel suite with all that?" she asked.

"Of course." He leaned in. "And if I didn't, I'd get it."

That made her smile. "So much charm you can't even contain it."

"Something like that." He wanted to kiss her. More than he'd ever wanted anything. "Tell me about your dad," he said instead.

Chapter Six



He wanted to hear about her dad. Which was strange. He didn't know how to handle that. He wasn't sure he could do a thing to make it better, and he wanted to make things better for Jane in a way he hadn't felt for anyone in a long time. His instinct should be to deflect and distract. Flirt. Maybe talk her into dancing. Maybe one more shot and a game of darts.

Instead, he asked about her dad.

“You really want to hear about that?” she asked. “Even with sex maybe, kind of on the table, you'd want to talk about my dad?”

“If that's one of the things you came to me for, I'll do whatever I can to make it better,” he said with more sincerity than he'd felt for something in far too long. The last time was probably when Ollie had come to him and said, “I need you to help me make sure no one leaves this Comic-Con without knowing who we are.”

He'd do anything for Ollie.

Or Aiden, Cam, or Grant. Or his mom. Or brother.

And now, apparently, Jane Kemper. A small-town Iowa girl who worked in a cake factory and had a sick father Dax couldn't do a damned thing about.

She looked a little amazed for a moment. Like she wasn't sure if she should believe him, but then she wet her lips and said, “My dad has this weird disorder. They're not really sure what it is. It's a little like Parkinson's, but they don't think it's that. They think it's caused by exposure to pesticides through

his work. But they don't know which one for sure, and he's the only one of the men who got sick from the work."

"What job?" Dax asked, frowning. That was a no-joking, bullshit thing. Someone got sick like that from work they were doing, but no one knew for sure?

"He did crop spraying," she said. "Flying planes to spray the fields with pesticides."

"So he's a pilot? That's cool."

She smiled. "He was. And then he also did farmwork. Various farms and farmers. Different jobs. But obviously exposed repeatedly to fertilizers and chemicals."

Dax nodded. "Weird he'd be the only one affected."

"Yeah. Though they say everyone is different, and how chemicals affect us is still based on our body makeup and genetics and other factors. So it's probably a combination of things."

"Are you investigating? Fighting to find out more? Any litigation?" Dax asked.

She sighed a very heavy sigh. "Honestly? That's all so exhausting. Battling the health insurance company is bad enough. I just... *we* just... go day to day. We try to make today as good as we can. Solve the problems right in front of us, and do the best we can."

He nodded. "I get that. But if these companies are doing something that's harming people, someone should be looking into it."

"They do. They have. But he's just one case."

"There have to be others."

"There probably are. But someone would have to get them all together and prove it." She shrugged. "It's just a lot for people like us to take on."

Dax frowned. "People like you?"

"Regular people, Dax," she said, fatigue obvious in her voice.

He wanted to take that away. He wanted her smiling and laughing and teasing him like she had been a little bit ago. This was why he didn't go into this stuff. This was hard stuff. Real-life stuff. Video game stuff—like lopping heads off trolls—was a lot easier.

“Regular people deserve to have things turn out right for them too,” he said. He reached out and covered her hand with his, needing to touch her.

She didn't pull away. Jane studied their hands as she said, “We do deserve it. It's just harder to make happen.”

He had some things to look up. Some phone calls to make. He had no idea what he was getting into here, but if he couldn't offer this woman anything else, he could definitely tell her that he wasn't *regular* people. And if he was one of the kinds of non-regular ones that had things turn out right for him more often than the typical person—and he knew he was—then he wanted to help.

“Have you ever had anything you wanted to fix for someone that you couldn't?” Jane asked him.

“Absolutely,” he said. “My mother is still in love with my asshole father and hasn't moved on even after he chose his job over her and left us.”

Jane's fingers slid between his, and she curled her hand in his. “Really?”

Fuck, he liked touching her. Even this much. “Yeah. She threw him out, but she didn't get over him. They still talk. He still comes over. They even go out sometimes. She definitely never moved on.”

“She really loved him.”

“Guess so. Hell if I understand why, but it does seem that way.” He stroked his thumb over the back of Jane's knuckles. “Do you ever wonder why your dad loves your stepmom?”

Jane shook her head. “No. He doesn't love her.”

“No?”

“He decided not to love anyone after my mom. She took his heart with him when she died. That’s what he’s always said. But he likes Cassie—that’s my stepmom’s name. She makes him laugh. Or did. I guess. They never fought or anything. They did stuff together. I think they were good... companions? Friends maybe even.” Jane shrugged. “He’s just not good at being alone. He thought he would be bad at raising daughters on his own. So he always tried to have a woman around for us. If one didn’t last, he’d find a new one as soon as he could. I think part of his attraction to Cassie was that she’s very ‘girlie’ with the makeup and the hair and clothes and shoes. She had a daughter about Kelsey’s age. He thought we needed her.”

Dax was fascinated. With the story, with Jane, with everything about her. “So he did it for you and your sister.”

She rolled her eyes. “Some of it was for us, but he also really likes women. He doesn’t like being alone. He really doesn’t like *sleeping* alone, if you know what I mean.”

He chuckled. “I definitely know what you mean.”

Her hand was still in his. She squeezed it, seemingly subconsciously. “It’s what makes the nursing home so difficult though,” she said, her smile fading. “He’s alone there a lot. He doesn’t have that companionship from a pretty, younger woman like he’s always wanted. And he’s not at home for Kelsey. Me too, but definitely her to a greater extent. That all makes him a little nuts.”

Dax nodded. He doubted his father and Jane’s had much in common—except maybe the penchant for liking a beautiful woman beside them at night—but he couldn’t imagine his father dependent on other people for his basic daily functions and not being a fucking asshole about it.

“He’s the youngest one in the nursing home and... it just sucks,” Jane said with a sigh. “They try. The people there are so great, and they really try to make it as pleasant for him as they can but it’s just... what it is. There’s only so much any of us can do to make it better. The entire situation really just sucks no matter how much we try to improve it.”

“I’m really sorry, Jane,” he said sincerely. He was. He felt helpless. He hated that. He wanted this woman to smile, and in that moment, when they were surrounded by liquor and music and all the other things that made bars fun and the perfect places for flirtations, he couldn’t come up with a single thing to do or say that would make it better.

“Thanks,” she said simply. “I really am too.”

They sat looking at each other for a long moment. Then Dax said, “I’m really bad at this.”

“At what?”

“Being quiet.”

She laughed. “You don’t have to be quiet.”

“I have no idea what to say.”

She looked at him for a long moment. And Dax was pretty sure she understood that him not having something to say was very unusual. And meaningful in some way.

“You always try to say something? In every situation, right?”

“Definitely.” He studied her hand in his. Her fingernails were short and neat, unpolished. The least sparkly female fingernails he’d ever looked at up close. “I hated when my mom got quiet. She’s very outgoing. Happy. She can talk to anyone. Everywhere we go, she strikes up conversations with total strangers.”

Jane smiled, listening.

“But after my dad left, she’d have these periods where she’d just get quiet. She didn’t cry. She didn’t get mad and throw stuff. She never yelled at him. Even the day she told him to leave, she did it in this very normal tone of voice. But when she got quiet, it was... awful. When it happened, I was always trying to get her to talk and smile and laugh. Even if I could do it for short periods, I’d feel awesome. She would still have her quiet spells, but it was always important to me that I could bring her out of them. Not for good, of course, but at least I could distract her for a little while.”

“Kind of like a game of Ping-Pong or a coffee bar in the break room? At least it’s a little reprieve?” Jane asked.

He nodded. “A lot like that. She was how I got into gaming. Into designing and creating, I mean. I was into it as a player already, but I realized I wanted to create one because of her.”

“Really?” She looked sincerely interested.

“When people game, they... do it on purpose. They turn the game on. They pick up the controller. They’re looking for a distraction, to kill time, to get lost for a little while, maybe connect with others online... whatever. But they go *to* the game for whatever it is they need. And I can deliver that. Happily. They know what I’ve got, and I can give them that reprieve, as you call it. With my mom, I was always guessing. What would work best? A funny story? A movie? A magic trick? A... game of Ping-Pong?”

“You had a Ping-Pong table at your house?”

“We did.”

“Did she play with you?”

“Yep. Sometimes.”

Jane laughed. And Dax felt tension leave his shoulders. He really liked when she laughed. Especially when it was because of him.

“You want to know something awesome?” he asked.

“Absolutely.”

“My mom is a master warrior enchantress in *Warriors of Easton*.”

Jane gave him a puzzled frown even as she smiled. “Your mom plays your game?”

“She does,” he said. “A lot. I didn’t even know until she told me that she’d gotten to Master Warrior level. Then she kept going. She’s good.”

“So you’re still able to give her that reprieve,” Jane said, her voice soft.

“Yeah. And now, it’s whenever she needs it and it’s like she comes to me.”

Jane squeezed his hand and shook her head. “God.”

“What?”

“Now every time I look at that cappuccino machine I’m going to melt a little and think about how you put that there so people could kind of come to you whenever they need to.”

He grinned. “That makes you melt a little, huh?”

She sighed as if annoyed by it but nodded. “It does. And now I’ll probably always think Ping-Pong is kind of sexy.”

He really, really liked her. “That’s awesome.”

“No,” she said. “It’s not. Because Ping-Pong is not sexy.”

He laughed and lifted her hand to his mouth without thinking. He brushed his lips over her knuckles, and their gazes clashed and held. The air suddenly got hot.

He had his lips against her skin. The skin on the back of her knuckles, but it was still skin.

“And now I think this might be an even worse idea, then, because you’re my boss,” she said, her voice soft.

“Why’s that?” He put her hand down but didn’t let go of her.

“Because I think a lot of my stuff is like your mom’s. Ongoing. Not something you can really fix. Something you can maybe give me temporary reprieves from but... I’m not sure that’s really enough. For you, I mean. Is it?”

It was a fair question. “First of all, I can *definitely* give you reprieves from it.” He gave her a wink. She smiled back. But he decided to be sincere with her. “Yes, it bugs me with my mom that I can’t fix things for good,” he admitted.

“Yeah. So maybe it’s better if you stick with girls who have needs you can fix easily.”

As if on cue, Riley set their pizza down on the table, causing them to both shift back and their fingers to slide apart.

“Here you go.” She set down two plates and two sets of silverware as well.

“Like hunger,” Jane said with a wry smile.

Yeah, hunger was a good one. Dax shrugged and gave her a grin. “Hunger and horniness are two of my favorite things to fix.” And those were usually more than enough. In fact, those were a relief. They were easy, and yeah, fun for him too.

But this woman. Man, he really wanted to fix it all. Or at least try. Even the not fun parts.

“Well, good thing for you, most girls I know get both of those. On a pretty regular basis,” Jane said.

“Good thing for me,” he agreed.

She watched him for a moment then turned her attention to the pizza. She served up slices for each of them, and they dug in, chewing and swallowing before saying anything more.

“Damn, this is good,” he said.

“Right?” she asked with a smile. She took another bite, watching him now as she chewed. After she’d swallowed a second bite, she said, “With all the stuff in my life I can’t really fix, I guess I like the idea that guys have some similar easy-to-meet needs.”

He lifted an eyebrow and took another bite, waiting for her to go on.

“Hunger and horniness, I mean,” she said.

He nodded. “Yeah, I was following that.”

She laughed, and he felt that familiar warmth behind his breastbone.

“Men are very easy,” he said. “I’d say if you can take care of the hunger and horniness for them, you’ve taken care of eighty to eighty-eight percent of their needs.”

“Wow, eighty-eight percent. That’s very high and very specific.”

He shrugged. “The need for sports and, of course, showering, sleep, and bodily functions, taking up the rest.”

She grinned. “Well, that explains why my dad’s with Cassie. She’s a really good... cook.”

Dax laughed. “Yeah?”

“She actually is,” Jane said. “Surprisingly. She’s also gorgeous and ten years younger than him so... well, yeah, it all tracks.”

“And I’ve gotta say, you’ve got really good taste in pizza and cake pops,” Dax told her.

“Oh, so just leading you to food can meet the hunger need?” Jane asked. “No need to actually *make* it for you?”

“For sure. I mean, homemade is great, but when a guy’s hungry he’s just focused on getting... not hungry, you know?”

She nodded, her grin wide. “I *totally* know all about just needing to get un-hungry sometimes.”

“Yeah?” He took another bite. The pizza really was exceptional. “And with your great-food-in-Appleby knowledge, you’re pretty good at getting yourself *un-hungry* when you need to?”

No, they were not just talking about being hungry for food.

He loved it. He loved talking with this woman. He loved flirting with this woman. He loved eating with this woman.

He was starting to think he would love doing just about anything with this woman.

Of course, he had very specific ideas about some things he was *positive* he would love doing with her.

“Oh, Dax,” Jane said, her tone completely sincere. “I have *never* gone hungry for too long in this town.”

He almost choked on his bite of pizza. He gave her an appreciative look. “I have no doubt about that at all.”

At least the men here weren’t stupid.

They sat, grinning at each other and eating pizza, and Dax thought maybe he hadn't had such a good time in too long to remember. And he played Ping-Pong. At work. And went to Comic-Con. That was definitely saying something. People at Comic-Con thought he was amazing. He had actual fans there.

He'd spent part of *this* evening talking about Jane's sick father and how there was nothing Dax could do to fix that or even help with it. Yet he didn't want this to end.

"So I just want you to know," he said, after he'd polished off his second piece. And watched her and grinned at her like a seventh-grader with his first crush. "If you ever want to talk about your dad more, I'm happy to listen."

She cocked her head. "Really? That doesn't seem like your kind of thing."

He nodded. "It's not."

"But you want to do that with me?"

"I do."

"Huh."

He watched her think about that. Maybe she'd figure out a reason for it other than that he was falling for her. Because that was about the only thing he could come up with.

"I guess I was expecting some more of the thing you *are* really good at doing."

He thought about how to say this delicately. He gave her a half grin. "So the two needs I'm best at meeting both start with H."

"Hunger and horniness," she said.

"And the way I meet those needs both start with F. Feeding and—"

"Got it," she said with a laugh.

He nodded. "And I'm really good at both. Like maybe not pizza and cake pop good, but I know some pretty great restaurants."

“I’ll bet you do.”

They weren’t talking about the feeding part just then either.

“So you might need to be more specific about which of the things I do that I’m really good at that you thought I’d be doing for you.”

“Right. Well, I was referring to the D thing.”

His brows rose. “The D thing. That’s a little less... polite than I’m used to...”

“Distracting, Dax,” she said over a light laugh. “I was talking about how you’re really good at *distracting* people from their problems.”

“Oh right,” he said, nodding. “I am pretty good at that too. Maybe not as good as the F thing.”

“You mentioned the great restaurants.”

“*Really* great. And my very big... credit limit.”

“Right. That was a goes-without-saying thing,” she told him.

They did that silly grin-at-each-other-for-several-long-seconds thing. Then he said, “Nearly three percent of the ice in Antarctic glaciers is penguin urine.”

She blinked at him.

He took a drink of cider.

“Really?” she finally said.

“Yep. Are you distracted?”

“Completely.”

He winked at her.

“That’s... interesting.”

“There’s more where that came from.” He knew tons of weird animal facts. For some reason.

“I guess I was expecting more of the flirtatious type of distraction,” she finally said. “Less of the animal urine type of

distraction.”

“Oh.” That was good to know. “I can do that.” He paused. “I think.”

“You *think*? Haven’t you been flirting this whole time?”

“Sure. I mean, that’s talking-flirting,” he agreed. “But if you want sexy-flirting... I’m pretty sure I can pull that off too.”

“Why only pretty sure?” She looked genuinely confused.

He decided to be totally honest. They’d shared a lot tonight. He could tell her this. “I’m not sure I’ve ever sexy-flirted with a woman I really fucking *liked*. I’d rather sit here and talk over pizza than have you dress up in a fairy costume and tell me my staff really is magical.”

“Oh my God, please tell me that’s a gaming thing,” she asked, looking part fascinated and part horrified.

He nodded. “Comic-Con.”

“That really happened once?”

“Three times.”

“I... um... have no idea what to say.”

He grinned. “Exactly. And I bet you’ve never owned anything from Prada or Louis Vuitton.”

“I do know what those are,” she said. “But no.”

He nodded. “And if you did have an extra two thousand dollars, you’d do something great with it rather than buying a purse.”

“*Purses* cost two thousand *dollars*?” she demanded.

“At least.”

“That’s... that should be... illegal.” She shook her head. Then she took a breath. “But you can’t judge people because they spend money on purses. To them, two thousand dollars is like twenty bucks to me.”

He smiled at her. Not a sexy grin. Not an amused grin. A smile he knew was full of affection and admiration. “I *like*

you. I respect the hell out of you. I think you're a better person than any of the women I've ever dated. Not because of how they—and you—spend money, but just because of who you are. And that's a little intimidating.”

She was staring at him as if he'd just told her four more animal urine facts.

“You okay?” he asked after another few seconds.

“*You're* intimidated by *me*?” she asked.

He laughed. “Yes. But not enough to get up, make an excuse, and leave you alone.”

She took that in. Then she slowly smiled. “Good. The not leaving me alone part, I mean. Not the intimidated part. You have nothing to be intimidated about.”

“I'm a guy who loved video games, accidentally made one that got popular, and now uses his money and success to drive his father crazy.”

“You're also a guy who looks around and wants to make things better. A lot of people never even look around. Those who do, don't feel personally responsible for changing things.”

“I bought a cappuccino machine.”

“Yeah. You *did* something.”

“That's not much.”

“It's *something*, Dax. It matters.”

“You didn't think so at first.”

They'd been slowly leaning in closer to one another across the table.

“I was wrong. I was looking at the machine, not the guy behind it.”

Yeah, he was falling for her. That was interesting. He wasn't sure that had happened to him since high school. And Bailey Conner didn't really count. He'd liked her mostly

because of her game controllers—not a euphemism—and love for *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed*.

“Yeah, well, you deal with a lot of shit, and you’re still a wonderful friend and coworker and daughter and sister. You want your workplace to be a great place and your coworkers to be happy and appreciated and have what they deserve when you could be wallowing in all your own crap and not worrying about anyone else.”

She looked a little sad for a moment. “I try to do that,” she said. “But full confession. I want to go to work, do my job, and then go home. I want it to be simple. I’ve worked there for so long because it’s straightforward. I resented getting pulled into all the drama with you guys coming in and taking over and stirring everything up and scaring everyone.”

“But you still got involved,” he said with a shrug. “You didn’t want to, but you did it. Sorry, but that makes it even more admirable.”

“Come on. The fact that I don’t want to be involved, even for the great people I work with is admirable?”

“Yes. Because even if you just want to go home at the end of the day and forget about it all, you definitely know something about how important temporary reprieves can be,” he said. “Having someone to dog sit, having a simple ride to work... Those little things can make a few moments easier, and that can make an entire situation lighter.”

Jane stared at him. But he meant it. The things she did to lighten things up for the people around her were more meaningful than what he did, but they both liked making things easier for others. He loved having that in common with her.

“And you do even more than that,” he went on. “You’ve been pushing for better working conditions and to be sure the new management respects the workers and the things that are already in place.”

“I did not want to,” she insisted. “I would have loved to have someone else go up to Oliver’s office that first day.”

“Do you think the great warriors always want to charge into battle? Risk their lives? Face injury and possible death? Of course not. But they do it anyway. That’s what bravery is. Not *wanting* to fight. Fighting because it’s the right thing to do.”

Her eyes widened. He was on a roll. He made a video game full of warriors and battles. This was his shit.

“You’re not even really doing battle for your own treasure,” he said. “I mean, you don’t have kids and dependents. You don’t need certain work shifts or jobs. You’re healthy and able to do whatever. You have yourself to take care of. But you’re in there fighting so everyone else’s treasure chests and villages are also protected.” The analogies from *Warriors of Easton* were easy. He grinned, pleased. “Fighting to protect someone else’s village, when yours is pretty safe, is *very* heroic.”

There was a beat of silence. Then she said softly, “Aiden coached me.” But she was watching him, taking in every word.

“You went to Aiden for coaching. The warriors often go to mentors. The generals and wizards who have more knowledge and experience. That’s just a sign of intelligence and heart. You know what you know, but you want to know what you don’t know too so you’re as prepared as possible.”

She nodded slowly. “Wow. I do sound pretty great when you put it that way.”

He laughed. “See? My crush on you is *very* well placed.”

Jane lifted an eyebrow, interest sparking in her blue eyes. “Crush?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Still really into how I ate that first cake pop?” she asked.

Her voice was more playful now, and Dax felt his gut tighten.

“For sure. And dammit, me being cute and funny and charming isn’t good enough for you. All the stuff that’s

worked on girls and teachers and marketing executives just doesn't work with you."

"You realize that, huh?"

"Yeah. You want me to actually fix something. To actually come to work every day and *try* at something."

"I'm a hard-ass," she agreed. But her voice was soft. And her gaze kept drifting to his mouth.

His body tightened more each time she did it.

"You want to know the best part of it?"

"My sexy work boots?" she asked.

"Well, the fact that you drive a forklift is not something I've forgotten," he told her. He was serious.

She laughed. And her gaze dropped to his mouth again.

"What's the best part?" she asked.

"That when you expect me to *do* something at work, to make a difference, you really believe I can."

Jane's tongue came out and wet her lips. "I do."

"Thank you."

They just looked at each other for several ticks. Then she asked, "No one else does that for you?"

"The guys do," he said. "And Piper."

"I liked her."

"We all love Piper."

"She makes you try?"

"She does."

"So that's good."

"Yeah, but there's something about you that the guys and Piper don't have," he said.

"The forklift?"

He grinned. “Okay, there are two things about you that the guys and Piper don’t have.”

Jane smiled back. “What’s the other thing?”

“I’ve never wanted to kiss any of them.”

Her smile disappeared as she sucked in a little breath. “Not even Piper?” she asked.

“Nope.”

He could have sworn she started to lean in again.

“Hi! Oh my God, I’m so sorry I’m late! I went to change, and I burned the cookies that were in the oven, and I had to start over because Lisa really need three dozen, and I’ve been texting you but you haven’t answered, and I called but your ringer is off, and then I called the bar and Dillon said that yes you were here and you were fine and that you seemed like you didn’t want to be interrupted.”

Jane and Dax both turned to look at the bubbly blond who’d just come up to their table, seemingly rambling and flustered. The appraising, narrow-eyed look she was giving them in return said otherwise.

“Hi, Josie,” Dax greeted, fighting a smile.

“Hey, Dax.” Josie turned her attention to Jane. “Hi, Jane.”

“Hi.”

“You forgot you asked me to come, didn’t you?” Josie asked.

“No.” Jane frowned and shook her head quickly. Too quickly to be convincing. “Of course not.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She asked you to come?” Dax asked Josie. He looked at Jane. “Why’s that?”

Josie leaned in, sort of, on the table between them. The petite woman had to stretch to get her elbows onto the high tabletop and it hardly seemed like leaning when she was on tiptoe, but she pretended nonchalance. “Well, I think it was to

keep this”—Josie wagged her finger back and forth between Jane and Dax—“from happening, actually.”

“That right?” Dax grinned and looked at Jane again. “What is *this* exactly? Pizza and tequila? Conversation?”

“It’s her looking at you the way she looked when Zoe told her she’d made strawberry pie in a jar,” Josie said.

“Josie!” Jane protested, her cheeks getting pink.

Dax laughed. “I don’t even know what that means exactly, but I like the blush.”

The blush got deeper. “It’s nothing.”

“She *loves* strawberry pie. Strawberry anything, really, but pie especially. And Zoe started making them in jars so they’re super portable and easy to keep so you can buy like—what Jane?—ten at a time and stack them in your fridge with no problem.”

“*Josie*,” Jane said through gritted teeth.

Josie just grinned. “So if she’s looking at you like she looked at those jar pies, it means she’s never seen anything quite so wonderful, and she’s not sure she’ll ever get enough.”

“Oh my God,” Jane groaned and covered her face. “I was not looking at him like that.”

“You totally were,” Josie said.

“You really were,” Dax agreed.

Josie laughed, and Jane shook her head, groaning.

“But in fairness, I was looking at you the same way,” Dax said, grinning so big he was sure he looked like an idiot. And he didn’t care.

“He definitely was looking at you like... something like that,” Josie said.

“Like what?” Dax wanted to know, noticing Josie’s pause. “What did you think?”

“Well, along the same lines as Jane and strawberry baked goods.” Josie got a sly look on her face and cast a glance at her

friend.

Jane peeked between her fingers.

“Like you were thinking about eating it *all* up and then licking the plate clean to be sure you didn’t miss anything.”

Dax felt his mouth drop open. Then he snorted. “Jocelyn Asher... I really like you.”

Josie grinned as if very proud of herself.

Dax focused on Jane. Her cheeks were burning, and she was glaring at her best friend.

“For the record,” he said. “She’s right about what I was thinking.”

“Okay, you two are trouble,” Jane said. “I think we’re done here.” She leaned over and started to dig in her bag where it hung from the back of her chair.

It took Dax a second to realize she was going for her wallet. “You have to be kidding.”

“What?” She looked up, her red hair falling across her cheek.

“One perk of introducing a millionaire to some of the best pizza he’s ever had is having him pay, don’t you think?”

She sat up straight again. “That is a really excellent point.”

“Ooh, thanks.” Josie reached for one of the two pieces left.

“Hey,” Jane protested.

Josie lifted the slice. “I know better than to go for your pizza without permission, but this is Dax’s pizza now.”

Jane rolled her eyes and Dax laughed. He signaled to Riley, letting her know to add the pizza and their drinks to his overall tab for the evening. Which was covering pretty much everything being consumed inside the building.

“Well, since I’m clearly too late to keep the two of you from thinking naughty thoughts about each other,” Josie said, “I’m going over to talk to Stacey and Kara.”

“You show up late, don’t do your job, and then leave me alone with him?” Jane asked.

It was clear she was teasing. Dax loved that these women gave each other as much trouble as he and his friends gave one another.

Josie looked back and forth between them. “Well, if I’m sitting here, you’ll feel bad about asking him to walk you out to your car, and then how are you going to kiss him good night? You can’t do that in front of all these people.” She leaned in and said in a lower voice, “He *is* your boss after all.”

Jane opened her mouth, shut it, shook her head, then said, “You’re the worst.”

“Because I’ve now told Dax you want to kiss him or because I reminded you that he’s your boss?” Josie asked, batting her eyes.

“All of it,” Jane told her.

Josie went up on tiptoe again and kissed Jane’s cheek. “Love you.” Then she started for the far side of the bar.

“Love you too,” Jane muttered, watching her friend go.

Dax waited until she finally turned back and looked at him. Almost reluctantly.

“You called for reinforcements?” he asked.

“I *tried* to call for reinforcements. Unfortunately, my reinforcements were elbow deep in cookie dough at the time.”

He grinned. “You can just say no to me, Jane.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think I can.”

He leaned in. “Have I given you the impression that you *can’t* say no to me if you don’t want to be with me?”

“Not at all.”

“Has anyone at Hot Cakes, especially in management, ever given you that impression?” he asked with a frown. A sudden, hot bolt of protectiveness went through his chest. *That* was weird. He didn’t get protective.

“No. Never.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I needed someone to remind *me* that this is a bad idea.”

Relief washed through him. He gave her a slow smile.
“Ah. The irresistible thing again.”

“Did you look up incorrigible?” she asked.

He laughed. “I texted Piper about it, but she disagrees, just so you know.”

“Does she?”

“She said incorrigible means beyond reform, and she reminded me Grant has been successful in correcting my behavior on more than one occasion.”

“How’s he do that?” Jane asked, her lips curling up as though she was fighting a smile. And losing.

“Sinatra memorabilia, mostly,” Dax said. “He gets some great pieces and then dangles them like carrots.”

“Wow, expensive carrots.”

“He tried rationing my gummy bears, but I mean, those are really easy to get. It had to be something I couldn’t get for myself.”

She nodded. “Should have known that correcting your behavior was out of my price range.”

“Well...” Dax leaned in. “You do have some things to offer me that I can’t get anywhere else.”

Both of her eyebrows went up. “Tell me you *don’t* mean anything by that that would be inappropriate for a boss to suggest to his employee.”

He shook his head, his desire for this woman growing by the minute. “Can’t do that. But,” he added, “if it’s any comfort, Cam is an excellent attorney, and he’d love to sue me for sexual harassment.”

She laughed. “You’re trouble.”

He smiled. “And you’re a good girl?”

She tipped her head. “Actually, I think I’m just too busy and tired to be bad.”

He chuckled. “There’s a lot there for me to think about.”

Jane pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, watching him, then said, “Speaking of tired, I really do need to get going.”

“Okay.” Disappointment jabbed him in the chest, but it wasn’t realistic to think he could keep her here talking all night.

The urge was so unusual he thought maybe it was good for them to have a little space too. Maybe it was the tequila. Or something they put in the pizza. How could he be falling for a woman with so much going on in her life that he couldn’t even touch? And so quickly?

“But... would you walk me out to my car?”

Fuck yeah. Josie seemed to know Jane well, and she’d thought Jane would want him to walk her out to her car so she could kiss him good night.

He’d do just about anything to have her kiss him. To have her let him kiss her. To slide his hand into her hair, hold her head, and taste her. Really taste her.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever wanted anything more than to walk you to your car,” he told her. “And I *really* wanted that napkin from the Sands with Frank’s signature on it.”

“That’s a big deal?”

“The Sands Casino in Vegas was where the Rat Pack performed together in the sixties,” he said, his hand over his heart. “The casino doesn’t even exist anymore. So that napkin is... everything.”

She laughed. “I’m going to need to read up on Frank Sinatra.”

“I can tell you anything you want to know.” Dax stretched to his feet. “In fact, we should go back to your place right now and get started. I know a lot.”

“Nice try.” She slid off her tall chair. “But I have to work at the factory tomorrow. New bosses. Have to impress them.”

He stepped close. “Consider that done.”

She blew out a breath. “Yeah, see... about that boss thing...”

“Shit,” he said. He grabbed her hand and started for the door. “Forget about that. I didn’t say a thing. That’s nothing.”

She tugged her hand free but kept walking with him. He pushed the door open and let her step through.

As she passed him, she said, “It’s not nothing.”

“It’s...” It was going to be nothing. He was going to talk to the guys in the morning. “Jane...”

“How about for right now we just... stop talking completely?” she asked.

He could do that. Probably.

He walked with her to her car. A very basic, blue Nissan sedan.

She opened the driver’s side door and tossed her purse onto the passenger seat, then she shut it again, and turned to face him.

“I had a really great time talking with you tonight,” he said. “Thank you for telling me about your dad. Thank you for coming out tonight.”

“The no-talking thing is pretty tough for you, huh?” she asked.

He nodded. “Really is.”

“Maybe this will help.” She took the tiny step forward that brought her right in front of him then took the front of his shirt in her hand and tugged him down, putting her lips against his.

Chapter Seven



The first time she'd met him, Jane had wanted to kiss him.

She'd told herself she couldn't. It would never happen. It was a bad idea.

But now... now that his lips were against hers, now that he'd made that little groaning sound in the back of his throat, now that his hands were on her hips and he was backing her up against the side of her car and pressing close, angling his head to deepen the kiss, opening his mouth, making her feel like he'd never wanted anything more... well, now she was a goner. Because it was still a bad idea. But, oh man, she didn't care.

He was the new strawberry pie in her life. She'd had one taste of Zoe's strawberry pie and that had been it. Nothing else would ever measure up. She would never not crave it. She would never pass up a chance to have it on her tongue.

Yeah, Dax Marshall was that.

And then some.

He pulled back, breathing hard, staring down at her.

She quickly put her hand over his mouth. "Don't talk. Talking is the *wrong* choice right now."

She was going to have to deal with the boss thing soon enough. And the millionaire thing. And the he-doesn't-live-here-and-isn't-staying thing. And all the other crap she always had to deal with that made this impossible.

But for another minute—or maybe ten—she didn't want to think about any of that. And if he talked, that would be very difficult.

He pulled in a breath, gave her a short nod that she interpreted as *okay, no talking* and she moved her hand.

Which was the *right* choice, because he leaned in as he slid his hand up the side of her body, skimming over her hip, waist, the side of her breast, up and into her hair. Then he cupped the back of her head and lowered his mouth to hers again.

This time *he* kissed *her*.

And seriously, she'd give up strawberry pie for this.

That was the thought that flickered through her mind as he kissed her, holding her with that hand in her hair, the other slipping under the edge of her shirt just above her hip. His palm met bare skin and just rested there, burning into her like a brand. But he didn't try to move higher, didn't even rub or stroke, just rested it there.

That area of skin, however, whooped it up. Her nerve endings were dancing, and heat streaked from there throughout her body.

She *wanted* him to rub and stroke. Lots of places.

He kissed her hungrily but also slow and deep as if he was savoring. Much the way she ate strawberry pie, come to think of it. She didn't rush through that. She appreciated every bite. She kept it on her tongue as long as possible. She licked the tines of the fork to be sure she didn't miss a bit.

Dax was definitely kissing her like that. Like he didn't want to miss even the slightest bit. Like he wanted to drag it out.

His tongue, his lips, the way he held her, the way he put his whole body against her whole body, the way he felt and tasted and smelled... it was a whole experience.

Jane arched closer, wrapping her arms around his neck, tasting him back. She slid her hands into his hair, running it through her fingers, then down the sides of his face, gliding

her palms over his short beard. She let go of the sighs and moans that wanted to escape, letting him know she was all in here, totally and completely.

They made out like that for long, delicious minutes.

When he finally took his mouth from hers, it was to slide it along her jawline, his beard causing goose bumps to trip down her arms and tighten her nipples. In her ear he said gruffly, “I have to talk now.”

She laughed lightly. “I didn’t think it would last for even this long, really.”

“Well, I do love using my mouth this way too.” He dragged his lips along the side of her neck.

Her nipples got even tighter, begging for him to drag those lips down there.

“But I can’t resist saying—” He lifted his head. “You are the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted. And I *really* like gummy bears.”

She grinned. “Well... same.”

A very sexy kind of surprised but superhot look crossed his face. “What about those jar pies?”

She sighed. “Those are amazing.”

“But the kissing...” he prompted.

She knew she shouldn’t tell him the truth. The guy’s ego didn’t quit. Already. But she found herself nodding. “I was *really* hoping you’d be bad at it. Like terrible. Like no-worry-of-dirty-dreams bad,” she said.

He arched an eyebrow. “And?”

She sighed. “It was *really* good.”

“Dirty-dreams-tonight good?” His voice was rumbly and low.

She nodded. “Unfortunately.”

He looked very pleased by her answer. “Better-than-jar-pie good?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. She was possibly going to regret telling him this. “Yeah, this was better. Don’t tell Zoe.”

“Do you have dirty dreams about jar pie, Jane?” he asked.

His husky voice caused warmth to twist through her stomach and then slide lower.

“I do,” she admitted.

His mouth curled up. “Maybe we should combine the kissing and the pie.”

Her eyes widened before she could stop it. That would be... holy crap she would *never* recover. “I can’t even imagine that, honestly. I might die.”

He laughed, his breath warm against her cheek. He cupped her face, running his thumb along her jaw, looking into her eyes.

“Thank you for letting me kiss you.”

“I think *I* kissed *you*.”

He nodded. “Thank you for that too.”

He was *thanking* her for kissing him? This guy... she honestly didn’t know what to think of him. He was so not what she expected nearly every time they talked.

“Do me a favor?” she asked.

“Anything. Except never kiss you again.” He shook his head. “Please don’t ask me that.”

She should. She really, really should. But she couldn’t bring herself to say the words. “I was going to say, please don’t promote me.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know. That was definitely promotion-level kissing.”

She pushed him back and took a deep breath. She needed some space. She needed to stop thinking about kissing him again—when, where, how long did she have to wait? Could they do it somewhere that would be conducive to taking off clothes? “It really was. I was *really* good just now,” she said.

“I can understand you wanting to reward me. You have to resist.”

He let her go, tucking his hands into his back pockets, but he was grinning the grin that, honestly, was a huge part of what had led to this kissing thing in the first place.

“But no promotions,” she said. “I’m serious. I *will* stop kissing you if you promote me.”

“I hear you,” he said. He reached past her and opened her car door, holding it for her to get in.

Jane resisted the urge to kiss him again. She was not going to keep doing that. He’d told her not to ask him to never kiss her again. Okay, she hadn’t asked him that. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t just *not* do it again.

“So just expensive gifts, then?” he asked. “Jewelry and stuff. As a ‘reward.’ Since you won’t take a promotion.”

“Absolutely not. I will pawn it all and pocket the money *and* stop kissing you.” She slid into the driver’s seat then looked up at him. “I had a nice time tonight.”

“Ditto,” he said.

“Thanks for the... pizza.”

“I’ll... eat pizza... with you any time,” he said, pausing the way she had, making it into a funny, hot euphemism. “And,” he added, “I’ll also eat pizza with you any time.”

She smiled. So he’d enjoyed just the pizza and conversation too. Yeah, that had been nice. And also a reason she’d kissed him.

She rolled down her window then pulled the car door closed. “I’ll see you tomorrow at work.”

“You will.” He grinned. “I’ll have the paperwork for your raise all ready to go. Since you won’t let me promote you or buy you things.”

Jane shook her head. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Go out with me Saturday night.”

Damn. He was so freaking tempting, and now that she'd kissed him she was really going to have to shore up her defenses. She could *not* have a fling with the boss. She barely had time to do all the crap she had to do on a regular basis. When would she fit fling-time in anyway? And Dax would be... a lot. He was just a big personality and would be very hard to pigeonhole into a booty-call box.

"Can't," she said. But she paused. She bit her bottom lip. She tried not to say it. But in the end she said, "But you could go out with me Saturday morning."

"Yes."

He didn't ask what they'd be doing, what time, anything. Just yes. Jane's heart tripped a little at that.

"And I'll let you buy my coffee and muffin at Zoe's."

She'd be at Zoe's anyway, and if he met her there for coffee it was only kind of a date. For all anyone knew, they'd just both happened to be there at the same time. If she drank coffee and ate pastries with him in the morning, she would not be tempted to spend the night with him. Something she was *sure* would cross her mind if they went out to dinner or to the bar again. She wouldn't be even able to spend the day with him. She always went from the bakery to see her dad. Kelsey usually met them there unless she had dance practice or a school trip or something. So Saturday morning coffee and muffins was the safest way to see Dax. It would be in public. It would have a time limit on it, and it would be a less-typical time of day for banging.

Though the idea of being in bed with Dax at 10 a.m. on a Saturday morning was not the craziest thing she could imagine.

"Breakfast, and I'm not even waking up with you?" he teased.

"Yeah," she said, nodding. She ignored the jab of jealousy over the thought that he'd probably awakened with and gone to breakfast with plenty of women.

He nodded. "I'll be there at ten."

“Well, I’ll be there at eight,” she said. Her internal clock was too well set to sleep much past seven. She wished she could sleep in and be leisurely in the morning, linger over her coffee, lie in bed and watch Netflix or read before getting up and at ’em. But she’d been getting up early for too long, and once she was awake her brain wouldn’t stop thinking about all the things she could be getting done if she wasn’t lying in bed.

“Eight?” He sighed. “You’re a morning person.”

“Have to be.” And he wasn’t. Big surprise. They were total opposites.

Except for the fact that they both tried to take care of one of their parents while having issues with the other. And that they both liked and cared about the people who worked at Hot Cakes—she really did believe that Dax cared about them as people after working with them for the past several days. And they both liked pizza. And each other.

She really did like him. Even though anything long term, other than friendship, would be impossible. So friendship. Yeah, they could do that. They could joke and tease and even kiss... Okay, maybe they shouldn’t kiss.

“I’ll be there at eight,” he finally said. Then he added, “Maybe eight fifteen.”

She laughed. “I’ll wait until eight twenty, but I’ve got places to be.”

“Fine. But I’m going to expect some *very* good... muffins.”

Yeah, he absolutely said that with an-inappropriate-for-a-boss-to-use-with-his-employee tone.

A warm shiver went through her.

“You show up by eight oh five, and your chances of getting those are much better,” she said. With that same inappropriate tone.

Though it was true. You had to get to Buttered Up early. There was always a morning crowd even on Saturdays.

“Duly noted,” he said.

She could have sworn that along with that amused grin, there was a little bit of affection in his expression.

Like *friends* would have looking at one another.

Friends could be affectionate. And eat pizza together. And spend a Saturday morning together.

And make out against her car again at the end of the night...

That would be *very* friendly.

She was in a lot of trouble here.

* * *

“You’re a real pain in my ass, Marshall,” Grant said as he came through Dax’s office door the next morning.

“Missed you too,” Dax said with a grin at the guy who liked to seem perpetually annoyed with them all but who loved Fluke Inc., and the energy and dynamic between the five men who made it up, as much as any of them did.

Grant Lorre was the oldest of the five partners, a year older than Aiden and Cam and two older than Dax and Ollie. He’d been a business management and econ major at the university when they’d all met. He and Aiden had met at some dorky seminar for business majors and had struck up a conversation that had extended past drinks after the seminar and well into pancakes and coffee the following morning. They’d been fast friends, and when Aiden and Cam had “discovered”—their word, not his—Dax and Ollie down the hall in the dorm working on their idea for a video game, Grant had gotten looped in.

Dax annoyed Grant. On purpose. The guy was so fucking serious about everything. Grant thought he was looking out for Dax and Ollie when they went on their crazy trips to conferences and fan meet and greets, but the truth was, Dax and Ollie felt it was their duty to get the guy out of the office, out of his suits, and out of his routine.

It was thanks to Dax and Ollie that Grant had *any* interesting stories to tell. They reminded him of that and told him he was welcome, on a regular basis.

Grant kept a bottle of Tums and one of ibuprofen in his desk drawer. He wrote DAX on the side of the antacids and OLLIE on the side of the painkillers.

That was fucking funny, and Dax loved Grant's dry, subtle sense of humor.

He also loved doing things that made Grant reach for those bottles. Because that meant he'd done something to spice things up for his I-live-by-spreadsheets-and-planners friend.

Grant didn't like messes. Literal or figurative. His fucking apartment in Chicago was all sleek lines and polished surfaces. He was a neat freak, a bit of a germaphobe, and took everything seriously.

Dax loved shaking things up. From surreptitiously rearranging Grant's tie rack in his closet to calling him at 3 a.m. to come pick him and Ollie up somewhere.

The fact Grant stuck around and had even considered investing in yet another business with them, told Dax everything he needed to know.

Grant liked him. In spite of their differences.

"Grant." Aiden was clearly surprised to see their partner in Appleby.

Dax was a little surprised too. He'd called Grant last night—well, this morning, since it had been 2 a.m.—but he'd really thought Grant could handle what he'd proposed via phone and email.

"Morning," Grant greeted Aiden. "You're on my list too," he said to Ollie, who was lounging in the blue beanbag.

"Me?" Ollie sat up a little straighter. Or as straight as you could get in a beanbag. "What I do?"

"You didn't talk Dax out of this craziness," Grant said. "And you let him dial my number at two a.m. We talked about the rules for that."

Ollie nodded. “Hospital personnel, law enforcement personnel, or criminals and duct tape have to be involved before we call after midnight.” He looked at Dax. “What did you do?”

“You weren’t with him?” Grant asked before Dax could respond.

“No. Are we talking last night?” Ollie narrowed his eyes, studying Dax. “He was out at the bar last night and spent most of his time with a certain sassy, gorgeous redhead.” Ollie leaned forward in the beanbag. “Did you marry her or something?”

“How did you know I was with Jane last night?” Dax asked, ignoring everything else.

Ollie shrugged. “Someone told Piper, who told me.”

“Who told Piper?”

“I don’t know. But the entire factory was there last night, right? I mean, it’s not like you were sneaking around. But seriously, did you go to Vegas or something?”

“Why would I be *here* right now with you if I’d whisked her off to Vegas and convinced her to marry me?” Dax asked.

Not that he *wouldn’t* do that. And they all knew it. It just didn’t make sense that he’d be here now with *them* if he had.

“The private plane could have gotten you there and back,” Ollie said.

“Technically,” Dax agreed. “But that doesn’t take into account the twelve hours straight I would have her naked in a suite at the Waldorf Astoria.”

“Ah.” Ollie nodded. “That’s true.”

“So you had nothing to do with the call?” Grant asked Ollie.

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

“Well, he...” Grant looked around. “For fuck’s sake, Dax, is there a regular chair *anywhere*?”

Dax grinned and crossed to the office door. He ducked around the corner to Aiden's office, grabbed one of his chairs, and brought it back in for Grant. "Here you go, old man. I forget about your aging back and knees."

"Fuck off." Grant took the chair and pushed it up to join the beanbags.

"Cappuccino?" Dax asked. "Gummy bears?"

Grant hated everything about Dax's office in Chicago, and this one was very much like it. To Grant, coffee, dry erase markers, and leather chairs should all be black.

"I'm good," Grant said with an eye roll. "Piper is going to get me a muffin and coffee at the bakery."

Ollie perked up. "I want a muffin from Buttered Up." He shot to his feet and started for the door. "Piper!"

Piper appeared in the doorway before he was even halfway there. "For God's sake," she told him. "I'm not your child or your dog. Stop yelling for me."

Dax wished he had a dollar for every time their executive assistant scolded Oliver. Ollie didn't actually mean anything with the yelling or even the "Get me a muffin" type demands he made. He just didn't *think*. He got excited, and as thoughts and ideas were crashing around in his head, they just kind of fell out of his mouth sometimes.

Ollie was the dreamer and the visionary. If you could pull his head out of the clouds and get him focused, amazing things happened. But the focus was generally short lived, and the ideas were usually a little crazy. At least until Dax formed them into something other people could see and understand. Then Grant would crunch numbers, tell Dax to tone it down or pull back on a few things. Which he would do. Usually. And once that all happened, Aiden could sell it to anyone. Cam would make sure the contract was very lucrative for Fluke. And they all lived happily ever after.

Honestly, the hard parts of the process were getting Ollie's ideas from his head to paper and giving up on things on Dax's wish list like life-sized troll dolls in their merchandise line.

Everything else seemed to fall into place, and all five of them ended up being happy.

“Sorry.” Ollie did manage to look slightly contrite. “Just wanted to catch you before you left for the bakery.”

“I’m already back from the bakery,” Piper told him, stepping into the room with a cardboard tray of coffee cups and four bakery bags.

“Oh, I just was hoping for some lemon poppyseed muffins in my life,” Ollie said with a dramatic sigh.

“I got you lemon poppyseed and an orange muffin,” she said, handing him the bag.

“Do I like orange?” he asked, taking it and peering inside.

“You will,” she said confidently.

“You’re the best, Piper.” Ollie looped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, planting a smacking kiss on her cheek.

And in a very, *very* rare moment within the offices—in Chicago or Appleby—Piper Barry looked flustered.

Only Ollie could do that to her.

Dax grinned. *He* could have kissed her right on the mouth, with tongue, and she wouldn’t have done anything but laugh, push him back, and tell him to knock it off.

Ollie was the only one who made her blush and not be able to find her words right away.

He was also the only one who made her grind her teeth.

She had a bottle of ibuprofen in her desk too and Grant wrote OLLIE on it for her as well.

The only problem with any of that, was Oliver was completely clueless about his effect on their pretty, capable, amazing assistant.

Grant, Aiden, Cam, and Dax knew, though, and Grant jumped in to cover Piper’s blushing before Dax could.

“Dax wants to sell his part of Hot Cakes.”

Oliver let Piper go and swung to face them. “What?”

Aiden sat forward in his beanbag with a frown. “What’s going on?”

Dax sighed. “I’m not leaving Fluke. I just don’t want my share in Hot Cakes.”

“Why not?” Aiden looked not only confused, but a little offended.

Hot Cakes meant a lot to him. Appleby was his hometown, and the people working here were friends and neighbors. He felt strongly about saving the factory and the jobs as well as making it all even better than it had been before.

“Because he’s in love,” Grant said.

Dax shot him a look.

Grant sat back in Aiden’s office chair and opened his Buttered Up bag. He looked smug.

Every once in a while, Grant succeeded in one-upping Dax and making *him* the eye-rolling one who had to deal with a bunch of chaos and questions. It was rare, but Grant enjoyed it immensely.

“You’re in *love*?” Aiden asked.

“With someone other than yourself?” Ollie quipped, reclaiming his seat in the beanbag and digging into his bakery bag as well.

“I didn’t say love,” Dax told them. Though he wasn’t really protesting the term.

Jane was amazing. He wasn’t sure he was in love with her yet, but he wasn’t a dumbass. *Not* falling in love with her would be pretty stupid.

Especially after that kiss. That kiss was why he’d still been awake at 2 a.m. and had decided to fix the “you’re my boss” protest Jane kept offering up. There was an easy solution, and he was more than willing to do it to have her.

“You said you had met someone and that you’d never felt like this before and that the only way to be with her was to

give up your portion of Hot Cakes,” Grant said.

Dax nodded. “Love doesn’t appear in that sentence anywhere.”

“Well, let’s see,” Ollie said, licking an orange muffin crumb from his finger. “You’ve felt lust and curiosity and affection for women before. You’ve also felt frustration and annoyance and fear.”

“Fear was *one* time, one girl, and that was all her, not me,” Dax protested. “She was a nutjob.”

He’d actually had a stalker for a while. She was *very* into *Warriors of Easton* and had been obsessed with its creators. Once she’d met Dax and Ollie at a few cons, she’d latched on to Dax. She showed up *everywhere*, sent him emails and letters and packages, posted on fan forums. It had been over the top, and the packages with her panties in them had been *a lot*, but it hadn’t been until she’d broken into his hotel room and he’d come in to find her in a full *Warriors of Easton* princess costume—complete with a sword—that he’d really gotten concerned.

He’d called Grant at 3 a.m. about that one. Grant had been just a few doors down and had been there, with the cops, in minutes.

“I’m just saying,” Ollie replied. “That you’ve felt a lot of things for a lot of women, so to say you’ve never felt *this* way before only leaves a few emotions. And,” he added, “this orange muffin is freaking amazing.”

Okay, Ollie had a point. Dax hadn’t really been trying to label what he felt for Jane, but it was very different, new, unique. And he loved *that* at least. He wanted to be with her all the time. He wanted to know all about her. He wanted to make everything better for her. Around her. For the people she cared about. If anything was even touching her life and wasn’t exactly what she wanted it to be, he wanted to fix it. He knew he couldn’t. He did acknowledge that. But he wanted to and that was new. The only people he felt that way about were his mother, the men in this room, Cam, and Piper.

“All I know is I want to be with her, and Hot Cakes is in the way, so I want to get rid of it.”

“Is it Jane?” Aiden asked, watching Dax with an expression that was part surprise and part concern.

“Yes,” Dax told him, meeting his gaze directly.

Aiden nodded. Jane was a friend of his. They’d gone to high school together. Zoe, Aiden’s girlfriend, was one of Jane’s best friends. It was important Aiden know Dax wasn’t just fucking around here.

That was also new. Usually Dax didn’t care if people thought he wasn’t taking things seriously. *He* knew what he was serious about and gave those things his all. What other people thought didn’t matter. Unless it was Grant, Aiden, Ollie, or Cam.

And there was also a niggle at the back of his mind that said he wanted *everyone* to know he was serious about Jane.

Which was interesting, because until that very moment, he hadn’t even told himself he was *serious* about her. He just didn’t get serious very often, about anything.

“You don’t have to give up your part of the business,” Ollie said. “That’s ridiculous.”

“She won’t date me because I’m her boss.”

Ollie snorted. “You’re not really her boss.”

“I own the company she works for,” Dax said. “At least a percentage of it. That does make me her boss.”

Grant lifted a brow. He was clearly surprised Dax would argue with Ollie but probably more so that Dax would consider himself a boss.

“And you want to date her that much?” Grant asked.

Dax shrugged. “I need to see what can happen with her more than I need to own twenty percent of a snack cake company.”

“You need to see what will happen with her?” Aiden echoed. “What could happen? You go out, have some fun,

have some sex, and then you leave, right? Is that really worth giving up an investment like this?" His tone wasn't confrontational though. He sounded more curious.

"I think there's a chance there's more there," Dax admitted. For the first time out loud but probably for the first time to himself too. "She's... amazing. Different than most women I know."

"Worth giving up millions for?" Ollie asked.

Dax nodded. "Yeah." He could admit it helped that he'd still have millions in the bank. He didn't want to blow this "sacrifice" out of proportion. He wasn't giving up fame and fortune here.

"And you want to make this grand gesture, right?" Grant asked. "That's pretty typical. Do something big and crazy to make a point."

It was totally typical. "Well, the thing is," Dax said, "and I'm sure you'll find this amusing," he told Grant specifically, "I'm not sure she'll go out with me anyway."

"No?" Grant asked. "When you take the one thing she's worried about out of the equation?"

Dax shook his head. "I think the boss thing is a convenient excuse. There's more reasons why she doesn't want to let me too close. But I'm definitely up for showing her I'm serious here."

Aiden was watching him carefully. "Jane is special," he said. "She's not at all like your usual girls."

Dax nodded. "I promise you I realize that. I won't hurt her."

Aiden gave him a small smile. "I think I'm more afraid that she'll hurt you, man."

Dax frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Jane doesn't have time for anything extra, anything silly or outrageous."

Dax gave him a nod. Aiden's words jabbed him in the chest. "Got it. I'm silly and outrageous."

"You are," Aiden agreed. "Intentionally."

"Maybe Jane needs a little silliness in her life."

"Maybe," Aiden said. "But that's going to be short term. The seriousness in her life isn't going to go away. You're not going to be able to just help her through a tough time and make it go away. That tough time is her reality."

And Aiden didn't think Dax had what it took to help someone through a tough time on any kind of ongoing basis.

That hurt.

But the worst part? Dax thought maybe Aiden was right. He'd helped his mom through her lowest periods, but he certainly hadn't been able to get her to a happy place on any kind of permanent basis.

"And this is going to hurt *me* how?" Dax asked Aiden.

"You're going to have to eventually just let it be what it is. And that's hard for you. You keep trying to reform your dad, for God's sake, and everyone knows he's the man he's going to be."

Dax really hated this whole fucking conversation suddenly.

"Just buy my shares out, and then when this all goes to shit, you can buy me a five-pound bag of gummy bears and get me black-out drunk," Dax said.

"Is that how you deal with broken hearts?" Ollie asked.

Dax could honestly say he'd never had a broken heart. Not over a woman anyway. He looked at his best friends and shrugged. "Fuck if I know."

Chapter Eight



The next day sucked.

Not because of the tequila shot or the later-than-usual night out at the bar or the fact that she'd had a hard time falling asleep because of all the thoughts of Dax and that kiss running through her head.

But because her stepmother really was wicked at times. And her sister was a drama queen.

"Kelsey," Jane broke into her sister's ranting. "I am on my way over. Do *not* throw any more dishes."

Cassie had basically grounded Kelsey because she'd gotten a C on her chemistry test. That meant Kelsey couldn't go to the school dance that weekend. *That* meant Kelsey was going to be insufferable to live with, which meant Cassie was going to be even meaner and... Jane was going to be getting a lot of calls from both of them.

"It's not fair! She's not my mom! I don't understand why she gets a say in this at all!" Kelsey said. Her voice was wobbly with tears, but they weren't sad tears. They were teenager-pissed-at-the-world tears.

"Because you got a C. That's not her decision. That was something dad and I put in place, and you know it," Jane said, heading out the door of the factory toward the parking lot. Thankfully, her work shift was already over, and she hadn't had to duck out early.

She *really* sympathized with Kelsey. Her sister was in a very tough situation in general. Her own mother was flitting

around the world while her father sat in a nursing home, and she lived with the stepmother who punished Kelsey for anything she had—friends, great hair, a natural talent for dance and a place in the front row of the dance team at school—that Aspen didn't.

But Kelsey also used her my-mom-was-never-there-for-me and my-father-is-sick stuff as an excuse to be a brat.

Jane had been there for her. Jane was still there for her. She didn't do Kelsey's laundry or cook for her or sleep under the same roof, but she went to parent-teacher conferences, showed up to every dance team performance, and went to bat for her when Cassie leaned too hard.

But Kelsey had to get good grades. She was capable of it. She just didn't try because she hated chemistry.

Well, I have to do a lot of things I hate every day, Jane thought. Kelsey needed to grow up a little. Throwing dishes against the wall in the kitchen was not grown-up.

"I got a C!" Kelsey said. "Big deal! That's passing! And she only grounded me because of the dance. If I didn't have anything fun going on she wouldn't have even bothered. And you wouldn't even know about the C!"

"Well, to be fair, I know about the C because there are two plates lying in pieces on the kitchen floor." Cassie had called Jane immediately. She'd even sent a video of Kelsey heaving the second plate across the kitchen.

"She would have told you anyway," Kelsey said.

"Probably," Jane agreed. "But that would have surely been after *you* told me because you know how much I hate hearing that kind of stuff from her."

"It's just one stupid test," Kelsey muttered.

"And the rule is 'no C's,' so it doesn't really matter."

"You *have* to get me ungrounded." Kelsey's tone turned pleading.

"*You* have to get *yourself* ungrounded," Jane told her. "Talk to your teacher about some extra credit. Do more chores. Beg.

But this is on you.”

“You could take me out Saturday,” Kelsey said, ignoring everything Jane said. “And then I could go to the dance from your place.”

Sister time with Jane never counted as “going out,” so the grounding rules wouldn’t apply. Jane could take Kelsey anywhere and anytime, for the most part. There had definitely been times that Jane had let Kelsey spend a weekend or even three or four days with her just to give them all a break. She suspected Cassie liked that as much as Kelsey did. But this wasn’t going to be one of those times.

“You can hang out with me this weekend if you want,” Jane said, compromising. It was Friday night. Kelsey could spend her grounded weekend on Jane’s couch with ice cream. That was better than her shutting herself in her room to avoid Cassie, Jane supposed. “But you’re not going to the dance.”

“Come *on!*”

“No. I’ll be there in ten minutes, and I’ll help you with the chores, but you’re not going to the dance, and I’m not sweeping up broken plates. Pull yourself together. Clean the kitchen up, and I’ll see you soon.”

Jane took a deep breath and blew it out. Maybe she should start doing yoga. Josie’s younger sister, Paige, ran Cores and Catnip, a yoga studio and cat café. Jane could head over there right now, in fact. Cores offered yoga classes of all kinds along with a juice bar and cat adoption center. The sign even had a cat playing with an apple core on it. Paige really liked the cats best, but the yoga and juice bar actually made money while collecting cats did not.

Cores was the opposite of Buttered Up in almost every way. The bakery was decorated in bright yellows and had display cases brimming with multicolored treats full of fat and sugar. People came in to get a shot of sugar and caffeine so they could face their workday. On the other hand, the yoga studio was all soft creams and tans and was a quiet place. People came in and did yoga while cats lay around on the mats and purred. People stretched, breathed deep, drank smoothies,

and petted cats. They even adopted them sometimes. If Paige could part with one.

Yoga sounded good. Relaxing. All that. Hell, maybe Jane needed a cat.

But truly, she probably needed to take up kickboxing. Pent-up frustration seemed to need something more like beat-the-hell-out-of-a-punching-bag than stretching and breathing. Or purring.

Jane tucked her phone away and mentally went over the cleaning supplies that were at the house, wondering if she needed to stop to get anything on her way over.

So she was about thirty feet from her car before she realized there was a man leaning against it.

Her heart thumped and she felt her lips curving. It wasn't just any man.

It was her very hot, very charming, hell-of-a-kisser boss.

And yes, she'd had dirty dreams about him and pie last night. Together. At the same time. Combined.

"I can't wait until Saturday to go out with you," he said with a shrug.

The stupid warm, twisty, aww-I-really-like-him sensation bloomed in her stomach at that.

"Saturday is tomorrow," she pointed out, coming to a stop in front of him.

God, he looked good. He was in jeans, a black Hot Cakes t-shirt stretched over his chest and shoulders, and black work boots on his feet. They were pretty clean and a little shiny compared to most of the boots around here, but otherwise, he didn't look awkward in them. He wore them with the same easy attitude he seemed to do everything.

Except kissing. The kissing had been pretty intense.

"Yeah, *tomorrow*," he said. "And you didn't come into the break room today."

He'd been looking for her. *Awww*.

“I got a call from my stepmother I had to return over lunch,” she said.

He frowned slightly. “Everything okay?”

“Everything is... typical.”

“So not okay.”

She nodded. “Right. But it could be worse. So typical.”

“Well, I can’t stop thinking about you,” he said, pushing off the car and straightening. “And eight o’clock on Saturday is fourteen hours and thirteen minutes from now.” He stepped forward, nearly on top of her. “That’s too long.”

Again, *awww*.

Guys didn’t make her go *awww*.

“Well, I’ve been thinking a lot about you too,” she admitted. “But I’ve already got plans tonight, and you’re still my boss so... we’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

Her plan for tomorrow included bright sunlight and public places and other people and activities that would be appropriate for a woman who was showing a new guy around town in a casual, platonic way. Even her boss.

“Take me with you to do whatever you’re doing tonight. Oh, and no, I’m not.”

“You want to come with me?” she asked, imagining introducing Dax to Kelsey, Aspen, and Cassie. *Wow, that would be... interesting.*

“Of course.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to be doing.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just want to be with you.”

She put a hand on her hip and tried to pretend that didn’t make her heart thump a little harder. “There probably won’t be any opportunity for more kissing.”

He grinned. He wasn’t touching her, but he was absolutely in her personal space. And she wasn’t doing a thing to change that.

“I really do just want to hang with you.”

Oh. “So you won’t even *try* to kiss me? Or talk me into kissing you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

That was better. She smiled. “Well, I guess...” She frowned as something occurred to her. “Wait a second, did you say ‘No, I’m not’ when I said you’re my boss?”

“I did.”

“But you are,” she said. “I mean, I guess if you’re not directly my manager or whatever and *say* that you’re not going to promote me or give me a raise or special treatment, I understand, but you still are. I can’t kiss or date or sleep with the owner of the company I work for, Dax. In spite of there being no fraternization policy. Which we should maybe talk about at some point, by the way.”

“I understand,” he said.

Okay, *that* little stab of disappointment was stupid and unexpected. She wanted him to understand this. It made sense. It was *very* understandable. But she wanted him to insist it would be okay, *a little* more.

“Good,” she said with a nod.

“Which is why I gave up my shares this morning.”

Jane stared at him. She repeated his words in her head. She frowned. She tipped her head. Finally she said, “*What?*”

He reached up and brushed the pad of his thumb over her cheek. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed. “Powdered sugar?” he asked.

Jane’s hand flew to her face, wiping the rest of the sugar away. “We dropped a huge bag in the warehouse, and it was *everywhere*. I was in the process of cleaning up in the locker room when my sister called and I just headed out. I didn’t remember I hadn’t gotten it all.”

He put his thumb to his mouth and licked the sugar off.

Her belly, and lower, clenched.

“So, um...” Her thoughts were spinning. In part because this guy just did that to her. He was very distracting. But also because she was still trying to fully understand what he’d said a minute ago. “What do you mean you gave up your shares?”

“Oh,” he said, his hand back at his side. He shrugged. “Grant, Aiden, Cam, and Ollie now each own twenty-five percent instead of twenty.”

“They divided up your shares?”

“Right. Or they will. They’re in the process. We just met about it this morning.”

“And that leaves you with what? Zero? Nothing? You just don’t own any of Hot Cakes now?”

“Exactly.” He smiled. “That doesn’t mean I won’t be in there playing Ping-Pong every day though. In fact, it means I can play *more* Ping-Pong. I’m just consulting now. I don’t really have to do anything but sit around and drink cappuccino and watch the Game Show Network.”

She had no idea what to say. Who did that? Who just gave up twenty percent of a multimillion-dollar company? “You’re... crazy.”

He grinned again—this was slower and sexier. He lifted his hand to her face, this time cupping her cheek, and leaned in. “Oh, and I also now get to fully pursue a woman I’m becoming completely enamored with. I can ask her out. I can kiss her. I can sweet-talk her into coming back to my hotel room with me—and not leaving for about a week.”

Jane felt hot bubbles fizzing through her bloodstream. “Why doesn’t that sound creepy and like you’re going to stalk me and hold me captive?”

“Because you *want* me to ask you out and kiss you and sweet-talk you and take you to my hotel room,” he said.

Well, that was a very good point.

“The problem is,” she said, realizing she sounded very breathless suddenly. “You’re not the boss now, so you can’t

really get me out of work for a week to lie around naked in a hotel room with you.”

His eyes flared with heat, and he leaned in, putting his mouth against her ear. “If they fire you, I’ll just be able to keep you in my hotel room even longer. I promise you won’t even remember where you used to work, and you certainly won’t care.”

She laughed, though she sounded completely seduced. Which she was. She imagined that laugh was the soft, breathy, oh-my-God-you’re-Dax-Marshall laugh that he heard a lot from girls at Comic-Con. She got it. She really did. And she didn’t even know that much about his video game.

“You didn’t *really* give Hot Cakes up so I’d say yes to going out with you.”

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “I did. I absolutely did.”

“But...” That just wasn’t sinking in. Who did stuff like that? “That’s nuts. You don’t even know that you really want to date me. We haven’t even gone out.”

“Well,” he said. “I hate to tell you, but last night was kind of a date.”

“It wasn’t. We both just happened to be at the same bar at the same time surrounded by coworkers and friends.” Yeah, that wasn’t true and she knew it.

“And we talked and got to know one another and realized we want to know each better, and I got a little crazier about you, and then you laid a kiss on me I couldn’t forget even if I wanted to. Which I absolutely do not.”

Jane pulled in a deep breath. “I’m assuming your friends will let you buy *back* into Hot Cakes if you suddenly decide this is all a huge mistake.”

He frowned slightly but said, “I’m sure they would. But I’m not planning on calling *that* meeting anytime soon.”

“Well, maybe we should actually try this out and see. That way you’re only out a few million by the time you realize you

messed up.”

He smiled. “Excellent idea. I’ll let them know you will be very late getting to work tomorrow.”

She gave a soft laugh. “I wasn’t actually talking about *that* part. I think you should see what hanging out with me really entails.”

He narrowed one eye. “You’re going to try to scare me off?”

“No. I’m not going to try. But I’m going to show you my real life, and, well, if you get a little scared, I won’t blame you.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Of course you’re not.” Jane wondered if Dax ever actually got scared about anything.

“Can I kiss you at the end of the night?” he asked.

She didn’t have to think about that for long. “If you still want to at the end of this night, then yes.”

“Then I can brave just about anything.”

If she was the swooning type of girl, that might have done it.

“We’ll see,” she said flippantly, instead of throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him right now.

Though maybe she should. Just in case he was no longer inclined to kiss her at the end of the night...

“So let’s go,” he said, stepping back and moving to open her car door. “Let’s get this night started.”

Yeah, that’s what they should do. She should show him what being in her real life actually meant. He’d probably be in Aiden’s office with his checkbook out, trying to buy his shares back tomorrow morning.

“The deal for the guys to buy your shares is just in process?” she asked as she slid into the driver’s seat.

“Yeah. Paperwork and shit,” he said.

“Okay.” That was good. They could just tear the paperwork up tomorrow. “Get in.”

He loped around the front of the car with a huge grin and got in.

“This is going to be fun,” he told her.

“Sure.” Though she had to admit the idea of millionaire, playboy, computer genius Dax Marshall witnessing a Kelsey-Cassie-Aspen showdown could be entertaining.

They drove the few blocks to her childhood home, her pointing out a few things in town—like the ice cream parlor and the arcade. Those seemed like places Dax might like.

She pulled into the driveway behind Aspen’s shiny red sports car. Her dad had given it to her for her birthday four months ago. She’d already had to fix a dented fender and pay a speeding ticket. Kelsey didn’t have a car and relied on friends or Jane to get her to and from school because she refused to ask Cassie or Aspen for rides. Or for anything really.

Jane turned off the ignition and took a deep breath as she focused on the front door. Everything seemed really normal looking at that front door. The house was a typical two-story with white siding and dark gray trim and shingles. The lawn was well cared for, thanks to Kelsey and Jane, and the flower beds looked great. Also a Jane thing.

She would admit keeping the house up and doing chores kept Cassie off Kelsey’s back and gave her less to complain to Jack about, but Jane did it for more than just that.

This was where she’d grown up. Everything here was dear and familiar. The new fixtures were Cassie and Aspen. And, of course, the furniture Cassie had insisted on buying. But the house and yard, the structure, the big, solid, unchanging parts were still Jane’s home, and she took pride in keeping it looking nice.

Not that she thought Cassie would let it go. She’d never live in a dump, that was for sure. But she would have hired someone to do things like the yard work and tree trimming and landscaping. Probably even housekeeping. That would mean

dipping into her joint account with Jack. The account that paid for his nursing home stay and his medications and the things he needed. Jane wasn't about to let Cassie get them to the point where her carpets were being steam cleaned before Jack's prescriptions were being filled.

"This is it," she finally said to Dax. "You ready for this?"

"I have no idea," he said. "I'm not sure what I'm preparing for exactly, so I don't know *how* to prepare."

She smiled. "Fair enough." She opened her door.

"So still no hint?" he asked, also pushing his door open.

"Nope. I walked into the break room one day to find a wall knocked down, a cappuccino machine, and a Ping-Pong table moved in, and an UNO tournament going on. This is *payback*."

That was *not* fair. What he was about to walk into was nothing like a break room with a Ping-Pong table. Because a break room with a Ping-Pong table could be *fun*.

There was nothing fun about walking into that house with two dramatic teenage girls who had no real adult supervision and were intent on making each other miserable.

"I do love surprises," he said. He rounded the bumper and came to stand by her, studying the front of the house. "I think this is going to be fun."

Jane snorted. "Dax, I think we're about to walk into the one place even Ping-Pong can't make better."

He got a thoughtful look on his face.

"Challenge accepted."

Oh boy. There was something about this guy saying those two words that made a tickle of trepidation go down her spine.

He grinned down at her. "Grant gets that same look on his face when I say that."

* * *

Dax followed Jane up the front steps to her dad's house. It was quaint. That was a good word for it, he decided. It was the kind of house you saw in movies. It was two stories, had big front windows that probably glowed with a soft yellow light at night, warm and welcoming. It also had a big front yard where he would fully expect to see a dad and son playing catch after dinner, a guy pushing a lawn mower over the grass on a Saturday afternoon, and a big old snowman in the winter. It was a family home. He would be sorely disappointed if there weren't a thousand Christmas lights dangling from the eaves in December, and he almost didn't want to look at the huge oak tree for fear there would *not* be a tire swing hanging from a branch.

Jane knocked on the front door and Dax asked, "Did you ever have a lemonade stand out on the curb?"

She glanced over her shoulder and nodded. "Yeah. A couple of times."

Dax put a hand over his heart and breathed out. "Thank God."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, looking bemused.

"This house was made for having a lemonade stand out in front of it," he told her. "How about a dog. Did you have a dog?"

"We did when I was little."

"Perfect." He grinned and looked around. "Did you pile leaves up in the fall and jump in them?"

She still looked puzzled. "We did."

"And you hung a wreath on this door at Christmastime, right?"

The door was perfect for a wreath.

She nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Awesome."

"What is going on?"

“This is a picture-perfect family home.” He pointed to the flower beds. “Those are perfect. And...” He took the chance and glanced at the tree. “There’s a damned tire swing.” He grinned. “Perfect.”

Jane looked around too. “It’s pretty... typical.”

“It is. And I love that. I’ve never jumped in a leaf pile or had a lemonade stand,” he said.

She looked up at him. “Huh.”

“It’s kind of tragic, don’t you think?”

“I never really thought about the fact that some kids don’t do those things. But it makes sense. Kids who grow up in apartments in the city wouldn’t, I guess. Those are just things I took for granted.”

He nodded. “Those things just always seemed like the epitome of childhood.”

“Because of movies and TV,” she said.

“A lot of it, yeah.”

“Well, a house that has a pile of leaves or a lemonade stand out front isn’t automatically perfect,” she said. “Remember, that’s just the front. The stuff you can see.”

Dax sobered immediately. He looked down at her, feeling a tightness in his chest that was unexpected. The intensity of it and the timing. This woman had a way of changing his perspective with the snap of her fingers.

He liked that. He needed new perspective. Everyone did. Getting outside the box you were used to, whether you liked the box or not, was important.

“You’re right,” he said.

She gave him a little smile. “But thank you for saying the flower bed is perfect. That’s my flower bed.”

“You planted this?” he asked, looking at it again.

“I did. Every year I do it and take care of it.”

“Well, I love it.”

“Thanks.”

They were smiling at one another when the door whipped open. “Finally!”

A beautiful teenage girl with long, dark hair greeted them. She was wearing cut-off jean shorts and a blue tank top. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail that hung to the middle of her back. She was slender and about two inches shorter than Jane.

They didn’t look much alike until she met his gaze.

Those eyes were Jane’s blue eyes.

“Sorry, it took a little longer to get away from work,” Jane said, stepping through the doorway.

Dax felt a flicker of what might have been guilt. He was the reason she’d been hung up in the parking lot rather than coming straight over here.

“Kelsey, this is Dax. He’s...” Jane glanced at him.

He lifted a brow. What was he? He wasn’t her boss anymore. Were they friends? Yeah, that felt right. But she’d definitely not kissed him like a friend last night. He just grinned, waiting for her to finish her thought.

“He’s new at Hot Cakes,” she finally said.

That sounded weak and he smirked. Kelsey must have thought so too because she gave Jane skeptical look. But before she could say anything more there was a scream from upstairs.

Not a there’s-a-guy-with-a-chainsaw-in-my-closet scream but a I’m-going-to-use-a-chainsaw-on-someone scream.

Kelsey blew out a frustrated breath. “Well, it’s a shitshow here.”

“What’s new?” Jane muttered. She looked at Dax. “Remember, you wanted to do this.”

“I’m totally in.” He had *no* idea what he was in for, but this had to be more interesting than his hotel room. Unless Jane came back to his room with him, of course.

Another teenage girl came pounding down the stairs off to their left just then. She was also beautiful. She had long blond hair and was wearing a sundress. He didn't know what color her eyes were, but even from ten feet away he could see they were shooting sparks.

"You *have* to be kidding me!" she said, holding up what looked like a lipstick tube. "You're such a bitch."

Kelsey crossed her arms, facing the blond. "Well, at least I know you can spell *that* word."

"This was brand new and cost more than *all* your stuff put together!"

"Aspen," Jane said to Dax. "Stepsister."

"Got it."

"What is going on?" Jane asked, raising her voice.

"She—" Aspen said, thrusting a finger at Kelsey, "wrote all over my side of the mirror with *my* lipstick! She totally ruined it!"

Jane sighed and looked at Kelsey. "What's up with that?"

"She wrote LOSER on my side of the mirror with my shaving cream. Used it all up. And she didn't even spell it right. She wrote LOOSER."

Dax did *not* grin at that. That would be inappropriate. But if it was his group of friends, there would definitely be a conversation about if the author had actually meant LOOSER.

"What did you write?" Jane asked, looking concerned.

"It's called a dictionary," Kelsey said.

Jane frowned.

"That's what I wrote on her side of the mirror."

Dax deduced that the girls shared a bathroom with, he was guessing, two sinks and one big mirror. Clearly that didn't go so well.

"I only wrote *one* word! She wrote a bunch!" Aspen protested. "It's a way bigger mess to clean lipstick off than

shaving cream too!”

“That doesn’t make it okay that you wrote on *her* mirror,” Jane said.

“And it’s not like *you’re* cleaning it up!” Kelsey shot back. “Why do you care if I make a bigger mess? I’m the one who has to do *all* the work!”

“You know what?” Aspen said. “That is a great point.”

She pivoted on her heel and started back up the steps.

“Oh no.” Jane stepped forward and caught the back of Aspen’s dress. “You’re not going back up to make it worse.”

“Oh yes I am.” Aspen narrowed her eyes at Jane. “You always take her side.”

“I don’t. You know that,” Jane said. “But why did you write on her mirror to start with?”

“Because she poured out my favorite hair gel,” Aspen said, glowering at Kelsey. “She knew I wanted to wear my hair curled today, and she knows that hair gel is the best for curls.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Kelsey said. “I don’t give a flying frig about how you wear your hair, Aspen! I never touched your hair gel. You used it up and didn’t replace it and are blaming me!”

“Your hair looks a lot better than usual,” Aspen said, eyeing Kelsey from four steps up. “You’re telling me you didn’t use *my* products?”

Kelsey gritted her teeth and pulled in a breath. “I didn’t use your products. Your products smell like rotting avocados.”

Aspen gasped. “They do not!”

“They do. And Wade wasn’t talking to me after school because of my hair.” Kelsey propped a hand on her hip.

Ah, this was actually about a guy. Dax was catching on.

“Then why was he talking to you?” Aspen said, looking down her nose at Kelsey.

“Because I’m *nice* and because *I can spell*,” Kelsey told her.

Aspen’s eyes narrowed. “You are such a—”

“I think jojoba oil is better than avocado for hair actually.”

All three females in the entryway turned to look at him. Dax shrugged. This was dangerous, he knew. He was with the one woman who had broken his I-can-charm-anyone-into-anything streak and now her little sister and stepsister. There was no guarantee he was going to do anything but make this worse.

But he still couldn’t shut up. “I do,” he said. “But the best is coconut oil. Love the way coconut oil smells on a woman’s hair.”

Jane raised both eyebrows. Both teenagers just stared at him.

“Who are *you*?” Aspen finally asked.

“I’m a friend of Jane’s. We work together.”

“Oh.” Aspen frowned, but she studied Dax, almost as if she hadn’t noticed him at all before. “Coconut oil, huh?”

“Yep. And easy to get at most grocery stores.” Of course, he was in Tiny Town, Iowa. “Or you can order it online.”

“We have coconut oil,” Aspen said, wrinkling her nose. “My mom uses it to cook sometimes.”

He nodded. “Well, there you go. Same stuff. Some of the most versatile oil in the world. And you don’t have to worry about replacing your hair gel, then.”

Aspen flounced down the stairs. “Fine. I’ll do that, then.” She glared at Kelsey. “You’re lucky.”

“Yep,” Kelsey said, nodding. “I tell myself how lucky I am every single day.”

Aspen rolled her eyes and continued to flounce, right past them and down the hallway Dax assumed led to the kitchen.

“Do *you* use coconut oil on your hair?” Kelsey asked, her gaze going over his head.

He grinned. “Nope. I’m just blessed with amazing hair genes.”

“So you know about the coconut oil from women you know?” Kelsey asked. Her gaze flitted to Jane and the corner of her mouth curled up. “Just... friends?”

Dax liked Kelsey. “Yes. Some of my friends have used coconut oil on their hair.” He’d actually been told about it by one of the cosplayers who was a regular at the cons Dax and Ollie attended. She had great hair. She was also happily married and one of the few women who thought Dax was amazing, loved *Warriors of Easton*, and who *didn’t* want to sleep with him.

“Right,” Kelsey said. “And you make a habit of smelling women’s hair?”

“Whenever possible,” he said with a nod. “Assuming we have *that* kind of... relationship.”

“Of course,” Kelsey said, fighting a smile. “What does Jane’s hair smell like?”

“Cake,” he answered immediately. Then realized he’d just more or less confirmed they had a hair-smelling-is-appropriate relationship. *Well done, Kelsey*. He grinned at her.

Kelsey laughed. “That’s true. Of course, *all* of Jane smells like cake because of the factory.”

Dax glanced at Jane. She was watching him and Kelsey interacting as if fascinated and confused.

“Well, I’ll have to take your word for that,” he told Kelsey, his eyes still on Jane. “For now anyway.”

Kelsey snorted, and Jane’s eyes widened as she snapped her head to look up at him.

“Okay, enough of that,” Jane said. “It sounds like we have a lot of cleaning up to do in the bathroom.”

“*She* made as much mess as I did,” Kelsey immediately protested. “And Wade is *not* her boyfriend. She has no right to be mad he was talking to me.”

“Kels,” Jane said, sounding tired. “If we don’t clean it up, Aspen will tell Cassie, and Cassie will tell Dad. Then he’ll be upset you’re fighting and be concerned about Wade and...” She sighed. “I’ll help you clean it up. Let’s just... get through it. Just another couple of years.”

Kelsey looked like she was going to cry for a minute, but she finally sniffed and lifted her chin. “Fine. Whatever. I’m not sorry though. I’m not apologizing.”

“Okay,” Jane said. “Except about the smashed plates. You need to apologize for that and buy new ones out of your allowance.”

Kelsey shrugged. “I already gave Cassie money. She’s out buying new ones now.”

Jane shook her head with a sigh. “She’s out getting away from the two of you fighting.”

“That too,” Kelsey agreed.

“Mother of the Year,” Jane muttered. Then she looked at Kelsey. “I did *not* say that and you will *not* repeat it.”

“I know.”

Dax watched the exchange with interest. So Cassie just bailed when the girls started fighting? And Kelsey was a plate thrower? Wow. And it seemed that perhaps Jane said a lot of things about Cassie that Kelsey shouldn’t repeat judging by Kelsey’s answer.

He was not having a terrible time. This was infinitely more interesting than anything he’d be doing at the hotel.

Unless Jane was with him.

He couldn’t resist adding that little afterthought every time he thought about how boring his hotel room was.

“So go grab the supplies,” Jane said. “I’ll meet you in the bathroom.” She looked at him. “You can watch TV or

something, if you want. Living room is in there.” She pointed. “I’m sure Aspen will shut herself in her bedroom and will be reading up on how to use coconut oil in her hair, and Cassie will stall coming back here for as long as possible. Especially because she knows I’ll be here.”

“She knew you were coming over?” Dax asked.

“She’ll assume Kelsey called me, and I always come over when the girls are fighting. Partly because Cassie always bails,” Jane said.

“Got it. But I’ll help,” he said. He wasn’t going to sit in the living room and watch TV when he could be hanging out with Jane. And Kelsey.

“You’ll help?” Jane asked. “You’ll help clean the bathroom?”

“Why not?”

She looked at up him, hand on her hip. “Have you ever, in your life, cleaned a bathroom?”

“Sure. There was this time in Vegas...” He shrugged. “It just didn’t seem fair to make the housekeeping staff clean *that* up.”

Jane and Kelsey’s eyes were both wide. He looked back and forth between them. “See, one of my friends was—”

“Nope.” Jane held up a hand. “Don’t want to know.”

“I do,” Kelsey said.

“No, you don’t,” Jane told her.

“I do.” She looked at Dax. “Is it super gross?”

He studied her. “Well, that depends. Are you the squeamish type?”

“No—”

“Stop it,” Jane said. She pointed down the hall. “Get the cleaning supplies,” she told her sister. Then she looked up at him. “If you’re going to help, you have to be good.”

He gave her a slow grin. He couldn't let the moment pass without commenting. "I'm always good."

"Yeah? And why do I think you're *just* the guy to ask about how to get lipstick off of a mirror?"

He laughed. "Rubbing alcohol."

Jane nodded. "Figured. And I don't want to know that story either."

"There's more than one story involving lipstick and mirrors," he said. It was true, but he also loved teasing her. "And windows."

"Nope." She shook her head. "No stories about Vegas, lipstick, bathtubs, showers, or... maybe no stories at all. How about that?"

He chuckled. He wanted to kiss her. Badly. He wasn't sure he'd ever wanted to kiss a woman more.

"I don't know if we have rubbing alcohol," Kelsey said.

"Hair spray will work too," Dax said. "Guessing you all have plenty of that."

"It will?" Kelsey asked.

"Yep, it's the alcohol in it. Just like the rubbing alcohol. And hair spray is easier when you're covering a large area. If it's just like a single lip print or a heart or something, you can just use a cotton ball and the rubbing alcohol, but if it's a big area like with words and stuff, then the spray is easier."

Kelsey grinned. "Yeah, we have hair spray. I'll raid Cassie's bathroom for the *big* bottle."

"You wrote in big letters?" Dax asked, really liking Jane's little sister.

She nodded. "Very big."

She headed down the hallway, presumably to gather supplies. Dax watched her go then turned to Jane.

"Lip prints, huh?" she asked.

He nodded.

“Guessing you’re pretty used to having lip prints in *lots* of places.”

Okay, he really liked the little flash of jealousy he saw her in her eyes. Was he going to tease her? Oh yes. “I have a little experience,” he said nonchalantly, tucking a hand in his front pocket.

“But soap and water will probably get most of them off?” she asked.

Insinuating that most of the lip prints had been on skin.

God he liked her. “Well, you gotta use rubbing alcohol or hair spray to get lipstick out of clothes.”

“Maybe you should hang out with people who can wait until the clothes are out of the way to start applying their lips,” Jane said.

Yep, she was definitely a little jealous.

“Or maybe I should hang out with people who don’t wear lipstick.” He lifted a hand and ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

Her eyes heated a little, and her tongue darted out to trace the same path his thumb had taken.

“Yeah, maybe you should,” she agreed.

He grinned. “It’s definitely a good idea. It took me half an hour and two trips to the store to clean the last lip print up.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Lipstick is a bitch to get out of carpet.”

Jane closed her eyes and took a breath. “Do *not* want that story.”

He laughed.

Kelsey rejoined them just then with a plastic bucket full of cleaning supplies in one hand and a large can of hair spray in the other. “Okay, let’s do this.” She was actually smiling.

Dax felt a stupid rush of satisfaction at that. He didn’t think Kelsey smiled about cleaning the bathroom very often.

He followed the girls up the stairs to the bathroom on the second floor. It was actually pretty good sized. As he'd guessed, there were two sinks in the long vanity with a huge mirror. One side of the mirror had white streaks that looked like dried shaving cream. The other was covered in words written in bright pink lipstick.

Dax had to laugh. Girls were brutal.

“Okay, you’ve got mirror duty,” Jane said to Kelsey. She plucked a bottle and a sponge from the bucket. “I’ll do the tub.”

“What do I get to do?” Dax asked.

“You can pick between the sinks, toilet, or floor,” Jane told him. “And just so you know, this is only room one. We have the kitchen to clean and the living room to dust and vacuum.”

“Awesome.”

She snorted. “Well, it’s definitely not Ping-Pong.”

But it could be. Not Ping-Pong exactly, but it could be fun. He chose a bottle from the bucket as well and looked at the label. “Toilet, it is.” Then he lifted the bottle and spoke into it like it was a microphone. “And my first selection will be, of course, ‘Chicago’ by Frank Sinatra.”

“We’re going to listen to Sinatra while we clean?” Jane asked.

“No, that’s my song for the lip-sync battle.”

Jane blinked at him. Kelsey asked, “There’s a lip-sync battle tonight? That’s so cool. Where?”

“Right here,” Dax said. “What’s your song going to be?”

“Huh?”

“We’re going to clean for fifteen minutes. Then one of us is going to do their lip sync. Then we’ll clean for fifteen minutes more. Then the other will go. If I were you, I’d grab my earbuds and listen to my song and practice while I’m cleaning. I’m *really* good.”

Kelsey grinned at him. “Seriously? We’re going to do a song every fifteen minutes?”

“Yep. And I know you’re younger than me and the sister of the girl I’m really trying to impress, but I will *not* go easy. Lip-sync battles are serious shit. And did I mention I’m really good?”

Kelsey was laughing. “You did mention that.”

“So, yeah, I’d find my headphones or whatever if I were you and pull that first song up.”

“Okay.” She started for the door. “I’m going to do ‘Sweet but Psycho.’”

Dax laughed. “Awesome.”

Kelsey ducked out of the room, and Dax turned to find Jane grinning at him. “‘Sweet but Psycho.’ You sure *you* shouldn’t do that one?”

He moved in close, taking the chance to pull her in and put his mouth against her neck. “Aw, you think I’m sweet.”

She sighed and tipped her head back, letting him kiss down her neck and along her collarbone. “I do,” she admitted.

He kissed back up her neck to her mouth. “And all it took was coconut oil and a toilet brush.”

She kissed him, going soft in his arms, letting him tease her lips open and meeting his tongue with hers. She arched into him, sliding her hand into his hair.

But after a few seconds, she pulled back. “That’s not all it took,” she told him.

“No? Then what was it?”

“The realization that you jumping in with coconut oil and a toilet brush is completely in character for you. You’re not even really trying to win me over here.” She smiled. “You’re trying to make my sister smile. And you’d be doing it even if I weren’t here.”

Dax had to swallow hard. He should be flippant and charming and flirtatious here, but damn. He couldn’t do it.

That meant a lot to him. “I would.”

“Thank you.”

“I—”

“Oh, see, that’s not fair,” Kelsey protested as she came back into the room. “If Jane’s the lip-sync-battle judge, you can’t be kissing her and stuff. That will bias her vote.”

Dax and Jane both laughed and moved apart. “She can be the judge if you want,” Dax said to Kelsey. “But I’m telling you, it’s going to be very obvious who’s winning this thing.”

Kelsey propped a hand on her hip. “Bring it on.”

“Gladly.” He pulled his earbuds from his pocket and tucked them into his ears. “See you in fifteen.”

Kelsey grinned and stuck her earphones in as well, tapping the screen on her phone then tucking the device into her pocket.

“What if I want to lip sync?” Jane asked.

He turned to her. “What song would you choose?”

“That’s easy.”

“Oh?”

“‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin.’”

Dax’s eyebrows shot up. “A Frank classic.”

She nodded with a sly little smile. “I might have looked up his greatest hits.”

Dax pointed a finger at her nose. “If I hadn’t already given up my shares in Hot Cakes, that would have done it.”

She laughed and turned away. Dax watched her squirt cleaning solution into the tub and kneel to begin scrubbing. Kelsey had already sprayed the mirror with hair spray and was working on the lipstick.

This was the weirdest date he’d ever been on.

He loved every second of it.

Chapter Nine



Dax hit the play button on his music app, and as Frank filled his ears, he studied the toilet. This couldn't be that hard, could it? He lifted the bottle of toilet cleaner, turning it to read the back label.

The directions for use were pretty straightforward, but he looked around and didn't see a toilet brush. Was he supposed to use a sponge like Jane was using? That sounded disgusting.

He turned, intending to ask her, but found she'd moved in behind him, and he bumped into her, stepping on her foot.

“Ow!”

He pulled the earbud from one ear. “Oh shit, sorry.”

“You don't know how to scrub a toilet?” she asked. Clearly she'd seen him checking out the label.

“I do. I just read the instructions,” he said. “But I need to know—if I *don't* put my hands in the toilet and scrub with a sponge, does that completely knock out the chance of a kiss tonight, or would you still consider it?”

She shook her head, grinning. “Your chances of getting kissed are *far* better if you *don't* stick your hands in the toilet.”

“Awesome.”

“So you need to use the scrub brush.” She pointed to the cupboard under the sink nearest him.

“Got it.”

He opened the cupboard and pulled the brush out and then, well, he scrubbed a toilet. For the first time in his life.

When the timer went off at fifteen minutes, everyone stopped and turned to look at one another.

Dax pointed at Kelsey. “You ready, or do you want me to go first?”

“Oh, you have to go first,” Kelsey said. “I need to see how this works.”

He nodded. “I’m on it.”

And he proceeded to reduce both of the Kemper girls to giggles and twinkling eyes, serenading them with Frank Sinatra, via toilet brush.

He had to admit Kelsey absolutely brought her A game when it was her turn. But in the end, he and Kelsey both agreed Jane was the winner. The way she lip-synced to Frank showed she’d listened to that song a number of times too, and that pleased Dax more than he ever would have imagined.

An hour later, the house was clean. Everyone had performed, and Dax was officially falling in love with Jane.

“Ice cream time,” he announced after all the supplies were put away.

“Yes,” Kelsey said enthusiastically.

“I don’t know...” Jane laughed and put her hands up as they both turned to her at once. “What am I saying? Yes, ice cream, of course.”

Kelsey ran upstairs to grab her shoes, and Dax took the opportunity to put his hands on Jane’s hips, back her up against the front door, and kiss her.

She didn’t resist. In fact, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed close.

They kissed for long moments, then Dax lifted his head.

“Wow, what was that for?” she asked.

“Frank Sinatra, being an amazing older sister, being sexy as hell, letting me come along.”

She smiled. “Oh. Okay, then.”

He chuckled. “You’re awesome.”

Her expression softened. “I don’t know about that. I’m kind of wishing I could *not* take my little sister out for ice cream right now. That’s not very awesome.”

“You don’t want to take Kelsey for ice cream?” Dax asked.

“Well, it means it will be longer I have to wait to have you alone.”

Oh, he liked that a lot. He leaned in. “You want me alone?”

“I really do,” she admitted.

“We can cancel ice cream,” he said quickly.

She laughed and pushed him back. “You *really* don’t know how teenage girls work.”

On cue, Kelsey came bounding down the stairs.

Dax let Jane step around him and took a second before turning, making sure Jane was in front of him. He didn’t know if Kelsey would notice how happy Dax had been to be up against her sister, but it was safer to block the view.

“I’m ready!” Kelsey said, her smile bright.

“Where are you guys going?”

They all looked up to find Aspen on the staircase.

“Ice cream,” Dax said. He glanced at Kelsey and Jane and then took a risk. “Want to come?”

He wasn’t sure who looked more surprised, Aspen or Kelsey.

“Um... really?” Aspen asked. Her gaze also skittered to Kelsey.

“Yeah, really. If you want to,” Dax said.

He couldn't see Jane's face, but she didn't say anything. He heard Kelsey sigh, but she didn't protest.

Aspen seemed very torn. She chewed on the inside of her cheek. He wouldn't have blamed her for saying no. After all, things were tense with Kelsey. Going out and eating ice cream together might be awkward.

But she finally nodded. "Yeah, that would be nice."

"Grab your stuff," he said. "We're on our way out."

"Okay." Aspen turned and ran up the stairs.

Dax braced himself for Kelsey and Jane's reactions.

"Ugh," Kelsey said. She sounded more resigned than angry though.

"Sorry," he said. "Just thought maybe extending an olive branch would be good."

Kelsey rolled her eyes. "I guess."

"You don't actually hate her, do you?" he asked.

Kelsey frowned. "I don't *hate* her. I hate sharing a bathroom with her, and she can be super obnoxious and petty and unreasonable. But..." She shrugged. "Aspen doesn't have a lot of friends, and she hasn't figured out that it's entirely her own fault. But I think she will eventually. I feel sorry for her sometimes. Her mom isn't helping make her a better person *at all*, and she's got a weird, broken-up family just like we do." Kelsey looked at Jane. "And she doesn't have a cool sister to help her through it." Kelsey focused on the floor. "I feel bad that I'm not a better sister to her. She's just so difficult, and I lose my temper and fight with her instead of trying to be her friend."

Jane reached out and pulled Kelsey into a hug. "It's not on you to make Aspen better. But you'll never be wrong being the bigger person."

Kelsey wrapped her arms around Jane's waist. "Is that your way of saying I shouldn't touch her makeup anymore?"

“It is,” Jane said. Then she kissed the top of Kelsey’s head. “And I think you’re a very cool sister too.”

Dax felt an ache in his chest. He’d never seen a woman he wanted to do very dirty things to, interact with her family. He’d met one mother of a girl he was dating one time, and he hadn’t really seen them just being together. So maybe he would feel this warm, soft, urge to hug them both very tightly if he’d seen other women with their families. But he doubted it.

“I’m ready.” Aspen joined them at the bottom of the steps. She actually looked shy.

“Okay, let’s go,” Dax said, clapping his hands. “I had no idea cleaning toilets could make me so hungry.”

“I guess I wouldn’t really know,” Aspen said, her smile small and tentative.

Kelsey snorted loudly. “That’s for sure.” But she actually gave Aspen a grin.

“Your lip sync was really good,” Aspen told her.

Kelsey’s eyes rounded. “You saw it?”

“I love that song. I looked out to see what you were doing.” She shrugged. “But I guess I’m not surprised. You’re really good at dance.”

Kelsey had added choreography to her lip sync and Dax would agree it had been impressive.

Kelsey looked stunned at Aspen’s compliment. “Uh... thanks.”

“Maybe next time I can help in the bathroom,” Aspen added, “if you’ll teach me some of that choreography.”

“Holy crap. I will *happily* exchange dance lessons for help with chores,” Kelsey said enthusiastically.

“Do you think you could help me get good enough to get on the dance team?” Aspen asked.

“Yes,” Kelsey said without hesitation. “But you have to quit being a bitch to me.”

“Kels!” Jane protested.

But, her cheeks pink, Aspen nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Kelsey said as if that decided it. She turned to Dax. “We’re ready.”

They all headed for Jane’s car, but Jane grabbed Dax’s hand, pulling him up short and letting the girls get to the car while they were still on the front steps.

“You know that ‘you’re awesome’ thing you said to me a little bit ago?”

He nodded.

“Well... ditto.” Then she lifted up on tiptoe and kissed him. “And eat your ice cream fast,” she said against his lips.

He reached down and squeezed her ass. “I have a feeling I’m in for some major brain freeze.”

She settled back on her feet and gave him a naughty little smile he was instantly crazy about.

“I’ll warm you back up,” she said. Then she headed for the car.

Dax took a breath. It was no surprise Sinatra and ice cream were solid ingredients for a seduction. But a toilet brush? He never would have guessed. But he knew without that particular tool, he would not be anywhere near as close to getting Jane Kemper naked.

He would happily scrub toilets every day.

* * *

Jane loved her little sister.

She really did.

She also loved ice cream. A lot. Not as much as pie. Or cake. Or cookies. But it was very, very good.

Yet here she was, eating fast, impatient with her sister’s chatter—even though happy chatter from Kelsey was lovely

and not common after a run-in with Aspen. Then again, Kelsey and Aspen eating ice cream together after one of their blowups had *never* happened, so this was an unusual night all around.

About as unusual as the idea of a playboy millionaire turning her on with a toilet brush.

Of course, that wasn't really what turned her on about Dax Marshall.

It was... pretty much everything.

Jane scooped up another spoonful of strawberry ice cream, listening to Kelsey telling Dax about the upcoming dance competition in Des Moines as her chocolate ice cream with marshmallow and graham-cracker-crumbs melted in her bowl. Jane cast a glance at Aspen. Her stepsister was just sitting there quietly eating her vanilla with caramel sauce. Jane tried to remember the last time she'd been around Aspen that hadn't included Cassie. She couldn't come up with anything.

Was it possible Aspen fed off her mother more than her actually disliking Kelsey and Jane? The girls did butt heads, and Aspen did seem jealous, but they were two teenagers living in the same space, wanting the same things. And Cassie did pit them against one another, now that Jane thought about it.

Huh. Maybe she needed to give Aspen more of a chance. Maybe the girl needed some positive female role models and just some freaking attention that wasn't about the things Kelsey had that Aspen didn't.

Jane felt herself frowning. *Dammit, Cassie.*

"Hi, Kelsey."

Jane was pulled out of her thoughts by the young, male voice. There were four guys about Kelsey's age standing around the table now. They looked like they could be athletes, based on their builds, and they were pretty cute. For guys *way* too young for her to really notice.

Kelsey was trying to look cool, but Jane could tell she was surprised by the guys' presence. "Hi, Matt."

“We were wondering if you wanted to come sit with us,” Matt said. He glanced at Aspen, who was studying her ice cream intently. “Both of you.”

Aspen looked up quickly, clearly shocked.

“Uh.” Kelsey looked at Jane. “I think we’re almost done, actually.”

“Oh okay.” Matt shrugged. “Just thought we’d say hi.”

“Okay.” Kelsey nodded, clearly puzzled.

“Um, you’re Dax Marshall, right?” Matt asked, lingering behind Kelsey’s chair.

Dax nodded. “I am.”

“We are *huge* fans, man,” Matt told him. “*Warriors of Easton* has been our favorite forever, but this newest edition is *kick ass*.”

Dax smiled. “Thanks. I really appreciate hearing that.”

“Yeah, I heard you were one of the new owners at Hot Cakes,” another of the boys said. “That’s really cool too. We had no idea you might come to town though.”

Dax gave Jane a look. She knew she was staring, but this was... weird. She’d known about the video game, of course. She knew Dax made appearances at Comic-Con and other gaming cons. She knew he had a huge social media following. But even after looking everything up and seeing some video footage, it hadn’t really sunk in that he was famous. At least in his corner of the world.

“I’m going to be spending a lot of time here,” Dax told the boys. But he was looking at Jane.

“That is *amazing*,” another of the guys said. “This town is so small and boring, but we’ve got the *Warriors of Easton* inventors here. That’s just wild.”

“Is there any chance you guys would do like a gaming event here or anything?” Matt asked. “It would be super cool if you did.”

Dax shook his head. “I don’t know. Something to think about though. We’re really focused on Hot Cakes right now, but I’ll keep that in mind. You guys would be up for helping out?”

“For *sure*,” Matt said, and the other three nodded adamantly.

“Great. Why don’t you give Kelsey and Aspen your numbers, and I’ll get ahold of you if we put anything together. They’ll be our go-between. I assume you talk to them a lot at school and stuff?” Dax asked.

“Uh... yeah,” Matt said.

Dax looked at Kelsey. She rolled her eyes.

“I mean... we can. We want to,” Matt said. “Very happy to be in touch with Kelsey and Aspen.”

“Great. Girls, why don’t you give the guys your phones, so they can put their contact info in?” Dax said.

Both girls reached for their phones, handing them over as if waiting for someone to yell “Psych!”

In the end, all four guys put their numbers into both phones and headed toward a back booth after gushing again over Dax and how much they’d love to have a tournament or a con in Appleby.

When they were out of earshot, Kelsey leaned in, her eyes on Aspen. “Oh my *God*.”

Aspen leaned in too. “I know!”

“I have Matt Porter *and* Landon Summers’s phone numbers in my phone!” Kelsey said in an excited whisper.

“And Tanner asked if we were going to be back in here next Saturday. A bunch of people are getting together after the baseball game!” Aspen said.

“They looked like athletes,” Jane said, scraping the bottom of her bowl with her spoon and taking the last bite of her Strawberry Supreme.

“They are *the* athletes,” Kelsey said. “Those four are good at everything and captains of like every team. They are the *hottest* guys in school.” She turned round eyes on Dax. “I had no idea they were gamers though. Oh my God.” She grabbed Dax’s arm. “They think we are so cool just because we know you!”

Dax smiled, clearly used to this kind of reaction. “Well, you’ll have to let me know if they say anything interesting about *Warriors*.”

“I can’t believe you set up a way for them to talk to us,” Aspen said. “I didn’t even know Matt knew my name.”

“Well, I don’t want them calling me directly all the time,” Dax said with a laugh. “Plus I did *them* a huge favor.”

“Yeah, you’re going to set up a huge gaming con in Appleby for them,” Kelsey said with a laugh.

“I don’t know about that,” Dax said, chuckling. “But I do know I gave them all very good excuses to talk to two beautiful, fun, smart girls. They don’t have to come up with their own lame lines now.”

Aspen blushed and Kelsey laughed. “Yeah, they were just *dying* to talk to us.”

“Well, if they weren’t, they will be after a few conversations,” Dax said.

“I know nothing about *Warriors of Easton*,” Kelsey said. “Sorry,” she added.

“Me neither,” Aspen said.

“I can teach you anything you need to know,” Dax told them. “But I’m thinking they’ll find new topics to talk to you about after a bit.”

Kelsey smiled as if pleased and Aspen sighed. “That would be nice.”

“Is everyone done?” Jane asked. She was ready to get out of here. Really ready. Dax was... too clothed. And not close enough to kiss.

“Yeah, I guess,” Aspen said.

“Not quite,” Kelsey replied.

“Hurry up,” Jane told her.

“Hey. What’s your problem?”

“I’ve got...” She looked at Dax. “Stuff to do.”

He smirked at her and her inner muscles clenched. Wow. That was new. And not unpleasant.

She reached for her sister’s ice cream dish and headed for the garbage.

“Hey! There’s some left.”

“Then you can eat it in the car.” Jane turned toward the door, still carrying Kelsey’s ice cream.

“Oh my God!” But Kelsey scrambled after her.

By the time she was behind the steering wheel, Kelsey was in the back seat with her dish, and Aspen and Dax were climbing in as well.

She glanced at Dax. He looked smug.

Well, that was fine. He could be as smug as he wanted to be. As long as he kissed the hell out of her the second they were alone.

No, the second they were back at the Hot Cakes parking lot where no one would interrupt them.

She tried to focus on the girls in the back seat, talking happily about the guys that had called goodbye to them as they left the ice cream parlor. That did make her happy. Of course.

But maybe not as happy as kissing Dax would.

She pulled into the driveway. “Okay, ladies, good night. Love you.”

Aspen hesitated getting out. “Hey, Jane?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for letting me come along.”

That caught Jane off guard. She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Aspen nodded then looked at Dax. “And thanks. This was all really fun.”

“You bet,” he told her.

“Hey, Aspen,” Jane said as the girl got out of the car.

“Yeah?”

“Let’s make things better tomorrow too. You can help with that, right?”

It was clear Aspen knew exactly what Jane was talking about. “Yeah, I can.”

“Great.”

“Night.” Kelsey leaned over the seat and kissed Jane’s cheek. Then she leaned over and kissed Dax’s cheek. “Nice to meet you.”

He chuckled. “Ditto. Work on your lip sync. We’ll enter the lip-sync competition in Chicago as a duo.”

Kelsey gasped. “Really?”

“Sure.”

“Okay!”

A minute later, both girls were finally out of the car and heading up the path to the front door. Once they were safely inside, Jane shifted into reverse. But before she moved the car, she looked over at Dax. “Have you ever had sex in a car that cost less than eight thousand dollars?”

His eyes were hot when he met her gaze, but he smiled. “I don’t think I’ve ever even *been* in a car that cost less than eight thousand dollars.”

She grinned. “You don’t think?”

“I’m pretty sure. *Maybe* a guy in college or something.”

“Right.”

“In case you’re wondering,” he added, “I’m *very* okay with doing anything you want in this car. Or any other car. Or any other place for that matter.”

“That’s good,” she told him. “That’s very good.”

Then she backed out of the driveway and pointed the car toward Hot Cakes.

They didn’t talk on the short drive back to where Dax’s car was parked. The lot was much less full, but there was a third shift, so there were still cars in the lot.

She pulled in next to his roadster and shut off the ignition.

“Jane, I—”

She unhooked her seat belt and turned to face him. “Yes?”

He shook his head. There were tall lights around the lot that kept the interior of the car from being completely dark, but they weren’t directly under or next to one. In the dim light she saw him smile. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t remember what you were about to say?” she asked.

“I don’t know what I thought I was going to say,” he admitted. “I’m usually pretty good in these situations, but with you it’s different.”

He amused her. He was so confident, so used to charming everyone, that she knew he didn’t even have to try. It was natural that he’d never be at a loss for words and never actually nervous about anything. But his honesty and moments of self-deprecation always made her smile. He always seemed surprised to find himself less than completely in control.

“These situations?” she repeated. “What situations would those be?”

“Alone with a gorgeous woman.”

“Ah. I’m guessing you’re pretty good even when you and the gorgeous women aren’t alone. And with less-than-gorgeous women.” She knew that was true. Dax was used to fame and incredible privilege, but he honestly treated every

person the same, no matter who he or she was, how they dressed, or what their job was.

“I’m very rarely off my game,” he admitted.

“But you are right now?”

“I don’t know that I’ve really been *on* my game with you for even one minute,” he said.

She liked that. “I don’t want this to be a game. I don’t want you to be playing around,” she said. Lip-syncing while cleaning the house, Ping-Pong in the break room, coloring books all seemed like playing around, but she could honestly say that as she got to know him, she realized more and more that those weren’t games either.

“Maybe that’s it,” he said after a moment, holding her gaze. “This isn’t a game. And I’m not used to that.”

She wet her lips. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I’m not used to any of this either.”

“Good.” He didn’t even hesitate with that answer. He unhooked his seat belt and leaned over the center console. He cupped the back of her head, sliding his fingers into her hair. “Thank you for tonight.”

“Thank *me*?” she asked. “You’re the one who saved the day.”

“You let me. I’m guessing you don’t let people swoop in and take the reins very often.”

They were leaning in, almost nose to nose. His hand was hot against her head, and all she could think about were all the other places she would love to feel that heat. “Most people aren’t even half as good as you are with those reins,” she said.

“A lot of people think all I do is fuck around.”

“A lot of people aren’t paying very close attention, then.”

Even in the near darkness she could see his slow smile. “Are you paying attention to me, Jane?”

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” she confessed softly.

“Thank God.” He met her lips with his, kissing her sweetly.

But she didn’t want sweet. She opened her mouth, sliding her tongue along his lower lip, then in along his tongue when he groaned and opened. Her hands went to his hair, holding him still so she could pour everything she was feeling into the kiss.

She admired him. She was grateful to him. She wanted him. But more than anything, she *liked* him. A lot. She would have never believed it a few weeks ago, but Dax Marshall was someone she could seriously fall for.

And that was all kinds of complicated. They were very different. He lived in Chicago. He might find her lifestyle interesting because it was new for now, but nothing about her regular life resembled his at all. And he had been her boss twelve hours ago.

But apparently that was one thing she didn’t have to worry about anymore.

She was breathing fast when she pulled back and looked at him. He was amazing, and he was making her look at everything differently.

“Temporary reprieves can be very, very nice,” she said softly.

“I will reprieve you any time,” he said with a wicked smile.

“I mean it,” she said, running her hand along his jaw. “I see how it can be important and can lead to more, even lasting, things.”

His smile died and he swallowed hard. “I’m glad.”

“There’s a lever on the side of your seat,” she said. “I would really like it if you would move your seat back as far as it will go.”

He did without question or pause.

Jane climbed over and into his lap, straddling his thighs.

His hands settled on her hips and she cupped his face. “I’m not going to ask again, but know this,” she said. “If you did *not* give up your shares in the company and you *are* still my boss after this, I *will* do terrible things to your gummy bears.”

Chapter Ten



Dax huffed out a laugh. “Noted. Headless gummy bears if you end up having sex with the boss.”

“I was thinking more like poisoned gummy bears,” she said. “But let’s say headless, poisoned gummy bears to cover it.”

“Got it.”

Then she kissed him. Deep and wet and hot. He tasted like hot fudge with a hint of salt from the peanuts in his sundae. A man shouldn’t taste that good.

She wiggled on his lap, loving the way his fingers curled into her hips as if wanting to hold her closer. He was hot and hard behind his zipper and she pressed close, grinding, not caring that she hadn’t made out in a car since high school. A guy also shouldn’t feel this good.

Dax’s answering groan, and the way his hands spread out on her ass pulling her down against him even more firmly fired her blood. She wanted him. She’d never wanted a guy like this. She’d been holding back for a number of reasons, but none of them mattered when he reached down to the side of the seat and hit the lever that tipped the seat back nearly flat.

She went with him, not wanting to stop kissing him. Ever.

His hands slid up and down her back, rubbing, teasing her skin through the cotton.

It was nice. He wasn’t in a huge hurry to strip her. He seemed content just to kiss and touch.

But she wasn't. Jane sat up suddenly, whipping her shirt up and over her head, tossing it into the driver's seat.

She was wearing a basic bra. It was a nude color. There was nothing special or skimpy about it. It didn't even have lace. But the way Dax looked at her in the faint light coming in through the window made her feel like she was the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

He ran a hand up and down her side, gliding over bare skin, but not touching her breasts. He just looked at her.

"Now you," she said, her voice husky. She started to push up the bottom of his shirt and he quickly obliged her, grabbing the shirt and stripping it off.

She'd been thinking about his chest and abs since that first day when he'd exchanged his button-down shirt for a Hot Cakes tee.

Jane ran a hand over his chest, the soft hair tickling her palms, making her nipples tingle with the thought of rubbing back and forth over that hot skin. She slid her palm over his abs, loving the way they jumped under her touch.

She really wanted him to do the same. To touch and stroke and tease. She reached back to undo her bra and Dax reached to help, hooking a finger in the front of the bra and drawing it down her arms. She tossed it... somewhere. She wasn't even sure where it landed because Dax did touch her then, cupping a breast and rubbing his thumb over her nipple.

She felt her pelvic muscles clench tight and heat wash through her. Just that simple touch and she was ready, a few perfectly placed strokes away from an orgasm. She shifted restlessly on his lap, rubbing against his very obvious erection. The pressure good but definitely not perfect.

"God you're gorgeous," he said gruffly. "You look like a goddess sitting up there. You know exactly what you want, don't you?"

She nodded, reaching to pull her hair from the ponytail. She felt like a goddess suddenly, and it seemed that goddesses

would wear their hair down. She shook her head, her hair falling around her shoulders. “I know exactly what I want.”

“You want it here? Like this? Because I will gladly take you back to my hotel and pamper the hell out of you.”

He plucked at her nipple and she gasped.

“I don’t need pampering,” she said breathlessly.

“What do you need, Jane?”

“You. With your pants down.”

He grinned, an almost wicked grin. “Same.”

She laughed and reached for the button and zipper on her jeans. She shifted and wiggled to get one shoe off and one leg out of the jeans.

He just watched her.

“Sorry. Cramped quarters,” she said. “But I don’t want to get off of you.”

“I have no problem with that. Grinding against me like that is almost killing me, but I like what the wiggling does to your tits.”

She huffed out a surprised breath. For some reason, laid-back, good-time-guy Dax didn’t seem like a dirty talker. And maybe “tits” was not exactly dirty talk. But it worked for her. She was hot and ready to go. She settled back on his thighs, one leg in her jeans and one leg out. But that was all they needed.

His gaze dropped to the front of her panties. Also nude in color and very basic. In fact, she had to think hard to even come up with a pair of underwear she owned that wasn’t black, white, or nude. She thought she might still have a pair of red ones somewhere. And there was a pair that was white but had lipstick prints all over them. A lot like that tie Dax had worn to their first meeting, come to think of it. She had no idea where, or why, she’d gotten either pair. The guys she slept with were a lot more interested in getting the panties off than they were in how those panties looked, and she was hardly the striptease kind of girl.

She figured Dax had experienced plenty of fancy, colored, skimpy panties in his time though. This was real-life, regular-girl, small-town, front-seat-of-a-car sex. It was good to expand his horizons.

She reached for his zipper at the same time he reached for her panties. He got there first. And she forgot what she'd been about to do. He ran his finger up and down her center, brushing over her clit and, no doubt, feeling just how hot and wet she was.

Jane closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It had been a while since someone other than her had touched that particular area. That area was very grateful for the attention.

“Really need your pants out of the way,” she said, her voice tight.

“I’m busy,” he told her, rubbing up and down again.

“Dax,” she ground out. She was trying very hard not to just start begging him to slide his finger in...

His finger slipped under the edge of her panties and he stroked over her with no barrier. Jane couldn't breathe, and her thighs tightened on either side of him, squeezing.

“I...”

“Yes, Jane?” he asked, circling her clit leisurely. “Were you going to say something?”

“I... don't know.” It was just his finger. Something better and bigger was just a few inches away, but his finger was *right there* doing very nice things, and she couldn't think about anything else suddenly except that digit teasing and filling her. She tipped her head back and gripped his wrist. She lifted slightly, guiding his hand down to right where she needed him, and then sank down, his thick middle finger sliding into her.

“Oh yes,” she said, almost panting.

“Fuck,” Dax answered. “That's so hot, Jane. Show me exactly what you need.”

Her eyes flew open and she met his gaze. His finger was pumping in and out of her and his thumb was circling her clit.

It was awesome. But he'd said she could show him *exactly* what she wanted, right? She leaned in, bracing her hand on the seat above his shoulder. It put her breast right at mouth level for him.

"Make me come, Dax," she said huskily.

"My fucking pleasure." He added a second finger as he took her nipple in his mouth, sucking hard.

She cried out at the sensations ripping through her. God, she needed this. This was the culmination of all the feelings and fantasies about this guy she'd been trying to fight.

She wasn't fighting anymore.

He licked and sucked, thrust and circled. He told her how much he wanted her and how she really did smell, and taste, like cake everywhere, and how perfect her curves were, and how hot her bossiness was. She shifted, putting her mouth against his and moving her hips wantonly against his hand.

And then lightning struck and a swift, hard orgasm shot through her.

"Dax!" she cried out, letting it all go. "Oh yes!"

"God, Jane," he rasped. "Yes. Hell yes."

She took his face in her hands and kissed him again. Pleasure was still coasting over her, and the orgasm had been intense and so very needed, but she still wanted more.

"Pants," she said against his mouth. "Please get your pants out of the way."

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through her too. She sat back and was shocked, and turned on, when he slid his hand from her panties and lifted it to his mouth. He sucked his fingers clean, his eyes on hers. "Better than cake."

That was so hot. She shook her head. She'd expected him to be playful with sex but not necessarily dirty. She didn't know why. "I'll take your word for it."

"Seriously." He lifted one of those magical fingers to her mouth. "Want to see?"

“Uh, no.”

“Forget chocolate,” he said, sliding his finger over her bottom lip. “This is what I want to dip strawberries in.”

Instinctively her tongue darted out to follow the path. She didn’t taste anything unusual—he’d sucked that finger pretty clean—but it felt dirty anyway.

And she really wanted to take a big old bowl of strawberries to bed with Dax.

“Strawberries in bed would get very messy,” she told him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It would take a lot of licking and sucking to clean up.”

Her muscles, which had just been treated to a very nice orgasm, clenched at that.

“Not to mention a nice long shower after,” she said. A fully naked Dax, wet and slippery, backing her up against the shower wall? Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

“Exactly.” He reached between them and unbuttoned his fly. “Now, what were you saying about my pants?”

“They are very much in the way.”

“I agree.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “You want to do zipper duty or condom duty?”

“Both.” She quickly reached for his zipper, pulling it down and then wiggling the denim and boxers over his hips, freeing his erection.

His cock was amazing. Long and thick and hard, and a shiver of pleasure went through her as she wrapped a hand around it and stroked.

“Jane,” Dax said.

It sounded like he was talking through gritted teeth and she looked up. Still stroking. “You okay?”

“About thirty seconds away from embarrassing myself and ruining the chance to thrust up into that sweeter-than-cake pussy,” he told her bluntly. “Move your hand.”

She didn't want to. She hesitated.

Dax wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled her away. "Girl, you're going to kill me."

He put the condom packet to his mouth, ripping it open with his teeth, apparently not trusting that he could let go of her wrist.

He was right. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to take him into her mouth. She wanted to explore every inch of him and make him crazy.

Dax reached between them, rolling the condom on one-handed. Then he let her go. She stroked her hand up and down his cock, smoothing over the condom. He just let her, but his abs were tight, and he was barely breathing.

Emotions washed over her just then. It was so dumb, the timing so strange, but suddenly she was overcome with affection and happiness. This man was something else. They were going to have sex in the front seat of her car and he wasn't batting an eye. Sure, he would have whisked her off to his hotel suite and put her down on eighteen-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets, ordered strawberries from room service, and made a mess that someone else would have to clean up. Though he was probably a really great tipper. He absolutely seemed like a great tipper. Also a huge point in his favor.

He also would have gone back to her place with her and wouldn't have cared that she hadn't made her bed in a week or that she had laundry sitting in a basket on her kitchen table. Or that she would have wanted to *not* make a big mess with strawberries because *she* was the one who would be cleaning that up.

Turned out, Dax Marshall wasn't as high maintenance as she'd initially thought. In fact, he was helpful and supportive and... really, really wonderful.

"You're..." She started. But her throat got tight, and she didn't know what she'd been about to say for sure anyway.

He paused, studying her, waiting for her to go on. But after a moment, he seemed to sense she couldn't.

“Fucking crazy about you,” he told her, reaching out and clasping her waist. “And in desperate need of feeling you wrapped tight around my cock and moving that gorgeous body on me.” He moved her forward.

She gratefully let sex take over for the words. Or the lack of words. She lifted up and then sank down on his length.

They moaned together as he filled her, sliding deep.

Jane stayed still for a second, just absorbing the feel of him. Then he squeezed her waist and started moving her. She quickly joined in, lifting and lowering, taking him deep, feeling the stretch and friction send sparks of heat and desire through her body.

They moved with an easy pace for a few minutes, their ragged breathing the only sound in the car. But quickly the heat and need grew, and Jane picked up the pace as she felt another orgasm hovering there, wanting to wash over her. She wanted that orgasm.

“Yes, Jane, fuck, yes,” Dax panted.

“You feel so good,” she told him, her voice breathy. “This is so good.”

He thrust up into her as their tempo built, and Jane felt her climax winding tight, ready to let go.

“Yes, fucking grip me like that,” Dax ground out.

She tightened her muscles around him and he groaned. Then he reached between them and found her clit.

It only took a few strokes to send her flying.

“Dax! Oh yes!” She came apart, clamping down on him.

He groaned, and then he was coming too, surging into her, holding her tightly against him.

For several long moments, they just panted and gasped. Jane slumped forward on top of him. His arms went around her. Their chests moving up and down together.

Slowly, her skin started to cool, and her breathing returned to near normal.

Though she wasn't sure the rest of her would ever return to a pre-Dax state. She'd never had sex like that. It wasn't the front seat or the darkness or the fumbling with the clothes. That had all happened before. It just had never felt so... right.

Everything about this night had felt like it clicked. Like it was exactly the way it should be.

Like *they* were exactly the way they should be.

Laughing, teasing, dancing, and singing, dealing with teenage-girl drama together, and then fucking in the front seat of her car because they couldn't wait to get anywhere else.

There was something that told her that even if they were really *together*, had a relationship, had been doing this for months, or even years, even if they owned a bed together only a few minutes away, they would still get frisky in the car from time to time.

She liked that thought.

Too much.

Jane pushed herself up and looked down at him, taking a deep breath. "So that was definitely better than cake."

He chuckled and reached to brush her hair back from her face. "How about strawberry pie?"

Yeah, he knew that was her weakness. "Well... we might have to do it again sometime, just to be sure, but it was *really* close."

"I'm happy to keep working until I'm right on top of your list of favorite things," he said with a grin.

Jane's heart tripped in her chest.

She was pretty sure he was headed straight to the top of that list. If he wasn't already there.

Uh-oh.

Jane shifted off of him, rolling into her seat and reaching into the compartment on the side of her door where she stuffed all the napkins she got when she went to the gas station for sandwiches or carried food out from the diner. She handed them over, assuming Dax could deal with the condom somehow. He was the more experienced one after all. She worked on getting her jeans back on, then lifted her hips, pulling her bra and shirt from under her butt and slipping into them as well.

By the time she was sort of put back together, Dax was too, and his seat was upright again.

Jane took a deep breath, tucked her hair behind her ear, and finally looked over at him again.

He was watching her as if waiting to see where she'd lead the conversation next.

“Are we still on for tomorrow?” she asked. She wanted to see him. She wanted to spend time with him. She wanted to kiss him. A lot. And she kind of wanted to take him to her house, and she was pretty sure she'd be okay with a strawberries-in-bed mess.

“We are absolutely on for tomorrow,” he said. “And any other time you'll give me.”

She wanted to take him home with her right now.

But she also wanted to have a little time and space. Just to think about it all. Just to be sure she wasn't on some ice cream high or that the cleaning solutions hadn't gotten to her or something.

Could she actually be falling for Dax?

She needed to figure that out before she saw him again. And then she needed to decide how she felt about that if it turned out she didn't want to lick him from head to toe just because he'd been nice to her sister.

And stepsister.

Yeah, yeah. He'd been nice to Aspen too. Something Jane was ashamed to admit she hadn't been able to pull off in the

past few months very well.

Her feelings for Dax really might just be because he was a nice guy with a great body. That she absolutely wanted to lick from head to toe. That would make things easier if that was true. For sure.

“Meet me at the bakery at eight,” she reminded him.

“Right. And I’m promised amazing *muffins* if I’m no later than eight oh five,” he said.

She grinned. “Honestly? I’ll save you the good muffins even if you’re not there ’til eight thirty.”

He lifted a brow. “Eight thirty. Wow, I must have done well tonight.”

She laughed. “You did very well.”

He leaned over and kissed her. She was surprised for just a second, then she started to melt into him.

He pulled back. “I’ll be there well before eight thirty.”

“Yeah? Well, *I* must have done very well tonight too. To be worth getting up early for.”

He nodded, but instead of teasing, he brushed his thumb over her cheek. “Very worth it.”

Something in his tone made her throat tighten and her heart flip again.

Thankfully, before she could cry or beg him to come home with her, he opened his door and got out. She watched him slide into his roadster, aware that even their cars showed how very different they were.

But he waited for her to pull out of the parking lot in front of him and gave her a little wave when they went in opposite directions at the stop sign at the entrance.

They were different. But, man, she *really* liked him.

Maybe even enough to be convinced to stay in bed with him on a Saturday morning and miss the strawberry-cream-cheese muffins Zoe only made on the weekends.

Maybe.

* * *

“Good morning!” Jane entered the bakery through the back door the next morning, a definite friends-with-the-owner privilege.

Both of her best friends were in the kitchen, busily preparing for the big dessert tasting in Dubuque later that morning. The dessert tasting was a part of a huge bridal fair, and the focus was on unique and fun options for wedding receptions outside of the typical wedding cakes.

Josie and Zoe did amazing wedding cakes, of course, but they’d embraced the idea of bringing new ideas to the tasting as well, including cake pops, brownie bites, and pies in a jar, the newer specialties in the bakery. Those items now outsold the usual bars and cupcakes, and Zoe, a longtime stickler for tradition and the tried and true, had finally admitted trying new things could be good.

Jane gave them both huge grins as she grabbed plastic gloves and prepared to help out however they needed her.

She hadn’t lied to Dax. The bakery was open and was doing its usual Saturday morning business, but this morning she was here to help Zoe and Josie get their sweets ready for the event while Zoe’s mom and dad handled the front of the bakery.

He’d still be able to get muffins, and she was happy to get a table with him once he arrived, but she had been called in as more than a patron today. She was happy to help. Not just because she loved the idea of Zoe and Josie showing off their talents to a wider audience and offering some limited shipping options for those outside of Appleby for the first time, but because now Jane had them both to herself for a little bit, and she could tell them about Dax.

And ask for their advice.

“Good morning.” Josie gave her a grin from where she was boxing up cake pops. “Hey, you’re wearing a dress.”

Jane looked down at the navy-blue sundress with the white flowers. “I am.”

“You almost never wear dresses,” Josie said.

“I know.”

“So you’re in a dress kind of mood,” Josie mused.

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay, what is going on around here with you two today?” Zoe asked, looking from Josie to Jane.

“I have a date later on,” Jane said. “With Dax.”

“Ah.” Zoe nodded. “So that’s why you’re so chipper. Do you have a date too?” she asked Josie.

“Too?” Jane asked.

Zoe tipped her head toward Josie. “She’s been humming all morning.”

Jane looked at Josie. “Oh really?”

Josie laughed and waved her hand. “I’m just in a good mood. Maybe I’m excited about this event. We’ve never done something like this before.”

Zoe and Jane shared a look.

“Sure,” Zoe said.

“Right,” Jane agreed.

Josie giggled, and Jane was certain she saw a little blush on her friend’s cheeks.

“Well, I am excited about my date,” Jane said, going to the table set up with the apple, cherry, blueberry, and strawberry—her favorite—jar pies. “But I’m also in a really good mood because of the sex.”

Jane started putting the little mason jars into the box that was padded with Styrofoam peanuts and tissue.

Both of her friends immediately stopped what they were doing and turned toward her.

“The sex?” Zoe asked.

“Yeah,” Jane said, her grin huge and, she was sure, goofy. “The sex last night.”

“Who did you have sex with?” Zoe asked.

Jane laughed. “I’m going on a date later with Dax.”

“So you said.”

“And I had sex last night.”

“You also said that,” Zoe agreed.

“You think I had sex with someone last night and am going out with someone else today?” Jane asked.

“So you *did* have sex last night with Dax?” Josie asked.

“Yes.” Jane grinned and kept packing jars.

“Oh my God, Jane!” Josie said. “That’s awesome!”

She laughed. “It is?”

“He’s so good looking and funny and charming.” Josie sighed.

Zoe shook her head. “I thought you were adamantly against that,” she said to Jane. “Since he’s your boss and everything.” She held up a hand. “Not that I don’t love Dax. He really is awesome and I know you’ve been flirting. But why did you change your mind?”

Jane paused with a jar in each hand. “Well, for one, he went over to the house with me and helped me and Kelsey clean last night.”

Josie gasped. “He did? Wow. That’s pretty sweet.”

“And he totally mediated this whole situation with the girls, and then he took us all out for ice cream and made the girls hugely popular with the hottest guys in their class.” She told them the whole story.

Through it all, Zoe's smile continued to grow, and Jane thought Josie might actually swoon at some point.

"Wow." Josie had her hands on her chest, her eyes wide, as Jane finished. "Just wow. That's so sweet. He's just so... heroic," she decided. "He must really *like* you to go in there and fix things like that."

"That's the thing," Jane said. "I don't think he was even trying to fix anything." She sighed. "That's just who he is."

Josie sighed too with a dreamy smile.

"So he was awesome yesterday," Zoe agreed. "And you decided that was more important than him being your boss?"

Zoe didn't actually think Dax being Jane's boss was a problem. She knew Dax and Jane. She knew Dax wouldn't reward Jane at work for sexual favors, and she knew Jane would never expect or want that. But she agreed it didn't *look* good to other employees, potentially.

"Actually," Jane said, shooting a glance at Josie, sure *this* would make her friend swoon. "He gave up his shares in the company."

Zoe's eyes got round, and Josie made a little squeak-gasp-choking sound.

"What?" Zoe asked.

Jane nodded. "Yep."

"To date you," Josie clarified. "He gave up his part of the business... that could have made him millions... so he could date you?"

Jane lifted a shoulder. "Evidently."

"Oh my God. I need to sit down." Josie reached for a tall stool nearby and slid onto it.

Jane laughed. "He can get it back. Of course. The guys would sell it back to him. In fact, the paperwork isn't even finished yet." She looked at Zoe. "Aiden didn't say anything?"

"No, but Grant's in town, which is unusual, so they took advantage of all being in the same place, in person, at the same

time and had a big meeting.” She grinned as she put air quotes around *meeting*. “Which I think means they went out and ate and bullshitted and drank a lot. He came in really late and crashed in the other bedroom so he wouldn’t wake me up. There was a sticky note on the bathroom mirror, but I haven’t seen him yet this morning.” She shook her head. “It’s a little hard on them all being apart, not being in the same office together every day. It’s pretty cute that they miss each other.”

Jane agreed. She knew the guys had all been friends for a very long time, and the things they’d accomplished together were definitely impressive. Which made it even nicer Dax had chosen to spend the evening with her. Sure, he might not be a Hot Cakes partner right now, but the guys getting together had been about more than business. It was longtime friends hanging out. But he’d chosen Jane. She felt a little warm at that realization.

“So,” she said, starting to pack jar pies again. “I was thinking that, before it’s all official and he’s *really* given everything up, I need to let him truly see my life. Really see what being with me would be like.”

“You mean with your family?” Zoe asked.

Jane nodded. “With everything. But he’s already seen the factory and knows what my job is like and how I feel about it. He’s met Kelsey and Aspen, and he’s heard about and gotten a look at what Cassie is like. So now he needs to meet my dad.” She looked up. “Right?”

“That’s big for you,” Zoe said, studying Jane.

“It is.”

Jane was very protective of her dad. He hated people seeing him in the nursing home. He didn’t want visitors other than Jane and Kelsey and Cassie.

“You don’t think Dax will change his mind just because your dad is sick, do you?” Zoe asked, frowning.

“No. I don’t, actually,” Jane said. “But he’s making this *huge* gesture in giving up the business. I just feel it’s only fair

for him to really see what my life is like. And I want Dad to meet him.”

“Will your dad be up for that?” Josie asked. She often said how much she wished Jack would let her come and visit. Zoe and Josie and Jane were close, and they knew one another’s parents well.

“I don’t know. I think if I tell him Dax is important to me, he’ll make an exception.”

“You’re not using this as a way to scare Dax off, or test him, hoping he reacts badly and gives you a reason to not see him anymore?” Zoe asked.

“I’m not,” Jane said truthfully. “I don’t think this will scare him off anyway. I think he’ll pass with flying colors.”

“You’re falling for him,” Zoe said, still watching Jane closely.

Jane’s instinct was to deny it, but she couldn’t. She didn’t introduce guys to her dad. She didn’t introduce guys to Kelsey, for that matter. Guys were just a once-in-a while diversion. Until now.

She nodded. “Yeah, I think I am.”

Josie smiled and gave another big, happy sigh. “That’s so awesome, Jane. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.” Jane took a deep breath. “So introducing him to Dad is a good idea, right? I want him to know all these parts of my life.”

“I think it’s awesome,” Zoe said. “Dax seems like exactly the type of guy you need. Fun, confident, generous, laid back.”

Jane agreed. With all of that.

“Me too,” Josie agreed. “I hope Dax understands what a big deal it is, but *we* know. I’m so happy you’re falling in love.”

Jane was too. It was a strange feeling, one she hadn’t felt in a very long time, if ever, but she liked it.

“So what about you?” she asked Josie. “Did you get lucky too?”

Josie blushed and shook her head. “Not the way you did.”

“No sex?”

“Nope.”

“Then why the humming and blushing?” Zoe asked.

“I had a... romantic encounter with someone,” Josie said. Then she frowned slightly. “Well, I thought it was romantic. But he seemed annoyed.”

Jane laughed. “What happened?”

“Last night after Zoe left, I was just finishing things up and wanted to refill the flour canister. So I was up on the step stool reaching for a bag on the top shelf. My shoulder’s been bugging me, and I got a major twinge of pain when I grabbed the bag, and I almost dropped it. I jerked, and I almost slipped off the stool. Suddenly there was this guy there, catching me.” She sighed and lifted a shoulder. “I thought it was very gallant and said something about him being a knight in shining armor. He just set me down on the floor and said, ‘For fuck’s sake, you need to be more careful.’”

Jane snorted, but Zoe’s eyes were wide.

“Well, he’s right,” Zoe said. “What if you’d fallen and gotten hurt? You were here alone. You can’t do stuff like that when no one’s around.”

“I didn’t even think about it,” Josie protested. “I needed the bag of flour so I climbed up to get it.”

Zoe shook her head. “Well, thank God he was there. And he just caught you? You just fell into his arms?”

“It wasn’t *graceful*,” Josie said. “I fell, and he kind of just kept me from smacking the floor. But he *did* save me. And...” She sighed. “He was very good looking. Big. Smelled amazing.”

“Who was it?” Jane asked. “Oh my God.” Big, good-looking, amazing-smelling guys were definitely not as

common around Appleby as the female population would have liked.

“I... can’t tell you,” Josie said, focusing her gaze on the cake pops she was now wrapping again.

“You can’t tell us?” Zoe asked. “Excuse me? Why not?”

“Because I don’t know.”

Josie’s cheeks were bright red now.

“You don’t know?” Zoe repeated. “He was a stranger?”

“Yep. Never seen him before.”

“He didn’t tell you his name when you introduced yourself?” Jane prompted.

“Nope. He stared at me for a few seconds then asked if I was Zoe. When I said, “No, I’m Josie,” he turned on his heel and walked out the door.” She finally looked up. “And that all sounds pretty stupid when I tell the story out loud.”

“He didn’t even tell you his name?” Jane asked. This was a crazy story, but for some reason she was grinning. Maybe because Josie actually looked a little starry eyed about the whole thing.

“He didn’t. When I said I wasn’t Zoe, he walked out. Not another word.” Josie sighed. “He had a great, low voice too.”

Jane shook her head. “Wow, you’re half in love with a guy who said like a dozen words to you and walked out? That’s pretty rude, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was weird,” Josie agreed. “But there was something about the way he looked at me.”

Jane arched her brows.

“But... you were *humming*,” Zoe said, looking puzzled. “Why were you humming?”

“Because whenever I think of it, I smile,” Josie said. “And because of the tingles.”

The last two words were almost too quiet to hear.

“The tingles?” Jane pressed. “He gave you tingles.”

“Major tingles,” Josie confirmed. “And I swear he must have felt something too. He let go of me super quick, like he’d gotten shocked or something.”

“Why are you so enamored with this guy?” Zoe asked.

Josie shrugged. “It was the most romantic thing to happen to me in a *very* long time.”

“That was romantic?” Zoe demanded. “He kept you from breaking your neck and then asked for me and walked out?”

“I can’t explain it,” Josie said. “It was just a *moment*.”

Jane caught Zoe’s eyes and gave her a little head shake. Josie was a sweetheart and a romantic. There was nothing wrong with that. The guy was a stranger, probably stopping by to try to sell Zoe some new cake pans or something. Josie would never see him again, so it didn’t really matter if they’d had a moment.

“Hey, Jane, there’s someone here to see you,” Maggie, Zoe’s mom, said, popping her head into the kitchen.

Jane felt her heart flip. Dax was here. She had to admit, she kind of understood where Josie was coming from. Sometimes there were just moments. Simple chemistry. Even before they’d had sex in her car, there were definitely moments where Dax made her hum. Or would have if she were the humming type.

“Thanks, I’ll be right up.”

“Oh, I have to see this,” Zoe said, setting the full-sized pie she was wrapping on the worktable and wiping her hands.

“See what?” Jane asked, starting for the door.

“You in love,” Josie said, sliding off the stool. “We’ve never seen that before.”

Well, she had a point.

Chapter Eleven



He'd dreamed of Jane last night.

That didn't surprise him. He'd absolutely gone to bed with her on his mind.

What did surprise him was that the dreams didn't include her naked and bent over the sofa in the living room of his suite, or her naked and on her knees in front of him in the shower, or her naked and tangled up in the sheets on his king-sized bed.

She wasn't naked in his dreams at all.

She was sitting at a big table, somewhere outside—the place didn't look familiar—with people from Hot Cakes and her sister and stepsister and Zoe and Aiden and Josie and Piper and Ollie and Grant and Cam. And Dax's father.

They had all been there, sitting around a big table laden with food and drinks. They'd all been just talking and laughing.

Then he'd come to the table, carrying a tray of strawberry pies and had passed them out before bending and kissing Jane and then taking his seat next to her.

They'd basically been hosting a dinner party for all the people in their life. As a couple.

It was the most normal, almost boring, dream he'd ever had. And he'd awakened from it feeling happy and in the best mood he'd been in for a while. Which was saying something. He was generally in a good mood.

Then when he'd looked at the clock beside his bed and saw it was only 7 a.m.—thirty minutes before his alarm was set to go off—he was even further convinced Jane was magical.

So he'd been whistling when he stepped into Buttered Up at ten to eight.

“Oh my God, are you sick or something?” Jane asked, coming through the door from the kitchen.

He moved to the end of the bakery case. Jane came around in front of the case, and Zoe and Josie stopped just behind it. An older woman and man were serving the customers at the register.

“I feel amazing.” Dax slipped an arm around Jane's waist and kissed her temple.

She gave him a big, wide-eyed stare that clearly said, “What the hell?”

“Good morning,” he said with a grin, unconcerned about her reaction.

She put her elbow against his side, trying to push him away. He laughed and dropped his arm.

“Morning, Dax,” Josie said, looking back and forth between them curiously.

He liked that having a man kiss Jane publicly seemed unusual. “Good morning, Josie,” he said. “How are you?”

“I'm great. And you?”

“I've never been better.” He looked down at Jane. “Seriously.” He wanted her to see his sincerity too. He was a well-known goofball, but he was crazy about her, and he wanted her to know he meant that with everything in him.

“I heard a rumor about you,” Josie said, putting three lemon-poppysseed muffins into a carryout box and passing them to the man who was helping the customers.

“Oh?”

“I heard you're no longer an owner at Hot Cakes,” she said.

“Oh, that’s true. Feel free to spread it around,” he confirmed.

“Really?” Josie cast a glance at Jane. “So it’s not a secret either?”

“Of course not,” Dax said.

“Are we also allowed to talk about the reason for it?” Josie asked.

“No.”

“Sure.”

Jane and Dax spoke at the same time, then looked at each other.

“You’re not going to tell everyone why you are thinking about giving up your shares,” Jane said. She narrowed her eyes. “Unless there’s a reason other than the one you told me about last night.”

“You,” Dax said. “You are the reason. The only one. And I’m not thinking about it. I did it.”

She swallowed hard, and when Dax glanced at her two best friends, they were both watching with huge smiles.

“You can’t tell everyone that,” Jane said, lowering her voice. “You shouldn’t really tell people you’re giving up your shares at all.”

“Why not?” Dax and Josie were the ones speaking simultaneously this time.

“Because when it doesn’t work out and you buy those shares back, everyone will know, and that will require even more explanation,” Jane said.

Dax turned to face her more fully. “I have no reason to believe it’s not going to work out.”

“You live in Chicago.”

“For now,” he agreed.

“We’re very different.”

“In wonderful ways,” he said.

“You don’t want to be a part of my crazy life long term, Dax.”

“I think I do, actually.”

“One night with the girls and you’re so confident.”

Dax laughed. “Admit it. The way I handled them was at least thirty percent of why you got naked with me in your car last night.”

Jane gave a squeak-cough and looked at her friends again.

“Your car?” Zoe said. “You left that detail out.”

Dax grinned down at Jane. “You told them the naked part though?”

Jane rolled her eyes as Josie confirmed, “Oh yes.”

Jane shook her head and looked at him again. “Maybe you saving me from Kelsey and Aspen’s dramatics was the *whole* reason the car happened.”

“Nah,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’ve been wanting to get into my pants since we first met.”

Zoe laughed and Josie said, “Yeah, I saw you two at Granny’s together, remember? The naked-in-your-car thing was just waiting to happen.”

Dax gave Jane a smug grin. “And don’t try to tell me I got you all softened up with the ice cream, because you were giving me that look when you saw me leaning against your car at Hot Cakes.”

“I was not.” Jane’s cheeks were a little pink.

And she didn’t ask *what look?* She totally knew. Dax grinned. “You totally were.”

She shook her head. “So we’ll just move into my tiny apartment together, and you’ll do your video game stuff from my kitchen table?”

He shrugged. “Or we can buy a house. Or build one. Or I could rent some office space.”

Honestly, if her entire protest was the size of her kitchen, he was so in.

“You’re really going to have to throw me harder challenges than that,” he said.

“How about I don’t like gummy bears or beanbag chairs and refuse to paint even a single wall in my home yellow?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“All the more reason for me to rent office space,” he agreed.

“Like I might *never* let you have gummy bears in my house.”

He shrugged. “I can make you like gummy bears.”

“No, you can’t.”

He gave *her* a look. A look that was full of all the dirty thoughts he was having about her and his favorite candy. “Dare me.”

She cleared her throat.

“But an office somewhere downtown will be better anyway,” he said, letting her off the hook. Kind of. They were going to come back to this conversation at some point.

“Because you can’t be left alone all day?” Jane asked. “You’ll be bored or get into trouble?”

“Or both,” he agreed. “I’d rather have an office where people might come in and where I can pop out for lunch.” Even as he spoke, he could imagine an office with a huge front window where he could watch the traffic and wave to people walking by. “I could put a cappuccino machine in and have a candy bar there,” he said. “I’d encourage all the local businesspeople to stop by to chat and grab some candy or coffee.”

“Ahem,” Zoe said. “I *sell* coffee. You can’t have free cappuccino in your office just because you might get lonely.”

He grinned at her. “I guess I can just pop in here whenever I get bored.”

Zoe smiled even as she arched a brow. “And that would be, what, three or four times a day?”

“Oh, way more than that.”

She laughed. “Maybe you could rent an office at Hot Cakes. Then you could have Aiden and whoever else around to talk to.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe they could move down here. That would make Hot Cakes more a part of the local business scene, right? We’d mingle with the other people who make this town work. And that will help out some local business owner who has space they need to fill.”

“You don’t think management should be on scene at the factory?” Jane asked. Then she shook her head. “You know what? Never mind. Having management off-site might be great.”

He laughed. “And if I’m based here, we can actually put together that gaming conference here those friends of Kelsey and Aspen’s were interested in. That would be a big boon to the town and local economy.” He started to nod as the idea took shape. “Yeah, great idea. I’ll have to hand a lot of it off to Ollie. These big plans are his thing.” That would also keep his friend in town longer. Dax would miss Ollie the most if he were back in Chicago. “We’ll leave our headquarters in Chicago, but this can be a second location for Fluke Inc.” He grinned at her. “Thanks for the great idea, Jane. That’s awesome. When should I bring my stuff over to your place? That will really cut down on my drive time too.”

She was just staring at him. Then she looked at her friends.

Zoe held up a hand and shook her head. “Don’t look at me. Aiden walked back in here day one saying we were going to get married, and I thought he was nuts, but look at me now.”

Yeah, now she was madly in love, happy, and engaged to be married.

“Can you put a few strawberry muffins in a bag and on my tab?” Jane asked, completely changing the subject from moving in together. “We need to go.”

“Of course.” Josie wiggled her eyebrows at Jane and Dax laughed.

“Not like that,” Jane said quickly.

Josie nodded. “Okay.”

“We have somewhere to be.”

“I believe you.” Josie grabbed four muffins and slid them into a bag.

“Seriously,” Jane said.

Josie handed the bag over. “Enjoy *whatever* you’ll be doing.”

Jane just took a deep breath and then blew it out. “See you later.”

“You will,” Josie promised.

“Wine night Monday night,” Zoe said.

Jane glanced at Dax then back to her friends. “Yeah, I think I’ll need that.”

Dax didn’t know why exactly, but that made him feel proud. Like he was achieving something here that he didn’t even fully understand. But being something Jane wanted to discuss at wine night with her friends—which was obviously what they all meant—seemed like an accomplishment.

Jane started for the door, but as he went to follow her he heard Josie whisper, “Dax.”

He turned back. “Yeah?”

“She’s not used to having a lot of positive attention focused on her. She’s the one always focusing on everyone else and what they need and how she can help them.”

“Okay.” That definitely seemed to be exactly who Jane was.

“So just keep it up,” Josie said. “She’s going to feel a little discombobulated at first. She’s pretty used to taking charge and knowing what needs to happen next. Just keep coming at

her with this you're-amazing-and-I'm-completely-into-you stuff. She really deserves that."

"It's all real," he felt compelled enough to say.

Josie nodded with a smile that was almost affectionate. "I know."

"That's why we're not leaning over this bakery case and threatening to make your life a living hell," Zoe added.

He gave her a wide-eyed nod. "Duly noted."

Zoe smiled. "Just remember, to melt unsweetened chocolate takes low heat and time and patience. You add the sugar in slowly. You just keep stirring. Eventually, it will melt. And once it does, it's smooth and sweet."

Dax nodded. "Got it." He started after Jane then turned back. "Oh, except the low-heat part." Then he gave Jane's best friends a wink and went after her.

* * *

Dax joined Jane on the sidewalk outside the bakery. "I have a surprise for you," he said.

"Oh?"

"I've come up with the perfect date. The surefire way to your heart. The only thing I could do once I heard about it."

She tilted her head with a curious smile. "What is it?"

"The bridal fair."

Jane's eyes went wide and she gave a little laugh. "Five minutes ago, we were just moving in together. Now you want to do wedding planning?"

Dax grinned and moved in closer to her. "Don't tease me, Ms. Kemper."

"You're a little crazy." She said it softly, looking into his eyes.

He nodded. “Crazy about you. And the perfect way to make you a little crazy about *me* is to take you somewhere we can eat all the desserts we could possibly want... for free.”

He could see the humor in her eyes.

“I have to admit you pretty much nailed it as far the perfect date to take me on.”

He nodded. “Movies schmovies. Candlelight dinner? Please. Surprise flight to Paris? No way. But all-you-can-eat sweets... bingo.”

But instead of laughing, she took a deep breath. “I actually can’t go.”

“To the bridal fair?” he asked. “I was kidding about wedding planning. We’re just going there to make sure none of the bakeries have to take leftovers home.” He paused. “We can always do the wedding planning next weekend.”

She did smile then. “As much as I would love to eat pie and cake all day with you, and you know I really would, I spend Saturdays with my sister and dad.”

Okay, that wasn’t an absolute no. “Well, that’s fine. We’ll take them with us.”

Jane shook her head. “That’s sweet but I don’t think so.”

“They don’t like cake?”

“They both love cake.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“My dad,” she said. “He’s not very social lately. Well, for the last several months. His condition has made him depressed, and he really just wants to stay in his room all the time.”

“Okay, well, we should at least ask,” Dax decided. “He can say no, and we’ll just hang out there with him. But maybe we can convince him. Some sunshine and fresh air and sugar could be good for him.” Then he frowned. “Wait, is sugar okay for him?”

Jane smiled. “Yes. He can eat whatever he wants for the most part.” Then she sighed. “It’s not a lack of sunshine and fresh air. It’s true depression.”

“I know something about that,” he said. “My mom’s was too.”

Jane nodded. “It helps that you understand that. A psychologist sees him every other week and is helping him with his depression and anger, but it still isn’t unusual for him to ask even me and Kelsey not to come see him. If he’s having a bad day because he’s feeling weaker than usual or if it’s just a particularly emotional day, he doesn’t want us to see him like that.”

“I totally get that,” Dax said. “Parents want to be the ones taking care of their kids, not the other way around.”

She nodded.

“I know being told no over and over is hard.” He reached out and grasped her upper arm, rubbing up and down. “It sucks to try, to want to help, and to have them reject it. Especially if it’s time with you they’re rejecting.”

Jane looked into his eyes, her bottom lips between her teeth again. He could tell she saw his sincerity.

“But,” he went on. “If you stop asking, stop trying, then they never have the chance to say yes. And even if the yeses are lot less common than the nos, they are so sweet when they come.”

She gave him a little smile. “But... he’s also in a wheelchair.”

“You mentioned that,” Dax said. “The other night at the bar when you told me some people had just showed up to build a ramp at the house.” He frowned, thinking about the house last night. “Hey, the ramp wasn’t at the house. Is it in back?”

Jane swallowed hard. “Cassie had it taken out. She didn’t like how it looked and once Dad moved to the nursing home, she said there was no reason to have it.”

Dax scowled. Wow, he really disliked Jane's stepmother. "What about when he wants to come home and visit? Holidays and stuff?"

Jane shook her head. "Nope. He doesn't do that. We went out to a restaurant at Thanksgiving, and that was such an ordeal he refused to do anything but have us come to the nursing home for Christmas."

"Why was it an ordeal?"

"The wheelchair is heavy and takes up a lot of trunk space, and then we have to help him in and out of it, which can be hard when he gets tired, and then we have to make room at the table for the wheelchair, and he was really embarrassed by that."

Dax didn't know Jane's dad. But he had an idea, knowing Jane and having met Kelsey, that he was a good guy. "No offense, but your stepmom is kind of a bitch."

Jane snorted at that. "She's a piece of work."

"So we can make this happen," Dax said. "I can help lift him and the chair and whatever. And the fair is being held in a bunch of buildings in a park outside of Dubuque, right?"

Jane nodded. "The park has a 'old town' area with buildings that look like buildings from the time the city was founded. They have fairs and events there a lot."

"So big buildings with good paths. We won't have to worry about tables crowded together in a restaurant," Dax reasoned. "And if it sucks or makes him uncomfortable, we'll leave."

Jane took a breath. "I don't know."

Dax watched her face. He knew her dad's situation broke her heart. He knew she did her damndest to make things work for her family. He knew she often felt helpless to really make anything better. He could definitely relate to that. He'd been there with his mom more times than he liked to remember. His brother to an extent as well.

He wanted to help Jane. He wanted to show her she didn't have to do it alone. He wanted to make things easier, on her and her family.

In fact, it was becoming a *need* more than a desire.

"Let's just go see him," Dax said. "We'll talk to him, and see what he thinks. We don't have to do it, but it *is* an option. I'm certain I can help with the wheelchair and everything."

"Your car's trunk can barely fit the spare tire," she said, her tone lighter.

"Then we'll take your car. Or I can rent one. How about a van with a wheelchair lift on it? Maybe we should just buy one?"

She laughed and put her hand on his face. "And I know you're not kidding."

"I'm totally not," he assured her. "If you're trying to shut me down, you're going to have to come up with something that I can't throw money at."

Her expression was one of wonder and affection. "I'm not trying to shut you down."

He pulled her hand from his cheek to his lips. He pressed a kiss on the back of it and then put her hand over his heart. "Good."

"Okay, let's go talk to my dad."

"Can't wait."

They walked, hand in hand, to her car. "I'll just text Kelsey and tell her to meet us over there," Jane said, digging in her bag once she was behind the wheel.

"I can text her while you drive," Dax said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. Their house wasn't far from the nursing home. Kelsey could easily walk the few blocks.

"You have Kelsey's number?"

"Yeah."

"I—" Jane broke off. "Great."

He grinned. “Told her she can call me any time. Especially if she needs something during your work hours.”

Jane frowned slightly. “I don’t mind her calling me.”

“I know.”

“Did you say that as my boss, because you don’t want me to take personal calls while I’m at work or as my...” She bit her lower lip.

“As your...” He trailed off the same way she had. “And Kelsey’s friend.” He paused. “And I’m not your boss.”

She nodded.

“I know you work your ass off, and that place would fall apart without you,” he added. “I don’t care if you sit in that break room and color and drink cappuccino all day.”

She smiled. “Too bad you’re not my boss anymore, then.”

He leaned over and cupped the back of her head, pulling her in for a kiss. A long, slow, wet kiss. When he let her go, she blinked at him several times.

“What was that for?”

“Reminding you that you’re very happy I’m *not* your boss.”

A smile teased her lips. “Right. I almost forgot.”

He growled and said, “Take me to meet your dad before I forget I’m too good of a guy to haul you back to your place and keep you naked all day.”

She gave a little shiver. “Right. But... later. We can be naked all night.”

“Deal.”

She was coming around. He knew he’d blown in and turned her life upside down and that she didn’t want to feel all the things he was making her feel. But she was feeling them anyway. And maybe even starting to like them.

Jane started the car and pulled out onto the street. He sent Kelsey a quick text: *Going to see your dad. Meet us there?*

He got an almost instantaneous reply: *There better be a muffin for me.*

Of course. He also added a strawberry.

See you there.

They pulled up in front of Sunny Orchard Living and Care Center a few minutes later. Jane took a deep breath.

Dax just waited for her to speak.

“Let me go in ahead. At least into his room,” she said. “He’s funny about guests.”

“I can do that.” Dax really didn’t want to make this harder, but he was eager to meet Jane and Kelsey’s father.

“Okay, thanks.”

They had just reached the front doors when Kelsey called to them from the sidewalk. They waited for her to catch up with them.

“Hi!” She seemed in a good mood.

“Hey.” Jane gave her a quick hug.

“I’m so glad you’re coming to meet Dad,” Kelsey said, reaching for the door.

“Yeah?” Dax asked, glancing at Jane.

“Definitely. He doesn’t usually let people come visit him but us. I’m glad he said you could come.”

They followed her through the door.

“Well, I haven’t told him yet,” Jane told her sister. “Dax is going to wait out here for me to kind of ease Dad into it.”

Kelsey frowned. “Oh. Well, he’ll be okay, right? I mean, he’d want to meet your boyfriend.”

Dax saw how that made Jane freeze for just a second. He lifted a brow, just waiting to see how she might handle that.

But she surprised him by turning to Kelsey. “Do you think so?”

Kelsey nodded. “Of course. I mean, he doesn’t want his old boss coming just out of guilt, and Aunt Amy will totally make a huge deal out of everything and insist on doting on him and make him crazy. And he doesn’t want his friends to see him like this.” She looked a little sad but she shrugged. “But Dax is different. He’s the guy you’re in love with. Dad will totally want to know him.”

Dax’s grin grew as Jane’s mouth dropped open. But she didn’t deny anything Kelsey had just said.

His chest got warm and a little tight. He wanted to grab her. But if he did, he’d back her up against the nearest wall, and it would become very inappropriate very quickly. Especially for the lobby of a nursing home. Though, the way he was feeling, it would probably be inappropriate for even the lobby of a sex club at the moment.

“Okay,” Jane finally said slowly. She glanced at Dax, and he just gave her a big, cocky grin.

She rolled her eyes. But the corner of her mouth curled.

“Let’s go see him first though,” she told Kelsey. “Just to warm him up.”

“Fine,” Kelsey said. She looked at Dax. “I will talk you up big time.”

“Thanks, Kels,” Dax said sincerely. “I’ll just hang out.” He looked around. The lobby had two leather-covered couches and a few armchairs gathered around a fireplace. There was a coffee and water station in one corner and a huge fish tank in the other. The reception desk was to his left.

“Hopefully, it won’t take long,” Jane said.

“No problem.”

She hesitated as if she wanted to say something more, but finally she just nodded, and she and Kelsey started down the long hallway.

Dax tucked his hands in his pockets and sauntered toward the coffee station. But he wasn’t really in the mood for a cup of coffee. He watched the fish for a little bit. He looked at the

artwork on the walls—nice, kind of typical scenes of farms and rolling fields and a sunset over a river he imagined was the Mississippi. He checked out the magazines on a couple of the side tables. He put three pieces into the jigsaw puzzle that was laid out on the big, round table near the windows.

Finally, he took a seat in one of the armchairs and opened a browser on his phone. He had never in his life been in a nursing home. He had a vague idea what he would find here, but he was curious.

Nursing home layouts was his first search. Then he searched *typical day in a nursing home*. Then *depression in nursing home residents*. Then *innovative nursing home programs*. Innovative was one of his favorite words in all situations.

He read four articles then sent off a message to Piper and another to Grant. They each said the same thing. *What do you know about nursing homes? Do we know anyone in the business?* They were the two most connected and knowledgeable about their business network.

A glance at the clock told him things down the hall with Jane's dad were not going as smoothly as Kelsey had anticipated. Dax was surprised to find himself disappointed about that. He'd like to meet the man, and he'd like to assure him that Dax had only the best intentions and that he'd be there for Jack's daughters however he could be. Surely that would be reassuring for the man. Wouldn't it? Or maybe it would just be a reminder that Jack couldn't do all the things for them he wanted to. That would suck. Dax was going to have to be careful here.

He approached the reception desk. "Hi."

The young girl—weekend help, he assumed—was busy looking at her phone. She looked up as if surprised to find someone standing there. So security guard she was not.

"Uh, hi."

"I'm Dax."

"Taylor."

“Have you worked here for a long time?”

She shrugged. “About a year, but I only work after school two days a week and weekends.”

“Do you like it?”

“Sure.”

“Tell me your favorite part.”

Just then his phone rang. He looked down to see Grant was calling.

“Damn, hang on. I have to answer this.”

“Okay.” Taylor seemed very unconcerned about having their conversation interrupted.

“Hey,” he answered, starting toward the fish tank.

“What are you up to?” Grant asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you asking about nursing homes?”

“Because I’m in one right now.”

That made Grant pause for a moment. “Why?”

“Jane’s dad lives here,” Dax said.

“Ah.”

Dax could picture Grant nodding as if he’d just figured everything out.

“So that makes sense?” Dax asked.

“Of course. You’re the most curious guy I know and you just walked into something new. Of course you’re going to try to figure everything out about it.” Grant said it with a very familiar slightly exasperated, slightly amused, slightly proud tone. He used that tone with Dax and Ollie a lot.

Dax knew he gave his friend heart palpitations, but he also knew Grant could have left Fluke a long time ago and been just fine. He could have made money and had much more important friends who didn’t give him migraines. But he’d

stayed. Because, whether he would admit it or not, he liked them.

“Well, nursing homes are definitely new to me,” he said. “Never gave them much thought, you know? Pretty different than anything else I’ve ever done.”

“True,” Grant said. “But that isn’t the new thing you just walked into that I was referring to.”

“What were you referring to?”

“Being in love.”

Dax grinned. “Well, yeah, there’s that too.”

“So you realize you’re in love?” Grant said.

“Yeah. I was pretty sure I was falling from almost day one. But yeah, I’m there.”

“And the woman that you gave Hot Cakes up for has a father living in a nursing home, so naturally you’re interested in how those work.”

Dax nodded. “Exactly. It’s a part of her life, so I want to know more.”

“Do not buy that nursing home, Dax,” Grant said.

Dax didn’t answer right away. His mind was spinning too fast.

Grant interpreted his silence correctly. “Shit. You *weren’t* thinking about buying it?”

“I hadn’t gotten quite that far,” Dax said. “But I probably would have at some point.”

Grant sighed. “Dammit. And now I gave you the idea.”

Dax laughed. “Don’t beat yourself up. I almost always get to *hey, I should buy one of these* with most things eventually.”

Grant groaned. “Dax, you know nothing about nursing homes.”

“Which is exactly why I texted you and Piper.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m not an idiot.”

“You’re impulsive.”

“I’ll give you that.” Then Dax laughed. “But don’t run out for more antacids just yet, G,” he said. “I was actually just thinking I could maybe make a donation so they can implement some new programs for depression. Sounds like most nursing homes need extra funding, and depression is very common among residents.”

There was a beat of silence on Grant’s end. Then he said, “Jane’s dad’s depressed?”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s hurting her?”

Dax took a breath. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” Grant said. “Then you should totally make a donation. I can get some resources together to see what kinds of programs are available and reach out to see what kind of funding would help most.”

Dax smiled. Grant Lorre was a good guy. He wanted to protect his business interests from Dax and Ollie’s reckless and sometimes ridiculous ideas. He wanted to protect his friends too, for that matter, from scams and people out to defraud them because of their fame and money. But the bottom line was Grant cared about them and believed in them. When they had a good idea or a true passion project—and not something that just occurred to them on a whim or when they were on an endorphin high—he was behind them 100 percent.

“Thanks,” Dax said. “I’d appreciate the help researching. I’m going to do more of my own too.”

“Oh right, you have more free time now,” Grant said. “What with not being a part of Hot Cakes anymore.”

Dax grinned. “Tell you what, I’ll do my research in the Hot Cakes break room. I hear they have great cappuccino. Then if you guys need me, you’ll know where to find me.”

Grant gave a grunt that was supposed to be laughter. “Great. When I need a quick game of Ping-Pong, I’ll be down.”

Which meant Dax would never see him in the break room. Grant didn't play Ping-Pong.

Just then, Jane stepped into the lobby. She found him immediately and motioned with her hand in a *come on* gesture.

Yes. He was in. "Gotta go. Talk to you later."

"Don't spend any money before we talk again," Grant cautioned.

"Only on cake and pie today," Dax agreed.

"Cake and pie?"

"Big dessert-tasting thing. Buttered Up is going to be there, so Jane and I are going to take her dad and sister out there."

"Buttered Up?" Grant asked sharply. "Zoe's bakery?"

"Yeah."

"Zoe will be there?"

Dax frowned. "Yeah."

"Anyone else?"

"Her assistant, Josie," Dax replied.

There was no sound on Grant's end.

"Hello?" Dax asked.

"Yeah. Okay. Nothing. Talk to you later." Grant disconnected before Dax could reply.

Well, that was weird.

"Everything okay?" Jane asked as he joined her.

"Yeah. Probably. That was just Grant."

"Okay. So—" She took a deep breath. "You ready for this?"

"You sure he's good with it?"

"He's... willing."

"Took a while."

“Yeah. We eased into it. And had to discuss Kelsey’s chemistry grades and her grounding and...” She sighed. “Anyway that’s all done, and he knows Kelsey thinks you’re amazing and that you were nice to Aspen and that you have the coolest car. Which he agrees with.”

“How’s she know about my car?” he asked with a grin as they started down the hallway.

“Oh, it’s not plastered all over your social media?” Jane gave him a look.

“Right. Yes, it is.”

“Yeah.” She shook her head. “I’m still getting used to the idea that you’re kind of famous.”

He laughed. “You’re probably not the target demographic for my message.”

“I don’t know,” she said without looking at him. “I think I’ve received your message about living in the moment and making it as great as you can, pretty clearly.”

He stopped her, turning her to face him. “That means a lot to me.”

She met his gaze. “I’m glad.”

He thought about kissing her, but she turned and started walking again.

The hallway was wide, stark white, with a white tile floor. It was brightly lit by fluorescent lights overhead.

The first room on the right seemed to be some kind of community room. There were several round tables with chairs and wheelchairs pulled up to them. There were about eight people in the room along with a woman who looked like a staff member, judging by her lavender scrubs and the name tag he could see but not read. It looked like they were working on some kind of craft project.

The next room was empty but was clearly a small chapel. On the left was a much larger room filled with exercise equipment of various types. Two staff people were working

with two residents going through a set of leg exercises. He gave them a smile as they continued on.

They passed the office of the nursing home's director, empty at the moment, and finally got to rooms that seemed like resident rooms.

There was a lot of noise—a lot from televisions in the rooms, but also some conversation—and a variety of smells. There was a medicinal disinfectant smell underneath the smell of food being prepared.

Finally, they reached the end of the hallway, where two more hallways led off in either direction. In the middle of that intersection of hallways was a round desk where staff, who were clearly nurses, typed on computers or leaned over writing on papers.

They took the hallway to the left and went four doors down. Jane hesitated just outside. “Oh, also, you should know my dad thinks you're my boyfriend.”

“I'm totally good with that. In fact, I think we should just make that official.”

She rolled her eyes but was smiling. “Okay. That would help so I don't feel like I'm lying to him.”

“Great.” Dax felt that warm feeling that had settled in his chest earlier, spread. “And does he think we're going to this bridal fair because we're talking about getting hitched?” he asked. He could totally play along with that too.

“Oh no, he knows it's all about the cake and pie for me.”

Dax laughed. “Right. He probably knows you pretty well.”

She nodded. “But he and Kelsey think it will be fun to pretend we are getting married and we're there to make plans.”

Dax liked Jack already. “So at the event we'll have to act like we're in love and like I'm ready to throw an elaborate, over-the-top party to declare you off the market and totally monogamous to only me.”

She lifted a brow. “Well, *you* will also be off the market and totally monogamous only to *me*.”

He liked that little flicker of possessiveness. He leaned in and stole a kiss. “Damn right,” he said against her lips.

She gave a little sigh and then pulled back. “So you can pull this off?”

“Acting crazy about you and that I love an extravagant party?” he asked. “Absolutely.” He let a beat pass and then said, “No acting required. For any of it.”

For a second she looked like she was going to confess something, but she just nodded and said, “You are so the extravagant party type.”

“I’m the extravagant everything type.”

Chapter Twelve



“Now this is my kind of forking around,” Jane said, dragging the tines of her fork over her tongue slowly and thoroughly because of the way it made Dax’s eyes darken.

“We’re taking some of this pie home with us.”

“Please,” she said, letting her voice get husky.

They’d been eating dessert and teasing with frosting and sprinkles and whipped toppings for two hours, and she wasn’t sure she’d ever had more fun.

Kelsey and Jack seemed to be having a great time as well. They’d not only sampled desserts but had also done a couple of passes by the hors d’oeuvres tables and had checked out all the other booths, including the ones showing off honeymoon packages and tuxedo rentals and we-can-build-it-in-a-day gazebos.

“I want to suck this whipped cream off your nipples and lick this strawberry glaze off your clit.”

Jane’s eyes flew to Dax as she made a little gasping-choking sound. “Dax!”

He grinned. “No one can hear me.”

“But...” She felt a flush go through her. “Yeah, you should definitely do both of those things.”

She’d never been with a guy who was dirty and sexy and sweet and playful all at the same time.

She was completely addicted and almost giddy. Giddy. That was a word she'd never used to describe herself before. Of course, that was probably because she'd never *felt* giddy before. She wasn't the giddy type.

She watched Dax lick whipped cream off of his index finger—slowly—catching her eye and giving her a wink.

She was definitely the giddy type now.

“And finally, we're thrilled to announce our grand prize winners!”

There was a woman on the makeshift stage at the front of the largest building set up for the bridal fair. She was going through the winners of several door prizes, including a basketful of goodies from Buttered Up.

Jane had been past Zoe and Josie's table a couple of times, and they always had a cluster of people in front of them, tasting their desserts and asking questions and placing orders.

Josie was thrilled. Zoe looked overwhelmed.

But she'd be okay. Aiden would talk her down, and they'd all pitch in to fill orders if needed. Jane was so happy for her friends and grateful to Aiden for coaxing Zoe out of her box to try new things.

“The couple's weekend at Pine Grove Bed and Breakfast includes the Diamond Suite, a couple's massage, tickets to the local production of *Wicked*, and gift baskets from The Sweet Spa, Rutherford Winery, and a shopping spree at Naughty and Nice Lingerie and Gifts,” the woman said excitedly.

“I think we should take some of the cupcakes from that place over by the other door too,” Dax said.

Jane nodded. “Yes. But we *cannot* tell Zoe.”

“Never,” he agreed. “We can take all the contraband back to my hotel room. Then there's no risk of her even seeing a wrapper.”

Jane grinned up at him. “That's pretty smooth.”

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Making going back to your hotel room *practical*.”

“I’m just presenting facts,” he said with a shrug. “I’d hate to hurt Zoe’s feelings.”

“But you’d also hate to leave this pie and those cupcakes behind.”

“I would hate that so much,” he said with a nod. And a wicked grin.

“You know, this could seem kind of like a guy trying to lure kids into his unmarked white van with candy,” Jane teased. “You know if you dangle strawberry pie, I’ll do almost anything.”

“No,” he said. “I know if I dangle strawberry pie, you *will* do anything. No *almost* about it.”

She laughed. “You’re using my weakness against me?”

He took a big bite of the pie in question and grinned, unapologetic.

The truth was, *he* was her new weakness.

“Fine,” she said as if put upon. “I’ll go back to your hotel with you tonight.”

He swallowed. “We’re going to give a new meaning to *orgasmic* strawberry pie.”

“Do people refer to strawberry pie as *orgasmic*?” she asked.

“They should.”

“Dax Marshall and Jane Kemper!”

They both jerked at the sound of their names coming over the loudspeaker. They looked at one another then toward the stage.

“Oh my God!” Suddenly Kelsey came jogging toward them pushing Jack’s wheelchair. They were both grinning widely.

“What’s going on?” Jane asked.

They were toward the back of the crowd, away from the stage, and people were starting to turn.

“You won!” Kelsey laughed and then high-fived Jack. “You’re the grand prize winners!”

“We are?” Jane looked at Dax. “We didn’t do anything.”

“We s-signed you u-up,” Jack said,

Jane was frozen for a moment, just looking at her father. She hadn’t seen him smiling that big in far too long. He looked younger and healthier. Her heart tripped.

“We signed you guys up for a ton of stuff,” Kelsey said. “We went around to all the booths and got samples and entered all their draws with your names. Since you’re the bride and groom.” She winked at them.

“You condone this?” Jane asked Jack.

He just grinned.

“And hot damn, the grand prize!” Dax said. “That’s awesome. What did we win?”

“You didn’t hear any of it?” Kelsey asked. “It’s like this huge package with wine and massages and a free stay in a B and B.” She looked immensely proud of herself. “You’re welcome.”

“Wow, they just drew our names?” Jane asked. “That’s amazing. But... we’re not even really engaged. Are they going to throw us out when they find out?”

Jack shook his head. “D-don’t t-t-tell.”

Jane gave him a look. “Lie?”

“F-f-for fun. It’s free st-stuff.” Jack also looked proud of himself.

“Oh yeah, you can’t give it back,” Kelsey said quickly. “Dad had to write an essay to win that!”

Jane felt her eyes widen. “An essay?”

“Yeah,” Kelsey said. “I wrote it but they were his words. And it’s awesome.” She grinned at her father. “*Very* mushy.

All about how happy he is that his daughter found true love and how he couldn't have picked a better guy and how he knows Dax will be there for you through all the tough times to come.”

Jane felt her throat thicken and a stinging behind her eyes. There were tough times coming. Probably. Eventually. No one really knew. But no matter what happened with his condition, there would be a time when Jane would have to deal with losing Jack. And having Dax beside her for that sounded amazing.

He couldn't fix everything that happened or went wrong, but he made things better. Facing things with him was infinitely better than facing them without him, no matter how it turned out.

“You totally used that wheelchair to get this win, didn't you?” Jane teased her dad, blinking back her tears.

Jack nodded. “Y-yes. This thing sh-should have some p-p-perks.”

Jane laughed. He had a point. “Okay.” She looked up at Dax. “I guess we have a grand prize to collect.”

Everyone in the room applauded as Jane and Dax made their way to the stage. They hammed it up—it was Dax, so of course they did—with him raising their clasped hands high overhead as if they'd just been crowned the heavyweight champions and then dipping her back to give her a big, sweet kiss.

Jane was laughing when he righted her and accepted the huge basket of goodies and gift cards. She found her dad and Kelsey at the back of the room and could see, even from the several yards between them, that Jack was beaming.

He loved being in on the joke, and she could see that he'd had a great day.

Dax had been right. Getting Jack out had been a good thing. A great thing. And with Dax along, it had been much easier than other outings. He handled the chair and assisted Jack without even pausing in whatever funny story he was

telling and didn't even blink when Jack tripped over his words. He'd thought ahead about how to avoid anything that might have been an obstacle, and he'd done it all with humor and a laid-back charm that made Jane once and for all sure she was madly in love with him.

With their big win in hand, they headed back for the car and back to Appleby. They dropped Jack off first. The girls kissed him goodbye and stepped into the hallway, when Jack said, "D-D-Dax."

Dax turned back. "Yeah?"

"S-St-Stay for a m-minute."

"Okay." He glanced at the girls. "Meet you at the car," he said to Jane.

"Uh, sure." She looked at her father. Oh boy, they were going to talk in private? "I'll walk Kelsey out."

Dax came strolling out ten minutes later.

Jane was leaning against her car the way she had been the day before in the Hot Cakes parking lot. She had her sunglasses on and her arms crossed. The perfect picture of nonchalance.

She hoped.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Totally." Dax gave her a smile, coming to stand directly in front of her.

"Was that all about me?"

Dax grinned and tucked his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "The part about how much he liked me and knew I'd be good to you? Yes. The part where he asked me to help him into his chair? No. The part where I asked him to look up a couple of things for me and give me his thoughts? No." He gave a thoughtful, totally fake, frown. "So one-third of the conversation, yes. Which means, the majority of it, no."

Jane's frown was real. There were lots of things she wanted to know more about there. Like what Dax wanted her

dad to look up for him. Jack had access to a computer in the community room and certainly knew how to Google things. But why would Dax ask him to look something up? Something like what? But the thing she was most focused on was that second one. “He asked you to help him into his chair?”

“He did.”

“That’s pretty... amazing.”

“Is it?”

“He sometimes lets me help him, when he’s feeling strong enough that it’s not a lot for me to do. He never lets Kelsey or Cassie help him. He’s almost always already in his wheelchair when we get here. He doesn’t like people to see him weak or incapable.”

Dax nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Did you have to give him a lot of help?”

He took a breath but then nodded again as he blew it out. “He said he’s tired from the outing. I had to lift him and did a lot of the work getting him into the chair.”

“Wow, but he let you.”

“Yeah. I didn’t realize that was a big deal. I’m humbled.”

“He trusts you.”

“That’s awesome.” Dax seemed very pleased.

Jane just stood looking at Dax for a long moment. Her dad did not have great taste in women, that was for sure. But as she thought about his friends and the men he chose to spend time with, she had to admit he did well there.

“Your dad is a good guy,” Dax said.

“So are you.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

“That means a lot to me.”

He said it so sincerely that Jane felt a little hitch in her breathing. "I'm glad." She waited a beat then said, "Dax?"

"Yeah?"

"Get in the car. The whipped cream is melting, and we have a long drive to your hotel."

Heat flickered through his eyes, and he gave her a sexy little smile, but he simply rounded the back of the car and got into the passenger seat.

* * *

He didn't dare touch her.

During the forty-five-minute drive from Appleby to his hotel he didn't touch her, though his palm itched with the desire to run up and down her thigh.

He'd never seen her in a dress, and the one she'd worn today left her shoulders bare and hit above her knees showing lots of smooth, creamy skin. That plus all the fork licking and laughing today had him wound tight.

He wanted to lace her fingers with his. Or rest a hand on the back of her neck. Something. Some kind of contact. But he couldn't. If he touched her, he'd be demanding she pull the car over and they'd have sex in her front seat again.

This time if he had her naked, he was keeping her that way for a solid twenty-four hours. She wasn't leaving his hotel room until Monday morning when she had to leave to go to work. Unless he could talk her into playing hooky and calling in sick.

He knew the chances of that with this woman were probably a thousand to one. But there *was* a chance.

So he kept his hands to himself during the drive. And as they walked into the hotel and across the lobby toward the bank of elevators. And as they rode up in the elevator without touching. And as they walked down the hallway to the suite without touching.

He waved his key card in front of the sensor and pushed the door open for her, standing back so she didn't even brush against him.

But the second he stepped into the room, set the pie down on the table just to his left, and the door thudded shut, he pressed her against the wall and kissed her.

He slid his hands up to the tie at the back of her neck holding the dress up. He pulled it loose and tugged the bodice of the dress down.

Her fingers went to the front of his shirt and began tearing at the buttons as he filled his hands with her breasts. He teased the tips with his thumbs, and Jane's fingers worked faster on his shirt.

Finally, the last button came undone, and she spread it open, running her hands over his chest and abs as he plucked at her nipples. They were kissing and gasping and moaning until she pushed him back slightly.

"Your pants are in the way again." She pushed her dress over her hips.

"You're right."

They both kicked their shoes off, and he tore open his jeans, shoving them and his boxers out of the way as she skimmed her tiny blue panties off.

When they were both naked, they came back together, their mouths hungry. Dax pressed her into the wall again, his hands roaming. He palmed her breasts, plucking and pinching, before gliding to her hips where he squeezed, then around to her ass where he cupped her, bringing her up against his aching cock.

Her hands were just as busy. She ran them all over his back, to his ass, then around and over his ribs and abs, before taking his cock in hand, squeezing and stroking.

"Fuck, you feel so damned good. I don't know where to start," he told her gruffly. He wanted every inch of her. He wanted to explore. He wanted to count freckles and catalog

ticklish spots and memorize creases and curves, but he also just wanted to hoist her up against the wall and plunge deep.

“We have all night and all tomorrow,” she told him breathlessly.

He pulled back and stared into her eyes. “You promise?”

“Promise.”

“You’re not leaving? You’re staying here with me?”

“Definitely.”

“I haven’t even told you what I have planned.”

“It doesn’t matter. This is where I want to be,” she said.

She gave him a playful smile that was full of something that nearly sent him to his knees.

Not lust. Not heat. Not naughtiness. That was all there too, but that wasn’t what he latched on to.

It was the trust and affection that made him feel like he was a king.

She was looking at him as if she liked him. Just *liked* him. Wanted to be here. Was completely enjoying herself and knew the next several hours were going to be fun no matter what they did.

This was what he lived for. What he thought he lived for anyway. What he chased. Giving other people a good time. Making them happy. Being a temporary reprieve from the shit show that the real world could be.

But Jane was looking at him as if he were a hell of a good time before he’d done a thing to earn it. Sure, the day had been fun. He knew he’d made her happy today. But in his experience, the fun was usually about the moment. The Ping-Pong game, lip-syncing into a toilet brush, the session at Comic-Con, a dessert tasting, the time in bed. But then it was over, and he’d have to work to make the next time fun again.

Jane seemed to be anticipating all the fun they could have this weekend before it even started.

“Okay, then.” He gave her what he knew was a wicked grin. “Then I do know where to start.”

Without looking, he reached toward the pie on the table to his left. He took a handful of whatever he first came into contact with—cream topping and strawberry filling—and lifted it.

Her eyes widened, but she did nothing to stop him as he moved toward her breast.

She sucked in a sharp breath as he smeared it over her right breast and nipple, then down, over her ribs and stomach to her mound.

He went to his knees, his sticky hand gripping her ass, and pulled her toward his mouth. Then he proceeded to lick the sweet mess from her, starting at the bottom and moving up.

She was gripping the hair at the back of his head by the time he'd licked it all from her clit and the sweet folds on either side. He ran his finger over the area to be sure he got it all and found plenty more sticky sweetness, that wasn't strawberry pie, to tease his tongue. Then he ran his tongue and fingers over her stomach, up her torso, and to her breast. He licked and sucked making sure he left no trace of pie behind. She was panting and had whimpered his name a few times by the time he let her nipple go and sealed his mouth over hers, letting her taste the strawberry goodness from his tongue.

He slid two fingers deep into her as he kissed her, taking her to the edge of her first orgasm, then he pulled back so he could watch her come.

“Open your eyes, Jane,” he said gruffly, rubbing over her clit.

She let her head fall back against the wall and her gorgeous blue eyes found his.

“Come for me,” he urged. “I need you slick and hot and ready.”

“Oh God,” she gasped, gripping the forearm that was bunching as he worked her toward her orgasm.

“I need you ready to take me, Jane,” he told her roughly. “I want you so fucking bad, and I need this sweet pussy soft and wet.”

“I’m so ready,” she promised.

“I need you to come.”

“I want you *now*.” She tried to pull him closer, tugging on his arm.

But he wanted her one orgasm ahead. He shook his head and pulled his fingers from her body.

“No!” she protested, gripping his arm harder.

He grinned at her clear frustration. “Guess we’ll have to pull out the big guns.”

“Yes. The *big* guns,” she said, reaching for his cock.

He dodged her hand with a grin though. “Oh no. The rules say we don’t move on to level three until you complete level two.”

“This is a game?”

“Are you having fun?”

“I *was*.” She pouted.

He leaned and plucked the big red strawberry off the middle of the pie. He held it up. “Well then, we need to use all the tools we’ve got to get you past level two.”

“I already made it past level one?” she asked.

“You’re naked,” he said, nodding. “That’s level one.”

She huffed out a little laugh in spite of herself. “And level two is an orgasm.”

He shook his head. “The orgasm is how you complete the level. Level two is my hands and mouth on you. No cock involved.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. So then I don’t think cock in pussy is really level three.”

“No?”

He wasn't going to last long if she actually got into this and played along, he realized. He had fun making sure other people had fun. But rarely did they actually concentrate on *his* fun in return.

"I really think level three would be a non-pussy orgasm for you. So my hands and mouth on you."

He cleared his throat as heat slammed through him.

"And then"—she put her hand on his chest, rubbing back and forth—"missionary position would be level four. Then like cowgirl or reverse cowgirl would be level five. All fours would be level six. Shower sex would be level seven. And you tying me to the bed with your neckties would be level ei—"

Dax took her mouth hungrily. God, he was so fucking in love with her. As she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back, he trailed the strawberry up and down her side. He felt the way her skin erupted in goose bumps in reaction. He pulled back just enough that he could rub it over her nipple. She shivered.

He pulled away from her mouth to dip his head and suck on that hardened tip as he trailed the strawberry down her body.

He let her nipple go with a little pop and looked up at her as he sank to his knees. "So clearly we're on the same team. If the mission is to complete all the levels and the way to do that is with orgasms."

She nodded, her eyes dark, her fingers sinking into his hair. "Yep. Same team for sure."

"So what's our opposition?"

"Time, I guess," she said with a smile. "We need to get through as many levels as possible before I have to go to work on Monday morning."

"Okay, then." He grasped one of her thighs and lifted it, draping her knee over his shoulder, loving her little gasp of surprise. "Then we need focus and determination and teamwork." He sucked on the end of the strawberry, then drew

it over her clit. He looked up at her as she let her breath out with a little hiss. “And strawberries.”

“Sure. Whatever tools and accessories and magical amulets we can get,” she agreed.

Well, in *Warrior of Easton*, the warriors collected diamonds on their quests.

Dax was very aware that he was getting closer all the time to getting Jane a diamond as a matter of fact.

But for the time being, he was more than willing to make do with the strawberry and his tongue and fingers and several dirty words and phrases.

She came hard only a few short minutes later, and he carried her to the bed, triumphantly.

“Level two, down,” he said, tossing her onto the mattress.

She immediately turned on her stomach and crawled to the edge. “I’m ready to do my part for level three.”

And she did.

Oh, she did.

By Monday morning they had conquered levels one through eleven and had a plan to knock out levels twelve through fifteen over the course of the next week.

* * *

“Hey!”

Jane turned at the sound of Max calling to her. She grinned as he jogged to catch up with her halfway across the parking lots.

“I’m so pissed off at you both,” Max said as he came up beside her. He put his hand on his chest and took a deep breath. “And now I’ve had to run too?”

Jane rolled her eyes. Max led a spin class at the gym four days a week. Because there was no one else in Appleby who

would have ever thought of getting up in front of a room full of other people on bikes and calling it a “class.” And truly it was a total of four stationary bikes with Max at the front blasting music from his phone and calling out encouraging things like, “You’ve got this! Work it, ladies!” and “Oh yeah, feel that burn!”

But he really didn’t like running.

“You’re pissed at me?” she asked as he fell into step with her.

“I am. You spend your lunch breaks making googly eyes at Dax and then beat it out of here at the end of the day to get naked by five thirty and then spend your whole night fucking his brains out,” Max said.

Jane gave a surprised snort-laugh. “I am *not* naked by five thirty.”

Max lifted a brow in a very skeptical look.

“I have to eat first,” she said. “Need to fuel up for the night of fucking his brains out.” She grinned widely. She couldn’t help it. She was happy. So, so happy.

Now Max snorted. “That’s my girl.”

“But I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much this week.” Dax was in the Hot Cakes break room most of each morning—not before ten or so, of course, but from about ten to one—chatting and hanging out and then eating lunch with her before he took off to work on some project he had going on now that he wasn’t a Hot Cakes owner. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, I’m fine, except that I’ve had *no* information about how great the man is in bed or how huge he is or what kinds of gifts the hot millionaire buys his fuck buddy,” Max said, propping his hip against the side of her car as she unlocked it. He grinned. “This is the kind of best friend information I require and have been denied and I’m not happy about it. At all.”

Jane tossed her bag onto the car seat and then gave her friend a grin. “He’s amazing in bed. I seriously think he’s the best lover in the *world*. The orgasms are plentiful, and I still

feel them the next day. He's *huge*. Like, porn star huge. And he buys me all the cake, pie, and cookies I can handle. And does very naughty things with them before I get to eat them. But I definitely get to eat them. I've probably gained five pounds this week." She paused. "Then again, we're definitely burning a lot of calories, so it's probably all good."

Max gave a happy sigh. "Even if you're lying to me, thank you. You are a really good friend."

She laughed. "You're so welcome."

"But truly," he said, sobering slightly and studying her. "You seem really happy."

"I am," she told him sincerely. "He's amazing. And everything is so good. My dad has never been happier. He's been letting Dax visit him and even let his sister and one of his buddies stop by. I thought my aunt was going to cry. Kelsey got a B on her last chemistry test. Cassie hasn't called me even once this week. Kelsey and Aspen have only fought twice this week and one of them was just a little tiff over what time they were leaving to go to some pizza party."

"Wait." Max held up a hand. He shook his head. "I don't even know where to start."

Jane smiled. Max knew everything about her family so he knew this was huge.

"I knew Kels was working on her chemistry," Max said.

"You did?"

"Yeah, she was in the break room after school the other day."

"She was?" Jane asked, surprised. "With Dax?"

"No, with Ben."

Ben was one of the food scientists on staff. "Oh. She was studying?"

"He was tutoring her. He's a chemist, you know," Max said with a little smirk. "And he's got three kids. He was really

good about explaining things to her. And the cappuccino probably helped.”

“I never even thought of that.” She didn’t mean the cappuccino.

“Dax did.” Max didn’t mean the cappuccino either.

She nodded. Of course he had.

“And Kelsey and Aspen are going to parties together?” Max reiterated.

“It’s the fucking twilight zone,” Jane said with a nod, her thoughts suddenly spinning.

“And we attribute this all to Dax?”

“We do,” she said. Then she thought about that. She really did attribute that all to Dax. Things had gotten better because of him. Like magically. Which was amazing. Wasn’t it? She frowned. “I mean, he got all the balls rolling anyway.”

“When are you proposing to him?” Max asked with a chuckle.

Jane forced a smile. But her chest tightened at the same time. It wasn’t that she was thinking about proposing, of course. They weren’t going to get married. Married was forever. And there was no way this was forever.

Which, obviously, brought up the question *how long is this going to last?* And worse, *what happens when it’s over?*

Her heart started thumping harder, and she pulled in a deep breath.

She was in love with him. She thought maybe Dax was feeling some pretty strong things for her too. But small-town Iowa and a woman who worked in a factory and hanging out with a teenager and a guy in a nursing home... how long would all that interest Dax?

He was a creator. He was larger than life. He traveled the world. He made things happen. He *lived* to make things happen. Big things. Bold things. Things a lot bigger than Appleby, Iowa could sustain. Sure, he’d been happy to make

some changes at Hot Cakes and to help Aiden and Ollie and his other partners get things off the ground. But he'd given it up easily enough too. Hot Cakes had been a little project for him that he'd been able to move on from without any trouble.

He was already working on something new. He'd been busy every afternoon this week.

He'd made a huge difference in her life, for sure. But in the overall scheme of things, these issues weren't all that big. Or bold. He'd gotten her sister and stepsister to stop fighting so much. He'd found a way to better Kelsey's chemistry grade, and helped with her dad's depression. He and Jane had definitely been having a lot of fun with cake frosting and, well, every room and horizontal surface in her house. But what happened when they got through all the "levels"?

What happened next?

There would be something new for him to move on to no doubt.

And where did that leave them? Did Kelsey go back to not caring about her grades? Did Jack get depressed again? Did Jane go back to juggling all the balls by herself... kind of badly? *She* hadn't been able to get Kelsey and Aspen to see one single thing they had in common. *She* hadn't thought of Ben as a chemistry tutor even though she saw him, literally, five days a week. *She* hadn't even considered taking Jack out to a dessert tasting. Or any other event.

Suddenly her heart was racing.

Everything was going to suck when Dax got tired of Appleby. Of her crazy life. Of them. And it wasn't just her who was going to suffer.

Max was frowning and reaching for her. "Whoa. You okay?"

She shook her head.

"Breathe, baby. Breathe," Max said, grasping both of her upper arms.

She did. Kind of. It was shaky, but oxygen did go into her lungs.

“What the hell, Janey?” Max asked. “You were smiling and looking all lovey dovey—not to mention smug as hell about all the chocolate-covered orgasms—and then suddenly you looked like you were about to pass out.”

She nodded and swallowed. “I’m...”

“Having a panic attack,” Max said.

She nodded again. “I think so.” Her eyes went wide. “Why am I having a panic attack?” She gripped Max’s forearms. “Why am I panicking? Shit happens all the time. I know that! I’m used to that! Why am I panicking?”

“Fuck if I know,” Max told her. But he gave her a little shake. “You’re in love with a millionaire who makes you incredibly happy, dishes out orgasms the way we dish up fudge coating, and has made your whole family better. Why aren’t you—”

He broke off as Jane started breathing rapidly again, and her fingers dug into his arms.

She felt like her head was spinning.

“Holy shit, Jane, pull yourself together.”

She wasn’t sure Max was going to win any empathy awards or should be teaching any seminars on getting friends through panic attacks, but she did manage to suck in a breath.

“What is going on?” He was staring at her like he’d never seen her before.

That was fair. She was never like this. She had her shit *handled*, dammit. She was always ready for the next crisis, the next curveball, the next wrench in the plan. She expected it. She just took it as it came. What the *hell* was going on here?

“It was...” She cleared her throat. “The proposal thing.”

Max frowned. “I was kidding. Jesus, you don’t have to propose to the guy tonight.”

She dragged in another breath. “No. I know. It’s not that. It just hit me, I guess. Proposal means long term. Forever.” She bit her bottom lip and blinked hard. “This isn’t forever with Dax.”

Max’s frown deepened. “It’s not?”

“Of course it’s not!” she snapped.

She breathed deep again and let go of Max. He let go of her too but watched her as if he was pretty sure she was going to crumple at his feet at any moment.

“Okay, why not?” he asked.

“He’s a millionaire playboy who is pseudo-famous—or maybe even *pretty* famous—because he really does have *tons* of fans. People want his autograph. They wear t-shirts he designed and dress up as characters he created and stand in line for hours just to get a selfie with him. It’s *nuts*. And he jets around the world and drives a crazy car and wears a *hat* that cost more than my *rent*. More than *three months* of my rent actually. He thinks nothing of buying a business for millions of dollars and then selling it a week later so he can have sex with some girl he just met. He buys Ping-Pong tables as a way to fix all problems. The *idea* of setting up his laptop on my kitchen table to work made him crazy. He has to be in the middle of the action and *with* people all the time and *doing* stuff. Big stuff. He will never be able to be happy in Appleby, not long term, and if I try to keep him here and just settle in and think that he’s going to fix all my problems and get used to everything being good, when he leaves it’s going to be... devastating.”

Jane was aware that she’d been talking nonstop, and very quickly. But Max just let her rant. His eyebrows were nearly in his hairline when she finished, but he listened, taking it all in. He didn’t interrupt or argue or even shake his head.

When she was done, Max just stood there watching as Jane took deep, shaky breaths, blinked back tears, and thought about everything she’d just said.

Yeah. That was pretty much the sum of it.

She'd been floating on a sugar-orgasm-no-angsty-phone-call high for the last several days. But everything she'd just said was true and... it sucked.

This couldn't last.

Everyone in her life already expected and needed so much from her, and she felt like she was falling short most of the time. How could she be enough for a guy like Dax?

"So Dax isn't your Prince Charming," Max finally commented.

Jane frowned. "What?"

Max shrugged. "You work so hard, literally cleaning your stepmother's house, and it kind of made you seem like Cinderella with Dax as your Prince Charming, coming in to whisk you away from it all. But he's actually been your fairy godmother... well, father. He's made all these wonderful things happen, given you a little time off from your real life."

Oh. Wow. Jane swallowed hard. "He's given me a temporary reprieve," she said softly.

That was what Dax did. So very well.

"Yeah," Max agreed, unaware of just what that all meant. "But you're thinking your coach is about to turn back into a pumpkin."

Jane sighed and let her head fall forward. That was actually a really great analogy. "The clock always strikes midnight eventually."

"Yeah. I guess so." Max sounded a little sad.

Jane lifted her head and met her friend's eyes.

"Of course, the story doesn't end after midnight," Max said, clearly trying to be supportive.

"No," she admitted. "But it's not the fairy godmother who comes after Cinderella."

Max just nodded. Then he reached out and pulled her into a hug.

She let him squeeze her, appreciating the comfort.

When he let her go she gave him a smile. “Sorry about the freak-out.”

“I guess you were due,” he said. “I’ve never seen you do that. Not with all the stuff you have going on. You keep it pretty cool.”

She nodded. “I think this just snuck up on me. I let my guard down. I’m usually better at remembering that the next mess is just around the corner.”

“You are my favorite cynic,” Max told her. He kissed her forehead then pulled her car door open for her. “See you tomorrow?”

“For sure.”

“If you need to get drunk tonight, I’ll be at Granny’s.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter Thirteen



As she drove out of the parking lot and headed for Sunny Orchard, she thought about just heading straight for Granny's afterward. She might be better off with tequila with Max tonight. That, after all, was a much more stable long-term plan than whatever game she and Dax would play tonight.

She walked through the doors of the nursing home, her heart still beating faster than the walk from the parking lot should have caused. She hadn't been for a run all week because she'd been up late with Dax and because rolling out of bed was a lot harder with him lying next to her. Still, she wasn't that out of shape.

No, the increased heart rate was still about realizing she was in big trouble. But it wasn't totally her fault she hadn't seen what was happening. After all, Cinderella's benefactor had been a fairy godmother. A nice older matronly woman if she remembered correctly. Even in the Anne Hathaway version, *Ella Enchanted*, the fairy godmother had been the, albeit gorgeous, but very female Vivica A. Fox. That Jane had assumed the handsome and charming Dax was the *prince* in this story was a fair mistake.

And by the way, where the hell *was* her prince in this little analogy, then? Was she only going to get a platonic prince in Max or something? She stopped just outside of her dad's room and took a breath. Maybe her prince was her dad. Maybe this was a reverse Cinderella story, and her dad was the one getting the makeover—of his attitude and outlook—so he could find his happiness. Maybe Dax was *Jack's* fairy godfather, and Jane

was just... one of the mice that turned into a coachman for the night. Or something. The metaphor was a little fuzzy there.

She pasted on a smile and ducked into her father's room. "Hi—"

But he wasn't there.

She frowned. His wheelchair was parked in the corner of the room, but Jack was absent. She knew he didn't have any appointments today. She hadn't seen him out in the lobby area. Of course, she'd been very distracted by her thoughts about Dax when she'd come through. She pivoted and headed back for the front.

But no, he wasn't in the lobby or in the dining room or in the community room. She approached the front desk. Taylor, the girl who manned the desk after school and on weekends, was there.

"Hi, Taylor, have you seen my dad?"

Taylor looked up. "Hi, Jane. Yeah, he's in Dax's office."

Jane nodded. "Oh okay." She started to turn away. "I'll just —" She swung back. "Who's office?"

"Dax's." Taylor pointed down the hall. "It's by Ken's office."

Ken was the nursing home director. "Dax who?" Jane asked. Dax was an uncommon name. At least in Appleby. And she knew everyone who had offices in this nursing home. She'd made a point of that. So she already knew what Taylor was going to say, but Jane needed a little time to process.

"Dax Marshall. The new owner."

Okay, that hadn't been enough time. Evidently. Because as Taylor's words hit Jane's ears, she felt a wave of shock course through her that actually made her feel numb.

"The new... what?" Jane asked, aware that her voice sounded weird.

Taylor gave her a look that confirmed she sounded weird. "Owner."

“Right.” Jane nodded. “So Dax is the new... owner. He bought this place?”

Taylor shrugged. “I guess. I got a raise, and we have a cappuccino machine now, so I’m cool with whatever happened.”

Of course she’d gotten a raise. That alone probably would have convinced Jane that Dax really had bought the place, but the moment Taylor said the words cappuccino machine, Jane knew it was all true.

“I don’t suppose there’s a new Ping-Pong table somewhere?” Jane asked, trying to calm her breathing.

Her heart was pounding again, but this didn’t feel like panic. This felt like anger.

Taylor gave her a huge grin. “There is. How did you know? They put it in the rec room.”

“Lucky guess,” Jane muttered.

So this was his new project.

He’d given up snack cakes, gotten bored, and bought a nursing home. That made sense.

At least in Dax Marshall’s world, it did.

“By Ken’s office, you said?” she asked Taylor.

“Yep. Just down the short hallway behind Ken’s office, actually.”

“Thanks.”

Jane started in that direction, trying to get her emotions under control. Dax was a good guy. He made people happy. It was his singular goal in life, in fact. He had good intentions here, she was sure.

But she couldn’t quite calm her heart rate or the thick, heavy, rough rope of stress that had twisted and pulled itself into a massive knot in her gut.

This was her father. This wasn’t just a way to kill some time while Dax was hanging out in Appleby.

She heard her father's stilted speech as she passed Ken's office. She couldn't make out what he'd said, but she heard Dax's answering laugh. Then she heard another voice. It was Ken, the facility director, but even more important was what he said.

"What about birds?" Ken asked. "We can start with an aviary. I've seen those in other places."

"The article specifically mentions rabbits and guinea pigs," Dax said with a shrug.

"And d-d-dogs," Jack added.

"Definitely dogs," Dax said. "We're absolutely doing dogs."

"There's just a lot to think about," Ken hedged.

"Ken, people go out to shelters and adopt dogs on a whim every single day. Rabbits and guinea pigs too, I'm sure. I don't really think there is that much to think about."

Jane rolled her eyes. Thinking things through wasn't exactly Dax's strong suit.

"And who will be taking care of the animals?" Ken asked. "The nursing and housekeeping staff are already—"

"M-me," Jack said.

"And others," Dax said. "That's the point. Residents take care of them."

"But—"

"They're dogs and rabbits and guinea pigs," Dax said. "They're not nuclear reactors. And most of our residents have had pets in the past according to the survey. For those with dementia and memory issues, the research shows caretaking tasks come back to them almost miraculously. And those who don't have those issues are fine."

"So what about the goats and the chickens?" Ken asked, his voice a little weaker.

Goats and chickens? Jane shook her head. What was going on?

“Same thing,” Dax said. “The residents involved with the farm program will have experience. It will come back to them. They’ll tend the gardens and take care of the animals. But of course, we’ll hire someone to oversee everything.”

“The llama too?”

Okay, that was enough.

Jane stepped through the doorway. “Hi, guys.”

They all looked over. Ken looked relieved. “Hi, Jane.” He got to his feet quickly.

“I don’t want to interrupt,” she lied. She completely wanted to interrupt this meeting. She wanted to know what the hell was going on.

She looked at her dad, but Jack was just smiling at her much as he did whenever she came to visit. Maybe even a little brighter than usual.

Everything had been a little brighter this past week.

Because of Dax.

She felt that heavy, ropey stress knot pull tight in her stomach even as her heart fluttered a little. Everything really had been better because of him. It had been shockingly easy to fall under the everything-is-going-to-be-so-great spell.

She finally looked at Dax. He looked happy to see her too even if a touch sheepish around the edges.

Yeah, when had he been planning to tell her his big news anyway?

“You’re not interrupting. I clearly have some reading to do,” Ken said, skirting around her. “Come on in.”

Oh, she was going to come on in. She waited until Ken had disappeared into his office and then she shut the door. She crossed her arms and regarded the two most important men in her life. Who had been conspiring behind her back.

“So you two have been busy.”

Her father didn't look the least bit sheepish. He grinned widely and picked up a paper from Dax's desk. Dax's desk. In Dax's office. In the nursing home. Because he now owned the place.

She took a deep breath.

Jack waved the papers at her. "A f-farm!"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"W-w-we're going to h-have a f-f-f" Jack looked at Dax.

"We're going to have a farm," Dax said. He smiled at her from behind the desk.

His desk. In his office. She couldn't do that again. Every time she *really* thought about what she'd just learned, she got all worked up.

"How about we start at the beginning," she said. Calmly. She was proud of herself. "I understand you bought Sunny Orchard."

Dax nodded. "Yep. It was finalized yesterday."

The guy moved amazingly fast. Then again, he had an amazing amount of money and a number of powerful contacts, she assumed, and hell, maybe the company that had owned the nursing home had been happy to let it go.

"Why?" she asked simply.

"Well, mostly because I wanted to start this farm, and in spite of my very generous donation of time, money, and knowledge, they said no."

"So you just bought the whole place?" she asked, feeling her chest tightening. "Just so you could start a *farm*?"

"Not just any farm."

Jack waved the papers he held again. Jane took them and scanned over them. "What is this?"

"It's a program introduced in Europe and brought over here for dementia and Alzheimer's patients," Dax said. "It's a

working farm. The residents live there and take care of the garden and the small farm animals. It keeps them active physically and mentally because it taps into tasks they've done all their lives. It gives them a sense of purpose which also keeps them calmer. And it's been studied and shown to actually slow some of the progression of the disease." Dax glanced at Jack. "Jack and I were talking, and I talked to some therapists and physicians, and they agreed that even for patients whose memory isn't affected, it would keep them active and productive and could help with things like depression and overall happiness. They would not only be participating in activities that are familiar, but by contributing things to the facility like vegetables and eggs and milk, they would feel important."

Jack nodded, grinning widely, and Jane felt her heart trip.

"And we can go even further," Dax went on. "We can get some of the residents into the kitchen, canning, and baking with some of our produce. Making salads. Egg dishes. And we've even talked about taking some things to the farmer's market."

Jane shook her head. He was... something. He was definitely a big thinker. It was hardly her fault she'd gotten all caught up in him and wanting to be near him and his energy and ability to take the simplest thing and make it more.

But this was her *father*. This was people's home. This was their life.

This wasn't a game or a whim or a crazy idea that may or may not work out.

"So this is what you had Dad researching after the bridal fair?" she asked, looking at Jack.

Jack nodded, clearly pleased.

"Yep. I gave him the name of the care facility out in New Jersey that's doing this now and asked him to find out everything he could."

"You did that?" she asked her father.

Jack nodded. "U-used the c-c-computer."

“Wow.”

“Jack’s farming experience has been really helpful,” Dax said, smiling at her dad. “I know you’re probably shocked to find out, but I don’t know much about it.”

She rolled her eyes but Jack laughed.

“You’ve been working on this a lot,” she said.

“It’s been a busy week,” Dax agreed. He was watching her now as if waiting for her to say more.

“It’s a pretty big secret to keep,” she said casually. Kind of.

She was sure Dax could see the tension in her face. Jack was studying the pages again and probably missed it, but Dax’s gaze was firmly fixed on hers.

“I was planning to surprise you on Saturday with everything,” he said. “*We* were.” He glanced at Jack.

Jack looked up with another big grin. She swore she hadn’t seen him this smiley in... too long. She felt her throat tighten. Damn Dax. He was getting Jack smiling. Which had been so great at the bridal fair. For that one afternoon. They could have done that again. Gone out somewhere. Taken him to a movie. Or hell, to a farm or a petting zoo or whatever if he was missing being around animals. They could have done the temporary make-things-good-for-right-now thing periodically to help with his depression.

Dax didn’t have to buy the whole fucking nursing home and promise Jack a pony. Which he really might have, for all she knew. She wouldn’t be at all surprised if there was something in the literature about how great horses were. She knew therapists used horses with little kids. Why would adults really be that different? And if Dax had read...

She sighed.

“G-g-goats!” Jack said.

She arched her eyebrows. “What?”

“Goats!” Jack said again, this time on the first try.

She looked at Dax. “What about goats?”

He laughed. “We were going to take you out to see the baby goats and then tell you all our plans.”

“L-l-l—” Jack tried.

Jane looked at Dax. “Do I even want to know what that is?”

He was completely unabashed when he said, “And the llama.”

“The *llama*?”

“We’re going to have a llama too.”

Jane blew out a breath. “Sure. That makes total sense.”

“Well, in fairness, the farm already has a llama. More than one. And I think they’re actually alpacas.”

Jane frowned. “What are you talking about? You already have the farm?”

“We’re going to be using some space on Dallas Ryan’s farm. Do you know him?”

“Dallas? Of course I know him.” Dallas had been a year or two younger than Jane in high school. He and his brother and a couple of friends ran a huge alpaca farm a few miles outside of town. They had plenty of other animals too, and she thought they grew alfalfa for hay if not other grains for feed. “You’ve talked to Dallas about this?”

“Yeah, they think it’s great. The residents will still live here, but we’ll transport them out to our corner of the farm. We’ll have a greenhouse for the garden so we can use it year-round and a small barnyard and barn,” Dax said. “Dallas and his guys will help us out with the care of the animals as needed, but our residents will do as much as they can. I’m helping them out by renting the space and helping with some upgrades to the buildings and the road.”

Jane couldn’t believe how much they’d gotten done in such a short time. “Wow.”

“We’re going to be busy. With that and the new building project.” He motioned to the wall behind her.

Jane turned with trepidation. Sure enough. Architecture plans were hung on the wall detailing a complete remodel of the facility they were now in.

She rubbed the middle of her forehead.

“This is a new advancement in nursing home care as well,” Dax started. “Each wing becomes its own little community. There is a kitchen and living space in each, with the rooms surrounding the common area. There will be dedicated staff and smaller numbers of patients per staff members and—”

“Sounds good.” It did. Of course it did. But it was all making her feel even more restless and worried. Dax, the gaming guru, was going to oversee a nursing home? “I um... just stopped by to say hi.” She smiled at her dad.

She had to admit knowing he was here, hanging out with Dax, being kept busy, researching and offering ideas and input, and getting excited about something was pretty amazing. If it could be this way every day, she’d feel so much... lighter. Knowing he was happy and not sitting in his room by himself and was engaging and feeling valued made tears prick at the backs of her eyes.

And then what would happen when Dax moved on to something else? When this project was done and he was ready for a new challenge? Or worse, when this didn’t work out as planned and he shifted focus? What would that do to Jack?

She swallowed hard. “I’m going to head out since you guys seem to have a lot to do.” She crossed to where Jack was sitting and gave him a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek. She stepped back and looked at him for a long moment. “You look good, Dad.”

He smiled and put his hand over his heart.

“I love you too,” she told him, her voice thick.

She glanced at Dax, who was already up and out of his chair, on his way to the door.

“I’ll walk you out,” he said.

She nodded. She knew he'd want to know what their plans were for later. That wasn't what their conversation was going to be about, however.

* * *

Jane was not excited about the goats. Or the llamas.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but Dax had to figure it out. It was driving him nuts.

He'd planned to surprise her on Saturday, not just with farm animals, but with his whole plan for staying in Appleby long term and really, truly making a difference. Doing something important. Something meaningful. Something that would impact her family directly. Something he was really excited about and feeling great about.

He was going to make her father's life at Sunny Orchard better, dammit. Lots of other people's too. He actually felt a strange tugging in his gut that told him this was where he wanted and needed to be, what he needed to be doing, that was bigger than Jack. But it was pretty fucking awesome that he got to directly make things better for one of the most important people in Jane's life.

Or so he'd thought.

Until she'd walked in and looked like she'd just sucked on a lemon when they'd told her about the goats.

They didn't talk as they walked down the hall, through the lobby, out the doors, and across the parking lots. They didn't touch either.

Dax was wound tight and feeling annoyed before they even got to her car.

More specifically, he was feeling something familiar. Something he fucking hated.

He was feeling the way he felt when he'd just told his father about something new he'd done and was waiting for his father's reaction.

And knowing it would be disapproving.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked before she could say anything.

She sighed and turned to face him. “You bought the nursing home.”

“I did.” He felt defensive. He *hated* that.

“That’s a little... much.”

Much. It was a little much? “Have you met me?” he asked.

She actually snorted. “Yeah. That’s fair.”

“Why is this bad?” he pressed. He just wanted to get to whatever was the problem here. He realized he was projecting some here. But he was definitely getting the same vibe from Jane that he got from his father when he’d done something big and unexpected that his dad didn’t quite understand. Or trust.

Jane took a deep breath. She did not rush to insist that it wasn’t bad. Dax’s gut clenched.

“You are making my dad really excited about this,” she said.

Dax nodded.

“You’re getting him involved. Getting him invested.”

“Right.”

“In something you just thought up a few days ago.”

Dax clenched his jaw.

She cocked her head. “I assume anyway? Considering you set foot inside a nursing home for the first time ever last week? I assume this stuff about getting nursing home residents involved in farming and remodeling facilities into smaller living communities is new to you?”

“It is,” Dax admitted.

“So it’s nothing you’ve ever done before. Nothing you have any experience in.”

“No,” he said tightly.

She nodded. “I’m concerned, is all.”

“About?”

“It not working out.”

“Why wouldn’t it work out? It’s worked out in other places. We have no barriers to making it work here.”

It looked to him like perhaps Jane was clenching her jaw a little as well. “How long did those other places work on the farm idea before it was successful?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. How long would it take? You get the animals and plants, and you take the residents out there and have them take care of it all. That doesn’t seem like a months-long endeavor.”

Jane took a deep breath. “They need a little more than just ‘taking them out there,’ don’t you think? They need assistance with things like handling tools safely and lifting and carrying things like buckets and feed bags. What if they can’t manage navigating the uneven barnyard with their wheelchairs and walkers and canes? What if they can’t properly latch the gates and the animals get out?”

He frowned at her. His chest was tight. In part because she was right. Those things were all considerations. But also because she was so focused on all the things that could go wrong. Why couldn’t she see the good he was trying to do here? “Why are you focusing on the negatives? What about the sense of accomplishment they’ll feel? The physical activity they’ll be getting?”

“Because *you* have to think of those things!” she exclaimed. “If you’re in charge here, you are responsible for their safety and well-being!”

“That’s what I’m trying to do here! I want to improve their well-being!”

She swallowed. “I believe your intentions are good. I believe your intentions are always good. But you go from wanting to make a guy smile to... llamas! It’s one thing if you’re just a friend of one of the residents and you want to take him out to do some new things. But you’re *in charge*

here. You have to think about things like how to safely implement these things. You have to think beyond getting some goats and tomato plants!” Her cheeks were pink and her eyes bright, and her voice had risen as she’d been talking. “And you shouldn’t be getting their hopes up about things. You shouldn’t be promising my dad things you might not be able to do!”

Dax scowled at her and stepped closer. “I *will* do this. I told Jack I’d do this and I will.”

She crossed her arms, and Dax wondered if it was a subconscious move to keep him from getting too close. “Fine. Maybe you will succeed in taking them out to see goats and llamas a few times.”

“It’s more than that.” It was a lot more than that and he wanted her to know all about it. He wanted her to believe in what the program could do. He wanted her to be excited about it. But she had to be willing to listen to the possibilities. “This program has already shown great success in other places, Jane. And with the right people on board, *we* could go past what’s already been done. Who knows what kinds of outcomes we could have? We could really study the psychological effects, the physical effects, even the effects on the community.”

“This is one little nursing home in one little town in Iowa,” she said. “It’s hardly a place where cutting-edge research happens.”

“The small-town setting is one of the best things we have going,” he argued. “It will make it even easier to tap into resources and get people involved and to measure the effects of our residents continuing to be a true part of the community. Too often nursing home residents get forgotten, but if the farm initiative works at getting them out and working at something they love, there are other opportunities we could explore.”

“You will need so much funding and staffing and so many permissions and—”

“We can deal with all that,” he cut in.

“Doing this will take time.”

“I’ve got time.”

“Do you?” She lifted her chin. “You have time to hang out in this little town that has one bar and a nonexistent gaming conference scene?”

Wow, she was really putting up every possible obstacle. “I’ll *make* a gaming conference scene if I need one.”

“Right. There’s never been anything that you couldn’t make happen if you wanted it,” she said, the sarcasm thick.

“There hasn’t,” he told her honestly. Her doubts were starting to piss him off.

“Fine. So you’ll have a gaming conference here.” She rolled her eyes though. “And you’ll take my dad out to see the goats a couple of times a week, and you’ll pay to remodel the nursing home. And then what?”

“Then I’ll figure out what else needs to be done,” he said stubbornly. Dammit, the “see the goats” thing was starting to really grate. It was *more* than that.

She threw up her hands. “This isn’t a game, Dax!”

He felt that like a punch to the chest. “I know.”

“These aren’t snack cakes that can get a little squished in the packaging or that can come out a little misshapen and get sold for half price in the warehouse,” she went on. “These are *people*. This is their home. And their health.”

“I know that,” he said, his voice gruffer now. This was a much bigger deal than anything he’d done before. He got that. He really did. That’s why he wanted it.

Dammit, he wanted her to believe in him. More, he wanted her to see that he could make things better *for her*. That he could come into her life and improve absolutely *everything*. Jane was independent and confident and knew who she was and what she wanted. She didn’t *need* him. But he wanted her to *want* him and to see that maybe she could live without him, but that living *with* him was better. Happier. More fun. Easier. *Something*.

Looking at her looking at him like he was nuts and screwing everything up, Dax realized the driving force behind all this was the same thing it had always been for him—he wanted to make life happier for the people around him. But now it was so much bigger. So much more important.

So much worse if he failed.

He loved her. He wanted her to want him in lifelong terms. Not for a meet-up at the bar for pizza or for hot weekend getaways in swanky hotels or for silly Saturday afternoons at dessert tastings. He wanted all of it. The hard stuff too. The stuff with the factory. The stuff with her sister. The stuff with her dad.

He'd only dabbled in it so far. He'd improved it all. A little. Temporarily.

But what Jack had said at the bridal fair was true—things were going to get harder ahead. And Dax wanted to be there for that. To make it better for Jane somehow. He didn't know what that would look like. Or even if he'd really be able to pull it off. But he was ready to do more than buy Ping-Pong tables and sweets. He wanted to do something real, something that would matter.

But what had he done upon buying the nursing home?

He'd bought a Ping-Pong table, and he had a jar of gummy bears on his desk here too.

She thought this, the first really big, serious thing he'd maybe ever done, was a lark. A whim. Something he'd just jumped into.

And she was right.

He'd read about it and the next day started researching the use of animals in eldercare. And goats. He'd been thrilled to learn about the alpaca farm outside of town, and he'd driven there immediately to meet the guys who ran it.

“You don't think I'll follow through on this?” he finally asked her.

She took a deep breath. “I know you care about my dad, and I appreciate you trying and getting him smiling and into something that’s got him out of his room and looking forward. But that’s what scares me. I know you’re into giving people little escapes from real life and that’s amazing. I’m a big fan actually. But I don’t think my dad thinks this will be temporary. And I just don’t know how serious this really is for you.”

Now Dax felt like the punch had landed in his gut.

Right. She was a fan of his temporary escapes from the real world. She understood why those were important. She’d finally opened up and let him do that for her. And that was what she thought he was good for.

“So I need to stick with my strengths—fun breaks, recess, gummy bears.”

She looked sad. “A week ago you owned a snack cake company.” She shrugged. “You went in with these big plans, but instead of implementing any of them, you brought in TVs and cappuccinos. And then you gave it all up for sex.”

Ouch. When she put it like that, he sounded like a real asshole. “I passed those plans on to the others though. Piper is working with Whitney and Aiden on a lot of it.”

Jane nodded. “That’s great. But do you think Piper and Aiden and Whitney will come over here and take things over when you get bored?”

Ouch, again.

But he hadn’t gotten bored at Hot Cakes. Or given it all up for sex.

He’d fallen in love.

He just hadn’t realized it at the time.

He needed to show her. He needed to stick with this. He needed to put in the time and the work and prove to her that he was in this for the long haul.

He could do that. Probably.

He wasn't good at being patient. He wasn't good at not getting what he wanted right when he wanted it—and he wanted *her* right now—but he could put in this work.

“And now I own a nursing home,” he said.

She nodded. “All of a sudden.”

He suddenly owned a nursing home. Which she, and everyone, had every reason to think he'd give up as soon as something more fun came along. It looked like he was just fucking around. As usual.

“Right. All of a sudden. Because that's how I do things.”

She sighed. “You're a good guy, Dax.”

“Who's a ton of fun,” he added.

She nodded.

He reached for her car door and pulled it open. She looked at it then back at him, finally swallowing and sliding in behind the wheel.

He thought about just shutting it. Letting her drive off. Letting her believe what she was going to believe until he could prove otherwise.

But at the last second, he gripped the car door, sucked in a deep breath, and crouched next to her seat.

He needed to tell her this. At least once.

In case he *couldn't* pull this off.

In case he couldn't actually do something that wasn't temporary and just a good time.

“I'm also a guy who's in love with you.”

Jane opened her mouth. Closed her mouth. Frowned. Then opened it again. “What?”

“I'm in love with you. But I've never been in love before, and my default mode is over the top, and you're not into gummy bears or Ping-Pong, so I bought a nursing home.”

“You're *in love* with me?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you *sure*?”

He laughed, but his chest and gut still hurt. He nodded.
“Yeah. I’m sure.”

“Wow.” She was just staring at him.

“So yeah.” There really wasn’t anything else to say. He needed to figure out what he was going to do with Sunny Orchard. How to make Jane happy. How to be the one who made her happy. More than temporarily.

He started to stretch to his feet, but partway up he leaned in and kissed the top of her head.

Then he turned and headed back into the nursing home.

She didn’t stop him. Or follow him back in.

Chapter Fourteen



Most people didn't believe you could work up a sweat playing Ping-Pong.

That's because most people played Ping-Pong for fun.

Not manically as a way of working off pent-up frustration and self-loathing.

Okay, loathing was strong. He didn't *loathe* himself. But he was disgusted with himself, and adding a new level to *Warriors*, including hacking more appendages off more monsters, hadn't helped. Nor had running—he *did* loathe running. Nor had visiting an alpaca farm.

Not that visiting an alpaca farm was supposed to help work off any kind of aggression, but he'd expected it to calm him. To make him happy. And it had.

It had also made him even more certain that he wanted to take the Sunny Orchard residents to visit the alpacas on a regular basis. He wanted to go with them too. He wanted to see them interacting with the animals. He wanted to see the cognitive—yes, he'd learned that word from his recent reading—and physical changes occur. And yeah, he wanted to play with the alpacas too.

That's where it all got mixed up with his self-disgust.

Why couldn't he just let it go? Why couldn't he just recognize that the best thing for everyone would be for someone else to be the administrator at Sunny Orchard and he could just own the place?

Over the past two days, as he'd texted and called Jane with no return messages or calls, he'd been trying to convince himself to hire someone else to be in charge of... well, everything. Someone else to do the programming and implement the new ideas. Someone with experience in the field. Someone who had contacts with other people in the field.

His argument with himself went something like this —“Bring in someone who's worked in eldercare for years.”

“But if they've worked in it for years, maybe they're not the right person for *new* ideas.”

“But they know better than you do what kind of outcomes to expect.”

“But don't we want to expect *more* than what everyone's used to?”

“What if you're expecting too much?”

“If you shoot for the moon, even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.”

“You read that on an inspirational poster when you were fifteen.”

“Still counts.”

“You're ridiculous.”

“You're an asshole.”

“Yeah, well you still know nothing about running a nursing home.”

Which was true.

Dax whacked the little white ball harder. It bounced back at him as if intent on revenge for the pummeling. He hit it again. And again. And again. It wasn't really helping his frustration, but it did prove he wasn't drunk enough to have impaired his hand-eye coordination. At least there was that.

Also, he couldn't get fired for drinking at work. Because he didn't work at Hot Cakes anymore.

“Oh my God, you’re even weird when you’re depressed?” Grant asked from the Hot Cakes break room doorway.

Dax looked over. Grant, Ollie, and Aiden were watching him.

“How can you tell if he’s depressed?” Aiden asked. “He’s playing Ping-Pong and eating gummy bears. That’s what he does when he’s happy.”

Ollie pointed at the table. “He’s playing Ping-Pong alone.”

Dax had shoved the Ping-Pong table in the Hot Cakes break room up against a wall. Ollie was right—that in itself was a sign things were wonky in Dax Marshall’s world. He never wanted to do anything alone.

“And those aren’t regular gummy bears,” Ollie said, pointing to the jar on the table to one side.

The guys came closer, and Aiden grinned when he noticed the bears were swimming in clear liquid.

“Vodka-soaked gummy bears?” he asked Dax.

Dax shrugged. “I tried straight vodka, but yuck.” Typical. He liked the fruit-flavored vodkas, and the cotton-candy vodka he’d tried once had been delicious but straight vodka wasn’t his thing. Of course, he was basically a child in a man’s body, so that tracked.

Aiden pulled a bear out with a thumb and finger and tossed it into his mouth. He shrugged. “I don’t think they’ve been in there long enough. Don’t they take a few hours at least to soak up the vodka?”

“Three days to be perfect,” Ollie confirmed.

Dax crossed to the jar and picked up the large spoon next to it. He dipped the spoon in as if it were a bowl of cereal and took a bite.

Aiden nodded. “Got it.”

“So gummy bears and Ping-Pong whether you’re happy or pissed or brokenhearted, huh?” Grant said.

“Guess so.” Thing was, until now, none of them had seen him brokenhearted. He’d never *been* brokenhearted. Happy and pissed, sure. But he’d never been in love, so no one had ever been able to break his heart.

“We need to talk,” Grant told him. “How drunk are you?”

“Not drunk enough.” The gummy bears had only been in the vodka for about an hour and eating them with a spoon still let him taste too much of the liquor.

“Then sit down.”

Dax rounded the edge of the sofa and slumped into the overstuffed cushions. He tipped his head back into the cushion behind him. “I’m ready for my pep talk.”

Grant took a seat on the coffee table directly in front of Dax. He snorted. “Pep talk?”

Dax lifted his head and frowned at Grant. “Yeah. My pep talk. Where you tell me I’ll get over Jane.”

Aiden snorted this time and took the chair perpendicular to where Dax sat. “You’re not going to get over Jane.”

Dax turned his frown on Aiden. “What?”

“Jane’s awesome. She’s one of those girls who, if you’re lucky enough to get close to her, you don’t get over. You fell for her and that’s forever, man.”

Dax sighed even as his heart turned over in his chest. That sounded accurate. “So is this a pep talk about how to get her back?”

“This is a talk about leaving Piper alone,” Ollie said, sliding onto the arm of the sofa and leaning his elbows on his thighs.

Dax frowned. “What’s wrong with Piper?”

“She’s now obsessed with baby llamas for one thing,” Ollie said.

“Alpacas,” Dax corrected. Piper had been helping him with research. Not only the farming program for people with

dementia but other programs for eldercare facilities as well as state policies and any other issues he needed to be aware of.

Ollie nodded. “Whatever. And goats. And potbellied pigs. That’s what she’s spending her time researching.”

“And by researching, Ollie means she’s been making trips out to talk to Dallas and Justin. And enjoying those trips a lot,” Aiden said.

Dallas Ryan and Justin Ross owned the farm. “So?” Dax asked.

“So Piper has... enjoyed getting to know those guys,” Aiden said.

“Fuck off, Aiden,” Ollie said.

Dax looked at Ollie. “Oh.”

“There’s no *oh*,” Ollie said. “We just need her in the office doing Hot Cakes work. And Fluke work. Not oohing and ahing over... stuff at the farm.”

“And by ‘stuff at the farm’ you mean the goats and alpacas, not the guys taking care of the goats and alpacas?” Dax asked, suddenly feeling better. Giving his friends shit always made him feel better, and it was about fucking time Ollie noticed how amazing Piper was. Maybe seeing her flirting with other guys was what it was going to take.

“Piper doesn’t dress appropriately for stomping around a *farm*,” Ollie said with a frown. “It’s ridiculous she’s going out there.”

Well, that wasn’t entirely untrue, but there was no way Ollie was concerned about Piper’s clothes. Okay, that might not be true. Piper looked sexy as hell in the dresses and skirts she wore. Ollie might very well be concerned about *that* and what Dallas and Justin thought of her dresses and skirts. But he wasn’t worried about her shoes getting dirty.

In fact, Dax had images of the farmers he’d met tearing off their flannels and tees to lay them down over the dirt so Piper could walk through the barnyard in her hot-pink pumps like a

queen. With her two shirtless escorts checking out her curves in her pin-up dresses.

He grinned. He really did love that Ollie was annoyed by this.

“Oh, no worries,” Aiden said. “She got some boots.”

Ollie looked over at him. “What?”

“Piper got some boots. They’re like rubber rain boots. But they’re bright pink with black and white polka dots. And go up to her knees. They’re pretty cute.”

Of course they were.

Dax could see by Aiden’s grin that he really liked that this was annoying Ollie too.

“Well, great,” Dax said with a nod. “Then it’s all fine.”

Sure, because the biggest problem here had been that Piper didn’t have appropriate footwear for the barnyard.

“*Anyway*,” Grant said, pulling their attention back to him. And his eye roll. “Ollie has a point.”

Dax frowned. “What?”

It wasn’t that Grant had *never* said Ollie had a point, but it was rare. Ollie didn’t make points. Ollie came up with crazy concepts. Then Dax turned them into more tangible ideas. Then Aiden turned those ideas into actionable points. Then Cam turned those points into paperwork. And finally Grant turned that paperwork into dollars. So no, Ollie didn’t often make points.

“Piper is doing a lot of work on the farm plan and that’s fine. But *you* haven’t done anything with it for two days.”

“I’m working through some things.” And texting Jane. And then trying with everything in him to *keep* from texting Jane. And then texting Jane about how he was sorry he kept texting and bugging her and how he was going to leave her alone. And then texting her about how he really was going to leave her alone, but first he wanted to say one more time that

he loved her. And then texting her that he knew he was pathetic with all the texting.

He could only hope she hadn't told Zoe about it. Or that at least Zoe hadn't told Aiden. Or that at least Aiden hadn't told the rest of the guys.

"You're playing Ping-Pong and drinking a ridiculous amount of cappuccino and moping," Grant said.

"That's how I work through things."

"Bullshit."

Dax's eyebrows went up. "It is."

"I've known you for nine years," Grant said. "It takes you, max, six hours to work through things. We're going on fifty-some hours now. You're moping and avoiding."

"I don't mope and avoid."

"Exactly. So get off your ass and do something."

Dax sat up straighter. "Hey, this isn't very supportive."

"You don't need us to be supportive," Grant said. "You're in love with her, and you're mad because she called you on some shit."

He frowned. "I think I like Ping-Pong better than this." He started to get up.

"But she was wrong."

Dax sat back down. "Go on."

"She panicked because you were your usual self," Grant said. "And your usual self does spontaneous things just because they sound fun."

Dax started to get up again. He knew this.

"At least, that's why she thinks you did it," Grant went on. "Because that's what *you* think you did."

Dax sighed and settled back into the cushions. Honestly, his head was swimming a little from the vodka, and he was too tired to keep getting up and down. The manic Ping-Pong game

had something to do with that. But more, he hadn't been sleeping well since he'd walked away from Jane.

He'd been determined to give her space—other than the texting, of course—but staying away, and her radio silence, was killing him slowly.

And he'd probably mess up the staying-away-physically thing too if he could go to her and say he was sorry for buying the nursing home. But he couldn't quite say that with any sincerity. He was sorry it had upset her. But he wasn't sorry about the things he'd learned and the excitement he felt about the possibilities. Or the excitement he saw in the staff and the residents who were anticipating the changes.

He'd also go to her if he could and say he was going to be selling Sunny Orchard. But he hadn't quite gotten around to doing a single thing about selling it yet either. It had only been two days. That was one excuse. But the truth was, it was because he didn't want to sell it. He wanted to make it work.

“I do things just because they sound fun,” he said to Grant. “That's true.”

Grant shook his head. “You're missing a key part here. The things you do sound fun to you *because they make the people you care about happy.*”

Dax frowned.

“Painting your office yellow and furnishing it with beanbags sounded fun, not because you love beanbag chairs, but because every time I walk in there and sigh, it makes Aiden, Cam, and Ollie laugh,” Grant said. “I mean, I believe you like beanbag chairs, but you insist on them because of the chain reaction they cause in your friends. Me being in a room with beanbag chairs makes everyone feel lighter.”

Dax narrowed his eyes at Grant. “Even you?”

“Maybe,” Grant hedged.

That was good enough for Dax. He grinned. “Go on.”

“You might *do* a lot of over-the-top things and spontaneously decide some new activity or trip or project

sounds fun, but it's always about how those trips and projects will affect the people you care about. When it comes to people"—Grant pointed at Ollie, then Aiden, then himself—"you stick. Nine years, Dax. Lots of trips and projects and craziness, but we have been a *we* for nine years."

Dax felt his smile die as he stared at Grant. He hadn't been expecting that.

"And I think Jane is perfect for you," Grant went on. "She's had a tough time, and even if things with the nursing home work out and things with her sister get easier, everything she's been through has impacted her and will stay with her. She's someone you'll get to spend a lot of time making happy."

He blew out a breath. "God, I hope so," he said fervently.

Grant nodded. "You need someone who needs to be made happy every single day. And she needs someone fully committed to doing that."

Dax swallowed hard. He was definitely committed to doing that. He wanted to be that person for her. He typically looked for the good time, but with Jane he wanted to be there for it all. "So what do I do now?"

"Make sure she understands she's one of your people. Everything else will make sense to her in time," Grant said.

Dax stretched to his feet and clapped his hands. Then he wobbled a little. Maybe he'd had a couple of spoonfuls too many of the gummy bears.

Grant pushed him back onto the couch. "You're getting on a plane early tomorrow."

Dax frowned. Then nodded as he remembered. "I have a nursing home conference in Austin."

Grant nodded. "That's a good idea."

"Yeah?"

"Well, you don't know shit about running a nursing home, so yeah," Grant said.

“But I need to go talk to Jane.”

“I’ll go talk to her,” Aiden said.

Grant shook his head. “*I’ll* go talk to her.”

“You will?” Dax asked.

“If anyone knows how crazy you can seem but can love you anyway, it’s me.”

Dax’s eyes got wide as he sat up straight. “Did you just say you love me?”

“I did.” Grant stretched to his feet.

“I love you too, Grant.” Dax was grinning bigger than he had in two days. And it wasn’t just because of the liquored-up gummy bears. He had amazing friends. He must be doing *something* right.

“Yeah, yeah.” Grant smoothed the front of his tie and stepped around the edge of the couch.

“I love you too, Grant,” Aiden echoed, with an equally big grin.

“Shut up, Aiden,” Grant said as he headed for the door.

“I love you the most, Grant!” Ollie called.

“I already regret everything,” Grant said then pulled the break room door shut behind him.

But they all knew he was lying.

Dax watched him go, unable to ease his frown. He looked at Aiden. “You really don’t think I should go find Jane? Or call her at least?”

Aiden shook his head. “You need to *stop* calling and texting her.”

Okay, so she’d told her friends about that. And Zoe had told Aiden.

“She’s with Zoe and Josie every night,” Aiden said.

That made him feel a little better. “I just need to wait for her?”

Aiden shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, you said everything you could say right? You told her you loved her. Nothing has changed on your end. You’re going to get your shit together and learn about nursing homes and you’re going to keep going with this and make it kick ass and show her you’re sticking around. But that will take time. You just have to be patient.”

“I’m not good at that.”

Aiden laughed. “No kidding.”

It came from having a lot of money from a young age. And being accidentally successful in everything he’d ever done. Dax knew that. But instant gratification was the norm for him, and he’d very rarely had it turn out badly.

Dax settled back against the cushions once again. “I’m not going to last long. I need a grand gesture.”

Aiden shook his head. “Just let Grant talk to her. Go to the conference and just... let it work out.”

Dax frowned. God, he missed her so damned much. What if it didn’t work out? What if she really was the one woman he could never fully win over? “Is she okay?” he asked Aiden. “Is she angry? Sad? What?”

Aiden shrugged. “She’s drowning herself in Zoe’s bakery case.”

Dax frowned. That didn’t surprise him. At least she was with her friends. And he had to admit, he was glad she was at least a little upset. Jane being fine without him was a really real possibility.

“Wouldn’t that be more like suffocating?” Ollie asked. “I mean, you have to pull liquid into your lungs to drown. Pie filling is kind of a liquid, I guess, but no way could you really breathe that into your lungs. Crumbs and icing and stuff could get stuck in your nose and throat, though, and block your airways. Which is suffocating. Besides, choking is absolutely the more common way to die from baked goods. No question.”

It took him a second to notice both Dax and Aiden giving him strange looks.

“What?”

“This is why Piper goes out to an alpaca farm to flirt with other men,” Aiden told him.

“She doesn’t go out there to flirt with anyone,” Ollie said. “She just likes alpacas. Evidently.”

“Uh-huh.”

Ollie rolled his eyes. “It has nothing to do with me.”

“Okay.” Aiden shrugged.

Ollie frowned. “It doesn’t.”

Aiden and Dax shared a glance. Ollie really didn’t know Piper had a crush on him. It was maybe better they didn’t point it out.

“I think she’s concerned you’ll actually forget to eat for days or you’ll hook up with some woman who will take you for all your money, and you won’t even realize it until you go to pay a parking ticket you got because you parked your car on the street for four days straight while you were in the middle of a project and sleeping at the office.”

“Piper’s like an older sister to me,” Ollie said. But he shifted on the arm of the couch, clearly a little uncomfortable.

Maybe he was starting to catch on that there was more there.

“Piper is five years younger than you,” Aiden pointed out.

“Well, she’s... my assistant. And sweet. That’s why she takes care of me.”

Dax actually snorted. “Piper is not sweet.” She was kind. She was empathetic. She was seemingly all seeing and all knowing. But she was no nonsense and a bit cynical and impossible to bullshit.

“I don’t understand why she puts up with you,” Aiden told Ollie in a way only a really true friend could.

“Well, Grant loves you,” Dax said, pushing up from the couch. “And I pretty much do too.”

“Grant never said that, and you’re drunk,” Ollie told him, also getting up.

“I could see it in his eyes,” Dax assured him with a grin. “And I’m not that drunk.”

“Yeah, well, I love you too,” Ollie said. “And I’m sorry your girlfriend can find the same comfort in pie and cake that she can with you.”

Dax sighed and slung an arm around Ollie’s neck. “Thanks, Mr. Compassion.” They started for the door.

“And Piper is not going out to that farm to flirt,” Ollie said again.

“Right. Just like you’re only worried about her going out there because of her shoes,” Dax told him.

* * *

“That’s it. I’m putting my foot down.”

“Try to take this pie away from me, and lose a finger,” Jane told Max as she shoved another bite of strawberry pie into her mouth.

“I’m serious. I’ve had it up to here,” Max said, pulling out the chair opposite her at the table she’d claimed three days ago at Buttered Up.

“Leave me alone, Max. If I want to eat my feelings, I can. I’m a grown woman and immune to guilt and bullying.”

“Oh, I don’t care if you eat your feelings, honey,” Max said. “I’m just sick of not being able to buy anything strawberry from this bakery. There hasn’t been any strawberry pie, muffins, scones, or even a tart for three days.”

“That’s because we ran out of strawberries, and our supplier doesn’t come until later today,” Josie said. “Those are the last ones, and Jane made us swear to hide everything in the back when we said we were running low.” She pointed at the two empty mason jars that had held strawberry pie and the one Jane now had her fork buried inside.

“You’re a mess,” Max told Jane.

“No shit.” She took another bite.

Josie climbed up onto the ladder she’d pushed in front of the tall shelves that displayed old photos and memorabilia from the bakery’s history. She held a feather duster.

Zoe remained behind the front counter waiting on the few customers still trickling in and out, but the morning rush was over. And now her friends could concentrate on Jane. Much to Jane’s chagrin.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Max,” Josie said as she reached to whisk the duster over the picture frames and vintage cookie jars on the highest shelf.

Jane frowned at her. “I haven’t been that bad.”

“I don’t like seeing you this sad,” Josie said. “Especially when you could go fix it right now.”

“I’m working through some things,” Jane said grumpily.

She’d been doing everything grumpily since she’d watched Dax walk back into Sunny Orchard three days ago. And eating strawberry pie grumpily was difficult because it really was heaven on earth.

“What things?” Max asked, sitting back in the chair and looking at her as if she was pathetic.

Which, of course, she was.

“That Dax loves me,” Jane said.

Max just sat, clearly waiting for more. “And?” he finally asked.

“I think he really meant it.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Max said. “Of course he meant it. He bought a *nursing home* because of you.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Right? I know. *That’s* what I’ve been thinking about.”

Max shook his head.

“Well, seriously,” Jane went on. She even put her fork down. “When he told me he loved me, I asked if he was sure.”

Max chuckled.

Jane frowned. She’d been serious when she’d asked. “And he said ‘why else would I buy a nursing home?’ and *that* is what I’ve been thinking about for two days. I mean, honestly, why else would he? For fun? I don’t know if owning a nursing home is really fun. At least not on the scale with going to Comic-Con and the other stuff he’s done. And then there’s the farm thing. I mean, he could go out and hang out with Dallas and Justin and those guys any time if he suddenly thinks goats and llamas are fun. He doesn’t need to own a nursing home so he has an excuse or something. And then there’s my dad. I mean, I know Dax likes him and wants to make him happier, but he could go over there and visit him. Or take him on outings like we did the other day. He would *not* have to buy the nursing home just to make my dad happier. So I think maybe he really did buy it because he loves me, and somehow loving me made him think about how he could do something bigger and more meaningful and something more... permanent.”

She dragged in a deep breath, very aware that she’d been ranting, but that had all been swirling around in her mind for two days now amid the sugar and caffeine and now just came tumbling out. She’d been desperately trying to figure out another reason for Dax’s seemingly impulsive purchase, but she couldn’t come up with anything else.

She watched Max. He seemed to just be waiting to be sure she was done.

Josie’s sigh was audible. “I promise you I’ve told her he meant it when he said he loves her,” she said to Max.

“I believe you.” Max gave Jane a sympathetic look. “But she’s never been in love before. She doesn’t know what to do now that she believes it.”

“Do you think she believes it?” Josie asked. She turned on the rung of the ladder partially so she could look down at them.

“I do. I think it’s sunk in.”

“But it shouldn’t be this hard,” Josie insisted. “She’s in love with him too. He’s been texting her almost nonstop. She needs to just go be with him already.”

“Hello!” Jane said. “I’m still here.”

“Josie’s right,” Max told her.

Josie gave her a smug look and turned back to dusting the shelves.

“You need to just go be with him,” Max said.

“It’s not that easy,” Jane said. Grumpily.

“Of course it is,” Josie said. “Falling in love should be the easiest thing.”

“It’s not easy when there are all these other people who are getting involved. It’s not just sex and pie, you know. There’s toilets and chemistry tests and wheelchairs and freaking llamas.”

“I believe they’re alpacas, actually.”

Everyone turned toward the new voice. Including Josie. Who actually whipped around quickly. Which caused her to wobble on the ladder. Which caused her foot to slip off the rung. Which caused her to fall.

Fortunately, the new guy caught her on her way down.

Jane gasped and was halfway out of her chair when the man’s arms went around Josie, sweeping her up, and eliciting a little squeak from her.

Everyone froze for a moment.

“Holy shit, that was smooth as hell,” Max said.

“Josie, are you okay?” Jane asked at the same time.

But Josie didn’t reply. She was staring at the man who held her. As he stared back at her.

“Um.” Max shot Jane a look.

She shrugged at him then looked back at Josie and her savior. “Josie?”

Still nothing.

“Jocelyn Diane!” Jane said loudly.

That shook Josie out of her daze. She blinked and then looked at Jane.

The man seemed to snap out of it too. He swung Josie’s feet to the floor, righting her.

Josie swept a hand down the front of her dress and apron and cleared her throat. “Yes. Yeah. I’m good. Fine.”

“Wow.” Jane looked at the man. “That was amazing. Great reflexes.”

“Well, we’ve had some practice at this.” He was looking at Josie when he said it.

Jane frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Uh, this is... uh...” Josie tucked her hair behind her ear, and Jane was very interested to see her friend was blushing. “This is the man who caught me the other night too.”

Jane felt her mouth drop open. She looked at the man with wide eyes. “Really?”

“The other night?” Max asked.

“Josie slipped off a stool in here the other night and was saved by a handsome stranger,” Jane said, her mouth curling. “Or so the story goes.”

Josie’s blush got darker as Jane spilled that she’d called him handsome.

“Maybe you need to keep your feet on the floor around here,” Jane teased.

“Or maybe not,” Max said with a grin. He extended his hand to the other man. “I’m Max.”

“Grant Lorre.” The man took Max’s hand.

“Wait.” Jane frowned. “Grant Lorre? As in Hot Cakes Grant Lorre?”

“Yes.”

“As in our *boss*?” Jane asked, shooting Max a glance.

Max cleared his throat. “Oh shit. Sorry. We didn’t recognize you, Mr. Lorre.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Grant said. He looked at Jane. “I’m actually here to talk to you. And not about Hot Cakes.”

“Me?” Jane asked.

“It’s about Dax.”

“Oh.” She sank back into her seat. Was she in trouble for fraternizing with him when he’d been her boss? They hadn’t slept together, but their flirtation had probably been obvious.

“I’m going to... go”—Josie started for the kitchen—“do ... something... somewhere else.”

It was clear Grant flustered her friend, and Jane couldn’t wait to dig into that further with Josie and Zoe and a bottle of wine later. But Grant was here to talk to her about Dax. Which meant they might need two bottles of wine later.

“Yeah, I’m gonna head out,” Max said, getting up. “Call me later if you need,” he told Jane. Then he swiped the one uneaten strawberry muffin from in front of her. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” she said. Suddenly her stomach was twisting, making her regret all the baked goods she’d consumed.

After the door closed behind Max, it was just Jane and Grant left in the bakery. Besides George and Phil, two regulars. They came in after the rush, sat at the same two tables every morning, and read the paper. They didn’t come in together, exactly, but, both widowers, they came in at the same time and stayed for the same amount of time every morning.

She focused on the man across the table. She had to admit she understood why Josie might be a little flustered after being in his arms. He was very good looking. Tall, broad shouldered, dark hair and eyes. He looked as comfortable in his suit as she felt in her yoga pants and the t-shirt that had been washed a million times and was soft as a baby’s bottom.

But he had an intensity about him that made him not her type. Her type was, apparently, a charming goofball who was only intense about Ping-Pong and llamas. Wait, excuse her, alpacas.

“How is Dax?” she asked. God, she missed him. When she wasn’t thinking about how crazy he was. Or how, if she went to see him she’d probably propose to him, and there was a good chance she’d come home to find a baby goat or an alpaca in her living room some night.

No, that wasn’t true. Even when she thought about those things, she missed him.

“I’m guessing kind of miserable about now,” Grant said, looking at his watch.

“Really?” Did she want him to be miserable? Maybe a little. *She* was miserable. And five pounds heavier than she’d been two days ago.

“Airplanes and hangovers don’t mix well,” Grant said. “Though, he should definitely know that by now, so I wouldn’t give him too much sympathy.”

“He’s on an airplane?” Her heart thunked hard against her chest. Dammit, he’d gone back to Chicago. She’d chased him off.

No! She didn’t want him to leave. He couldn’t run Sunny Orchard from Chicago. That meant he’d probably sold it. Son of a bitch! “How is it that he’s able to keep buying and selling major businesses so quickly and easily?” she demanded of Grant. “Shouldn’t these things take a few days, at least? I couldn’t sell my mountain bike for *three months*, and it was practically new—I do *not* like biking because biking *sucks*—and I was asking like a hundred bucks! That was a steal! How can he just change his mind and snap his fingers and everything just *poof* falls into place? And why didn’t any of his friends stop him? Any of *you*?” She glared at Grant. “You *know* he would be great at this nursing home thing! Fun innovations, bold ideas, making people happy—those are his specialties! He needs to start doing something more

permanent. To see that he can make people happy long term. That he's not just a temporary reprieve for people."

She stopped, realizing that not only had she been ranting again but this time it was at her boss. One of them, anyway. Having this many was starting to get annoying. Oh, and she'd pretty much just told *herself* that Dax needed to keep the nursing home.

Grant just waited until she was done, however.

When Jane pressed her lips together, he said, "I agree. Except for the part about biking. Biking is great. And that selling major businesses is fast and easy. It's not. But he hasn't even tried to sell the nursing home, so there's that. Which is also why we didn't try to talk him out of selling it."

She pulled in a deep breath. Okay, he wasn't selling it. That was good. But he was still on an airplane right now.

"Then why is he going back to Chicago?" Maybe he just needed to get more socks or something from his apartment.

"He's not going to Chicago. He's on his way to Texas. For a nursing home conference."

She took that in. "Oh." She frowned. "Oh." He was going to a conference. To learn. To network. To figure some things out. "Wow."

"And I fully expect that in a year, he'll be presenting at conferences like that one, teaching other people about how to implement programs like the ones he's going to be doing at Sunny Orchard."

She smiled at that. "You think so?"

"I do. Because of all the things you said." Grant leaned in. "Look, of all people, I get where you're coming from. The things Dax does are short term, fun, frivolous. But that's all on purpose. Those things accomplish his goals. But this is... different. It's more than that. He doesn't want this to be short term, and he knows it will take time and there will be ups and downs."

"He does?" she asked.

Grant hesitated then nodded. “He probably does.”

She laughed lightly.

“Listen, Dax is brilliant. And he’s got a huge heart. He’s a pain in the ass, but I’ve been lucky enough to be his friend for nine years. I could have taken a number of jobs and made a ton of money and hung out with people more like me. But I need Dax. I need them all, but sometimes I think I need Dax and Ollie the most. The dreamers. The guys who are willing to go big. The guys who are willing to make me ask ‘what if?’ once in a while.” Grant smiled. “I like to play it safe. Thanks to those guys, I have adventures too.”

“And it always works out?” Jane asked, her heart hammering.

“Definitely not,” Grant said. “But we’re still here. Nine years later. Laughing.”

She nodded. “So I can trust him to put his heart into this and do his best?”

“Absolutely. And,” Grant added, “when you get one of us on your side, you get all five of us. And we’re a pretty formidable team.”

Jane smiled and nodded again. “Seems that way.” She felt lighter. Her stomach hurt a little, but it was definitely now because of overdoing the sugar and butter for two days. “I feel like I’m going to want to kill him from time to time,” she admitted.

“Oh, you will,” Grant agreed.

She laughed.

Grant got to his feet. “It was nice meeting you finally,” he said.

“You too.” She hesitated but then asked, “Hey, Grant?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t suppose... this is really unlike me to ask, but I think maybe this once I need to be a little over the top for Dax.

I don't think people do that for him much, and I was thinking that might be good for me too."

"Okay." Grant looked amused.

"And, what the hell, I guess I might as well be a little bold and ask you... I don't suppose you would be able to help me get to Texas to where he is? Like today? Like soon?"

Grant smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I could do that."

Her heart flipped and she nodded. "And I also don't suppose you know where I could get a gigantic gummy bear?"

That surprised him a little more, evidently. But he nodded again. "Well, I *have* known Dax Marshall for nine years. I know more about gummy candy than any man should."

"So you could get me *and* a gigantic gummy bear to Texas in the next few hours?"

"Yes, I could."

She grinned and hopped up out of her chair. "Don't tell Aiden, but you're my favorite boss."

He chuckled and started for the bakery door. "I'll have Piper call you in a little bit."

"Great!" Jane felt happiness washing through her and reached for the rest of her unfinished strawberry pie. She was now celebrating after all. For just a second her brain—and stomach—asked, *are you sure about this?* But she refused to ever be in a position where she was sick of strawberry anything. She scooped up a big bite.

Just as Josie came through the swinging doors from the kitchen.

Her gaze landed on Grant who stopped at the door, looking over at her.

They both froze for a moment, and Jane felt her eyes widen watching them.

Then the kitchen door swung back and hit Josie in the butt, startling her and making her take an awkward step forward.

When she'd caught her balance, she looked up at Grant again.

"Bye, Josie," he said, a slight smile curving his lips.

"Um, bye, Grant."

"Maybe I'll see you again. Soon."

Josie nodded slowly. "Do you like sweets?"

Grant's smile grew and he nodded. "I do. Though I'm very particular."

"We can do whatever you want. Special order," Josie said.

Jane put a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle. She wasn't sure her friend even realized how flirtatious she sounded.

But Grant did. His grin grew almost wolfish. "I'll keep that in mind. For sure." Then he stepped through the door, pulling it shut behind him, the little bell above tinkling merrily.

Josie continued to stare at the door for almost ten seconds.

"You'll do whatever he wants, special order?" Jane finally demanded, allowing herself to laugh out loud.

"What?" Josie asked.

Zoe was laughing too. "Do you like sweets?" she asked, mimicking Josie's voice but batting her eyelashes. "You little hussy!" She swatted Josie playfully with the towel she held. "Willing to give Grant your sweets just because he caught you heroically in his arms not once, but twice."

Josie's cheeks were pink but she laughed. "That is *not* what I meant."

"Uh-huh."

"We run a *bakery*," Josie insisted. "He said he'd see me again. I'm sure he was talking about my cupcakes."

"I'm sure he was talking about your cupcakes too," Phil piped up from his table.

George nodded.

Jane, Josie, and Zoe all burst out laughing.

“Well, I have to say,” Josie admitted. “The name Hot Cakes is taking on a whole new meaning with these guys in charge.”

Jane couldn't agree more.

* * *

Comic-Con was four million times better than Nursing Home-Con.

This thing wasn't even called Nursing Home-Con. It wasn't even that cool. Dax left the conference room at the hotel with a thick packet of handouts, feeling like he was in way over his head. Which, of course, he was.

They'd been talking about financials and Medicare payments and the pros and cons of contracting therapy services versus hiring your own in-house staff. All. Damned. Day.

Not one mention of innovative activity programs. Not one hint of anything having to do with goats.

At least they were playing Frank in the lobby. He heard the intro to “I've Got the World on a String” overhead as he stepped into the atrium.

But he came up short as his gaze landed on the woman standing under the massive chandelier in the center of the marble floor.

She was dressed in a gray pinstriped suit that Frank would have loved. She also wore black heels and a very sharp felt fedora with a black silk band above the brim.

She also had gorgeous, long red hair. And had a gigantic red gummy bear tucked under one arm and a toilet brush in the other.

Dax wasn't sure what he loved most.

Then she started lip-syncing to the song. Into the toilet brush.

When she got to the first musical declaration of being in love and pointed the brush at him, Dax finally took a deep breath—a huge, relieved, happy-to-be-alive, madly-in-love breath.

This was good. So very, very good.

He looked around and spied a cream-and-gold upholstered armchair near a tall potted plant. He pulled the chair out, took a seat, and settled in to watch the show, propping an ankle on his other knee.

Jane's eyes widened, but she shook her head as if to say, "Of course."

And she kept lip-syncing.

She even had a little choreography. A few steps that looked like maybe she'd picked them up from Kelsey.

By the time she got to the last line of the song she was right in front of him, and she'd gone down on one knee and had the huge gummy bear extended as an offering.

He'd never been happier in his life.

He hadn't realized they'd attracted a crowd until the people gathered in the lobby started to applaud.

Jane was blushing hard. Public spectacles, grand gestures, calling attention to herself wasn't her style at all. But her gaze was locked on his.

"I wanted a life-sized gummy bear, but this was the biggest Grant could round up on short notice," she said. "It's strawberry though."

He smiled at that. "It better be."

"And if that's not enough, then this fedora is another of Frank's. It's... I don't remember. But Grant has the paperwork. It's official."

He wanted her so badly. God, this woman was everything. She was generous and funny and down to earth and loving and

real and everything he'd never known he needed.

"If it's not enough for what?" he asked. "Jesus, I'm so happy to see you. Candy and lip-syncing is the whipped cream and sprinkles on top of this freaking gorgeous, sweet pie that I don't even think I deserve."

"It's to say I'm sorry for doubting you," she said.

He stood swiftly, pulling her to her feet. "You had every reason to doubt me. I have no idea what I'm doing, Jane."

She shook her head. "That shouldn't matter. You've given me no reason to doubt you. You care about the things you do and the people you do them for. You find a way to get things done, and you have a whole team of people who will pull together to help you. I never should have thought for a second that this would be any different."

"This is your dad. And I can't fix it. It's serious."

"But you can make it better. You always make things better. Just being there and listening. And taking us out. And taking us to see llamas. And making sure we always eat dessert."

"Strawberry pie might not always be enough," he said, cupping her face.

"No. It won't be. But *you* being there will be. I love you, Dax."

"I love you too, so damned much." He pulled her in and kissed her. Not with heat, but with all the love and hope he felt because of her and that he wanted her to have because of him.

She wrapped one arm around him. The one with the toilet brush. The other still hugged the gummy bear.

Their crowd applauded again.

He pulled back after several long, sweet moments and grinned down at her. "I'm so happy you're here."

"Me too. I'll bet the robes and room service here are awesome."

"You took time off work?" he asked.

“I did. The three days while you’re here.”

“Wow. Now I *know* you love me,” he said with a grin.

She nodded. “I do. So much.”

“And now you can go to these Medicare seminars with me.”

She laughed and shook her head, pulling back. “No way. This is *your* idea. I just make snack cakes. Llamas are all you.”

She did so much more than make snack cakes. But he just sighed. “They’re alpacas.”

“Right. Whatever. Do you have a suite?” She started toward the elevators.

He was hot on her heels. Jane was here. She loved him. They were going to make this work.

“I do.” He crowded her up against the wall of the elevator as soon as the doors swished shut.

“Wonderful.” She kissed him. “The strawberry pie should already be up in the room.”

He was instantly hot and hard. “I’m going to have to tip the housekeeping staff extra, aren’t I? We’re going to make a big mess.”

She nodded with a grin. “I certainly hope so.”

“And with all that in mind,” he said, his eyes drifting up to the hat on her head. “On a scale from zero to ten, how weird would it be to ask you to wear this in bed?”

She lifted a brow. “A seven. But it would only be a four if *you* wore it in bed.”

He laughed. “I love that you know me.”

“I do.” She kissed him quickly on the mouth. “And I’m telling you right now... this gummy bear isn’t even allowed in the bedroom, so don’t ask.”

* * *

Thank you so much for reading *Forking Around*! I hope you loved Jane and Dax's story!

Next up is Josie and Grant's story in

[Making Whoopie!](#)

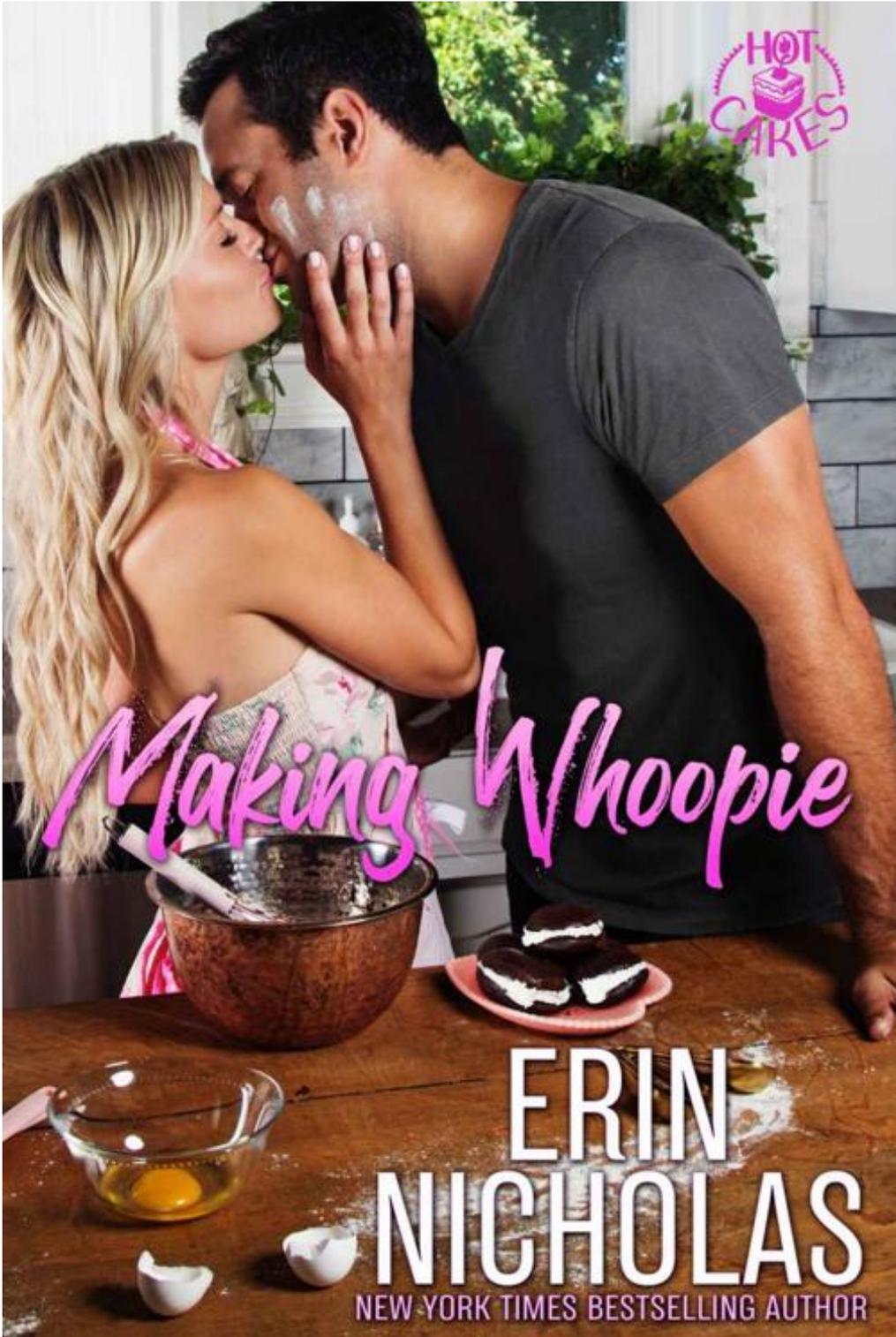
He's allergic to spontaneity. So how did he end up *married* to the small-town baker he had a one-night stand with? Well, at least it's just temporary. And as long as it lasts it's going to be very sweet...



Making Whoopie

ERIN
NICHOLAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



About Making Whoopie

This marriage of convenience is about to get sticky.

Getting hitched for the health insurance is not Jocelyn Asher's idea of romance.

But the hospital quote has really frosted her cookies, and suddenly, "I'm rich. We should just get married," sounds a whole lot more swoony.

Especially when the man proposing is this gorgeous. And takes her to parties featuring champagne and petit fours. She's a sucker for anything with bubbles or icing. And just like that she finds herself married to a near stranger.

Grant Lorre is usually allergic to spontaneity.

So why did he ask the beautiful small-town baker he had a one-night stand with to marry him? Somehow watching her lick batter off a whisk—not a euphemism—made a wedding and a little fraud seem like a sweet idea.

They'll just play house and make some whoopie—pies, of course—for a few months and then move on with their separate lives. Until then, bring on the cream filling. And that is a euphemism.

But as things heat up even outside of the kitchen, they quickly realize there's no recipe to follow when it comes to love.

Chapter One



No one fell in love over cheesy potatoes.

That was ridiculous. There was nothing sexy about cheesy potatoes. Or potatoes without cheese, for that matter.

But lust? Well, that was a possibility. Apparently.

Because watching Grant Lorre eat cheesy potatoes across her best friend's mother's dining room table was making Jocelyn Asher hot.

Of course, Maggie McCaffery's cheesy potatoes were award-winning. Seriously. She'd taken home the purple ribbon four times from the Dubuque County Fair and twice from the Iowa State Fair. And Grant seemed to agree that they were delicious. He'd made a sexy groaning sound when he'd first taken a bite, and Josie had been mesmerized as his lips closed around the tines of his fork. Never mind how her heart rate had picked up when he'd turned the fork and *licked* it.

She was a mess. Purple ribbon or not, Josie was pretty sure that getting worked up over watching a man eat potatoes meant she was hard up.

She took a long drink of iced tea and tried to remember the last time she'd had sex. If she wasn't forgetting anyone—and how sad would *that* be—the last time had been with Ben Davis. After Kara Davis's, now Tibbin's, wedding.

Last week Kara had been into Buttered Up, the bakery where Josie worked with her best friend Zoe, to order a miniature version of her wedding cake to celebrate their first anniversary.

Josie sighed. That had to explain the sexy potato thing going on across the table. It had to.

But then Grant laughed at something Aiden, his best friend and Zoe's fiancé—yes, it was one big happy group at this table—said, and Josie felt her neglected lady parts clench. Yeah, it wasn't the potatoes.

Thankfully.

Kind of.

As weird as getting turned on by potatoes might be, it *might* have been preferable to being turned on by the man who had been coming into the bakery nearly every morning for the past two weeks, but hadn't so much as asked her to have a cup of coffee with him.

He'd asked her if the blueberries in the muffins were locally sourced. He'd asked her if they had any gluten-free cinnamon scones. He'd asked her for a lemon slice for his cup of hot water. But that was pretty much the extent of the things he'd asked her over the course of the time they'd known each other.

Oh, and he'd caught her when she'd fallen. Twice.

The first time she'd been up on the stool reaching for a bag of flour. Her shoulder pain, which was becoming more and more of an issue, had jabbed her hard, and she'd dropped the flour and slipped off the stool.

But Grant had been there. He'd caught her. In his arms. Very gallantly.

The second time, she'd been up on a ladder, dusting the bakery's shelves, and he'd startled her. She'd twisted, and her foot had slipped off the rung—or something. She wasn't totally clear on what had happened because she'd been all about Grant then too—and he'd, again, swept her up before she'd hit the floor. Like a freaking knight in shining armor.

But both times he'd simply set her on her feet and gone on with his day.

She, on the other hand, was now getting hot and bothered by side dishes.

Honestly, he'd probably even make green bean casserole sexy and that should truly be impossible.

Then he'd started coming into the bakery every day. He placed his order with Zoe some of the time. When he did order from Josie that was *all* he did. It wasn't like they'd even been flirting. But every freaking time he came through that door, she felt herself get a little happier.

It was like when five-year-old Sammie had come in that afternoon and seen the unicorn cupcakes Josie had made. The little girl had *lit up*. Everything about her had gotten brighter.

Josie felt for Grant the way Sammie felt for unicorn cupcakes. For sure.

“Are you all right, honey?”

Josie pulled her gaze away from Grant's fork—which was lying innocuously next to his plate—to look up at Maggie. “Oh yes. I'm fine.” She gave the other woman a mostly sincere smile. Maggie was lovely and Josie, and Jane, Zoe's other closest friend, had dinner with the McCafferys almost once a week.

At least, it used to be that way. Before Aiden had moved back to Appleby and he and Zoe had fallen in love and he'd become a regular at the table. And before Jane had fallen in love with Aiden's friend Dax, and he'd taken up the third seat on Maggie's right.

Not that Josie didn't love Aiden and Dax too. But things around this table had changed, and she'd been feeling like a fifth wheel for the last couple of weeks. Henry, Zoe's little brother, had told her she could be his date. He was cute, smart, and funny. But he was also only eleven so she was still, for all intents and purposes, the single girl at the table.

“You've barely touched your food,” Maggie said with a worried little frown. “Are you sure?”

It was very unusual for anyone to leave food at Maggie McCaffery's table, it was true. And it wasn't because Josie

didn't love Maggie's pork chops, and yes, cheesy potatoes. She'd just been distracted throughout the meal. Which was entirely Grant's fault. Which made no sense.

He was a suit-wearing, rich city boy who worked in an office, loved spreadsheets, drank hot water with lemon and worried about gluten, and who was, apparently, not attracted to her.

She didn't need him. There were dozens of guys in Appleby—okay, *a dozen*, plus or minus—who were interested in her. Guys who happily ate gluten—a good thing for a guy dating a *baker*. Guys who wore good old blue jeans and worked with their hands and appreciated every dollar they earned and freaking drank *coffee*, the hot beverage God intended to be paired with baked goods. Gluten-free or not.

“I'm... feeling a little off,” Josie said, deciding to be as honest as she could. She wasn't sick. She was annoyed. But that was “off” for her. She was bubbly and happy and optimistic, and much to her chagrin, sometimes, romantic.

A guy who caught her from falling off a ladder, who literally had swept her up and saved her, was supposed to at least want to take her on a date.

Especially if he was her age, handsome, and looked amazing in a suit.

She'd always thought she was a blue-jeans-and-flannels girl. Grant Lorre was making her think she'd been wrong about that. Very, very wrong.

Even tonight he was wearing a button-down shirt. He didn't have a tie or jacket on, but he'd paired the shirt with jeans, and she would very likely always find flannel shirts lacking now. Which was going to be a problem. Small-town Iowa guys liked their flannel.

“Oh, honey.” Maggie put her hand on Josie's forehead in a very maternal way, and Josie had to fight a smile. “Do you need some ibuprofen? Or how about lemon cake?”

That made the smile even harder to hide. The McCaffery family absolutely felt that lemon cake—or really any cake—

was as medicinal as *actual* medicine. And Josie had really never had reason to doubt that belief, as a matter of fact.

“No, I think maybe I just need to head to bed early tonight.”

That wouldn't *hurt*, and just getting away from Grant's sudden presence in her social circle and his cheesy-potato sexiness was probably all the remedy she really needed. She hadn't been expecting him to be here tonight. That was probably what was throwing her off.

She didn't know the guy. She saw him for, like, three minutes each morning. Sure, she'd felt his rock-hard chest and his big biceps and had slid along his long, firm body as he'd caught, held, and then lowered her to the floor. Twice. But she was probably making it all better in her memories than it really was. Like how people remembered movies as being better than they really were. Or high school.

She just needed to get her mind around the fact that he was, evidently, sticking around Appleby. So she'd be seeing more of him. Even though he was from Chicago. And lived in Chicago. And worked in Chicago. And had come to her tiny hometown only because his best friends had decided they were all going to buy a snack cake factory, and Grant, from what she'd overheard from Aiden and Dax, was the money guy and kept everyone else in line when it came to business and investments.

So he was here babysitting his friends. Helping them get things going with their new venture. Making sure no one blew through several million dollars without any supervision.

Josie internally rolled her eyes. It was weird to her that Aiden and Cam—Zoe's older brother—were millionaires. They'd met Dax and Ollie and Grant in college and had accidentally invented the fastest-growing online gaming phenomenon of the decade. So they were *accidental* millionaires. She supposed it was good they had someone like Grant around. Twentysomething guys fresh out of college with unlimited disposable incomes and no accountability could definitely get into some trouble.

Not that she knew anything about disposable income. She'd never had it and doubted she ever would.

Anyway, Grant was still here. Possibly because Aiden and Dax and the others still needed overseeing. But how long was that going to go on? Aiden and Cam were almost thirty. Dax and Ollie were twenty-eight or -nine. Did they really need Grant looking over their shoulders indefinitely?

And if so, did he have to do it with Buttered Up muffins and scones in hand? Couldn't he just go straight to the office in the morning? Oliver seemed to manage. He was the only one of the five partners who she'd only met a couple of times. Ollie didn't make regular stops at Buttered Up. He survived.

Then again, his assistant, Piper, did come in regularly and took treats back for Ollie, so there was that. But surely Piper could get Grant's scones too.

Now, though, Grant was showing up at Maggie's for dinner too. That was way worse than the few minutes in the bakery. He'd been charming and sophisticated and polite and intelligent tonight. She assumed. She'd kind of tuned out a lot of the particulars of the conversation, but he'd smiled and laughed and made others smile and complimented Maggie, and in general, seemed like a really nice guy.

Great.

Hot and nice.

She really needed him to have a flaw. Or four.

No, just one. She could cling to one.

Like the hot-water-with-lemon thing. What was that? That wasn't a real drink. At least not in the morning before starting the workday.

Yeah, that was a flaw. She could work with that.

That was good because she didn't want to start avoiding Maggie's dinners altogether, and she was not going to keep leaving early and missing dessert. Buttered Up bakery had been in the McCaffery family for three generations. These people knew how to bake. Plus, she really did love the

camaraderie and fun of the dinners at the McCaffery house. Even with the lovey-dovey new couples who made her own romantic heart yearn for what they had.

Yes, she yearned. For love. She was the romantic of their group. Zoe had always been too picky to really fall in love, and Jane had been too busy to even entertain the idea of letting a guy into her life full time. Josie, on the other hand, had been wanting it to happen for... ever.

And now she'd had not one, but two, incredibly romantic moments with a guy who only wanted lemon slices—for hot water, for heaven's sake—from her.

“Well, okay, honey,” Maggie said, still looking worried. “I could get you some hot water with lemon and honey.”

“No!” Okay, that was a definite overreaction. Hot water with lemon was not the problem here. Josie smiled. “No, I'm okay. I'm just going to head out.”

“All right. But text me tomorrow and tell me how you are.”

Maggie leaned over and kissed the top of Josie's head. Josie did feel cared for with the gesture. Maggie had been like a second mom to her all her life. She and Zoe had been best friends since first grade. Josie's own mom and dad lived about fourteen blocks from here, but she loved Maggie and Steve dearly.

“Okay,” she promised Maggie. Her smile was much less forced this time.

As Maggie moved away, Josie's gaze drifted to her best friend, sitting a few seats down.

Zoe was looking at her with an eyebrow up. Yeah, Zoe wasn't falling for it. They worked together long hours every single day. Zoe had known Josie most of her life. They'd shared all their secrets. Zoe knew that Josie was fine. At least physically. And she was going to want to know what was going on.

So far, it had gone mostly unnoticed that Josie wasn't talking much or paying attention to the conversation. That was

one positive about having Dax Marshall around. He could talk to anyone about anything and made it a personal mission to have everyone laughing and enjoying themselves no matter the occasion. She swore that he could make a root canal fun. But she should have been doing a better job eating. A too-full plate would not go unnoticed at Maggie's table.

"You're sick?" Jane asked, pulling Josie's attention to her other best friend as Maggie and Steve carried dishes out of the dining room. "I saw you eat the last piece of carrot cake in three bites and chug a cup of coffee just before we came over here."

Josie scowled at her. "Shh." She did *not* want Maggie to overhear that.

"What's going on?" Jane asked. Though she did lower her voice.

"Nothing. I'm just... full."

That would make sense. She had just eaten cake and coffee before coming over, and that should definitely mean she was full. Of course, her body didn't work that way. She had a crazy-fast metabolism, which sounded like a blessing, and most of her girlfriends assured her that it was, but was actually a pain in the ass. She was hungry all the time.

Still, it did help since her career was making cakes—and pies and cookies and everything in between—and she really liked sweets. Being around sugar all day made it difficult to resist, and the stuff she and Zoe did with sugar was amazing, if she did say so herself.

"You're just full," Zoe said in a very yeah-right tone. "What's really going on?"

"I'm just in a weird mood." Josie flipped her hand as if to wave it all away as no big deal.

She really needed them to drop it. At least as long as Grant was around. She had no qualms telling her girlfriends that she was all mixed up about Grant. She was pretty sure they suspected it anyway. But no way was she admitting it to him. Or his friends.

She had been stoically avoiding looking at him since she realized she was fantasizing about him and root vegetables, but now she sneaked a glance.

Surprise and heat arrowed through her when she found his eyes on her.

He was watching her as if he knew exactly what was going on. Which was crazy. How could he know? They hadn't even talked about the weather. How would he know that she was borderline obsessed with him?

She frowned. Maybe this happened a lot. Maybe women became obsessed with him all the time. The dark good looks, the air of indifference, the money, the suits, the smooth sophistication. Sure, those could do it. Some women might even overlook the hot-water-and-lemon thing.

Dark good looks made some things easier to overlook for sure.

“So I’m just going to go,” Josie said, scooting her chair back and standing.

It seemed imperative, suddenly, that she get out of here.

“You really think you’re just going to get away with acting weird and leaving?” Zoe asked. “Really?”

Josie gripped the back of her chair and pressed her lips together. She looked from Zoe to Jane. Then to Grant. She lingered there. Then looked at Zoe again. Josie shook her head. “No, I know you’re not going to let it go, but for now, it would be great if you’d just... give me some space.”

Zoe’s eyebrows went up again, but her look didn’t say you’re-full-of-shit. She looked concerned. “Just tell me you really are okay. Like mostly, generally, for the most part, okay.”

“I am,” Josie promised. “It’s just... weird. You’re going to think it’s super weird when I tell you, I promise.”

“You’re going to tell me too,” Jane interjected. “For sure.”

Josie nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Will we need wine?” Jane asked.

“Spiked lemonade,” Josie said. “Lots of spiked lemonade.”

“Got it,” Jane said.

For the three of them “spiked lemonade” generally meant there was a family issue or a guy issue they needed to talk about. Otherwise they stuck with the mellow, happy effects of wine. Spiked lemonade was for the serious stuff that needed numbing or the tearing down of inhibitions or both.

“Night, everyone,” Josie said, looking around the table. She saved Grant for last.

She didn’t know him. He wasn’t a friend or a member of her friends-that-were-family family. He was a friend of a friend—two of them actually—so that meant that he had potential to be a part of that family though. Eventually.

And she was really going to have to figure out how to not have dirty thoughts about him when they were doing the simple family stuff with the rest of these nice people. Especially if, God forbid, he ever brought a date.

She shuddered. Then rolled her eyes at herself. She was jealous of a possible future date of the guy who wasn’t her type and who didn’t even like her cupcakes?

Everyone liked her cupcakes.

She couldn’t date a guy who didn’t like her cupcakes.

That would be like a... painter who dated a guy who didn’t love art. Or woman running a dog rescue who dated a guy who hated dogs.

No, actually, no one should date someone who hated dogs. That was just wrong on every level.

Still, *she* couldn’t date a guy who didn’t swoon over her cupcakes. Period.

Grant Lorre only bought muffins and scones. Those were Zoe’s specialties. Everything in the bakery was made from Zoe’s family’s recipes, of course. But Zoe wasn’t as... culinarily gifted... as Josie was. It wasn’t an insult to her

friend. It was just a fact. Like saying Zoe had more freckles or Josie had bigger boobs. Josie was just better in the kitchen. So Zoe stuck to the basics. Muffins, cookies, scones. Zoe could decorate the basic cookies and cupcakes, of course. She'd been doing it since she was old enough to hold a whisk. But if anyone needed something special—a cake that looked like a dinosaur or cupcakes that looked like cats—that was Josie's expertise.

She always did a few cute little things for the bakery case to go alongside the basic vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry with the swirled icing. And she wouldn't lie, she loved the fact that her stuff usually sold out first.

But not to Grant Lorre.

Grant stuck with the basics.

He had no idea how moist and sweet her cupcakes really were.

And yeah, she meant that to sound a little dirty. Even if it was only in her head.

She was losing it.

“Night, Jose,” everyone echoed in multiple variations as she started for the front door. She couldn't face Maggie again. Maggie would either get even more worried... or she'd figure out Josie was lying about not feeling well.

She was feeling fine. Horny. But fine.

She really didn't want to explain that to the group at dinner.

“I'm going to head out too.”

Josie froze in the doorway between the dining room and foyer as Grant spoke. She slowly turned back.

Grant was getting to his feet. He laid his napkin by his plate and smoothed a hand over the front of his shirt as he stepped around his chair.

“No dessert?” Dax asked. Dax Marshall never skipped dessert.

“Nah. I have some stuff I need to do yet tonight,” Grant said.

“Something more important than lemon cake?” Dax said, clearly not believing it.

“Definitely,” Grant answered.

Then he glanced at Josie.

Chapter Two



Her heart stopped.

Just for a second. Maybe two. But it actually happened. And she realized that, for some reason, Grant Lorre was following her out of the house on purpose.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow at the office,” Grant said to Aiden. “And you... sometime, I assume?” he asked Dax.

Dax grinned. “I’ll stop by. I know you miss me when I’m not there.”

“Yep. That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Dax had been a partner at Hot Cakes, the snack cake company that Aiden and Grant, along with their other partners, had taken over. But Dax had given up his shares so that he could date Jane. Since she worked for the company, she’d refused to go out with him while he was her boss.

Dax giving up the potential for millions of dollars of profit to be with Jane was the most romantic thing that Josie had ever heard, and she sighed a little every time she thought of it.

He now owned the nursing home where Jane’s dad lived and was working to remodel it and introduce several new, innovative eldercare programs. Honestly, that was also all because he’d fallen in love with Jane, and Josie knew that any guy who came along for *her* now was going to be measured by the Dax Marshall standard.

She was so screwed. Who was going to be able to compete with all of that?

And it wasn't even the money. Dax definitely had enough of that to throw at any and all of Jane's problems. Whether or not she would *let* him do that was another issue, but still, money was no object. But Josie wasn't expecting to meet a guy whose wallet could measure up to Dax's. It was his heart that she admired. His willingness to do whatever it took to make sure Jane—and the people she loved—were safe and happy.

But while money made that easier, it wasn't the primary factor. Her father and grandfather were two of the most romantic, caring, generous men she knew. And neither of them had ever had more than a couple thousand bucks in the bank at one time. They'd both lived paycheck to paycheck—her dad still did—but they still provided a safe, happy, loving home and treated their wives like queens.

Just queens without jewels or gold or servants.

That was what Josie wanted. Just to be loved with someone's whole heart. Even if all they had to give in the romance department was a Netflix subscription and microwave popcorn every weekend. That would matter as much as someone else giving her diamonds and trips to Paris.

"You already made it through that month's supply of gummy bears I sent you and you need some more?" Dax asked Grant with a grin.

Grant lifted a brow.

"He donated them to the Candy Apple," Aiden said, referring to the candy and ice cream shop in town. "They're making some special sundae with gummy bears on top. What's it called again?" He directed the question at Grant. Aiden wore a grin that said he knew the answer, and he was enjoying this immensely.

Dax turned interested eyes on the more serious of his two friends. "Yes, what's it called, Grant?"

Grant shook his head. "I don't remember."

"The Goopy Gummy Grant," Henry piped up.

Everyone looked at him. The little boy had been so quiet Josie had almost forgotten he was there. Okay, she'd probably almost forgotten because she'd been too distracted by Grant tonight to remember much of anything. Like to keep her heart beating steadily, for instance.

"No they're not!" Dax crowed, clearly delighted.

"Seriously," Henry said. "It's strawberry ice cream and marshmallow fluff with gummy bears and whipped cream and sprinkles. They sell it for twenty-five percent off the price of the other sundaes because the gummy bears are free because of Grant."

Dax's mouth was hanging open in obvious glee when he looked back to Grant. "I. Love. Everything. About. That."

"That was *not* what was supposed to happen," Grant said. "I went back in and asked them to not call it that but they insisted."

"You mean Betty insisted," Aiden said. "No one says no to Betty."

It was true. Betty Andrews was the owner of the Candy Apple and was the sweetest woman on the planet. She had a way of making the people around her feel like they had brought such joy and sunshine into her life just by *being* there, and no one ever had the heart to say or do anything that might disappoint her.

Josie found herself fighting a smile as she watched Grant. He was clearly uncomfortable with being associated with something *gooey* and *gummy*.

And now she wanted to cover him in marshmallow fluff.

Which was a vast improvement over cheesy potatoes, so there was that.

"You gave Grant a month's supply of gummy bears?" Zoe asked, going back to the previous point. "Question one, how many is that? And question two, *why*?"

"Well, assuming that a guy would need about four to five ounces of gummy bears a day," Dax said seriously. "Rounding

up, of course, to be safe, that comes out to about nine and a half pounds of gummy bears for a month.”

Zoe’s eyes widened. “Nine and a half *pounds*?”

“Roughly,” Dax said with a nod.

Aiden was laughing out loud now.

“And to answer your second question,” Dax said, glancing at Grant, “because Grant needs a little sweetness in his life, and if I’m not there for him every day, that is going to be sorely lacking.”

Zoe laughed and Grant rolled his eyes. But his expression was one of resigned affection.

That did something funny to Josie’s stomach.

It was one thing to see him every morning just looking good—confident and sophisticated and powerful in his suit and tie. It was something else to see him charming and friendly with Zoe’s parents and then goofing around with his friends. Not that Grant was goofing around. There was definitely something about him that made Josie certain Grant Lorre didn’t goof. But the way he rolled with the punches from Dax and Aiden—and yes, the way it was clear he cared about his friends, even if he and Dax were night and day in personality—made her like him.

Dammit. First romanticizing the way he’d caught her in his arms, then lusting after him, and now liking him *too*? Great. That wasn’t the way to get over a crush.

“I don’t know,” Zoe said, looking from Dax to Grant to Josie. “Grant’s been coming into the bakery really regularly. Maybe he’s found another way of getting a little *sweetness* in his day.”

“Has he now?” Dax asked, arching a brow at Grant.

“I need to get going,” Grant said. He started for the front door.

Which meant he started in Josie’s direction. For a minute there she’d become a simple observer of the scene playing out in front of her. But she was still standing here, and he was now

coming toward her, and pretty soon he was going to be right in front of her and...

She suddenly straightened, her heart pounding as he drew near.

“I’ll walk you out.”

Her eyes widened at his words. It wasn’t really a question. Or even an offer. It sounded a lot like a command.

“I’m... fine.”

He was only a few inches away—the doorway was only so wide after all—and he smelled really good, and he was really tall next to her, and yeah, she remembered that chest and those arms really well and...

“We’re going in the same direction,” he pointed out.

Right. They were both walking out to their cars, which were parked in front of the McCafferys’ house. It didn’t really matter if she was fine. Or not. Him walking out with her was more of a just-the-way-it-was-going-to-happen than him taking care of her.

That was a very weird thought to go flitting through her mind just then.

He didn’t really come across as the warm-and-fuzzy-nurturer type. She also didn’t need anyone taking care of her, thank you very much.

Still...

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Sure of the marshmallow-fluff-all-over-his-body thing? Or the curl-up-in-his-lap thing? Or the big-hands-rubbing-her-feet thing? Because yes. To all of that.

“About?” she asked.

“Being fine?”

She was kind of staring at him. And not moving. And not turning and walking toward the front door of the house the way she should be.

“Oh yes. Mostly,” she said.

He didn't seem convinced. But he didn't press. He just gestured toward the door.

She gave the dining room—which was surprisingly quiet at the moment—a little wave, carefully not making eye contact with anyone. Zoe and Jane were no doubt watching her with what-the-hell expressions. Then she pivoted and made her feet carry her toward Maggie's front door.

Grant reached around her to open the door for her, emphasizing that he smelled good and that he was a gentleman, in spite of barely speaking to her after catching her in midair—twice.

She stepped out onto the porch and sucked in a deep breath, hoping that would help. But Grant stepped out behind her and shut the door. Which meant they were now alone. In the almost-dark of the early summer night. And that didn't really help with her lust-and-like-and-why-isn't-he-attracted-to-me daze at all.

The disappointment of that last part was the sharpest. That surprised her. It wasn't as if every man she met fell at her feet. It wasn't as if every man *she* was attracted to was automatically attracted to her. It just didn't work that way. But she was far more disheartened by Grant Lorre's lack of interest than she had been in a long time. Okay, ever.

Mostly, Josie believed that when the time was right, the right guy would come along, and she'd get her happily ever after. That had been validated even further by her two best friends finding true love when they'd been least expecting it. Falling in love wasn't something you could put in your planner.

So when things didn't work out with a guy she liked or even one she'd gone out with a few times, she didn't get overly upset about it.

But Grant Lorre was upsetting her.

It was crazy.

She stopped at her car, debating what to say to him. Just a simple good night seemed most appropriate. She turned to speak and was startled to find him right behind her. Very close. Closer than two casual acquaintances should probably stand in the dark.

Close enough it should have seemed creepy.

It didn't. At all.

She wanted to take the little step that would bring her right up against him and press her nose to his chest and take a big, deep breathe. She would bet the combination of his cologne and laundry detergent would make her stomach flip a lot like it had when he'd reacted to the Goody Gummy Grant.

"It's not really my business, I realize," he said.

Was it the dim evening light making his voice sound huskier?

"But I don't really think you are okay. Is there anything I can do?"

Josie peered up at him. He was tall. Well, she was short. So he was definitely tall next to her, but he was just tall too. He had to be about six-three or so.

"I'm..." She really did almost say fine. But at the last minute she said, "Stupid."

Clearly that wasn't the answer he'd been expecting. "Stupid?"

She blew out a breath. "Yeah. But it's not really anything for you to worry about. It's not fatal or anything."

"Is it chronic?" he asked.

And the corner of his mouth curled.

And she was never getting over this crush now.

She nodded. "I think so. At least, very long lasting."

"How long?"

"How long are you going to be in town?"

Oops. That she had *definitely* not meant to say.

He frowned. “That’s a good question. But I’m not sure how it relates to your stupidity problem.”

She sighed. “I bet if you think about it you could come up with a guess.”

He did think about it. Seemingly. Then he took a small step forward. “I have something to do with your stupidity?”

Oh what the hell? He was a friend of a friend, but he didn’t live here. He didn’t know her. Her friends were going to find out soon enough—from her—that she had a thing for this guy. They were hopefully going to help her drink it away. So what would it matter if she confessed?

“You have everything to do with it.”

His eyebrows rose. “How?”

“Well, it seems that I have a little thing for you, and it was fine when you had only saved my neck. But then you started coming to the bakery and I saw you every day. But you didn’t even really want to talk to me. You definitely didn’t want to flirt. Which I didn’t love, but I could get over after you walked out with your scones and hot water.”

Why did she mention the hot water? She wasn’t sure. Maybe just because it was definitely a sign her fascination with him was crazy.

“But now you’re coming to dinner here. At this place I love with these people I love. And you’re being charming and... long suffering, which I find funny and endearing... and it just makes it harder to not be disappointed that my crush on you isn’t reciprocal.”

She took a deep breath.

“But,” she added, before he had a chance to respond, “it’s fine. I’m a grown-up, and while getting worked up over cheesy potatoes is annoying, I can deal with it.”

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then asked, “Cheesy potatoes?”

She nodded. He had to already think she was a little cuckoo, so what could it hurt to go all in here? “I found it sexy

how you ate the cheesy potatoes.”

Yeah, that was definitely a look of surprise on his face.

“So anyway,” she concluded, “I’m not exactly *fine*, but I’m going to survive. Especially if you could just, you know, go back to Chicago. But until then, it will all be okay.”

There, that hadn’t been so bad. She turned and started to open her door.

“Jocelyn.”

But his deep voice—and her full name—stopped her.

He knew her full name?

She turned back. And swallowed hard. There was no way she could have labeled the look on his face, but it was... not uninterested.

“Yes?”

“You have a crush on me?”

She felt her cheeks heat a little, but she rolled her eyes. Come on. He had to hear her say it twice? Really? “Yes.”

“And you think that it’s not reciprocal.”

“Right.”

“And that’s why you’ve been acting strange tonight? Because you’ve been uncomfortable around me because you think you have unrequited feelings?”

She blew out a breath. “Is this the serious-businessman thing? Like how much you love spreadsheets and stuff? You have to go over every single point and make everything really black and white?”

His lips curled again. “Probably. Though it might also be that I want to be very sure about your feelings right now.”

“Why is that?”

“Just tell me all of that is true.”

She threw her arms wide. “Okay, fine, yes, Grant. You got it all right. That’s all true.”

“Very good to know.” Then he reached up, cupped the back of her head, stepped her back until she was against her car, and kissed her.

Oooo-kay.

So maybe indifferent wasn’t quite the right word to use.

Grant did *not* kiss her as if he was indifferent to her. He kissed her as if he’d been thinking about it as long as she had. And had been thinking about covering her in cheesy potatoes.

Then he gave a little groan, tipped his head, pressed even closer, deepened the kiss, and all she could think was *no, marshmallow fluff. For sure.*

Josie felt every stroke of his tongue in her lower belly and between her legs. She was immediately up on tiptoe and gripping his shoulders, arching closer.

They kissed for long minutes before Grant finally lifted his head. They were both breathing hard and just stared at each other for several seconds.

Josie licked her lips. He let her go, and she lowered back flat on her feet.

“Very reciprocal,” he finally said.

“The first day you just walked out of the bakery,” she said. That was the part that had been bugging her the most.

He nodded. “I was afraid you were going to make me want to stay in town.”

Oh. That was definitely not what she’d expected him to say. And she was equally surprised by how much she liked that answer. “But you *are* still in town.”

“I guess I didn’t get out of the bakery fast enough.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re still in town because of me?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t even hesitate. He didn’t blunt the answer. He didn’t even blink.

He was a very straightforward guy. She was used to the charming, flirtatious guys she'd grown up with.

“So why haven't you asked me out?”

“You don't seem like the casual dating type of girl.”

She thought about that. Was it casual dating when you literally fell into the guy's arms and you locked eyes and you both became immediately smitten? But he was right. She nodded. “I'm not really.”

“Exactly.”

She should let it go. If he just wanted to casually date and she wasn't the type for that, then she should let this go.

And she might have, if he hadn't kissed her.

“Did you really have something else to do that made you leave before dessert?” she asked.

“Yes. I needed to walk you out and make sure you were okay.”

That clinched it. “Well, I need to go home and bake.”

He seemed confused.

“I bake on the side. For people who have last-minute work potlucks or kids' school parties they don't have time to bake for themselves. It's purely to help people out. Stuff the bakery doesn't do,” she added quickly. “You can't tell Zoe.” She felt a flicker of guilt. That was familiar, however. She always felt a little guilty when she baked behind her best friend—and boss's—back. Well, when she did it for money, anyway.

“My lips are sealed.”

His lips. Yeah, she really liked his lips.

“So I was thinking... if you just stopped by my house tonight and sampled a few things for me then that's not really a date, right?”

Hey, she couldn't be held responsible if he took “sampled a few things” as innuendo.

His eyes flickered first with understanding, then heat. “No, I wouldn’t call that a date.”

“Four Fifteen Elm Street,” she said. “The kitchen door will be unlocked.”

“I just have one more question,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Can you be late for work tomorrow morning?”

Heat flashed through her. His meaning was clear. Her reaction to it was as well.

“Yes,” she told him simply.

Hell, she could play up the I’m-not-really-feeling-well thing in the morning too if necessary.

And after that kiss, it was going to be necessary.

“Great. I’m definitely in the mood for something sweet.”

She had never had a one-night stand. She’d never slept with someone she hadn’t known for at least a year. Actually, if she thought about it, she probably hadn’t slept with anyone she hadn’t known for three years or more.

But Grant was Aiden and Dax’s friend and partner. Aiden Anderson, her best friend’s fiancé, had known and worked with and trusted this man for nine years.

“I’ll see you there,” she told him. Then she got into her car and headed for home, her heart pounding, her breathing uneven, and her panties much warmer than even the early summer night should account for.

She had nothing to worry about with inviting Grant over to her house for... whatever.

Except that she was ninety percent sure she didn’t have any marshmallow fluff at home.

That was really unfortunate.

Chapter Three



This was really one of the worst ideas he'd had in a long time.

Grant acknowledged that even as he followed Jocelyn Asher home.

He didn't have bad ideas very often. In fact, it was pretty typical that he was saving others from *their* bad ideas.

But even the taillights on Jocelyn's bright blue Ford Fiesta were tempting him. He wanted to follow her home. He wanted to back her up against the wall of her—no doubt—bright, cute, sweet kitchen. And kiss the hell out of her.

He had an inkling of what the draw was here.

There was no question Jocelyn was gorgeous. She had long, wavy blond hair that fell nearly to the curve of her lower back. She had big blue eyes. She had a tiny body with sweet curves and a bright, quick smile. She had a tinkling laugh.

Yes, tinkling. Like bells or wind chimes or something. Something bright and cheery and impossible to hear without it making you feel happier.

She was clearly a bubbly, sweet, happy, sunny person.

Not his type at all.

Yet he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her since she'd fallen—literally—into his arms the first time he'd set foot in the bakery where she worked.

It was very likely that fall—and the one that had happened the second time he'd ever seen her, also at Buttered Up—was

messing with his subconscious.

He had a hero complex. He saved damsels in distress. Not in the old-fashioned, slaying-dragons way. Not in the I'll-physically-protect-you way. Not in the putting-himself-in-danger or sacrificing-for-them way. In fact, damsels kind of annoyed him.

That sounded cold even to his own ears. But he was determined to make sure that the women in his life were strong and confident and knowledgeable and never dependent on anyone else for survival or happiness.

He didn't teach self-defense classes or anything, though he was a big supporter and advocate of those. He wasn't a psychologist or a counselor. Though, again, he was a big fan of those. He was a financial coach, who worked almost exclusively with single moms and widows. He taught women how to make, invest, and spend their money so that they were financially independent.

He didn't feel worried or protective of his clients. He felt motivated. Energized by the opportunity to help. And often frustrated. With the women who thought they were "dumb about money" or "not good at math" and couldn't handle their finances. And the men who liked having women depend on them. He also got exasperated with the women who attended his seminars and then hit on him. It was like they weren't listening at all. He wanted them to leave his seminars understanding that they didn't need a man.

He'd also recently been very uncomfortable with one of his attendees. His most recent seminar had been Michelle's third time participating, and she'd made it very clear afterward that she was only there because of him.

Finding a woman naked in his bed in his hotel room had been a shock. That was the kind of thing that happened to Dax and... No, really only Dax. Grant had quickly dissuaded her of any idea that he was interested and had told her he thought it was best she didn't come to any more seminars. He'd been able to get her out of his room without getting hotel security involved—which, according to Dax when he'd heard the story,

meant the woman wasn't *really* a fan—but Grant had decided that he needed to start wearing a wedding ring and talking about his “wife” at these seminars. Or at least bringing an assistant along. He thought, for the right price, Piper would accompany him, but he wasn't sure he could afford her.

Jocelyn Asher, however, was neither a mom nor a widow. And she was most definitely making him feel protective. And he'd love to find her naked in his bed.

He didn't like that. He didn't want to nurture or take care of someone.

But he couldn't stop thinking of her.

Following her out to her car tonight had truly, initially, been out of concern. She'd seemed quieter than he'd expected her to be at a meal with her friends. Then when those friends had commented that she'd been acting strange, and Maggie, clearly the mother figure to all of her daughter's friends, had seemed legitimately concerned, *he'd* gotten concerned.

But then Jocelyn had told him it was because she was attracted to him, and he couldn't keep his lips off her any longer.

Once he'd tasted her, resisting her was futile.

He was going to have to figure out why she was making him feel so protective. But first, he was going to get her naked.

Again, maybe not the wisest decision, but fuck it. He had no idea how to fight it. Nor did he want to.

Dax and Ollie got to make dumb decisions all the time, and they always landed on their feet. This was Grant's turn.

They pulled between two stone columns with lamps set on top and drove up a curving driveway.

Grant knew his eyes were wide as Jocelyn stopped her car in front of a three-car, carriage-house-style detached garage. The garage was set back from the main house. An enormous 1800s Victorian mansion, to be exact. The house sat back from the road several yards and was surrounded by trees, grass, and flowers.

The fading light of the evening didn't give him a perfect look at everything, but his first impression was that of a gorgeous, peaceful, old, and majestic property, and he knew his mouth was hanging open as he got out of the car and met Jocelyn at the front bumper.

She was wearing a pale pink sundress with a subtle flowered pattern. The skirt hit her just below the curve of her calf and her dainty feet were in nude-colored sandals that showed off pale pink toenails. The bodice of the dress, however, was strapless, leaving her shoulders and arms bare, showing off lots of smooth, pale, creamy skin. The top of the dress cupped her breasts and fit to her narrow waist before flaring slightly at her hips. It was a very feminine, sweet dress. With her long blond hair falling in soft waves to her lower back and her general gorgeous-girl-next-door looks and easy smiles, she was so unlike the polished city women at the top of their corporate game in law, real estate, marketing, and sales of all kinds, that he could only shake his head in wonder. He'd bet Jocelyn didn't have a single pantsuit in her closet.

Why was he drawn to this woman? This woman he knew next to nothing about and who he had nothing in common with?

Then again... he glanced at her house. Maybe there were layers upon layers of things he didn't know about her that he'd find fascinating and familiar. He was definitely used to spending time with women who were from old money. He didn't visit them at home, but he could imagine some of his clients having stately old mansions that sat at the back of humongous lawns and had gardens overflowing with flowers behind them. Along with stone cherubs dotting the property and wrought ironwork that was older than his grandfather.

Jocelyn took in his expression as he looked up at the house.

She smiled. "I inherited it from my grandparents. My great-great-grandparents lived here, then my great-grandparents, then my grandparents. Now they live in a small, much easier to care for townhouse about ten blocks away."

“This is...”

“Surprising?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She laughed, and he thought of the comparison to wind chimes again. The sound was light and happy and soothing. He focused fully on her, forgetting about the house.

“The house has been paid off forever, so I only have to come up with the money for the utilities. And the repairs. I was the only one who wanted to take on the upkeep. It’s gigantic and... old. There’s lots of issues with pipes and electric and creaky floorboards and leaky roofs. But our family has a ton of great memories in this house, and there was no way I could let it go.”

Grant felt himself frowning. “How do you take care of all of that?”

She shrugged. “Myself, when I can. Favors, when I can’t. Pinching pennies when that doesn’t work.”

“You have people who can do some of that stuff for you?”

She nodded. “I’ve lived in this town all my life. I know everyone. And I’m an amazing baker. You’d be surprised what people will do in exchange for free cookies.” She peered up at him, a tiny crease between her eyebrows. “Actually, you probably would be surprised.”

He was aware of how short she was when she stood looking up at him like that. When he’d kissed her just before, it had been obvious. He’d had to bend, and she’d had to stretch. But tasting her, touching her, absorbing her little gasp and then moan had been at the forefront of his mind then.

“Why would I be surprised by that?”

“You don’t really like cookies.”

He lifted a brow. “I don’t?”

“You never get cookies from the bakery. Or cupcakes.” Her frown deepened.

“I come to the bakery at seven thirty in the morning,” he pointed out.

“You could get them and eat them later.”

She seemed offended that he’d never bought cookies or cupcakes. And she’d been paying attention to what he bought. Maybe she knew everyone’s order. That wouldn’t surprise him actually. Appleby was a very small town, and the bakery seemed to have a lot of regulars. As she’d said, she’d lived here all her life. Still, he liked that she’d paid attention to his order.

“Remember what I said about if I got to know you I’d want to stay around?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I was pretty sure if I ate your cupcakes, I’d never want to stop.”

Did *ate your cupcakes* sound as dirty to her as it did to him? He hoped so. Because it was true. In the sex sense *and* the cake sense. There was something about this woman that made all kinds of warning signs flash for him.

Yet here he was.

Jocelyn smiled at him then. And the warning sign flashed even brighter.

But did he turn around and get back in his car?

No, he did not.

“So you were avoiding the good stuff at the bakery because you were afraid of it?” she asked.

That was so true. On so many levels. He nodded. “Definitely.”

“You might not want to come into my kitchen, then,” she said. “I’m trying something new tonight, and I think it’s going to be amazing.”

He was trying something new tonight too. Sleeping with a sweet, small-town baker, who wore pink, flowery dresses and didn’t date casually. She was also friends with the fiancées of

two of his best friends. Which meant if he hurt her, he'd be fucking a lot up.

"I'm absolutely coming into your kitchen tonight, Jocelyn."

Yep, that definitely sounded dirty.

He was, apparently, also making bad decisions he knew were bad going in. Which was also new.

Heat flickered in her eyes and she took a quick breath. Then she nodded. "Okay, then."

She led the way across the loose white rocks that covered the drive toward the steps that took them up to the back porch. She turned the knob and pushed the door open.

"You don't lock your doors?"

"In Appleby?" She laughed. "No. Besides, I don't have anything worth stealing."

He frowned. "Someone could just want *you*. They wouldn't necessarily want to steal anything."

She just laughed and stepped inside.

Grant didn't think it was funny. He stepped through the door, but nearly plowed her over when she stopped and bent to slip her shoes off.

His hands landed on her hips, her ass pressed against his groin. The position was provocative but clearly unintentional. Still, his body responded.

Well, nothing like getting up close and personal in minute one.

Jocelyn straightening quickly, jerking her head around to look at him, her hair whipping against his face. "Sorry!"

Grant didn't remove his hands. "I'm not."

She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. He was certain she had no idea she'd even done it. "I... go barefoot a lot."

That fit, somehow. "Want me to take my shoes off too?" He, on the other hand, never went barefoot.

“You don’t have to. The whole house is marble or hardwood floors.”

“Your feet don’t get cold?” He had no idea why that was the thought that occurred to him.

She seemed equally surprised. And amused. “They do sometimes,” she admitted. “I have a huge collection of socks.”

“But you just don’t like shoes?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just here that I go without them. It feels less homey to wear shoes in my own house. I’ve crawled on these floors, slept on these floors, danced and fallen and bled and puked on these floors. Feels weird to be formal on them. And shoes seem formal.”

He just stared at her. He’d never known anyone who was attached to floors. Who had even given that much thought to floors. Then again, he’d probably never known anyone who’d lived in a place where they had history like that. Except Aiden and Cam.

His two friends who were also from Appleby. There was definitely something about this little town that seemed to make it hard for people to leave. Permanently, at least.

Aiden had been gone from home for nine years, but he was definitely back to stay now. Cam seemed determined to avoid his hometown except for the random weekend where he’d come back and donate a boatload of money and accept a boatload of praise and thanks for it. Like when he’d paid to build the youth athletic complex or when he’d saved a historic bridge that ran across a small river outside of town. He did love being the hometown hero even though he seemed a bit allergic to actually being in the town. Still, he’d been fully on board with the idea of their company saving Hot Cakes, the local snack cake factory that employed a huge percentage of the town.

“I think I want to take my shoes off on your floors,” Grant said. His voice was strangely gruff.

Jocelyn rewarded him with a smile. “Okay.”

He let go of her finally and bent to remove his shoes. He was stupidly aware of his footwear for the first time in maybe ever. The shoes were leather, lace up, casual men's shoes. They weren't tuxedo shoes. They weren't the most expensive shoes he owned by a long shot. But they weren't tennis shoes or work boots, that was for certain, and he was suddenly aware Jocelyn probably saw a lot of both of those. He shouldn't assume that, of course. She was, after all, attracted to *him*. And she was single. Gorgeous, sweet, a hometown girl, *gorgeous*. It was almost ridiculous that she was single. Unless small-town, blue-collar country boys didn't do it for her.

Maybe Grant was exactly her type.

But she went barefoot at home because she felt attached to the floors. In the one-hundred-plus-year-old house that her family had owned for generations. In the town she'd lived in her whole life. Where she worked in a bakery with her best friend and went to dinner once a week at her friend's mom's house. Where they served things like cheesy potatoes and lettuce salad with ranch dressing and breaded, baked pork chops.

He wasn't her type.

She didn't know many guys like him. If any.

He'd bet a million dollars on it. Literally.

After he'd kicked his shoes to the side, she took him through the three-season room and into the kitchen.

She set her purse and car keys on the little table just inside the doorway and then headed to the sink. She washed her hands and then grabbed an apron—one of four—from the little hooks on the wall.

“What are we making?” he asked. He wanted to watch her bake. It was as strange as wanting to go barefoot, but hey, he was willing to roll with things at this point.

He'd been friends—and a pseudo babysitter—to Dax Marshall and Oliver Caprinelli for nine years. He was the voice of reason, the guy who talked them out of the dumbest ideas and the one who paid the bail for the ideas he couldn't

talk them out of. Generally, he was the guy who kept them out of the *worst*-case scenarios.

And he'd learned the best memories and stories were never the ones where people were toeing the line.

Dax and Ollie had more fun than Grant did.

Sometimes he was a little jealous of that.

Like right now when his head was telling him he should turn around, leave Jocelyn's house, leave Appleby, leave Iowa. But his heart was saying *this is going to be so, so good. Crazy, but good.*

She smiled. "You want to help?"

"I want to watch."

"You want to watch me bake?"

"I do."

"Is that a fetish I'm not aware of?"

"For me, as of tonight, yes," he told her truthfully.

Her eyebrows rose as if surprised, but her smile was sly and pleased. "Well, okay, then."

She crossed the room to the stove and grabbed the tea pot. "Hot water?"

He frowned. "For?"

"To drink?"

"Uh, no. Do you have coffee?"

She turned to face him. "Of course. But you drink hot water with lemon, right? Not coffee?"

Ah, his order from the bakery every morning. "That's for Piper."

Jocelyn tipped her head. "So you drink coffee."

"I do. Strong. Black."

"Oh." She seemed relieved. "But you don't like our coffee?"

“I get up early and usually have already had a cup or two by the time I come in,” he said. “And there’s more at the office if I need it.” He peered closer. “Does that offend you? I’ll gladly drink your coffee, Jocelyn. If that would make you happy.”

That sounded a little like innuendo as well. He meant it that way too.

She gave him a little smile. “Actually, Zoe makes the coffee, so no. But I *do* want you to eat my sweets tonight.”

That was definitely innuendo. Though it was also literal. She was going to bake. And he was going to strip her naked and take her right here on one of her countertops.

“I can’t remember the last time I had a craving like this,” he admitted.

She pressed her lips together but then gave a little nod. She turned to the Keurig coffee machine. “Regular or decaf?”

“Regular.”

She fixed his coffee and set the mug on the center island. He grabbed it, then propped a shoulder against the doorway that led into the dining room. He figured he’d mostly be out of the way here but could see everything she was doing.

Jocelyn bustled around the kitchen, retrieving ingredients and bowls, spoons, whisks, and spatulas from the fridge, cupboards, and drawers. She had flour, eggs, cocoa, buttermilk, and various other small bottles and cans laid out before she stepped back to survey the assortment.

Grant cradled his cup between his hands, mostly forgetting about his coffee. He was intent on the woman who was muttering to herself as she moved around. He was quite sure she was unaware of the way she talked to herself and he found it endearing.

“Buttermilk, soda, salt, eggs... *butter*. Dammit.” She turned back to the fridge and retrieved the butter.

“Buttermilk,” she started again, to herself. “Soda, eggs, butter, cocoa, salt... brown sugar. Fuck.”

She headed for one of the cupboards and Grant grinned. For some reason, he hadn't pegged her as someone who said "fuck." It didn't offend him in the least, of course. It was one of his favorite, most used, words. But Jocelyn gave off a sweet and sunny air that didn't quite line up with someone who muttered curse words to herself in the kitchen where she created things like the cupcakes he'd seen just that morning.

They'd been freaking caterpillars. Of course, you had to buy three cupcakes to get the full caterpillar—head, middle, and tail. Which was brilliant marketing, in his opinion. They had been done in bright colors and each head cupcake had sported a huge smile. Now he wondered how many *fucks* Jocelyn had dropped while making those brightly smiling cupcake bugs.

She set the canister of brown sugar down on the worktop with a *thunk* and a frown. "Buttermilk," she muttered again, sounding irritated. "Eggs, butter, cocoa, soda, salt, sugar and... *flour!* Fucking *flour!*"

He chuckled at that, but when she looked up with a frown, he quickly lifted his cup to hide his mouth. She narrowed her eyes but turned to stomp into the pantry, retrieve the flour, and return to the work area.

Grant didn't know what was going on, but she surely didn't usually have this much trouble baking every time she tried. She might be Zoe's best friend, but Zoe couldn't afford to pay someone who took this long just to gather ingredients.

Jocelyn started measuring and mixing, but she stopped after adding three ingredients and swore.

"Son of a *bitch.*"

Grant couldn't hide his laugh this time.

She looked up and scowled at him. "You're very distracting."

"I'm the problem here?"

"Do you really think *this* is how it usually goes when I bake?" she asked.

“What just happened?”

“I just added the buttermilk to the flour and soda.”

“The recipe needs buttermilk, right?” he asked.

“It does. But not *now*.”

“Oh.” He didn’t understand.

“The texture of the cakes depends on how you mix the ingredients together. I can’t just add the wet ingredients in with some of the dry now and then more later.” She sighed. “Ugh!” She grabbed the bowl and turned to the sink, dumping the contents and washing them down.

“Can I help?” Grant asked.

“Can you be less hot and stop watching me, like you’re imagining me doing this naked?” she asked.

“Um... no,” he finally said. “At least not the last part. For sure.”

She shook her head. “Maybe we should have sex first. Then I can come back down and bake later. I’ll be a lot less flustered and distracted then.”

Grant pushed away from the doorframe and crossed to where she stood. He set his coffee cup down and crowded close to her. “Well, one, we’re not going *up* anywhere. I’m taking you right here, in this kitchen.”

Her lips parted and her breathing sped up. “Oh.”

He nodded. “From the first second I met you, you’ve had flour on your cheek or sugar in your hair. You smelled like cake the first time you fell into my arms—and the second, for that matter—and I’ve had some very specific and erotic images of you, sugar and flour, and lots of bare skin since then.”

She wet her lips and stared up at him, her eyes wide. “Like... what?”

“Like my flour handprint on your sweet ass,” he told her bluntly and honestly. “Like your nipples coated in sugar. Like

icing and batter streaked over your tits and stomach and ass and clit.”

Her pupils dilated, and he wondered if he'd gone too far. He barely knew this woman. Just a minute ago he'd been shocked to hear her say the word *fuck*. Maybe she wasn't the type he should be saying *tits* and *clit* to.

“Holy hell, *yes*,” she said breathlessly.

Or maybe she totally was. His body went hot and hard and he leaned in. But he didn't kiss her. “Mix up some batter, Jocelyn,” he practically growled.

She wet her lips and nodded. “Yeah.”

“But I think maybe you need a plan B for whoever it is you're baking for tonight. Because that batter isn't going to make it to the oven. And you're not going to have much time between now and tomorrow morning.”

“I was thinking about trying something new for her. But I have cookies in the freezer I can give her.”

Wow, he loved that needy, husky tone in her voice.

“Excellent,” he told her.

Jocelyn stood, just staring up at him. Well, at his mouth.

“Jocelyn?”

“You should call me Josie.”

“Why?”

“That's what my friends call me. People who know me well. And... you're going to know me well.” She gave him a sexy-but-shy smile.

“I am,” he agreed. “Very well. But Jocelyn fits you.”

“Josie doesn't?”

“Josie is cute and sweet,” he said with a nod. “It fits. But Jocelyn is gorgeous and sexy and makes your eyes darken.”

“It does?” Her brows rose.

“It does.”

“I think that’s actually because of how you say it.” She wet her lips. “You make it sound sexy and a little bossy.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “I tend to be bossy.”

“I like it.”

“Do you? Is that one of your turn-ons?” God, he could boss her around all fucking night long.

“I don’t know. There isn’t a single guy in this town—in this *county*—who would be bossy with me.”

“No? Why’s that?” His palm itched to reach up and tuck her hair behind her ear.

“Because they’ve known me forever,” she said, lifting her shoulder. “Because they know my family and it would feel disrespectful maybe? Or because they know my friends and are afraid they’d kick their asses?”

“Or because they think they know you, and you’ve always been sweet and friendly, and you probably helped them with their homework or worked on a school play or at a fair stand with them or went to Sunday school with them, and they can’t imagine saying something like, put your hands on the counter, bend over, and let me lick your pussy,” Grant said.

Her eyes flared with surprise and heat. She bit her bottom lip and nodded. “Yeah, maybe that.”

“Then it’s a good thing I came along. Because I have no qualms about saying that to you.”

Chapter Four



“Wow.” Jocelyn practically breathed the word. “First it was catching me from falling and then it was the potatoes. I didn’t even know that there was all of *this* to look forward to.”

“This?” he asked.

“The dirtiness. The confidence. The bossiness.”

He nodded. “There’s a lot of all of that.”

“That’s so good.” She said it with just a touch of wonder.

“What about the potatoes?” he asked with a frown.

“You’re sexy when you eat potatoes.”

“Am I?” That wasn’t something he’d ever heard before.

She shrugged. “To me.”

He leaned in. He towered over her and found he loved the size difference between them. He loved how little she was and the images of lifting her up and putting her on the counter or against the wall. Or throwing her over his shoulder and heading for her bedroom. But no, he really did want to lick chocolate cake batter from her tits first.

He ignored the niggle that said *she makes you feel possessive and protective*. It was just the alpha-manly-testosterone thing that was rushing through him with all the sex talk and knowing she liked being bossed. Or would like it. Or thought she’d like it.

He loved the idea that other men hadn’t been like that with her. These small-town farmer guys had probably been nice and

gentlemanly toward her. Which was great. In fact, they better fucking have been. She deserved that. But if she wanted a little dominating, he was happy to oblige. It didn't mean he *felt* anything soft or serious for her. In fact it was the opposite, right? Bossing her around? Being dirty with her? Those were the opposite of soft. He liked being in charge. So he could give her a little of that while he was in town. Then she could go back to the nice guys, and one of them could get her a white picket fence and a puppy.

“Jocelyn,” he said, making sure his voice sounded gruff and a little firm.

“Yes?”

“Make us some chocolate cake batter to play with.”

Play. And sex. While talking about dominating her. It didn't seem like all of that should go together. Play and sex didn't really go together for him usually. He just didn't... play. In general. Much.

Dax made sure he did some. But women never did. He dated sophisticated women who liked sophisticated things. Being covered in chocolate cake batter didn't seem very sophisticated. But he'd been absolutely honest when he'd told Jocelyn that he'd been having very specific fantasies about her and baked goods.

And she was the type to play. To giggle and tease with chocolate and Lord knew what other fun, sweet, sticky stuff.

As evidenced by the, “Yes, sir,” she gave him and the smile she flashed as she turned toward the worktable and started pulling ingredients toward her and mixing them up.

He braced a hand on the table and leaned his hip into the edge, settling in to watch her. “You don't seem to be having trouble remembering how to put this all together now,” he commented, watching her confident moves.

“I guess I'm very focused now,” she said, grabbing the whisk and beating the buttermilk and vanilla together.

“But I'm still here.”

She nodded, reaching for the hand mixer and turning to plug it into the outlet behind her. “And I’m very motivated to get this done.”

He smiled. “What’s this supposed to be?”

She gave him a sly grin that made his cock harden. “Whoopie pies.”

He lifted a brow. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. You know what they are right? Chocolate cake sandwiches with cream in the middle.”

“I’ve maybe seen them, but I’ve never had one.”

“Oh, well, just wait.”

“I will. But only because you’re sexy as hell when you’re baking. And in that apron.”

She gave him a sexy smile, then got to work.

She beat the butter and sugar together, then added the egg. She slowly added the dry mixture and the buttermilk mixture into the bowl in small alternating batches, scraping the sides of the bowl down periodically. Finally, the batter was well combined and smooth.

She shut the mixer off and then blew out a breath and looked up at him.

He leaned in. “Now we have to taste test it, right?”

Jocelyn dipped her whisk into the bowl, then lifted it to her mouth and took a little lick.

Watching her tongue run over the curved metal of the whisk made Grant’s body tighten. And his smile grow. He liked Jocelyn flirting and teasing.

“Oh no, I need to feel your tongue on *me*.” He dipped the tip of his index finger into the batter and then lifted it to her mouth.

She obediently moved the whisk out of the way and opened her mouth. He set his finger on her bottom lip and she

closed around it, sucking lightly, then flicking her tongue over the tip.

His nerve endings lit up. Just that one little graze of her tongue and he wanted it all over his body. Some places more than others, of course.

He pulled his finger from her mouth, cupped the back of her head, and brought her in for a kiss. He didn't go slow. He opened his mouth on hers, running his tongue over her bottom lip where his finger had been a moment ago, then sliding in deep along hers, tasting the chocolate and the sweetness that was all Jocelyn herself.

She arched close, her hand going to his cheeks and holding his face as she met him stroke for stroke.

He reached to bump the bowl of batter to the side and then lifted her to the island, stepping between her knees, all without breaking contact with her mouth.

She seemed perfectly fine with the change in position. Both of her arms went around his neck, and she welcomed him into the V between her legs, tightening her knees on either side of him.

He reached for the bow at the back of the apron, pulling it loose, and then separating from her only enough to whip the apron off over her head. But he took her mouth again immediately after the pink frilly thing was gone.

He ran his hands over her body. He wanted to know every curve. He wanted to know which spots made her gasp, which made her moan, which made her arch closer, which made her beg.

Especially the ones that made her beg.

She was already arching closer and moaning. Her hands were also roaming, and Grant felt them run up and down his back, over his ribs and then to the front, where she slipped them under the bottom edge of his shirt and onto bare skin.

He sucked in a breath as her palms glided over his abs and to his chest. Her hands on him were heaven and hell. She

seemed to want to explore thoroughly, and his skin felt like it was burning.

He wanted some of that action too. He found the zipper on the side of her dress, grasping the tiny tab and pulling on the delicate fastener. The bodice gaped, and he tucked his finger in the front and tugged it down, freeing her breasts.

He tore his mouth from hers, needing a good look at her. She was panting, her mouth shiny and pink from his. Her pupils were dilated as she blinked up at him. The bra she wore was also strapless and pale pink, nearly matching her skin. It wasn't completely sheer but her nipples were darker and he could see the stiff points against the thin fabric. He ran a thumb over one and she gasped.

“Need this off too,” he said gruffly.

“Need this off, then,” she said, tugging on the bottom of his shirt.

His fingers went to his buttons, his gaze locked on hers. She reached behind her for the hooks on her bra.

She got done first.

The pale pink silk dropped away from her body, revealing the most perfect breasts he'd ever seen. He wasn't picky about breasts. Any size, any color, they all made him happy. But these... these were his favorite. Ever.

“Fuck, you're gorgeous,” he told her.

“Keep going,” she said, her voice husky.

He realized that he'd stopped unbuttoning and quickly went back to it, debating about just ripping the damned thing off.

But then she started to wiggle, and he was fine with taking his time on those buttons, so that he could watch her.

She was shimmying her dress down her hips and legs. The movement made her breasts bounce slightly, and obviously revealed even more of her gorgeous body. By the time she kicked the dress to the floor and hooked her thumbs in the tops of her panties—also pale pink and also tiny—and wiggled

them down and off, Grant's shirt was hanging open, his mouth was dry, his heart was thundering, and his cock was harder than it had ever been.

"Damn," was all he could manage.

Jocelyn met his eyes. Her expression was sexy and almost devious as if she knew exactly what she was doing to him and had him right where she wanted him.

Well, if this was where this goddess wanted him, he was all in. He didn't care about tomorrow or next week or, hell, five minutes from now. He just wanted *this*. Her.

She reached out and dipped her finger in the cake batter, then painted a swirl of chocolate on her stomach. She trailed the finger up toward her breast, but the chocolate ran out by the time she got to the glorious mound. She reached for more batter, then made Grant the happiest man on earth. She leaned back onto her other elbow, hooked one heel on the edge of the counter, and drew the chocolaty finger around her nipple.

"Take your clothes off, Grant," she said softly, playing with her nipple, coating it in chocolate and making it pucker even tighter.

He couldn't speak. He could barely breathe. He shrugged out of his shirt, toed off his shoes as he tore at his fly, and pushed his jeans and boxers to the floor. He stepped out of them, kicking them to the side.

Her gaze roamed over him, taking in every detail. "Oh my God, you are so hot," she told him. Her eyes lifted to his. "So big."

He grinned and stepped forward and ran a *big* hand up the outside of her thigh. "Ditto on the hot part. Very much ditto."

"I'm serious," she said, looking very sober suddenly. "You're huge."

"I'm a big guy," he said soothingly. "But this will work. No worries."

She laughed. "Well, yes, I'm sure it will."

He lifted an eyebrow. Okay, so she wasn't *worried* about his size exactly. She was a tiny woman, and he was a big man, if they were talking averages anyway. But hey, maybe the guys of Appleby, Iowa were well endowed.

"But you're going to have to do a little extra work first." She quirked an eyebrow. Then handed him the bowl of cake batter.

Oh, he liked this girl a lot.

He took the bowl with a little growl. "Lie back, Jocelyn."

She took a quick, deep breath, and shook her head. "Yes, sir." She eased herself onto her back.

Her blond hair spread over the work surface. He was sure there was going to be flour and sugar in it when she got up. But she was going to be a lot messier and stickier than that before he was done with her.

He let his gaze take in every inch. He ran a hand over her stomach, causing her muscles to clench and her to suck in a breath. He spread the chocolate swirl she'd drawn into a messy smear of sticky brown. Then he lowered his head and took a long lick.

It was delicious. But that had everything to do with the silky, hot skin underneath. And the moan that it elicited.

"Grant."

His name was breathless on her lips and he fucking loved it. He followed the chocolate trail up her stomach, over her ribs, and to the lower curve of her breast.

She was already wiggling and her fingers slid into his hair.

"So, the way I understand what you need, is that I have to make sure you're nice and hot and wet and slick so that I can ease into you without any trouble," he said against her breast, before swirling his tongue around her nipple.

"Grant... yes..." Her head moved back and forth on the tabletop.

He really liked how easy it was to get his name out of her. He drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking all the chocolate from it, then sucking harder, then even harder.

Her hips lifted from the table and he grinned. Okay, sensitive nipples. Very nice.

He trailed his hand up her thigh, circling his thumb over her hip bone, then sliding along the crease that led to her mound. “And is there anything specific that really does it for you, or can I just go according to the gasps and *yes, Grants?*”

“You can...” She gave one of those gasps as he brushed over her clit. “You’re doing fine.”

He chuckled. Fucking chuckled. During sex.

That was strange enough for him. But now he was about to smear cake batter all over a woman. No one would believe it.

As he looked down at the naked, wriggling woman spread out like a dessert buffet for him, he knew he wasn’t telling anyone a damned thing about this though.

He reached for the cake batter, and rather than dipping just one finger, he scooped up a handful. He let it dribble onto her stomach. She sucked in a breath. He drizzled it up and over her breasts, down the valley between them, swirled it around her belly button, and down to her mound. He moved his hand back and forth, painting swirls there, then dripped it down her thigh.

He followed it from top to bottom with his tongue and lips, making sure to get every drop and to spend extra time on each spot. By the time he moved his thumbs to part the sweet folds between her legs and flick his tongue over the slick, swollen bud there, she was whimpering and begging, and she came almost instantly.

“Oh my God! Grant!” Her toes actually curled and her back arched. Her body shuddered, and she gripped his forearm tightly.

Grant lifted his head to look at her. Her entire body seemed flushed, but her face was a darker pink and she was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling.

One lick? He'd made her come that easily?

Damn, that was good for a guy's ego.

Several long moments passed as he just stroked the outside of her thigh into the curve of her ass and waited. She wasn't begging him to *keep going, please don't stop, oh, that's so good*, so yeah, he assumed she needed a second to regroup.

Finally, she put a hand over her eyes and gave a sobbing laugh. "Oh wow."

He squeezed her hip. "Why, thank you very much."

She laughed again. "I can't believe that happened so fast. And easy!" She moved her hand to look at him. "You hardly even did anything down there!"

Grant gave a choked laugh. "Hey, I was willing. I was just getting started!"

She grinned. "I know! That's... wow. You have a magic tongue. I mean, it definitely got a workout everywhere else." Her smile was a combination of amused and shy. "You're good with it, I'll give you that. Maybe it would have been too much if it had been... applied directly."

He laughed again. He wasn't sure what to expect to come out of her mouth. "Jocelyn," he said, his tone serious even though he was grinning like a damned idiot. "You *will* find out what it's like when applied directly."

She blushed deeper but also grinned. "Good."

"But now—" He shifted so he was straighter and reached to take her ass in both hands. "I think we've completed the prep work."

She blew out a breath. "Boy, have we. I've never been... prepared... quite like that."

Damn right she hadn't.

It was the kind of thought that should have him worried. He never cared about the men that came before him—or after, for that matter—with the women he dated. They simply didn't matter. The relationship was about Grant and the woman he

was with for however long it lasted. He didn't think much—and certainly didn't *worry*—about the woman's history before him or what happened after.

That might make him an asshole, but he cared about a lot of women outside of the bedroom. Women who needed someone on their side. Who had a lack of allies in their life and needed a coach and a cheerleader and a teacher.

He never dated women like that. Women who *needed* things.

But Jocelyn needed something. Him. And another orgasm. Right now.

He'd worry about the other things she was making him feel later.

Because he needed something right now too—her. And he *never* needed anything.

Focusing on the naked, post-orgasmic-glowing woman before him, he ran the hand not covered in chocolate up her thigh and eased a finger into her pussy. Definitely slick and hot. And tight. Still really damned tight.

She said his name in that breathy, begging way again, and he added a second finger, gliding in and out, loving the feel of her already.

“How do you want me, Jocelyn?” he asked, circling his thumb over her clit.

She bit her bottom lip. Oh, she had a request. He could tell. She wanted him to be bossy but she had an idea.

“Tell me,” he said firmly, curling his fingers into her G-spot.

She gasped and let her head drop back. “You...” She took a breath. “You mentioned flour handprints on my ass.”

Oh. Fuck. Yes.

He removed his fingers, pulled her off the island and turned her to face it in one swift, smooth move. He leaned in,

his front to her back, his whole body against hers, his cock pressing into her ass. “You like being spanked?”

“I have no idea,” she said softly.

Even better. He ran his hands down her arms to her wrists, then lifted her hands to the table. “Don’t move them,” he said, pressing them into the wooden top.

She nodded.

He reached around her, running his palms through the flour that had spilled and was now spread over the work surface by her body. He leaned back, seeing that white powder already dusted her back and her ass. He put one hand over her right butt cheek, pressing and squeezing slightly, making a perfect handprint.

“Oh yeah, that’s pretty,” he said.

She arched her back, almost instinctively, as if offering her ass up to him. He gave her a little swat as a reward. She gasped, more from surprise than pain. He leaned in, his mouth against her ear. “How was that?”

“Hot,” she said, her voice husky.

He bit her earlobe and she moaned. He dragged his mouth down her neck, making sure the scruff on his jaw abraded the sensitive skin. Goose bumps broke out and her nipples tightened. She groaned. He bit the curve of her neck where her shoulder began, and the groan turned to a whimper.

“Fuck, you are so good,” he told her. “I am going to love fucking you.”

She shivered at his graphic language. He leaned back and gave her another swat, this one a little harder.

“Yesss,” she hissed softly.

They barely knew one another but she clearly trusted him. That fired his blood and made his cock rock hard. He would take such good care of her. Did she sense that somehow? Did she sense the way he was feeling? This protective, possessive thing that he didn’t want, but couldn’t deny?

He rubbed her ass then swatted the other side, rubbing away the sting immediately as she pressed into his hand. Covering her in flour from his hands was strangely erotic and satisfying. As if he was marking her.

He was in so much trouble.

“Grant, I need you,” she said, her voice pleading.

He ran his hand over her sweet curves again. “I know, sweetheart, I know.” He leaned over and snagged his pants, pulling out his wallet, and then a condom. He’d had no idea he’d need this tonight, but he was always prepared. At least where condoms were concerned.

He wasn’t sure he was truly prepared for Jocelyn Asher at all.

“Please.” She pressed back when he’d straightened again, her ass against his cock. “Please.”

“Please what?” He ripped the condom packet open, then rolled the thing on one handed. “Tell me what you want.”

He wanted to push her. Just like her letting him swat her ass, he wanted to know what all she’d let him do, how far she’d let him go. How much would she trust him?

“Please. I want you inside me.”

He put his mouth on her ear again as a *need* to push—and more, a need to see how far she’d trust him—rose inside him. “I want you to ask me to fuck you,” he said, his voice rough. He reached up and took a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He plucked, then pinched.

She moaned, her head falling back against his shoulder.

“Say it, Jocelyn. Tell me you want me to fuck you. That you’ll just stand here, hold on, and take it.”

“Yes.” Her voice was wobbly. “Yes, I’ll take whatever you want to give me.”

A surge of emotion went through him, and he took her hips in both hands. He wasn’t going to try to define that emotion. Or analyze it. At least not beyond the realization he was in

way too deep with this woman already. That he recognized without giving it a single bit of focus. That was a subconscious resignation.

As he positioned himself at her entrance, he vowed to go slow. Yes, he wanted to push, and he'd never been this worked up and she was, after all, begging. But he didn't want to hurt her.

Of course, she surprised him again. She leaned over, pressing her breasts and cheek to the table, completely at his mercy.

"Damn," he muttered. It was part *oh-damn-I'm-so-screwed-here* and part good old-fashioned awe.

He slid into her in one long, slow thrust.

They both groaned. Jocelyn gripped one edge of the table. She couldn't reach both sides at the same time, but she held on to the one and tucked her other hand underneath her chest. There was something about the sweet pink nail polish on the fingers curling over the edge of the table, hanging on as she was fucked from behind, that was insanely hot.

Grant withdrew and thrust again. She took him easily enough. It was a tight fit, but in a glorious, hand-in-glove way that pulled at his balls, and his restraint. He wanted to pound into her, make the table rock, and make her scream.

Every time he pulled out, her body clenched and clung, not wanting him to go. Every time he sunk deep, she made sounds that made his balls, gut, and even his chest draw tighter.

He ran a hand up and down her back as he thrust, loving the silky feel of her hair over the back of his hand and wrist. He loved the curve of her back and her hips. He loved the color of her skin. He loved the way she went up on tiptoe to take him and the way his name fell easily from her lips.

But he couldn't hold on for long. Her body was heaven, and her pussy milked him relentlessly.

"Jocelyn, I want you to come again for me," Grant said through gritted teeth.

“This is so good,” she said.

“It is. Jesus, honey, it is. I can’t last too long.” He thrust deep. “I want you to come on my cock. I want to feel the way you come apart.”

She gave a little groan. “Oh yes. I’m so close.”

He gripped her hips and changed the angle just a bit, hitting more toward the front. Her pussy responded with a tighter clenching, and she said his name breathlessly.

“I need you wider, Jocelyn,” he said. “I need your pussy wide open and taking me.”

“Oh God,” she whimpered.

He grasped her knee and brought it up. The table was too high to rest it on the edge, so he just held it, surging deeper into her body.

“Step stool,” she gasped.

“What?”

“Under the table. Stool.”

He paused. Somehow. Unbelievably. He felt underneath the edge of the table with his foot and located the leg of what must have been a stool. He pulled it out by hooking his foot around it. Sure enough. It was a little wooden stool that would boost her up about three inches. It looked more decorative than functional. But he wasn’t picky at the moment.

Jocelyn reached back, grabbing his ass. “Don’t leave me,” she said. Then pressing into him, she stepped up onto the stool.

She put her own knee on the edge of the table.

“Oh wow,” she gasped.

She was spread wide and Grant nearly lost it. She really was going to do whatever he told her. And she was going to trust him for all of this.

“You’re... amazing,” he told her.

“Keep going, Grant,” she told him, gripping the edge of the table again.

“My fucking pleasure.” He gripped her hips and drove deep.

She moaned and pressed back against him. He did it again.

“Yes!” she called out.

“Come for me,” he demanded.

She reached for her clit, circling it as he continued to thrust, and a minute later he felt her pussy clamp down, and her cry was an even louder, “*Yes!*”

He picked up the pace, thrusting into her hard and deep until he let go, his release rushing through him.

Gasping, Jocelyn slumped onto the table and Grant pulled out, still gripping her hips. He tipped his head back and worked on sucking in oxygen.

His thoughts stopped spinning a minute later and he focused. He ran his hand over her flour-covered ass. “Yep, that is really pretty.”

She giggled. “I am going to get so horny every time I bake in here now.”

“Good.” He didn’t know why he said that. Why was that his first reaction?

He wanted her thinking of him whenever she came into her kitchen? Why? This was a one-night fling. Maybe a couple-weeks-long fling. She was a small-town baker. A *sweet* small-town baker who wore pink sundresses and was attached to an old house in her hometown that was very far from Chicago. She was not his type. It was cruel of him to want her thinking of him all the time after he left.

But even as he moved to the sink to deal with the condom and clean up, he couldn’t deny that seeing his handprints on her, knowing that she trusted him, thinking that chocolate cake might always make her think of him, definitely made a surge of something go through him.

Something that was probably best labeled *I was right to not eat her cupcakes.*

Chapter Five



Somehow Josie managed to push herself up from the table.

She didn't want to move. She'd never felt this good in her entire life. She never wanted these blissful waves of thank-God-bodies-could-do-that-to-each-other to fade. She never wanted to use this tabletop for anything *but* what she and Grant had just done.

And that was saying a lot because she loved all the things she did with flour, sugar, and butter.

But now that she'd had sex with Grant Lorre, she was never going to love anything more.

And that had been *sex*. Hot, dirty, take-over-every-sense *sex*. The kind she'd always hoped was possible. It hadn't been, so far, in her love-slash-sex life. But she'd held out hope. She was, after all, an eternal optimist. That didn't have to just apply to the state of world politics and her ability to save even the worst cake fails.

She hadn't officially named her side business where she baked for overworked moms who'd forgotten they had to provide dessert for the next day's office potluck or kid's class party. Or those who didn't have time to bake four-dozen anything. Or those who were just not good at baking, period. She was unofficially known in the circles she helped as Bakery 9-1-1. She loved that.

She'd met women in the gazebo at the park to give them their goodies.

On Tuesday, she'd met Travis, a divorced dad, on the seventh hole on the golf course—the one with the most trees—with three-dozen caramel-stuffed Rice Krispie treats. She'd helped him take them from the box and put them into his own plastic containers and even brought extra caramel to put on his shirt so that *he* could be his son's hero at the birthday party at his ex's house.

She'd met Nancy, a fifty-something corporate executive, behind the nursing home last Saturday. Josie had handed off a strawberry shortcake made with Nancy's mother's recipe for her mother's eightieth birthday. Nancy had *needed* that cake to be perfect. She just hadn't had the time to make it.

Josie was happy to help.

All of those people had the best intentions of doing it themselves. They wanted to take the time and put the effort into making something special for people they cared about. But time worked against them. Or their lack of experience. Or their lack of the right equipment—like a big enough mixer to handle the job or the right ruffle decorating tip. Or their realization at midnight that they didn't have enough eggs.

So Josie's personal cell number had gotten passed around. She liked being able to help those people have the special goodies they needed without the stress and hassle that sometimes came with making it themselves. She didn't mind if they passed her treats off as their own.

Besides, word was getting around. She'd actually had to hold back on those Iron Man cupcakes to make it at least *a little* believable that Travis had made them. That had been difficult for her. She'd had some really cute ideas for them. But a simple vanilla cupcake spread with red icing and a yellow mask—that she'd had to redraw twice to make it *worse*—in the middle had had to suffice.

As she forced herself upright and smoothed her hair back, she heard the water running in the sink behind her. Grant was cleaning up, and she should do the same, she supposed.

She looked down. And giggled.

Her front was covered with chocolate and flour and sugar. She knew her back was similarly messy. Her body tingled as she thought about how all of that had gotten on all of those places.

She'd suspected things would be hot between her and Grant the second he'd kissed her. Hell, she'd been the one thinking about his naked body and cheesy potatoes and marshmallow fluff—not together—so combining food with sex had seemed inevitable. But this cleanup was going to require a shower.

She grabbed for her apron, rather than her clothes, and slipped it over her head, tying it at her back.

Grant turned from the sink and stooped to grab his boxers, but he froze as his gaze landed on her.

His mouth turned up in a slow, sexy smile. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

She loved his smile. She also really loved his gruff voice and the way he was looking at her.

“I’m thinking that if we did something like this at Buttered Up, we could increase sales,” she said, doing a little turn.

“Don’t even think about it.”

His voice was firm, and he was frowning when she faced him again.

Her brows went up. “No?”

“No.” Again firm. And serious. He jerked his boxers up.

He didn’t seem to be kidding around. “I was just joking,” she said. She thought that was really an unnecessary clarification to make.

“I know.” He was still scowling.

“Are you okay?”

“The idea of you... showing anyone any of... you,” he said, seemingly at a loss for words as he tried to explain. “Makes me... irritable.”

That wasn't funny, exactly. Still, she laughed. He frowned harder.

"Grant, there's no way I'd go to the bakery like this."

He grabbed his pants and yanked them on. He drove a hand through his hair, let out a breath, then focused on her again. Shirtless, his hair disheveled, his pants unzipped and loose, he looked so sexy she sighed.

"No," he agreed about the apron-only idea at Buttered Up. "But you might wear that here for someone."

She studied his face. What was going on? "I guess. Maybe."

"And that makes me... irritable." He paused before that last word again. As if that wasn't quite the word he was looking for. Or as if he was avoiding that word, possibly.

Josie didn't know what word he *was* thinking, but she liked that he didn't *like* the idea of her here with someone else. She stepped close and put a hand on his chest, rubbing in a little circle. "Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?"

"Never have sex with anyone else."

That wasn't what she'd been expecting. "Um. Ever?"

"Ever."

"I thought you didn't want to stay in Appleby."

"I don't."

"So that would mean no more sex at all for me?"

He nodded. "Except for the times when I visited."

She gave him a little smile. "You're good, Grant. You're very good. But unless you're visiting here several times a week, I don't think you're good enough to keep me satisfied indefinitely."

He gave a little growl at that, and her inner muscles tightened in response. Yeah, she was going to need a lot more

of everything he had to offer. And not long distance or over the phone.

“But I’m very happy to give *you* full access to my... kitchen... for as long as you’re here,” she said with a grin and what she thought sounded like a pretty saucy tone.

He nodded. “And no one else.”

She widened her eyes. “Of course not.” Okay, she’d been pretty bold tonight, at times, but she was a one-man-at-a-time kind of girl. In fact, a one-man-at-a-time-with-lots-of-time-in-between-men kind of girl, actually.

“Good.”

Wow. That sounded... possessive.

She liked it.

Also wow.

“I think I need to go,” he said after studying her for a long moment.

“Enough kitchen time for one night?” She sensed there was something else going on. He wasn’t leaving because he was done with her. He was leaving, maybe, because he *wasn’t*.

“I basically want to throw you over my shoulder, take you to bed, and stay there for a month or two,” he said.

“So you’re leaving instead,” she clarified.

“Right.”

“This is like the reason you didn’t ask me out.”

“Right.”

She got to him. Somehow, for some reason, she—little Josie Asher of Appleby, Iowa—got to this guy. She was making him act out of character. Apparently. And feel things he wasn’t used to feeling.

Her mouth curved into a wide smile.

He lifted a brow.

“Okay,” she said. “You can go.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You look very smug suddenly.”

She nodded. “I’m feeling smug.”

“About?”

“Scaring you.”

He frowned. “You don’t...” But he didn’t finish the sentence. He took a deep breath. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Will you?” She wasn’t sure how far and for how long a guy like Grant might run from something he was afraid of.

She felt herself smiling again. Yeah, she liked that she shook him up. It was all just a feeling she had about a feeling she thought he maybe had—so, obviously, nothing tangible or even confessed-out-loud—but the fact that Grant was acting possessive while also claiming that he hadn’t wanted to ask her out because it would have made him want to stay, all made happy bubbles of emotion fizz through her body.

That was damned romantic.

He might be fighting the feelings, but he was having them.

She liked that a lot.

He nodded. “You’ll see me tomorrow.”

She grinned. “I thought you kind of thought you should stay away.”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

“So...” She trailed off on purpose, really wanting him to fill in that blank.

He hesitated for just a second, then he backed her up against the island where they’d just been *very* friendly, braced a hand on the counter next to her, and leaned in. “So...” he said, his voice low and husky. “Now that I’ve had a taste of your cupcakes, I have no chance of staying away.”

That was exactly what she’d wanted him to say. Or a very nice variation of it anyway. She looped her arms around his neck and went up on tiptoe, pressing her lips to his. He didn’t

move his hands or lean in any closer, but he kissed her back thoroughly.

When she pulled back she said, “I like your cupcakes a lot too, Grant.”

He gave a short huff of laughter. “My cupcakes? That’s not very manly.”

She arched into him, pressing against his cock that was already hardening again. “Your Yule log?” she asked, then giggled.

He growled and kissed her again, deeply and hungrily. When he lifted his head, she was breathing hard. “I’m going to go,” he said firmly. “But I’ll be thinking about your cream filling all night.”

Her eyes widened for just a moment. That was surprisingly dirty. And funny. And hot. “I hope so,” she told him honestly.

Lord knew *she* was going to be lying in bed thinking about him. She loved the idea that it would be mutual.

Grant grabbed his shirt, donned his shoes, and headed for the back door with a final, “Night, Jocelyn” as he paused at the threshold. Then he was gone.

Josie gave what could only be described as a swoony sigh as the screen door slapped shut behind him.

She surveyed her kitchen. It was a disaster. And it made her smile.

Then, still wearing only an apron, she pulled the frozen cookies out to thaw for Karen for the next day and she went to work baking cupcakes for Grant. Very special cupcakes. Just for him.

* * *

“Is this a pussy cupcake?”

Dax was standing in front of the bakery box Grant had set on the table in Aiden’s office. Dax had just lifted the lid to

check out the goodies.

Grant crossed the room quickly. He looked down into the box.

Of pornographic cupcakes.

His mouth twitched.

Jocelyn had baked him cupcakes. Especially for him, or so she'd said when she'd grinned at him as if she'd never been happier to see anyone in her life and handed over the bright yellow Buttered Up bakery box.

He'd been downright dazzled by that smile. He'd had a hell of a time falling asleep after leaving her, and he swore, even after a shower, that his skin still smelled like chocolate cake. And Jocelyn.

Then he'd walked into the bakery, and her face had fucking *lit up* when she'd seen him. He couldn't remember the last time someone looked at him like that. He did get a lot of admiration and general gratitude from the women who attended his financial seminars. But this had been different. He hadn't helped Jocelyn pay off her credit cards or refinance her house. He'd just laughed and fucked and had fun with her.

And she'd looked at him like seeing him had made her entire day.

Damn. That had jabbed him right in the chest.

He'd still been thinking about it when he'd taken the box of cupcakes and headed for the office. He'd still been thinking about *her*. And how eager he'd been to see her too and how much he wanted to carry her into the kitchen and take a nice deep taste of her. Her mouth. Her breasts. Her pussy.

Yeah, her *actual* pussy had definitely been on his mind. Which was why he hadn't looked inside the bakery box—where she'd given him another sweet, sticky, delicious pussy to start his day—before bringing them in to share with the guys.

He'd figured he wasn't going to be able to eat six cupcakes anyway, and he'd looked forward to the guys wondering why

Jocelyn had made *him* special cupcakes.

That was pretty obvious now. But how could he have expected the woman who made caterpillar cupcakes to make him sexual cupcakes?

There were six. Two were breasts, complete with hard nipples. One was a mouth. One was a butt—with a flour handprint on it. He really liked that. One was an erect penis. She'd made that cupcake extra big, which definitely made Grant chuckle. And the sixth was clearly a pussy. He would bet a million dollars it was cream filled too.

He quickly reached out and snagged that one. He actually wanted to keep them all to himself now, but he was certain Dax wasn't going to let that happen.

"Tell me it's cream filled," Dax said, clearly thinking along the same lines.

Grant bit into it, then turned the cupcake to face Dax. "Of course."

"That"—Dax informed him, pointing at the cupcake—"is awesomely naughty. I love it. Whatever you did to that girl—and I have a general idea and don't need details because I need to face her at the bakery later, and I don't want to be blushing and stammering—was well done."

Grant shook his head. He'd just barely kept from groaning out loud over that first taste of Josie's cupcake. Much like the night before. "When have you *ever* blushed and stammered?"

Dax shrugged. "Picturing Jocelyn Asher, sweet, smiley, always upbeat baker extraordinaire, letting you do things to her that led to pussy cupcakes in the morning? That might do it."

"Pussy cupcakes?" Oliver walked in just then. "You'd better mean cupcakes that are shaped like cats. Piper will never let us introduce a porn line of baked goods. Though that would be awesome. We could sell online only." Ollie's brain had clearly started spinning already. That was common. A single sentence, a simple mention of something, and his imagination would take off. "It would be kind of a secret, off-

menu thing that only our special clients know about and people only find out about by word of mouth.”

“No.” Piper, their executive assistant—who was five years younger than the youngest of the partners and five times as bright, or so it seemed—breezed through the doorway a second later. “Absolutely not.”

“It could be huge,” Ollie said.

“No,” Piper said again, handing Grant the files he’d asked for when he’d passed her desk earlier. “No pussy cupcakes.”

Ollie sighed and looked at the guys. “Told you.”

“I’m totally giving that idea to Zoe,” Piper said with a smile. “*She* can have a special off-menu, word-of-mouth-only line for bachelorette parties and gag gifts and such.”

She turned and sashayed out of the office. Piper almost always sashayed. It was part attitude and part the way she dressed. The pinup girl skirts and dresses, the heels, the bows and scarves, the glasses, the lipstick... it just all seemed to call for sashaying.

“Dammit,” Oliver said. “My great idea, stolen right out from under me by female empowerment. Typical.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Grant said dryly. He was certain Ollie did not, in fact, feel bad. No one was more dedicated to their company and its growth and well-being than Piper. If Piper had thought that was a good idea for them, she would have looked past any misgivings she might have had about the actual product and encouraged it. “Jocelyn made these cupcakes. If Zoe wants a line like that, she’s already got the idea and the best baker in town.”

“Best baker in town, huh?” Ollie asked, dropping into one of the armchairs. “You’ve sampled a lot of *baked goods* in this town, then?”

They all knew that was not the case. Whether they were talking about actual or figurative baked goods. Grant had no intention of dating anyone—or sampling anything from anyone—in Appleby. Of course, that had been blown to hell the minute Jocelyn fell into his arms.

“No,” he answered. He put the rest of the pussy cupcake into his mouth. Damn, it was delicious. And he wanted Jocelyn again. Right now. As badly as he had before.

“So you’re just assuming that Jocelyn is the best?” Ollie asked.

“You don’t have to try *all* the cupcakes to know when you’ve found the best ones,” Grant said.

He heard a snort to his left, and he glanced over to find Dax grinning.

“What?” Grant asked.

“You’re almost kidding around,” Dax said. “And it’s not even ten a.m. I feel like we *all* need to start the day with Josie’s pussy cupcakes.”

“No.” Grant said it firmly. More firmly than needed.

Dax lifted a brow and looked at Ollie. “What if I called her up right now and said, ‘Hey, Josie, I’d love some more of your pussies?’” Dax asked.

Grant knew Dax was messing with him. He knew the other man was just poking at him, trying to get a reaction. He knew Dax was expecting a certain reaction, in fact. Grant knew he should not give Dax that reaction. He didn’t care. “I’d kick your ass,” he said simply.

Dax nodded as if Grant had given him exactly the right answer. “Even if I was referring to the actual cupcakes?”

“You won’t ever say the word *pussy* or *pussies* to Jocelyn,” Grant said. “And those cupcakes are *mine*.” He reached out, took the box, closed the lid, and tucked it under his arm.

Dax shook his head as he moved toward one of the other chairs and sank into it. “Wow, that was fast. Like *really* fast. Maybe faster than me and Jane.”

“What’s fast?” Grant asked.

“You becoming smitten,” Dax told him. “But you’re totally the type to see something you want and to just *take* it, so it doesn’t really surprise me, I guess.”

Grant frowned at him. “I’m not smitten.”

“Oh, you’re totally smitten,” Ollie said, nodding.

“Fuck off,” Grant said. But he was afraid they were right.

Dammit. This is what he’d been trying to avoid. Jocelyn Asher was exactly the type of woman that men became smitten with. They didn’t just lust after her. She was too sweet for that. They didn’t obsess. That seemed too crazy. They just fell head over fucking heels for her.

He did not want to be in love. Or smitten. Or obsessed, for that matter.

Lust he could handle. He could cope with liking her for sure.

But anything more than that would mean that he’d feel responsible—for her happiness and her safety. He didn’t want that. Women needed to be responsible for their *own* happiness and safety. Men fucked that up way too often. They couldn’t be trusted.

He’d seen that personally. With his grandmother and his sister. Men couldn’t actually be trusted to take care of women in the way they needed. To care for them and love them without smothering them or making them feel helpless.

What the hell did he know about taking care of someone? Not physically, of course. But emotionally. Men just weren’t equipped to take care of women emotionally.

Aiden and Dax might be the exceptions. But Grant had to say, and he thought his friends would agree, that Zoe and Jane were strong women who had been taking care of themselves very well before the guys showed up and were willing and able to call the guys out on their shit if they started thinking they were somehow in charge of things.

Aiden was an amazing supporter of Zoe’s, encouraging her to grow her business and try new things. Dax was the perfect guy for the strong but sad-around-the-edges Jane who took on the weight of the world. He made her laugh and made sure she had fun.

So yeah, his friends were exceptions to the rule of men sucking when it came to women. There were a few of those. Grant ran into them once in a while.

But mostly men sucked.

It was why women were paid less, held fewer CEO positions, held fewer seats in Congress... he could go on and on.

He wanted to help women see that they didn't need men. The way he'd done for his sister. The way he'd done for his grandmother. He'd done it for dozens of women in the seminars he taught.

He wasn't about to start taking care of a woman now. He didn't want to feel protective and possessive and like her happiness and safety was his one and only priority in life. Jocelyn didn't need that. And he sure as hell didn't.

"Piper said I needed to check out the cupcakes," Aiden said, coming into his office and rounding the desk. "Something about a new product line for Zoe?"

Grant recalled Jocelyn confiding in him about her side business and saying that Zoe didn't know about her baking special projects outside of Buttered Up. He couldn't let on to Zoe's fiancé that Jocelyn was doing side projects.

He liked the idea of Jocelyn having a side business. It gave her more security. He knew from a few conversations with Aiden since he'd been back and gotten involved with Zoe romantically, that the bakery didn't offer a lot in terms of benefits for its owner and single employee. That bugged Grant. More than it should.

He would frown on any business not offering its employees as much security as possible, of course, and he would have been tempted to go to Zoe, as a female business owner, and offer his financial consulting services if she didn't have Aiden. But the fact that Jocelyn was her one employee made him even more irritated by the idea that the two young women were just flying by the seat of their pants.

“These cupcakes were made exclusively for me,” Grant told him. “It’s not going to turn into anything regular at the bakery.”

As much as he liked the idea of Jocelyn having a side hustle, he did *not* like the idea of her making pussy cupcakes, or breasts or butts for that matter, for anyone else.

That was as stupid as his sudden desire to start her a 401K. She wouldn’t even have to know about it. He could just contribute to it monthly. He’d have to have Cam look into the legalities of paying that out to her when she retired, but he was sure it could be done. Almost anything could be done with the right lawyer drawing things up. And Cam was one of the best.

Grant shook his head. He could not start Jocelyn Asher a secret 401K.

“Okay, well, good,” Aiden said, looking confused. “I guess.” He took his seat behind his desk and shuffled some papers to the side.

The guys had gotten into the habit of convening a short meeting every morning. Or they’d revived the habit, actually. They’d worked together in the same space for the past nine years. Their company, Fluke Inc., had taken up the entire thirty-ninth floor of their building in downtown Chicago. They’d each had an office, and there were two big conference rooms as well as various other rooms and offices for their product development team. But every morning they’d come together, just the five of them, in the smaller of the conference rooms to touch base and start the day together.

It had almost started by accident. They’d never made it a formal meeting. But it seemed that they needed to physically see and talk to one another before going their separate ways for the day.

They grounded each other. Even though when the five of them got together the ideas and brainstorming and crazy plans flew, they also kept each other anchored. The morning meeting was their way of just being *them*. Giving each other shit, catching up on things outside of work—women, parents, hobbies, and such—and just remembering where they’d

started before they went out and met with their young, energetic, wildly creative development team, or made marketing calls, or fought a copyright infringement, or the many other tasks they each handled to keep the company safe and growing.

They'd all found each other in college. The online game, *Warriors of Easton*, had become a huge phenomenon almost overnight, launching five young guys to millionaire status and pseudo fame—at least in certain circles—so quickly that it had taken them a long time to really come to grips with their new reality.

They'd been busy and in demand and very wealthy, and it had all happened by accident. None of them had known that the game would take off the way it did. They'd simply been drawn together, like pieces to a puzzle, each fitting in their space just right to make the big picture come together. They'd sensed a chemistry between them, and that had turned into friendship, and that had turned into “Hey, what the hell, let's see what the world thinks of this” and... nine years later, they were millionaires, with a huge fan following and a solid friendship that would last the rest of their lives.

Then they'd bought Hot Cakes.

The factory in Aiden and Cam's hometown had gone up for sale and the town, and the three hundred or so people who worked for the company had feared that it would be bought out and changed by a much bigger company, or that it would close. Aiden had wanted to step in to save it, and as always, the other four had his back.

So they now owned a snack cake factory in a tiny town in Iowa, and frankly, they were all realizing they weren't nearly the master businessmen and managers they'd all thought they were.

But they were trying. And learning. And so far, anyway, they hadn't fucked anything up.

“I thought Cam was coming in today,” Dax said, tossing a handful of gummy bears into his mouth one by one.

Grant had no idea how the guy could eat candy this early in the morning. But his grip tightened on the bakery box as he realized that the cupcake he'd greedily shoved in his mouth had more sugar than those gummy bears did. And he didn't regret a thing.

"I am. I had to flirt with Piper," Cam said, coming through the door. "I haven't seen her in weeks."

"You talk to her every day," Ollie said.

"It's not the same." Cam grinned. "She's awesome all the time, but so much better in person."

"Thank you!" Piper called from her desk outside the office.

Grant had to admit that Piper was a force of nature even via text, but there really was something about seeing the woman in person. She could put you in your place and make you laugh about it at the same time. And she was a knockout.

"But I definitely think I deserve a pussy cupcake for driving all this way," Cam said, dropping onto the couch near the window and stretching his legs out.

"You drove in last night," Aiden said. "It's not like you got up at the crack of dawn."

Cam had been the only one of the five partners to stay in Chicago. He'd come to Appleby briefly when Aiden had needed to break the news to Cam's family—Aiden's adoptive family—about their purchase of the company that was the McCafferys' archrival. But Cam had hightailed it back to Chicago shortly after their town hall meeting announcing the purchase and introducing themselves to the town. The town knew Cam after all, and he'd moved on to bigger and better things. Or so he claimed.

His four closest friends knew that his reason for keeping a healthy distance between him and his hometown was the woman who'd broken his heart over a decade ago. Whitney Lancaster. The granddaughter of the Hot Cakes founders.

Aiden had been very happy with Cam's choice to stay away. Cam was a troublemaker. Always had been. Not a

happy, have-an-adventure-take-a-stupid-risk type like Dax and Ollie but a cause-a-bar-fight-take-people-down-in-court type.

And he had a chip on his shoulder about Whitney. And Hot Cakes. And Appleby, Iowa to some extent.

According to the story Aiden had told Grant, Dax, and Ollie—because Cam didn't talk about it—Cam and Whitney had fallen in love in high school, but because their families had been feuding for two generations, they'd kept their romance a secret. As graduation approached, Cam had asked Whitney to run away with him. She'd said no. He'd told her he'd stay in Appleby rather than go off to college on the full-ride football scholarship he'd been offered. She'd broken up with him.

She'd gone to work for the family company. He'd gone to the University of Chicago, and he'd long believed that she'd chosen her family business over him.

“That pussy cupcake?” Ollie asked. “It's from your sister's bakery.”

Cam made a horrible face. “Ew. What the hell, man?”

Dax laughed. “Josie made it, not Zoe.”

“Jesus, that's an important distinction.” Cam scowled at Ollie. “You're a dick.”

Ollie nodded. “Sometimes.”

“Anyway,” Dax said. “Grant's not sharing the cupcakes. Josie's cupcakes are all his.”

Cam looked over at Grant. “Is that right?”

“Not all of her cupcakes,” Grant said mildly. Not her literal ones anyway. “I want no part of the caterpillars.”

“Guessing you're not into the ladybugs or the rainbows or the high heels and hair bows either,” Aiden said dryly.

Ollie laughed. “Nope. Just her pussies.”

“Well, he's not sharing her butt, mouth, or tits either,” Dax said.

He absolutely fucking wasn't. Thankfully, he didn't say that out loud.

Grant wondered why he didn't have better friends. He *chose* to stick around these guys. He could have made just as much money in a number of other businesses.

"What about the cock?" Ollie asked. "I specifically saw a cock." He looked at Grant.

"All of the above are between Jocelyn and me," Grant said, refusing to rise to their bait and give them any kind of reaction. Well, any *further* reaction. "You all knock yourselves out with the high heels and hair bows."

Cam shrugged. "Once it's in my mouth, I don't really care what it looks like."

Dax snorted. "That attitude can lead to a lot of bad, contagious things."

"Your *sister's* bakery," Ollie reminded Cam.

Cam shook his head. "Now I know we're talking about Josie. That's different."

Grant felt his grip on the bakery box tighten again.

"Is it?" Dax asked, casting a sly glance at Grant.

"Josie's the best," Cam said with a nod. He crossed his arms over his chest, his huge biceps bulging, the tattoos that decorated one arm from shoulder to wrist and the other arm from shoulder to elbow, jumping as the muscles flexed. "And she's always been cute, but she's definitely turned out hot."

Grant gritted his teeth. He needed to *not* react.

Cam had known Jocelyn for years. She'd been his little sister's best friend since they were kids. They were probably more like brother and sister than anything else.

He glanced at Aiden. Then again, Aiden had been Cam's best friend for just as long and Cam's sister, Zoe, should have been like a sibling to Aiden too. She wasn't. At all.

"I'll never forget that first summer Josie had boobs," Cam said thoughtfully, as if reminiscing about days gone by. "She

was probably about fourteen. She came over to sunbathe with Zoe, and she walked through our kitchen in a bikini, and I dropped an open two-liter bottle of soda, and it sprayed all over everything.”

Grant ground his teeth.

Dax laughed. “How’d you explain that?”

Cam shook his head. “Josie was sweet and innocent. She had no idea that had anything to do with how she looked in that swimsuit.”

“So, of course, the question is,” Ollie said, glancing at Aiden, “if Josie had come to you at some point and asked you to be her first, what would you have said?”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “Fuck off.”

Zoe had done exactly that to Aiden just last Christmas. She’d been a twenty-five-year-old virgin, and she’d been ready to get her first time “over with”—her words to Aiden. She’d tried to seduce Aiden. And he’d turned her down.

Needless to say, when he’d come back to Appleby to tell her he was in love with her, he’d had a lot of work to do to win her over.

“Oh, I would have *absolutely* helped her out with that,” Cam said, completely seriously. “Once she was old enough, of course.”

Grant breathed in and out steadily. His friends were just fucking with him. He knew that.

“I still would help her out with that,” Cam went on. “I mean, I taught her to roller skate and how to play poker. And I gotta say, she’s really good at both now.”

“Enough.”

Grant’s response quieted the room, and his four best friends looked at him. But not with surprise. With *aha* expressions.

Grant rolled his eyes. Cam had been back with them for ten minutes, and he’d already joined right in with the bullshit

without missing a beat.

Grant had resisted. He really had. But he wanted to punch someone in the face right now.

“But you really do need to let her sell these cupcakes,” Ollie said. “It’s a good idea. Maybe she could do, like, a liqueur filling. Make them very adult themed.”

“It’s not up to me to *let* her do anything,” Grant said. Which was true. He was feeling possessive of her—and the dirty, flirtatious cupcakes she’d made just for him—but he wasn’t about to tell *her* she couldn’t sell them. Hell, he should encourage it.

“Did you see them?” Dax asked Ollie. “The nipples on the boob cupcakes were hard candies. So you could suck on them.” He grinned. Then he looked at Grant. “Hey, was the clit a candy you could suck and lick too?”

“Shut the hell up, Dax,” Grant said.

“I’m being serious,” Dax said, sitting up straighter. “That’s creative and perfectly, hilariously dirty.”

Grant sighed. It was. “It was a hard candy,” he conceded. Then added, “Cherry flavored.”

Dax shook his head, looking a little awed. “Perfect. That sweet little lady has a naughty side. That’s amazing.”

It was. It was sexy as hell. And Grant was thinking about taking the rest of the day off and camping out at Buttered Up just so he could watch her bake again. Everything about her turned him on, and he couldn’t wait to see her again.

“The liqueur center of the pussy cupcake should definitely be cherry flavored,” Ollie said, nodding.

“But the pussy cupcake is *cream* filled,” Dax said. “Come on. We can’t mess with that.”

There was a beat, then Ollie and Dax said together, “Cherry-flavored cream.”

Grant groaned. This was how it so often went. Ollie could not shut his imagination off. He would let things just fall out

of his mouth, Dax would pick them up and run with them, and Grant would blink, and everything would snowball.

Cam had swung his legs around and was leaning onto his thighs now. “Zoe and Josie are going to do this at the bakery?”

“It would have to be a side thing,” Aiden protested. “They couldn’t put those in the bakery cases.”

“Of course not,” Ollie said. “But they could easily let people know they were available and take orders without displaying them.”

Cam was nodding. “That would be hilarious.”

Aiden seemed unsure. “The nice little family-owned small-town bakery?”

“People who really knew my grandma knew she wasn’t always nice,” Cam said.

“I’m just saying, I’m not sure that’s on brand,” Aiden told him.

Grant nodded. “Agreed. They should *not* do this.”

Mostly because it had been Jocelyn’s idea, and if *she* wanted to sell these cupcakes, then she should do it herself. She didn’t have to give this idea to Zoe.

Though Grant needed to check with Cam on that. Did Jocelyn have a contract with Zoe that would prevent her from baking for profit outside of the bakery? If Zoe didn’t have a contract like that, she maybe should. But he wouldn’t be the one suggesting that now because he was absolutely Team Jocelyn.

Which meant he probably shouldn’t bring it up with Zoe’s brother, who might mention the idea to her.

Dammit. This little town and this group of people was so intertwined, everything got complicated very easily.

“Oh, they should absolutely do this,” Ollie said. “And if you think I wouldn’t send each of you cherry-cream-filled pussy cupcakes on your birthdays, you are crazy.”

“Pussy cakes for everyone,” Dax agreed.

“Um...”

They all swung toward the feminine voice.

Whitney Lancaster, their VP of Marketing and Sales, the granddaughter of the Hot Cakes founders, and Camden McCaffery’s ex, was standing in the doorway.

Chapter Six



“I can come back later,” Whitney said, looking very much like she would love to turn around and leave, in fact.

Aiden sighed. “No. You’re right on time. Come on in.”

“You could have warned us, Piper!” Ollie called out. “Or her!”

“No way! This is way more fun!” Piper called back from her desk.

“Sorry,” Aiden said to Whitney, rising, and rounding the desk.

Whitney cast a glance toward Cam but then gave Aiden a smile. “Guess I’m not used to the changes around here yet. My dad doesn’t have much of a sense of humor.”

Cam snorted at that and Grant looked over at him. His eyes fixed on Whitney.

“Hey, Whitney,” Dax greeted as he popped up from his chair, offering it to her while he propped himself on the corner of Aiden’s desk.

“Hi, Dax.” She gave him a smile as she accepted the seat. “Hi, Ollie.”

“Mornin’, Boss,” Ollie greeted.

She actually laughed lightly at that. “I told you before that nickname wasn’t going to stick.”

Ollie grinned. “Trust me. After you tell them all your new idea, it will. You should definitely be the one in charge around

here.”

Grant agreed. Whitney had grown up in the company and had been officially the VP of Marketing and Sales for the past ten years but functioned very much like a CEO. Her grandparents had started the company. The idea and recipes and original baking had all been her grandmother’s, but her grandfather, Dean, had been the one to truly grow it into the national brand that it was today. Whitney’s father, Eric, had taken over after Dean retired, but Eric had never been enthusiastic about Hot Cakes and had focused his attention and time on growing another food brand based out of Dallas. Whitney had stepped up and taken the reins at Hot Cakes even though her father had never given her a change in title.

Grant and the guys were fortunate that she’d been willing to stay on when they’d taken over. What they lacked in knowledge about, well, everything having to do with running a commercial snack cake factory and business line, Whitney had been able to help with.

If it hadn’t been for her past with Cam, they would have likely already offered her a partnership. As it was, they were happy to have her in charge of marketing and sales for them as well, with a hefty salary, and wait for the dust to settle a little before they made any huge changes.

Of course, that meant that Cam was Whitney’s boss now.

One of them anyway.

“What new idea?”

On cue, Cam spoke up. He stretched to his feet and approached Aiden’s desk and the chairs in front of it. He stayed off to one side, near the potted tree by the bookcase, but he was intent on the meeting suddenly. He had his arms crossed and seemed unable to stop looking at Whitney.

Whitney, on the other hand, seemed determined to *not* look in his direction.

It wasn’t as if they hadn’t seen each other. Every time Cam was in town it seemed they ran into each other. Always unintentionally. Though sometimes literally. Like when he’d

almost hit her in the crosswalk at Christmastime, causing her to drop her box of cookies and bag of panties all over Main Street. And then had to help her gather those panties up off the icy pavement.

Grant was sure that interaction had stayed with them both.

“New product,” Ollie said. “Whitney thinks we need something new to invigorate things and that it’s the perfect time with the change in ownership and everything. We can bring our own flavor—so to speak—to Hot Cakes.”

Aiden had run this all past Grant and Ollie a few days ago, and Grant was completely on board. Not only would a new product bring in additional revenue, which would help cover the costs for improving their employee benefits, but this was a great thing to get Ollie focused on. His visionary friend needed projects or he got bored and came up with his own. Which were usually wild and expensive and sometimes completely unrelated to anything else. This would give him some creative outlet while also benefiting the company.

Grant also liked this chance to pull Whitney in more and get her involved with the team. She was sharp and experienced, but he got the impression she hadn’t been encouraged to share ideas or head up projects when her dad and grandfather had been in charge. Grant would love to see her shine, and this seemed a great place to start.

“More cake? Bring it on,” Dax said. “I’m feeling lemon.”

Dax was no longer a partner in Hot Cakes so was here this morning as a consultant only. Well, he was here because they always had a morning meeting, and he would have wanted to know if anything happened between Grant and Jocelyn after they left the McCafferys’ together last night. But he was also here to weigh in on the new idea. There was rarely an idea that Dax couldn’t embellish.

For better or worse.

“You’re ‘feeling lemon’?” Cam asked.

“Yeah,” Dax said. “We don’t have anything lemon.” He looked around. “Do we?”

“No,” Cam said. “But if we’re doing something new, it better be coconut.”

“Come on,” Dax said. “No way is coconut better than lemon.”

“It most definitely is,” Cam said. “And then there’s caramel. That would be the second thing we do. Way before lemon.”

Cam was here, though, because he was a partner, and he had to have a say in big initiatives. A new product would mean work for all departments from actual production in the factory to legal paperwork for trademarking and so on. They all had to be involved.

But that meant he had to work—at least partially—with Whitney.

Aiden had been concerned about that, and after he’d shared more of Cam and Whitney’s history with Grant and Ollie, they’d agreed. But Grant would love to see them working together and getting past some of their heartbreak and history.

And if Cam was a nice, guy-next-door type, Grant would think that was a possibility, and they’d have nothing to worry about.

But Cam was Cam. He loved to argue, which had drawn him to law school, and he could hold a grudge like no other. To think that he might have a little revenge on his mind was not a stretch.

“We’ll have to vote,” Dax said. “That’s the only fair way to do it.”

“You’re not a partner anymore,” Cam reminded him. “So your vote wouldn’t count anyway.”

“But you all really value my input,” Dax said.

Cam snorted. “I could arm wrestle you for it,” Cam said, seemingly nonchalantly flexing his arm.

Dax shook his head. “Ping-Pong tournament.”

“No fucking way,” Cam said. Cam sucked at Ping-Pong.

“We have a better plan than any of that,” Ollie broke in. “We’re going to have a contest.”

Cam cocked an eyebrow. “A contest?”

Ollie nodded with a grin. “Tell them, Boss,” he said to Whitney.

She swallowed and glanced at Cam, then quickly looked at Dax instead. “I was thinking that if we had a baking contest, then a few things could happen. One, we don’t have to develop a brand-new product from scratch without knowing if anyone will like it. Our customers can bring products they’d like to see to us. We can pick and choose from the entries. That gets us the basic recipe to adapt. Two, it gets the community involved. It would have to be open nationwide, I would guess.” Again she looked at Cam. These were the kinds of things they needed legal counsel for—“but even so, it would get our customers involved. They could compete to be the ones to submit the final recipe to us.”

Dax was already nodding. Clearly, he liked the idea. Of course, he liked any kind of game or contest and was a pro at interacting with fans. Customers of Hot Cakes weren’t exactly the same as the fans that played *Warriors of Easton* and showed up at Comic-Con, but they were still the people purchasing from them repeatedly. Interacting with them was a good idea.

“We can have rounds,” Dax said. “We have taste testing to narrow down the entries. We can get the town involved in that part. That shows them that we really want to be a part of the community, and it gets them invested in the company and the new things we’re doing.”

Whitney was smiling more genuinely now. “So we have all of the entries put to a taste test by the people of Appleby.” She nodded. “I like that. We can have people send entries in from wherever they are, but we have community judges narrow things down.”

“Then the top ten get flown in then,” Ollie said, picking up the thread. “We bring them to Appleby, put them up at the B and B, make it a whole event.”

“And,” Whitney said, “we have special judges for the final rounds.”

“Like the mayor or something? Maybe your grandmother?” Aiden suggested. “That would show she was happy with the transition and was giving it her blessing.”

Whitney nodded slowly. “That’s not a bad idea. Maybe she can be the very final judge. Like when we get down to the last two or three?” She grimaced slightly. “She has some dementia. I don’t know how much she’ll really understand about it all. But if we give her two desserts and ask which she likes the best, she’ll be able to pick. Just having her involved in *all* of the final few rounds might be a lot.”

Aiden nodded, a sympathetic look on his face. “I’m sorry.”

She smiled. “She’s still healthy and has some really good days.” She looked at Dax. “She’s really excited about her new apartment at Sunny Orchard.”

Dax grinned. “Having her there will be huge for us.”

“She’s moving into your nursing home?” Grant asked.

“Yep. She’s going to have one of the first deluxe suites when they’re finished.”

Grant actually felt a surge of pride when he saw the work his friend was doing and how excited Dax was about it. Dax had found a fabulous way to apply his love for fun and willingness to go over the top and try new things. If anyone was going to try new programs for enriching the lives of people living in nursing homes, it would be Dax.

“That’s really great,” Grant said sincerely. “Good for both of you.”

Dax and Whitney shared a smile.

“Until then,” Whitney said, “Grandma and I are living together in her house.” She laughed lightly again. “She doesn’t need twenty-four-hour care but shouldn’t be totally alone

either. So it's working out, but it can be... interesting. But yes, I'm sure she'd think it was fun to be involved."

"If you think she should be the final judge, how should we handle the prior rounds?" Ollie asked. "We could put together a community panel. Or maybe a group of employees."

"Well..." Whitney bit her bottom lip.

Aiden lifted a brow. "What are you thinking?"

"You might hate this idea," she said hesitantly.

"Lay it on us," Ollie encouraged. He loved brainstorming.

"Well... we could play up the Hot Cakes name by having hot guys be the judges," she said, her cheeks getting pink. "I know that's gimmicky, but it would draw an audience, I promise you. We could show everything online too, and I'm sure we'd have people watching. We find, I don't know, a handful, of young, good-looking, charming guys. We make sure everyone knows who they are." She looked around. "With the right guys, it could be a big hit."

Ollie was sitting forward in his chair now. "What if we make the contest three days? We bring those ten finalists in. We have a big event space, a stage, the whole bit."

"Oh, the hot-guy judges could each *make* one of the finalist's dessert submissions," Whitney said. "We could set it up so it's like a little cooking show. Women love men who can cook."

Dax was nodding. "We could do a bachelor auction. The women bid on the guys, and the date includes the dessert that guy makes and maybe wine or coffee at some location around town."

Grant caught Aiden's eye. Wow. Whitney was sitting between Ollie and Dax. All three of them were leaning in, talking excitedly, the ideas bouncing around and growing as they went.

The last thing they needed was a *third* person who dreamed big and was willing to go over the top.

Still, he couldn't help but grin. The tension in Whitney had completely relaxed, and she was clearly in her element. He had to wonder how much creativity she'd been able to show with her grandparents and father. From what he could tell, Hot Cakes had been very much the same for most of the fifty years it had been in existence. The logo had been freshened up about ten years ago—likely Whitney's doing—but the product line hadn't changed at all.

Now, watching Whitney brainstorm with Ollie and Dax, Grant could tell that she'd been stifled and was thrilled to have a chance to think outside the box.

And to have two partners in crime.

Oh boy.

“Okay, maybe before we put up a circus tent and start selling off bachelors, we should hammer out some details?” Grant said, interjecting the voice of reason as he so often did.

“Well, I want in,” Ollie said. “I want to be one of the bachelors.”

Grant looked at him in surprise. “Really?”

“Sure. I'll taste test new products. And I can bake.”

“You can?” Aiden asked as surprised as Grant.

“Well... probably,” Ollie said with a shrug. “I know the basic principles.”

“I don't know—” Grant started.

But Whitney was nodding. “That's perfect. It would be hilarious to have a guy up there who doesn't really know what he's doing but who can be funny and charming about it.”

“Uh.” That came from Dax. He looked at Ollie. “I love you like a brother, but funny and charming aren't really your forte.”

Ollie frowned. “I can be funny and charming.”

“He'll be great,” Whitney rushed to assure them. “Girls love hot nerds.”

“What?” Ollie asked. “I’m a nerd?” He didn’t question the hot part.

Whitney laughed. “You didn’t know that?”

“Well, I...” Then he nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

“But it will be great. If you’re a little awkward up there, the women will eat it up.”

“I want to do this too,” Dax said.

Whitney grinned at him. “I don’t know how Jane would feel about you going on a date with someone else.”

Dax sighed. “True.” He looked over at Aiden. “Guess that means Aiden’s out too.”

Aiden laughed. “Thank God.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t have wanted to be up on stage, acting all cocky while you frost some cookies, having girls ooh-ing and ahh-ing over you?” Dax asked.

“I would kick all of your asses,” Aiden said with a nod. “I’ve been... frosting cookies... at Buttered Up for most of my life.”

Whitney lifted a brow at the way he paused before “frosting cookies.” “Yeah, that innuendo stuff will definitely work.” She glanced at the others. “You have to do that.”

Aiden laughed. “Yeah?”

“Women are going to love this,” she said confidently.

“You only want women interested in this?” Grant asked.

“I want everyone interested,” Whitney said. “But if the women get interested, the men will be too. They’ll want to see what the girls are into. Maybe they’ll want to try a recipe to impress their girls.” Whitney grinned.

“Oh, we should *encourage* that,” Dax said. “Have them send in stories and videos of it.”

“Yes,” Whitney agreed enthusiastically.

“Okay, so Ollie’s in. Aiden and I are out,” Dax said. He gave Grant a look.

“What?”

“You should do this,” Dax said.

“No way.”

Whitney turned in her seat to face Grant fully. “You should.”

“Not my kind of thing.” And he was kind of seeing someone. Except that he wasn’t. He was... obsessing about someone. That was not the same thing.

“But we’ve got the hot nerd,” Whitney said, gesturing at Ollie. “We could definitely use a bossy CEO type.”

Grant crossed his arms. “Aiden’s the CEO.”

“Aiden’s off the market,” Whitney lobbed back. “Ollie can do the smart, hot, adorably awkward thing.”

“Hey,” Ollie protested.

“And you can do the broody, sexy suit-and-tie thing,” Whitney went on.

Grant lifted a brow. “Broody?”

“You’re totally broody!” Piper called from her desk.

Grant rolled his eyes. “These guys all wear suits and ties.”

Whitney nodded. “For this, we’ll have you each play up your type. Ollie will wear his glasses and a button-down with jeans. You’ll wear the tie.”

“What will I wear?”

Whitney pivoted at Cam’s question. Her eyes were side, and the tension that had melted out of her was instantly back. “What?”

“What will I wear for my type?” Cam asked.

“Leather jacket and jeans!” Piper called.

“Just get in here so you don’t have to keep yelling!” Ollie yelled.

Piper appeared in the doorway a moment later. “Cam’s the hot bad boy.”

Grant looked at Whitney. Her eyes were on Cam. She swallowed hard. “You’re going to do this too?”

“Damn right,” he said.

“The adorable nerd, the broody suit, and the hot bad boy,” Piper said with a nod. “The perfect trio.”

“You think I’m adorable?” Ollie asked her.

“I think other women will think you’re adorable,” Piper told him. “Since none of them have to work for you.”

“And Cam’s a fantastic baker,” Aiden said.

“Really?” Grant asked. He did not know that about his friend.

Cam shrugged. “Yeah.” He said it as if it was no big deal at all.

“He’s been baking all his life with his mom and grandma,” Aiden added. “I can see it now. Ollie will just throw things together and probably forget at least two ingredients. Grant will measure every damned thing to the exact line on the measuring cup. And Cam will be over there whipping things up without even using a recipe.”

Whitney actually laughed, seeming a little more relaxed. “This could be really fun.”

“So leather jacket and jeans, huh?” Cam directed the question to Whitney rather than to Piper. He seemed to be wanting something from his ex.

Attention? Acknowledgment that he’d look hot in leather? Grant rolled his eyes.

Whitney’s smile faded a little, and she took a deep breath. “Can you bake in leather?”

“I can do anything—”

“Tight t-shirt,” Piper interjected before Cam finished his answer. “One that will show off your muscles and tattoos. You can arrive on stage with your jacket but then take it off.” She nodded. “Yeah, for sure.”

Whitney just wet her lips.

“I’m not wearing a suit to bake in,” Grant said.

Whitney was the one to look him over. “Jeans are fine but with a button-down shirt and tie. That you take off before you start baking.”

“Oh yes on the taking-off-the-tie thing,” Piper said to Whitney, her eyes on Grant. “And he unbuttons the cuffs and rolls up the sleeves.” She nodded. “Yes, definitely.”

Whitney nodded her agreement.

Grant felt like a piece of meat. Or one of Jocelyn’s cupcakes being perused by a customer. A hungry customer.

He wondered briefly what Jocelyn would think of him being in a bachelor auction that included baked goods. Specifically Hot Cakes snack cakes. Hers were far superior to the mass-produced and prepackaged snack cakes.

“And I suppose I’m going to wear a sweater vest or some fucking thing?” Ollie asked, frowning at Piper.

But for just a second, Grant thought maybe he was frowning over Piper’s attention to, and appreciation for, the attributes of other the men.

“No. You need to wear one of your nerd t-shirts,” Piper said. “And your glasses.”

“My nerd t-shirts?” Ollie glanced at Cam. “He’ll already be in a t-shirt. That’s not overkill?”

Piper chuckled. “Cam isn’t going to wear his t-shirt quite the way you will.”

“What’s that mean?” Ollie planted his hands on his hips.

“Cam’s t-shirt will be tight and plain. Probably black,” Piper said thoughtfully.

“And mine?”

“I think you should wear the one that says *I Paused My Game to Be Here.*”

Ollie frowned. But then said, “I love that shirt.”

“It’s a great shirt,” Piper agreed. “It’s very you.”

He gave her a look that said he really didn’t know how to take that, but Aiden jumped in before Ollie could respond.

“Okay, so we can deal with the details later. But we’ve got three judges, a general plan, I think we can go ahead.”

Everyone nodded.

“And I think we need to pull Piper in,” Aiden said.

“Obviously,” Whitney said.

“I suppose I could squeeze it into my schedule,” Piper said.

They wrapped the meeting up in the next few minutes, and Grant kept an eye on Cam and Whitney as the brunette rose from her chair and smoothed her pencil skirt. But Cam did nothing more than watch her leave the office.

Grant waited to see if his friend would say anything about his ex, but Cam just blew out a breath as Whitney disappeared through the door.

It seemed maybe Cam was as tense about Whitney as she was about him.

“This is going to be great,” Dax said, rising and clapping his hands together.

“The bachelor-cake auction?” Aiden asked. He shook his head. “It might be over the top.”

“It’s definitely over the top,” Dax agreed. “That’s what makes it great.”

Of course Dax would think so.

“You think people will really care about three guys making cake and blind dates?” Grant asked.

“I do,” Dax said. “It’s fun.” He shrugged. “You guys underestimate the power of doing things just because they make people smile. It will call attention to Hot Cakes and our new product. That’s the main goal. This will definitely accomplish that, but it will also give the whole thing a fun air.

There is nothing wrong with the new Hot Cakes management being associated with fun and laughs and good times.” He pinned Grant, Ollie, and Cam with a serious look. That alone was unusual for Dax, but then he said, “You guys better pull this off.”

A warning about stepping up from the goofball of the group? Really? Grant lifted a brow. “You think we won’t?”

“I think you need to not take it too seriously,” Dax said to Grant. Then he looked at Cam. “And you’d better not make this all about making Whitney jealous. This is about Hot Cakes, not some little vendetta you’ve got tripping through your head now.”

Cam narrowed his eyes. “You think she’ll be jealous?”

Dax sighed but didn’t respond. He looked at Ollie. “And you have to stay focused. Like you have to actually show up.”

“I’ll show up,” Ollie said. “Jesus, you guys—and girls”—he frowned toward the office doorway—“make it sound like I’m a fucking flake.”

Dax shrugged. “You’re a damned genius. But you also don’t have a lot of time or patience for things that you aren’t a hundred percent into. You have to at least fake it for this.”

“I’m one hundred percent into the launch of a new product,” Ollie said. “I’m just not thrilled about playing the part of nerdy, hot guy.”

Grant snorted at that. “Well, I don’t know how much playing you’ll be doing.”

“And it’s creepy to hear you call yourself hot,” Cam said. “So knock it off.”

“You didn’t protest when Piper called *you* hot,” Ollie said with a frown.

Cam lifted a shoulder. “Because *Piper* called me hot.” He gave Ollie a little grin. “I didn’t say it myself.”

“Bad boy,” Ollie muttered. “Whatever. Just because you have tattoos.”

“You wanna go get a tattoo?” Cam asked him, flexing the arm that had the full sleeve, on purpose. “I’ll take you and even hold your hand.”

“I don’t need a tattoo to feel confident,” Ollie said.

Cam grinned and nodded. “Okay.”

“Once you’re up on stage making cookies you won’t seem so badass,” Ollie told him.

“I’m not worried,” Cam said.

“Women love a man who knows what to do with a tube of frosting,” Dax said. He looked at Aiden. “Right?”

“Well…”

“No,” Cam said, holding up a hand. “No. I’m cool with you being with my sister, but frosting talk is my hardline. We’re not going there.”

“Want to hear about strawberry pie filling?” Dax asked.

“Fuck, no,” Cam told him.

Dax just laughed.

Grant shifted, his body remembering every single thing about chocolate cake batter from the night before. He was grateful, not for the first time, that he was the quiet one of the group. When Dax was around, no one else really needed to talk, and when Dax, Ollie, and Cam got going, no one would notice that Grant wasn’t contributing much to the conversation. Or was lost in thought. Or more specifically, distracted.

Which meant they wouldn’t ask what he was distracted by.

Or who.

Grant ran a hand through his hair.

Following her home last night had absolutely been the worst idea he’d had in a long time.

He should probably regret it.

But he didn’t. Not a bit.

Chapter Seven



“Hey, Jos?”

Josie looked over from where she was pulling a pan of cupcakes from the huge oven in the bakery’s kitchen. “Yeah?” she asked Zoe.

Her friend, and boss, had been out front, as usual, tending to the counter and frosting cookies in between customers, while Josie worked in the kitchen, baking and doing the bigger decorating jobs.

“I was just wondering... are we going to make any cupcakes today that aren’t chocolate?” Zoe held up a cupcake. “This is our last vanilla, and I noticed everything you’re bringing out today is chocolate.”

Josie looked down at the pan of cupcakes in her hand at the moment. They were also chocolate. “Oh.”

Zoe grinned. “What’s going on?”

“I’m just... craving chocolate today, I guess,” Josie answered, her cheeks feeling hot. But she couldn’t help her smile.

She definitely had chocolate on the brain. Well, she had Grant on the brain. And last night. Which also meant chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate.

“Are you?” Zoe gave her a quizzical look. “You seem to be feeling a lot better than you were when you left Mom’s last night.”

Josie set the pan of cupcakes down on the worktable in the middle of the kitchen and pulled off the oven mitts. She was surprised Zoe had waited until now to ask about that. She'd texted both Zoe and Jane that she was fine, feeling a lot better, and heading to bed last night after Grant had left. Well, after she'd made him his special cupcakes.

All of which was true. She'd been feeling *a lot* better after Grant left, and she had been heading to bed when she'd texted them.

But Zoe, Jane, and Josie told each other everything. She'd expected to be questioned first thing this morning. She and Zoe opened the bakery at 6 a.m., and Jane was always first through the door, needing her sugar fix for the day.

They'd been busy this morning, though, and Jane had been running a little late—something that had been happening more regularly since she'd gotten together with Dax. Josie and Zoe suspected it had to do with Jane being more reluctant to leave her bed now that there was a hot, funny millionaire in it.

Josie had known she wouldn't get off completely free of sharing what had been going on with her last night though.

"I'm *much* better," Josie told her friend.

"And to what do we owe this miraculous recovery?" Zoe asked, seemingly innocently. But there was a twinkle in her eye that told Josie Zoe knew something.

Josie put a hand on her hip. "What do you mean?"

Zoe laughed. "Aiden texted me that you gave Grant pussy cupcakes this morning."

Josie felt her face flush, but she grinned too. Those cupcakes had been inspired, dammit. Dirty, but inspired. She was surprised Grant had showed them to the guys though. "Only one was a pussy," she said, her grin growing.

Zoe laughed harder. "Jocelyn Elaine Asher! You made him a pussy cupcake?"

"And boobs and a butt and a cock," she said. She knew she probably looked proud. Because she was.

“Wow. You and Grant.” Zoe looked thoughtful.

“Yeah.” Josie smiled. “You’re surprised?”

“I am. He doesn’t seem like... your type.”

“Hot? Romantic?”

“He’s romantic?” Zoe did seem surprised by that.

“He’s...” Josie thought about that. He’d seemed romantic, yes. The night had. Their connection had. Something had.

“I think of your dad and your grandpa as being romantics,” Zoe said.

“Or Dax,” Josie added.

Zoe added. “Definitely. Grant seems too gruff for that or something. But if you’re happy, I’m happy. He’s a good guy. Just not someone I would have put you with.”

“He’s...” Josie frowned. “He’s been trying to stay away from me actually.”

Zoe’s eyebrows went up. “What?”

Josie nodded. “He felt drawn to me but was trying to fight it. He followed me out last night because he was worried. But he doesn’t really want to be worried.” She hadn’t thought much beyond the sex and the cake batter, but now that she was talking it out, Grant really didn’t seem like her type. Again. She’d thought it before. His mouth and hands and other body parts had distracted her from it. But it was true.

“But he felt drawn to you,” Zoe pointed out.

“But he was trying to fight it,” Josie repeated. She frowned again. “I don’t want a guy who fights his feelings for me.”

“Well...” Zoe said slowly. “What if he’s not winning that fight? That’s kind of romantic—or something—right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Aiden said he would not share his cupcakes once he saw what they were,” Zoe said.

Josie had to admit she liked that.

“And he’s out front now. So he’s not doing a very good job of staying away from you.”

Josie’s eyes flew to the swinging door that led to the front of the bakery. “He’s here now?”

“Yep. He’s talking with George and Phil.”

George and Phil were bakery regulars. They were two older men, seemingly complete opposites, who came in every day after the morning rush and sat and read the newspaper and had coffee and muffins. Not together. They sat at separate tables and barely spoke to one another. But they came in at the same time every day, did the same thing, and stayed the same amount of time. It had been their routine since their wives had passed away.

“What’s he talking to them about?”

“Something about them going into business together?” Zoe asked with a shrug. “I’m not sure. But he definitely glanced around as if looking for someone else when he first came in.”

Josie’s heart kicked against her ribs at that. Wow. She needed to get over this crush, if this crush was so intent on getting over her.

Then again, he was here.

Maybe to talk to George and Phil.

But maybe not.

“Did he look around as if trying to be sure I wasn’t around? So he could avoid me?” she asked. “Or did it seem as if he was hoping to see me?”

Zoe smiled. “Well, Josie, he was *very* adamant about not sharing your pussy cupcake. I’m guessing he was hoping to see you.”

Josie couldn’t help her smile. “I guess that does make sense.”

But nothing else about her and Grant really made sense. It was all kind of crazy really. How attracted she was. How hot they’d been together. How she’d made and decorated X-rated

cupcakes for him without even hesitating to wonder if she should. How happy she'd been to see him this morning. How much she wanted to see him now.

As she stepped out from the kitchen, Grant looked up from where he was sitting at one of the little round bakery tables with George and Phil. They were at the same table for a change. They had their heads bent over some papers. That alone was strange. But seeing Grant there with them was even more so. Josie hadn't been aware that Grant even knew the two older men. He was sitting back, one ankle propped on his opposite knee, a cup of coffee cradled in his hand, almost as if he was observing the meeting between the other men, but he was clearly welcomed there.

His gaze met hers across the bakery counter, and she stopped and took a deep breath.

It was really too bad that he was from Chicago and not into dating a small-town baker, who wanted to get married and have a dog and a couple of kids. Because her heart had never thumped like it did when she looked at him. Even now. No need for nakedness and cake batter. Just him sitting there doing normal things in a normal way looking very normal made her stupid stomach flip, like she'd gone over the top of a roller coaster.

She gave him a smile and made her feet approach the counter. "Hi, Grant."

"Jocelyn," he greeted.

She actually sighed at the sound of his voice.

She never should have had sex with him. How was she supposed to get over him now? He'd been so *good*. Sex like that was not run-of-the-mill sex. That had been ruin-her-for-other-men sex.

"Did you come to talk to George and Phil?"

George and Phil both looked over.

"Phil's going to start renting out his rig," George said. "I'm helping him get that going. I know about loans and

capital. We figured maybe Grant knew something about contracts like this.”

Phil had been an over-the-road trucker for years, while George had been a banker in Appleby for as long as Josie could remember. The two men had very different backgrounds and lifestyles. George was a burly man who wore slacks and a button-down shirt every day, was clean shaven, and wore his hair neatly trimmed. Phil was lanky, pulled his long gray hair in a ponytail, often had scruff on his face, and wore jeans and t-shirts. It was interesting to see them working together on a project.

Josie looked at Grant. “Do you know something about all of that?”

“Yes.”

Of course he did. He was the epitome of a polished businessman who knew everything about mergers and expansions and every other business term.

“But Cam’s the one they really should talk to.”

Josie nodded. “So *you’re* here because...”

“Of you.”

She felt her shoulders relax as he filled in the blank the way she’d wanted him to. She smiled and crooked her finger at him. He lifted a brow but got up and approached the counter. She leaned in when he was close.

“I’m sorry about the cupcakes,” she said softly.

Grant frowned. “You’re sorry?”

“Yes. I realize now that those were inappropriate.”

Grant tucked his hands into the pockets of his pants. He’d been wearing the full suit when he’d come into the bakery that morning as usual. Her heart had stuttered when she’d seen him. She’d been stupidly attracted to him for a long time, but that morning, after last night in her kitchen—now that she knew how his mouth felt against hers, and against other parts of her, how his hands felt on her skin, how dirty he could be, how *good* he could be—she hadn’t been able to do anything

but stare at him for a full ten seconds when she'd first seen him.

Now he was wearing everything but the jacket. He even still had the tie on, though it was loose at the throat.

Josie had to curl her hands into fists to keep from reaching for the knot and pulling it loose. She wanted to see the tie hanging loose around his neck, those top buttons open, exposing the skin at the base of his throat. Even if she went on tiptoe she'd barely be able to press a kiss there.

"Why do you think the cupcakes were inappropriate?"

Her eyes widened. "There was a—" She cast a glance at George and Phil. She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "A c-o-c-k cupcake."

The corner of Grant's mouth curled. It reminded her so much of her kitchen the night before and how much more open and relaxed he'd seemed that she pressed her lips together. *Don't say anything stupid. And don't kiss him. That would definitely be inappropriate.*

"I think George and Phil can spell."

She gave a little huff of laughter. "Right."

Grant just looked at her for a long moment. He seemed to be trying to figure out what to say. Or maybe how to say it. "Jocelyn," he finally said. "The only thing I didn't like about the cupcakes was the idea of you making those for any other man. Ever."

That sent a shaft of heat through her. He said the most preposterous and possessive things. They really did barely know each other. So why did he feel that? And why the *hell* did she like it?

"I've never made those before."

"But you could make them again," he said. "They'd be a great line to offer as part of your side business. Bachelorette parties, gag gifts, that kind of thing."

Josie felt her eyes widen again. "You think so?"

“Well, yes.” He seemed reluctant to admit that. “But like I said, I don’t like the idea of you making them for anyone else.”

She couldn’t help but smile at that. “They’re just cupcakes.”

“They were just cupcakes for me?” he asked. His voice had dropped to a husky, lower tone. “Because they felt like a dirty, private joke just between us designed to have me thinking about your sweet pussy and tits and ass all day and making me eager to get my mouth on them all over again as soon as possible.”

Josie sucked in a sharp breath as all of those parts, and well, every nerve ending in her body, it seemed, responded to that.

He leaned in a little more. “Tell me they weren’t that, Jocelyn.”

She swallowed hard. “They were,” she said softly. Huskily.

“And you thought that would be inappropriate?”

She nodded.

“After I had my mouth all over your body last night?” His voice was quiet too, but George and Phil were completely silent and leaning in to hear better.

She wet her lips. But nodded again. “I wasn’t sure you’d actually want to again. The cupcakes could have been kind of pushy.”

He did that half-smile thing again and her belly flipped. “Push me, Jocelyn. Please.”

Now *she* smiled even as her entire body got hotter. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She couldn’t hide her grin or her blush.

“Good. I still want to try my hand at those whoopie pies. I was thinking about seeing how the cream filling turns out tonight.”

Her inner muscles clenched at the look on his face now. He looked... hungry.

Damn. Okay. So he'd changed his mind. He knew she wasn't the casual type, and he'd just said that the cupcakes were fine. In fact, he wanted more.

She giggled.

"What?" he asked, a smile still tilting his mouth.

"Everything about the bakery suddenly sounds dirty in my head," she said.

His eyes darkened slightly. "What time do you get off work?"

"Five."

"I'll meet you at your house at five oh five."

"Okay."

"And I'm going to have quite the appetite."

A hot shiver went through her. "Noted."

Finally, he lifted his hand and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. And she melted a little.

He was sweet. He was gruff and dirty and even a little reluctant to get involved at all, but he was also sweet and possessive, and... he'd fallen under her spell. Even though he hadn't wanted to. She had to admit that made her feel powerful. Romantically powerful.

This was how romance worked. It was a force you couldn't fight and you couldn't deny.

Not even Grant Lorre.

And it was *her* making him feel that way.

Okay, so the rom coms didn't have pussy cupcakes in them or naughty kitchen sex. But that honestly just made all of this so much better.

"I should get back to work," she finally said after staring at him for several long seconds and just basking in how all of this was really worth all the frogs she'd kissed so far.

“Yeah. Okay.” He seemed reluctant to let her go. “I’m just going to watch.”

She laughed. “Right. Your newly discovered fetish.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

She was now going to have to find a reason to stay at the front of the bakery today. Grant was a baking voyeur, and she was very happy to help him with that.

Chapter Eight



Josie helped a couple of customers and then pitched in on the last-minute order for four-dozen cake pops Zoe had taken while she and Grant had been talking.

“I think we’re going to need more sugar,” Zoe said, eyeing the cake-pop embellishments they had laid out. “We have plenty of sprinkles, but there’s not as much blue sugar. It will look weird if we do like three-dozen sprinkles and only one with sugar.”

Josie nodded. “Well, let’s do four different ones, then. One dozen with sugar, one dozen with sprinkles, one dozen with crushed nuts, and one dozen with... crushed cookies?”

Zoe grinned. “Brilliant. Yes. Do we have chocolate cookies?”

“Definitely.”

Josie grabbed the short ladder and pulled it over in front of the tall set of shelves set into the wall behind the bakery cases. They stored their canisters of various ingredients on the shelves, making it decorative and functional at the same time. The canister of cookies was on one of the higher shelves, and Josie had to stretch for it.

She felt a twinge in her shoulder blade as she reached but ignored it. It happened from time to time. It was an overuse injury from stirring and whisking a lot during the day. Probably tendonitis according to Alicia, the nurse practitioner, Josie supplied with seven-layer bars on the side for family functions and potlucks. She’d never formally seen Alicia, or

anyone else about the pain that came and went, but she'd mentioned it once, and Alicia had agreed that it was likely a hazard of Josie's job.

It had started about a month ago and had been getting more frequent, but Josie was ignoring it for the most part. She didn't have time to go to the doctor. Moreover, she didn't have time to rest her arm. Her job required her to use it, a lot, every single day. And her job didn't really have built-in sick time. It was just her and Zoe running the bakery. If one of them wasn't here, Maggie could and did fill in, but it wasn't the same, and Josie knew, without any ego, that she was the true talent. People came to Buttered Up for decorated cakes in part because Josie was extremely good at her job. The bakery was a town staple and was famous in this area of the state. Their recipes were tried and true. People bought their pies and cookies and cakes because they would be delicious every single time.

But since Josie had started at the bakery, right out of high school, they'd seen a definite increase in demand for specialty cakes for birthdays and other occasions. She could create anything out of cake. And word had spread.

So she had to be here. Zoe and the business depended on her.

Besides, she didn't have insurance to pay for a doctor's visit or treatment anyway. As a very small business, Zoe didn't offer insurance. Prior to Zoe owning Buttered Up, it hadn't been an issue. Zoe's grandma and then her mom had run the bakery, and they'd been covered on their husband's plans. Zoe was covered on her dad's plan, and once she and Aiden were married, he'd cover her. Josie had been on her dad's insurance up until about two months ago when he'd been reduced to part time. It was good for him. His job at the egg factory was hard on him physically and cutting back helped immensely. But financially it was going to be tough until her mom could find something.

And that left Josie without insurance coverage.

She hadn't told Zoe. It would make her friend feel bad and maybe even cause her to panic buy something to cover Josie that would cost far more than it needed to.

Aiden was a millionaire and could just buy a policy probably, but neither he nor Zoe wanted that. Buttered Up was *her* business, her legacy, and she wanted to do this herself. Aiden respected that and didn't expect to become a partner. And a guy couldn't go around just writing million-dollar checks to his girlfriend's business without some legal considerations.

So he was helping Zoe get policies and things caught up at Buttered Up. The fact that they didn't have things like employee benefits bothered him a lot. But it was taking a little time, and they both had a lot going on. So Josie just wanted to give them a chance to get it all straightened out. She could deal with her tendonitis until it all got figured out.

But as she pulled the heavy ceramic canister from its spot on the shelf, the pain grabbed and she gasped.

It was either the surprise of it or the actual nerve suddenly refusing to fire, but her grip loosened and the canister slipped. The ceramic jar hit the hard linoleum with a loud crash.

Everyone in the bakery jumped and swung to face her.

"Oh my God! Josie, are you all right?" Zoe came forward quickly. She was frowning, clearly concerned.

Josie realized she was holding her shoulder. And probably grimacing. Because she felt like someone had a hot poker and was stabbing it under her shoulder blade. She was having a hard time taking a deep breath. She nodded but was grateful for Zoe's hand on her other arm as she stepped down. She didn't trust her painful arm to help.

Suddenly Grant was there, big and glowering, practically pushing Zoe out of the way.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded, seeming almost angry.

But the huge hands on her waist, that plucked her off the step and turned to set her on the counter were gentle.

“I just... my shoulder hurts,” she said.

“Can you move it?” He was still scowling at her.

She frowned back and lifted her arm. She had full range of motion, and it didn’t hurt to move it. Well, it didn’t hurt *more* to move it. It still hurt. Especially when she took a deep breath. What the hell? She was able to reach overhead and circle it.

“What did you do?” Grant asked. His voice had calmed a little, but he was still standing very close, nearly hovering.

“I didn’t do anything. I grabbed that canister, and it made my shoulder tendonitis twinge, and—oh no!” Her eyes flew to the smashed pieces of ceramic on the floor behind Grant. “Oh, Zoe!” She found her friend standing to the side, watching Grant fuss over her with an amused look on her face. “I’m so sorry!”

Zoe shook her head. “Don’t be silly. You didn’t mean to drop it.”

“No, but I feel terrible. It was your grandma’s.”

Zoe waved toward the shelves. “I have lots. No worries. I’m a little concerned about your shoulder though.” She gave Grant a look. “Are you going to be okay?”

Josie waited until Zoe’s gaze swung back to her. “Oh, me?”

Zoe chuckled. “Well, both of you. There’s a lot of... something going on around here.”

Grant didn’t look amused. “I’m just concerned.”

“Me too,” Zoe agreed. “So it’s tendonitis? Should you see someone? A physical therapist or someone?”

She probably should, yes. But that would cost money. Josie gave her friend a smile. “I talked to Alicia about it. She said ice, rest, ibuprofen, all of that. She said massage might help.”

Zoe nodded, but Grant asked, “Who’s Alicia?”

His voice was gruff and he was still frowning.

He seemed legitimately worried and that made Josie feel warm. Warmer than how Zoe's reaction made her feel. Zoe made Josie feel cared for and loved, but she didn't make her feel *protected* the way Grant did.

Lord, she really needed to like that a lot less. She didn't need Grant taking care of her.

But then he put his hand on her shoulder and started rubbing.

Okay, she didn't *need* him to take care of her. But damn if she was going to fight it. She was independent. She lived alone, helped Zoe run their business, took care of her friends and family when they needed her. If a big, hot guy who could melt her like butter on a muffin wanted to rub her shoulder—or anything else of hers—she was not going to say no. Independence didn't have to mean using a self-massager... on any part of her body... did it?

His thumb found a knot in her shoulder, and she made a soft moaning sound without meaning to.

“Jocelyn.” His voice was softer now. Less angry. Maybe even a little amused.

She forced her eyelids open, not having realized they'd slipped shut, and sat up straighter as she found she was leaning into his touch. “Um...”

His expression was definitely more relaxed now. “Who's Alicia?”

“My doctor. Nurse practitioner actually.”

His frown was back. “She's not even a doctor?”

“She's great,” Josie protested.

“Yeah, I wouldn't pull the you're-not-even-a-real-doctor thing on her,” Zoe said. “She's brilliant and beloved.”

“But she's not an orthopedic specialist,” Grant said.

Josie's eyes widened. “I don't need an orthopedic specialist.” Lord, she could have sworn she heard her wallet

whimper in the other room just from the word *specialist*. Her shoulder throbbed a little more too.

“You might. What if this is a rotator cuff tear and not just tendonitis?” he asked.

“Well...” Shit. This really could *not* be a rotator cuff tear. She didn’t have the money for that, but she also didn’t have time for that. *Zoe* didn’t have time for that. Buttered Up was a two-woman job.

“Maybe I just need more massages.” She literally batted her eyes at him. She liked him protective, but she didn’t like him pointing out truths that she didn’t want to think about. “Last night my shoulder felt great,” she added.

Grant froze at that, clearly surprised. His gaze locked on hers, hot and dark. “Well, I’m no expert, but I’m aware that endorphins can be powerful things.”

She nodded, darting her tongue out to wet her lips. His eyes dropped to her mouth, and she felt heat tingle through her belly and between her legs. Yeah, see, all she needed was more Grant.

“So maybe I just need another dose of those,” she said. She definitely did. Regardless of what the hell was going on with her shoulder.

“Endorphins only cover things up,” he said, dragging his eyes back to hers. “If you have an actual serious medical issue, you need to get it looked at.”

“Maybe you’re just overreacting,” she told him. But there was a niggles in the back of her mind. Not the one that said having him worry about her was kind of nice. The other one. The one that reminded her that *Alicia* had also mentioned something else that could cause stabbing pain in the shoulder blade area that came and went. And there was the *other* niggles that reminded her that she’d had pain two days ago in her stomach.

“Maybe I am,” Grant said, agreeing with her overreaction comment. “But I’d rather assume it was something worse and be wrong than risk underestimating it.”

She tilted her head. “Why is this bothering you so much? I didn’t drop *your* canister.”

He opened his mouth. Then shut it. Then looked at a spot over her head. Then met her eyes again and said, “I think you know. It’s the same reason I’m still in Appleby after deciding I was going to leave two weeks ago.”

Her heart did a happy little flip. See? *That* was romantic. He was smitten. It wasn’t love—that would be ridiculous—but he felt drawn to her. She sighed. She’d always wanted someone to be smitten with her.

“You don’t look sorry,” he commented wryly.

She widened her eyes. “About?”

“Keeping me here. Making me worry about you.”

“Well, good,” she said. “I’m not sorry about that one bit.”

He laughed lightly and her inner muscles tightened.

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“And I appreciate your... endorphins,” she said with a grin.

“Zoe?” Grant asked, without looking away from Josie.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t suppose... in light of the shoulder injury and all... that Josie could get off early tonight?”

Zoe laughed. “Do you actually think that’s subtle? At all?”

“No.” He gave Josie a small grin.

“So what you’re really asking is can you take my best friend home and kiss it all better?”

Grant’s grin got bigger. Josie smiled in return. She loved Zoe.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m asking.”

“Then yes,” Zoe said. “You can. *If*,” she added, “you make her take ibuprofen, and you put some ice on her shoulder at some point, and you talk her into making an actual

appointment with Alicia, not just a casual chat when they're at the post office."

Josie felt a flicker of guilt. She hadn't run into Alicia at the post office. She'd asked the nurse practitioner about her shoulder when she'd been dropping bars off at Alicia's house. Bars that had not been made at Buttered Up. Of course, they didn't have those bars on the menu. Buttered Up's menu had been the same, for the most part, since Zoe's grandmother had first opened the doors over fifty years ago and seven-layer bars hadn't been a part of her plan.

But still, Josie could never fully shake the guilt of baking for money on the side.

"You think I can convince her?" Grant asked.

"I think you have some... leverage," Zoe said with a nod. "You know... withhold a few *endorphins* until she agrees. Something like that."

Grant blinked but then slowly grinned. "Interesting idea."

Josie's eyes went wide. "Hey! No fair!" She leaned around him to glare at her best friend. "Whose side are you on?" Whoa, that leaning thing made a pain jab her in the side. What was that? Josie worked to not wince or gasp.

"Well, Grant's, obviously," Zoe said with a shrug. "As long as his side includes you being safe and healthy."

Josie swallowed and sat back—carefully—and looked up at Grant, batting her eyes again. "Oh, you wouldn't do that, would you? I mean, withholding *my* 'endorphins' would mean fewer 'endorphins' for you too."

"Would it?" he asked, his eyes hot. "I'm not so sure about that."

Something in his tone and their teasing made her whole body heat and she leaned closer. "Oh?"

He shifted, bracing a hand beside her hip on the counter and put his mouth near her ear so no one else could hear. "I think teasing you until you're begging and need me more than anything, keeping you right there, knowing that I have total

control over everything you're feeling, would give me plenty of endorphins." He slid his hand to her hip and squeezed. "And there are lots of ways for me to have all kinds of fun while you're frustrated and on edge."

He would just use her for his own pleasure? What would *that* be like?

"You don't seem like the selfish type," she told him softly, nearly panting. In fact, he seemed the exact opposite of the selfish type. He seemed very concerned with her and how she was feeling and her being happy as a matter of fact.

"But you don't know me very well," he said gruffly.

Then he nipped her earlobe.

Lust shot through her and she gasped.

"Okay, okay, okay," Zoe said.

She hadn't needed to have heard all of that to get a pretty clear idea of what they'd been talking about with the way Grant was leaning in. And the way Josie was nearly melting into a puddle.

"No endorphins on my bakery countertop," Zoe said.

Josie knew her cheeks were pink but not because she was embarrassed. She was just plain *hot*. She leaned around Grant to grin at her friend again. "Oh, like you and Aiden have never gotten *endorphins* on these counters."

"Not these," Zoe said, shaking her head. "Too many windows." Then she winked. "Get out of here and 'nurse your shoulder.'" She added air quotes when she said those last three words.

"Gladly," Grant said gruffly as he helped Josie off the counter.

She had a feeling he meant them literally, though, as well as metaphorically. She might get some "endorphins" from him, but she was also going to get a big, hot, protective nursemaid.

Which didn't sound at all like a hardship.

“Are you okay to drive?” he asked as she collected her stuff from the kitchen and pulled her keys from her purse.

“Yes.” She smiled up at him. “I’ll take any excuse to get you over to my house again. But I’m fine to get there, I promise.”

“You don’t need an excuse,” he said. “You just have to ask.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“But you’re not thrilled about the... effect I have on you?”

“I’m getting more thrilled with it,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” He did that thing where he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear again. “You have a way about you.”

She smiled, happiness bubbling up in her chest. “Thank you. I’m pretty thrilled that you’re getting more thrilled.”

He gave her a slow smile. “I really want to take care of your shoulder tonight. For real.”

She nodded. “I know. And I want you to.”

“Yeah? You like being bossed around?”

“Definitely not.”

“Then why do I get an invite to play doctor tonight?”

“Because I like your hands on me.”

His eyes flickered with heat. “Well, then we’re going to get along just fine because I’d very much like to have my hands all over you.”

“Meet you there.”

* * *

Josie had already let herself into her house through the back kitchen door by the time Grant pulled in behind her car. He’d

just been here last night, and yet he felt like he'd been waiting to have her again for weeks. Maybe months.

This woman was getting to him. He should truly want to be anywhere *but* here. She was distracting him. And not just with thoughts of last night flashing through his mind at inopportune times during the day or with her flirtatious, dirty cupcakes. But now he was feeling protective and worried.

He fucking hated worrying. He wanted everyone in his life to just make good choices, make the right decisions based on data and knowledge and calm, rational thought. He didn't expect them to be perfect and to always have all the answers, but he did expect them to listen to him. When he gave advice, he knew what he was talking about. If he didn't, he found out before he gave advice.

But now the woman who had rocked his world with cake batter—both by its use during sex as well as when she actually baked it into cupcakes—was making him worry. And she wasn't listening to him.

She had an injury. He had no idea how serious or mild. But she wasn't taking care of it. She was shrugging it off. She wasn't even making an actual appointment at a medical clinic to discuss it with a professional. Okay, maybe she didn't need an orthopedic surgeon at this point, but she'd only talked about it in casual conversation with her nurse practitioner. Probably while they'd been discussing the weather or some new cookie recipe.

People who didn't make good choices made him crazy.

People who didn't listen to him when he gave them instructions and advice made him angry.

Ollie and Dax made stupid decisions sometimes. They were usually driven by a desire to entertain their fans... or to entertain Grant. They weren't just total fuckups. He'd learned that pretty early on. They were creative and natural risk-takers, and sometimes that manifested itself in doing things like hang gliding off the top of a building on the Vegas strip or losing their shoes to a street magician in Paris. Those sounded bizarre, he completely agreed, but the hang gliding had been a

part of a fundraiser, and the street magician had been research for a new addition to their video game. Or something. At the time they'd explained it, Grant had understood. At least enough to say, "Fine. Whatever. I've booked you on a flight home, and there will be shoes waiting in the car that's coming to get you."

But Ollie and Dax listened to him. After they gave him shit, of course. But they still did what he told them. When he said, "Get your ass back to Chicago. The flight leaves in three hours," they showed up at the airport. When he said, "You should get that casted in Vegas, or your flight home will be miserable," they went to the hospital and got a cast put on Ollie's wrist before coming home.

Jocelyn wasn't listening to him. Yet.

He also hadn't fully turned on his bossiness.

He wasn't above using whatever leverage was needed to get his way. That was just who *he* was. Ollie and Dax were the creative risk-takers. Cam was the I-don't-give-a-shit-what-you-think guy. Aiden was the charming leader. And Grant was the I-always-know-best guy.

Grant climbed the back steps and let himself into Josie's kitchen. She was expecting him after all.

"I was thinking that—"

Whatever he'd been about to say was cut off by the sight of her doubled over, gripping the edge of the counter.

He crossed to her swiftly. "Jocelyn."

She looked up at him and gave him a weak smile.

"What's going on?"

"Um, pain," she said.

"In your shoulder?"

"Kind of. Yes. But not just there." She took a deep breath.

Grant worked on breathing too. He was shocked by how hard his heart was suddenly pounding. This woman had him in knots. He didn't even know what was wrong, but seeing her

beautiful face scrunched up in pain was making adrenaline surge through him.

“Tell me what’s wrong.” His voice was far sharper than he’d intended, but he couldn’t help it. He needed to fix whatever this was, right now.

“I just am having more pain suddenly,” she said. “Which is strange, right? Because I’m not really using my shoulder.”

“How about we let a doctor decide what’s strange?” he asked. “Is there an urgent care here?”

She shook her head. “I don’t need urgent care.” She straightened, though the move seemed to take longer than it should have. She gave him a smile. “It’s not urgent.”

He frowned at her. “How about we be sure?”

“How about you distract me from this little muscle strain by stretching some of my *other* muscles?” She winced. “Did that sound dirty or weird?”

He gave a short laugh. “A little weird.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He noticed that while it looked like she had her hand on her hip, she was actually pressing her fingers into her side.

With a frustrated grunt, Grant pulled his phone out and searched for urgent cares in the area. There wasn’t even one in this town? The closest was about eight miles away. Fuck. Where the hell were they?

He took a deep breath. Okay, eight miles. Hell, the closest one to his apartment in Chicago was possibly farther than that. Just the idea of this one being in another town made it feel farther away.

He eyed the blond who was making him worry and fret and cuss. If he kept going here, he was going to be in over his head. He should call Zoe. Or Jane. Or even Aiden or Dax. They would definitely jump in here and take care of her. Zoe and Jane might be even more effective in getting her to the doctor. They knew her better. Had known her longer.

But even as those thoughts occurred to him, Grant knew he was the one who was going to be taking her to urgent care.

“How long has this pain been going on?” He especially eyed her hand pressing into her side.

“My shoulder started bugging me a few weeks ago, I guess,” she said. “But this... is different.” She grimaced slightly.

“How?”

“Well, the pain has been coming and going ever since it started, but this time it’s not going away as quickly and it’s not just my shoulder.”

“You know that means we need to get it checked.”

Her eyebrows rose. “We?”

Yeah. Fuck. *We*. He nodded. He could just pick her up and carry her out to his car, but it would be nice if she’d *agree* to let him take her to see someone.

He *really* liked it when people listened to him and did what he told them.

“I’d really like to be sure you’re all right.”

She gave him a little smile. “That’s really nice.”

“Well, if your appendix ruptures, it will be a while until I can... stretch you.”

She gave a short, surprised laugh. “See, now when you say it, it kind of sounds dirty.”

He grinned.

Then she frowned. “Oh my God, you think it’s my appendix?”

“I have no idea. That’s why we should talk to a doctor,” he said, trying to be patient.

She bit her bottom lip. “Maybe I can just call Alicia. I don’t think she would mind.”

“Jocelyn,” Grant said, firmly and with a touch of warning.

“I um...” She was studying the buttons on the front of his shirt instead of meeting his eyes. “I can’t... it’s cheaper if I just talk to her.”

Grant realized that he and his friends often didn’t consider the financial implications of the things they did and suggested. He was better about it than Ollie, Dax, and Cam because he worked with people on their financial plans all the time, but he did sometimes forget how easy it was for him to do or obtain things he wanted without thought to the cost. Still...

“Yes, I would certainly think that removing your appendix on her kitchen table with a couple of shots of tequila to numb the pain would be cheaper than the hospital,” he said dryly.

Jocelyn frowned. “I’m just saying that she could help me know if that was necessary.”

He looked at her side again. “It’s getting worse.”

“It’s easing up a little now,” she said.

“In *general*,” he said through gritted teeth. She was so sweet, and she’d certainly taken direction last night when he’d been saying things like *bend over* and *spread your legs*. Now he was seeing a stubborn side that was annoying the fuck out of him.

But then she nodded. “Yeah, it is.”

“Let me take you to urgent care,” he said. “Please.”

Her eyes flew to his. It seemed she realized that *please* was not a regular word in his vocabulary.

“I don’t have insurance,” she blurted out.

He frowned. “What?”

“I don’t have health insurance.”

“Zoe doesn’t provide benefits?” He was surprised Aiden was okay with that.

“I was covered on a family plan with my mom and dad until recently,” Jocelyn said. “Zoe was on her dad’s too. The bakery has always been small, and there hasn’t been a need for

comprehensive benefits. If someone is sick or needs vacation time, we just... make it work.”

“Do you get paid for sick time?” Grant asked, feeling his frown deepen.

“Well, no, not exactly. But she gives me bonuses when she can and...”

“That’s not okay,” he broke in. “That’s not fair to you.”

“It’s fine,” Jocelyn insisted. “I knew what it was when I went into it. It’s really more like it’s my business too.”

“But you don’t have insurance,” he pointed out flatly.

“I did have. But my dad got cut to part time recently.”

“And Zoe didn’t offer to help out?”

“I haven’t told her,” Jocelyn admitted. “I knew she would feel terrible and that it would be a big financial burden on the business. She’s been looking into plans and things with Aiden’s help. We’re just not there yet.”

“But now you need it.”

“That’s not her fault.”

Grant sighed. “I’ll pay for it.”

Jocelyn’s eyes went wide. “No.” She said it quickly and firmly. “Definitely not.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“I do! I’ll make payments to the hospital or whatever. I’m not taking money from you for this.” She wrinkled her nose. “That would be... really icky.”

“Icky?” He felt his frown relax slightly. “How so?”

“Well, we’re not related, and we’re not really friends. I mean, why would you give me money? For sex? I can’t take money for that!”

“I would be giving you money for your *health care*,” he said. “Not for sex.”

“But the only thing I’m giving *you* is sex.”

“It’s not related. The sex was before this,” Grant argued. Why was he arguing this? Why couldn’t she see that this was a great option? He had plenty of money. And he had an intense desire to be sure she didn’t have an internal organ that was about to explode.

“But there will be more sex after!” Then she narrowed her eyes. “Won’t there? I realize this isn’t very sexy. And if I do have to have my appendix out...” She paled slightly and took a shaky breath. “That’s going to put a damper on things.”

He stepped closer to her. “There *will* be more sex.” That was maybe the only thing he knew for certain at this moment. “But the two things aren’t related. I’m paying for peace of mind here.” He decided to use a new tactic. “We *are* friends. I care about this. Let me help make sure things are all right. Or if they’re not, let me help make them right.” Because they weren’t all right. Something was going on with her and he needed it fixed. It was a strange drive, but the idea that Jocelyn was sick and in pain was making him nuts.

Jocelyn stood, blinking up at him, studying his face.

He saw when another stab of pain hit. She winced and held her breath for a second.

That was enough. He bent, scooped her into his arms, and started for the door.

“Grant—”

“We’re going to the doctor. We’ll figure the rest out later,” he said.

“But I—”

“Jocelyn,” he said firmly. “You’re going to have to learn that I don’t really like to be argued with when I’m right about something. And I’m almost always right.”

“But—”

“Jocelyn, enough.”

She stopped arguing then.

But only because she threw up on him.

Chapter Nine



Well, she might have ruined Grant wanting to take care of her no matter what.

In the process she'd probably taken care of him wanting to stick around Appleby indefinitely as well.

She'd definitely taken care of the ever-getting-naked-together again.

But honestly, at the moment, she couldn't care.

She felt horrible. She was huddled against the door of Grant's car trying with everything in her to not throw up again. She'd heard him talking brusquely to someone, asking them to meet him in Bridley, the town eight miles away that had the closest urgent care clinic. She assumed it was one of the guys and they were bringing him a change of clothes. She also assumed that whichever guy it was, soon Jane and Zoe would know about what was going on.

This could *not* be her appendix. She could not have her appendix out. Besides, not being able to take time off from work for that and not being able to afford it was terrifying. Taking internal organs out of her body? Yikes. Yeah, she knew that millions of people walked around without that particular organ. It was pretty routine surgery. The appendix was, arguably, not all that useful. Still, the whole thing made her feel even queasier than she already was.

They pulled up in front of the clinic minutes later, and when she reached for the door handle she got a firm, "Stop."

Grant got out, rounded the car, and again scooped her up into his arms. Even after she'd thrown up on him. That was pretty nice.

She actually thought she could walk at this point. She was still not feeling *good*, but she didn't feel like she couldn't walk. Then again, if Grant wanted to snuggle her against his hard, warm chest, who was she to argue. After the puke-down-his left-arm-and-shoe thing, this might be the last time she got to be this close to his chest. So she rested her head on it and closed her eyes.

She heard him talking to whomever he needed to tell what was going on.

She thought she heard the term *girlfriend*, but she couldn't be sure. She *was* sure she heard *cash*. She really should argue with him about paying for this. But she didn't have the energy. Not because she wasn't feeling well but because, dammit, Grant was bossy and stubborn and always thought he was right. He'd said so.

She'd deal with how to pay him back later. And no, it wouldn't be in sexual favors. That was tempting, for sure. But also gross. Kind of. Somehow. Immoral anyway. Kind of.

Yeah, she'd think about all of that later.

Grant settled into a chair in the waiting room, with her on his lap.

Reluctantly, Josie lifted her head and started to get up to get into a chair of her own. Grant's arms tightened around her. "Just stay," he said gruffly.

"But—"

"Stay," he said again, pulling her up against him.

And really, why argue with a guy who was saying things that you liked and wanted to agree with?

She relaxed back into his hold.

"Are you okay?" he asked against her hair.

“Um...” She thought about his question. “I don’t feel like I’m going to throw up. The pain has lessened. But I feel... weird. And still achy in my shoulder blade.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t know if it was okay exactly, but they were here now. She had to admit that she felt relieved to know that she was with medical professionals, and before they left here she’d have an answer about what was going on. Fixing it was something else. Could she afford it? What would it entail? *Could she afford it?*

But first she needed to know what she was dealing with.

“Hey, here you go.”

She looked up to see that Cam had joined them. He held out a duffle bag to Grant.

“Thanks.” Grant looked down at her. “Can you sit with her while I change?”

“Of course.”

“Grant, I don’t need a babysitter,” she protested.

“Humor me,” he said.

There was something in his eyes. It was almost as if *he* needed Cam there more than she did.

“Okay.”

He rose and crossed the waiting room to the door marked as a restroom.

Cam leaned back in his chair, studying her. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m in urgent care after barfing on the guy I would much rather be naked with right now,” she said. “What do you think?”

Cam grinned. “Fair enough. How are you feeling? Physically?”

She sighed. She’d known Cam all her life. She wasn’t sure what it meant that Grant had called Cam. Maybe because he

wasn't currently dating one of her best friends. But maybe also because Grant knew she knew Cam well and would be comfortable with him.

Cam had always been a little rough around the edges. He'd loved to poke at people and had gotten into more than his share of fights at school and had never missed a chance to tease Zoe, or Josie by extension, but he was a very loyal friend and son and brother.

Josie was completely comfortable with him here. "I'm... fine. Ish. I guess? I'm worried about what is going on," she confessed. "But at this very moment, I'm not in horrible pain or anything."

Cam frowned. "You think it's something bad?"

She shrugged. "Grant mentioned my appendix."

Cam nodded. "Yeah. Guess that would make sense. But that's almost nothing. I got mine out in high school."

She remembered that now that he said it. "Yeah. You're right. It will be fine." She was comfortable with Cam, but no way was she going to tell him that she was worried about the money. Her insurance situation would get back to Zoe for sure. If not directly, then to Aiden. She was sure Cam wouldn't approve of Buttered Up not having solid employee benefits either.

She'd been surprised that the bad boy Cam had gone into law. He'd seemed more the type to become a professional MMA fighter or to go into construction. Something where he got his hands dirty and could swing hammers—or his fists—and knock things—or people—down on a regular basis. She had a hard time picturing him in suits and ties and in courtrooms. But when she'd found out from Zoe that, while he did represent the guys' company, Fluke Inc. when it came to trademarks and contracts and such, he also did a lot of pro bono work for small companies and nonprofits. He loved to go in as an underdog and fight larger corporations that were trying to screw over the smaller ones.

That actually fit. Josie, of course, knew Cam's whole history with Hot Cakes and the Lancaster family and Whitney. She knew he felt that Whitney had chosen her family and their business and money over being with him.

That chip on his shoulder had manifested into him becoming a champion for smaller people fighting against bigger companies and Josie loved that.

Cam was a fighter, and if he could do some good for those who couldn't fight for themselves, then it was a perfect outcome.

"So you've really got Grant all twisted up," Cam said. He had an ankle propped on his other knee, one big hand resting on his leg, his arm muscles bunching. He said it casually, but he was watching her carefully.

She gave him a look. "Do I?"

"You don't realize it?"

"He told me that he didn't intend to stay in Appleby this long, but that he's basically here because of me," she said.

Cam nodded. "That's really unusual for him. Grant never does anything he doesn't want to do."

Okay, it looked like she was going to get some insight into Grant from one of his best friends. She was completely here for this. She leaned in. "How about when he has to go chasing after Ollie and Dax?"

"He only goes if he wants to. Otherwise he'll send someone."

"So sometimes he *wants* to go after them?"

Cam nodded. "Sometimes. Not that he'd ever admit it to them, but sometimes he finds what they're doing is interesting, and he wants to see it up close. Often those things turn into new projects."

"If he thinks what they're doing is silly and waste of time, that's when he sends someone else to bail them out?"

"Right."

“And his instincts are pretty good about which times he should go see it in person and which times it’s a waste?”

“Spot on. Every time,” Cam said with a nod.

Josie sat back in her chair. “I’m guessing he’s been in urgent cares or ERs with them before?”

“More than once,” Cam confirmed.

She sighed. “Maybe I’m a project, then? That’s what you’re saying?”

Cam thought about that for a second. “It’s really not apples to apples,” he said.

“No?”

“Definitely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s never wanted to see either of them naked, and I’m certain he’s never...” Cam paused. Then grinned. “Eaten either of their cupcakes.”

She blushed hot even as she laughed at his innuendo. “Well, that might muddy the picture a little.”

“It’s just interesting,” Cam said.

Interesting. She liked the word *romantic* better, but Cam McCaffery was definitely not the type to use the R word. Actually either R word—romantic or relationship. He’d sworn those off when he’d left Appleby and Whitney behind.

Josie really didn’t want to be a project of Grant’s. She really didn’t. She didn’t want to be a problem he had to solve or a charity case he had to take care of. But here she was, in urgent care, and had already promised to pay cash for the visit.

And she didn’t know how to change that. She could, *would*, pay him back, of course, but she would have to do it over time.

That wouldn’t be humiliating at all.

Her side twinged just then as if to remind her that this wasn’t really something she could change her mind about,

however.

The bathroom door opened, and Grant emerged, dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved Henley. He now had more casual shoes on as well. He looked different. Not as buttoned up and perfect. But he still made her heart thump. Maybe even more so dressed like this. More laid back. More like he might if he was just hanging around the house on a Saturday with her. Like if they were in a relationship and he was her boyfriend and—

“Jocelyn Asher?” the nurse called just then.

Josie sat up straight, jerked from her daydream. She opened her mouth to respond, but Grant beat her to it.

“Yes. She’s right here.” He crossed to her swiftly.

Cam rose and took the bag back from Grant. “You guys good? Want me to stay?”

“Nah, I appreciate you coming though,” Grant said, taking Josie’s hand and pulling her to her feet.

As if she couldn’t figure out how to stand up by herself? She wasn’t *that* bad off. Annoyed by the prospect of being a project to him, and annoyed that she wasn’t enjoying being taken care of as much now, she pulled her hand away.

Grant gave her a little frown. She gave him one back.

“Right this way, Ms. Asher,” the nurse said.

Josie headed in that direction, aware of Grant right on her heels. *Right* on her heels. He literally stepped on the back of her shoe, pulling it off her heel.

“Grant!” she snapped.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

Josie wiggled her foot back into the shoe and gave the nurse a smile. “He’s a little on edge.”

“She’s been having a lot of pain. It’s been getting worse. She started vomiting tonight,” Grant said.

Josie rolled her eyes.

The nurse nodded. “So I read.” She looked at Josie. “Do you want your... friend... in the room with you?”

Josie glanced up at Grant. “Quit acting like a weirdo.”

He gave her a bemused look. “I’m acting like a weirdo?”

“Yes. Just... relax.”

“Not going to happen.”

Yeah, Grant wasn’t really the relaxed type. He was intense and serious and a little broody and definitely bossy. “Can you just let them do their jobs at least?” Josie asked.

“Are you going to listen to *them*?” he asked.

“I really do need to get you back into a room,” the nurse interjected.

Josie sighed and nodded. “We’re fine.”

She, of course, wasn’t sure that was true at all. Physically or emotionally, for that matter. But it also looked like all of this was now out of her control. And not in the fun way that being out of control with Grant had been the night before.

* * *

Three hours later, Grant followed Jocelyn into her kitchen again.

He got the impression that she wanted him to leave her alone.

Well, that wasn’t going to happen.

She hadn’t *said* that. She hadn’t said much at all since the doctor had told her that she needed to have her gall bladder removed.

Grant had asked more questions than she had.

There had been the routine questions and taking of her vital signs. They’d done an exam which had led to a trip to the hospital in Dubuque for an ultrasound which had confirmed the doctor’s suspicion about her inflamed gall bladder.

Apparently an angry gall bladder accounted for all of her symptoms, including the shoulder pain and the fact that the pain had come and gone for the past few weeks. He said he wasn't surprised that she'd assumed she'd injured her shoulder at first. She was young and healthy and not in the typical demographic for gall bladder issues. But there were always exceptions, and the ultrasound had confirmed gallstones.

He said it wasn't something that had to be taken care of immediately—as in that night or the next day—but that her symptoms would definitely continue to worsen. She could control them to some extent with what she ate, but that his recommendation was to have the gall bladder removed. He assured her it was a simple surgery with a relatively easy recovery, especially for someone of her age and health.

Jocelyn had gone very quiet after all of that.

Now, back in her kitchen where it had all started, Grant was starting to get antsy with that.

“Are you going to call the surgeon tomorrow?” he asked point-blank. That was really what he wanted to know. He could offer to make her a cup of tea or to rub her feet or to run out for some antacids or something, but she didn't really need any of that. She needed to have her gall bladder taken out. And *he* really needed to know when she was going to get this taken care of.

“I don't know.” She rounded the middle island and went to the refrigerator, taking out a bottle of water. She twisted off the cap and leaned back against the counter, taking a long drink. She seemed lost in thought.

Grant ground his teeth. This was not really any of his business, he reminded himself, but it not being his business didn't seem to keep him from being concerned about it. Or prying.

“You know what the problem is and you know how to solve it. Why wouldn't you just make that phone call?” he asked.

“Because I’m not ready to solve it,” she told him, finally meeting his eyes.

She hadn’t even looked at him in over two hours.

That had also been grating on his nerves. Not because he needed her to placate him, but because he got the definite impression she was not okay.

“You’re not ready to solve it?” he repeated, moving forward to lean his hands onto the kitchen island. “What does that mean?”

“It means, I need some time,” she said with a frown.

Lord save him from stubborn women. He had certainly dealt with his share of them. His sister, his grandmother, just to name two. He definitely ran into some in his seminars, but they were in the minority. When women signed up for his seminars, clearly they knew what they were coming for and *chose* to come to get his advice. They came to him. Because of his expertise. Because they wanted to hear what he had to say. Because they acknowledged that he was someone who knew what he was talking about. He could admit that was a part of the job that he really loved.

“Some time for what?” he asked, trying to not let on that he was gritting his teeth. His fingers gripped the edge of the counter.

“Time to think it through and plan,” she said with a frown. “It’s not something I can just do.”

His eyebrows went up. “It’s something you *need* to do.”

“I have a job, Grant,” she said, her tone snippy.

Jocelyn didn’t seem the snappish type.

Was that one of the reasons he’d been drawn to her? She’d seemed so sweet and docile and submissive? She’d seemed like the type of woman to listen to him and defer to his judgment?

Fuck.

Yes.

He knew that a woman who was *too* submissive would not be someone he could be with long term, of course. He loved strong, independent women. Hell, he helped women *become* strong and independent. But for a short-term fling, did he like the idea of a woman who would think he had all the answers and would sweetly say yes to him over and over again?

Yep.

That was not Jocelyn Asher after all.

And now, here he was, up to his eyeballs in caring about her and worrying about her enough to seriously consider throwing her over his shoulder and kidnapping her to the hospital to have her gall bladder taken out.

He shoved a hand through his hair.

“Your boss is your best friend. I’m certain if she knew what was going on she’d insist you get it taken care of as well,” Grant said, trying to keep his voice even.

Jocelyn narrowed her eyes. “You’d better not even think about telling her. *I* will tell her about what the doctor said.”

“You mean you’ll tell her a *version* of what the doctor said.”

She didn’t confirm it. But she also didn’t deny it.

“Dammit, Jocelyn.” Grant smacked his hand down on the counter. “Be reasonable.”

“I’m *being* reasonable!” She frowned at him. “I have a lot to consider here! I told you, I don’t have insurance. I need to figure out to make this work. When I *can’t* work for a little bit. And when I’ll have big bills to pay! Just leave me alone for a freaking minute!”

Grant blew out a breath. This was not his problem. She was not his concern. She was not his responsibility.

That didn’t seem to matter.

“I’ll give you the money.”

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. As if counting to ten to gather patience.

Oh, *she* needed to gather patience to deal with *him*?

“That’s very nice of you,” she finally said calmly. “But we’re talking tens of thousands of dollars. I couldn’t take that kind of money from you.”

He had it. It would be no problem at all. But he appreciated someone not wanting to take a handout. Pride was important too. “You can pay me back.” There was no way he’d have her pay him back the full amount, but he’d figure something out when the time came.

“I can also pay the hospital back. They’ll have some kind of payment plan, I’m sure.”

Damn stubborn woman. “Mine would be interest free.”

“I wouldn’t be comfortable owing you that much money for the length of time this would take,” she said, lifting her chin.

Grant ground his teeth. “Borrow it from Aiden, then. He’s a friend. Someone you’ve known forever.”

“No fucking way.”

He ground his teeth harder even as he made a note that she evidently swore as she got more determined.

“You’re being ridiculous,” he told her.

“Maybe you should just leave,” she responded.

Yeah, maybe he should. Because he was tempted to call a friend of his who was a computer hacker to get into Jocelyn’s bank account and make a deposit. Or maybe he could just call the hospital and arrange to cover her expenses anonymously. That he could do, surely. He’d ask Cam about legalities and such. Hell, he’d have Cam just handle it, so the hospital wouldn’t even know who it was coming from directly so that Jocelyn couldn’t find out.

She would surely guess, but as stubborn as she could be, *he* could be so much more so. She had no idea.

“Fine.” He turned on his heel. “I’ll leave. But this isn’t over.” He stalked to the back door.

“I appreciate everything you did to help me tonight, Grant,” she said softly behind him.

He stopped and pulled in a deep breath. See? She *was* sweet. She was stubborn and feistier than he’d given her credit for, maybe, but she was also sweet and sexy and had a smile that did things to his heart that had never been done to it before.

“You’re very welcome.” He looked back over his shoulder. “Call me if you need anything. Please. I mean it.”

She didn’t reply right away.

“I promise not to yell or nag,” he added.

She snorted softly.

“I’ll *try* not to,” he corrected with a small smile.

“Okay. Thanks.”

She wouldn’t call him. There was a jab in his chest as he realized it. Dammit. Hopefully she’d call Zoe or Jane. But it wasn’t his place to tell them anything about this. Fuck.

He turned back and grabbed the doorknob, but then heard himself say, “Marry me.”

Chapter Ten



He gripped the doorknob, holding his breath, just waiting.

He wasn't panicking. He wasn't hoping she hadn't heard him. He wasn't hoping she'd laugh it off.

He really fucking wanted her to say yes.

Finally she did answer.

"What?"

He turned. She was staring at him as if he'd just announced that he was going to take her gall bladder out right here and now with nothing but a butter knife and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

"Marry me," he said again. Firmer. "It's the perfect solution."

"To what exactly?"

"All of this." It really was. He hadn't even realized just how perfect until now. As the idea kept going through his mind, it became more and more clear. He nodded. "I want to help. This allows me to do that. You need help. This provides that. You don't have insurance. This would give you insurance. We'll add you to my policy. That won't cost me anything more. I already pay the premiums, and we have an exceptional plan with excellent coverage and a very low deductible."

Those were all true statements. He and Cam had found the best plan for their company. While the five partners were all healthy, single guys and didn't need a lot of coverage, they

needed to cover their employees as well, and they'd all agreed that a comprehensive plan that didn't cost the employees much was going to be a perk of working at Fluke Inc. Cam had also agreed with Grant that they needed good coverage, not because any of the partners had chronic illnesses but because two of them had the chronic tendency to do things like travel in foreign countries on whims and skydive with only a couple of lessons.

"But we would have to actually *be* married," Jocelyn said.

"Yes."

"That's... fraud."

"It's not fraud if we're legally married," he said. "They don't need to know *why* we're married. All that matters is that we have a legal marriage license."

"But..." She frowned. "We would have to actually *be* married," she repeated.

"Yes," he said again.

"Why would you do that?"

"For all of the reasons I just listed." He crossed the room, coming to stand right in front of her. "And because I can think of a lot of things far worse than living and sleeping with you every night."

Her eyes widened. "You were just complaining about the fact that I was 'making' you stay here in Appleby longer than you'd intended," she said, lifting her finger to put quotes around *making*. "Now you want to commit yourself to even more?"

Grant lifted a hand and tucked her hair behind her ear. She really was beautiful. She was sassy at times. She had more spunk than he'd anticipated. But she was sweet, and he knew she thought his inability to forget about her was romantic.

"Look, I'm going to be totally honest with you," he said, his voice getting gruff without him even trying. He could convince her of this. He could sweep her off her feet. Not because he was so smooth and romantic but because *she* liked

the idea of them having instant chemistry and a connection he couldn't deny.

He didn't want to use that against her. At least, not entirely. He wanted her to know the score.

Her bottom lip was trapped between her teeth as she studied his eyes.

"If it weren't for your gall bladder I wouldn't have proposed already," he said. He gave her a little half grin and was gratified to see her smile in return. "But I wouldn't have been leaving town any time soon either. I would have wanted to keep seeing you. I would have wanted to keep getting you naked. So this is going a little farther than all of that, I'll admit, but it's for a good cause."

She just stared at him, but she took a deep breath.

"And I *really* need to know that you're okay now that I've gotten to know you," he said. "That's who I am. I can't stand leaving people more vulnerable than I found them." He smiled. "You can ask my sister and my grandmother about how stubborn I can be when I decide I need to take care of someone."

Jocelyn blinked. "You take care of your sister and grandmother?"

He nodded. "My sister and grandma needed someone to look out for them and I was that guy. I've helped them become a lot more self-sufficient and independent and I love that. But when they really needed help? Yes, I was there and *insisted* on it."

She pressed her lips together as she searched his eyes. "Why do you think *I* am your responsibility?" she asked softly.

He sucked in a breath and then let it out. He wasn't going to lie to her about this being damned weird and out of character for him. But it was a very real feeling, and he wasn't going to be able to shake it. She needed to know that too.

"I'm not really sure," he admitted. "You clearly have a ton of friends who love you. I know your family is here and I'm guessing would do whatever they could to take care of you."

I'm not the type to get deeply involved so quickly with women—or probably anyone outside my family and circle of friends. I'm not spontaneous. I'm not a gambler. But... there's something about you. And the last time I felt this way—caring about someone so quickly—it was when I met Dax and Ollie and Cam and Aiden.” He shrugged. “And that's turned out pretty well.”

She smiled, the worry lines on her forehead easing.

“And so I'm also not the type to argue against a good idea once I realize it's good,” he said. He braced a hand on the counter beside them and leaned in. “And as long as we're going to be seeing each other exclusively anyway and sleeping together, I don't see why we shouldn't have a piece of paper that says you can use my health insurance while we're doing that.”

She swallowed. “When you put it that way, it almost sounds practical.”

He had her. He grinned. “And,” he said, because he felt compelled to lay it all out, “we can get an annulment or a divorce or whatever when you are fully recovered and the bills are all paid.”

That made her brows draw together. “Oh. Right.” She nodded. “True.”

He knew that took some of the air out of her romantic bubble. But they had to acknowledge there was a way out too. They barely knew one another. His life was in Chicago and hers was, clearly, very rooted here. There were lots—lots and lots and lots—of reasons that this wouldn't work out long term. But as a short-term solution to this problem it was nearly perfect.

“How much is the deductible?” she asked.

This was definitely not the way he'd imagined a proposal ever going. Not that he'd ever imagined proposing.

“Two thousand dollars. Maybe three,” he said. “I'll check.”

“I’ll pay you back for that much at least. And any percent of the bills that aren’t covered.”

He bit back the “No, you fucking won’t” that threatened to come out of his mouth. He nodded. “Or you could earn it.”

She lifted both brows nearly to her hairline. “Oh?”

He chuckled. “Not like that.”

Her brows pulled down. “Then what?”

“You can go with me to my seminars as my assistant. You can help with paperwork and AV and things like that.” This was perfect. He could let everyone there know she was his wife, and he could avoid any awkward moments like unexpectedly finding naked women in his bed.

Well, except for Jocelyn, of course.

She was clearly confused. “Seminars? AV? What are you talking about?”

“I’ll fill you in,” I said. “But I need an assistant on weekends once or twice a month. I have a seminar this weekend, in fact. You can come along and work off the cost of the deductible.”

Of course, he didn’t give a shit about the deductible, but he knew she did, so if this would make her happy, then fine. She needed time to get used to this, and she was clearly not going to be scheduled for surgery before Monday anyway. So he’d take her to Chicago with him. Maybe they’d pop into the courthouse and get married while they were there. Then everything would be ready to go by the time they got back to Appleby and got her surgery scheduled.

“I don’t know anything about AV,” she finally said. “But I like the idea of doing something for the help you’re giving me.”

“I’ll teach you.”

He reached out, slid a hand around her waist to her lower back, and drew her forward.

“Say yes,” he said softly and firmly.

She wet her lips and swallowed. “Yes.”

He was shocked by the emotions that rocked through him. Relief was there, for sure. He was going to be able to fix this after all. But there was also a healthy surge of happiness. He was happy about this. Was it unconventional? Absolutely. Was it spontaneous? Definitely. Was it completely out of character? Yes. Yes it was.

Would his friends want *him* to go directly to the doctor for a checkup?

Very likely.

But just as he was starting to feel a little hint of *what the hell did I just do*, Jocelyn leaned in, wrapped her arms around him, and hugged him. And that surge of happiness washed the rest away.

* * *

Getting married for the health insurance wasn't exactly romantic. Or the way she'd ever thought she'd be saying *I do*, but it was maybe the most practical thing she'd ever done.

And honestly, Grant Lorre was very hard to say no to.

At least for her. She also had a suspicion that he was starting to figure that out. That might be a problem down the road.

Oh, who was she kidding? It was a problem right now. He was talking her into getting *married*. Because her gall bladder was about to bite the dust.

Ugh. This was absolutely *not* the swoony-tell-all-her-girlfriends-about-it situation she'd always imagined.

But her gall bladder stabbed against her side—she was imagining it with a little frowny face and a giant knife that it stuck into her from time to time insisting on being let out—and she realized that she didn't really have a choice here.

She had to get her gall bladder out. No matter what she'd been telling herself and Grant, it *was* getting worse. And now

that she knew what it was, she was freaking out a little bit. It made sense that her symptoms had been coming and going. It depended on what she'd eaten that day. She hadn't put those things together, of course, thinking it was her shoulder, but now it made sense.

She did want to get it out. Thinking about having an infected internal organ swelling up inside her and making her sick, not to mention the associated pain, had definitely pushed this to the *must do* column in her head.

And the estimate the hospital had given her had made her feel even sicker.

But Grant was here. Offering a practical solution. That would work. And would keep him around longer, and yes, in her bed. In her kitchen for that matter. In her... life.

Josie knew that her romantic tendencies could be a problem. She knew that real life wasn't like the movies. But... she wanted to date him. She wanted to get to know him better. She wanted to spend time with him. She absolutely wanted to have more sex with him.

Being married was one way for all of that to happen.

It wouldn't be a hardship to let Grant move in here. He was bossy, and yet at the same time, had a way of being protective and caring. It was a potent combination.

She'd watched that combination with her father and grandfather toward her mom and grandma all her life. The men respected their wives and certainly encouraged their independence, but her dad, Chris, and her grandpa, Larry, also took care of them. They went above and beyond to make sure they were safe and healthy and happy.

The happy part had always been what she'd focused on. The little treats her dad would bring home even though money was always tight. The way he'd whisper in her mom's ear and make her laugh. The way he'd go with her to school events—her mom was a fourth-grade teacher—and would haul boxes and set up huge science-fair displays and would dress up as

Aristotle or Sir Isaac Newton without batting an eye. Because it made her mom happy.

He'd always wanted to take her to Italy, but unable to afford that, every year on their anniversary they went to a fancy Italian restaurant, and they'd watch *Roman Holiday* and *Only You*, her mom's two favorite romantic movies, while snuggled up on the couch and would go over the fantasy trip itinerary that they'd started while on their honeymoon to Branson, Missouri instead of Rome.

It was sad that her father couldn't take her mom on their dream trip. But the effort he made to keep that dream alive was incredibly romantic, and Josie swore that her mom was happier with their imagined trip than an actual one at this point. The real thing might not have a chance of measuring up.

But now... looking up at Grant and thinking about something as mundane as health insurance... she had to admit that the "in sickness and in health" part of the whole getting-married thing could be romantic too.

Him wanting her when she was healthy and happy and fully able to be put on the kitchen island and coated with cake batter was one thing. But *insisting* on being with her after she'd puked on him—and likely would again—and would be costing him paperwork headaches, if not actual money, and would probably not be up for kitchen-island canoodling for a little bit was another thing entirely.

She lifted onto her toes and tipped her head, wanting to kiss him. But he was enough taller than her that he had to meet her partway.

Which he did. They kissed, but it was sweet.

That was nice. It really was.

But she wanted more. Josie arched closer, gripping the front of his shirt, and opened her mouth.

Of course, just then her bastard gall bladder decided to remind her that he wanted *out* and the sooner the better. She felt the stab under her ribs and gasped.

Grant seemed to realize it wasn't a gasp of pleasure—or maybe it was the way she stiffened in his arms suddenly—but he lifted his head frowning down at her.

“Are you okay?”

Josie pressed her hand into her side even though she knew that wouldn't help. She gave him a smile. Or she tried to. The way his frown deepened, she was pretty sure her smile had come off as more of a grimace. “Sorry,” she said.

“Jesus, don't be sorry.”

He bent and lifted her into his arms, tipping her so quickly her head spun a little. He kept doing that—picking her up as if it were nothing.

She liked it.

“Let's get you to bed,” he said, starting in the direction of the main part of the house. It was really the only direction to go from the kitchen other than out the back door again.

“This isn't really how I imagined you saying that to me,” she said, pointing toward the staircase.

He started to climb. “Not how I imagined saying it either.”

“Ugh!”

He chuckled. “One thing at a time, tiger. I'll be taking you to bed every night for a long time.”

Her heart stuttered at those words. That sounded amazing. She wouldn't even mind if he *carried* her to bed. She would never admit that to her strong, feisty, best friends, but yeah, she liked this. A lot.

But would he be doing it for a long time? Maybe to Grant a long time was three months. To her a long time, at least in terms of marriage, was fifty to sixty years. She sighed. *This* marriage was practical. It would be fun and sexy too, which was great. But it was not a till-death-do-us-part kind of marriage. In fact, she'd kind of like to leave that out of the service, come to think of it. She did not want to promise that in front of her friends and family and God and all, knowing that it was until her stomach healed and her debt was paid off.

She was going to have to look up how long it took people to recover from gall bladder surgery. She was guessing that, even if she milked it a little, it wasn't going to get her to her silver wedding anniversary.

“Which one?” Grant asked at the top of the stairs.

“Second on the right.”

He stepped through the doorway to her bedroom, and Josie was struck by three things at once. How damned big he was, how feminine her bedroom was, and how much she wanted him to stay.

This wasn't the master bedroom of the house, but it was the one that Josie had stayed in when she'd been a little girl visiting her grandparents. Even though she'd lived in Appleby too, spending the night at Grandma and Grandpa's house had been a treat, and she'd slept over often. She had incredibly good, warm, happy memories here, and when she'd moved into the house, it had felt wrong to sleep in any other room.

Grant set her down on the edge of her bed. The duvet was a light green that went with the pale green walls and white wood trim around the doorway and windows and the baseboards. She had only sheer curtains over the windows because she loved the sunlight, and this room got amazing morning sun.

All of her white, wooden bedroom furniture had been handed down to her with the house, including the rocking chair in the corner with the pile of books next to it and the green, blue, and white blanket that her grandmother had knitted for her draped over the arm. She'd slept in this bed, though she'd replaced the mattress a few years ago, when she'd been a little girl. Her mother had rocked her in that rocking chair. She'd played dress-up with dresses and hats and shoes dug out of the large trunk that sat at the foot of the bed and had played with makeup in the enormous round mirror over the dressing table that sat across the room. It had been her mother's. Kate Asher had done her makeup and hair at that dressing table for her dates with Josie's dad.

The trunk now held blankets and photo albums and the dressing table drawers were full of the actual makeup Josie used now, but everything in this room had memories attached to it. Lifelong memories.

And she was about to marry a guy with the intention of it being short term.

Looking at the trunk where she hadn't even realized she'd planned to store her wedding dress and veil after her wedding, she decided that they couldn't have an actual wedding. No gorgeous dress with a long train. No veil. No flowers. No photographs. Hell, they shouldn't even have a ceremony.

“Do you think we could elope?”

Grant's attention came back to her immediately. He thought about her question. “Absolutely,” he said after only a few seconds.

Wow, that hadn't been difficult for him to decide. But Josie refused to let that bother her. She nodded. “Great. I think we should go away for the weekend, let everyone know that—well, maybe not my grandma,” she said with a frown. “But our friends, I mean. We'll go away for the weekend saying that we're having such a good time that we decided I should go to your seminar to help out. Then we'll find a justice of the peace? A judge? Whatever. And when we come back we'll tell them that we... got drunk and a little crazy, but that we're going to see what happens.”

He nodded. “Okay. On all of it except the drunk part.”

“No?”

“I don't get drunk.”

That didn't surprise her. “Okay. Then we'll just get caught up in the moment. The romance. The sex. Whatever.”

“I don't really do that either.”

She nodded. “You're going to have to sell it. I mean, what other story are we going to use?”

“Well, fortunately you sent me those cupcakes,” he said, the corner of his mouth curling slightly.

“Oh?”

“I acted... uncharacteristically happy and possessive about those,” he said.

“Did you?” She liked how that sounded. At least this wasn’t completely platonic. It wasn’t a business deal. It was... it was kind of a business deal. She could admit that. But they were... friends. Kind of. He was a friend helping her out with something. There was *some* emotion here. A lot of it was lust, maybe, but it went a little beyond that. Fuck buddies didn’t sit in urgent care. Or offer to commit insurance fraud.

“I did,” he said. “And I think that made the guys think that something was going on that was more than... anything else before.”

She lifted her brows.

He blew out a breath, tucking his hands into his pockets. He looked a little uncomfortable or... vulnerable. That’s what it was. He looked vulnerable.

Josie sat up a little straighter.

“I like you,” he finally said. He was looking at her knees. “I like you, and I feel very strangely protective of you, and I’m... addicted to something here. Something that makes me want to stay and have more. More of... whatever it is.” His eyes lifted to hers. “And yes, the men who have been my friends and partners for nine years can tell all of that.”

Okay, *that* was all pretty great. It wasn’t madly in love and wanting to spend the rest of his life with her, but it wasn’t *I basically see you as a charity and need to make a big donation so I can sleep at night*.

“So they might believe this?”

“They might.” He shrugged. “I’ll make them believe it.”

She smiled. She believed *that*. Grant definitely had a way of presenting his arguments. She figured he didn’t lose very often.

“Will your friends believe it of you?”

“That I ran off for a romantic weekend with the guy who has *literally* swept me off my feet and ended up married to him?” She gave a soft chuckle. “I should actually probably be worried by how easily they’re going to believe that.”

He gave her a little grin. “So we can pull it off?”

“I think so.”

“We can fly to Chicago tomorrow,” he said. “I can make some calls and get something arranged with a judge. The seminar is on Saturday. We can stay Sunday and... see the city. And we can be home Sunday night in time for you to call and schedule your surgery Monday.”

See the city? She didn’t want to see Chicago. She wanted to spend the day in bed with her hot, would-be-by-then husband.

Then again... she kind of wanted to see the city. Her parents and grandparents both always wanted to travel and had never been able to. She was excited about the idea of the plane and everything that this would entail.

“That sounds good.” Then she tipped her head. “Will it look suspicious if we get married, and three days later I’m scheduling surgery?”

He shook his head. “Zoe saw your attack today at the bakery. We’ll just say that it happened again and the surgery was emergency.”

“But Cam knows we went to urgent care,” she pointed out.

“Cam won’t say anything,” Grant said easily.

“You’re sure?”

“I totally trust him.”

“Oh, I do too. But will he know he shouldn’t say something?” Josie wanted to know.

“I’ll fill him in.”

“So, Cam will know our secret. That we’re married for the insurance.”

“Yes. But he’ll have to help with the paperwork and everything anyway,” Grant said. “I’m hoping he can pull strings with one of the judges.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Grant moved to stand in front of her and tipped her chin up with his finger. “What’s wrong?”

She shrugged, feeling silly. “I just... I know it’s not going to be real, but I thought if we were the only ones that knew that then maybe it would... feel a little real.”

“It’s going to be real, Jocelyn,” Grant said. “The marriage will be real.”

“But it’s not...” She took a breath. She was *not* going to whine to him about how they weren’t in love. He knew that. And he did not want to be stuck, even temporarily, with a crazy, love-at-first-sight believer. “It’s not like we *want* to get married,” she finally said.

He crouched in front of her, taking her chin between his finger and thumb. “I do want to marry you. Maybe the reasons aren’t entirely conventional, but the desire to be your husband is real.”

She so appreciated him not saying *maybe I don’t love you but...* She smiled and leaned in, putting her lips against his. “Okay.”

He kissed her, then pulled back. “By the way, I’m staying tonight.”

“Good.”

“But no sex.”

She pouted. She knew that made sense. Her side was achy, and she was still freaked out, and things between them were a little weird. Mostly good weird, but still weird. Still... Grant in her bed all night without any of *that*?

“You need to rest tonight,” he said, smiling at her disappointed expression. “You’ve had a lot of pain, and it’s been emotional, and you need your sleep.”

He was even taking care of her now.

“And I’m going to text Aiden and have him tell Zoe that I’m whisking you off to Chicago tomorrow and that you won’t be in.”

“No!” She gripped his wrist. “No. Seriously, Grant. I have to work in the morning. It’s our busiest time, and it’s too late for her to get her mom to help fill in.”

“She knows you weren’t feeling well.”

“I would have told her by now if I couldn’t be there,” Josie insisted.

Zoe depended on her. Yes, it made taking time off and sick days complicated, but Buttered Up was Josie’s too. Not officially. It had been in the McCaffery family for three generations and the family was... traditional. Okay, that was a nice word for set in their ways. Stubborn. Stuck.

Still, Josie loved Buttered Up and working with Zoe, and she truly felt as invested in the bakery as if it *was* partly hers.

“I’ll be okay. I’ll rest, and I’ll eat carefully in the morning. We can head to Chicago in the afternoon.”

He didn’t look happy but he nodded. “Fine. But we’ll leave right after the morning rush. Not afternoon. Maggie can get there by then.”

It was a compromise. And Grant coming in and whisking her off for a surprise getaway would be an easier sell than Josie planning a trip. That just wasn’t something she would normally do. She’d never been on an airplane. Never been to a city bigger than Des Moines. Never gone out of town with a boyfriend.

It would also play into *something is different about Grant and Josie* that would help when they came back married.

“Fine, but you have to come in as if it’s a last-minute-surprise romantic trip,” she said. “You have to basically kidnap me.”

He gave her that half smile. “Hmm. Should I bring handcuffs and a blindfold? That could be fun later in the

weekend.”

She felt a hot shiver go through her. “I wouldn’t say no.”

Something flickered in his eyes as his smile grew. “Yeah. That’s something I really like about you.”

She smiled. “Okay, so if there’s no sex tonight and I’m going into work in the morning before we leave, you don’t *have* to stay.”

“Yes, I do. In case you get sick in the night or need something.”

He said it firmly, and she felt her head nodding. “Okay.”

It wasn’t needy of her to want him to stay. She just... wanted him to stay. She liked him, and she was kind of hoping this might turn into more than just a favor—and a little insurance fraud—between friends. She wasn’t going to lie about wanting it to be more. If it didn’t turn into more, fine. They were going in eyes-wide-open. She wasn’t going to trick him or manipulate him. But could she show him what a real relationship with her would be like and hope that he liked it? Why not?

They were going to be married. Might as well give it a fair shot. She couldn’t, in good conscience, stand up in front of her family and friends in a church and take wedding vows that she knew might not stick, but once she was bound to Grant legally, even if he saw it as temporary, she could definitely try to make the marriage real and enjoyable for the time they had. She knew a lot about happy marriages. Maybe not from her own experience, but she’d been around two, observing them daily, up close, her whole life.

Of course, she needed to get past the puking and stabbing pain and then the bloody bandages and possible post-op puking part of all of this first. She really needed to look some things up about gall bladder surgery. Still, it was probably the least sexy thing she’d ever done with a member of the opposite sex.

“Okay,” Grant repeated. “Great.” He seemed relieved she wasn’t arguing.

He stretched to his feet and toed off his shoes as he started to undo his jeans.

She blew out a breath. She'd really love to stay and watch him undress. "You're going to strip right in front of me and then tell me we can't have sex?" she asked, watching his long, thick fingers undo the buttons and zipper.

He paused. "I... yeah, I guess that's what I was doing."

"You could sleep in the guest bedroom," she suggested.

"I'm not doing that."

She looked up at him, just then aware that her gaze had still been on the fly of his jeans. "Why not?"

"You're going to be my wife. I'm sleeping in your bed."

Dammit. It wasn't *really* real but when he said "my wife" her heart flipped over. "Even when I'm sick?"

"Maybe especially when you're sick."

See? *That* was romantic. She didn't care what anyone said.

She took a deep breath. "And the sex thing tonight? Definitely off the table?"

"As much as I'd love to," he said. "I think it's best. It would really bother me for you to have pain in the middle of it."

She believed him. If nothing else, she already knew that Grant was very bothered by her pain. That was also romantic. "Okay. Then I'm going to go brush my teeth while you undress. You be under the covers when I get back." She pointed at the bed.

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled and stepped around him.

"Hey, Jocelyn?"

"Yeah?" She looked back. She was stunned by how much she liked seeing him undressing next to her bed. It was a physical reaction from her attraction to him, for sure, but there

was something softer too. A comfort in having him there and just a feeling of rightness.

“Could you put your pajamas on while you’re in there? I see what you mean about the stripping in front of each other.”

She grinned. “Well, I should maybe torture you a little since this is your rule.”

She loved the idea that she even *could* torture him. That his attraction to her was strong enough that watching her undress would have been tempting too.

“But,” she went on, “yes, I can do that.”

He blew out a breath. “Thank you.”

She put a hand on her hip. “You really thought I’d make you watch me undress?”

“You’re... sassier than I expected,” he told her. “The torture things seems like something you might do.”

Josie lifted an eyebrow. “I’m sassy?”

“You have some definite sass in you,” he said with a nod. And a tiny frown.

She liked that. She was nothing compared to Jane and Zoe. *Nothing*. Those two were fighters and the epitome of sassy. But it was inevitable that they would rub off on her a little, she supposed. “Well, thank you.”

His tiny frown grew bigger. “I’m not sure it’s a compliment. I don’t love it.”

“You mean, you don’t love it when I’m using the sassiness on you.”

“Exactly.”

She laughed. “You like when people listen to you.”

“Love it.”

“Yeah, I’ve already figured that out, and we haven’t even known each other that long.”

Why people *wouldn’t* listen to Grant she couldn’t really say. He wasn’t just bossy. He exuded confidence and

assuredness that was downright comforting. He was clearly intelligent and successful. Why wouldn't someone assume he knew what he was talking about?

But she hadn't just gone along with his ideas, had she? She'd fought him on going to urgent care. She'd fought him on letting him pay her bills. She'd been worried—for the right reasons—and wanting to take care of herself. She'd made him compromise and come up with a plan that she could live with. That wasn't perfect but... was kind of perfect in many ways. And when he had finally presented the compromise, where she got something she wanted and needed and so did he, she'd agreed.

She hadn't just fallen at his feet, but she hadn't stubbornly insisted she was right to the detriment of everything.

She'd like to think that was all very reasonable.

“And I can already tell that you're going to be difficult sometimes,” he said.

Josie nodded. “That's probably true.”

“I'll be sure to have the judge add the ‘honor and obey’ line to our wedding service,” he said, the corner of his mouth curling up.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, that will make me *really* compliant with my medical orders so that I heal and recover as quickly as possible.”

So that they could annul the marriage or whatever they were going to do as soon as possible.

She didn't add that part, but they both knew that's what she was referring to.

She didn't like that part. She'd admit it. She'd never imagined being someone who would marry for anything less than true love and forever.

But interestingly, Grant didn't laugh or smile or even nod agreement with her statement.

“I hope you're compliant and get better quickly because I hate seeing you not feeling well,” he said. Sincerely.

That. Was. Romantic. Dammit.

She sighed. She wasn't in love with him. She couldn't be. She wasn't even falling in love with him. Yet. But she wanted to fall in love with him.

"I'm going to brush my teeth. And change into my pajamas."

"I'll be right here when you get back."

It was going to be a long night lying next to her romantic-even-though-he-didn't-mean-to-be, saving-her-ass, mostly-naked, sort-of fiancé.

Chapter Eleven



It had been a long night.

He had not only spent it in a queen-sized bed—Grant couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in something smaller than a king—but he'd spent it next to the woman he wanted more than he'd ever wanted a woman. Who wanted to have sex with him. Who he was, basically, for all intents and purposes, engaged to.

She smelled good. She looked good. She felt good.

She'd snuggled right up next to him in the night as if they'd been sleeping next to one another for years. Her sweet ass pressed right into his crotch, her head tucked right underneath his chin, her feet sandwiched right between his. As if that was *her* spot and she'd never been more comfortable in her life.

He didn't know if she'd done it to torture him—since she'd kindly skipped the striptease—or if she was just a cuddly-touchy-feely type even when she was unconscious but... it was the most heavenly hellish way to spend the last three hours of his night.

He guessed it was the cuddly-touchy-feeling-type thing, honestly. She was bold and stubborn at times, but Jocelyn Asher was not vindictive. He didn't know how he knew that with such certainty, but he did.

When her alarm went off at the ungodly hour of 5 a.m., she stretched like a cat, rubbing that ass—and the rest of her—against him, probably without even realizing it.

Until she felt his erection pressing into her.

And became aware of his body snuggled tightly up against hers. His arm draped over her waist, his chin resting on the top of her head.

She froze. Then slowly turned. Her eyes widened, and she quickly whipped her head back to face away from him. Then she scooted out from under his arm and to the edge of the bed, nearly jumping off the mattress.

He blinked. “Um, good morning.”

She ran a hand through her hair and gave him a little smile. “Hi.” Then she spun on her heel and practically ran from the room.

Okay. So she hadn’t snuggled up against him on purpose. She’d seemed shocked to see him in her bed as a matter of fact.

Grant stretched and yawned and also got out of bed. Though less as if his ass was on fire and more like a normal person. He was dressed, but shoeless when Jocelyn came back into the room wrapped in a bathrobe, her hair in a ponytail.

He watched her for a sign about how to proceed here.

“So... hi,” she said again, this time with a smile.

“Everything okay?” he asked, moving around the edge of the bed. Maybe she’d felt sick and had run to vomit.

She nodded. “I’m not used to waking up with men... well, people of any gender... in my bed.”

He came to stand in front of her. “Can’t say I’m not happy to hear that,” he told her honestly.

She gave him a small smile. “I panicked about the morning breath.”

He nodded. “Understandable.”

Her eyes went wide, and her hand flew up to cover her mouth. “Was it bad?”

He caught her wrist and chuckled. “No.”

He started to lean in, but her hand went to his chest.

“I brushed my teeth,” she said.

“Okay.”

“You haven’t.”

Right. He grinned and straightened. “On my way.” He stepped around her but paused in the doorway. “Just for the record though, there’s *lots* of places I could kiss you in the morning where you won’t notice—or care about—morning breath.” Then he continued on to the bathroom.

It must have taken her a second to recover from that because as he was closing the bathroom door he heard her call, “There’s a new toothbrush in the second drawer!”

Grant chuckled. In fact, he found himself smiling through the entire teeth-brushing process and a quick shower.

By the time he made it to the kitchen, Jocelyn was dressed, had another apron on, and was making what appeared to be French toast.

Any man who claimed that the adage about getting to his heart through his stomach wasn’t true was a damned liar. At least in part. There was nothing bad about sleeping with a woman who could cook. Except maybe the extra couple of miles he’d need to add on to his daily run.

“You probably shouldn’t eat that,” he said, leaning onto the kitchen island, loving everything about watching her in the kitchen.

She looked over her shoulder. “I’m not. This is for you.”

“You’re making it just for me?” he asked, surprised and stupidly touched. She was just being a good hostess.

“I am.” She turned from the stove with a spatula holding two pieces of French toast and slid them onto a plate. They were perfectly golden brown. She turned to take a small saucepan from the stove and proceeded to spoon syrupy, cinnamon-smelling apple slices over the bread. Then she reached into a bowl and took a pinch of powdered sugar,

dusting it over the French toast before pushing it in front of Grant.

Then she went for the coffeepot.

Grant just stared at the plate in front of him. This wasn't just plain old French toast. Of course it wasn't. This was Jocelyn Asher. Nothing was *just plain old* with her.

"Wow," he finally said as she set a cup of black coffee in front of him. "This looks amazing."

She nodded. "I know you go for scones and the simpler muffins at the bakery, but I'm determined to win you over to the decadent side of life."

He nodded. "Done."

"You haven't even tasted it yet."

"I licked cake batter off your naked body. It doesn't get much more decadent than that." He picked up his fork as her mouth fell open.

He cut into the French toast and took a big bite.

Yep. Decadent. That was a pretty damned good word for it. He groaned.

Jocelyn gave a happy sigh.

He met her eyes as he chewed and swallowed. "You look happy."

"I *love* making people make that sound because of my food."

He almost made a quip about making him make that sound with other things, but he didn't. He just nodded. Cooking and baking, creating things that made people happy, was her life. She clearly did love it, and she was very, very good at it. "You keep doing this for me and this marriage is going to work out just fine," he told her with a grin, cutting into his breakfast again.

Her smile faded just a tad. If he hadn't been watching her, he wouldn't have even noticed.

“We can probably make it through my whole breakfast and brunch rotation once before it’s over. But I have a lot of great recipes,” she said.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to divorce you before I’ve tasted them all,” Grant teased, trying to keep the moment light. “But I wouldn’t mind extending it to include *this* at least one more time.”

Her smile was definitely smaller, but she nodded. “I can slip it in again, I’m sure.”

She turned back to the stove and made him three more pieces, which, of course, he had to eat regardless of calories or fat content. Not that he minded.

She started doing the dishes as he ate.

“What are you eating?” he asked.

“I already had some toast and some berries,” she said. She glanced over her shoulder at him. “I’m fine. I’m feeling good today.”

“Okay. Good. I don’t want you skipping meals because you’re afraid it’s going to flare up though.”

She nodded, reaching for the dish towel. “I’ll admit it’s in the back of my mind, but I’ll be good. I can be careful for a few days.”

Grant studied her. She was so trim. Not a bit overweight. Yet she clearly loved food. “Working around sweets all day doesn’t make you crave them less? You don’t get sick of them?” he asked.

She laughed at that. “No way. I love everything about baking and cooking and decorating. I don’t think I’d be as good at it if I didn’t like eating it all too. How could I make the raspberry filling perfect or put the right amount of butterscotch chunks in something if I didn’t appreciate how delicious it all was and could be with just a few more chunks or just a little bit more vanilla or just a dash more of cinnamon?”

Grant lifted a brow. “Aiden said that Zoe is a stickler for following her grandmother’s recipes at the bakery. In fact, he’s been a little frustrated by how adamant she is about not changing things down there. That’s why you guys doing cake pops and pies in a jar are such a big deal, right? Because it’s a change.”

Jocelyn nodded, her eyes on the pan she was drying.

“Are you telling me that you sometimes *change* the recipes, Jocelyn?” Grant asked, teasing, but curious about this woman.

Her cheeks were pink, but she still didn’t meet his gaze. “I don’t *change* them. I might *tweak* them a bit.”

“But Zoe doesn’t know.”

Jocelyn looked up. “Zoe isn’t as... particular about her baking as I am.”

He couldn’t help it. He grinned. “What does that mean?”

“She follows the recipes to a T. And they’re awesome. So there’s nothing wrong with that,” Jocelyn said. “But she doesn’t sample everything, and she doesn’t pay *that* much attention. So she... doesn’t know when I tweak things.”

“And your tweaks make them better?”

She nodded. “They do.”

“Better than tried-and-true recipes that have been used and become famous in this area for half a century?” He wanted her to say yes. With confidence. He loved seeing her sure of herself and her talents and willing to defend them.

Jocelyn thought for a moment. Then she said, “Yes.” She hesitated. “But you can’t tell Zoe.”

“I’ve already promised to keep your secrets,” he told her. “I’m one hundred percent Team Jocelyn. I like that you know when to tweak something, when to lean on your talent and knowledge.”

She took a deep breath. Then gave him a small smile. “I’ve never told anyone that. No one knows that the butterscotch

bars and the raspberry thumbprint cookies are so damned good because I actually changed the recipe slightly.”

“They give the credit to Zoe?”

“Well, to the family. Her grandmother, I guess, technically. Everyone knows that we use Letty’s recipes faithfully.” She shrugged. “Semi-faithfully.”

“Does it bother you that they don’t know it’s you behind the deliciousness?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said after a moment. “I consider Buttered Up my business too. Its success—or failure—impacts me directly. So I want it to do well. If people love the butterscotch bars, for whatever reason, it’s a good thing for all of us.”

He nodded. What she said had merit, of course. He just wasn’t used to people not wanting to be acknowledged and applauded.

“Is that also partly why you liked having the business on the side?” he asked. “Because then you can make whatever you want however you want to?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It really didn’t start that way. It really started as a way to help the people out who needed that stuff last minute or needed things that we don’t make at the bakery. We don’t make French-toast casseroles for brunches,” she said, pointing at Grant’s empty plate. “But a woman wanted to take one to her aunt’s house for Easter brunch. She’s a terrible cook but wanted to bring something homemade and asked if I could make it for her. She supplied the recipe and said she’d pay anything.” Jocelyn grinned. “I love trying new recipes, so it was a win win.”

“And you made it even better than the recipe, right?” Grant asked, knowing the answer. “You added something extra to it?”

She smiled. “I did. And when the woman called to tell me how everyone *raved* about it, it made me feel so good. I love when I can help people out, but also, of course, love hearing how much people love what I create. It’s just...” She shrugged

as if having a hard time finding the words. “It’s very fulfilling.”

Grant couldn’t help but smile back. She was so fucking beautiful and sweet. Yes, a little sassy too. But he was finding he liked that. A lot. That sauciness made her add extra butterscotch chunks to the butterscotch bars at the bakery. Behind her best friend’s back, maybe, but it wasn’t hurting anything. If anything, it was Zoe’s fault for being so damned stubborn. Grant had heard Aiden rant—affectionately but exasperatedly—about his fiancée’s obstinacy, so it wasn’t just Jocelyn that dealt with it.

But Jocelyn’s sweet side was very addictive. Even more so than her French toast.

“So, anyway, I don’t think I could ever be sick of the stuff I make.” She tilted her head and studied him. “But I couldn’t imagine spending every day doing something I didn’t really love and believe in. Isn’t that how you feel about your work?”

Grant didn’t have to think about that for long. “It is. I know it sounds superficial since I’m the money guy with Fluke, but I believe in the guys and the company, and they need me to be as successful as they are. So I’m doing my part. But that’s why I do the seminars too,” he added. “That’s really fulfilling for me. I know how you feel about doing something that makes other people happier and better.”

She gave him a soft smile. “I can’t wait to hear more about those,” she said. “I think. Are they about money and stuff?”

He chuckled. “They are.”

“I will *try* to be interested,” she said. “I promise.”

“Not your thing?” A lot of the women who came to his seminars didn’t think money and numbers were their things either. He wasn’t worried.

“Not even a little,” she said. “That is one reason I’m glad I’m not Zoe’s partner. She has to worry about all of that stuff.”

“Would you like to be Zoe’s partner?”

She shrugged. “I sometimes think so. But I think I am in all the ways that really matter. We work together to make the bakery the best it can be. Everyone knows I’m a part of it.”

“They don’t know how much you’re a part of it,” he couldn’t resist pointing out.

“They know I decorate all the cakes,” she said. “Zoe is great about that. She praises me all the time. Makes a huge deal out of it. She’d be lost without me. She could never do the cakes that I do.”

“But you don’t make the money that a partner would make. You don’t make decisions, like healthcare plans, that a partner would make.” Grant told himself he shouldn’t push like this. It wasn’t his business. Not really. He was solving her immediate problem. What happened long term was not his concern.

“Well, I wouldn’t be a very good partner,” Jocelyn said, pushing away from the counter. “I don’t like the money and business part, and if I had to review healthcare plans I’d fall asleep by page two, I’m sure.”

Grant bit his tongue. He couldn’t make her want to be Zoe’s business partner.

“Anyway, I need to get ready for work.” She started out of the kitchen.

“Right. As if you’re not being swept off on a surprise romantic weekend trip by your new boyfriend.”

She stopped and turned to look at him. “Are we officially calling you my boyfriend?” she asked.

“What else would I be?”

She shrugged. “I guess fuck buddies don’t go out of town together?”

She asked it as a question indicating that maybe she’d never had a fuck buddy before. Grant liked that.

“I suppose they could,” he said. “I mean, that’s a lot of what weekend getaways are comprised of, right?”

“Right.”

“But...” Fuck buddy didn’t seem right as a label for Jocelyn.

Sure, that’s what they’d done. Sure, that’s what he hoped they’d do again. And again and again and again. But there was more here. He couldn’t explain it. *He* wasn’t the in-love-with-love one of the two of them. But he felt something more, something softer and deeper, for her than just a desire to get naked.

“I like boyfriend better,” he finally said simply.

She seemed surprised but she nodded. “Okay. If I need to call you anything other than Grant, that’s what I’ll say.” She turned and started for the doorway again.

“I mean, at least until you’re back on Monday. Then you’ll be able to call me your husband.” He wasn’t sure why he’d felt compelled to add that.

She stopped again and turned back. “Right.” She looked at him for a long moment, then added, “But maybe just sticking with Grant as much as possible would be good all around.”

She didn’t want to call him her husband?

It was *ridiculous* for that to bother him. This was a short-term fix to a money problem. That was it. It probably took even really-in-love couples time to get used to calling each other *husband* and *wife*. By the time he and Jocelyn adjusted, her gall bladder would be healed, and she would have been his assistant for the three seminars or whatever she would agree would make them even financially.

But as he watched her leave the kitchen and listened to her climb the steps and move around on the second floor while he drank his second cup of coffee and then washed his plate and cup in the sink, he didn’t miss how domestic it all seemed.

And how nice it was.

Plus, that French toast? Definitely worth loving and cherishing her, if not until death, at least for a while.

* * *

“Hey, Josie, do you—”

Josie jumped and dropped two eggs on the hard tile floor of Buttered Up’s kitchen.

Make that two *more* eggs. Because she’d dropped three earlier when Zoe had barged through the swinging doors with an order for three-dozen pumpkin-spiced muffins that Mrs. Andersen needed tomorrow.

“*What* is going on with you today?” Zoe asked, eyeing the eggs.

“What do you mean?” Josie knelt to wipe up the mess.

“You’re so jumpy.”

“You’re the one who keeps coming in here and startling me,” Josie protested.

But that was a really weak comeback. And Zoe’s hand on her hip and raised eyebrow told Josie that her friend thought so too. Zoe came in and out through those swinging doors all the time, all day long, every day. There was no reason that it should be startling Josie. And honestly, Zoe hadn’t barged. Not this time or last.

Josie was anticipating Grant’s arrival to whisk her off on the “surprise” weekend trip to Chicago, and Josie knew that her chances of convincing Zoe that she’d known nothing about it were a million to one.

“I’m *startling* you?” Zoe asked. “Maybe if you had your mind here at work and not on the hot millionaire who’s been rocking your world, you wouldn’t be surprised when your partner walks into the kitchen of the bakery that you run together.”

Josie realized in that moment that Zoe often referred to them as partners. She often called Buttered Up *theirs*. And Josie had never noticed that it was strange. Or really thought about it being untrue.

But it was.

Grant had made her recognize that this morning.

Of course she knew that she didn't own a part of the bakery or have a financial stake in it. But it really had always felt like *theirs*—hers and Zoe's. Together.

Now, though, it felt weird to hear Zoe say it.

Josie frowned.

“You *are* thinking about Grant and sex!” Zoe said with a huge grin. “I knew it!”

“I'm... yes, I'm thinking about Grant,” Josie admitted. That much was true. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry. You getting laid so well that you can't concentrate on baking things you've made so many times you could do it in your sleep is so worth a few eggs!”

Josie blinked. “I'm... wait, what do you mean I can't concentrate? I dropped a couple of eggs but... oh my God, did I make something wrong?”

Zoe laughed. “The blueberry muffins had no blueberries in them, and you left the sugar out of the chocolate ones.”

“*What?*”

“It's okay,” Zoe assured her.

“It is not!” Josie couldn't believe it. She'd *never* messed up baking like that.

“It's fine. I just told everyone we were already sold out. Which was kind of true. We were sold out of the good ones.” Zoe gave her a wink, clearly enjoying this a lot.

Josie groaned. “This is such a mess.” Zoe didn't even know all the ways that this was a mess.

A hot, gorgeous, bossy, protective, sweet mess.

Grant Lorre was like a molten lava cake covered in ganache. A little hard on the outside, but softer once you got past that outer layer, and downright hot and even gooey inside.

Okay, gooey might be pushing it. But the hot was exactly right.

Not to mention addictive.

And maybe bad for her in vast quantities...

“Hi!”

Zoe and Josie both swung toward the back kitchen door as Zoe’s mom and little brother came through.

“Hi, guys!” Zoe greeted.

She didn’t seem surprised to see them. Of course, Maggie and Henry came and went freely from the family bakery but it was early. The morning rush would have just died down, and this was the time Zoe and Josie spent cleaning up, restocking, and then diving into the orders that had been placed. It wasn’t as busy as the six-to-nine time frame, but they stayed pretty busy from six to noon every day. It wasn’t the best time for visits.

“Where do you want us to start?” Maggie asked, moving to the sink to wash her hands.

“You’re helping too?” Zoe asked her little brother.

Henry shrugged. “Mom said I can do cookies.”

Zoe nodded. “Great. But they can’t all be trolls.”

Josie laughed at that. The last cookies Henry had decorated in the bakery—a skill that Maggie insisted all three of her children learn—had been green blobs with eyes. He’d claimed they were trolls, but everyone knew they were Henry-didn’t-want-to-decorate-cookies cookies.

“Fine. I’ll do some ogres too,” Henry said with a grin. “But I’m going to need gray frosting.” He looked at Josie. “Do you have gray?”

Josie shook her head. “Sorry. All out. I made a bunch of ogres earlier this week.” Of course they *could* have gray frosting. They could mix any color. But Henry needed no encouragement.

He grinned. “Sure you did.”

“How about butterflies?” Josie teased. “Or teacups? Mrs. Landers loves to have teacup-shaped sugar cookies with her tea.”

Henry wrinkled his nose. “I have no idea how to decorate those.”

Maggie nudged him toward the sink. “Of course you could,” she said. “But I think Henry can do chocolate chip and peanut butter and the others that don’t need to be decorated. That might just be best for everyone.”

Zoe laughed. “I don’t know. I have to admit that we sold a bunch of those troll cookies.”

“All to Henry’s friends,” Josie reminded her.

“Still.” Zoe shrugged. “They had real money.”

They all laughed, but then Josie had to ask, “But why are you guys here helping—”

The back door opened again and a head poked through. “Hello?”

“Hey, Kelsey!” Zoe motioned for Jane’s little sister to come in.

“Jane said to come to the back, but I wasn’t sure if I should just walk in or what,” the slender brunette said, coming through the door. There was a pretty blond with her. “You guys know Aspen, my stepsister, right?” Kelsey asked.

“Sure. Hi, Aspen,” Zoe said. “This is so great. Welcome.” She crossed to give Kelsey a hug, then pulled Aspen in for a quick one as well. “I’m so happy that you’re doing this. It will be fun!”

She took Kelsey and Aspen over to the sink and showed them where to wash up and then grabbed them each an apron. Maggie and Henry had already moved to the other side of the kitchen. Maggie greeted the girls too, but she was busy pulling out ingredients and utensils for cookie making.

Josie just watched it all, stunned, and confused.

For one, what were they all doing here? For another, Aspen was here too? With Kelsey? The two girls, only a year apart in high school, fought all the time. Okay, lately they'd been doing better according to Jane. Dax had a lot to do with that apparently. But Josie had never expected to see them out together, just the two of them, on purpose.

Clearly, Jane had recruited them for... whatever this was.

Zoe came back to the middle island. Apparently she was going to teach Kelsey and Aspen cake pop making.

“What is going—”

But the back door opened *again*. This time Josie's mouth actually dropped open.

“Hi, everybody!”

It was Paige.

Her sister.

“Paige! What are you doing here?” Josie rounded the island to go to her sister.

Paige was four years younger than Josie. Their other sister, Amanda, was four years older than Josie. She was married with two kids and was a teacher. She had her shit altogether. She was the epitome of put together and living the small-town dream. Josie was... where she was. Doing okay. Figuring it out. Paige, on the other hand, was a... free spirit. That was how their grandmother referred to her anyway. She wasn't figuring anything out. Nor was she trying.

She owned the yoga studio in town, Cores and Catnip. It was actually a yoga studio and cat café. It was *actually* a yoga studio only because Paige had to have a place to keep her cat collection, and to afford them. And yes, the “collection” was a collection of real cats.

She was a twenty-one-year-old, crazy cat lady.

And completely unapologetic about it.

When people teased her that she'd never find a man who would tolerate that many cats, she always said, “Good.” And

then got another cat.

In fairness, she worked to adopt the cats out to new homes. But if they didn't get adopted, she certainly wasn't upset.

The craziest thing about Paige being here now, however, was that she didn't eat white flour or sugar and never baked with either of them.

She was a vegetarian and baked only with things like almond and coconut flours. She never ate from Buttered Up.

"I'm here to help," Paige said with a bright smile. That seemed genuine.

Josie hugged her gorgeous, young sister. "Help bake?"

"Well..." Paige looked over at Zoe. "Or maybe clean up or wait on customers or whatever."

Zoe grinned at her. "I would let you bake if you want to."

"I'm willing to try."

"But you can't sneak in any artificial sweeteners," Zoe said.

"Stevia comes from a plant," Paige told her. "Just like sugar comes from sugarcane."

"You still can't use it."

Paige sighed. "Fine."

Josie shook her head. This seemed like a very bad idea.

"I don't understand what's going on at all."

"Grant set this up," Zoe said, her eyes twinkling. "But that's all I should say."

Grant had set this up? Because he knew that Josie was uncomfortable leaving Zoe shorthanded. That made her heart flip slightly.

"We can tell her now."

The deep voice rumbled from the doorway leading from the front of the bakery.

Josie pivoted to face Grant.

He had her so mixed up that she was leaving the blueberries out of the blueberry muffins, but just looking at him made her heart thump hard. She gave him what was surely a goofy smile. “Hi.”

“Hi. I have a surprise for you,” he said. He was also smiling.

It was one of those smiles that a few weeks ago had been impossible to imagine on his face. But damn, he looked so good wearing it.

“Oh?” She played along.

“I’m taking you to Chicago for the weekend,” he said, coming into the kitchen.

Josie was very aware that everyone had stopped what they were doing and were watching her and Grant closely. She widened her eyes, focusing on him, determined to make this look convincing. “Really? Chicago? What for?”

“A romantic weekend away,” he said, coming to stand so that she had to turn slightly, putting her back mostly to the room.

She relaxed then. Without them all able to see her face it was easier to pull this off. She appreciated that he’d realized that. She smiled up at him. “That sounds amazing.”

He nodded. “I have a seminar on Saturday. I was hoping you’d come with me, and we could spend some time together just the two of us before and after the seminar. I’ll show you the city. We can go to some of my favorite places. There’s a fabulous restaurant that overlooks the city that I think you’ll love. Their desserts are to die for.”

Josie tipped her head. That all did sound amazing. “I love dessert.”

“I know.”

His voice was a little gruffer with that reply, and she wondered if he’d done that on purpose. It caused heat to skitter down her spine anyway.

“So when are we leaving?” she asked. She glanced over her shoulder. “Looks like things are covered here.”

Everyone was watching them. All of the women in the room were watching with wide eyes and big smiles. If she wasn’t mistaken, even Paige was looking a little swoony at all of this. Henry was less impressed. But he was an eleven-year-old boy. She knew that Grant could win him over too if he started talking about the video game he and the guys had developed. It was Henry’s favorite thing in the whole world.

Grant had officially won over the entire room.

“Right now,” Grant said. “I have a bag packed for you in the car.”

She looked back up at him. “Wow, really?” She’d packed the bag that morning before leaving the house.

“Yep. Everything is taken care of. All you have to do is say yes.” He held out his hand.

Saying yes to this man wasn’t difficult. And she was afraid that was going to be a problem. But she didn’t even hesitate a second before taking his hand and saying, “Yes.”

There was a collective happy sigh in the room, and Josie rolled her eyes at Grant even though she was smiling.

“I’ll bring her back safe and sound,” Grant said to the room at large.

“When?” Zoe asked, her tone teasing.

Grant looked down at Josie. “I think I’ll keep her as long as she’ll let me.”

Ugh. See? That was romantic.

It was fake, of course. For the sake of their audience—who gave another collective sigh—but it still sounded good. And he was also referring to their trip. Not to their marriage—that no one else in the room even knew was on the horizon. Not even to their relationship. Just this trip.

Still, even Josie fell for it. For a second.

She kind of wished Jane was here. Zoe had never been a huge romantic before Aiden, but she was getting soft. Jane was still more practical, even with the love of her life, Dax around. She was softer around the edges too, but she wasn't the swoony-sigh type.

“Well, let's see what you've got, Mr. Lorre,” she said, trying to sound flirtatious and not like she was torn between melting into a puddle of goo and crying because this wasn't even real.

“Oh, I've got a lot.” He started tugging her toward the front of the bakery, not even realizing how what he'd just said sounded.

Josie giggled and looked over her shoulder. “Uh, see you?”

“Have fun!” Zoe waved at her, actually *beaming*.

Her friend and partner was so happy for her. It actually made Josie's heart twinge a little knowing that this was all made up because she needed her stupid gall bladder taken out.

The most *un*-romantic thing ever.

Chapter Twelve



“I can’t believe they all showed up,” she said, tripping after Grant as he strode through the bakery toward the front door.

He lifted a hand to George and Phil as he looked down at her. “They all love you.”

She nodded. “Yes. But... Zoe has to love me *a lot* to put up with Paige in the kitchen and Kelsey and Aspen together. The chances of them making it a couple of hours in a confined space without fighting are very slim.”

Grant chuckled. “You’ll have to tell me more about Paige.”

“Okay.” She smiled. She’d love to know more about his family too.

It looked like they were about to have a lot of together time. She supposed they could spend some of it talking. They were going to be *married* after all.

“Hey, Josie!” George called.

She looked back as Grant held the front door open for her. “Yes?”

“Maybe take your apron off.”

She looked down. Sure enough she was still wearing her frilly yellow Buttered Up apron. She grinned and looked up at Grant. “Grant likes me in aprons though.”

He gave a little growl. “Well, when you’re in *only* an apron.” He said it low enough for her ears only.

Though the looks George and Phil were giving her when she looked back at the older men told her they had an inkling about what Grant had said. Well, they'd both been married for a very long time before losing their wives within a few months of one another.

She giggled. "Maybe I'll just... bring it along." She reached behind her back and untied it.

"Good idea," Grant said.

"Very good," George agreed with a nod.

She blushed and giggled again. Maybe this wouldn't be all bad. It was already kind of fun.

She, of course, couldn't get used to being whisked off, well, anywhere. The kind of guy she was likely to end up with long term would be like her dad and grandpa. A salt of the earth, blue-collar guy who worked hard and was sweet and romantic but could only get her as close to Paris as a movie screen. But that would be enough. Because love was the most important thing, and knowing that he would be giving her as much as he possibly could would mean more than a guy like Grant dropping a few thousand dollars on a weekend getaway. Those few thousand dollars were like pocket change, and weekend getaways were as common for him as going to the movies was for her parents.

She had to remember that.

But when he escorted her onto the private plane waiting for them on the runway in Dubuque and offered her a glass of champagne, and then after landing, tucked her into the back seat of an actual limousine, and then walked with her hand in hand through the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Chicago, and then opened the door to the penthouse suite, she knew she was going to have a very hard time remembering.

Especially when his answer to her question about why they were staying in a hotel when he lived here was, "Because I figure you've never stayed in a penthouse suite in a Four Seasons Hotel in the downtown of a big city," as he took to her

to the window and pulled the curtains back to show her the view of the city and Lake Michigan.

Because that was freaking romantic.

He was making this trip into something special for her. Even if it was fake, or at least temporary, and the reason for them getting married was *not* romantic, he was making the process of doing it romantic.

She wasn't going to have the huge ceremony and the gorgeous dress and the bridesmaids and flowers, but the penthouse suite in the Four Seasons was not bad. At all.

Josie looked up at him. "Wow."

He grinned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. This is pretty amazing." She looked around. The cream upholstery, the gold accents, the marble countertops. "Though flying on a private plane and the penthouse suite, for my very first time, is probably going to ruin me forever."

Grant paused and gave her a little frown. "Your first time?"

She nodded. "My first time flying. Or staying in a hotel."

"That was your first time flying? Ever?" he asked. "And you've *never* stayed in a hotel?"

Josie shrugged. "That was my first time. This is my first time." She swept her hand to encompass the suite. "I've stayed in two *motels* in my life. One was a family road trip to Six Flags. The other was a school trip in high school with our dance team." She grinned. "We made it to State."

"What's the biggest city you've ever been in until now?" he asked.

"Des Moines," she said.

Grant's eyes widened. Then slowly his mouth lifted into a sexy smile. "This is going to be fun."

"What is?"

"Spoiling you."

She felt her stomach flip.

Yeah, see? That was also romantic.

Dammit.

* * *

Grant couldn't believe how fun it was to spoil Jocelyn.

He'd bought things for women before. Of course. Occasionally. All right, usually it was just dinner. Tickets to shows once in a while. Sometimes flowers. Jewelry a couple of times.

Nothing compared to watching Jocelyn first step into the massive bedroom in the suite—it was one of two, but there was no way she was sleeping anywhere but in that master suite with him—and see the dress he'd had delivered for her.

Zoe, through Aiden, had helped him with the size, and he'd had Piper call and order something appropriate for a night out wining and dining—and getting married. Yeah, he'd had to confess to Piper that he and Jocelyn were eloping.

The thing about Piper was that nothing any of the guys did fazed her. Sure, it wasn't usually Grant doing crazy, spontaneous things. He was sure she'd blinked a couple of times when he'd first made his request, trying to figure out if he was serious. But Grant was always serious. And as crazy as eloping with a woman he'd known for about a month was, it really wasn't that nuts compared to some of the stuff Ollie and Dax had pulled. So Piper, being unflappable and amazing, had helped him with multiple last-minute details. A dress, a ring, flowers.

It was also the reason for his reaction when Whitney had texted him, *This contest to find the new snack cake is out of hand. Already. We can't do it.* First he'd asked why, and she'd replied, *Ollie is... a lot.* Grant had simply laughed—because it was true—and replied, *Get Piper to help you with Ollie.* Hell, that's what he would have done if he was there and was finding the project getting big and crazy. Whitney hadn't been

around Ollie long enough to understand that projects *always* got big and crazy when he was involved. She needed to learn now how to use all of the resources at her disposal. And Piper was definitely the best way to handle Ollie.

Piper could do anything. Even pull off a wedding with a few hours' notice.

This wasn't the wedding of Josie's dreams. It wasn't the forever wedding. But he wanted to make it nice for her. Something to make her smile. Something to make her even think back on it in the future as something a little more than a business arrangement to get her gall bladder fixed.

He didn't spend time analyzing *why* he wanted this day to be a fond memory. He just did. So he was making it happen. With help.

Piper had been able to do everything but one major detail. That, he'd needed Cam for—getting Judge Warren Perkins to marry them after hours.

Thankfully, Cam wasn't *always* an asshole. Or at least, he was an asshole to the right people, and Judge Perkins generally agreed that those people were assholes, so he and Cam were friends. Ish.

Jocelyn gasped and then spun to face him from the foot of the bed. Her hands were over her mouth, her eyes wide.

The dress was hanging from the outside of the armoire. It was white with shimmery threads of silver through it. The hem was uneven and would “swirl around her ankles,” according to Piper. It was a sheath dress so would fit to her body and fall straight to the ground. The bodice was a halter style that hooked behind her neck and left her shoulders and arms bare. There was also a light silvery shawl to go with it to keep her shoulders warm when they were outside or if there was a draft in the restaurant.

Grant knew next to nothing about dresses, but Piper had rattled all of that off to him as he'd looked at the photo she'd sent to his phone.

All he'd cared about was the look on Jocelyn's face when she saw it. His instructions to Piper were, "something that will make her feel like a princess."

"Oh my God, Grant!" Jocelyn's hands finally fell to her sides, and she crossed to the dress. "This is completely gorgeous."

"Good." He crossed to the dresser and lifted the royal blue velvet box. He turned with it, opening the top when she looked over.

It was a diamond tiara. It was on loan from the jewelry store where he'd dropped more money than he should have on a ring. The jeweler had been happy to let him borrow the tiara for the evening.

Jocelyn gasped again.

"We have to give this back," Grant said with a tiny smile. "But the dress is yours."

She looked from the tiara to the dress then back again.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say yes that you'll marry me. Tonight." He set the tiara back on the dresser and reached into his pocket and withdrew the ring, holding it up.

She was going to get to keep the ring too. He was hoping she'd sell it, or maybe keep it in a safe deposit box as an insurance policy in case she ever needed it. He knew she wouldn't take a stack of cash or a check from him, but he wanted to be sure she was taken care of even after her gall bladder was out and those bills were paid.

"Tonight?" She stared at the ring.

"I have a judge waiting in his chambers for us," Grant said, stepping forward and taking her hand. "We can be Mr. and Mrs. Lorre by the time we go to the best dinner you've ever eaten, overlooking this gorgeous city." He tugged her forward and slipped the ring halfway down her finger. "And then I'll bring you back here to this suite, strip that dress off of you,

and make you come on eight-hundred-thread-count satin sheets for the first time.”

She looked from the ring up to his eyes. Her lips tipped into a smile, and he was certain she had no idea how fucking sexy that smile was.

“Yes,” she said as she pushed her finger the rest of the way through the ring.

His heart thumped against his ribs, and he had to admit that no business deal had ever done that to him before.

“Get dressed,” he told her. “We have a date with a judge.”

“You’re wearing a tux, right?” she asked.

“I am, actually.” He’d wondered if it was overkill, but Piper had insisted he *had* to wear it, so he’d had his housekeeper deliver it from his apartment.

“Oh good,” Jocelyn said, her smile bright.

He lifted a brow. “Yeah?”

“Definitely. I can’t wait to see how hot you look in a tux.”

“You’ve thought about that?”

“Of course. And of getting you *out* of a tux.” Her smile was flirty and sexy.

He watched her move toward the dress and draw a finger down the front of it.

“I hope you’re okay with us taking dessert to go tonight,” he said, his voice husky.

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Why is that?”

“I’d really love to cover you in chocolate again. On those eight-hundred-thread count sheets.”

But she shook her head. “Oh no, Mr. Lorre.”

“No?” He frowned.

“For one, I intend to roll *all over* those sheets and I don’t want them all messy. And two, that look on your face says there’s a chance this dress might get messy too, and there’s *no*

way I'm letting that happen." She turned back to the dress, stroking it again.

"I can make you not care about the sheets, and I can buy you another dress," he practically growled.

"Nope. I want this one," she said, not even looking back at him that time.

Feeling challenged, Grant crossed to where she was standing, in three long strides. He put his hands on her hips and pulled her back against him. "Or I could just keep you here now, tie you to that bed, order chocolate cake from room service, and make you come over and over again while looking at this dress from across the room."

She pressed her ass against his cock. He was already getting hard just thinking about having her again. He'd truly been concerned last night, wanting her to rest, but she seemed fine today, and he wasn't sure he was going to be able to wait until after her surgery. Unless she was actually in pain, of course.

"You would deny me the pleasure of this dress? And stripping me out of it?" she asked, wiggling her butt against him.

He moved his hand to cup her through her clothes, rubbing the heel of his hand against her clit. She gasped and he said against her ear, "There's so much pleasure to come that I'm not worried."

She leaned back into him, her hand covering his.

It was her left hand. The hand with the diamond ring now on it.

Something about that grabbed him in the gut and twisted. This felt so damned good.

Maybe it wasn't till death—and they were going to have to leave that out of the vows because he didn't make promises he couldn't keep—but for however long it was going to be, he wanted it to be good.

He moved his hands. One slid up to cup her breast, teasing her nipple through the fabric of her dress. The other started bunching the skirt of the dress. He really loved that she wore dresses. It fit her. It was sweet and feminine. Jocelyn was smart and could be feisty, but she just wasn't the power-suit type. And he liked that. If he wanted a woman who could wear the hell out of heels and pantsuits, he could pick from about forty contacts in his phone right now.

Jocelyn was softer but no less strong. She knew what she wanted, where her loyalties lay, what was worth fighting for. They were just very different things than he was used to.

"Hold it up," he told her gruffly as her skirt bunched above her panties.

She did, gripping the fabric and letting her head fall back against his chest.

He slid his hand into her panties, finding her slick and hot.

Her moan as he grazed her clit shot straight to his cock. He pressed his middle finger against her clit and then slid into her tight heat. Her pussy gripped him and he pulled out, dragging his finger against her G-spot, then thrusting in again deep. He looked at her. Her eyes had drifted shut.

"Open your eyes and look at your wedding dress," he told her.

He liked calling it that more than he should.

She did, focusing on the white sheath.

"Now tell me, if I wanted to fuck you while you were still wearing that, would you tell me no?" he asked, his thumb rubbing her clit as he added a second finger.

"*Grant,*" she gasped.

"Tell me, Jocelyn," he growled. "If I wanted this sweet pussy while you were wearing the dress you're going to become my wife in, would you deny me?"

Damn, he sounded like a freaking caveman. He felt like it too. She was going to become his wife legally, yes, but only legally. And only temporarily.

Why did it feel like all of this—the words *wedding* and *wife* and *married*—mattered so much?

He continued to stroke her, tugging on her nipple, his fingers thrusting deep. He put his mouth against her neck and kissed her.

“I wouldn’t be able to,” she finally said breathlessly. “I wouldn’t be able to say no.”

“Exactly,” he told her, feeling satisfaction rip through him. “Because you want me more than a damned dress.”

“Yes,” she gasped, gripping his wrist where he was thrusting into her. “Yes.”

“Good. Don’t forget that.” He pulled his hand away from her body.

She wobbled a little as he let her go. Once he knew she was upright to stay, he turned toward the bathroom, with a little smirk.

Three.

Two.

One.

“*Grant!*”

He looked back but continued toward the bathroom. “Yes?”

“You... that was... you stopped!”

“Yes. But I didn’t stop until I made my point.”

“Your *point?*” Her voice rose on the last word. “That’s what that was?”

“Of course.”

“Of *course?*”

He wouldn’t have been surprised if she stamped her foot. He hid his grin by ducking into the bathroom. He washed his hands—though really he wanted to lick every drop of sweetness from his fingers and then put his face between her legs and lick her until she came hard and loud.

Then he walked back into the bedroom, drying his hands with the hand towel.

Her cheeks were pink—partially from lust and probably partially from anger—and her eyes were bright.

“That was mean.” She crossed her arms.

“It wasn’t as mean as telling me that you were more concerned about keeping the dress clean than you were about fucking me on our wedding night,” he told her.

He tossed the towel back in on the counter next to the sink and then crossed his arms as well.

“I never said I wouldn’t do that,” she said, her chin lifting.

“You said you wouldn’t let me cover you in chocolate,” he pointed out.

“But that’s...” She shook her head and then laughed softly. “That’s a deal breaker, huh?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Maybe.”

“Or is it that you’re just so used to getting your way that you’ll dig in on even the smallest thing?” she asked, walking toward him.

“I do really like getting my way.”

“So maybe I need to show you that letting me have *my* way sometimes is good too.”

“Not if it means—”

But she reached behind her and unzipped her dress then, and Grant forgot what he was about to say. The dress dropped to a little puddle of pale-blue-with-yellow-flowers fabric at her feet. She stepped out of it and reached to unhook her bra. That also fell to the floor.

Grant’s mouth went dry. He had to adjust his fly as his cock realized that maybe it didn’t have to wait until after dinner.

That had absolutely been the plan. It had been a good one too. Sweet. Romantic. Wait until they were married, wine and

dine her, carry her over the threshold, all of that.

But while Jocelyn Asher was definitely sweet and romantic, she wasn't *only* that, and he should probably remember that.

"I'm just trying to show you that letting me get completely naked before you fuck me would be fine too," she said.

"I—" Grant had no idea what he'd thought he was going to say.

She smiled as if she knew she was short-circuiting his brain and went to the foot of the bed. She reached for the duvet, sweeping it to the side. Then she ran her hand over the top sheet. "Eight-hundred count, huh?" she asked, looking back at him.

He'd been studying the way that position made her breasts swing and the curve of her ass. He met her gaze. "Yeah." He didn't give a fuck about the sheets.

"I bet these feel amazing on bare skin." She stood and hooked her fingers in the tops of her panties, pushing them over her hips and down her legs.

As she bent to unhook them from her foot, Grant caught a gorgeous glimpse of the pink between her legs.

Yeah, this woman was going to get anything and everything she ever wanted from him. And she knew it. And he didn't care.

"You could stay just like that," he said, pulling the belt from his pants.

She looked back. And shook her head. "I want to feel these amazing sheets. All over me."

He stalked toward her, but she'd already sat down and then lay back. She stretched, rubbing her body—her completely naked, mouth-wateringly gorgeous body—over the sheets like a cat.

"Oh, Grant, you're right. These are amazing."

He threw his belt to the side, toed off his shoes, tossed a condom onto the mattress next to her hip, shrugged out of his shirt, and unzipped his pants. Then he grabbed one of her ankles and tugged her twisting body to the end of the bed. "Come here."

"Okay." She gave him a sweet smile.

Sweet, his ass. She knew she had him wrapped around her finger, and she was loving every second of it.

Well, so was he.

He shoved his pants to the floor and gave his cock a firm stroke. He watched her watching his hand on his cock. Maybe he needed to regain a little of the upper hand here.

"Come here," he said in a low, firm voice.

"I'm pretty much here," she said, moving one of her thighs to the side, giving him a heart-stopping view. She even ran a finger over her clit.

Oh, he could watch that all day.

He reached for her hand, pressing it more firmly against her pussy. "More."

She rubbed again, then dipped lower. Her breathing hitched, and her other hand found her breast, tugging on the nipple.

"God, yes. Fucking gorgeous," he told her.

She moved her legs restlessly. "I want you, Grant."

"You can have me," he told her, running her finger down and pressing it into her pussy.

"Now. Please."

"Give me your mouth," he told her, meeting her eyes.

Her pupils dilated and she nodded. She rolled to her stomach and moved to the end of the mattress as he took his cock in hand again. He guided the head to her mouth and she dutifully opened.

“Fuck, Jocelyn. Yesss,” he hissed as his head slid between her lips.

Her smaller hand wrapped around his base as she licked his crown, then sucked slightly on the tip.

“Harder, honey,” he urged, placing his hand around hers and his other hand on the back of her head.

She sucked harder and then opened her mouth wider, letting him slide deeper.

He felt the heat and pleasure to the soles of his feet. Grant gritted his teeth, holding back from thrusting hard into her throat.

He cupped her head and kept hold of his cock giving her only a few inches. But her greedy mouth, the way she licked and sucked and moaned around him, made it the best blow job he'd ever had. She was enthusiastic, if not overly skilled, and just being here with her, the way she'd turned the tables on him, the way she flirted and teased and seemed to relish being able to make him growl and get graphic, made this all so different, and so much more than it had ever been before.

“Need you.” He pulled his cock from her mouth and flipped her backward.

“Yes,” she agreed, spreading her legs and reaching for him.

But he wanted to see every inch of her. “Like this.” He cupped her ass and brought her to the very edge of the mattress so that he was standing and she was laid out on her back on the bed. Taking in every glistening, sweet, pink inch of her, he donned the condom, and then sank into her slowly.

“Oh, Grant, oh, yes, oh, please.” She panted in between each word, her body gripping his tightly.

Again, he found himself gritting his teeth to keep from just slamming into her and barreling ahead.

This position was heaven. He could see everything. Every bounce of her breasts, the flush that started on her chest and climbed her throat, her hands gripping the sheets, the way her mouth fell open to make the incredible sounds she made, her

gorgeous blue eyes locked on his. He held her thighs in his hands, keeping her wide. She had little leverage, he was completely in control, and yeah, he felt like she had full command of everything—his body, his mind, his heart.

This was dangerous.

And nothing could have stopped him.

“Yes, Grant, oh yes!” Suddenly she was going over the edge, crying out, her body clamping down on his.

Grant thrust hard and fast, feeling the answering ripples of his own orgasm starting.

“Oh yes!” she shouted, coming hard, her neck arching, her upper body lifting off the bed. One hand still gripped the sheet, but the other reached for him, grabbing his arm as if needing to touch him.

“Josie!” Grant felt his body erupt, pleasure blasting through him, as her body gripped him, milking him hard.

He braced a hand on the mattress next to her, letting her leg dangle over the end of the bed.

He dragged in gulps of air, watching her work to catch her breath. Her hair was wild, her skin pink, her limbs loose, lying on the bed as if spent.

He realized he hadn’t even kissed her. He remedied that. Leaning over, he met her lips with his. He felt her smile against his mouth, then return the lazy, deep kiss. Their tongues stroked, and her arms lifted to wrap around his neck, pulling him down on top of her.

As their bodies cooled, they kissed and ran their hands over each other’s bodies languidly.

Finally, Grant lifted his head. “Huh, sex with you is good even without chocolate.”

She laughed. “Told you.”

He squeezed her ass. “I still want to fuck you in your wedding dress.”

She looked puzzled. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” He couldn’t explain it. He ran a hand over her hip. “There’s something about it being your wedding dress that makes me feel like I need to *claim* you. Something about the ring. The whole thing.”

She didn’t laugh. Or look concerned. She just studied him. Then she nodded. “Yeah. You know what? I want to ride you in the back of the limo with you in your tux too.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You do?” That sounded fucking amazing.

“Yes. While we drive around this city,” she said, nodding.

“Why is that?”

“So that when you wear it in the future, or are in a limo again, or drive around downtown, you think of me,” she said.

And that was it. He wanted to make memories. He wanted that dress to be *all* about everything he *could* give her. She’d never traveled before. Not *really*. She hadn’t been pampered and spoiled. She hadn’t been naughty in a penthouse suite. She hadn’t been risqué in the back seat of a limo. She hadn’t been married before.

He didn’t know if she’d have any of those things again. But he wanted her to remember these firsts, and him, either way.

“I want you to ride me in the back of the limo with me in my tux too,” he said.

“Yeah?” She looked excited and mischievous.

He loved that look on her. “Very much so.”

“Then let’s go get married so we can do that!” she said.

He laughed. “Well, that’s one reason to get married.”

Jocelyn scrambled off the bed. And gave him a hell of a view in the process.

Grant groaned. “Maybe we should shower separately. So Judge Perkins doesn’t have to wait all night for us.”

She paused in the bathroom doorway and gave him a sexy look. “Okay. But *next time* I shower, I want you in here with me.”

“Done.” He wasn’t sure he had the willpower to stay out next time, frankly.

He wasn’t going to think about the willpower he may, or may not have, when it came time to stay away from her for good. After all of this was over. After she was healthy and stable. After he was back in Chicago again. Alone.

Chapter Thirteen



There were worse ways to get married.

No one had lost a bet. There were no shotguns involved. No one was drunk.

And damn, her groom looked *good* in a tux. So good. Grant looked good all the time, but when she'd stepped out of the suite's bedroom in her shimmery white dress, she'd actually stopped in her tracks at the sight of him.

It was the tux in part. The man filled it out and wore it with the ease that the men she knew wore t-shirts and denim. But he'd also been wearing a smile that had caused her heart to skip a beat. A smile that had been quickly replaced by a look that was a combination of awe and heat.

"You look gorgeous, Jocelyn," he'd said in a gruff, low voice that had made her stomach flip.

She *loved* this dress. She never wanted to take it off. It glided over her skin like butter. It clung to her in all the right places but she didn't feel like she had to suck anything in or prop anything up with spandex or special bras. She was wearing a halter bra that she'd found in the top drawer along with a tiny silk thong. That was it. Two skimpy pieces of lingerie, the dress, and a pair of heels that she was going to beg to keep after the annulment or divorce or whatever. They were the prettiest shoes she'd ever worn. She wasn't a high-heels kind of girl, but these shoes could change her mind. They were princess shoes. The whole thing was a princess ensemble. Including the freaking tiara.

That she had to give back. She knew that. But that wasn't stopping her from loving every second it was on top of her head.

She felt sexy and beautiful and confident. And when Grant looked at her the way he'd looked at her in the living room of the suite, she knew that tonight was going to be magical.

She'd pushed the thoughts of gall bladders and hospital bills to the back of her mind. She'd crossed the room—she'd freaking *glided* across that room—she'd tipped her head to look up at the downright dashing man standing there, and she'd said, “I love all of this. Thank you.”

It wasn't I love *you*, but it was honest, and it was appropriate, and it was better than *thank you for keeping me out of debt*.

“You are very, very welcome.”

And that had seemed very honest as well. He'd offered his arm very gallantly and escorted her to the elevator.

“If I hadn't already been determined to take you out on the town,” he'd added as they waited for the elevator, “this would have done it. I'm definitely going to be showing you off.”

She'd smiled at that. She wasn't sure she'd ever been shown off before.

He'd leaned in just as the elevator car arrived. “And if I hadn't already been determined to fuck you in that dress, this would have done it.”

Then the doors swished open, and he nudged her inside, with her heart pounding and her body warm and her new thong damp. But before she could come up with a response, the car stopped on the next floor and opened to let two more couples on.

She had to bite her tongue and Grant chuckled beside her. As if he knew. Well, she would get him back. Making the serious, always-in-charge Grant Lorre lose that control and have some fun had already been very enjoyable. She knew that he hadn't planned on having sex when they were up in the room earlier.

The rush of power that gave her was crazy. But she loved it.

The ceremony in front of the judge was simple. It was nothing like any wedding ceremony she'd ever imagined, but that was good. None of her friends were there. Her parents and grandparents and sisters weren't there. There was no beautiful meaningful music, and the vows were straightforward and basic.

The whole thing took about ten minutes.

And it was good.

Because she never could have gotten through it if all of those people had been there, if someone had sung "A Thousand Years" by Christina Perri, if Grant had said, "Love, honor, and cherish" to her.

She wanted all of that. But this, with Grant, wasn't it. So this ceremony was perfect.

The dress and tiara and ring were all part of this fantasy weekend getaway. Grant was part of that. The hotel suite, the limo, the hot sex. All of that was new, different, probably once in a lifetime.

She was going to remember this as a vacation, a hot fling, a dream. The ceremony was just a ten-minute reality check, and then she could dive back into the dream.

They said, "I do." They exchanged rings—Grant had one for her to slip on his finger as well. The judge pronounced them man and wife. Grant smiled at her. And it was a great smile.

Of course, it wasn't *love* on Grant's face. But damn, he was doing a great job faking it. And she thought she could safely call it affection. Grant liked her. He wasn't *upset* about being here. Starting a marriage with affection and *major* chemistry wasn't terrible. It wasn't even a terrible way to spend the entire marriage. At least when the marriage was going to be about a month long.

And then they kissed.

The kiss felt pretty real, she had to admit.

The way Grant cupped her face with both big hands and leaned in, taking her mouth in a slow, sweet kiss that didn't even involve tongues but promised at more—so much more—later... yeah, that all felt very real.

Then they were back in the limo.

She gave him a grin as the driver pulled away from the curb.

“Dinner first,” Grant said.

“What do you mean?”

“I know what that look on your face means,” he said. “You just keep your sweet ass on that seat for right now. We're only a few blocks away from the restaurant.”

In spite of the wedding in a judge's office, she was feeling good and playful and not disappointed as she'd thought she might. “I don't know what you're talking about,” she told him, running her fingertips over the back of his hand where it rested on her knee.

See, if he didn't want to do anything risqué in the back seat of this limo, he shouldn't put his big, hot hands on her. But Grant hadn't stopped touching her since she'd walked out of the bedroom in *The Dress*.

The Dress was how she was going to refer to it forever.

He'd held her hand, or had his hand on her lower back, or at her waist, or like now, on her leg, ever since she'd taken his arm to walk out of the suite.

“You're thinking about climbing into my lap, unzipping me, moving that thong to the side, and taking me deep,” he said, his voice rumbling, his hand tightening on her leg.

She was thinking about *exactly* that. But hearing him say it made her suck in a quick breath. “Would that be so bad?” she asked.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, then went back to her eyes. “You think you can come in three minutes?” he asked, his

hand moving up and down her thigh, rubbing the silky fabric along her skin. “Because that’s how far from the restaurant we are. And you *will* come before I let you off my cock.”

Her whole body flushed. The sex was so good. That was going to be hard enough to let go of when this was over. But the dirty talk was going to be the biggest loss, honestly. She loved that.

“I think it’s very possible that three minutes is enough,” she told him, her gaze on *his* lips now.

He smiled, a wicked smile that made her not want dinner at all.

“Challenge accepted.”

Oh, *yes*. She slid across the few inches of leather and hiked her skirt up, straddling his thighs.

He smiled up at her. Something in his expression made her pause. He looked far too satisfied. As if this was going exactly according to plan. Huh. That seemed less like she was teasing him to the point of abandoning all of his plans and more like he was in complete control.

He reached behind her neck and unhooked the tiny hook holding her bodice up. It dropped away and he curled a finger into the top of the cup of one side of her bra, pulling it down. He immediately lower his head and took her nipple in his mouth, licking and then sucking hard.

She gasped, arching closer, her hand going to the back of his head.

He ran a hand up her thigh to her hip and slipped a finger under the lacy edge of her thong. But he simply pulled, rubbing the thong against her clit as he sucked on her nipple.

The car came to a stop, and he removed his hand, pulled her bra up, refastened her dress, and slid her off his lap.

“Let’s go to dinner,” he said, straightening his tie and then opening his door.

He slid out and then leaned back in, offering his hand. “You coming, Jocelyn?”

Well, she'd been *about to*. She glared at him. "That was mean."

He grinned. "I told you we were close."

"You also said you accepted the three-minute challenge."

"I did," he agreed, snagging her wrist and tugging slightly.

She slid across the seat and let him help her out of the car. Once she was standing, he put his hand on her ass and his mouth against her ear. "I didn't say when the three minutes would start though."

"They didn't start when the nipple made its appearance?" she asked, sounding huffy.

She was just wound up and completely *not* hungry now. Well, not hungry for food.

"That was what we call getting a competitive advantage," he said.

"Listen here, Grant Lorre," she said, sticking a finger in his face. "I *am* going to have sex in the back seat of a limo at least once in my life, and this might be my only chance. So we can go and have dinner and whatever, but you better not think that all you're going to do in that car is tease me."

He squeezed her ass, bringing her up against him more fully. "I have very *big* plans for you and that car, Jocelyn Lorre."

Her heart turned over, and her panties got even wetter and it had nothing to do with the *big* promise—that she knew he could deliver on—and all about him using her new last name.

She took a deep breath. "That's better." She wet her lips, smoothed the front of her dress, and stepped back.

He gave her a wicked, knowing smile.

Then they went to dinner.

It was a gorgeous restaurant. Exactly the type of place she'd always wanted to dine. Five courses, white linen tablecloths, multiple forks, the whole thing. The food was

delicious, the wine perfect, and Grant was sweet about helping her pick things she'd like from the menu.

Josie had completely intended to tease *him* throughout the meal. Licking her fork and moaning and all of that. A lot like he'd done over those cheesy potatoes at Maggie's. But she couldn't tear her eyes away from the view out the window. Grant sat just to her right, but he'd given her the chair that looked directly out over the city and the lake. It was breathtaking. She'd never seen so many lights all at once in her life. She'd never been up this high. That all sounded so stupid in her head. Very small-town hick, to be honest. But she *was* a small-town girl, who hadn't traveled far beyond her own backyard.

Grant was giving her the trip of a lifetime. She turned to look at him as the waiter cleared their plates.

"Amazing," she said. "This is all amazing."

Grant was sitting, leaned back in his chair, his bow tie loosened, twisting the stem of his wineglass between his thumb and finger, and watching her. She didn't know if he'd looked out the window more than a couple of times.

"I'm really glad you're enjoying it," he told her.

She propped her chin on her hand and looked back at him. "Is it boring by now? You've seen it all so many times that it's nothing special?"

He frowned slightly. "No. It's familiar, yes." He glanced at the window then back to her. "I love this city. It's home. But I love watching you look at it more."

She gave him a slow smile. "That's sweet." It was romantic was what it was.

"You're gorgeous. All the time, but especially when you're excited about something."

The warmth that flooded through her was different than the heat he so easily caused to wash over her. "Thank you. It's maybe a little silly to be so excited about all of this. But I've never worn a dress like this or seen a city like this."

He shook his head slowly. "I love seeing you with all of that too, but you're just as gorgeous when you're excited about simpler things. Like the day you handed me the box with the pussy cupcake in it."

She would never not blush when he said *pussy*, she decided. Not because it embarrassed her but because he made the word sound so dirty and delicious at the same time. She shifted on her chair. "I was feeling playful," she admitted.

"I like that look on you," he said. "You also looked beautiful the day Mrs. Milford came in to pick up a cake. You made a point of showing it to her before she paid for it."

Josie felt her eyes widen. "You noticed that?"

"I did. The morning she came in to pick it up, I was still there getting my scones."

Josie smiled about the scones. Those stupid, boring scones. "And you noticed how I looked?"

"Whenever you're anywhere in sight, I watch you."

She took a quick breath. "That should sound creepy."

"Does it?"

"No." It was hot. And kind of sweet. And the R-word.

"You always look very happy to be serving your customers, actually," he said. "And always beautiful. But I can tell which cupcakes you've decorated."

"You can?"

"You light up a little more when someone chooses one of them."

She shook her head. "It's crazy that you notice that."

He shrugged. "Maybe a little creepy too."

She laughed. "Maybe it's crazy that I like you being creepy."

"It probably is," he agreed with a small smile. "So what was it about that cake?" he asked. "You were especially... glowing when you gave it to her."

“Was I?” Josie remembered being not nervous, exactly, but eager to see Mrs. Milford’s reaction. When the older woman had teared up, Josie had known she’d gotten it right.

“You were. I wanted to sweep you up and kiss you right there.”

Her stomach flipped. “I would have liked that.”

He gave a soft chuckle. “I’m glad to know that.” He paused. “So what was it about that cake?”

“It was for her husband’s college graduation.”

Grant frowned slightly. “She looked like she was in her sixties or so. How old is he?”

“Sixty-six,” Josie said with a smile. “He went back to college and got his accounting degree. Isn’t that amazing? He didn’t go to college after high school. He went to work with his dad for the railroad. But he always wanted to have a degree and to do accounting. He was diagnosed with cancer when he was sixty, and after he beat it, he decided that he was going to do the things he’d always wanted to.”

Grant was watching her with an expression that was hard to decipher. “That makes sense,” he finally said. “That cake was a part of a celebration that meant a lot to them, so you wanted it to be just right.”

She nodded. “It’s an honor to be a part of people’s monumental days. I know it’s just cake and it’s going to be eaten and disappear. I know as soon as they cut into it, all the decorating and everything gets ruined anyway but... it still matters. To me.”

“The cake can still make the day memorable,” he said. “It’s a part of the whole thing.”

She nodded. “I’m glad you don’t think that’s silly.”

“How can you caring so much about someone else’s important days be silly?”

And Josie felt herself fall a little in love.

Oops. Crap.

The waiter came over to ask if they wanted more wine. Grant had him fill both of their glasses again, and then with his eyes on Josie, said, “And a piece of the triple chocolate fudge mousse cake.”

Josie felt her eyes widen. That sounded sinful. And amazing.

The waiter moved off and Grant said, “It’s not the same as someone making a cake specifically for us for today, but I think it’s only right we have some cake to commemorate the day.”

She nodded. “I agree.”

“So what do you like so much about the city?” he asked, tipping his head toward the window.

She thought about his question. “It’s pretty,” she finally said. “The lights and everything. There’s an energy here that’s so different from what I know. There are so many things here—things to do and see, opportunities. Museums, shows, libraries. I’m sure there a hundred classes to take. I could learn to cook Indian food or make real Italian pasta from scratch. I could have someone teach me to make authentic baklava.” She nodded. “It’s all the different cultures and things to learn and experience.”

He nodded. “But you could always come here and spend a few days and do those things and then go home.”

“Yes. I guess that’s true.”

“You’d never want to actually live here,” he said. He didn’t phrase it as a question.

Josie didn’t have to think about that very hard. “No.” She shook her head. “I think, for me, that’s the intrigue of travel. Seeing things, experiencing things that are different from what I know. But then taking it back with me and making it a part of my ‘normal.’”

“Tell me more about that,” Grant said.

His posture still suggested that he was relaxed and casual, but he was watching her intently. He seemed completely

focused on her.

Grant Lorre's full attention and focus was an intense thing.

Josie swallowed and sat back in her chair too. But she couldn't help playing with the napkin in her lap. "I would love to see the mountains, for instance," she started. "But I think when I got home, the mountains would make me notice the plains in Iowa more closely. I would love to eat authentic Mediterranean food prepared in Greece. But I think when I got home, I would pay more attention to how great the bacon cheeseburgers were. I think seeing the country, even the *world*, would be amazing and would make me appreciate other places, but I think it would also make me appreciate the things I have right at home more too."

He nodded but didn't say anything.

"What do you like about traveling?" she asked. "You do a lot of it, right?"

"I do. But it's more of a necessity. Not that I don't enjoy it," he added. "I've seen amazing places, eaten amazing food. But I don't have that contrast that you do. The places I go are very much like where I live."

"Greece and Rome and Paris and Honolulu and San Francisco are not like Chicago," Josie protested. "Or like one another."

"They're cities where I stay in a hotel that's a lot like the apartment I live in and eat food prepared by professional chefs and ride in car driven by other people," he said. "It's not like Appleby."

For some reason, that made Josie hold her breath.

"Appleby is the kind of place that makes you appreciate all of that," he went on thoughtfully. "Professionally prepared gourmet meals with things like truffle sauce and lobster tail seem fancier because you also know the comfort and goodness of homemade pork chops and cheesy potatoes."

Those cheesy potatoes were going to haunt her forever, Josie decided. But she liked what he was saying.

“The lights of the city seem brighter and more sparkly next to the old-fashioned streetlights and relative dark of the little town,” he said. “The museums seem more majestic because you can compare them to the little house at the end of Main Street Appleby where they have photographs and items collected from when the town was founded.”

“The museums *are* much more majestic than that house,” Josie said with a laugh.

“But they’re doing the same thing,” Grant said. “They’re telling stories about the past, preserving things that are important for the place they’re in.”

She shook her head. “Wow, you sound almost nostalgic about Appleby all of a sudden.”

“Let’s just say, I understand the charm,” he said.

“I’m glad.” She meant that. She didn’t know if it meant he’d come back and visit more often. And that maybe she’d get to see him when he did. Maybe they’d try to keep dating. After their marriage was over. She almost rolled her eyes at how ridiculous that sounded. But even if it didn’t mean Grant would spend more time in her hometown, she liked knowing that he’d think of it fondly. She could admit that it made her sad to think about a time when she wouldn’t see Grant every day though.

Already.

How had this guy gotten to her so quickly?

“What is being here in Chicago making you appreciate about home now?” he asked.

“The darkness,” she said with a smile, pushing the melancholy thoughts away. She was here in the big city, amid the bright lights, in a fabulous dress, with the most amazing man she’d ever dated. The man who was her husband. At least for now. She didn’t want to waste any of this on being sad. “The quiet, of course. The fact that I can walk to my house from wherever I just had dinner and not have to sit in traffic.”

He was her *husband*. Something about that suddenly hit her directly in the chest. He was hers. At least right now he

was. They were on their first date, but this was also their *wedding* night.

That filled her with heat and anticipation and an amount of happiness that should have concerned her, probably, and a surge of *hell, yeah*.

She reached out and ran her index finger over his wrist. Just that. A simple, not particularly sexual touch. But she had every right to touch him, didn't she? To tease and tempt him. To seduce him.

She was never going to have a night like this again. She was going to take full advantage of it.

Grant didn't move a muscle, but his gaze heated. "I'm going to make you very happy to have to sit in traffic on the way back to the hotel."

She gave him a slow smile. "You'd better."

The waiter set the plate of cake down just then.

It looked absolutely as decadent as it had sounded.

"Oh wow."

"I want this cake to be memorable," Grant said. "Even if someone didn't bake it especially for us the way you do at Buttered Up."

She smiled, running her finger back and forth over his wrist. "Everything about tonight will be memorable."

His hand tightened around the stem of his wineglass, and she felt a little thrill at the obvious reaction to her. He definitely affected her and knew it. She wanted to make an impression too.

They had two bedrooms in the suite. They could get one of the beds all sticky and messy with cake and then sleep in the other.

"So maybe we could—"

"Go to the ladies' room."

Her eyes widened at the tone in his voice. Firm, commanding. Hot.

“What?”

He shifted, leaning forward, sliding his wineglass to the side and capturing her hand that had been tracing back and forth over his wrist. His finger ran over her palm, the touch igniting her nerve endings from her hand to her toes. Her nipples hardened just from him running the tip of his finger over her heart line.

“Go to the ladies’ room, take your panties off, and take this —” He ran his other index finger through the thick chocolate frosting on the cake and held it up. “I want this on your nipples.”

Her eyes widened and her breathing caught. “And then what?”

“And then come back out here.”

“But—” She glanced around then leaned in so no one would overhear. “Pull my dress back up? With the frosting... there?”

“Yes.” He lifted a brow. “I’ll get the dress dry-cleaned.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, studying him. He was so gorgeous. And hot. And dirty. And fun. And this was a once-in-a-lifetime night. He’d just turned the tables on her—of course. This wasn’t going to be her seducing him after all. But how could she say no to this? She wanted him to think about this night as often as she would.

Josie wet her lips and pulled her hand from his. She stood, set her napkin next to her plate, smoothed her dress, then reached out and scooped a dollop of frosting off the cake. Then she headed for the ladies’ room without a look back.

But she could feel his eyes on her as she crossed the elegant dining room. Her stomach flipped and she felt herself smiling. This was more adventurous than she’d ever been. Yet it was still cake frosting. Something she knew very well.

That was funny and sweet and naughty and odd and perfect all at the same time.

She was alone in the restroom, fortunately. Typically, she would have taken a moment to appreciate the gleaming marble countertops and the ornately etched glass of the mirrors and the gorgeous gold fixtures. But all she could think about was the chocolate icing and how it was going to get all over her dress. And how she didn't mind as much as she should have.

She slipped into one of the stalls and reached up for the hook at the back of her neck—the one Grant had undone in the car when he'd been teasing her with the three-minute challenge. Her bodice dipped, and she reached into her bra with her sticky, frosting-coated fingers. She painted the frosting on her nipples, shivering with desire as she did it. This was beyond crazy and weird and sexy. She realized it was only in part about playing with frosting. It was also Grant testing her to see how much she would do for him, how far she'd let him push her.

The answer—very far.

He was her greatest adventure. He was the escapade she was going to remember when she was eighty and thinking back on her life. She hoped a lot of wonderful things filled in the time between now and her eightieth birthday, but she knew that she'd always think of Grant and smile.

With the frosting on her nipples, feeling naughty and slightly uncomfortable, she pulled the dress back up with one hand. She couldn't hook it that way, though, so holding the bodice up with one arm across her chest, she let herself back out of the stall and went to wash her hand. It was awkward, but she got cleaned up enough to redo the hook behind her neck before a woman came through the door.

They smiled at each other in the mirror, and Josie pretended to fix her hair as the woman went into one of the stalls. Once the door shut behind her, Josie quickly reached up under her skirt and pulled her panties off.

She hadn't brought her purse with her so she had nowhere to put them. She looked around for an idea, but finally just

balled them in her fist. She looked at herself in the mirror once more.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. She was pantyless, with frosting on her nipples, about to go back out and join her new husband for dessert. She grinned.

Best night ever.

Chapter Fourteen



Grant sucked in a deep breath as Jocelyn rejoined him at the table. She slid into her chair like a queen. Then she gave him a smile and reached over to put something in his hand.

Her thong.

He gripped it tightly and raised his other hand, signaling the waiter. “We’ll take the check now,” he told the man who appeared almost instantly, handing over his credit card. He didn’t need to see the bill.

Jocelyn giggled and his gut tightened. God, he wanted her. He’d never wanted a woman like this. It was actually making him crazy.

He didn’t know if he’d ever been with a woman who fascinated him the way she did. The simplest things made her happy. She appreciated everything from the fabric of the duvet on the bed to the fact that the butter pats on the table were in the shape of roses.

She was sweet and genuine and charming. She made him want to continually delight her. She was so in love with her hometown. She was so loyal to her friends and to her job. She did her work with her heart and barely worried about the money. And yet she’d gone into the ladies’ room at one of the best restaurants in Chicago and painted chocolate cake frosting on her nipples and taken her thong off. For him.

He loved these two sides to this woman.

He tucked her thong into his pocket, signed the credit card slip, and shoved his chair back. He held out a hand to her.

She smiled up at him as she took his hand and let him tug her to her feet.

He couldn't resist leaning in and kissing her. It was too short, too superficial a touch, but he couldn't not do it. Then he turned her and escorted her to the door.

They waited at the curb for the limo without talking. The driver had been parked only two blocks away so arrived quickly.

Grant helped Jocelyn into the back of the car, then leaned into the passenger side window. "Hey, Tyler."

"Yes, Mr. Lorre?"

He liked Tyler. Tyler was his regular driver. He didn't always work nights, but since Grant had been out of town, Tyler had been happy to drive Grant and Jocelyn to their wedding and then dinner.

"I need you to take the long way back to the hotel."

"Yes, sir."

"The *really* long way," Grant added. "I want to show her the city. Take us by some cool stuff."

"Got it." Tyler was a Chicago boy, born and raised, so he could easily drive them past several sites.

If Jocelyn happened to be looking out the window while he got her naked in the back seat.

Grant climbed in with Jocelyn and shut the door. The partition was up, and they had the whole night.

"I told Tyler—"

But his wife climbed into his lap before he even finished the sentence.

His *wife*. The thought took the air out of his lungs.

Jocelyn cupped his face and kissed him. His hands settled on her hips, squeezing, pressing her against his already hard cock. She ground against him with a little moan.

Okay, so maybe Jocelyn didn't care about the scenery. He'd bring her back to Chicago and show her around any time she wanted. For right now, all he wanted to show her was how quickly he could make her come.

Kissing her deeply, he reached for the hook on her dress, pulling the bodice down, and unhooking her bra. He leaned back to look at her covered in smears of chocolate.

He thumbed her nipple. "See, your bra kept the dress clean anyway," he said, meeting her gaze as he rolled the hard, sticky tip between his thumb and finger.

She nodded. "But I'd better not leave this car with one drop of chocolate on me, *Mr. Lorre*."

"Absolutely not a problem, Mrs. Lorre." He lowered his head, taking the chocolatey nipple in his mouth, licking and sucking until she was clean—and wriggling on his lap, pressing against his cock.

He moved to the other side and did the same, relishing the feel of her fingers sinking into his hair to hold him close.

"Grant," she said, panting. "I need you."

"There are so many more sweet inches of you to lick and suck though," he said, kissing his way from her breast to her mouth.

He kissed her, letting her taste the chocolate from his tongue. When he let her up for air, she gave him a dreamy, dazed look.

"And if you're going to lick and suck all of me, you'll have to lay me down," she said, her voice husky. "But I want to watch the city lights out the back window of this limo while you're buried deep inside me."

Heat and lust seized him and he squeezed her hips. Okay, so maybe she did care a little about the scenery.

Or maybe she just enjoyed making him crazy.

Either way, he pushed her back just far enough that he could unbutton and unzip his pants and push his boxers out of the way.

Her hand was there, wrapping around his length before he got the condom out of his pocket.

His breath hissed out as she squeezed and stroked and he let his head fall back against the seat. “Damn, Jocelyn.”

“Oh, I really like the way you sound right now,” she told him.

How this woman, the one stroking him like it was her job, saying things like she wanted him buried inside her while they looked at the city lights, was the same one who made caterpillar cupcakes and got teary eyed when someone loved a graduation cake she’d decorated was beyond him. But she was one and the same.

And he was afraid he was falling in love with her.

He nudged her hand out of the way, rolled the condom on, and said, “Get that skirt out of my way.”

She hiked it up, lifting her butt off his thighs to get it out from underneath her. With the skirt bunched at her waist, he brought her forward. He held her just above his cock.

“You ready for me, *wife*?” he asked, the word coming out naturally and making a surge of possessiveness rip through him.

“I am,” she said, her voice soft. “So ready.”

He brought her down, sinking down. They both groaned. Her hands gripped his shoulders as she took him. It was a tight fit—a holy-shit-nothing-has-ever-felt-this-good tight fit—and he paused, just breathing for a moment.

Then Jocelyn started moving.

He let her set the pace, watching her move up and down on him, her knees on the leather seat, her hands gripping his tux jacket, her eyes on the lights and traffic and buildings outside the car.

Pleasure and other emotions—affection, happiness, more that he wasn’t quite willing to name—built as she moved, her pace picking up naturally.

Finally he couldn't hold back. He moved a hand between them, finding her clit with his thumb, rubbing and circling. She gasped and then moaned. "Yes, there."

"I've got you, love," he said, his voice gruff. "Whatever you need."

"Faster." She took a breath and tipped her head back, her hair spilling down her back. "Harder."

He circled her clit faster and leaned in, taking a nipple in his mouth, as he surged up into her. Faster and harder he could definitely do.

It only took a few more strokes to send her flying, and he was right behind her, thrusting into her, chasing that completion that had never been as good as it was with her.

"Fuck! Yes, Josie! Yes!"

Her body gripped him, and he emptied himself, a groan erupting that seemed to come from his bones.

She slumped against him, her arms around his neck. She rested her chin on her arm on top of his shoulder as she caught her breath, and Grant realized she was looking at the lights as she recovered.

He chuckled and ran a hand up and down her back. "And that's limo sex."

She sighed. "Wow, I really liked it."

"Me too."

She pulled back and looked down at him. "Thanks."

He lifted a brow. "Thanks? Seriously? This is the best limo ride I've ever had."

Something flickered in her eyes.

"What?" he asked when she didn't reply.

"I was trying not to say that I hope it's the best limo ride you ever have. Ever."

And this was where things got complicated. Because it was very likely this was the best limo ride he'd ever had, and it

was almost over, and he didn't want it to end. Or he at least wanted to know he could do this all again with her—not just the sex either, but the lights and the laughter and the teasing and getting to know her.

For a guy who didn't want to get involved and have a woman too dependent on him—emotionally or otherwise—that all sounded, well, pretty involved.

“It honestly makes me dread riding in a limo with any of the guys at any point in the near future,” he said, trying to lighten the tone.

“Why?” But she was almost smiling.

“Because if I replay all of this and Dax is sitting across from me, he'll notice me daydreaming and give me all kinds of shit.”

Her smile grew, and Grant felt the band around his chest loosen slightly. “You don't seem like the daydreaming type.”

“I'm not.”

“But you might daydream about me in a limo someday?” she asked.

God, she was so fucking cute. And sweet. And he would absolutely daydream about her. Dammit.

“I think the odds are actually quite good,” he admitted.

She grinned. “I'll take that.” Then she slid off his lap, and they both worked to get cleaned and straightened up, at least enough to walk through the hotel lobby to the elevators.

Grant was glad that she was placated by the idea of him just remembering their limo ride together fondly. But he should have left it at that. He should have probably even withdrawn a little now that he saw her getting attached. He should definitely have banged her against the bathroom counter or something, reminding them both that they were fuck buddies with health insurance benefits.

Instead, he cuddled her. All night long. His arm over her, her butt tucked against his groin, her hair spilling all over the

pillow, his nose buried in her neck. And after she'd fallen asleep, he realized she'd worn her wedding ring to bed.

And so had he.

* * *

Grant's seminar wasn't boring.

Josie was actually surprised by that. It was a seminar, with a PowerPoint presentation given in a hotel conference room, and it was about managing finances and budgets and investments.

It should have been boring.

But she was fascinated.

It didn't hurt that he looked hot. He was in a dress shirt and pants with a jacket, but no tie. And while the suits always did something to her, it wasn't that or that he was freshly shaven—after scraping her inner thighs with his morning stubble as he “kissed” her awake that morning—or how he'd styled his hair or any of that. It was his confidence, his smile, and honestly, how damned excited he was to be talking about this stuff.

He'd said she looked beautiful when she was serving the bakery customers and especially when they chose her cakes out of the display case. Now she understood. Watching Grant in his element, happy and excited and doing something he was clearly passionate about, and very good at, was a turn-on. Plain and simple. He looked hot talking about money.

Not because she cared about money—she so didn't—but because he did. And more, he cared about these people. She'd had no idea what these seminars were about. She never would have believed that someone could make money personal like this and that they might *care* about the people sitting in the straight-backed hotel conference room chairs. But clearly, Grant did. He was part educator, part life coach, part cheerleader up there. He was teaching them about their finances, but he was also preaching that they not only *should*

take control of their money but that they *could*. They had that power. They didn't need anyone taking care of them. If they were in control of their money, they were in control of their *life*. And he was going to help them get there.

She had to know more about him now. Why was he so passionate about this? There was a story there, and she couldn't wait to hear it. He was fascinating.

He was gruff and serious and protective and bossy, but he was also sweet and, dammit, romantic and passionate and so, so sexy.

Josie sighed and sat back in her chair, watching him up on the raised platform at the front of the room with the headset microphone, pacing in front of the screen that displayed his PowerPoint slides.

He was a grumpy, suit-wearing, money guy from the big city. Who, it turned out, *did* like her cupcakes, but could show amazing restraint around them.

And yes, she was never going to get over him.

They took an hour-long lunch break where everyone was on their own for finding food in the various restaurants in the area. Grant bought Josie a salad in the hotel dining room and they chatted as they ate.

“So how did this all happen?” she asked, waving her fork in the general direction of the conference room.

“The seminars?” he asked.

“Yes. Your passion for helping women become financially independent.”

“My sister and grandma,” he said. He sipped his iced tea then met her gaze. “My grandma was widowed at age forty-eight. Really young. She'd never even balanced the checkbook when my grandpa died of a heart attack in the backyard while mowing the lawn.”

Josie felt her eyebrows rise. “Wow.”

He nodded. “She didn't know where their life insurance policies were, where the key to the safe deposit box was—

nothing. She was completely scared. So she quickly started another relationship. She was afraid of being alone and thought she needed someone to take care of her. Ten years later, he stole a bunch of her money and left her for a much younger woman. Very cliché.”

Josie frowned. “Oh my God.”

He nodded. “I watched her struggle after that, not just financially but also with her self-esteem. She felt stupid and used. She dated on and off but had a hard time trusting anyone, obviously. Finally, when I was old enough, I decided to teach her everything she needed to know about managing her money and her finances. I wanted her to be totally secure in that and how to take care of herself. I taught her everything from interest rates to taxes to investments. We’ve played the stock market together for about ten years now.” He smiled. “Once she felt confident and secure financially, she was able to find a guy she really liked who she could get close to—because she didn’t have to worry about him scamming her. Because she knew everything about her accounts and her money and could make all of those decisions completely on her own.” He shrugged. “So they signed a prenup and got married about three years ago.”

Josie smiled at that. “Wow. That’s pretty amazing.”

He smiled.

“What about your sister?”

Josie watched his eyes harden with that question. “My sister was in a flat-out abusive relationship,” he said. “Corey wasn’t physically abusive, but he was emotionally and financially abusive. She never had money of her own. He didn’t want her to work, insisting that it was his place to take care of her. But he also didn’t give her money to spend. She had to tell him exactly what she was getting at the grocery store, how much gas she was putting in the car, when she needed new clothes. And then *he* got to decide what she bought.”

Grant’s voice had gone cold, and he was staring at the tablecloth instead of looking at Josie. “He didn’t ‘let’ her have

things like makeup or perfume. He said that it would just lead to other men finding her attractive. He didn't let her buy ice cream or cookies because he didn't want her to get fat."

Grant's hand was fisted on top of the table now, and Josie could feel the waves of rage coming off him.

"And he didn't 'let' her buy birth control. He said she should want to get pregnant with his babies and that birth control was too expensive anyway." Grant's jaw tightened. "When she did end up pregnant was when she finally realized she had to leave him. She needed prenatal vitamins and he said no. Said they were too expensive, and she just needed to take better care of herself and the baby. She realized that he would deny their child all kinds of things—toys and treats—but she was also scared he'd skimp on things like car seats and other safety items. So she showed up at my house one night and told me everything and asked if she could stay with me."

"And, of course, you let her," Josie said. This man was the most protective she'd ever met. Now she had a very clear window into why.

His eyes met hers. "I did. And I'll admit, I was really fucking happy when her piece-of-shit husband came over to demand she come home with him. I'm not a violent guy but breaking his nose felt really damned good."

Josie nodded. "I'm glad you did that. *I* want to break his nose, even now."

Grant took a deep breath.

"Please tell me she's fine. Totally independent and in charge of her life. And that she and their child don't have to see him?" Josie said.

Grant blew out his breath. "She miscarried at four months," he said. "So the child isn't an issue."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

He shrugged. "It's for the best, really. But yes, she's totally independent now. Fully in charge of her own life. And no, she doesn't ever see him. I'm very fortunate to know one of the best, take-no-shit lawyers Chicago has to offer."

She smiled. “Cam?”

“Cam,” Grant said with a nod.

“Awesome.”

Grant still looked incredibly tense. She hated that she’d brought this all up. But she really liked knowing these intimate details about his background.

She reached out and covered his hand with hers on the tabletop. She didn’t know if he wanted comforting, or if he’d find her comforting, but she couldn’t not touch him.

To her relief, and pleasure, he turned his hand over and linked his fingers with hers.

“Thanks for telling me.”

He gave her a single nod.

“So you do all of this in their honor,” she said, resting her chin on her other hand. “That’s pretty great. Do they know?”

“They do. My grandmother has come to a couple of my seminars.”

“That’s so great. She must be really proud of you.”

“I think so. I’m proud of *her*. She changed her whole life. Her whole outlook on life.”

“And now you’re helping other women do that.” She really liked him. She loved being naked with him. She loved his romantic, surprisingly sweet moments, she liked the idea that she was a bit of a surprise to him as well. She loved his protective side. But she also just liked him. He was a good guy.

“I’m trying to teach other women a few things so they can do that,” he said. “They still have to do the work.”

“I bet you get emails and letters all the time,” she said. “I bet you have a huge fan club.”

He gave her a grin that made her lower stomach clench. “I do, actually. It’s why bringing a wife along as an assistant is a good idea.”

She felt her stomach swoop as it always did when he used the W-word. “Seriously,” she said, smiling. “I *completely* understand why they want to be all over you.”

He gave her a slow, wicked grin. “Oh yeah?”

“Even if I didn’t know how good you are with your tongue and fingers,” she said. “You’re a unicorn.”

He chuckled. “A what?”

“A unicorn. You’re this incredibly hot guy who’s young, rich, successful, could have any woman, the world is your oyster. But you’re a huge champion for women. You truly believe that women can and should be independent and not rely on men. You spend your weekends telling roomfuls of women how smart and savvy they are and to trust and have faith in themselves and helping them take charge. And you’re motivated by love for your grandmother and sister, for heaven’s sake.” She sighed. “Yeah, I would be shocked if women *weren’t* throwing themselves at you.”

His fingers tightened on hers and he leaned in. “Well, I’m not above reminding *my wife* that there are a couple of things she *does* need me for.”

Jocelyn loved when he got dirty and playful. “Oh?”

“Like reaching that one particular spot inside her pussy that makes her eyes cross and her toes curl.”

His voice was low and husky, for her only, and that spot tingled at the reminder. It was true that no one, including herself, had ever gotten to that spot before Grant. She swallowed. “I’ll give you that.”

“And you can’t suck on your own nipples, can you, Jocelyn?” he said, his eyes dark.

She cleared her throat. “No, no I can’t.”

He looked smug. “Good. I just don’t want you leaving my seminar thinking you don’t need me at all.”

She grinned at him. “Well, I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I haven’t really been listening to the specifics.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “No?”

“I’ve been too distracted.”

“By?”

“Your ass. Your hands. Your mouth. Your package.”

Now he was the one who had to clear his throat. “Is that right?”

She shrugged. “I’m wanton now.”

He snorted softly. “Really. And that’s my fault?” But he looked cocky. As if he knew that it was absolutely his fault and he was very proud of it.

“Completely.” She really loved flirting with him. A few weeks ago, she never would have believed that Grant Lorre was the flirting type, but he not only brought it out in her, he seemed to genuinely enjoy it too. “Before you came along I was a sweet, small-town baker who thought cake batter and frosting were these innocent, fun things that I enjoyed baking into innocent, fun shapes like ladybugs and rainbows. Now I look at a cupcake, and my panties get wet and my nipples get hard, and all I can think about is how much I want to smear frosting all over your body and then lick it off, slowly.”

He leaned in. “I’m going to be doing the afternoon session with a hard-on now. Mrs. Lorre.”

Her stomach swooped. “You better not. I know I’m not the only one in that room checking you out. They’ll totally notice.”

“Then *my assistant* better get the hotel staff to bring a podium in there.”

She giggled. “I’m on it.”

And Grant did, indeed, do most of the afternoon’s presentation from behind that podium.

Jocelyn knew that he could see her very smug expression even from the back row.

Chapter Fifteen



I quit.

Grant grinned at the text from Piper and simply responded with, *Again?*

She'd sent back a middle finger emoji.

He chuckled and texted back, *What did Ollie do?* He knew it had to do with Ollie. Piper told Grant she was quitting at least once a week. He never believed her, of course, but that was the signal that Ollie had pushed his luck with her.

She answered, *He talked Whitney into buying a circus tent for the snack cake baking contest.*

Grant snorted out loud at that. Ollie was turning the thing into an *actual* circus? Of course he was. *And you said?*

I asked if he wanted pony rides and a petting zoo too. Do you want to guess what his answer was?

Grant didn't need to guess. *No way would Whitney go for that.* But Grant felt a little niggle of dread. *Would she?*

Lord, was Ollie turning Whitney into an ally? That would never do. Dax and Ollie were enough. It had been a bit of a relief when Dax had stepped down from Hot Cakes to go do his own thing. Not that he didn't get Ollie going on crazy ideas, but at least he wasn't there all day, every day. And thanks to Jane, he wouldn't be hopping on planes at the last minute to take wild trips or getting thrown into jail in Italy. Or had that been in France? Grant couldn't even remember.

She would, Piper told him. She's almost as bad as he is. It's like she had all this pent-up creativity inside her, and Ollie pried the top off, and it's now spilling out all over the place.

Grant couldn't help but grin at that. Whitney needed a chance to be innovative and have some fun with her work. The company had been in her family all her life. She knew it inside and out, and it clearly meant enough to her that she'd stayed on after her family sold it. She needed a chance to be a part of its growth, and if she had some things she'd always wanted to try, they needed to tap into that. For her sake, and for theirs. The woman knew the market and the product and the factory better than any of the rest of them ever would. They absolutely needed to let her take the lead on any number of things.

Except pony rides at a snack cake baking contest maybe.

I blame you, Grant told Piper. I sent her to you when she was worried about Ollie overdoing. Why didn't you stop it? He grinned, waiting for her reaction.

I'm very, very, very good, Piper texted back. But I think we both know that, at best, I can distract him or slow him down. I've never been able to really stop him.

Grant frowned. That sounded a little less confident and good-natured than he was used to from Piper.

And now he's got her all caught up in his magical fantasyland. I think she's a lost cause, Piper added.

That didn't sound good. He definitely didn't need two Oliver types on his hands. But more, Piper could *not* get sick of Ollie. Fluke Inc., and by extension, Hot Cakes, needed her. Ollie needed her, actually. Someone had to keep his feet on the ground.

Keep them apart until I get back, Grant decided. If they can't brainstorm together, maybe we can keep this from snowballing until I can be there.

I'll do my best, Piper said. But you should know that I'm "forgetting" to look into pony rides, the tent order "accidentally" got canceled, and I'm hiding his company credit card.

That's my girl, Grant said.

I'm also considering putting a sedative in his orange juice.

Okay, maybe we don't need to go quite that far, Grant said. He would not put that past Piper at all.

Fine. But I expect gifts. You know my size.

About 750 ml? Grant asked.

You've got it.

He'd definitely get her a bottle of the Disaronno Riserva amaretto liqueur she loved. Even though it was almost four hundred dollars a bottle.

And you're not quitting. Ever, he added.

I'm not quitting, she agreed. Then a moment later sent a second text: *Today.*

Though they joked about it all the time, that last word seemed ominous suddenly. Dammit.

He would deal with *all* of that when he got back to Appleby. He couldn't believe he was adding Whitney to the list of issues though.

He quickly filled a plate at the buffet table and grabbed two glasses of champagne before heading for the table where Josie sat with four of the women from his seminar.

"Well, one of us reads out loud and the other does the foot rub," he heard Josie say as he approached.

Grant set the little glass plate next to Jocelyn's elbow as the women at the table all oohed together.

"You are so sweet," one of them said to him as he took his seat.

"Oh?" He glanced at Jocelyn. "Why do you say that?"

"They were asking about what it's like to be married to you," she said, smiling at the plate.

It was covered in petit fours. Piper had, of course, handled the catering menu for the reception after the seminar. But she

always did finger foods—hors d’oeuvres and little cakes and tarts—and a selection of drinks.

He also handed Josie a glass of champagne.

“I was telling them how romantic you are. How we’re really homebodies and like to just be together, doing simple things.” She accepted the glass and took a sip.

Okay, so they were going to make up stories about their marriage. It didn’t really matter what these women thought of him, or his and Jocelyn’s relationship, and this could be fun.

“Well, I hope you told them about how I showed up at your work and whisked you off for a weekend getaway to Paris,” he said, helping himself to a little cake.

Vanilla with raspberry filling. Yum.

“Paris? Wow. I thought you said you hardly travel other than back and forth to Chicago,” one of the women, Cristy, said to Jocelyn.

Jocelyn smiled at her as her hand settled on Grant’s thigh and she squeezed. “Oh well, there have been a couple of trips. But we mostly just go back and forth between here and Appleby,” she said. “Grant loves his work so, of course, the seminars are really important, but Appleby is truly home.”

Okay, so he’d definitely missed the intro to the conversation. But this was interesting. Maybe this would give some insight into how Jocelyn thought a perfect marriage would look.

“Appleby is a sweet little town,” he agreed. “But obviously there’s not as many business opportunities there.”

Jocelyn squeezed his thigh. “Oh, but honey, I told them all about Hot Cakes.”

“Yes, that sounds like so much fun! Making *cake* for a living!” This came from Margaret. “Of course, Jocelyn does that too. It’s so interesting that you’re both involved with baking but in such different ways.”

Grant put his hand over Jocelyn’s on his leg, peeling her fingers—and fingernails—away and lacing their fingers

together. “I’m very proud of what Hot Cakes means to the town,” he said sincerely. “But Jocelyn understands how important these seminars are to me too.” She did. She’d just told him so at lunch.

“Which is why I love traveling back and forth to Chicago with him,” Jocelyn said.

“Well, not to mention the bright city lights, the high thread-count sheets, and that very special cake frosting you love so much from our favorite restaurant.”

She nearly broke his finger as she smiled sweetly at the other women at the table. “We do have fun traveling too,” she said. “But nothing beats cuddling up on the couch together with an old movie and the chocolate cinnamon popcorn that Grant invented just for me.”

“Chocolate cinnamon popcorn?” Ashley, another seminar attendee repeated.

“Sweet and spicy, just like him,” Jocelyn said.

“Wow, I just don’t picture a millionaire who teaches money seminars doing such... domestic, sweet things like inventing popcorn flavors for movie night.” Ashley looked at Grant with a soft smile. “That’s... awesome.”

Grant squeezed Jocelyn’s hand now. What was she doing? She wasn’t supposed to be promoting romance here. This was about female empowerment and independence.

“So, do you let Grant give you business advice?” Cristy asked. “I mean, it’s pretty great to have such a guru at your beck and call, right?”

Jocelyn laughed. “Oh no, but I don’t really need business advice.”

“That’s right, honey,” Margaret said. “We’ve got this.”

“Oh, I just mean, the bakery where I work is my best friend’s,” Jocelyn said, popping a petit four into her mouth.

“You’re not partners?” Margaret asked.

Jocelyn shook her head, and Grant had to swallow a sigh. He could see where this was going.

“No, I work for her,” Jocelyn said. She laughed. “I know nothing about books and accounting and stuff.”

Margaret, Cristy, and Ashley all looked at Grant.

“Oh,” Margaret said. “I guess I just assumed that Grant Lorre’s wife would be... a business owner. Or something.” She gave Jocelyn a smile. “I shouldn’t have assumed that though.”

“She has her own business,” Grant inputted. “The bakery is her friend’s, and Jocelyn loves her work there, so she continues to work with Zoe, but she has her own business as well.”

“Of course,” Margaret said. “That makes sense.”

But Jocelyn was frowning at him. “Well, I’d hardly call it a *business*. I do some baking on the side.”

“Well, sweetheart,” Grant said, squeezing her hand. “Your customers pay you, obviously.”

“Sure, but it’s cash,” she said. “I don’t have a logo or business cards or anything, and I don’t even keep that close a track of things.”

Grant gritted his teeth. Not just because she was kind of making him look bad—which he recognized was not entirely fair since they weren’t *really* married and since it shouldn’t be a wife’s responsibility to make her husband look good anyway—but also because what did she mean she didn’t keep close track of things? Had she claimed her side income on her taxes last year? How did she account for her expenses?

“Wow,” Cristy seemed a little confused. “That’s... weird.”

“What is?” Jocelyn asked.

“I mean, he talks about how important it is to have full control over your finances, to be independent, and to always know that you could fully support yourself if you needed to. But then he’s married to someone who... doesn’t care about all of that.”

Jocelyn sat up straighter in her chair. “What? I’m independent. I could fully support myself if I needed to.”

She had been, in fact, right up until yesterday when they’d gotten married, Grant thought wryly.

Well, except for the health insurance thing. The entire reason for their wedding in the first place.

“So you have your own accounts and everything?” Cristy pressed.

“I do,” Jocelyn said.

“And he doesn’t help with your books?”

“He does not,” she answered.

She was squeezing his hand again, but Grant thought it was more just general tension than sending any kind of annoyed message to him.

“So you could walk away tomorrow and be totally on your own?” Cristy said.

“Of course.”

But he saw how Jocelyn chewed her bottom lip.

She couldn’t totally be on her own. That was *entirely* the reason they were married right now. She needed his health insurance. She couldn’t have handled that by herself.

Yeah, the reality of the whole thing had just hit him too.

He’d just taught a seminar about how women should always be financially independent, even when they were married, and that money shouldn’t be a reason that anyone stayed in a relationship.

But he had a wife now because she needed money.

He’d gotten married to take care of Jocelyn.

Fuck.

It wasn’t like this was a brand-new revelation. They’d both gone into this with eyes wide open. But how had he let this happen? In his mind, marrying her to help her through her

health crisis had been somehow different from marrying because she needed money.

But it wasn't.

She was dependent on him right now. It wasn't long term. He wasn't going to use it to manipulate her.

Still... it was the opposite of what he taught women sixteen times a year.

Dammit.

"Um, Grant?" Jocelyn asked, leaning closer.

"Yeah?" He realized that things were tense at the table. The other women were concentrating on their food at the moment.

"I think... we need to go."

It was uncomfortable. He might have just lost three fans, but he didn't really know how to smooth this over. Leaving it alone might be the best plan. He nodded. "Okay."

She was gripping his hand again. Yeah, well, he was a little annoyed too, but they could talk about everything later.

Actually, what they needed to talk about was how he was going to make her financially independent before their marriage ended. She didn't like to worry about numbers and budgets and spreadsheets? Too bad. She was going to learn.

"I think maybe..."

He looked at her and noticed she was suddenly very pale.

"Jocelyn?" he asked, alarmed. "Are you okay?"

She sucked in a breath and shook her head. "I don't think so."

"What is—" But then he saw how she was pressing her hand against her side. Her gall bladder. Shit. He stood swiftly. "Come on." He pulled her chair out and helped her to her feet, but she was having a hard time standing up straight.

"I shouldn't have eaten those cakes," she said. Her voice was tight.

“We’re going to the hospital,” he told her, bending and lifting her into his arms.

The fact that she didn’t protest told him everything he needed to know about how bad she was feeling.

* * *

At least she’d gotten hot sex, petit fours, and champagne before she’d had to have an internal organ cut out of her body.

Josie knew she was being dramatic and maudlin. But she felt yucky. Yucky being the perfect word to describe how she was woozy and a little sore and generally crabby.

Grant helped her through the lobby of his building. He was taking her to his apartment this time rather than back to the hotel. He’d decided that they should stay in Chicago for the first three days after her surgery so she could get past the worst of the recovery before returning to Appleby.

She was actually grateful about that. And that her gall bladder had decided that it needed to come out *now* while she was in Chicago. It wasn’t like she had a surgeon on stand-by back in Dubuque. The only time she’d even ever had anesthesia before this had been to get her wisdom teeth out. So she didn’t really care who operated on her. Chicago was, of course, full of fantastic doctors, and she’d had wonderful care at the hospital.

Now it was possible that she’d never have to tell her family or friends that she’d even had her gall bladder out. She might be a little sore for a few days after getting home—and she was going to have to avoid fatty foods for a while, including all the bakery stuff she loved so much—but she could cover all of that up.

According to Grant, as far as their friends knew, they were just having a fabulous time in Chicago, and he wanted to keep her here with him for a few more days. He’d left it to Cam to tell everyone.

Cam was the only one who knew the truth. Grant had asked him to call the insurance company and *ensure* that there would be no snags with getting the bills paid just because he and Josie had been married for only about twenty-four hours by the time she'd been admitted.

Cam had promised to handle it. Apparently one of Cam's favorite groups to fight with were insurance companies.

Josie knew how the conversation with Cam as the messenger with their friends would go.

Cam would say, "Grant and Josie are staying in Chicago for a few more days."

Zoe would ask something like, "Oh my gosh, they are? What are they doing?"

Cam would give her a give-me-a-break look and would say, "Probably fucking like rabbits, but I didn't ask specifically. Would you like me to call him back and get the details?"

Then Zoe and Jane would exchange looks, and Zoe would say, "Do you think they're falling in love?"

And Cam would groan and roll his eyes.

And Jane would frown and say, "Grant doesn't seem like the in-love type. She's so sweet. He'd better be nice. I will make him sorry if he hurts her."

Josie frowned as she watched the numbers on the elevator lighting up on their way to Grant's apartment. Grant didn't seem like the in-love type. She'd known that from the start. And then last night during the reception after the seminar, he'd resisted playing along with her romantic tales of their marriage. What was that about?

Her thoughts wandered back to their friends discussing the prolonged stay in Chicago.

Surely Dax would say, "Grant's a great guy. Nothing to worry about."

But Jane would say, "Great guy and worthy of Josie are two different things."

Which was so nice. Her friends were really great. They loved her, and they would want her to be happy.

She wanted to be happy.

She also wanted to be married for real. For good. Forever.

Suddenly she was sad. She knew she was melancholy partly because she was still feeling the effects of the anesthesia from her surgery and the pain pills. But it was real too. She really liked Grant. No, honestly, she was falling in love with Grant.

And now that her gall bladder was out, her time with him was on a countdown.

She sniffed and Grant looked over. “Are you okay?” he asked immediately.

He was sweet. He didn’t mean to be. Maybe he didn’t want to be, but he was.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Are you in pain?”

Yes, in my heart, her dramatic little inner voice said. “A little. Maybe. I’m okay though.”

He frowned, not looking convinced, but he dropped it as the elevator arrived on his floor. The top floor of the building. Of course.

He ushered her off and down the hall. He’d already moved all of their stuff from the hotel over here so all she had was a little plastic bag of items from the hospital. She was in a pair of yoga pants and a tee that he’d brought back to her. Her hair was in a ponytail and she wore no makeup. She was as un-put together as he’d ever seen her. The morning at her house after they’d slept together with no sex, he’d seen her bedhead and with no makeup too. But this was post surgery. She was walking slowly, her head was fuzzy, and she just wanted to lie down and sleep.

“I’m so sorry about this,” she said as he let them into his apartment.

“Sorry?” he asked. “What the hell are you sorry about?”

“That this all flared up like this. This wasn’t how we’d planned it. Now you’re stuck with me until Wednesday.”

“Jocelyn.”

She was in front of him in the little hallway just inside his apartment door. She turned to face him.

“I’m not stuck with you,” he said. His expression and tone were both serious. “I’m actually... relieved. I’m glad the surgery is over and that you won’t have the painful attacks anymore. I’m glad you’re here, in my apartment and city, where I can take care of you. I know where everything is here, and here I don’t have to...”

That was all really nice, and Josie found herself very curious about the rest of that sentence. “Here you don’t have to what?”

He looked like he was going to try to avoid a direct answer for a moment, but Grant Lorre was nothing if not direct. “I don’t have to put up with your friends and family being here and doting on you.”

She felt the corner of her mouth curl. “You wouldn’t want the help?”

“I don’t want them in my way,” he said. He lifted a big shoulder. “I want to do this my way. Having you here works out really well.”

Of course he would want to do this his way. He wanted to do everything his way. She shook her head but was smiling. “Well, I still feel like a burden.”

“You’re not a burden, Josie.”

Her eyes met his. He’d called her Josie two other times. Both when they were having sex. He called her Jocelyn almost always, but twice, when they were as close as two people could get, and he was coming undone, it had been Josie.

She didn’t comment on it, but she definitely made a note of it. She wet her lips. “Okay, good. I’m hoping for a quick recovery here.”

Not really. The faster she recovered, the sooner she wouldn't need him. Already he'd fulfilled his part of their deal. He'd turned over his insurance card.

But she was definitely grateful that he wanted to take care of her in these next couple of days. And she didn't mind not having her mom, sisters, grandma, or friends here with her.

Not as long as she had Grant.

That should have been a red flag. Grant could replace the people who were closest to her? Who comforted her and made her feel the most loved?

That was weird. And probably a great way to get her heart broken.

But hell, she was this far in. She was pretty sure she was going to have her heart broken anyway. And she wasn't even going to be able to drown her sorrows in cupcakes or ice cream.

No one had ever recovered from a broken heart by eating salads and oatmeal. Those were two of the main things on her list of approved foods. Anything that was high in fiber and low in fat.

Ugh. This broken heart was going to especially suck.

"Let's get you settled. You look tired," Grant said.

"Okay." She was, of course.

He escorted her into the apartment with a hand on her lower back.

The apartment was gorgeous. Way too big for a single guy to be living in. The living room had floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over downtown and the lake. Much as the hotel had. Everything was sleek gray and granite. The floor was a dark gray wood. The only light color was the white stone fireplace and the light gray area rug under the enormous dining room table.

Honestly, the table was big enough to seat one of Maggie McCaffery's dinner parties with seats left over. What was Grant doing with a table that size?

There were touches of home though. A stack of books on the table next to the couch. Earbuds on the coffee table. Tennis shoes next to the breakfast bar.

“Bedroom or couch?” he asked.

She wondered how many bedrooms he had and if he meant *his* bedroom or a guest room. They’d slept together without sex the night he’d been worried about her, but she was fixed now.

“Um... what are you going to do?” she asked, looking up at him.

“I have some work I thought I’d look over. But only after you’re settled and napping or whatever,” he said. “I can make you something to eat. I can run out and get whatever you need.”

“Would you...” She shouldn’t ask. She shouldn’t get more attached. She shouldn’t make more memories that would make her sad later. But then again, why not? Why not have memories at least? Why not be able to look back fondly on the few days when she was married to a man she was in love with?

That thought made it seem even more like she *should* make these memories.

He shifted closer, his hand on her back bringing her against his side. “Anything.”

“Would you sit on the couch with me?” she asked. “Could you look over your work there?”

It was dumb. He could sit wherever he wanted to in *his* apartment to do *his* work. Of course.

“Absolutely.”

It was also dumb how hard her heart flipped when he agreed.

“In fact, if you want to watch a movie or something, the work can wait.”

She stared at him. He was offering to watch a movie on the couch with her. That was sweet. Huh, after the whole thing at the table last night.

She nodded. "That would be really nice."

He smiled. Almost looking relieved. "I'm going to change clothes quick, then. You pick a movie. I've got Netflix, Hulu, all of them."

"Okay."

He started down the hall to the right.

"Hey, Grant?"

He turned back. "Yeah?"

"Which bedroom am I using?" She could use a brush and maybe some ibuprofen.

He lifted a brow. "My bedroom."

"You sure?"

"Am I sure that my wife will be sleeping in my bedroom with me?" he asked. "Yes, Jocelyn, I'm sure."

That sucked all of the oxygen out of her lungs and all she could do was nod.

"Come on." He tipped his head in the direction of the bedrooms.

She followed him into the huge master suite at the end of the hall.

"There are two other bedrooms," he said. "Only one is set up as a guest room since my family and friends all live close and don't really need to stay over. The other I use as an office."

She nodded, her wide-eyed stare taking in everything about his room. This room was warmer than the living room, dining room, and kitchen areas. He still, apparently, preferred cooler colors but in here they were darker gray and blues.

His bed was enormous. That was the main thing she focused on. They would not have to cuddle in that bed the way

they'd been practically forced to in hers.

That was too bad.

Grant sat down on the end of the bed and started removing his shoes. "Bathroom is through there," he said, gesturing toward the wide doorway leading off the bedroom. "Or there's another down the hall. This one has the best shower though."

He tossed his shoes toward the closet, almost making them land inside the partially open door.

Josie grinned at that. He wasn't totally put together and organized every single second. That was nice.

She thought of her house and the multitude of colors and décor styles. There was no one "color palette" or "theme." It was a house. A *home*. It was full of stuff that mattered to her and that made her smile. It was a bit like the house at the end of Main Street that functioned as a mini-museum for the town, but her house was a collection of the history of her family. She loved every creaking floorboard, every mismatched throw pillow, every cluttered curio cabinet—and she had three. And the pile of shoes by her back door was a little ridiculous.

Grant stood and shucked out of his pants. In boxers only, he crossed to the dresser and pulled out a pair of gray sweatpants.

Josie liked that he was comfortable enough to undress in front of her. It wasn't as if she hadn't seen it all before. And she just stood, appreciating the scene.

He pulled the sweatpants up and then took out a long-sleeved black t-shirt. He unbuttoned the dress shirt he'd worn to the hospital and shrugged out of it. It was as he was tossing it toward the hamper in the corner that he noticed her watching him.

He lifted a brow. "You okay?"

"Very much so." She let her gaze wander over his naked shoulders, chest, and abs.

He pulled the shirt over his head, tugging it down over all those glorious muscles and inches of skin. "Be good," he told

her, running a hand through his hair.

“Good?” she asked. “You’re the one stripping in front of me.”

“I was just changing clothes.”

“Stripping,” she said.

“I didn’t know you’d be ogling me.”

“Of course I’m going to ogle you, Grant,” she said with a light laugh. “One of the perks of married life.”

For a second they both stopped and just stared at each other.

He’d called her his wife earlier. It was, as always, hot when he’d said it. Hell, just an hour ago, she’d had to sign her discharge papers at the hospital, and he’d quietly reminded her to sign *Lorre* instead of *Asher* just in time.

So why did *this* moment feel different?

Was it the term *married life*? Because it wasn’t going to be a *life* and they were both realizing it?

He coughed after the moment had dragged a little too long. “Good point,” he said. “I don’t suppose you need to change clothes?” He added a roughish grin that worked to lighten the mood.

She shook her head with a smile. “No and even if I did, not so sure the big bandage on my stomach is that sexy.”

He crossed to where she was standing and looked down at her. He didn’t touch her, but she felt his affection when he said, “There’s nothing that could make you *not* sexy to me.”

She was sure *that* wasn’t true but she appreciated the sentiment. On impulse, she stretched up on tiptoe and kissed his chin. That was as high as she could get without him leaning over. But it did the trick.

Almost instinctively, Grant’s hand settled on her ass and he pulled her in for a little hug. He kissed the top of her head and Josie felt her heart melt.

“Movie time?” he asked.

She nodded against his chest. “Movie time. After I brush my hair and take some ibuprofen.”

He shifted back. “Do you need something stronger?” The concern was back in his eyes.

“No. I’m just a little achy. And the pain pills make me tired.”

“Are you su—”

She put her hand over his mouth. “I will take pain pills when I need them. I promise. Ibuprofen is enough for now.”

“Fine.” He squeezed her butt and let her go. “You get the brush and I’ll get the pills.”

They met back in the middle of the room a minute later and headed for the living room together.

And when he tucked her up against him rather than on opposite ends of the couch, she smiled. And when he watched not only *Roman Holiday* but also *Only You* without pulling out any work, she felt her heart melt a little. And when he got up and came back with popcorn with chocolate and cinnamon on it—and admitted he’d looked up a recipe for it—she fell a little more in love.

“So, me telling stories about us at the reception yesterday made you tense,” she commented as she helped herself to the popcorn in the bowl balanced on his lap.

He stiffened for a second, then sighed. He looked over at her. “Yeah. A little.”

“Why?” She put a piece in her mouth and munched.

“Because these women are there to learn about being happy and content without a man,” Grant said. “And then you were there, not just telling romantic stories, but about *me*—someone that had just spent the day coaching them to be their own person—but also made-up stories.”

She thought about that and took another piece of popcorn. She gestured to the bowl. “Not made up now.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“So you didn’t want them thinking romantic thoughts right after you spent the day telling them that they were fine alone,” she said.

“Right.”

“But that’s not what you were telling them.” She shifted on the couch cushion, propping her elbow on the back of the couch. “You were telling them how to be confident and independent with their money, but you never said that they shouldn’t have relationships.”

He frowned and didn’t respond.

“That’s what you want them to take from your seminars?” she asked. “Really? You want all of these women to walk out totally content to be single?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even hesitate.

Josie felt her eyes widen. “But... it’s natural for people to want to be in couples. It’s what we’re designed for.”

“It’s what women are taught from birth to think they’re designed for,” he said.

“You think that falling in love happens because girls are socialized to think that’s what they’re supposed to do?” Josie asked, a little appalled.

They’d just watched two of her favorite romantic movies. And now her *husband* was telling her that romantic relationships were figments of girls’ imaginations?

“Not just girls,” Grant said. “But yes, society puts a definite emphasis on marriage and coupling up. Women who don’t have a partner are seen as lacking somehow. Even nowadays when we should be so much more evolved.”

Josie took a breath and blew it out. “So underneath all the money stuff and all the *you can do it* stuff you teach about loans and taxes and investments and entrepreneurship and everything, your message is *you don’t need men and you should be happy single?*”

“Yes.” Again, no hesitation or even further explanation.

“Wow.”

“I’m not saying that people shouldn’t have partners and get married,” he finally said. “I’m just saying that women—*people*—shouldn’t feel that *that* is the ultimate way to be secure. They should *choose* to share their life with someone else rather than doing it because they have to or because all other choices are somehow worse.”

Josie sat back on her cushion. She felt the impact of his words directly in her chest.

She was married to him right at this very moment because she had to be. She’d needed something from him that wasn’t love or companionship or friendship. It had been money. They hadn’t chosen to spend their lives with each other. They’d made an agreement to spend a few weeks together so that she wouldn’t be burdened with medical bills.

Wow.

They were the perfect example of what *not* to do, according to Grant Lorre’s seminars.

“Like us,” she said softly. “People shouldn’t do things the way we did.”

He met her eyes. He didn’t jump to deny what she’d said. “I don’t think that most people get married the way we did,” he said. “But I do think that there are marriages—or at least relationships—of convenience out there. The people involved are may not be aware of it at the time. They think they’re in love or have feelings for one another at least. But the idea of moving in together to cut expenses in half or getting married for a tax benefit or someone supporting someone else while they go to school... those are all very real scenarios.”

“And you don’t think two people meeting and falling in love and wanting to be together forever is a real scenario?” she asked softly.

“I think it happens,” he said. “But I think it’s better when it happens if each person is independent and strong on their own,

and they come together because they *want* to live together rather than because it's cheaper than having two places.”

She nodded. She didn't know what else to say.

“Where did the story about reading to each other during foot rubs and the chocolate-cinnamon popcorn and the whole homebodies who love the simple things come from?” he asked after a moment.

“My grandparents and parents,” she said. “I could have gone on and on with stories. Sweet, romantic, in-love stories from both of them. None of them ever had a lot of money, but they've always been madly in love.”

Grant nodded. “Ah.”

“You're thinking all my romantic ideas make sense now, right?”

He nodded.

“Just like all of your ideas about relationships make sense,” she added. “I do admire that you're such an advocate because of your sister and grandma.”

“My mom has been a happy single parent for most of my life too,” Grant said with a wry smile.

Josie nodded. “We come from pretty different places.”

“In almost every way.”

“Yeah.”

Yeah. She was still a romantic, but she was starting to think that the opposites-attract thing was kind of a bunch of bullshit.

Chapter Sixteen



“If you ever put zucchini, or any other vegetable, into one of my baked goods without my permission, I will never speak to you again.”

Josie stepped into the kitchen at Buttered Up completely unnoticed.

Her sister, Paige, and Zoe were squared off across the center island, a plethora of baking pans and utensils between them. One bowl was definitely full of some kind of batter. Some kind of green batter. A green that was not created by food coloring.

“You put carrots in your carrot cake,” Paige pointed out.

“And whole lot of sugar and butter and cream cheese,” Zoe said. “It is not gluten free, nor is it low carb or paleo or anything else.”

Paige nodded. “I know. Which is exactly why you need sugar-free, gluten-free zucchini muffins on the menu.”

“No.”

“They sold out yesterday.”

“There were only twelve, and you took six to the yoga studio,” Zoe pointed out.

“Still, the other six sold,” Paige said.

“And Renee Wagner called me later and asked what the hell was wrong with them.”

“It’s not my fault Renee Wagner doesn’t understand that almond flour tastes different from white flour.”

Zoe took a deep breath. “Just make the lemon poppy seed, Paige. There, lemon. That should make you happy. It’s fruit.”

“They use lemon juice. That hardly counts as a fruit.”

Zoe rubbed a finger up the middle of her forehead. “If you do it and you’re good, I’ll let you do the apple cinnamon too. Those do use actual apples.”

“Fine,” Paige said. “But you should let me do some low-carb lemon too. We’ll do a taste test and see what people think.”

“They’ll think the low-carb lemon muffins taste weird,” Zoe said.

“Different,” Paige said. “They’ll think they taste *different*. But we can educate them on all the health benefits. You can have a whole new line of healthy muffins and bars.”

“The bakery is called *Buttered Up*,” Zoe said to Paige. “That doesn’t exactly scream healthy and low carb.”

“Oh, but butter is low carb!” Paige said, almost excitedly. “You can have butter and cream cheese, even *bacon* on a low carb diet. Did you know—”

“Hi, girls,” Josie said, deciding this was a good time to cut in.

They both swung to face her.

“Josie!” Zoe exclaimed. “You’re back early!”

“Yep.”

She’d felt so good—at least in regard to her surgery—they’d come back that morning instead of waiting until tomorrow as planned. She’d seen the surgeon that morning, and he’d declared she was doing wonderfully and could slowly return to her normal activities as she felt able. She had to watch how much she lifted, but that wasn’t really a problem in her normal day-to-day activities, so she was optimistic about

keeping it all from Zoe. And her family and other friends for that matter.

She'd had to tuck her gorgeous wedding ring into her jewelry box at home and leave it there, of course. Which made her sad. She loved it and had already gotten used to wearing it. But it was silly to wear a wedding ring when the marriage wasn't really real. And yeah, when they were trying to keep the whole thing a secret.

Paige came around the island and pulled her into a hug. "Thank goodness!" She let Josie go and immediately untied her apron, lifting it over her long blond hair and handing it to Josie.

"You're leaving?" Josie asked.

Paige turned, grabbed a zucchini, and tucked it against her chest, and nodded. "I'm taking my unappreciated vegetables and going home."

Josie fought a smile. "Thanks for filling in. I love you."

"I love you too."

"I love you too, Paige," Zoe said with a grin.

Paige looked over and gave Zoe an eye roll. "Yeah, yeah, I love you too. But your cupcakes make my stomach hurt."

"But they have butter and cream cheese and all kinds of great stuff in them," Zoe teased.

"And gluten. Evil, horrible, gut-wrenching gluten," Paige said dramatically.

"It pairs nicely with the white sugar," Zoe said, unapologetically.

Paige sighed. "Well, when you decide to have healthy food that doesn't twist my insides up into painful knots, you let me know and I'll stop by."

Zoe laughed. "And when you stop teaching classes that don't twist my *outsides* up into painful knots, you let me know and I'll stop by."

Paige grinned. “I have a new beginner’s class. You kind of just lie on the mats and stretch and play with kittens.”

“I’m in,” Zoe said.

“Tuesday night. And I *will* have gluten-free, sugar-free pumpkin spice muffins for you to try.”

Zoe mimed gagging, but nodded. “Can’t wait.”

Paige laughed, gave them both a wave, and swept out the door.

Josie watched her graceful, gorgeous sister leave then turned back to Zoe. “So how’d it go?”

Zoe laughed. “Fine.”

“Other than the zucchini muffins.”

Zoe waved that away. “Renee complained, but Janice Conner didn’t even notice that the banana nut ones Paige made were sugar-free and made with almond flour.”

Josie hung her purse up on the hook inside the door and donned the apron her sister had handed off. “I guess almond flour would kind of go with the nutty flavor.”

Zoe nodded. “And I had to pay Paige ten bucks on Saturday. She bet me that Wilson Thomas wouldn’t know that she’d snuck spinach in the double chocolate muffins.”

“She did not!” Josie said, pausing in tying the apron.

“She totally did. *And* she used dark chocolate chips because they’re healthier. I caught her at it just as she was slipping them into the oven.”

“And you let her?” Josie couldn’t believe Zoe would let that go.

“I told her that Wilson Thomas has been buying our double chocolate muffins for ten years and that if he said one word about them tasting funny she owed me ten bucks and had to remake the batch out of her own pocket.”

“And he didn’t say anything?”

“Nope. Said they were delicious. Of course, your sister is also part fairy or something. She probably put a spell on him.”

Josie snorted as she rounded the island and took a quick inventory of the ingredients laid out. Looked like Paige had been about to start on the lemon poppy seed after all. “I don’t know about that.”

“She gets people to do the weirdest stuff,” Zoe said.

“Like what?”

“I went to hot yoga last night.”

“You did not!” Josie stared at Zoe.

“I did. Jane did too.”

“What?”

“Yep. We almost died. Our bodies are *not* supposed to do some of that. And when she says hot she means *hot*.”

“How did she talk you into that?”

“A spell. I’m telling you. Maybe she’s a witch.” Zoe nodded. “Probably a witch. Or drugs. She brought us smoothies. They were delicious. Totally full of vitamins and stuff. But she could have snuck something else in there. We had so much energy all day. And that’s when she pounced. When we were all revved up and feeling great and she said, ‘Come by the studio tonight! It will be so fun!’ and we said, ‘Oh sure, great!’” Zoe gave Josie a look. “It was *not* great. Aiden had to literally help me get out of bed this morning.”

Josie laughed. “She’s not a witch and it’s not drugs. It’s the cats.”

Zoe nodded. “You’re probably right. While you’re there and twisted into these unnatural positions, you barely notice it because you’re watching kittens play, and you’ve got a big old tabby lying next to you purring.”

Josie grinned and started measuring ingredients. By heart. She’d made these muffins so many times she could do it in her sleep. She did notice that her sister had some golden flax seed off to the side, no doubt that she’d planned to slip into the

muffins. Josie shook her head. Paige was braver than Josie in dealing with Zoe. Then again, Zoe couldn't really fire Paige. She was a fill-in who was friends with Zoe but only because of Josie really. Paige was a lot younger and had her own friends. Whereas Josie couldn't lose Zoe. She wouldn't survive without Zoe in her life, and she certainly wasn't willing to have a falling out over muffins.

But as she zested the lemons, she wondered what she was actually afraid of. Zoe wouldn't let their friendship fall apart over muffins either. And Zoe needed Josie. She couldn't decorate like Josie. Not even close. She could probably hire someone else, but she'd never find someone with the skill *and* the relationships in town that Josie had. She knew their customers as well as Zoe did. People came to the bakery as much because of knowing and liking Zoe and Josie as they did for the baked goods they created. It was the whole package, and she was definitely a part of that.

Why had she not really thought about her value before? About the fact that, while she loved and needed and wanted this job, this job needed her too?

"Okay, I'm here, spill." Jane came bursting through the back door of the bakery, making Josie jump.

"Finally!" Zoe said, from where she'd just pulled blueberry muffins from the oven. "I've been *dying* waiting for you."

"You've been waiting for Jane?" Josie asked.

"To find out all about your weekend with Grant?" Zoe asked. "Um, yes."

"I would have killed her if she'd found anything out before me," Jane said. She set a bottle of wine on the island beside Josie's mixing bowl, then grabbed an apron from the hooks by the door and put it on. "I'm here to help with muffins, but I was thrilled to hear that you were back early!" She gave Josie a big grin. "So we're going to combine wine night and morning muffin making."

Josie glanced at the clock. She'd come in just after closing, knowing that it would be the best time to catch Zoe without any interruption from customers. Their busy time was definitely morning, but they had people stopping in throughout the day, and there was always a little rush just before they closed from people who needed dessert for the evening or wanted something for the morning without needing to get up early to come to the bakery.

"How did you know I was back?" Josie asked.

"Zoe texted me," Jane said.

"You did?"

"Of course," Zoe said. "And we've told Aiden and Dax that they have to take Grant out for a beer or something so we get his side of it too."

"Like this is high school?" Josie asked. She *really* wanted to know what Grant said to two of his best friends about her though. Just like high school.

"God, no," Zoe said. "You'd better have had *way* more—and better—sex than you did in high school."

"I didn't have sex in high school," Josie said. "Well, graduation night isn't really high school, right?"

Jane laughed. "Yeah, well, Grant Lorre is the type of guy to give you better sex just with a hot look than you had on graduation night."

Josie couldn't argue with that. Grant made her feel things just walking into a damned room than she'd felt for the first three guys she'd had sex with. Which either meant she'd been way too easy for those guys... or Grant was special.

She was pretty sure she knew the answer.

Jane moved in next to her and peered at the recipe for apple cinnamon muffins, reading over the ingredient list and directions.

Josie stirred the poppy seeds into the batter in front of her and pushed the bowl to Jane. "Here. Put this in the muffin pans."

Jane blew out a breath. “Thank you.”

But instead of reaching for the muffin tins, Jane grabbed the wine bottle and twisted off the top.

Zoe laughed. “We have a corkscrew.”

“In a bakery?” Jane asked. “I couldn’t risk it.”

“We do.” Zoe frowned. “Though I’m not sure why.”

It was on the tip of Josie’s tongue to tell Zoe that she had come down one Sunday evening and experimented with some wine-infused cupcakes for a bridal shower. The maid of honor had found the recipes online but wondered if Josie would do them for her. They’d turned out amazing. Josie had felt guilty the entire time she’d been in the bakery, but she’d had to make such a big number of cupcakes at once, and her oven at home hadn’t been big enough.

They should add those cupcakes to their off-menu menu. With the pussy cupcakes.

In the end, she just pressed her lips together and started on the apple cinnamon muffins.

Jane poured wine into coffee cups from the front of the bakery and handed them out.

The girls sipped and made muffins for about two minutes. Then Jane said, “Oh my God, Josie! What happened with Grant in Chicago?”

“Oh!” She’d been lost in thought. About margarita cupcakes with actual tequila in them and how they could add healthy muffins with zucchini in them to the menu. She looked at her two best friends. “Um, it was great.”

“I’m going to need an adjective other than great,” Jane said, leaning to refill her cup from the bottle.

Zoe nodded. “This is really uncool. You always wanted details about Aiden and Dax.”

The thing was, she would almost rather talk to Zoe about her ideas for the bakery. She had lots of those suddenly. Or maybe it wasn’t sudden. But they’d started to gel recently.

Whereas, she had no idea what to say about Grant. He gave her butterflies and made her sad at the same time.

They'd decided not to tell anyone they'd gotten married, so she couldn't tell the girls about that.

What was the point of saying anything? The surgery was over, so no one needed to know about that. Her recovery was coming along great. In fact, she'd felt so good, that they'd come back to Appleby on Tuesday rather than Wednesday. They were just waiting to make sure all the bills went through and the insurance company covered everything and to see what the final outstanding balance was.

Then they could get divorced.

At least, that's what she was waiting for. She assumed that's what Grant was waiting for as well. Considering *he* was less interested in the whole marriage thing overall than she was.

But they had to have some kind of story about their romantic trip and extended stay in Chicago. Josie tapped into her feelings about those first few days. The flight on the private plane, the fancy hotel, the amazing dinner, the rock-her-world-ruin-her-for-all-other-men sex.

She had to focus on those things. Those were the things that made her stomach swoop and her body heat and her heart pound. But in an exciting, sexy, I have a big, hot, protective boyfriend way.

It was easier and more fun to think about those things instead of the last couple of days at Grant's apartment. The days since her surgery had been bittersweet.

Grant had been amazing. He'd taken great care of her. He'd cooked—*cooked*, not ordered in. He'd run her baths. He'd brought her medication when she needed it. He'd checked on her almost too often. He'd also sat with her on the couch, took her for walks through downtown, rubbed her shoulders and feet, and cuddled her at night.

He'd been the ultimate caretaker. Sweet and attentive and a little worried, but also just comforting and nice. Nice seemed

like such a blah, weak word, but he really had been.

They hadn't talked any further about their outlooks on marriage and relationships and if girls were or were not brainwashed into thinking that marriage and family should be their destiny or if that was just a natural inclination for many. They didn't talk about their very different families. They didn't talk about their own marriage for that matter.

They also didn't have sex.

The whole post-op thing had something to do with that. She knew that Grant wouldn't touch her until he was positive she wasn't going to break and he wasn't going to be positive about that until the doctor cleared her.

But it was a great excuse for her to practice a little distancing—physical and emotional—too. Things were weird between them. They'd gotten married for practical reasons but it hadn't *felt* practical. It had felt like there were real feelings there. Until they actually talked about how they both viewed marriage.

She didn't think Grant *regretted* getting married. It wasn't that. But she did think he was a little worried about her turning this into more. She had to show him that she was a grown-up and could handle this being exactly what it was and nothing more.

But to do that, she had to pull back a little. It was far, far too easy to want to be close to Grant, in every way, and if she didn't watch it, she was going to not just get her heart broken, but she was going to end up embarrassing herself.

Not having sex with him was very helpful in not becoming even more attached to him. The sex was awesome, and not that it was a huge surprise, but it made it hard for her to separate her heart from her head.

“Wow.”

Josie tuned back into her friends, realizing she'd been quiet and lost in thought for too long. She'd stirred the hell out of the apple cinnamon muffin batter.

“You don’t even have words for it?” Zoe asked. She was leaning on the island watching Josie carefully.

“I think that’s a fair assessment,” Josie agreed.

“You’re so quiet,” Jane said. “You’re *never* this quiet about romance and relationships.”

That was true. But the romance and relationships were almost never *hers*. She’d had a thing going with Dallas Ryan, a local farmer, for a little while. Dallas was hot. And sweet. And sexy. And she’d thought maybe something could come of that. She’d been feeling butterflies in the stomach about Dallas and had gushed a little to Jane and Zoe about him.

But it had fizzled after a while. They’d only had sex once and it had been great. But it hadn’t been Grant great. Now she and Dallas were good friends. He’d flirt with her when he came into the bakery, but he never asked her out and she never expected him to.

He just wasn’t her one.

Grant isn’t your one either, she told herself firmly.

She just really wished that he felt less like he could maybe, possibly, be her one. If he felt completely differently about things like marriage and family and relationships in general.

“I think I’m just tired,” Josie hedged. She had, after all, just had surgery. Not that Zoe and Jane knew that—or would know that. *Ever* if Josie could help it.

“So is he staying with you right now?” Jane asked.

“How did you know that?” Josie asked. They had *just* gotten back into town a couple of hours ago.

“Dax mentioned it when I said they should go out for beers,” Jane said. “He said it was a lot more fun when everyone was crashing in Appleby and didn’t have to worry about driving home.”

“Yeah, but Cam is crashing at *our* place,” Zoe said.

“Oh, poor baby, you have to be quiet having sex instead of doing it on the kitchen table and yelling about it,” Jane teased.

“Look who’s talking,” Zoe said. “I know about the Ping-Pong table in the Hot Cakes break room.”

Jane froze and looked up at her. “What? Who told you about that?”

Zoe laughed. “No one. But I assumed you had done it on that table at some point and you just confirmed it.”

Jane narrowed her eyes but nodded. “Well done.”

Josie swallowed. She shouldn’t be jealous of her friends. For one thing, she was so, so happy for them. She was thrilled they both had men they loved who loved them fiercely.

But she wanted that with Grant. She wanted to know he’d be there at the end of the day, whatever time that finally ended up being, because he wanted to be there, rather than because they were, essentially, pulling off a con. Conning their friends into thinking they were having a hot affair. Conning an insurance company into thinking they were married. Except they *were* married. And they were having a hot affair.

She supposed they were only conning themselves. Conning themselves into thinking that this wasn’t a big deal. When it was feeling like a really big, messy, complicated, she-never-wanted-it-to-end deal.

“So Grant’s staying with you,” Jane said. “And you had a great time in Chicago.”

“Yeah.” Josie shrugged.

Jane and Zoe exchanged a look, and then Jane shook her head and set her wineglass down to cross her arms. “Nope. What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” But Josie could feel that she was on the verge of telling them everything. She wasn’t a secretive person. She loved having friends and family that were involved in her life. She was already keeping the side-baking away from Zoe and that made her feel bad enough. She’d also recently realized that she was keeping her feelings about the bakery and wanting to be more involved from her friend. She did not want to have another secret.

And she *was* a romantic. If she was crazy about Grant, and they were having a fling that resulted in him staying at her place most nights, then she would be spilling to Zoe and Jane.

“Something is going on with you,” Jane said. “You love romance. Now you have a big, hot, rich guy whisking you away for the weekend and living with you... and you’re not saying anything? Come on. Did something bad happen in Chicago?”

Oh crap. Now they were worried. Jane looked sincerely concerned while Zoe was starting to look mad. “Seriously, Josie,” Zoe said. “Do I need to call Aiden? Do I need to go over there and yell at Grant myself?”

Josie took a deep breath. “I think I’m in love with him,” she confessed.

That took her best friends a couple of seconds to digest. Then Zoe blew out a long breath. “Thank God. Okay, that’s more like it.”

Jane agreed. “We figured you had to be by now.”

Josie couldn’t argue with that. She wasn’t the weekend-away type. Not only because she didn’t date guys who went away for the weekend—unless it involved camping and fishing. “We had an amazing time in Chicago. Very romantic. Fun.” She paused. And sighed. “Hot. Very, very hot.”

Jane and Zoe grinned. Then frowned. Clearly confused by what had to be a morose look on Josie’s face.

“Why don’t you seem happier about it though?”

“He... we’re very different,” Josie said. She was going to give them as much truth as she possibly could. She could use some advice, and she really did want them to know what she was going through. She could tell them everything without mentioning that she and Grant had already said *I do*. Probably. Though actually if it came down to it and she ended up spilling that too, she wouldn’t completely mind.

“You are,” Jane said. “But Dax and I are totally opposite and it’s great.”

“You’re not though,” Josie said. “Not in the *really* important ways. You both take care of people. Making the people in your lives happy and lightening their burdens is always what drives both of you. You do it in very different ways, but that’s the bottom line for both of you.”

“She’s right,” Zoe said to Jane. “Like Aiden and I—we’re very different in that I love tradition and routine and the comfort of the familiar, while he’s more of a big-picture thinker and a risk-taker, but deep down, we’re the same in the important ways. We both care about the people around us, our families and our community and serving others.”

Josie frowned as she thought about her two friends and their loves. “And the things that are different about you, make you each better,” she said. She looked at Jane. “Dax’s playfulness and adventurous nature makes you take things a little less seriously. While your serious side makes him buckle down when he needs to.” She glanced at Zoe. “Aiden has made you take some chances you wouldn’t have otherwise because *he* is the comfortable familiar that you need, and you’ve given him the roots and home that he needed to settle down.”

They both just nodded.

“Grant and I are just different.” She shrugged. “It’s not bad. It’s just... not going to last.”

“You seem different in that he’s serious and gruffer and more intense while you’re sweet and sunny and fun,” Jane said. “Is that true?”

“Yep.”

“But that should mean that you can make him take things a little less seriously—like what Dax does for me,” Jane said.

Josie sighed. “Okay, the thing is, he’s very into people being independent, self-sufficient, not at all dependent on anyone else. He thinks everyone, especially women, need to be able to completely make a life on their own. He’s not really into partnering up. And I’m, obviously, very into wanting a partner, someone I can lean on and share things with.”

“So he’s cool with dinner and sex and a weekend together in a hotel and stuff, but not full time?” Jane asked.

“Yeah. I think he’d be really happy if I had my own place, my own accounts, my own everything, and we just got together once in a while for... fun. Sex. Trips. Dates. I mean, he likes spending time with me. He’s sweet and takes care of me and likes to do things that make me smile. But he hates that I don’t like spreadsheets and don’t balance my checkbook every month”—actually, she hadn’t told him that part—“and that I’m kind of paycheck to paycheck.” She winced and looked at Zoe. “I don’t mean anything by that.”

Zoe shook her head. “I know. But I can see why that would bug Grant. It bugs Aiden too.”

“I don’t need anything more,” Josie said. “I don’t owe on the house. I paid my car off. I don’t have any debt really. I’m fine.”

Zoe shook her head. “But if something would happen—”

“I have a little savings, and I have friends and family I can rely on,” Josie said quickly. But, of course, the voice niggled in the back of her mind that when she’d needed her gall bladder out, she’d had to go to extreme measures. Measures that wouldn’t be available the next time. Unless Grant was up for getting married again if she needed her appendix or tonsils out. There were a surprising number of internal organs that a person didn’t *actually* need.

“I’m just saying it’s sweet that he just wants to be sure you’re okay,” Zoe said.

Josie shrugged. “Yeah. He just wants me to be okay in a different way than I want to be okay.”

And *that* was her bottom line. It wasn’t that Grant wasn’t a great guy or didn’t want her to be happy. It was just that his idea of how she should be happy was different than her idea of that. She didn’t need his money, but she did want to rely on him emotionally. She wanted hugs when she’d had a hard day and foot rubs when she was tired and someone to tell silly stories to and someone to play in the kitchen with. And she

wanted it full time. Hell, they could have separate checking accounts if that would make him happy. But she didn't want him bugging her about budgeting, and she didn't want him feeling like she *needed* him for health insurance when really she *needed* him for... him.

"What do you mean that he wants you to be okay in a different way?" Jane asked.

"He actually teaches women to be self-sufficient and to not need men," she said. She laughed softly. "I—the most romantic person you know—am falling in love with a guy who would very much like it if every woman decided that she didn't want to have anything more to do with men than sex and fun weekends and *maybe* a movie marathon on the couch once in a while."

"He *teaches* women this?" Jane asked.

Josie told them about Grant's seminars and about his sister and grandma. "I mean, he comes to it from a really true place," she said. "I can't fault him for any of it. But I want the marriage." She felt a jab near her heart. She had the marriage. She just didn't have the *marriage* that she wanted. "I want the Mr. and Mrs. I want melding everything together. If I'm going to do a weekly budget, I want to do it together, to figure out where the movie date will come from and if we can afford the popcorn and Junior Mints or if I should make some cereal mix at home and sneak it in."

Zoe smiled at her. "You've romanticized being broke," she said. "That's going to be hard to pull off with Grant, even if you can talk him into a real relationship. Seeing how he's a millionaire and all."

Josie frowned slightly. "That's true."

"You've seen the romance with your parents because they *had* to come up with little ways to show each other how they felt," Zoe went on. "They couldn't buy stuff, so they made up for it in gestures."

"That made it more obvious," Josie agreed. "I mean, coming up with unique, fun, sweet date nights takes more

thought and emotion than making reservations at a fancy restaurant and booking a room at a hotel.” But she had a little niggle at the back of her mind when she said it, causing her to frown.

Grant had booked the restaurant because it had the best view. For her. He’d booked the hotel instead of taking her to his apartment because he’d wanted to give her that experience. It might have been easy for him to make the phone call and to afford the final bill, but it had still been done for a sweet reason.

“I don’t know,” Jane said. “Dax has a ton of money too, but he still does little sweet stuff that means a lot more than buying me things.”

“He bought your dad’s nursing home,” Zoe said with a laugh.

Jane grinned. “Yes, he did. And that was over the top. But he did it because he cared about me and my dad. I guess what I’m saying is that it’s also about the intention behind what they’re doing.”

That was so much like what Josie had just been thinking about, she sucked in a quick breath.

Zoe was nodding. “It’s true. And now that I think about it, I think Grant’s rubbed off on the guys. In a really good way.”

Josie perked up at that. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Aiden’s got millions too. But he’s never offered to buy the bakery or buy me an insurance policy or give me money to do anything with it. He’s given me advice and gone over the books with me, when I’ve asked, but he’d always been really respectful of it being my business and not just throwing money at my problems for me.”

“That’s true,” Jane said. “Dax has never said a word about me not working at the factory or him supporting me or anything. He didn’t buy the nursing home just to impress me. He really wanted to work there and because it was a challenge for *him*. I’m sure if I wanted to quit and live on his money,

he'd be okay with it, but I'd be willing to bet that's never even occurred to him."

"And you think that's because of Grant?" Josie asked.

"I think Grant's taught the guys, either actually or by example, to respect other people being independent and working and doing their thing their way. I think he's instilled a definite sense of respect for women," Zoe said. "They treat Piper really well."

"They do. They tease her like a friend, but they listen to her and include her almost like she's a partner," Jane said.

"And they've brought Whitney in on a lot of stuff," Zoe said. "Even though she worked for Hot Cakes before they bought it and was part of the family that basically ruined it, they've given her a chance to stay on and help rebuild it. I think that's pretty great."

Josie did too now that they pointed all that out. Grant's respect for women and his support of autonomy was *not* a bad thing.

"So you guys are making it work," she said. "The being your own woman but still in a relationship."

"We are," Jane said.

"Of course," Zoe said. "The guys would never expect us to suddenly change."

"Well, Grant *does* want me to change," Josie said.

"How?" Jane asked.

"He wants me to be more responsible and more aware of my budget and more careful with my money." Okay, when she said it out loud it didn't sound so bad.

Zoe agreed. "And that makes him a jerk?"

"No. It makes us incompatible long term though," Josie said. Then she winced. "That makes me sound like I really want to be irresponsible and poor, doesn't it?"

Jane laughed. "A little bit. I know that's not what you mean though."

“But would it be terrible to let him teach you about spreadsheets or whatever?” Jane asked. “I mean, Dax has taught me more about Frank Sinatra than any person on the planet should know besides Frank himself.” She shrugged. “Making him happy is worth a little painful boredom sometimes.”

“And maybe he could teach you about filling out spreadsheets while cuddling on the couch,” Zoe said. “You both get a little of what you want.”

Josie sat up a little straighter. Curled up against Grant would make learning about budgeting better for sure.

“Or you move the spreadsheet session to the *bedroom*,” Jane said. “Tell him you’ll listen about formulas and columns and rows, but he has to be naked while he teaches.”

Josie laughed. “I won’t be concentrating very hard. I won’t retain a thing he tells me.” But she liked this general idea. She could meet him partway. That was very real relationship-ish.

“I’m just saying, learning spreadsheets is a lot more fun that way, and it will limit the amount of time he makes you practice,” Jane said with a grin.

“Well, that sounds good when you put it that way,” Josie agreed.

“And hey, anything that has the words *spread* and *sheets* in it, at least has the potential to be dirty and fun, right?” Zoe asked.

“You’ve become downright naughty since Aiden came back and took care of your V-card situation,” Jane said with a grin, lifting her glass.

“Yes, yes, I have,” Zoe said, leaning back with a very satisfied look on her face.

Josie smiled. She was feeling more satisfied than she had for a few days. Maybe there was a way to make this work with Grant. Give and take. Compromise. Teaching each other something new.

And if all else failed with the spreadsheet cuddling, she could always mix up some chocolate cake batter.

Chapter Seventeen



“We need to rethink everything.”

Grant couldn't agree more. Though he didn't think Whitney was talking about the same thing he was. Namely his marriage to Jocelyn.

Whitney took the seat behind her desk and opened the folder she'd brought in with her.

Grant was seated in front of her desk. He'd been waiting for about five minutes, but Piper had told him Whitney was on her way. He'd arrived early, needing to get out of the house. That sounded terrible. But he'd wanted to leave Jocelyn's house because he wanted nothing more than to *stay* in Jocelyn's house. With her. Forever.

He was going a little crazy.

Especially since finding the plate of whoopie pies in the kitchen that morning.

Jocelyn had, apparently, gotten up either in the middle of the night or very early that morning to make them.

He'd made the mistake of tasting one.

The whoopie pie was the fifth best thing he'd ever had in his mouth.

Right after Jocelyn's pussy and her nipples and her tongue and well, any other part of her body. In that order.

It had been killing him to not touch her, not kiss her. He'd been keeping his hands to himself as she recovered from the

surgery, letting it be her choice when they were intimate again.

She hadn't initiated anything yet.

That was also driving him crazy. Not only because he was dying to be with her again, but because he was afraid that she was pulling away. Not just physically, but emotionally as well. And he'd never been afraid about that with any other woman. Ever.

Needless to say, he'd been thrilled to get Whitney's text last night that they needed to meet ASAP about the new snack cake they wanted to add to their product line.

He needed something to take his mind off the fact that he wanted to stay married to his wife. He was sure that would sound as stupid out loud as it did in his head. Which was why he hadn't said it to anyone. Including his friends. Including his wife herself.

"Okay," he said, trying to focus on Whitney and his job. "What specifically do we need to rethink?"

"This contest is completely nuts," she said bluntly.

Grant grinned in spite of his tumultuous thoughts about his wife. His *wife*. Damn, he liked calling Josie that. "My understanding is that it's nuts, at least in part, because of *you*."

Whitney groaned and slumped back in her chair. "Oh my God, it is. I don't know what happened. I go in to have a short conversation with Ollie about something, and two hours later we're talking about food trucks and if you can hire acrobats for community events."

"Acrobats?" Grant repeated. "Piper didn't mention acrobats."

Whitney nodded. "Ollie said we shouldn't tell her."

Oh damn. Ollie knew enough not to tell Piper every plan? What else was he keeping from her? From them? How much had he kept from them all over the *nine years* they'd been working together? Grant started to feel his head start to ache and knew he'd be heading for his top left desk drawer after this. That's where he kept the bottle of antacids with DAX

written on the side in Piper's handwriting. OLLIE was written on the side of his bottle of ibuprofen.

“And *can* you hire acrobats for community events?” Grant asked.

“You can. But they can't do tightrope or trapeze stuff, of course. They can just do tumbling and juggling and things like that.”

“So how many acrobats do we have coming?”

“None. If they can't ride a unicycle across a tightrope then what's the point?” Whitney asked. “That's a direct quote from Ollie, by the way.”

Grant sighed. Partially in relief, for sure. “How did this circus theme happen anyway?”

“I made the mistake—in hindsight I realize it was a mistake anyway—of saying something about the whole thing turning into a circus,” Whitney said. “He just took off from there. But”—she hesitated and sighed—“I got caught up in it. It was fun. Just letting the ideas run wild, not having any restraints. I didn't realize that he's actually serious about everything he says.”

Grant chuckled. “He's not. He depends on the rest of us to tell him no or that it's getting crazy. I'm sure that when he saw you were on board, he figured he was on track and coming up with brilliant plans.”

Her eyes widened. “He was waiting for me to pull him back?”

“Yep.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. Finally, she sat forward in her chair and shook her head. “I don't want to. I don't want to be the person who says no or that we have to slow down or that he's thinking too big. I—” She swallowed and then met Grant's eyes. “That's pretty much all I've heard from my family about any idea I've ever had here. I don't want to do that to someone else.”

Grant nodded. He'd figured there was something like that going on. "That's fine. We're a team. The rest of us have your back. You keep right on brainstorming like crazy with him, and we'll take care of making sure we don't have elephants and people being shot out of cannons at our snack cake baking contest."

Her expression was hard to read. After a moment she asked, "Will you all help keep my ideas in line too?"

"Do you mean will we let you throw out anything and everything and dream big and then make as much of it happen as we can and as makes sense, but will we also be honest with you about what won't work and why?"

She nodded, her bottom lip between her teeth.

He smiled. "Yes. Absolutely."

She let out a breath.

"Listen, without Ollie and Dax being big thinkers, none of us would be where we are today. I try to give them a long leash whenever I can. I like to think of myself as the guy who finds ways to let Ollie and Dax do their thing while keeping the company solvent and responsible." He paused. "If you want to be one of the big thinkers, that's awesome. The rest of us are here for... everything else. We'll all make it happen together."

She looked touched by that, and she gave him a huge smile.

That smile and the way she lit up made Grant think of Cam. His friend was still in love with this woman. He might not admit it, or hell, he might—he was Cam and was forever contrary and doing the opposite of what people expected—but it was true and Grant could see why in that moment.

Whitney was gorgeous, but there was more than her long dark hair and her eyes and lips and curves. There was an intelligence behind her beauty. She wasn't as bold as Zoe or as down to earth as Jane or as sweet as Jocelyn. Whitney had a classy, sophisticated polish to her, but there seemed to be a lot of passion just underneath.

It was interesting that this was the woman who'd stolen Cam's heart. Cam was a fighter. He liked to push buttons. He was downright crass when he wanted to be. He could read a room—not that it always meant he pulled punches—but polished and classy were not adjectives anyone would use for Camden McCaffery.

Maybe that was the draw. The opposites-attract thing, Grant mused. That seemed the case with him and Jocelyn to a degree. They had very different backgrounds and upbringings.

But he couldn't shake the way she'd talked about his seminars. Even what he did for a living with the guys. He made it possible for them to shine. He helped other people recognize their potential and helped encourage them to see themselves as capable of more.

Jocelyn did that too. She made Buttered Up better than it would have been without her. She encouraged Zoe to try new things. He knew the recent addition of cake pops to the menu had been Jocelyn's idea. That seemed small, but he knew that with Zoe it took a while to get new ideas through. Jocelyn had done that. The cobblers and cookies she did for the busy women of Appleby seemed like a small thing, but it was an important piece to a much bigger picture.

And Jocelyn was fine being behind the scenes and helping other people have those moments of happiness. The graduation cake for Mr. Milford had been important, even those pussy cupcakes. Those had all been her using her baking to make moments for other people.

Grant was starting to see that small, simple, sweet things could add up to big, important things. Literally and figuratively.

Damn, he was in love with her.

He was married to her.

He wanted to stay married to her.

“Sorry I'm late.”

Grant looked over his shoulder to find Cam striding into the room. Grant glanced back at Whitney.

She sat up straighter and gave Cam a little frown. “How can you be late to a meeting you weren’t invited to?”

“Interesting point. Guess I’m right on time, then,” he said, handing two white envelopes to Grant.

“For a meeting you *still* weren’t invited to?” Whitney asked.

Cam dropped into the chair next to Grant and propped one ankle on his opposite knee. “Yep. What’s up?”

“Maybe something you don’t need to know about,” she said.

“I’m the company attorney, darlin’,” he said with a slow smile. “I need to know about everything.”

Whitney sighed. She couldn’t really argue with that.

“What’s this?” Grant asked, taking Cam’s focus off his ex for a moment.

“One is the insurance papers. All the bills have come through and are paid in full. The other is the divorce papers.”

Grant lifted a brow.

Cam glanced at Whitney. “Oh yeah. Don’t say anything to anyone about that.”

Whitney looked back and forth between them. “Divorce papers?”

“Thanks, Cam,” Grant said with a sigh.

“It’s Whitney,” Cam said with a shrug. “She’s a great secret keeper. Aren’t you?”

Whitney opened her mouth, her cheeks suddenly pink. Then she snapped her mouth shut.

Cam looked at Grant, but his expression was less playful now. “Don’t worry. Whitney has secrets about me that she *still* hasn’t told anyone.”

Grant did *not* want to get in the middle of this. “I don’t want to know.”

“No, you probably don’t,” Cam agreed. “It’s just stupid shit like her being madly in love with me and wanting to spend the rest of her life with me and her giving that all up to be fucked by her family’s company instead.”

Whitney gasped and narrowed her eyes. “Cam,” she said through gritted teeth.

Grant let his eyes slide closed and took a deep breath. He *really* didn’t want to get in the middle of this. “Okay, enough,” Grant said firmly, leveling Cam with a look. “If you’re going to be an ass, you need to leave.”

Cam just relaxed farther into the chair. “Nah, I’ll be good.”

He wouldn’t. Cam didn’t know how to be good. But if he’d stop poking at Whitney, then it was easier to let him stay than make a big deal out of forcing him out. The other option was to tell him the meeting was already over. But Grant did want to hash out some of these details of the new product, and it wouldn’t hurt to have their lawyer here for that.

He decided to divert the conversation. And the best topic for that was, unfortunately, him.

“Jocelyn and I got married in Chicago,” Grant told Whitney.

Her eyes widened. “Congratulations.”

He shook his head. “It was... purely practical.”

That’s a lie, a voice in his head protested. It was that word *purely* that was tripping him up, he realized. Because they *had* gotten married for a very practical reason. It just hadn’t been the only reason he’d been happy to be saying *I do* to her in that judge’s chamber.

“She needed health insurance to cover her gall bladder surgery,” Grant explained. “It was the easiest way take care of that.”

Whitney nodded. “Okay.”

Grant looked at her closely. She seemed to be accepting it all easily enough. “Really?”

“It’s none of my business,” Whitney said. “And even if it was, it makes sense.”

Grant nodded. Okay. See, this was what it was like to deal with commonsense, practical people who understood black and white. Whitney wasn’t *just* a big thinker and dreamer. “Thank you.”

“And now you’re getting divorced?” she asked, glancing at Cam.

Cam lifted a shoulder. “As soon as they sign the papers anyway. Everything’s taken care of. No reason to stay married.”

“The bills are already paid?” Grant asked, looking down at the envelope in his hand.

“I encouraged them to rush it,” Cam said.

“How?”

“I’m very good at my job, and I have a lot of connections,” Cam said as if it was the most obvious thing.

Both of those things were true, and Grant had no reason or way to argue them. “Why did you think they had to go through so fast?”

Now that the bills were paid, there wasn’t really a practical reason for him and Jocelyn to stay married. He had figured that it would take at least thirty days for the hospital to file everything and for it to go through. Thirty days was a great amount of time for him to be sure the she was fully healed and back to normal.

It had now been three weekdays.

“Why not?” Cam gave him an assessing look. “I figured you’d want it taken care of. And that’s what I do. I take care of stuff.”

“They won’t think that’s suspect? When we end up divorced so quickly?” Grant asked.

Cam shrugged again. “I’m not sure it matters if they think it’s suspect. You were actually married at the time we filed the

claim. She actually had a medical need for the procedure. The claims were filed properly, albeit quickly. They paid the claim. It went through a little faster than usual, but it wasn't fudged in any way. There's nothing illegal about it." He grinned. "They can try to deny it. I'd be happy to discuss it with them further."

Grant sighed. Cam had probably pushed the insurance claim through extra fast in the hope that they'd come back and want to fight about it. He was probably bored. There hadn't been as much legal work to do with Hot Cakes since the purchase had gone through.

Hell, it was very likely why Cam had come into Whitney's office. He'd probably asked Piper where Grant was and as soon as she'd said he was in with Whitney, Cam's eyes had probably lit up.

He was such an ass. But such a loyal, good-guy ass. He loved to fight, but he fought for the right things. And if he cared about you, he'd fight for you to the death.

That was the problem with a guy like Cam falling in love. Once he fell, he never got over it. It was very possible that he'd never get over Whitney and he'd die an old bachelor. A *cantankerous* old bachelor.

Okay, fine, so now the bills for Jocelyn's gall bladder surgery were taken care of. "These are the divorce papers?" Grant asked, holding up the other envelope.

"Yep." Cam gave him that thoughtful look again. "Do with them what you will."

"What does that mean?"

"Once you both sign, the divorce will go through quickly. You don't have any mutual assets and no one's contesting anything. There're no kids. I've made it very simple," Cam said. "But, of course, you're married until you both sign."

Grant looked down at the envelope. Right. They had to actually sign the papers to end the marriage. Regardless of the hospital bills. "Is there a time limit on it?" Grant asked.

Cam shot Whitney a look. Grant looked at her too. She looked surprised, but she was pressing her lips together as if to keep from saying anything.

“Not really,” Cam said. “I’ll work it out whenever you sign. But the longer you play at husband and wife, the harder it might be to keep this simple.”

Grant wanted to protest the use of the word *playing*. Which was the first red flag.

The fact that he thought *it’s already not simple* was red flag number two.

The fact that he asked his next question was red flag number three.

“You think we might develop real feelings for each other if we keep this going?”

Cam looked at Whitney again. Then he nodded. “I think it’s possible. Yeah.”

The fact that Grant liked the idea that Jocelyn’s feelings could grow was red flag number four.

“Grant,” Cam said.

“Yeah?” He looked up at his friend.

“Are you going to sign those papers tonight?”

Grant already knew the answer to that question. “No.”

“I see.” Cam shifted on his chair, leaning forward to rest his forearms on his thighs, pinning Grant with a direct look. “Why not?”

“I need to be sure she’ll be okay first.”

“Is she not feeling well?” Whitney asked. “Having trouble with her recovery?”

“She’s feeling great. Doctor said everything turned out perfectly.”

“Then why are you concerned?” Whitney asked.

“She needs to be okay financially,” Grant said. “That’s why we had to do this in the first place.” He looked at Cam.

“Can you put something in the divorce papers that she gets part of my money?”

Cam’s eyebrows shot up. “Alimony?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been married for five days.”

“So?”

“I’m not doing that, Grant,” Cam said firmly.

“You should if I want you to.”

“As your attorney, and even more as your friend, I am telling you that’s a bad idea,” Cam said. “I’m not doing it.”

“She needs to be taken care of,” Grant insisted.

His stomach was tightening, and his heart was pounding. He had no reason to keep Jocelyn married to him. He’d married her because she’d needed taking care of. She’d agreed to it because she’d needed taking care of. It was exactly what he taught other women *not* to do. He had to let her go, let her out of it. He couldn’t keep her legally or financially tied to him.

But he also couldn’t just turn her loose. She needed to be financially independent so she didn’t end up in another situation where she was putting off taking care of something because she didn’t have the money, jeopardizing her health or safety.

Grant felt his gut twist. No, he couldn’t let her go completely until he knew she’d be okay.

“Okay, well, I understand where you’re coming from,” Cam said.

He was using his calm, reasonable voice—which irritated the fuck out of Grant because it sounded condescending as hell since Grant was supposed to be the calm, reasonable one.

He suddenly wasn’t feeling calm or reasonable.

“Josie will never go for it,” Cam said.

“She will,” Grant told him. “I’ll talk to her.”

Cam lifted a brow. “I’ve known Josie most of her life. There is no way she’s going to take money from you, ongoing, into perpetuity, just because you were married—a marriage of convenience, I might add—for five days.”

She hadn’t even wanted to take money from him for the surgery, Grant acknowledged. To himself only, of course. But she hadn’t even wanted him to help her with that.

Fuck.

Grant shoved a hand through his hair. “I want her taken care of.”

Cam looked at him for a long moment. Then he sat back in his chair. “You could stay married.”

“No.”

Cam looked at Whitney again. Whitney’s eyebrows were up.

“Why not?” Cam asked. “You like her. She seems to like you.”

“Because I...” Grant swallowed. “I don’t want her to *need* me. I don’t want her with me just because she needs money or health insurance. I want her to want to be with me. To choose me when she has every single other fucking option.”

Whitney’s eyes widened slightly but she nodded. “Do you have any reason to think that she *doesn’t* want you?”

“No. But... we’ve fucked this up.”

Grant was not used to being vulnerable. He just wasn’t. He made fantastic decisions based on facts and data. He was the one who other people came to for advice and when *they* needed to be bailed out.

But—he looked from Cam to Whitney and back—if he *was* going to get an opinion on something from someone, these two would be two of his picks. They were both practical. They dealt with the real world, they made tough decisions, and they knew things didn’t always work out just because you wanted them to. Hell, they both dealt with assholes on a daily

basis. Cam in the field of law and Whitney inside her own family.

“We screwed this up by getting married first. For money. And *then*”—he blew out a breath and tipped his head up to look at the ceiling—“and *then* falling in love.”

“You’re in love with her?” Whitney asked.

“Probably. Very likely. I’d be stupid not to be,” Grant said.

“Is she in love with you?” This came from Cam.

Grant looked over at his friend. “I think that Jocelyn Asher, the most romantic person I’ve ever met, would like nothing more than to be in love with her husband.”

Cam cocked a brow. “That is not what I asked you.”

No. It wasn’t. “I don’t know,” Grant admitted. “But I think maybe.”

“So there’s only one thing to do,” Cam said.

“There is?” Whitney asked.

“We hire Josie to make the new cake,” Cam said.

“Hire her?” Whitney repeated. Then her eyes widened. “You mean instead of the crazy contest?” She looked excited.

Cam nodded, and Whitney blew out what could only be described as a relieved breath.

“The winner was going to get ten thousand dollars and then five percent royalties on sales of that cake each month, right?” Cam asked. “So that’s what we’ll offer Josie. She’d be getting a monthly check. I mean, it wouldn’t be millions, but it would be a decent chunk. Maybe enough to buy some health insurance on the side of her regular job.”

“But—” Whitney started.

“Whit,” Cam said, cutting her off. “Don’t you think that someone who’s truly in love should have the chance to really make it work? That they should have the people who love them and care about them do whatever they can to support

them? That we, as their friends, should really want them to be happy?”

Grant looked at Whitney. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes narrow, her lips pressed together.

“Of course I do,” she said. “I think if we can take away some of these barriers between Grant and Josie, we should do that.” She looked at Grant. “And if I don’t have to run that contest and bachelor auction, I will be your loyal and grateful employee forever.”

He smiled at that, but he needed to focus on Josie. “What about the contestants?” he asked. “Is it fair to just let Josie do this?”

“You mean the contestants for the contest we haven’t even announced yet?” Whitney said. “No one even knows about this. There’s no one to be disappointed. Except maybe Ollie.”

Oh, Ollie would definitely be disappointed. “You’ll just hire her because she’s my... wife?” Grant hesitated over that word. He’d never said it out loud to anyone other than Jocelyn.

“Of course,” Cam said. “She’s part of the family.”

That made Grant’s heart thump hard against his sternum.

“But she won’t be your wife anyway,” Cam went on, making Grant frown.

“What?”

“I thought you were going to divorce her.” Cam lifted a big shoulder. “So we’ll be hiring someone local, who Whit and I have known all our lives, and who’s very talented. She’ll have the income so she won’t need you for that. Then she’ll realize she loves you for you and wants to be with you, and you’ll get back together.”

Grant started to protest, but realized that all actually sounded okay. “You haven’t tried her cake or whatever she would be inventing for Hot Cakes.”

Cam laughed. “I’ve eaten more of Josie’s cakes than you have, my friend.”

He said it with a tone that had just enough innuendo in it to make Grant grit his teeth.

Whitney rolled her eyes and said to Grant, “I really like Josie, so I have no problem with this. But she’s known for her decorating and designs. She mostly follows the recipes at the bakery, right? We can’t have her poaching one of Zoe’s recipes for us. Though if Zoe wanted to be involved too, maybe we could include some joint promotion—”

“No,” Grant said quickly. He could feel himself frowning. He glanced at Cam, Zoe’s brother. “No offense, but I think we leave Zoe out of it. Jocelyn does plenty of baking with her own recipes. She’d be very capable of developing something for us, and I think it would be great for her to have some recognition for something outside of the cake decorating she does at Buttered Up.”

Cam shrugged. “Okay by me.”

Whitney nodded. “Fine with me.”

Grant nodded too. This was really good. It would accomplish all of the objectives.

Jocelyn would be financially stable without him, on her own merit, with a product *she* created.

This was a great plan.

Now all he had to do was convince *her*.

And to sign the divorce papers.

And then to go out with him on a real date that had nothing to do with his health insurance.

* * *

Jocelyn’s house smelled amazing. She’d baked. Again.

He figured that was a very typical thing in this house, and he couldn’t deny that was not at all a bad thing to think about coming home to.

But he'd want to come home to this house, to her, no matter what. Forever.

So he really needed to get this divorce thing done.

And yes, he was aware how stupid that sounded.

The kitchen was empty other than the amazing aroma of freshly baked something—cookies, he thought, but possibly muffins or cake—so he made his way through the house and up the stairs. He heard the television from the bedroom. So she was in the room of the house where he most liked having her. The kitchen a very close second, of course.

“Hey,” he said from the doorway.

She gave him a big smile that punched him in the gut. “Hi.”

He braced his hands on either side of the door and just studied her.

She was propped up on the bed, her laptop on her thighs. She had her hair up in a messy bun, glasses propped on her nose, and was wearing a thin tank top and shorts. It was clear she was mostly ready for bed.

Yeah, he wanted her like this every night. This is what he wanted to come home to. Not the expensive furniture and high thread-count sheets. Not the city lights. Not the gourmet food delivery from some of the best restaurants in the country.

This. This woman. This house. This bedroom. And the smell of cookies. Or cake. Or whatever.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

She pulled her glasses off and met his gaze. “Horny.”

Grant froze. He blinked at her. “Oh?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“So... better, then.”

She smiled. “Yeah. Good, actually. A little tired and like we might have to be careful with our positions so I don't pull

on the sore spot on my side, but mostly I feel good.” She paused. “And I want you.”

Grant curled his fingers into the wood doorframe. “You’re sure it’s okay?”

“They said to resume my normal activities as I feel ready.”

He blew out a breath.

“Are *you* going to be okay?” she asked, a smile in her voice.

“Don’t know,” he said honestly. “I want you too. Always. But I have this insane protective streak where you’re concerned.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“I might get partway into it and start to worry.” He was serious about that.

“Well, I’ve always got my vibrator if I have to finish that way.”

He huffed out a laugh even as his body heated, and *God, I really like her* went through his mind at the same time. “I’d kind of like to see that, actually.”

She grinned. “Then we’re good no matter what. I’ll get the horniness taken care of one way or another, and you won’t be *too* disappointed no matter how it turns out.”

He nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

He started to toe off his shoes and undo his belt.

“And I have an idea that might make it even more fun and get you out of your head about my surgery,” she said.

“What you just mentioned sounded pretty fun,” he told her, tossing his belt and kicking his shoes to the side.

He started for the bed.

“What if I told you that I wanted to combine the sex and the vibrator with”—she paused dramatically, a mischievous look in her eyes—“spreadsheets.”

He stopped at the side of the bed. Spreadsheets and sex? Sounded weird. And like combining two of his favorite things. “Go on.”

She gave him a knowing look. “I thought that might get your attention.”

He put one knee on the mattress and started unbuttoning his shirt. “You always have my attention, Jocelyn.”

That made her lips curl into a sweet smile. “So... I’ve been thinking, and I’ve decided that you should teach me a few things about business. And I think we should start with spreadsheets.”

He lifted a brow. “Tonight? Now?”

She nodded. “Yes. You teach me something. I try it. When I understand it and do it right, one of us takes a piece of clothing off.”

He let that sink in. Then laughed. “You have like three pieces of clothing on.”

She looked down, then up at him with a smirk. “Two, actually.”

He could see her tank top and shorts. No panties, then. Good to know. He nodded, feeling his blood heating. “So I can teach you two things?”

“Well—” She looked him up and down. His shirt was hanging open but still technically on. “You have a few things on too.” She leaned to look down at his feet. “I guess it’s your call on if we count the socks as one thing or two.”

He nodded. “Okay. You have two things on. I have a shirt, pants, underwear, and two socks. So I can teach you seven things before we’re both naked.”

She shook her head. “The socks are two things, huh? Damn.”

He laughed. “Two things. But how do you expect us to be concentrating on things in Excel by the time we even have a couple of items off?”

She shrugged. “I guess you either start with the more difficult stuff and make it get easier as we’re more distracted. Or we start with your socks and leave the more... revealing clothes removal toward the end.”

Grant had to admit this sounded like fun. A lot of fun. Even if she didn’t learn a damned thing about Excel, this would be fun. And she was willing. That actually made him go a little soft. She didn’t want to learn about spreadsheets. He knew that. But she was making a gesture here.

“Okay,” he agreed. He buttoned half of his shirt buttons back up. “Let’s do this.”

She seemed very pleased as he crawled onto the bed beside her. “I’ve already got Excel open and everything,” she said, turning her computer to show him.

“Good girl.”

She gave him a saucy smile.

“What?” he asked.

“I like that.”

“Good girl? You like that?”

She nodded. “Kind of gives you a hot teacher vibe.”

He gave a little growl. “I can definitely do the hot teacher thing with my favorite student.”

“Oh, this is going to be so good,” she said, turning her attention back to the screen.

Grant chuckled. Fun and torturous.

He moved in behind her, positioning himself so that she could lean back against his chest, and they could both see and reach the computer. She settled in against him easily, and he marveled at how amazing she felt in his arms. He took a big, deep, contented breath.

He moved her hair back from the side of her face and leaned in to put his chin on her shoulder. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me too.” She sighed. “It’s nice to be home.”

It was. This wasn’t even his home, and it was very nice to be here.

“What’s first?” she asked.

“Okay, well, what do you know?”

“How to open Excel.”

“That’s it?”

“Pretty much.”

Okay, so this was going to take a few lessons. But that was fine. He liked the idea of having multiple nights ahead that they could spend just like this.

“First lesson,” he said. “Blank workbook.” He pointed at the screen.

She clicked and they got started.

It turned out that she didn’t know much more than how to open Excel—an hour, and two orgasms later.

They lay with their limbs entwined, sweaty, and panting.

And Grant decided he didn’t care if Jocelyn ever figured out spreadsheets. He’d do all her spreadsheets for her.

But they would keep playing strip-spreadsheet-tutoring whenever possible.

“So that’s how you auto sum a column,” he said, stroking the pads of his fingers up and down her back.

She giggled against his chest. “That might have been my favorite part.”

“Yeah? I thought you liked removing duplicates,” he said with a grin.

She nodded. “That was really good. But that auto summing... wow.”

He hugged her close. Had he ever been this happy?

No. It was easy to come up with that answer. He’d never been this happy. Never known that simple stuff like this could

make his heart pound and his gut tighten and even his bones feel warm.

After another couple of minutes, he finally rolled and sat up, taking her with him. They cleaned up, put the computer away, and got under the blankets.

Jocelyn cuddled up against his side.

“You sore?” he asked her huskily in the dark.

“No. You were very careful with me.” She ran her hand back and forth over his chest.

He’d tried to be. But she hadn’t acted like she needed him to hold back, that was for sure. Still, he’d been happy to do most of the work.

“Well, you tell me if you feel it tomorrow. I don’t want to push you too hard,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” she said, a smile in her voice. “I promise to let you pamper me and spoil me and protect me as much as you want.”

His heart thudded. He definitely wanted that. He wasn’t supposed to. His head told him that. He was supposed to encourage her to take care of herself and to not need him.

But he really wanted to take care of her.

Was there a way to have both?

The whoopie pies. Those were the answer. If she had her own thing, something that she was proud of, that was all hers, that would support her and make her happy, then the rest would fall into place.

The whoopie pies, where he and Jocelyn had essentially started, were the answer to how they could make this last.

Grant drifted off to sleep thinking about how beautifully poetic that really was.

Chapter Eighteen



Learning about spreadsheets didn't make him want to stay married to her.

Josie stared at the papers lying next to the plate of whoopie pies on her kitchen island.

The kitchen island where she and Grant had first had sex.

The whoopie pies that she'd been trying to make that first night—that they'd ended up using in the hottest sex of her life.

That was... horribly ironic. Or something.

He still wanted a divorce. The papers were right here. He'd brought them over. He'd laid them on this island, next to these whoopie pies, and then he'd come upstairs, and had strip-spreadsheet-sex with her.

He'd also already signed the papers.

Along with them were the hospital and doctors' bills from her surgery—all marked paid—and a contract from Hot Cakes for her to develop their newest snack cake.

It already had her name and everything filled in. All it needed was her signature.

Just like the divorce papers.

It was 5 a.m. Grant was asleep upstairs in her bed. She'd floated down the fucking stairs. *Floated.*

Josie worked to breathe. And not cry. Okay, he'd signed the divorce papers. They'd talked about this. This should not be a shock. She'd known this was where he'd thought this was

headed from day one. The marriage had been for a specific purpose. That purpose had been fulfilled.

Grant was nothing if not a very focused, purposeful person.

She breathed in, then out. She thought about her sister and what Paige had taught her about breathing and centering herself.

Then she crossed to the drawer that held a collection of things like scissors and tape and notepads and pens. She took a pen out, went back to the divorce papers, and signed her name.

Okay. She was now divorced.

Wow, that had been a lot easier than it should have been.

And it really sucked.

She eyed the coffeepot. Coffee didn't actually sound good at the moment. She looked at the fridge. Nothing sounded good to eat. She looked at the back door. She could... go for a run. If she was a runner. But she wasn't. At all.

Damn. She had no idea what to do.

Her sister had a yoga class at five thirty every morning. Maybe she'd do that. She could definitely use some more deep breathing and centering and calming.

She could also use someone to talk to. Someone who wasn't in love with one of Grant's best friends and who wouldn't freak out about Josie marrying him for health insurance and who wouldn't freak out about her having her gall bladder removed in Chicago and who wouldn't be upset with her for baking on the side and... all of the other secrets she'd been keeping.

Paige didn't freak out about things. She was the calmest person Josie knew. She was the calmest person most people knew.

Yeah, Josie wanted to talk to her sister.

And play with some kittens. She grabbed her keys and started for the door.

But just as she was pulling it open, she heard footsteps thundering down the staircase from the second level.

Grant was definitely not *floating* downstairs this morning.

She sighed and turned.

“You’re still here. Thank God,” he said. He looked like he’d vaulted out of bed. He was still wearing only his boxers. His hair was mussed, one side sticking straight up. He had stubble darkening his jaw, and he looked slightly dazed as if he’d just been jolted awake.

“I was just leaving.”

He glanced at the center island. Right at the papers that he’d clearly left there last night.

“Don’t worry. I signed.”

“You did?” His eyes lit up slightly. “So you like the idea?”

Did she *like* the idea of getting divorced? No. Not even a tiny bit. But she wasn’t sure she wanted to admit that to him. She wanted to have a little dignity here, didn’t she? A little pride?

But she frowned and shook her head. “No, Grant. I don’t like the idea. But it’s what we agreed to, and if it’s what you want I’m not going to fight you.”

He frowned. “It’s what we agreed to? What do you mean?”

“We both knew that the marriage was temporary. We agreed that it was for the insurance. Now that the bills are all paid, there’s no reason to stay married.”

His frown cleared, and he shoved a hand through his hair. “Oh. That.”

“Yes. That. What did you think I was talking about?”

“The agreement with Hot Cakes. To make our new snack cake,” he said. “I wanted to go over that with you before you went to the bakery because I know you probably wouldn’t be comfortable talking about it there. And I’d love to get that ball rolling today.”

She propped a hand on her hip. “What ball rolling?”

“We want you to develop our new snack cake,” he said again.

“I got that part. I’m not going to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Why would I? I work for Buttered Up. I know things are a lot better between the two families, but I can’t develop a new cake for another company without talking to Zoe. And if someone is going to do that, shouldn’t it be her?”

“No, *you* need to do this. You deserve this,” Grant said, taking a step toward her.

“Deserve this?” she repeated. “What are you talking about?”

“You deserve the ten thousand dollars that comes with it. And the monthly royalty payment as long as the cake is a part of our product line. Which, considering the company has never added or removed any other product, will be for a very long time.”

She frowned and turned to face him more fully.

He took another step closer. “You also deserve the recognition of having one of your cakes produced a million times over, sold to hundreds of thousands of people.”

“I... don’t want that.” But her heart was beating hard. What was that?

She didn’t want to do work for Hot Cakes. She didn’t share Zoe’s long-held belief that Hot Cakes and the Lancaster family were inherently evil—and, of course, Zoe’s feelings about the company and the family had changed recently as she’d let go of the three-generation old grudge she’d been holding on behalf of her grandmother—but Josie did believe that what she and Zoe did at Buttered Up was different, and yes, better on some levels. It was more personal. It was more special. They created from scratch, by hand, and with the people of Appleby in mind. They didn’t mass produce cakes that would sit on grocery and convenience store shelves for strangers to grab

without even giving it a true thought. They baked for their neighbors and friends, and they did it with a mind to tradition and the occasions that their treats would be a part of.

“You don’t want to be financially secure?”

Ah, well, of course that’s what this was about. “That is a lot of money.”

“It is. And it’s guaranteed. You can use your talents to make yourself financially independent.”

She crossed her arms. “Strange coincidence that the guy who is obsessed with me being financially independent also co-owns the company offering me this contract.”

He shrugged. “It wouldn’t work if we weren’t already looking for a new product and you weren’t already a talented baker.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was Cam’s idea,” he said.

“Really.” She didn’t believe that.

Grant nodded. “We were going to have a contest for people to enter recipes and a big town taste testing and... a whole event. But when I talked to Cam and Whitney, Cam suggested we just hire you.”

Josie felt herself frown. That sounded a little easier to believe. “You’re still setting this up for me.”

“Every time I do a seminar, I set things up for women,” he said. “I advise them on good investments, help them get those started, help them with how to expand what they’re already doing if that applies. This is no different.”

This is no different.

Right. That was the thing she had to remember. She was just another woman who had needed his help financially. This was Grant’s passion. This was what gave him purpose and happiness. There had been sex—and a wedding—involved in this particular circumstance, where he didn’t usually sleep with, or marry, the women he counseled, but truly, at the end

of the day, she was just another woman who had gotten into trouble financially, and he'd stepped in to bail out.

He'd gotten in over his head, sure, but that other set of papers would get him out of that.

She pulled in a breath. "Well, I appreciate the option, but I'm not comfortable with it."

"You're not comfortable making ten thousand dollars and then a percentage of sales of your snack cake every month?" he asked.

She wanted to ask how much he thought that would be, she couldn't deny. But it didn't matter. She wasn't doing this. She wasn't a charity case. She hated that all he really saw was another woman who needed his help.

"I guess you still don't believe that I'm really very happy with how things are," she said. That was true. The health insurance thing aside, she *was* happy. "I don't need millions of dollars. Yes, I loved the private plane and the fancy restaurant and the amazing hotel suite, but I don't *need* them." She pressed her hands against her stomach willing it to stop flipping. "I loved the popcorn on the couch, sitting with you reading while you worked, learning about spreadsheets just as much." She swallowed hard. "The best part of the dinner at the restaurant was talking to you and hearing your stories. The best part of the hotel suite was sleeping in your arms. I don't need the city lights or expensive wine or high thread-count sheets. And I was hoping that you would realize that and... maybe feel the same way."

"Jocelyn, I do want you to be happy. I just want you to stop hiding your talent and taking less than you deserve." His voice was gruff, and he looked surprised and pained at the same time. "You hide your side-baking. You stay in the kitchen at the bakery. Even though everyone knows you do all the major decorating, Zoe still keeps the majority of the profits, and the recognition all goes to the bakery. She needs you more than you need her, yet you keep working there, making *her* business a success, while she can't even provide you with health insurance."

Josie felt a jab of protectiveness in the middle of her chest. “Zoe is my best friend, Grant. She gives me so much more than money. We’re family. She’s someone I can laugh with and cry with. Someone who will always be honest with me. Who wants me to be happy. Who...” She trailed off as that hit her.

She’d been keeping secrets—big secrets—from someone who had always loved her no matter what. Zoe was someone who would decorate her living room to look like Rome and figure out how to make—or cater in—Italian food and desserts, and find Italian music and watch Josie’s favorite Rome-set films with her even if she couldn’t take Josie to Rome for her birthday. Zoe could make movie night on the couch fun and comfortable. Zoe would listen to her hopes and dreams and would want them to come true.

It wasn’t romantic love, but it was love. And Josie had been ignoring that. She’d been keeping secrets, not telling Zoe all of her dreams and what she wanted and how she was feeling. Even the bad feelings. The scared feelings about having her gall bladder out without health insurance. Zoe would feel terrible. As her boss—but as her friend—she would have been there comforting her and making her soup and watching a hundred back-to-back episodes of *Gilmore Girls*.

Josie had *really* liked having Grant there. *Really* liked it. Loved it, even.

But if he didn’t want to be the one next time, if he wasn’t going to stick around for it, then she’d still be okay. She had her friends. Her family. She didn’t *need* Grant.

And that hit her right in the heart.

That was what he wanted.

He wanted her to not *need* him. He wanted her to just *want* him.

Well, she was there.

“I’m fine,” she said to Grant. “I’m more than fine. I’m good. I don’t need to work for Hot Cakes. And I don’t need to be married. But I do need to go.” She turned and twisted the

doorknob. “I’m going to be late for work. At the bakery. With my best friend.”

She swept through the door leaving the love of her life standing in her kitchen next to a plate of whoopie pies. And their signed divorce papers.

* * *

“You know that showing up for the end stretching and relaxation sequence and then cuddling cats doesn’t really count as attending a yoga class. Even here,” Paige said, coming to lie next to Josie on the mat.

Josie had needed to make one stop on her way to the bakery. She’d snuck into the end of Paige’s early class and was now lying on her back with a white-and-gray cat named Grace curled up on her stomach.

“Does it really count as a yoga class when it’s you and three other people?” Josie teased.

She’d been shocked to see two of the attendees of Paige’s early class actually. Piper was on a bright yellow mat at the front. And Cam was by the window on a dark purple mat.

“It does,” Paige said with a smile. “I’m here for whoever needs me.”

“You basically come in to do your own practice, and if others wander in you let them stay?” Josie said.

Paige nodded. “Yeah.”

“How long has Cam been coming?”

“Oh, he’s been in a few times when he’s been home in the past. When he’s home over Christmas for instance,” Paige said, tipping her head to look over to where Cam was gathering his stuff. “But he makes it in about three days a week at least, now that he’s been in town more full time.”

“No kidding.” That did *not* seem like Cam.

“Yeah. But I’m sure he was practicing in Chicago. He’s really good. Keeps right up with me,” Paige said, admiration clear in her tone.

Josie frowned slightly. “Is there something going on with you two?”

Paige laughed at that. “Oh, Lord, no. I do not go for the growly, fighter types.”

Yeah, that’s what Josie would have thought.

“He’s a very contrary spirit,” Paige said, folding her hands on her flat stomach and closing her eyes. “I’m happy to help him quiet some of that, but no, I have no interest in having that in my personal life. I want quiet, peace, mindfulness, calm.”

Josie nodded. “Okay. Good.”

“But I don’t mind watching him bend and stretch first thing in the morning,” Paige added.

Josie snorted softly. She could imagine. She was in love with Grant, and Cam was like a big brother to her, but she wasn’t blind. He was a good-looking guy, with a lot of muscles and some very hot tattoos. “You’re the tattoo type?” she asked Paige. She wouldn’t have guessed that actually. Paige seemed the type to go for the nerdy professor or a tortured artist. But come to think of it, Paige had been asked out a lot and had gone to school dances and things like that, but she’d never had a serious, long-term boyfriend.

That was interesting. Her sister was gorgeous, intelligent, confident, and kind. But she wasn’t interested in dating, it seemed. Growing up, Paige hadn’t been all that social in general, actually. She’d stayed home a lot reading, knitting, cooking, drawing. She’d had friends and had always been well liked. She’d been invited to social events and out to movies and parties. She’d just said no thank you more often than she’d accepted. She’d liked doing her own thing and had been content at home in her own company. Content. That was a very good word for Paige. She was comfortable in her own skin, happy with her situation, satisfied with her world just as she’d made it.

Josie had always kind of envied that. She suspected most people would envy that. To know who you were and to be happy with where you were in life at such a young age was amazing. Their grandmother said Paige was an old soul. That seemed to fit.

“So what are *you* doing here so early?”

“I need you to cover at the bakery this morning,” Josie told her.

Paige rolled her head to look at Josie. “Ugh, really?”

Josie smiled. “Please? I have some baking I need to do at home.”

“You’re baking at home but *I* have to cover at Buttered Up? That’s weird.”

“I’m making things for... well, for Zoe. But not for the bakery.” She frowned. That sounded confusing. “I need to make some things, like gluten-free zucchini muffins and whoopie pies and some strawberries and cream cereal mix and some chocolate chip cookie dough popcorn and pussy cupcakes...” She looked up to realize she’d been rattling those off as she thought about what she wanted to show off. “I need to make some stuff before I have Zoe over for a talk,” Josie admitted.

Paige rolled to her side to face Josie, propping her head on her hand. She looked very interested. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been doing this side business,” Josie admitted. “Zoe doesn’t know about it. And I need to tell her. Especially because I want to expand.” That was the first time she’d said that out loud. She took a deep breath. “I want to do more with it. It’s all things that we don’t do at the bakery. Like the whoopie pies and all the healthier muffins you were talking about yesterday and some naughty cupcakes and cookies for bachelorette parties... just things that I think would be fun to create and do on the side. Maybe even an online store. Things Zoe doesn’t really want to get into. But I don’t want to do it behind her back.”

“You’re going to start your own business,” Paige said with a grin. “That’s so great.”

“Just something small. On the side. I want to keep working with Zoe.”

“Of course. But this is great. You will love that.”

“Do you think so?” Josie felt butterflies in her stomach, but she wasn’t sure if they were nerves or excitement. Probably both.

Earlier in her kitchen when she’d been talking to Grant and he’d mentioned that she deserved to have the recognition of one of her cakes being mass produced and sold to hundreds of thousands of people, her heart had pounded.

She didn’t want that. She didn’t want her creations mass produced and sitting on shelves. But she’d had a flash of making *more* of what she was doing now. Having more people ordering and enjoying her treats. And having everyone talking about it and telling her, and their friends, how much they loved them. She didn’t need recognition in the form of advertisements or logos or checks. But she did love the idea of not having to be a secret. That had been the reason for her heart pounding.

She wanted people to enjoy her stuff and know it was hers.

“I know that you’ll enjoy it,” Paige said. “You’ve always loved feeding people. You especially like making desserts. I think it’s because you can make them pretty *and* make people happy with them.”

Josie thought about that. Paige had something there.

“Let’s face it, you could definitely make people happy with your lasagna or your chicken casserole. Those are amazing. But the cakes and cookies and stuff are also pretty.”

“The strawberries and cream cereal mix is pink,” Josie said. “And I put little sparkly sugar in too. Just to make it fun. And I’m thinking that I could do banana cream flavored cereal mix. Or a mix that tastes like a seven-layer bar. With coconut and—”

“*Okay*,” Paige cut in with a laugh. “What about those healthy ones?”

“Oh! If I do some of those, would you offer them here? I figure your clients might grab them after a class.”

Paige nodded. “Yeah, I think we could work something out.”

“Wonderful,” Josie felt a surge of excitement. “So you’ll fill in for me so I can get prepped to show this all to Zoe?”

“I will,” Paige agreed. “But I get all the zucchini muffins you make in exchange.”

“Deal.”

“And the strawberry cereal mix,” Paige added.

Josie laughed. “Okay.”

Paige shrugged. “I eat gluten-free because it’s healthier and I feel better with it, but I *can* eat gluten, and that stuff sounds delicious.”

“I can make snickerdoodle cereal mix too,” Josie said.

Paige’s eyes widened.

“Mornin’.”

Josie looked up to find Cam standing over them. “Hi.”

“Never seen you here before,” he said.

“Yoga at this time of day is only for crazy people,” Josie told him.

He chuckled. “You might be right.” He looked at Paige. “Thanks for the practice today.”

“My pleasure.” Paige pushed herself up from the mat. “I better go get ready for the bakery.”

“Love you,” Josie told her.

“I can see why,” Paige said with a nod. She headed for the room at the back of the building that functioned as her dressing room and office.

“You couldn’t drag Grant down here?” Cam asked Josie.

Josie shrugged. “Well, I mean, once we got divorced, I kind of figured I couldn’t really drag him anywhere.”

Cam paused and then nodded. “How long have you been divorced?”

Josie glanced at the clock. “About an hour.”

“You okay?”

“With that? No. In general, yes.”

“You didn’t want the divorce?” Cam asked.

“Let’s see, would I rather be married to the guy I’m madly in love with or *not* married to the guy I’m madly in love with? I’d say married,” she said, pushing up from the mat.

Cam nodded. “That would have been one of the fastest courtships and engagements ever.”

“So?”

He chuckled. “I guess I was just pointing that out.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. We both signed the papers so it’s over.”

“It’s over?”

She shrugged. “Obviously.”

“I did not get the impression that Grant wanted things to be over, Josie,” Cam said with a frown.

“Well, maybe he shouldn’t have divorced me, then,” she shot back.

Cam held up his hands. “Fair enough. But...”

She narrowed her eyes. “But?”

“He’s never done this before.”

“Gotten divorced or been married?”

“Been in love.”

That made the air rush out of her lungs. She swallowed. “Me neither.”

“But you’ve seen a hell of a lot of love. And marriage. And romance. Your family. My family.”

She nodded.

“So show him what it’s about,” Cam said.

Josie felt her stomach flip. “You make it sound like that’s easy.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“He...” But then she really thought about Cam’s question. *Why wouldn’t it be?*

Grant had good reasons for thinking that coupling up was less than ideal. But she had great counterarguments. She agreed that women should be independent and happy on their own and able to take care of themselves. But wanting a marriage and a family and to be with someone who made them feel all the things Grant made her feel wasn’t bad or wrong. That didn’t make her weak. It actually made her stronger.

She wasn’t going to expand her baking business to impress Grant or to win him over or to convince him she could be independent. She was going to do it because over this time with Grant, she’d realized something important—she really loved baking. She was really good at it, and she loved how her food made other people feel. She’d always known that she liked it and was good at it. Basically. But it had always been a part of something bigger—Buttered Up. And her relationship with Zoe. Her baking had blended into the bigger picture.

Since Grant had started talking about how she should let people know more about what *she* did and had made her aware of how her baking made others happy—because he’d been noticing that—it had been at the back of her mind. Plus, Grant loved her baked goods. And that wasn’t a euphemism. He’d gotten her really thinking about what she did and how she felt about it and how it affected others.

She was going to expand because she wanted more of that in her life. She wanted more of helping people make their special occasions perfect and fun, whether it was a birthday party with a huge elaborate cake, or a potluck at the office

with cookie bars that made people smile in the middle of their workday, or movie night with fun popcorns and cereal mixes. She wanted to do more, and yes, she wanted to do some things that were *hers*. Not a McCaffery family recipe that she just followed, but something she created, something that, when people gushed over it, they were truly gushing over something she had done completely on her own.

She loved Zoe and the bakery. She wanted to keep working there. But yes, she wanted to branch out. Because of the things that Grant had gotten her thinking about.

Josie realized she'd been staring at Cam.

"You're giving me relationship advice?" she asked. "You're no expert."

He snorted. "Hey, I'm the Thomas Edison of relationships."

Josie frowned. "What? Thomas Edison? The guy who invented the light bulb?"

Cam nodded. "Sure. You've never heard his famous quote about failure?"

"No."

"Well, this isn't exact, but it goes something like this, *I didn't fail. I just found ten thousand ways not to make a light bulb.*"

Josie laughed. "So you're not failing at relationships, you're just finding ten thousand ways that they won't work."

"Something like that." He was quiet for a moment, then added, "Just take it from a guy who had it right and let it go. Once you've had the real thing, you'll never be able to convince yourself that anything else is good enough."

Wow. Josie stared at him for several beats. Then she nodded. "Okay."

Why wouldn't it be?

Cam had asked her an honest question. Why wouldn't showing Grant about love and marriage be easy? If Grant had

gotten her rethinking everything in her life so easily, maybe she could get him rethinking some things in *his*.

Like the idea that a woman was better off without a man.

Sure, there were definitely some men that women were better off without. All women. And a woman definitely needed to be her own person.

But she knew, firsthand, that people could have healthy, strong, happy marriages while each person maintained their own identity and interests. She'd seen it right in front of her all her life.

Grant hadn't.

That's all he needed—someone to show him something he just hadn't seen before.

Just like he'd shown her how her baking could make people feel.

“Yeah, okay,” she finally said. “I can show him about love and romance and marriage.”

“Great.” Cam grinned. “You can still contest the divorce. I know the attorney pretty well. Maybe the papers will accidentally fall into the shredder or something.”

She shook her head. “No. I still want the divorce.”

“Oh?” Cam looked confused.

“Yeah. I think I need to date my ex-husband for a while.”

Chapter Nineteen



“Where the fuck is Cam?” Grant roared as he stomped into Cam’s office and found it empty.

Piper wasn’t at her desk either.

Almost no one was in their offices or at their desks. It was fucking early in the morning. But Cam wasn’t at Zoe and Aiden’s house, where he was staying, either, and Grant had no idea where else he would be.

“Probably at Cores and Catnip.”

Grant swung around at the sound of Whitney’s voice. “At what and what?”

She smiled and stepped into the office. “Cores and Catnip. It’s the yoga studio downtown. Cores as in apple cores and... body cores.” She made a circle with her hand over her lower stomach.

“And catnip?” Grant asked.

“It’s also a cat café. And adoption center. Though you have to pass a major test, including a home visit, before Paige will let you adopt one, and not many people make it through her screening. So it’s really just her way of collecting cats without people thinking she’s crazy. Though a lot of people think that anyway.”

“Who’s Paige?” Grant asked. Yoga and cats? What was going on?

Whitney crossed her arms and tilted her head. “Your sister-in-law. Well, one of them.”

Ah. Josie's sister. Damn. Why did he feel sad thinking about not being related by marriage to a woman he had never even met? "Well, as of about an hour ago, Paige is my ex-sister-in-law."

Whitney blew out a breath. "I was afraid you were going to do that."

He was still feeling pretty shitty about everything. Like Jocelyn turning down the Hot Cakes deal and the guaranteed money. If she was financially stable, he could date her. And eventually propose. Again. But if not... he'd likely end up proposing again anyway and then just wondering if he was going against everything he thought he believed in for the rest of his life. Just something little like that.

"It was the agreement," he said. "We got married for the insurance. We need to start fresh."

It sounded stupid even to his own ears.

"That's really stupid," Whitney said. She moved to sit on the edge of Cam's desk, facing Grant.

He blew out a breath. "I know. But she also turned down the agreement with Hot Cakes. She's not making our new cake. So she's not going to have that extra money coming in. I don't know if I can leave her alone, but I don't know if I can stay with her not knowing if it's just about money."

Whitney didn't seem surprised to hear Jocelyn had turned down the offer. She crossed her legs and braced her hands on the desk, leaning forward. "Look, Grant, take it from someone who majorly fucked up the best relationship in her entire life. Go to Josie, tell her you love her, and beg her to rip those papers up."

"You and Cam?" he asked.

"And hey, I was eighteen. I have youth stupidity as an excuse. You don't. And don't try to change the subject," she said with a frown. "This is about your fuckup."

"Jocelyn deserves to be her own woman, to know that she doesn't need me."

Whitney laughed. “What makes you think she thinks she *needs* you?”

He scowled. “She needed me for the insurance.”

“Was that her idea? Did she propose to you? Beg you to let her use your insurance temporarily in a mini-pseudo insurance fraud scheme?”

His scowl deepened. “No.”

“So it was your idea? You proposed?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. And when you brought the divorce papers over, did she cry and beg you to rethink it? Did she protest? Did she hesitate to sign them?” Whitney asked.

Grant sighed. She hadn’t. In fact, he would have liked to see *a little* more reluctance from her. “No.”

“Did she ever ask you for your pin number for your bank account?”

“No.”

“Have you checked your wallet? Are any of your credit cards missing?”

He rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Did she give you any indication that she wants to move to Chicago and jet around the world on your private plane and have you drape her in diamonds?”

He shook his head. “No.”

Whitney lifted a brow. “Then what the hell are you talking about, Grant? What, exactly, do you have that Josie needs? She’d been living a very happy life here in Appleby surrounded by a town full of people who love her. She spends her days with her best friend, surrounded by cupcakes, for God’s sake. She’s got a great house that she has no intention of ever leaving.” Whitney shrugged. “Seems very egotistical of you, frankly, to assume that she needs you. As if she’s been sitting around, just waiting for you to show up and ride her off

into the sunset when really, her favorite sunsets are right here, and she's already had them every night for twenty-five years."

Grant just stared at Whitney. He felt his breath sawing in and out. He felt his heart thudding in his chest. He felt his blood rushing.

Those were all really good points.

"She needed to have her gall bladder taken out," he finally said. "She needed to pay for that."

Whitney nodded and slid off the desk. "And if she hadn't been able to figure out payments or something, this town would have held a chili-feed fundraiser, or hell, her friends would have gone door to door and easily collected enough money from the town to cover that." Whitney smoothed her hands down the sides of her skirt and met his gaze. "I would have made an anonymous donation that would have covered the whole bill. Or Aiden would have. Or we both would have, and she would have been able to tuck a bunch of money under her mattress for a rainy day if she wanted to. But she wouldn't have wanted to do that. She probably would have donated the excess to something else here in town."

Whitney stepped closer to him, her expression sincere, and a touch sympathetic. "Jocelyn isn't afraid of the future or worried about her bank account. She doesn't need you to take care of her, Grant. She's always been taken care of when she needed it because *she* takes care of the rest of us when we need it. That's how it works around here. We're maybe not all completely independent, but I personally think that's really nice that we lean on each other."

He took a deep breath. That was nice. He'd never been a part of something like that.

"So," Whitney went on, "that means you need to give her something she doesn't already have that she *wants*." She stepped around him and started for the door. "And by the way, I don't mean spreadsheets or a budget or an investment portfolio."

“Right.” He nodded. But he felt his mouth curving. “Got it.”

He glanced toward the desk as a light flashed in his peripheral vision. Whitney had left her phone lying there. He stepped over to retrieve it.

And noticed the flash had been a new text message from Cam. It said simply *thanks*.

Cam and Whitney were texting? Nice and polite things?

Grant couldn't help it. He read the messages just above the *thanks*.

Cam: *Hey, can you keep Grant busy at the office today? Josie needs some space. She's got a plan hatching.*

Whitney: *Are you helping with the plan?*

Cam: *Kind of. More cheering her on.*

Whitney: *He's definitely in love with her.*

Cam: *I know. She's got this.*

Whitney: *Okay. I'll do what I can.*

Cam: *Thanks.*

Cam and Whitney were conspiring together to get him and Jocelyn back together? And Jocelyn had a plan?

He let all of that sink it.

Whitney stopped in the doorway and glanced back. “Oh, and don't even think about rushing out of here to go be romantic or anything.”

“No?” he asked, laying her phone back on the desk. Maybe Grant could help nudge Whitney and Cam together too. She would have to come back in here later to find it. She might run into Cam then, and they could rehash their matchmaking.

“No,” Whitney said. “I need you to stay here in the office.”

Grant bit back a grin.

“We need to figure out what we're going to do about this new snack cake now that Josie turned us down,” Whitney said.

She suddenly froze. Then groaned. “Oh *no*.”

“What?”

“I suppose this means that crazy contest is back on?”

Grant laughed lightly. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“*Ugh*.” She looked at him. “Then you’re definitely staying here and helping me go over this with Ollie. I clearly don’t have enough willpower to say no to pony rides.”

“But pony rides at a cake tasting contest and bachelor auction are strange, right?”

“They are,” she said. “But think of the kids who will be there with their parents. Their impression of the new Hot Cakes will be fun and laughter and good times. A return to the simple things of childhood, like when you first tasted a Fudgie Fritter. It will take their parents and grandparents back too. We can have an old-fashioned lemonade stand set up, and maybe we can do some carnival games like a ring toss or a dunk tank.” Her eyes got wide. “Oh, we should *totally* put the bachelors up in a dunk tank!”

“Okay, I will *definitely* be sitting in on the meeting with you and Ollie,” Grant interrupted.

Whitney took a deep breath and nodded. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “I feel like I’ve got a split personality thing going on. And Ollie is the little devil sitting on my shoulder, telling me how much fun this will all be.”

“Who’s the angel on your other shoulder?”

“Exactly. I don’t have one. That’s going to be you.”

This was good. This would keep him occupied while he gave Jocelyn some space. He wanted to go to her, but he was willing to let her figure out whatever her plan was. And he needed a little time to come up with a plan of his own. A plan to romance his ex-wife. The most romance-loving person he’d ever met, when he’d never really romanced anyone ever before. No pressure.

Still, he was grinning as he followed Whitney out of Cam’s office.

He couldn't wait to see Jocelyn's plan. He hoped it included whoopie pies.

* * *

“Whoopie pies, huh?”

Josie nodded, watching her best friend's face carefully. “Whoopie pies. All flavors. I'm even going to play with the flavors of the cream filling.”

Zoe had arrived about thirty minutes ago. They were in Jocelyn's kitchen, her center island covered with baked goods. None of them things that they offered at Buttered Up.

It was just after closing. Paige had been covering her shift all day, and Josie had called Maggie about two hours ago and asked if she could go help close up and do tomorrow's prep. Maggie had been happy to. When she'd asked if everything was okay, Josie had simply said, “I hope it will be soon.” To which Maggie had replied simply, “Then I hope so too.”

Josie was realizing that she had a lot of people who really loved her and really did want her to just be happy. She knew Zoe was one of those.

She'd debated over having Jane join them. Or even Aiden. Or yes, Grant. Or all of the above. But in the end, she'd realized this was between her and her lifelong best friend. And boss.

“I love whoopie pies,” Zoe said.

It was clear from her expression and tone that she was still stunned by all of this. Jocelyn had come clean about the baking she'd been doing on the side. She'd also confessed that she wanted to keep doing it and expand. She wanted to do the naughty cupcakes, the healthy muffins, everything.

Josie handed her one of the whoopie pies. It was a traditional chocolate with a white cream filling.

Zoe took it, looked at it for a long moment as if it held all the answers, then bit into it. Josie held her breath.

Zoe chewed and swallowed. Then took a deep breath. Then nodded. “Amazing. Of course.”

Josie felt the breath whoosh out of her lungs. “You think so?”

Zoe smiled and shook her head, setting the whoopie pie down on the plate. She brushed her hands together. “Of course I think so. You’re amazing. You are an extremely talented baker and...” She sighed. “I know everyone knows that you’re behind the awesome decorating, but yeah, they probably don’t realize how awesome you are at the baking part because Buttered Up doesn’t give you a lot of chance to really show that off.”

She looked sad for a moment, then she took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

Josie frowned. “For?”

“Not letting you do more. Not even realizing all of what was going on with you.”

Josie was shaking her head before Zoe even finished speaking. “I was purposefully keeping all of this from you, Zoe. You couldn’t have known.”

Zoe nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Listen,” Josie said, “I love working with you. I’m not looking for something else or something instead. I just want to get a little creative and to have some fun on my own too.”

Zoe took a few pieces of the cereal mix and tossed them into her mouth. She chewed, then smiled. “This is so you. Sweet and salty, colorful, and unique. Something to make a normal movie night on the couch or a game night around the table or an afternoon at the ball field a little different and fun.

Josie’s breath caught in her throat. Okay, it was pink cereal mix. It was cereal pieces covered in white chocolate and strawberry powder and mixed with mini pretzels, cashews, and pink and white M&M’s. It was silly to get choked up over someone complimenting that.

But it wasn't the cereal mix. It was how Zoe described how it made her feel. That it made her smile. And that it was Zoe.

Josie swallowed, her eyes watery.

Zoe noticed. She looked worried. "Are you okay?"

Josie sniffed and nodded. "Yeah. I just... I like making stuff that makes people happy."

Zoe gave her an affectionate smile and moved around the corner of the island to pull her into a hug. "I know." She squeezed and then let go. "I love you so much for that. I think because it's always been who you are, and I've known you forever. I never really thought about how you don't get to truly shine at the bakery. I know that you love seeing people light up about the stuff you decorate. It never occurred to me that you might want to do even more." She grimaced. "I'm a terrible friend."

"No." Josie shook her head. "I never said anything."

"Well, we can definitely do this at the bakery. We can do the whoopie pies and even make a case—half a case—for healthy stuff. We can have a secret menu for the naughty stuff and the stuff for potlucks and class treats and school so that people can still pass them off as their own if they want to and ___"

"Zoe."

Zoe stopped and look at her. "Yeah?"

"I... appreciate that, but I want to do this on my own."

Zoe was quiet for a long moment. And then another. Taking that in and processing it.

"I'll make you a partner," Zoe said. "Watching Aiden and the guys together, I realize how amazing they each are on their own but how much *more* they are together as a team. I need you. *We* are an amazing team too."

Josie felt her heart flip. She smiled. "That's really nice. And a month ago I would have taken you up on that. But..." She looked around her kitchen again. "I'm ready to be on my

own a little.” Josie took her friend’s hand. “I don’t want to leave the bakery, but I might want to eventually just do the big decorating jobs. You don’t need me to be doing the simple chocolate chip cookies and things like that. You can hire someone else for that. But I’ll come in and do the bigger, more elaborate projects that I love. And then I can do this”—she looked at everything on the center island—“on my own.”

Josie met Zoe’s eyes. “I won’t do anything the bakery already does. I don’t want this to be a situation like Letty and Didi. I would never let that happen,” she said, referring to Zoe’s grandmother, Letty, and her best friend, Didi, who couldn’t come to an agreement about how to run the bakery and it ended their friendship... and started a family feud that lasted until Zoe and Aiden fell in love.

“Hot Cakes—well, Grant, and Cam, and Whitney—offered me a chance to develop a new cake for them.”

Zoe’s eyes widened.

“But I turned them down too,” Josie said. “I love watching people’s eyes light up when they see or taste something I’ve created. I would never get to experience that with a Hot Cakes cake. I do get to do it at the bakery sometimes, and I’m grateful for that. But I’d love the chance to really try new things and get people’s reactions one on one. This is a little more personal, a little more my own thing, and I want a little bit of that.”

Zoe smiled. “I love that. If you want to do this, you have my support, however you want to make it happen. You can do it through Buttered Up or on your own, but either way, I’m here for you. I love you, and I’m sorry that I haven’t let you shine.”

Josie gave a choked sob-laugh and pulled Zoe into another hug. After she let her go, she said firmly, “It wasn’t you. It was me. I wasn’t ready to shine. I was... content. I really was.”

“Until?”

“Grant,” she admitted.

Zoe gave her a knowing smile. “Falling in love has a way of changing your perspective and shaking things up you didn’t even know needed shaken.”

Josie nodded. “I hope it works that way for Grant too.”

“It will.”

She really hoped so. She really, really hoped so.

Just then her phone chimed with a text notification. It was Cam.

I hope you’re almost done. This guy is like a caged animal.

She grinned. *A caged animal, huh?*

Cam replied, *Pacing around, growling at everyone about everything, generally losing his patience... and sense of humor. Don’t know how much longer we can keep him here.*

Josie felt her heart swell. Grant Lorre was like a caged animal, huh? Grant was the levelheaded one, the one who talked the rest of them out of reacting purely on emotion.

Maybe Grant was getting a little shaken up too.

Good.

She took a breath, looked at Zoe, looked at the island top full of treats—*her* creations—and then typed, *I’m ready for him.*

* * *

Finally.

Grant stomped up the back steps to Jocelyn’s house.

It had been fourteen hours since he’d seen her. It felt like a year.

The meetings with Ollie about the new snack cake and the contest and auction and circus had been predictably crazy and annoying. Grant had finally called Cam in as backup because, sure enough, Ollie had a way of getting Whitney worked up and excited about really stupid shit.

Okay, maybe not *stupid* shit. But when more than half his concentration had been on Jocelyn and what she was thinking and feeling and how to tell her he was in love with her and how to save his marriage... conversations about bouncy houses and how much it would cost to rent a Ferris wheel had tried his patience more than they usually would have. And they usually would have tried his patience *a lot*.

Now he was finally “allowed” to go to Jocelyn. If he hadn’t known that Cam and Whitney were keeping him away on purpose, because Jocelyn had some plan she was trying to put together, he would have lost it. He’d have fired them both. Or locked them in the supply closet and come over here hours ago.

Then again, the supply-closet thing might have been great. It would have gotten *them* together and out of his way at the same time.

But now he was here, and he and Jocelyn were going to get back together.

He was going to beg her to forgive him, move his stuff into this amazing old house in this tiny, quirky town, convince her to marry him again with a huge ceremony and the-whole-town’s-invited party after, and then they were going to live here, happily ever after, dammit.

But he paused on the top step, his hand on the handle of the back door, and took a big breath. He blew it out. Repeated the breath. Then opened the door and walked in.

The aroma was the first thing that hit him. As always. Her house smelled delicious. Like a *home*. Like a place people came to be comforted and to celebrate and to be taken care of.

Jocelyn didn’t need to be taken care of. She needed to take care of people.

He was very happy to be one of those people. If she’d have him.

He kicked his shoes off inside the back door and headed into the kitchen.

He came up short at the sight that met him.

Jocelyn was at the middle kitchen island, tossing a salad, barefoot, wearing a huge smile and an apron and... nothing else.

“Hi,” she said softly.

“Hi.” Everything in him strained to go to her. But he had some things he needed to say first. “I—”

“I thought our first date should be a candlelight dinner here, in my house, that I made for you,” she said.

He glanced to his left and into the dining room. It glowed with candlelight, the flames glittering off the chandelier overhead that had probably hung there for a hundred years. He pulled in a deep breath, feeling the tension drain out of him.

“Our first date?” he asked, turning back to her.

She nodded. “We’ve had a one-night stand that wasn’t even a whole night. We’ve had a marriage. But we haven’t really had a date.”

He supposed she had a point. Their dinner in Chicago had been as a married couple as had the movies and cuddling on the couch. “Married couples can’t have dates?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Of course they can. But since we’re not married anymore, *this* isn’t a married-couple date.”

“We can fix that,” he said, stepping forward. “We can rip those papers up.”

She shook her head. “No, we can’t.”

“But if we don’t want to be divorced—”

“You don’t rip chapter one out of a book when you get to chapter two,” she said, picking up the salad bowl. “You just turn those pages and keep going. Those pages are as much a part of the story as the next ones.”

“But we’re going to keep going?” he asked, his chest tight.

She smiled and started for the dining room, giving him a magnificent view of her bare ass in that apron. “We’re definitely going to keep going.”

Grant felt relief spill through him, and he followed her, crowding in close as she set the salad bowl down.

He quickly took inventory of the table. Pork chops, salad, rolls, wine, and what looked like a pan of cheesy potatoes.

As soon as her hands were empty, he turned her, his hands on her upper arms. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry that I somehow made it seem like you needed me to fix things. Or if I made you feel like you were living your life the wrong way. You’re not. You’re happy and loved and... there’s nothing more important than that. I’m sorry if I made you feel like I didn’t want to be a part of that. Because I do. So much. I just need a little practice being...” He wasn’t sure what word to insert there. He hadn’t practiced this speech. This was all just from the heart.

“Impractical?” she supplied with a grin.

“In love,” he finally said.

Her expression softened. “I can help you with that.”

“You already are.”

“For the record,” she said, resting her hands on his chest and moving closer, “I need practice at that too. I know what it looks like. I know how I want it to be. But I’ve never done it. And I realize that it’s going to look a little different for us than it does for others. I’m sorry if I made *you* feel like I was striving for some perfect idea in my head.” She paused and shrugged. “I probably was, actually. I never expected to fall in love with a guy who likes adding and subtracting so much.”

He grinned down at her, his heart feeling light, the happiness a nearly palpable thing. “Thank God you are romantic enough to know that love comes along in the most unexpected ways.”

“It really does.”

“And to celebrate us starting to date, we’re having whoopie pies for dessert, right?” he asked hopefully, running his hands down her back to her ass.

“Actually, no.”

He pulled back. “No?”

She pointed to the cake on the table.

It was a square cake, still in the pan, with white frosting.

“Oh. Cake,” he said. “Okay.”

She laughed. “It’s okay if you think that looks very simple and plain. Interestingly, it’s the most straightforward, simple, plain cake I think I’ve ever made.”

He lifted a brow. “Is there some symbolism there? Like our relationship is actually quite straightforward and simple when you get right down to it? We don’t need a lot of fancy embellishments? We are what make it colorful?”

She nodded. “Kind of.” She took a breath. “I realized that what I love about baking is seeing people react to what I make. I love watching them get immediately happy when they see or taste something I made.” She pressed her lips together, then bracketed his face with her hands. “I’m your cake, Grant.”

He felt his chest tighten and had a hard time taking a deep breath.

“The look on your face when you walk in and see me is how people look at my cakes. When people come into the bakery and first see a cake I’ve made for them or are perusing the bakery case and see the perfect thing, they get this look that says that they’ve found something even better than they imagined and they’re just... delighted.” She nodded her head. “I delight you.”

She did. She so fucking did. He would have never picked that word to describe him, but it was absolutely perfect.

She wet her lips and continued, “I got Zoe a t-shirt once that said *I want someone to look at me the way I look at chocolate cake*. She found him. Aiden looks at her that way. Dax looks at Jane that way. And... you look at me that way. And *that* is why we should keep dating, and eventually, after my business is up and running, and you’re used to living here in a little town and everything, why we should get married again.”

He just stared at her. She was absolutely right. When he looked at her, when he heard her voice, when he kissed her, when he knew he was *about to* see her, he lit up. He could feel it. She made him happy and content and excited and like the day had gotten a little more special. She delighted him. She made him feel like all of her customers looked when they saw her cakes.

He felt a grin curving his lips. Then he thought about what else she'd said, "Your business?"

"I have a lot to tell you," she said.

"I can't wait."

She gave him a happy, excited grin. Then she glanced at the cake on the table again. "Okay, confession," she said.

"Okay."

"I was actually going to make the cake into a spreadsheet," she said, looking back up at him with a sheepish smile. "But I didn't have time to pull it up on my computer, and I couldn't remember what a spreadsheet looks like in enough detail to decorate a cake like one."

Grant chuckled. Then he laughed a little louder. Then even louder. He hugged her to him, relishing the feel of her in his arms, surrounded by the smell of vanilla and sugar. If love had a smell, that's what it would be for him.

"I love you, Jocelyn."

"I love you too, Grant," she said, tipping her head back to look up at him.

His phone dinged with a text. He ignored it.

"I'd be very happy to reacquaint you with spreadsheets. Just like the lessons last night," he told her, his voice gruff.

She grinned. "Deal. And since I'm not really wearing anything that I can strip off, how about every time you teach me something and I get it right, you can smear frosting from that cake on a part of my body and lick it off."

His body heated and he growled, "Deal."

The phone dinged again. He sighed.

“You can answer it,” she said. “We’re both business owners. I get that we’re kind of on the clock all the time.”

He smiled down at her. “Fine. But we agree right now that when we’re both naked, the phones can wait.”

She grinned. “I agree.”

He pulled his phone from his back pocket and swiped the screen with his thumb. It was a text from Cam.

Grant frowned and read the text out loud, “I should probably tell you now that you’re not actually divorced.”

“But we both signed them,” Jocelyn said.

Grant nodded and typed back *What are you talking about?*

As your attorney I feel obligated to say you should always read every single word in any document you are signing.

Grant sighed. *What are you talking about?* he asked again.

The divorce papers you both signed are actually cat adoption papers from Cores and Catnips. So congrats. You’re still married, and you can now go to Paige’s place and pick out any three cats.

Grant blinked at the message. He read it out loud to Jocelyn. Her eyes widened, and then she started laughing.

“Three?” she asked. “Not even just one?”

Grant shook his head. “I suppose you love cats as much as your sister does?”

“Oh, no one loves cats as much as my sister does,” Jocelyn said. “But yeah... I wouldn’t mind having a cat. Or three.”

Grant looked down at the love of his life realizing that there was nothing he wouldn’t do or put up with for her. “A small town, a woman who doesn’t like spreadsheets, another business partner who thinks *way* outside the box, and now three cats. How did my life get so crazy all of a sudden?”

Jocelyn grinned. “You fell in love.”

Everything in him softened. He smiled. “Yeah, I did.”

“And oh my God! We’re not divorced?” Jocelyn suddenly exclaimed.

“I guess not.” He had to admit, that was pretty fucking great. They’d figured out how they truly felt, and if they had been divorced, they would have ended up together—for all the right reasons—anyway. But now... she was still his. In every single way.

“So...” She was clearly thinking it all through. “Can we still date? I mean, I feel like we still need to *date* each other for a while.”

“We can absolutely still date,” he said. “For the rest of our lives.”

Her expression softened, and she gave him a sweet smile. “Okay. Then we’ll still date. For...” She was clearly thinking something through. “Maybe six or seven months?”

“What happens in six or seven months?” he asked.

“We’ll have our wedding.”

He blinked at her. “A wedding? We did that.”

“No. We got legally married by a judge,” Jocelyn corrected him. “Now we’ll have a *wedding*. Here in Appleby. With all our friends and family.”

“All of your friends?” he repeated. “So the entire town?”

She grinned, practically glowing. “Yes.”

Grant felt himself nodding. “Okay. Let’s do it. Let’s have a huge blowout dream wedding. After we date for a few months.”

Jocelyn threw her arms around him. “Thank you!”

Maybe she didn’t realize that he’d do *anything* for her yet, but he was sure she was going to figure it out quickly.

“And now, about this frosting and those spreadsheets...” He started to reach for the cake.

But she stopped him. “Oh, first, cheesy potatoes.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Before frosting?”

“Well, they’re symbolic too.”

“Symbolic cheesy potatoes?”

She nodded, grinning. “Turns out, people *can* fall in love over cheesy potatoes after all.”

* * *

Thank you so much for reading *Making Whoopie*! I hope you loved Josie and Grant’s story!

Next up is Cam and Whitney’s story in

Semi-Sweet On You!

She broke his heart ten years ago.

Now he’s back — and her new boss.

And she might still be semi in love with him.

What could possibly go wrong?



*Semi-Sweet
On You*

**ERIN
NICHOLAS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

About *Semi-Sweet On You*

A slow burn, second-chance rom com!

She broke his heart ten years ago.

Now he's back — and her new boss.

And she might still be semi in love with him.

But that's no problem, right? They can keep it professional.

Until her grandmother gets involved.

She's thrilled to think that Whitney and Cam are still in love.

And invites him to move in with her...and Whitney.

Of course, Whitney can handle that too. Yeah, everything is fine. Just fine.

Until Cam makes it clear that he's all in.

Having him back is very sweet, but can she really have it all?

Or will it all crumble around her?

Chapter One



“I think my butt looks really weird in this. Can you come look?” Whitney called from inside the powder room in her office.

Piper was out at her desk in the reception area of the Hot Cakes executive suites and this dress was hers. Whitney did *not* think she was pulling it off. At all. The other woman wore the pinup-style dresses and looked like a million bucks. But Piper had the curves for it. And the attitude. She was confident, sassy, and sexy.

Whitney knew *she* didn’t have the curves, and she was pretty sure she didn’t have even half the attitude.

But she wanted it.

She really did.

She wanted a change, that was for sure, and her attitude was just part of it.

This dress might be a good start.

She turned in front of the mirror on the back of her powder room door. Or maybe it wasn’t a good start.

She wasn’t ready for a dress like this.

“Seriously, I don’t have the curves for this,” she called. Piper might be on the phone, but Whitney really needed a second opinion.

“I sincerely doubt I’d ever use the word ‘weird’ in regard to your ass.”

Whitney swung around with a gasp. That was *not* Piper's voice.

"But I'm very happy to take a look."

Whitney sucked in a breath. Dammit. That was Cam.

Camden McCaffery.

One of the partners who owned Hot Cakes.

One of her new bosses.

Her ex.

Oh, and the guy who she was still sort of in love with.

Fuck.

She took another breath and then peeked around the edge of the door.

Cam was leaning against the doorjamb of her office door. Looking hot in a custom-tailored charcoal suit, the light blue shirt underneath unbuttoned at his throat. And cocky. As always. And amused.

"I thought Piper was out there," Whitney said. Which was obvious. But what the hell else was she supposed to say?

"That's who I came up to find too," Cam said, stepping into Whitney's office. "But she's gone."

"Gone?" Whitney asked. Piper knew she was in here trying on dresses.

Cam shrugged one big shoulder. "I guess."

Whitney swallowed, her eyes on that shoulder. He was so... yeah, big. Wide. Solid. He'd always been muscular, but now he was... big. He had definitely changed over the years. Grown. Filled out. Gone from cute to oh-my-God hot.

Which was really unfortunate for a girl who was trying to her damndest to be over him.

She'd seen him here and there. It seemed every time he was home to visit they ran into each other. Sometimes literally. Like the time she'd come around the big display of marshmallows at the end of aisle three at the grocery store and

run directly into his chest. She'd jumped back, trying to avoid him touching her, and fallen right into that big stack of marshmallows. The entire store had come rushing to see what had happened.

And that wasn't even the most embarrassing time.

"So come on," he said, motioning her forward with his hand. "Let's see."

Her eyebrows shot up. "See what?"

"Your ass." His lips curled on one end. "Isn't that what you're worried about?"

"I can wait for Piper."

"Why?" He tucked his hands into his pockets. "I'm quite qualified to judge how a woman's ass looks. In dresses. In jeans. In shorts." He paused. "*Out of* all of those things."

He was an ass. She couldn't forget that. Of course, when he was an ass, it was on purpose. Especially when he was an ass to *her*. He was stubborn, had a quick temper, a deeply ingrained sense of justice and loyalty, and a pretty black and white view of how things should go, but he had never been an ass to her. He'd been downright sweet and protective and romantic and... sexy.

Until she'd broken his heart ten years ago.

So, yeah, she might deserve it a little. She knew that.

They'd been in love. He'd wanted her to go to college with him. When she'd said no, he'd wanted to stay in Appleby with her. So she'd broken up with him. No way could she have kept him here. But it had broken his heart.

And it certainly made working for him now a challenge. Hell, it made seeing him on Main Street a challenge.

He'd been poking at her for the past month. Ever since he'd come back to Appleby full time. Every time they were in a meeting together or had a conversation, he made comments that were meant to annoy her. She didn't know why, exactly. She could speculate, but she hadn't even let herself go there.

She just knew she had to hold her shit together. She couldn't lose her temper. She couldn't snap at him—or even glare at him, honestly. He was her boss. He was one of the reasons the company was still standing. That she had a job at all. That her family's name wasn't a curse word in this town.

She freaking *owed him*.

Which he was very aware of.

Maybe that was why he was poking. Because he knew she couldn't give it back. Or maybe because he was hoping to push her to the point where she would lose it and he could fire her.

Whatever the reason, she just had to breathe deeply, smile, let it roll off, and act professionally.

Good thing she'd been practicing all of those things for the past ten years working with her grandfather, father, and brother.

She was a fucking *pro* at letting male egos and snide remarks roll off.

It was why she drank wine. And kickboxed. And did yoga. More the kickboxing, but still.

Of course, Cam had started going to the morning yoga class *she* had always liked best, so she'd had to adjust her schedule because there was no way in hell she could be in a room with him for an hour watching him bend and stretch and flex.

“Come on, Whit. Let me see.”

Fine. What she'd learned about the asshole men she'd been working with for the past ten years—yes, all her relatives—was that *not* letting them know they were getting to her was the most important thing.

She stepped out of the powder room, running her hands over her hips, smoothing the dress.

Cam's eyes widened as she came into full view.

Yeah, take that.

Hey, she didn't *say* the stuff out loud but that didn't mean she didn't think it. She schooled her features and just watched him taking her in.

His gaze tracked over her. Slowly. Twice.

Her whole damned body was tingling by the time he was done.

And if she didn't want him to know that his comments about being her boss and saving the company and how her family had nearly put three hundred and forty-seven people out of work got to her, she *sure as hell* wasn't going to let on that his biceps and tattoos and cocky smile got to her. And she was *not* going to react to him reacting to her.

Because he was. He really was.

His jaw was tight, he was standing straighter, and he looked as if he was putting every ounce of willpower into just standing there and not coming toward her.

She lied to people all day long. For years it had been to her dad and brother and grandfather. She told them she was fine and on top of things and thought things were going well. Those were all lies. She hadn't been fine, and she'd never felt like she was doing what she wanted to be doing, and no, she'd never liked how her family ran the business. She also lied to her grandmother, telling Didi that everything at Hot Cakes was great and she loved her job.

Didi Lancaster had started Hot Cakes and had worked in the business for the first five years or so but Dean, her husband, had convinced her that it just wasn't "right" for her to be working in their multimillion-dollar nationally renowned company. She was too good to be working in the factory, and she didn't know enough about business to work in the business offices or executive suites. That's where Dean and their son Eric—Whitney's dad—and later Whitney's brother, Wes, belonged. They let Whitney have an office too. Mostly because it had kept her under their thumbs.

Of course, she hadn't figured that out for about three years. But she'd known it for a long time now.

So yes, she was fully prepared to lie to Cam. And the rest of her bosses, for that matter. She was going to tell them that everything was great, that she thought they were doing a great job because working for them could not be worse than working for her own family.

She was also absolutely going to lie to Cam about how she felt about him.

It was just all for the best.

She had wine and kickboxing. It would all be okay.

Whitney said nothing as Cam continued to study her. It was probably really only about a minute, but it felt like she'd been standing there under his hot gaze for a week. Still, she stubbornly stood, waiting for his reaction. Because, by God, he was going to be the one to react first.

Finally he shifted his weight in a clear attempt to look more casual and lifted his gaze to hers. "You're gonna have to turn around if I'm gonna make a judgment about your ass."

She cocked an eyebrow. Camden McCaffery was full of himself. Always had been. He didn't care what people thought of him and he didn't really care for rules. Like sexual harassment guidelines at Hot Cakes. He just said whatever the fuck he wanted to. She knew how to handle him. He expected other people to say what they were thinking and feeling too. Without getting fired, of course.

Though she suspected she was *less* likely to get fired for speaking her mind with him than she would be if she lied.

If he knew she was lying anyway.

It was a good thing she was *very* good.

"But you think I look okay from the front?" she asked, propping a hand on her hip.

He shrugged. *Shrugged*. And her eyes narrowed.

"Your tits look amazing," he said. "But I'm not sure this dress is really right."

Yeah, bosses should not say things like *your tits look amazing* to employees. Guys should also not say things like that to their exes.

But if Cam thought that sexism and blatant disregard for her feelings was somehow going to give him the upper hand, he was very badly mistaken. She could deal with sexist assholes all day without even rolling her eyes. Visibly anyway.

It was so normal in her world, in fact, that dealing with his three partners—her other bosses, who were actually decent men who respected women and liked working with them—was a shock to her system. She found herself having to remind herself that they weren't being sarcastic when they asked what she thought.

But, yeah, she could handle Cam.

She smoothed the front of the dress again and looked down at her breasts. “Amazing, huh?”

That, of course, pulled his gaze back to her breasts. “Absolutely,” he said simply, with a nod.

Yeah, she was a very accomplished, unapologetic liar. Except to herself.

She liked his reaction.

She was thinner now than when they'd dated. They'd been seventeen and eighteen when they'd been together but looking back, they'd been kids. She'd never been curvy but she'd been heavier than now. She was now more toned thanks to workouts to manage her stress. And now with Cam's eyes on her, she was really glad about every one of those sweaty sessions in her home gym and the yoga studio downtown.

“Well then, I'm thinking this dress might be just right.”

He met her gaze. “Turn around.”

She was also *very* grateful for ten years practicing schooling her reactions because *that*—the deep, gruff, firm command with the heat in his eyes—was *really* hard not to react to, even with all the experience she had.

She licked her lips, watched his eyes drop to her mouth, then turned—before she smiled.

She bent her knee, propping her hand on her cocked hip, and just stood, again letting him study her.

What did she have to lose? Her butt didn't look weird in it so much as *she* just looked weird in it. This was not her kind of dress. The dress was way too sassy for her. It was a wiggle dress—the hem narrower than the hips which caused the wearer to take shorter steps and added a little wiggle to the stride—and was bright red. She wore pencil skirts but they weren't this tapered, for one thing. They also didn't cling to her hips and butt like this. The material of the dress was a silky, stretchy fabric that hugged her body, giving the illusion of far curvier curves than were really there. The bodice was a halter style, cupping her breasts and dipping low between them, with the wide straps hooking behind her neck and leaving her upper back bare.

And she never wore red. She wore black and gray and navy blue. She had one forest green skirt too. But, yes, lots and lots of black.

It was another very, very long minute before Cam said anything.

He cleared his throat though.

And when he did, her stomach clenched. Or maybe what clenched was lower. It was an area that she hadn't felt clench in a while.

Probably since Christmas when Cam had nearly run her over in the crosswalk on Main and then had to come help her pick up her cookies and panties. She'd been carrying packages of both and had dropped them when he'd scared the ever-living shit out of her.

Watching him pick up the bright blue thong and scrap of a bra—even brighter against the white snow and dark gray of the wet pavement they were lying on—and stare at them, had made her heart pound even harder than nearly being killed.

Then it had gotten worse. The cookies in the box she'd been carrying had been frosted sugar cookies that she'd secretly bought from Buttered Up, Cam's sister Zoe's bakery. She'd paid a little girl twenty bucks to go in and buy the cookies for her and then pass them to her behind the lingerie store. Whitney had slipped them into a plain bag so no one would know. The family feud between Buttered Up and Hot Cakes was three generations old and meant she couldn't freely shop in the bakery. Which sucked. It had always sucked.

Thankfully, Aiden, one of the new Hot Cakes owners, had fallen in love with Zoe and they were quickly obliterating all of the stupid tension between the two businesses. And maybe, just maybe, her working with the guys to build Hot Cakes back up and make it even better would heal the tension between the families.

Maybe.

Of course, she and Cam were a big part of that.

The feud had started with their grandmothers. But Cam's grandma, Letty, was gone and Whitney's, Didi, was in mental decline.

But those damned cookies and their icing had come back to bite Whitney. Some frosting had gotten on the thong that Cam held. And as she squatted there on Main Street—in one of her black pencil skirts with cold December Iowa air blowing up underneath—he'd swiped the frosting off the thong, lifted it to his mouth, and licked it off.

She hadn't felt one bit of cold air in that moment.

"Yeah, definitely not weird," he finally said, his voice huskier than before.

Whitney breathed out. He'd spoken first. She'd won that round of chicken.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "So I'm good to go in this one?"

"You can't wear this dress in Appleby," he said, shaking his head.

She frowned and turned. “Why not?”

“This dress is not you.”

He was right.

She’d been dressing in conservative business attire because of her grandfather and dad. She’d been trying to be taken seriously for the past decade by the very men who should have been encouraging her to be involved in the company and proud of the things she’d tried to do. Not that the skirts and pants had worked. But this dress? No way would this have convinced her grandfather she should be introducing a new product to their line.

These guys though? Cam, Aiden, Ollie, and Grant? They were all in. They not only thought it was a great idea, they were very happy to have her leading the charge.

She couldn’t wear this dress to the big dessert-baking competition and auction they were holding in the town square tomorrow. But she would love to hear Cam explain to her why.

It was too clingy. It was too *red*. It was too sexy. It was too... not Whitney Lancaster.

Which was why she loved it. She wanted to wear this dress. She wanted to have a man—she corrected that almost immediately—she wanted *Cam* looking at her in this dress exactly the way he was looking at her right now.

Like he was seriously considering how sturdy the desk behind her was and if they were really alone here.

Her pulse skittered under her skin.

They were alone. And that desk was very sturdy.

But, yeah, she suddenly wanted to hear Cam say all of that to her. Would he? Would he just put it out there?

She’d, of course, turn him down. She was not the sex-on-her-desk kind of girl. Either.

But she wanted to be that too...

Not with Cam, of course. That would be really, really, really stupid.

Whitney swallowed and worked on keeping her cool.

She was now thinking about sex on her desk. With Cam. Because of course she was.

He was looking at her like he was too.

And if she were being totally honest with herself—and she really did try to be that—Cam was the only one she could imagine having sex with. Period. Because he was one of three guys she'd had sex with. Ever. And she absolutely knew that it was pathetic and that was probably a huge part of why she was uptight and tense and kind of cool and bitchy at times.

But being Whitney Lancaster meant there weren't many guys in Appleby who were willing to approach her for dates, and she was not at all the type to go to another town. That would require girlfriends. And a desire to go to bars or clubs or... wherever people went to meet people.

Which meant she'd had sex two other times since her high school boyfriend. Both had been with men she'd met at business conferences. They had been single occurrences. And they hadn't been all that good.

Whereas having sex with Cam at age eighteen on blankets by the river and the back seats of cars and on the lumpy sofa in the basement at his house and in her bed when her parents were out for the night... had all been amazing.

Facing him now with that hot look in his eyes and her very sturdy desk behind them and her entire body suddenly humming with awareness was truly a test of that cool bitchiness she had going on.

She crossed her arms. "What's that mean?" she asked about the dress not being her.

But he just gave her a look that said he knew she knew what he meant. "There are no buttons."

She frowned slightly. "No buttons?"

"Hard to be buttoned-up without buttons."

Ah. Got it. Ha-ha. "Well, the idea of the contest and auction is that we're doing something new, right? New

ownership, new product, new approach to the business?” She looked down at the dress. “Maybe I need a new look.”

“You’re going to cause heart attacks in that dress, Whit.”

Whit. Ugh. He had to call her Whit? That nickname got to her. He wasn’t the only person who called her that. The other guys did, too, from time to time. But that was the thing... only these guys called her that.

Her family didn’t. Her friends... okay, she didn’t have many friends, and the ones she did kind of have didn’t call her Whit.

But these guys all did. Like friends. Or brothers. It was familiar and affectionate and it always made her feel warm.

But she knew they called her that because Cam did.

And when he had done it in the past, it had unquestionably been affectionate. And hot. It was now too. Probably because of the stupid dress, but right now when he said it, she could remember how he’d said it in those back seats and on those blankets by the river.

She lifted her chin. “Well, thanks.”

He took a step forward. “I’m serious. You can’t wear that to the auction. That’s not a business dress.”

“What kind of dress is it?”

“That’s a sex dress.”

Her eyes rounded. She’d poked but she was still surprised that he’d said it like that. “This is one of Piper’s dresses.”

“It’s not a sex dress on Piper.”

Whitney felt her mouth curving. “Piper looks amazing in all of her dresses.”

Cam nodded. “Yeah.”

“And she’s got better breasts than I do. In every dress.”

His gaze dropped to her breasts again and Whitney could only hope her bra would hide her nipples’ reaction to his attention.

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” he said.

Her mouth was suddenly a little dry but she managed a little laugh. “Piper’s breasts are bigger than mine, no matter what dress we wear, no matter what.”

His gaze made it back to hers. “Bigger maybe. But you said better.”

“You don’t like big breasts?”

“I don’t like any breasts as much as I like yours.”

And there it was. Out loud. Hanging in the air between them. Needing addressing. And all her fault. She’d poked. She’d wanted this.

She swallowed, knowing that her cool and collected expression had finally wavered. Not only did she really like that he liked her breasts, but she also liked the insinuation that he’d never met another pair he liked more. “Thank you,” she finally said.

Because what the hell was she supposed to say to that? She hadn’t really thought that far ahead.

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “You’re welcome.”

She wet her lips again. So now what?

“Your ass too. While we’re on the subject.”

She pressed her lips together now.

“And your—”

“Let’s *change* the subject,” she said quickly. Her heart was hammering and she was very aware that she was three big steps away from her sturdy desk and about ten seconds away from becoming a sex-on-her-desk girl.

“Anyway,” he said. “You can’t wear a sex dress to the auction.”

“It’s not a sex dress,” she said. “Piper wears this to work.” Then she frowned. “Do you think of sex when Piper wears this?”

She and Cam were talking about sex. This was really not how she'd imagined her night going.

"I do not," he said. "I..." He seemed to be thinking about how to explain something. "I notice her in this dress. This is a dress that's hard *not* to notice. And Piper is gorgeous and she wears the hell out of her dresses."

Whitney nodded, telling herself that the stab of jealousy she felt was really stupid. If Piper and Cam were going to get together, they would have by now. They'd known each other, worked together, for years.

For all she knew they *had* gotten together. She didn't know his history with other women because she very stubbornly refused to think about, wonder about, or *ask* about that.

She'd seen them flirt but Piper had this flirtatious air about her all the time. She treated all the guys like they were good friends she loved but who also drove her nuts. She took care of them. She gave them shit. She *called them* on their shit. She also bent over backward to help make things work and get them what they needed and wanted to make the company work.

Piper was amazing. As far as Whitney knew, there was nothing the woman couldn't do. She was easily five years younger than Dax and Ollie, who were the youngest of the partners, but she managed them as if she were an older sister. Or a mom some of the time.

She was undeniably gorgeous too. So maybe it just made sense that Cam thought so.

"But I think about sex when I see this dress on *you*."

Air rushed out of her lungs. Dammit. This was so bad. She and Cam could *not* talk about sex. They shouldn't talk about a number of things. Their past. Her family. Sex. Yeah, those were probably the top three. For sure. Though not necessarily in that order.

"You can't say things like that to an employee," she finally told him, her fingers digging into her arms.

He shrugged. "You have my boss's phone number."

She did. Though he didn't have a boss. But he had three partners and all three would care if she was feeling harassed. He also had a fourth best friend, Dax, who was a consultant for the company and who would also care how Cam was treating her.

And suddenly Whitney felt warmed by that. She had people on her side.

It was a very strange moment to realize that. It was a very strange moment to be touched by that. But it had been a long time since she'd felt like she had people who would have her back.

She'd told her father once that a business associate of his had hit on her at a big reception. He'd laughed and told her that was just how men treated beautiful young women and she should be flattered. She'd told her brother that a guy he'd gone to college with had propositioned her to secure a deal. He'd told her to stop being such a prude.

So yeah, it was really nice to know that she had people who would take Cam to task for this.

She also didn't miss the irony that Cam was the one guy she most wanted to talk about sex with.

He'd always been so sweetly dirty. He'd said things to her, even at age eighteen, that had been graphic and gruff and came completely from a place of emotion. It was like he hadn't been able to hold back. She'd loved it. But only because she knew that it was a sign of how much she affected him and how much he loved her.

Dirty talk as a sign of love? Yeah, well, that might sound strange to anyone who hadn't heard Camden McCaffery's dirty talk, but it was true. It had been one of the things missing with the other guys. Not the only thing, but clearly some of it.

No one had ever talked to her the way Cam had.

Even the first time he'd asked her out. He'd come up to her in the school hallway, said, "I can't stop thinking about you so you have to let me take you out."

She'd said, "I do?"

“You do. I have to either get over you. Or get you under me.” He’d leaned in with a little smile and a look in his eyes she hadn’t fully understood but that had made her feel hot and tingly.

She’d been seventeen. The rich, untouchable Lancaster princess, and the school bad boy had just said he wanted to get her under him. And she’d wanted that—him—instantly. He hadn’t been intimidated. He hadn’t been slick or flirty. He’d been straightforward.

She’d met his eyes and with her best haughty princess voice had said, “*That* won’t help you get over anything.”

She *still*, all these years later, couldn’t believe she’d said that. She’d been a virgin. She’d been on two dates and she hadn’t really thought they were worth repeating. She had nothing to back up her comment, but something about Cam’s cockiness had brought her own out.

His cockiness had been all the more impressive because he’d been a McCaffery saying those things to a Lancaster. Their families would have flipped out to know that they were talking about even going to the movies not to mention flirting about sex.

Of course, that little thrill had made her even more willing to say yes.

They’d snuck around, had a lot of teenage sex, a lot of laughs, and fallen in love over the next year.

The best year of her life.

Still.

“So I probably also shouldn’t say that I think of sex when I see you in a lot of things,” he said, moving closer again.

Her heart tripped.

“You definitely shouldn’t.”

“Which means you probably won’t tell me that you think about sex when you see me either.”

Dammit. She shook her head. “No, I won’t tell you that.”

“Out loud anyway,” he said.

“What?”

“You won’t tell me that out loud.”

“What’s that mean?” But she was pretty sure she knew.

“It means that you tell me that in lots of ways, Whit,” he said, his voice gruff. “Even if you don’t say it out loud.”

She took a deep breath. She had to be cool here. He could be bluffing. He could be trying to get a reaction. He could just be trying to get her to admit something he didn’t know for sure. She might not actually be giving away how she felt every time she saw him.

“Some things never change,” she said, lifting her chin, fighting for the detached air she wore like she wore her favorite perfume. Why was it so hard to find when Cam was around? “You’re still completely full of yourself.”

He actually gave a soft laugh. “Well, yeah.”

That was another really appealing thing about this guy—he knew himself and he owned his flaws. Oh, he owned his accomplishments and talents too, but he owned his flaws.

She just wasn’t sure he thought being full of himself was a flaw.

“You really like that dress?” he asked, his gaze tracking over her again.

She nodded. “I do. I think it’s time I try a few new things.”

She didn’t like this dress. Well, she liked the dress. But she wasn’t going to wear it. She wasn’t... ready for a dress like this. She wanted to be. She wanted to feel confident and free of worrying about her image and prepared to just go with what felt good, but she’d spent twenty-nine years having to worry about what other people thought and how she presented herself and trying to prove herself. It was going to take some time to get to the point where this dress was a good fit. Metaphorically.

“Then I know exactly where you can wear it,” Cam said.

“Oh?”

“Timothy’s.”

Timothy’s was an expensive restaurant in Dubuque. White tablecloths, multiple forks, all of that. “Yeah, I guess this would work at Timothy’s,” she agreed.

“So let’s go tomorrow night.”

She froze. Slowly she lifted her eyes to his. “Us?”

“You and me.”

“*Just us?*”

“Yes.”

“Like a...business dinner? We’ll talk about plans for—”

“No. Dinner, wine, dessert, me feeling you up under the table, walking downtown and talking, late drinks, then sex all night in a suite at the Hilton.”

Whitney just stared at him. Her heart was thundering so loud that she almost couldn’t hear anything else. This was the thing with Cam’s straightforwardness—it was really hard to pretend that you misunderstood.

Okay, so her cool façade was going to waver a bit. So sue her.

“Not even a *pretense* of something else?” she finally asked.

“When have I ever been a pretense guy?”

He had a point. “So you actually want...” She trailed off and pressed her lips together, not sure she wanted him to fill that in.

He moved closer again. The air between them heated. At least *she* was feeling hotter.

“To look at you in that fucking dress all night long,” he said. “Getting harder and hotter as the time goes on until we can’t stand it any longer and I almost rip it off of you in the elevator on the way up to the room.”

Well. Holy. Shit.

She'd asked.

And she'd wanted an answer like that.

But that answer was really the worst thing he could have possibly said.

How was she supposed to be completely professional and pretend she was over him when he said stuff like that?

He's just pushing your buttons, she told herself.

He didn't look like he was kidding. Or messing around. But she had to tell herself that was exactly what he was doing. Or she was going to grab him and strip him out of that hot suit and lick the tattoos that he'd added to since she'd last been able to lick them.

Daaaaaamit.

She took a breath. Then nodded. "Okay, so I guess my butt doesn't look weird in this dress, then."

He didn't seem surprised that was the only reaction she gave. "Definitely not."

"Okay, thanks for the input."

She stepped around him and headed for the bathroom.

Chapter Two



He waited for her to change.

Of course he did.

He wasn't the type of guy to leave and let her catch her breath and gather her composure and see each other the next day as if he hadn't just confessed that he wanted to take her out.

And to a hotel. For sex.

He really hated beating around the bush, so he didn't. It made it so much easier when he knew that everyone knew exactly where he stood on things.

It was very important that Whitney Lancaster know where he stood on things.

That was why he was still here in her office, perusing the stuff on her shelves, playing with the stress ball he'd picked up from her desk, and thinking about the fact that she was at least semi-naked on the other side of the thin door of her private bathroom. And wondering what color panties she had on. Or if maybe it was a thong. Like the one he'd picked up from the snowy pavement a few months ago.

A gentleman wouldn't think about that. Or the last time he'd seen her in a thong. Or naked. Well, he assumed. He only knew maybe one and a half gentlemen and he didn't spend a ton of time with them.

A guy who was over her probably wouldn't think about any of that either.

Of course, he was neither of those things.

As evidenced by the things he'd said to her. And the fact that he was still here and planning to say more.

He squeezed the ball harder as he studied the framed photos that she had on the shelves of the massive cherrywood bookcase by her window.

The photos were of her with her family. Of course.

And wow, he really hated her grandfather and father.

He felt his chest tighten with bitterness and anger just looking at photos of them.

Dean and Eric Lancaster were the epitome of entitled, rich assholes who thought that they could do whatever they wanted to because they had money and power.

It was not a secret to anyone who knew Cam and his history with the Lancasters, or to himself—or the therapist that he'd seen for a while a few years ago—that a lot of his drive came from wanting to be a rich asshole too. He wanted to be at their level of wealth and success so that he could prove that they'd been wrong. About everything.

It absolutely wasn't mentally healthy, but it had worked out so far. He was rich and successful and he had surpassed them in both wealth and success. And he was asshole, but he was less of one than Dean and Eric were.

In fact, he now owned *their* business and was in the midst of helping build it into something that was bigger and better than anything they'd ever done.

The Lancaster family had run Hot Cakes for as long as it had existed. Up until about two months ago when Cam and his partners had bought it. Whitney's grandmother had started the company. After she'd stolen the first recipe from *his* grandmother. Him now owning the factory was fucking sweet. Pun totally intended.

Clenching and relaxing his fist around the lime-green stress ball, Cam leaned in to peer closer at the photo of Whitney and Dorothy—Didi to everyone who knew her—in

front of the factory. Whitney had to have been about six or seven.

Even then she'd been cute. Long, dark hair, those big brown eyes that he'd always been a sucker for, that huge smile. She was wearing a red coat, grinning at the camera, while holding Didi's hand with one of hers, hoisting a Hot Cakes snack cake—it was too small in the photo to tell which one—in the air with the other.

It was strange, but it was the red coat that caught his attention.

Red.

She never wore red.

That was one of the reasons seeing her in Piper's dress had punched him in the chest. It was a bright, bold, happy color. She never wore bright, bold, happy colors.

But he hadn't realized it until he saw her in that fucking dress.

That was only one of the things about the dress that had sucked every molecule of oxygen out of his lungs and made him hard and stupid all at once.

Her tits really had looked amazing in that thing. And no, her ass had *not* looked weird.

But he could not get over that color.

She used to wear red.

Not just as a little girl, but in high school too. In the time he'd know her she'd worn red. And other bright colors.

Hell, he'd picked bright blue panties—well, it had technically been a thong, a detail he had *not* missed—up off the street at Christmas.

So she wore red *under* her black and gray and navy blue clothes that she wore to the office.

He hadn't put his finger on it until this very second, but that was why he hated her fucking clothes.

At first he'd thought it was because those pencil skirts did actually make her ass and legs look great and he figured he was just dealing with horniness and the whole wanting-what-he-couldn't-have that always simmered in the air when he was near Whitney.

Then he thought it was because they were very conservative, something he was *not*, and she paired them with those buttoned-up blouses that reminded him of what a good girl she'd always tried to be. Or the image of one that she'd tried to project at least. Which then reminded him of how naughty and fun that good girl could be when he got her to loosen up. Which led back to the horniness and the wanting-what-he-couldn't-fucking-have that plagued him.

But now he put his finger on it.

She wore those damned boring-assed colors that were *not* her and he would put a million dollars—and he could literally do that, thank you very fucking much—on the fact that she wore those because her grandfather or father had told her that's how she should dress to work for Hot Cakes.

He loved her in that red dress of Piper's.

Not just because she looked sexy as hell but because he would bet another million that *she* really liked that dress.

The door to the powder room opened behind him and he turned to face her.

She came up short when she saw that he was still there.

She was back in her silky light blue blouse and the dark gray skirt. He found it interesting they were wearing the same colors today.

But he really fucking hated her outfit.

He frowned and moved to her desk to return the stress ball to its spot next to her plain black pencil holder. Damn, even the stress ball and pencil holder were boring. Dax had one that when you squeezed it the inner liquid squished out into multicolored bubbles. Whitney needed one of those. Desperately. Literally and metaphorically.

“You’re still here,” she said.

“You didn’t tell me if we’re going to dinner tomorrow night or the next night,” he said, tucking his hands into his pockets.

She tossed Piper’s dress over the back of one of the chairs that faced her desk and regarded him with narrowed eyes.

“Neither. But you already knew that answer. So why are you really still here?”

Ah, see, that was the other reason he hated her clothes. When she dressed like this it was clear that she *felt* more buttoned up and cool. Not at all vulnerable and sexy.

“I’m really still here because I want to know when we’re going out. We don’t have to go to Timothy’s. Hell, we don’t have to go to dinner for that matter.”

“Just straight to the hotel then?” she asked.

“Sure.” He shrugged.

“Well, I guess it’s a step up from the riverbank.”

He lifted a brow and took a step closer to her. He didn’t miss the way her breath caught for just a second. “You had *no* complaints on that riverbank, Whit.” They’d been so damned hot together. Even as teenagers.

She wet her lips. “I was seventeen. What did I know?”

Yeah, well, at seventeen Miss Whitney Lancaster had been the best sex of his life. And that was still true ten years later. And he’d absolutely tried to erase that memory.

“You knew that you were madly in love with me and that nothing felt better than when we were naked together,” he said.

She pressed her lips together, lifted her chin, and met his gaze directly.

He appreciated that. She was tough. She didn’t want him to see that he affected her. That made this all so much more fun.

He took another step. Now he could reach her. He wasn't going to, but he could and she knew it.

“Go out with me.”

“No.”

“Let me put you up on your desk and convince you.” Damn, he wanted to do that so fucking bad he almost had to reach down and adjust his cock. He did appreciate dress pants and the bit of give they had compared to denim. He was going to have to remember that if he was going to have these conversations with Whitney.

“No.” But she swallowed hard after that one.

“Okay.” He took one final step. Now she had to tip her head back to look up at him. “Let me bend you over your desk and convince you.”

This time she had to swallow before she answered. “No.”

He studied her face. Her pupils were wide and round, her cheeks pink, her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat. “You think I'm testing you,” he said as he realized it.

“Are you?”

Well... He nodded. “Maybe a little. But not the way you think.”

“You're not trying to find a reason to fire me?”

He was legitimately surprised that she thought that. “I don't want to fire you, Whit.”

“No?” She looked skeptical.

“Oh, no,” he said. “I want you right here, front row, center, watching me and my friends turn this company into so much more than your family ever did with it.”

Emotions flickered in her eyes and he wasn't sure if he should brace for a fight or... what.

Finally she nodded. “Good. I want all of that to happen.”

Yeah, he hadn't been expecting that. Not even a mild defense of her family?

“But,” she said lifting her chin. “I want to... I *intend* to be a part of that. Not just sitting and watching.”

She did, huh? “Because you’re not really qualified to do anything else?” he asked, unable to resist the job.

Hey, he wasn’t *as big of* an asshole as the Lancaster men, but he would never deny that he could be one. Unmistakably. Unapologetically, too. Most of the time.

She took a breath. “I’m an asset to you and this company,” she said instead of directly answering the question.

She was.

He nodded. “But you want to stay because you like that big old house you inherited from your grandma and you don’t want to have to move and buy something on your own?”

Did it matter why she wanted to be here? As long as she was and she was a witness to the great work he and his friends were doing here? Yeah, it did matter. She needed to know where she stood with him, but he needed to know where he stood with her too.

And he had a feeling she was going to lay it all out. And that he already knew.

“I do like that house,” she admitted. “This town is also my home. I don’t want to live anywhere else. And I don’t have a college degree to take to another company,” she said, her chin up again, her gaze on his. “And I don’t have any other experience except what my family gave me and I know exactly how that would look on a resume. But”—she took a breath—“what I really want is to take this company to levels my family never did. I want more markets, more products, and to double our bottom line. I want to expand the number of jobs here and to look at a second factory location. And I want to be a part of all of that.” She crossed her arms and took a deep breath. “I want to be a partner.”

He stared at her.

He hadn’t been expecting any of that.

He really hadn’t.

Whitney had always been sweet, dedicated to her family's company because that had been ingrained since she'd been born, believing that her grandfather and father could walk on water, willing to go along with whatever they wanted or needed from her. She'd been a part of the company up to this point. So why did this all sound like she'd been frustrated and was so determined to grab on to this change in ownership as an opportunity?

"I—" he started.

"Which is why I can't go out with you and I certainly can't sleep with you," she said.

Cam's eyebrows rose. "Hang on now."

"For one, it's ridiculous to even think we should go there," she told him. She dropped her arms, but she also moved behind her desk, putting the wide expanse of solid wood between them.

Cam knew that wasn't an accident.

"We broke up ten years ago," she said. "We are *exes* who haven't exactly been friends. Why would you think we should go out?"

"Well, first, *we* didn't break up. *You* broke up with *me*," he corrected, unable to help himself.

She just lifted her brows.

"And the fact we're *exes* and that you want to be more involved in the company is exactly why we should go out."

She gave him a *really?* look. "So if we sleep together you'll give me the partnership?"

"Girl, if you're even half as good as you were on that riverbank, I'll probably give you my shares too," he said. Again, unable to help himself.

She rolled her eyes.

He was probably lucky that she knew him well enough to know he was mostly just mouthing off. He really could end up with a sexual harassment suit against him with someone else.

Of course, he'd never say that to anyone else. He did have *some* restraint and decorum. Besides, it wouldn't be true with anyone else.

No one else had ever rocked his world like Whitney had. It hadn't been because she had been experienced or even all that wild, she'd just been... he blew out a breath... madly fucking in love with him.

"But what I meant," he went on before he said anything else about sex. For now. "I think we *have* to date."

She frowned. "That makes no sense."

"Of course it does. We're not the only ones wondering about what's going on with us."

"Except that *we're* not wondering what's going on," she said.

"We're not?"

That hand went back to her hip. "Are we?"

"I am," he admitted. "You're not?"

"We broke up." She held her hand up. "Fine. I broke up with you. *Ten years ago*. You've hated me for a decade, Cam. Now you own my family's company and you're my boss. *That* is what is going on."

He stalked to her desk, braced his hands on the top, and leaned in. "I do not hate you, Whitney."

Her eyes flickered with vulnerability for just a second. Then she did that annoying straighten-her-spine-lift-her-chin-smooth-her-features thing that made him want to swear. Loudly.

"I'm glad," she said coolly. "I really am. But the fact remains that we didn't work out and now—"

"I'm back."

"So?"

"So you sent me away. You broke up with me because you thought I needed to leave Appleby. You thought I needed to go

off to college and see what I could do outside of this town. And you thought you needed to stay. So we did that. I left. You stayed. And now I'm back."

"You're back for now," she said. "You're here to help Aiden and Grant and Ollie get Hot Cakes going."

"Why would I leave?"

"Your life is in Chicago."

"My best friends in the world are here now. Aiden and Dax and Grant are all staying," he said. They'd all fallen in love with Appleby girls. Girls who were happily tied here, girls who had no intentions of leaving. His sister and her best friends to be exact. "My family is here. My work is now here."

They'd headquartered their company, Fluke, Inc. in Chicago because that's where they'd all been when things had taken off. Grant was from there and he was the money guy. The rest of them hadn't had a preference for where their offices would be. But they'd sold *Warriors of Easton*, their online game, to a bigger gaming company several months ago. Dax and Ollie were still involved in creative and marketing tasks. Aiden consulted here and there. But Cam and Grant were mostly out of the loop now. That company had their own money guys and lawyers. Fluke could go in a number of directions now but right now their focus was Hot Cakes. Cam had no reason to go back to Chicago, honestly.

"You're staying?" Whitney said. "Really?"

He straightened. "Yes."

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. Obviously this was news to her.

"So we need to at least see if there's anything between us anymore," he said. "Everyone will be wondering." He sure as fuck was. He suspected there was plenty still between them, but he really did need to find out. He didn't know if what he was feeling was still all about the girl she'd been, the one who'd broken his heart, or if their past was something they could build on.

She was shaking her head now.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “We need to go out. We need to give it a chance. If it doesn’t work out, then we part as friends, and we can convince everyone that we gave it a fair shot, we both realize that we’ve changed and that we only want to be work partners now and everyone can finally exhale because the sexual tension will be gone and people won’t have to walk on eggshells around us.”

She frowned. “People aren’t—”

“They are,” he interrupted. “They don’t know how to act around us because *we* don’t know how to act. Are we friends? Are we more? Are we less? Are we just work associates? And are we both cool with that if so? Or is one of us uncomfortable or upset or horny? What if we’re not together and we have a big company party and we bring other dates? How are we both going to act? Is anything going to get thrown and broken? Anyone going to get punched?”

She rolled her eyes at that.

Yeah, he’d punched a guy over her in high school. Twice.

Not the same guy. Two different occasions. One of them might have been an overreaction on his part though.

“We need to figure all of that out and get a handle on how we feel. We don’t know because we haven’t talked about it. We haven’t explored it.”

“Horny?” she repeated.

So she’d focused on that word. Interesting.

“Yeah, horny,” he said. “My friends are wondering if I’m sitting in meetings thinking about fucking you on the conference table instead of actually listening to the details of the new proposal.”

She blew out a breath. “You keep saying this stuff just to get a rise out of me.”

“I’m saying it because it’s true.”

“Why would your friends be wondering that?”

“Because they know how I feel about you.”

She wet her lips. “Which is... horny?”

“We can call it *intensely attracted* if that sounds classier to you.”

“That would sound classier to anyone.”

He just lifted a shoulder. Not many people would apply the word *classy* to him. Or any people.

She was watching him, her eyes slightly narrowed.

“What?”

“That all sounds very... mature.”

He lifted a brow. “I’ve got my moments.”

“Huh.”

He couldn’t help the half smile. He could admit that “mature” was another word that not many people had used to describe him in the past.

“We’re ten years older, Whit. We’ve grown up. I went away and did other stuff. Now we have to find out what this is.”

She took a deep breath, focused on the very boring black and silver lamp on her desk. “It’s nothing, Cam.” She met his eyes. “It can’t be.”

He felt his gut tighten. “I don’t believe you.”

She lifted a shoulder. “We’ll just tell everyone we talked about it, decided to be friendly coworkers, that everything is fine and no one has to worry or wonder about anything.”

He narrowed his eyes. “*I’m* wondering, Whitney.”

She shook her head. “You’re not. Not really. Not if you thought about it.”

“What the hell does that mean?” He felt the back of his neck tightening with frustration. He really hated this uptight, cool side of her. Clearly she’d been perfecting this persona or whatever the fuck it was over the past ten years because it was pretty damned solid. Even when he was saying things about

bending over her desk or fucking her on the conference room table. She was just facing it all. And still saying no.

“It means that the story hasn’t changed. This is just chapter two.”

He scowled. “What?”

“This company, Hot Cakes, has always been my priority,” she said. She pulled in a deep breath. “It still is. Now even more than ever. Now I have a chance to really be a part of it in a way I haven’t before. I’m not going to do *anything* that would keep me from showing my family that they were wrong to not put me in charge a long time ago.”

Frustration slammed into him. *Fuck this company.* That was his first reaction. He was happy to be an owner now but—he had to stop even that train of thought. There was only one reason he was an owner. Aiden had asked him to be.

Aiden Anderson was his best friend. Had been since kindergarten. Aiden had wanted to come back to Appleby to be with Zoe and buying the factory had been a great investment and a way to save the town. That was right up Aiden’s alley. Cam was with Aiden on anything his friend wanted to do.

It was a definite perk that this company had been the reason Whitney had dumped him and he now had the chance to build it up and show everyone that the minute a McCaffery got involved was the minute things got really good. But at the time Aiden had wanted to buy the company, Cam had not had a single thought about returning to Appleby on any kind of permanent basis.

That had changed over the past couple of months as he’d been home more helping the guys get the company going in the new direction. He’d loved seeing his family more. He’d loved being back in his hometown. He’d loved seeing his friends and partners excited about their new endeavor. And yeah, he’d loved being around Whitney again.

But any *happiness* about owning a chunk of Hot Cakes was much less about the company itself and a lot more about

lifting a middle finger to the Lancasters who hadn't thought he was good enough for Whitney.

Maybe a bit of a finger to Whitney too, since she'd gone along with that.

"And you think that being with me would jeopardize you being more involved with the company?"

"There's that risk," she said. "If we try dating again and it doesn't work out, there is no guarantee that we'll both be fine and be able to be friends and it will have no effect on the company."

"And you're not willing to take a chance?"

She crossed her arms. "No." She said it with her eyes on his, no hesitation, not even a blink.

"And what if one of us isn't okay with us *not* trying it and keeps wanting to and makes everything uncomfortable?" he asked.

"Well, I would hope the *maturity* we've both found over the past ten years would keep that from happening."

Yeah, that was probably how maturity worked.

He'd definitely done some growing up. He hadn't punched anyone in the face in years. He punched them in the face metaphorically now. In court. But that didn't happen as often as he'd like. One thing that came with their company's increased wealth and power had been a decrease in the number of people willing to tangle with them. He hadn't had a really good fight in a while.

Grant and Josie had gotten married a month ago so that she could have her gall bladder taken out and be covered on Grant's health insurance. Cam had been hoping the insurance company would fight him on that.

They hadn't. And he'd been annoyed.

He wasn't sure where his contrariness and love of a good fight came from but most people said he got it from his grandmother. The one who had held a grudge against

Whitney's grandmother for half a century. That seemed to add up.

So he wasn't quite as inclined to think that he was grown up enough to just let this go.

He wanted to date his ex-girlfriend.

His hot, intelligent, creative, buttoned-up, cool and composed ex-girlfriend.

Yeah, that buttoned-up, cool, and composed bit was part of it. That wasn't the Whitney he remembered. The fact that he couldn't really rattle her was also absolutely part of it. He'd always been able to rattle her—in really good ways—before.

Maybe he was bored.

Maybe he was immature.

Maybe he was still in love with her.

But which of those this was, was exactly what he wanted to figure out.

“Okay,” he said, he turned and started for her office door.

“Wait,” she called after him.

He glanced back.

“Okay?” She frowned. “That's it?”

He shrugged. “For now.”

That made her look worried.

Good.

He stopped in her doorway.

“For now?” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

“So... you're not actually going to drop it?”

He gave her a slow grin. “Do you remember the last time you broke up with me?”

She *definitely* looked worried now. “Yes.”

She probably wasn't thinking about him getting drunk and in a fight with her brother. Or the week of incessant phone calls. Or him getting drunk and in a fight with fucking Carter Jackson when he said he couldn't wait to take Whitney out. Or even how he'd broken her window by throwing a rock through it. He'd only meant to get her attention but he'd picked a rock that was too big. And he'd probably thrown in too hard.

Okay, he'd clearly thrown it too hard.

"You are *not* going to do that again," she said firmly. But she was nervous. For sure.

Yeah, she was thinking about how he'd kidnapped her.

It had only been for twelve hours and no one had even known she was gone. But it had been a kidnapping by the strictest definition, he supposed.

"I don't really drop things easily. As you know."

She sighed. "Come on, Cam."

"A few dates. That's all I want. I'm not proposing. I'm not asking to move in. We don't have to even let anyone know we're trying until we figure it out. All I want is a chance to see how things go. It can just be between the two of us."

She just looked at him, saying nothing, looking confused and concerned. Finally she shook her head. "Hot Cakes is too important. To both of us."

Now, see, that pissed him off.

It was a total flashback to the past. She'd chosen Hot Cakes over him before.

And when he got pissed, he wanted to dig in, wanted to fight, wanted to win.

He felt the surge of anticipation that he always got when he heard the words, "We're going to court."

He didn't punch people anymore. He wore them down with excellent arguments and being fucking *right*.

He gave her a big grin. "I'll see you tomorrow at the dessert auction."

Her eyes got round. Clearly, him grinning also made her nervous.

Good.

His gaze landed on the red dress draped over the back of the chair in front of her desk. He crossed to it in four strides, swept it up, and then headed for the door.

“Hey!”

“You don’t need this until the night of our first date,” he told her.

He left her standing behind her perfectly neat and organized, boring as fuck, corporate desk in her damned gray pencil skirt, looking dazed.

Chapter Three



“What do llamas have to do with cake?” Whitney turned to Piper as the other woman came up next to her. “Nothing,” Whitney answered her own question. “That’s what. Llamas have nothing to do with cake.”

“I think those are actually alpacas,” Piper said, looking toward the pen where the petting zoo was set up about fifty feet from the stage where the baking competition was about to begin.

Whitney felt her eyes widen. “That is not helpful.”

Piper laughed, then looked at Whitney’s face closer. She frowned. “You okay?”

Whitney took a deep breath—got a lungful of alpaca-scented air—and shook her head. “No, I am not okay.” She turned her attention back to the stage that had been constructed four days ago in the center of the Appleby town square.

“Why not?” Piper looked around. “Everything seems great. Everyone is having so much fun.”

Whitney sighed. “I have a baking competition happening on an *outdoor* stage as the temperature is inching past ninety. There are bugs out here, the butter and cream cheese are melting, and I have no idea if our release forms cover if someone gets diarrhea from eating desserts made with eggs and cream that have been sitting out in ninety-two-degree weather.”

Piper’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“And there are not just llamas—or alpacas or whatever—in a petting zoo stinking the place up, but there are also goats, a potbellied pig, a miniature cow, and an *emu*.”

Piper nodded. “I saw the emu.”

“I didn’t even know the Ryan boys had an emu,” Whitney said. Drew Ryan and his brothers ran the alpaca farm outside of Appleby. Apparently, they had more than alpacas.

“Dave is cute.”

“Dave?” Whitney asked.

“The emu’s name is Dave,” Piper said.

Of course it was. “I never should have let Oliver handle the petting zoo details,” Whitney said, shaking her head. “But I was so busy with coordinating the baking competition and I was so happy that he’d let go of the idea of the Ferris wheel and actual circus tent that I figured a petting zoo would be harmless.”

Piper nodded. “Well, in Oliver’s defense, he’s never put in charge of details. Of any kind. He probably didn’t know what to do. He’s not really the detail guy.”

Piper would know. She was Oliver’s executive assistant. Piper was actually the executive assistant to all five of the partners in Fluke, Inc., but it had taken Whitney only a few weeks around her new bosses to figure out that, while they all needed Piper, Oliver was the main reason for Piper’s job. Ollie was... a dreamer. He was the visionary of the company, the big ideas guy. He was brilliant and creative and practically a genius. But he was also not into things like schedules and plans and rules.

“I should have known when he was so disappointed that we couldn’t get actual acrobats to perform,” Whitney said.

Piper just shrugged. “You really should have. Never put Ollie in charge of something. Everything should go through Grant or Aiden,” she said, naming the CFO and CEO of the company. “Or me,” she said with a smile.

Piper really did handle Oliver. He listened to her in a way he didn't to anyone else. Piper had a way of communicating with him that seemed almost magical. She could anticipate most of his thoughts and needs. And Oliver could be hard to keep focused unless Piper was involved. She could absolutely get and hold his attention. It was fascinating.

Whitney blew out a breath. "That doesn't make this better now. Why didn't *you* stop him from having *goats* here?"

They were having a baking contest. On a stage. In the middle of the town square. Three handsome men were going to make three different desserts, cooking-show style, then the final judge was going to choose the winner. That winning recipe would become Hot Cakes' newest product.

This was Whitney's first big project for Hot Cakes since she'd gotten new bosses. The first big project she'd pitched to someone other than a family member. Ever.

The first big project that someone had said, "Wow. Yes. Let's do that." Ever.

And now she felt like she was going to throw up.

Hot Cakes had never added a new product. The products that made the company millions of dollars every year had been the same for over fifty years. But now with new owners it was the perfect time to launch something fresh.

Or so Whitney had told Aiden, Grant, Ollie, Dax, and Cam during her pitch last month.

And they'd bought it. They loved the idea. They thought it was brilliant. Well, four of them had anyway. Cam had seemed... determined to make her squirm.

She shifted her weight and shot a glance in his direction. He was standing off to the side of the stage with Ollie and one of the Hot Cakes employees, Max.

This was a terrible idea.

Cam had been making her squirm since he'd gotten back to Appleby and walked into that meeting last month and then volunteered himself as one of the bakers for this event.

But that had been nothing compared to the jumpy, jittery heat that had been plaguing her since last night and their little showdown in her office.

He wanted to date her? As in really *date* her? What? That made no sense.

Except that everything he'd laid out made a lot of sense.

Anyone who knew anything about their history—basically his four best friends and his entire family—would be wondering how things stood between them.

The only reason *her* family wasn't wondering was because all of them except Didi were now living in Dallas where their new company was based. Didi's dementia made it so that she would likely be unaware of Cam's involvement in Hot Cakes, and even if she did hear his name in connection, it would surely be difficult for her to put him together with Whitney's boyfriend from a decade ago.

But, yes, everyone who was aware of the fact that Cam now owned part of Hot Cakes and therefore worked with Whitney, would likely wonder how that was going.

Couldn't they just be friends?

Just then he tipped his head back and laughed at something Max had said and her stomach clenched. Hard.

No, they probably couldn't just be friends.

Not when she wanted to jump into his arms, wrap her arms and legs around him, and kiss him until he was squeezing her ass and groaning her name. Like she had done probably a hundred times in the past.

Ugh.

It had already been difficult to keep her composure around him, but now she knew he wanted her too. How was she supposed to ignore *that*? How was she supposed to walk into the conference room for a meeting and not immediately flush or stammer or trip over her feet?

Damn him for stirring all of that up. She wanted to be composed, totally professional, brilliant and organized and

impressive and capable, so that the guys would offer her a partnership. Or so they would at least say yes when she asked to buy in.

But now she was going to have to deal with personal feelings for Cam the whole time? The composed part was out the window, probably. And if she couldn't handle working with him, why would the guys think she was partner material?

On top of that, she couldn't *quite* shake the idea that Cam had done it on purpose. *Was* he testing her? Maybe not to fire her. She believed his sincerity when he said he wanted her right there watching him and his friends make her family's company into a huge success. But maybe he was testing to see just how *not* over him she was and if he could get her to admit that she'd been wrong to let him go.

Well, the thing about that was... she hadn't been wrong.

He'd had an amazing college football career. He had a law degree. He'd met three of his four best friends who would be in his life forever. He was a freaking *millionaire*.

So, no, she hadn't been wrong to "let him go"... or force him to go. However he wanted to look at it. It had been the right thing and she wasn't sorry.

Did she miss him? Had she failed to find another guy who came even close to making her feel the way Cam had even as a teenager? Sure.

But she'd done the right thing *for him*.

"Do you believe me?"

She focused on Piper again. She'd forgotten the other woman. "Oh. Um..." She glanced around.

She was in the shade and still sweating as the aroma of alpacas—and a pot-bellied pig, a bunch of goats, and an emu—drifted over the crowd that had gathered. And an hour-long dessert date with her ex-boyfriend, who she was still at least semi in love with, was about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Nope. Not okay.

“I have *alpacas* at a baking event,” Whitney said.

Piper nodded. “Yeah, and I told you that it wasn’t Ollie’s fault. But I don’t think you heard me.”

“It’s not Ollie’s fault?” Whitney looked over at the petting zoo.

That was *such* an Oliver thing. It was his partners, and friends who honed Ollie’s ideas into manageable, doable proposals. For instance, Ollie would have said, *Let’s have a petting zoo!* and someone else would have said, *Or we could have someone make balloon animals. Because balloons do go with cake. Whereas farm animals don’t so much. And that way we don’t have to deal with the smell.*

“Then who’s fault is it?” Whitney asked as Piper chewed on her bottom lip.

“The alpacas are not a *terrible* idea,” Piper said instead of answering directly. “We wanted to make this an event that would encourage people to come and get involved. The more activities and the more fun for people of all ages, the better.”

Whitney regarded the other woman.

“So I have barnyard animals oinking and snorting in a pen fifty feet from the stage where we’re going to be producing what we hope to be the biggest Hot Cakes product ever because *someone* thought that would draw more people down here?” Whitney asked.

“Alpacas kind of make this purring sound, actually. It’s kind of like humming,” Piper said.

Whitney narrowed her eyes. “Piper.”

She’d really thought Piper was the one person immune to Ollie’s craziness.

In fairness, even Whitney had *initially* thought Ollie’s idea to literally turn this whole thing into a circus was funny and creative. But then she’d thought about how much liability insurance would cost for *acrobats*.

He’d been very disappointed, so she’d compromised by agreeing to a bounce house and food trucks—tacos, pizza, and

pulled pork sandwiches—and a few carnival games. Snack cakes were, after all, fun. They were treats. Part of childhood. So associating them with fun and frivolity was okay, she supposed.

But she'd had to draw the line at knife throwers and people jumping through rings of fire.

And alpacas.

“Are you or are you not the reason I have alpacas stinking the place up as we speak?” Whitney asked Piper.

“Well...”

“*Piper.*”

“Drew Ryan is really cute.”

Whitney blinked at her. Drew Ryan *was* really cute.

Whitney crossed her arms. “Ollie has a thing for Drew?” she asked, knowing that was not the situation at all.

“Um...”

“Oh my God, Piper! Drew talked *you* into having a petting zoo?”

“The petting zoo was totally Ollie’s idea. At first,” Piper protested. “But... I went with him to talk to Drew.”

“And Ollie balked at the idea and you talked him into it?”

Piper winced. “Yeah.”

“*You* have a thing for Drew?” Whitney asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I have a thing for Ollie being jealous of Drew,” Piper said with a shrug. “Anyway, somehow we ended up deciding that alpacas would be a great idea. And then Drew added the other animals for free.”

Whitney rubbed the middle of her forehead. She was *paying* for those alpacas.

“It’s great,” Piper reassured her, rubbing a hand up and down Whitney’s back, comfortingly. “You’re throwing the town a big party. It’s a way to show Appleby that we

appreciate them. It's just fun. It doesn't have to make perfect sense."

Whitney wasn't so sure of that. She took a deep breath—tinged with the scent of alpacas—and said, "Be honest. Do you *really* think we're pulling this off?"

Piper nodded. "Completely. You've done a fabulous job. I love how you organized this. Getting the Chamber of Commerce involved in narrowing down the top ten recipes was a great idea and having the town do the taste testing to choose the final three was brilliant."

The people of Appleby had been invited to a huge taste-testing event last weekend where they *had* set up tents. Gauzy white tents with twinkle lights, white tablecloths, music, and a champagne fountain as a matter of fact. It had been more like a classy, outdoor wedding venue than a circus, thank you very much.

Whitney looked around. "It does seem like people are having fun with this today."

Now those final three recipes were going to be baked live on stage by three hot, single, charming men with plenty of flirty baking innuendos and banter thrown around as they did it. Then the treats would be sampled by the Grand Dame of Hot Cakes herself, Didi Lancaster, and she would pick the winning recipe. As the company's founder, it was perfect that she be the one choosing the new product.

Of course, Whitney would be a lot less nervous about *that* if she wasn't Didi's granddaughter and didn't know Didi was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. At least no one else in town knew. *No one*.

Everyone thought Whitney was living with Didi simply because the older woman's house was enormous and it was silly for them to both live alone. But truthfully, Didi couldn't live by herself anymore. She wasn't safe in the kitchen, she would get lost driving, and she wasn't able to handle keeping track of her medications.

In another month, Didi would be moving into the gorgeous new wing of Sunny Orchard, the nursing home that Whitney's friend Dax Marshall had recently purchased and revamped. Didi was excited to move in and be closer to some people she'd known her whole life, and Whitney was beyond relieved that her grandmother was good with the move. She really wanted to get her relocated before the dementia made it harder for her to adjust to new surroundings and routines.

So far today had been a good day, and if Didi could hang in there until the final judging, everything would be fine. All she had to do was taste three desserts and say which she liked best. Dessert tasting was as familiar to Didi as anything, and Whitney really thought they could make it through this one event without letting on there was anything unusual going on with Didi.

Whitney could only focus on one nerve-wracking, headache-producing thing at a time though, so she looked at Piper.

"They are *totally* having fun," Piper assured her. "No one's even thinking about alpacas and cake not going together."

"Okay, so what do alpacas have to do with cake?" Jane Kemper asked as she and Zoe McCaffery came to stand with Whitney and Piper.

Whitney sighed. "Nothing," she said. "Absolutely nothing."

"It's *fun*," Piper said, giving Jane a look. "It's just one big fun time. That's all that matters."

Zoe looked at Piper and then slowly nodded as if catching on. "Right. That's right. Totally true. Big-time fun. It's great." She gave Whitney a huge grin.

Whitney knew that Jane and Zoe and Piper were just trying to make her feel better. But she appreciated it. Zoe was engaged to Aiden, one of Whitney's bosses and, maybe more importantly, she was a *McCaffery*. The McCafferys and Lancasters had long been rivals. It wasn't so much that Hot Cakes and Zoe's bakery, Buttered Up, were *actual* business

competitors, but their grandmothers had been best friends at one time and when Whitney's grandmother, Didi, had split off to start Hot Cakes, it had ruined their friendship and started a family feud that had lasted for nearly three generations.

Then there was the little detail of Whitney breaking Zoe's brother's heart and... yeah, Zoe even pretending to try to make Whitney feel better about this event meant a lot.

Whitney blew out a breath. "Thanks, ladies."

"This is all a huge mess," Paige Asher said as she came walking up.

Whitney sighed.

"No, it's *great*," Piper said, trying the wide-eyed look at Paige that had worked on Zoe and Jane.

But Paige shook her head. "No, it's really not. I can't bid on Ollie."

Okay, that was *not* great. Whitney frowned. "You *have* to, Paige."

Piper nodded. "You do. You have to bid on him."

"Bid on him?" Zoe asked, frowning and looking between the three of them.

"The bachelor auction," Piper said.

"Wait, I thought it was a dessert auction," Jane said. "Ollie, Cam, and Max are going to bake the final three recipes on stage and then Didi is going to pick the winner. People are going to bid on those three desserts and the proceeds are going to the food bank." Jane looked from Piper to Paige to Whitney. "Right?"

"Yes," Whitney said. "Except that they're also bidding on an hour with the guy who baked the dessert. They get to have dessert *with* the baker."

Yep. Somehow this had also turned into a bachelor auction with three very hot men. One of whom was her ex.

Whitney rubbed her head again. Okay, that part had been totally her idea. Well, not the part about Cam being one of the

bakers. She'd suggested it thinking Grant and Ollie would do it and they'd recruit a couple of other guys. But then Grant had gone and fallen in love with Josie and it didn't seem like he should be up for a dessert date auction. And then Cam had volunteered to be a part of it. Actually, he'd *insisted*. Whitney hadn't included him initially because he was still living in Chicago then. Well, and because she would have never thought to auction him off to another woman.

Yeah, there was that too.

Not that she'd admit that part.

The third bachelor baker was Max, one of the long-time factory workers who literally baked Hot Cakes every day.

The three were actually perfect for this. On paper. Two were owners of the company, the other a very long-term employee. Cam was a hometown boy who had donated a lot of money to the community in the past ten years. Ollie was used to being up on stage, entertaining and engaging an audience at Comic Con and other gaming cons because of *Warriors of Easton*. Max was well-liked in town and had been a part of the community for a long time. He was funny and charming and would have no trouble being up in front of everyone.

They were also all very good looking and single.

Whitney felt her stomach start to flutter with nerves again and she pressed a hand against it. She didn't have time to be nervous about the guys too.

The guy who was going to bid on Max was already planted in the audience. Max and Elliot had been exchanging texts and Snapchatting for the past month or so. Elliot worked for Fluke in Chicago as a programmer and Dax had introduced them. Elliot had enough money, thanks to Dax, to bid whatever it took to get that dessert date with Max.

The same was supposed to be true for Ollie. Oliver was... not the suave playboy the other guys of Fluke, Inc. were. He was good looking and rich and funny in his own way, but he was... a nerd. And Piper, who knew him best, had insisted that they plant a date for him as well.

Paige was a friend and she and Ollie had no chemistry, but Paige could talk to anyone for an hour. She'd agreed to bid on Ollie—with Whitney's money.

That left Cam. No one was planted to bid on Cam.

And that made Whitney's stomach tighten.

Every woman in town knew who he was. He was the bad boy who'd gone on to become rich and successful. He'd donated tons of money—into the millions of dollars—to the town in the form of a new sports complex, scholarships, a wing on the school, and new equipment for the medical clinic. And he'd helped save Hot Cakes and the three hundred and forty-seven jobs there... and the families who depended on those jobs. Truly, he'd helped save the *town*.

He was also gorgeous. Muscular, tattooed, short beard, piercing blue eyes, with a general brooding, rebellious air, and a naughty grin that would stop you in your tracks.

There were plenty of young, single women in Appleby who knew exactly what they were bidding on and would likely happily dip into their savings for a chance at dessert with Cam.

Whitney hated everything about this event suddenly. And, if she were honest, the alpacas were actually a very small part.

“This whole thing is *great*,” Piper insisted again. “We're getting the town involved and interested. Everyone is coming down to bounce in the bounce house, eat tacos, pet alpacas, and then watch three hot guys make dessert. The auction will raise money. There is nothing *bad* about this plan.”

Except Cam going on a date. That Whitney basically set him up on.

This was all so stupid.

He'd *certainly* dated other women. Camden McCaffery had *not* been sitting at home alone every night since Whitney had ended their relationship.

Hell, *she'd* been on dates too. That's what people did after they broke up. They were sad for a while, but then they moved on.

That would have *maybe* consoled her if he hadn't told her last night that he wanted another chance with her.

And now she was going to get to watch a townful of women *bid* on him right in front of her on a stage she'd literally helped construct for an event she'd come up with.

This was *not* great.

"Yeah, it's all great," Paige said to Piper. "But I just can't bid on Ollie. You'll have to get someone else."

"Why not?" Piper asked. She was frowning at Paige. "You promised."

"Yeah, well, that was before Elliot brought Christopher with him."

Piper's frown deepened. "What?"

Paige leaned to the side. "Do you see Elliot?"

Piper peered over her shoulder and Whitney turned as well. The programmer was standing near the far end of the stage talking to a tall guy with dark hair and glasses. He looked like all of the other guys milling around in t-shirts and jeans and tennis shoes or work boots. He held a glass of lemonade and seemed to be just hanging out, enjoying the day. Whitney knew everyone in Appleby. That guy was not from here.

"Yeah," Piper said. "That's Chris. He's another of our designers. He works with Dax." She focused on Paige again. "Wait, you know Chris?"

Paige sighed. "Yeah."

"What's going on?" Whitney asked. "How do you know one of Fluke's designers?"

"Well, I didn't *know* that I knew one of Fluke's designers. But I flirted with *that* guy at Granny's the other night," she said, referring to the bar in town that specialized in, of course, hard ciders.

"Okay. So?" Piper asked.

“So we made out. Heavily.” She tipped her head. “Then I told him I was a real estate agent in Kansas City and gave him a fake number. And that my name was Kara.”

“But... why didn't you want him to know who you were?” Piper asked. “Chris is a great guy.”

“Because I wanted to have a couple of drinks and make out with him and that's *all* I wanted to have with him,” Paige said. “Which means, now that he's *here*, I need to avoid him until he leaves. So obviously, I can't call attention to myself by bidding on Ollie.”

“But—” Piper started to protest.

“Sorry. Thanks for understanding,” Paige said. Then she smiled and turned and slipped through the crowd.

Headed in the opposite direction of where Chris was standing.

Piper turned to Whitney. “Things just got less great.”

Chapter Four



Whitney signed. “You think?”

“Now what?” Piper asked.

“*You’ll* have to bid on Ollie,” Whitney said.

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t. I... work for him.”

Whitney laughed. “So?”

“I just can’t.”

Whitney didn’t understand that, but she honestly didn’t have the time or energy to devote to *another* complication.

She glanced at Jane and Zoe but they were out. They were both spoken for.

Whitney sighed. “Then I guess we’ll just let the ladies of Appleby bid without knowing who the winner will be.”

“I... don’t know.” Piper didn’t seem thrilled with that either.

“I don’t think you have to worry,” Jane said, nodding to the crowd.

The baking show was going to start in about five minutes. The crowd was gathering closer to the stage and, yes, there were a lot more young women than men. Or older women. Or kids. The crowd was predominantly women about Cam and Max and Ollie’s age. Most of the women in Appleby knew

that Max was gay, so it was safe to assume that Ollie and Cam were the draw here.

Whitney pressed her hand against her stomach.

Could she disappear during the baking show and auction? Dax was going to MC the whole thing. Piper was here and on top of things. Aiden and Grant were both here somewhere. Surely Whitney wouldn't have to *watch* Cam strut out on stage in the blue jeans and tight black t-shirt Piper had decided he should wear to show off his tattoos and muscles. She wouldn't have to watch him bake. Something he was actually quite good at. He was a McCaffery after all. He'd grown up in Buttered Up bakery. He'd been baking since he was old enough to hold a mixer. She was *well* aware that women found that sexy. And *surely* she didn't have to watch him get bid on by the beautiful women who would be vying for a date with him.

She probably needed to go check on... the alpacas. Or something.

"*That* is why we can't just leave Ollie up there to be auctioned off," Piper said.

"Because a ton of women in Appleby have noticed that he's good looking and know he's a rich genius?" Jane asked. "Come on. Why can't Ollie have some fun?"

Fun. Yeah. They might have fun on these dates.

Whitney glanced toward the side of the stage where Cam and Ollie and Max were waiting to take their places at the mini-kitchen stations they'd built into the stage for the contest.

He looked *good*. That black t-shirt did very nice things for his shoulders, chest, and huge biceps. But it was the smile he was wearing that really made her heart flutter. Dammit.

Being over him was a lot easier when he wasn't *here*.

When he was here in Appleby, in the same office, working on the same projects, and showing up to this event as one of the baking bachelors looking gorgeous, it was really hard to ignore that she'd been madly in love with him when he'd left Appleby. And that she'd never had a reason to get over that.

Then she'd found out that as Grant's attorney, Cam was supposed to draw up divorce papers for Grant and Josie after they'd gotten married temporarily so Josie would have health insurance coverage, but he hadn't done it. He'd faked the paperwork, somehow knowing that Grant and Josie should stay married.

That was damned romantic. Hopeful. Sweet even.

Did Cam still believe in love? Had she *not* totally ruined that for him forever? She'd like to think so.

But she did not want to watch him find someone to date and possibly fall in love with right in front of her on stage in the center of Appleby.

She also didn't want to date him herself.

Well... she didn't think she *should* date him herself.

She did want to. Or maybe she just wanted to have sex with him again.

"Ollie isn't really casual-dating, bachelor auction material," Piper said, pulling Whitney back to the conversation at hand.

"Oh?" Zoe asked. "Why's that?"

Piper chewed her bottom lip.

"From what I understand from the way the guys talk, Ollie gets plenty of attention at all the conferences he goes to," Jane said. Ollie went to those conference with Dax. Jane had probably heard a ton of stories.

"Those are gaming conferences," Piper said.

"So?" Jane asked.

"So those women are into *Warriors of Easton*."

"So?"

"So he can talk *Warriors* all day," Piper admitted. "And—" She drew in a deep breath. "I'm not sure how much they all *talk*. I think those women know who Ollie is and they're fans

and they flirt a bit and then... they don't go out to dinner or shows or have *conversations*, if you know what I mean."

Whitney did know what she meant. Ollie had casual flings and one-night stands with women who thought he was amazing because of the video game. But Piper looked annoyed, and a little sick, talking about it.

She knew exactly how Piper was feeling. She didn't want to watch Cam be bid on either, but there was nothing she could do about that.

"Oh, there's Dax," Jane said. "I'm going to go give him a pep talk before he gets up there to MC." She grinned and headed in her boyfriend's direction.

Whitney shook her head. Dax Marshall needed a pep talk about getting up on stage and being fun and charming like Whitney needed... another alpaca.

"I'm going to go find Aiden too," Zoe said. "And then I need to head back to the bakery."

"You're not going to stay for the show and auction?" Whitney asked.

Zoe shook her head. "No offense but, I don't really care what new product you guys roll out. Aiden loves what you're doing, and if he's happy, I'm happy."

Whitney felt a little warmth spread in her chest at hearing that Aiden was happy with what she was doing. If he was happy enough about it to talk about it at home, that was something.

"And," Zoe said. "If I'm honest—which is probably pretty important in this new friendship we're forging after years of hating each other because our grandmas told us to—there's a tiny bit of me that's hoping it flops." She grinned. "I do know that you're not really my competition, but it's been so ingrained that I can't help it sometimes. I'm working on it."

Whitney had to laugh. Their grandmothers had truly taken grudge-holding to a new level. They'd been best friends and had started out at Buttered Up, Zoe's bakery, together. But when Didi had wanted to try new things and Letty had shut her

down, Didi had gone off on her own. As things picked up, Didi had gone back to Letty and offered her another chance to do it together. “They’re selling like hot cakes, Letty!” Didi had told her. Letty had still said no. So Didi had named her new company Hot Cakes and had painted those words in huge block letters on the side of the building.

“Well, sorry.” Whitney couldn’t help but tease Zoe. “With Aiden working on this, I really doubt it’s going to flop.”

Zoe gave her a smile that was full of love. “Yeah, you have a point.” She sighed, pretending to be put out. “I guess I’ll just have to get used to us *both* being successful.”

Whitney smiled and nodded. “Guess so.” Lord, she hoped so.

Zoe moved off to find her fiancé too and Whitney looked at Piper.

Okay, she couldn’t keep Cam from being bid on, but she could help Piper out.

“I think I can fix this,” she said.

Piper gave her an interested look. “*You’re* going to bid on Ollie?”

Whitney actually laughed at that. “That’s a terrible idea. Ollie and I alone for an hour? We’ll end up with alpacas walking on tight ropes through circles of fire. Or something.”

She absolutely loved brainstorming with Ollie. He never said no, he never shut things down, he never didn’t at least consider everything she said. The creativity just flowed out of her and she couldn’t believe how *good* that felt. She’d spent ten years having ideas and then having those ideas ignored or even flat-out mocked. These guys never did that. Even when Aiden or Grant put a little common sense and practicality to the plans, they never ever made her feel silly or irrelevant.

Piper nodded. “True. We should probably keep the two of you apart unless you have a chaperone.”

Whitney smiled at that. “I have a better idea about who should spend an hour with Ollie. Come on.”

She started across the grass toward a group of boys. One of them was Henry McCaffery, Zoe and Cam's younger brother. He was the biggest *Warriors of Easton* fan in the world. Aiden was practically like a brother to him as well so Henry absolutely had an inside track to news and behind-the-scenes about the game. He was a bit of a local celebrity himself, being so close to two of the guys behind the game. But Aiden was the CEO and Cam was the company attorney. Neither of them had created the game. They weren't designers. The game—the story, the characters, the graphics—those all came from Dax and Oliver.

Who better to spend an hour with Oliver, talking about the thing he knew best in the world, than three eleven-year-old boys who thought he was basically a god?

“Hey, why aren't you wearing the red dress?” Piper asked, apparently just noticing.

Whitney sighed. She was in one of her pencil skirts. A black one, which was *not* helping with the heat out here, and a pale green sleeveless blouse. And, yes, one-inch black heels.

She knew it was boring and made her look uptight. Well, *now* she did. She'd thought—hoped—that her work clothes made her look put together and professional. But last night with Cam, changing from the red dress back into her gray pencil skirt, had been like magic. She'd gone from feeling exposed and mixed up to feeling cool and like she could face him. Sure, inside, everything had still been a riot of emotions. But she was used to that.

Her skirts and blouses were like armor. She *looked* like a put-together corporate executive, so she felt like one facing her grandfather, father, and brother. When she was wearing a sexy red dress, she looked like a woman who was ready for a hot date and hoped that dress would end up on her date's bedroom floor. And that's how she'd felt facing Cam while wearing it.

His reaction to the dress hadn't helped.

But his reaction to her skirt and blouse had. He'd clearly thought she seemed uptight in that outfit. Which was fine.

Uptight was better than vulnerable.

“I, um, thought this was better for today,” she told Piper.

Piper waved a hand at her face. “A short sundress or shorts and a tank would be better for today,” she said. Piper herself was dressed in a bright yellow dress with a halter top that cinched at the waist with a neon blue belt and flared from her hips, ending just above her knees. Her long hair was piled on top of her head and wrapped with a yellow scarf with blue polka dots, and she wore bright blue sunglasses. She managed to look like a fashion icon while still being cool. Whitney was very impressed. While she sweat through her polyester and silk.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Whitney said. She wore sundresses and shorts and capris around home.

“So where is the red dress?” Piper asked.

Cam had it. He’d taken it because she, supposedly, didn’t need it until their date. The date they were not going on. But she definitely felt a shiver at the memory of how he’d looked at her in that dress.

“I was wondering if I could keep it for a bit?” Whitney asked. “I really like it. I’d love to find a reason to wear it.”

“Of course,” Piper said. “Red is a great color for you.”

“Hey,” Whitney said, stopping and turning to face her new friend. “Where were you last night anyway? You left me in my office trying on that dress alone.”

“I had to run down and get something from the break room,” Piper said. “But I passed Cam on his way up. I figured he could tell you how you looked in it.” She had a sly look in her eye now.

“Oh.”

“And did he?” Piper asked.

“Did he what?”

“Tell you how you looked in it?”

Whitney studied Piper. How much did the other woman know and what was she fishing for?

“I didn’t even see Cam last night,” Whitney said, just to gauge Piper’s reaction.

The other woman laughed. “Liar. I saw him when he came back out. A *long* time later. Carrying my red dress. That he informed me *he* was keeping for a while.”

Whitney’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. “No he didn’t.”

Piper was grinning. “He totally did. So... I’m cool with that. As long as I get details *after* you wear that dress.”

“I’m...” Whitney shook her head. “I’m not wearing it for him.”

“Yeah, that is *not* what his expression or tone of voice said,” Piper told her, still grinning.

“Well, he can think whatever he wants, but...” She took a deep breath. “It’s not a good idea.”

“Be that as it may,” Piper said. “It’s a *Cam* idea.”

“What’s that mean?” Whitney felt trepidation slip down her spine.

“It means it will happen. One way or another,” Piper said, lifting a shoulder.

“He always gets his way?”

“Pretty much. By the time Cam’s involved with an idea, he’s thought it all through, he’s looked at all the angles, he’s done the research. He knows all the possible outcomes and has a plan B, C, and D. And once he’s in on something, he’s all in. He’ll give it his all. He just...” Piper seemed to be thinking for a moment. “He doesn’t take on fights he isn’t sure he can win,” she finally finished.

Yeah, that shiver of trepidation was a full-on wave now.

Combined with a stupid mix of anticipation. How hard would he try to convince her that giving them another try was

a great idea? How hard would he have to try before she gave in?

Hard. No question.

But she wasn't stupid enough to think that she could resist him forever. He'd have to pull out the big guns but... that could be fun.

She swallowed hard.

Piper read her expression accurately. "Don't be scared," she said with a grin. "You know him, right? Nothing to worry about."

"I do know him," Whitney said. "Which makes me *more* worried. He might..."

Could she admit this to Piper? She didn't know the other woman *that* well. But who could she admit this to? She didn't really have girlfriends. She worked a lot and... she sighed. Her family members weren't great at cultivating relationships that weren't work related and she'd inherited that, she supposed. She didn't relax and just sit around and talk about nothing. She felt like things should have a purpose and she was drawn to people who felt the same way. People who worked fourteen hour days, seven days a week.

Plus, she'd never really had nonwork friendships modeled for her. She'd seen her mother host teas with other executives' wives. She'd seen her dad golf with men he had professional relationships with. She'd seen her parents and grandparents and their "friends" at dinner parties and holiday parties at their homes. But the social events always also functioned as business events.

She had never seen her father or grandfather drink more than a single glass of scotch. That made you lose control and Lancasters *never* lost control.

She'd never seen her mother in ponytail and sweatpants or her grandmother reclining on the couch watching a movie. That would indicate relaxation, and Lancasters also never relaxed. Not fully. Until recently. Didi had clearly relaxed since the rest of the family had moved to Dallas.

“You’re even *more* worried because Cam might what?” Piper prompted.

“He might want a little revenge.”

“Revenge?” Piper asked.

“I broke his heart. He might... I don’t know... want to mess with me a little. Make me fall for him and then be the one to walk away?” Whitney suggested.

Piper didn’t respond right away. She was clearly considering all of that. Finally, she nodded. “I see what you mean.”

Whitney felt her heart fall. She didn’t want it to be true. She could admit that to herself, anyway. She wanted him to really want her.

What she would do with that was another question, but she wanted to have that problem.

“But I know Cam too,” Piper said. “And I guess, maybe I’ve known him better over these past few years, right?”

Whitney nodded. That had to be true. Piper saw him every day. And she saw him with the guys. The five guys—Aiden, Dax, Grant, Ollie, and Cam—were so natural together. It was clear that they could fully be themselves when they were a group and they appreciated and loved each other and *wanted* the others to be who they were. It was so fun to watch them.

And it made her want the same thing. She wanted a group that she could belong to like that. But you couldn’t make things like that happen. They just did. Fate. Kismet. Karma. Magic. Whatever it was, it wasn’t something you could *make* happen.

“So I can tell you, for sure, that when he comes back to Chicago after being here visiting, and running into you, he’s a mess,” Piper said.

Whitney felt a little bad about it, but she perked up at that. Her heart thumped a little harder. “Really?”

“He gets super drunk the night after he sees you and then he’s a hungover mess the next day at the office,” Piper said

with a nod. “I’ve gotten really good with the hangover cures.”

Whitney hadn’t known that. She knew *she* was always shook up after seeing him, but he’d always acted cool when they’d run into each other. He even seemed angry at times. Like seeing her was a huge, annoying inconvenience.

“So,” Piper said. “I don’t think that he’s wanting revenge. I think he’s still got feelings and now that he’s here, he’s probably thinking that he wants to see where things stand.”

That had been, essentially, what he’d said. But wow, hearing someone else say it made it feel really real.

“The question now is, what do *you* want?” Piper asked.

To *not* mess up this chance to make Hot Cakes great and to be a part of that. To earn the respect and trust of the men who had come in and saved the company, and her family’s reputation. To have a job because she was good at it and not just because her grandmother told her grandfather and father that they had to make a place for her in the company.

And Cam.

But she couldn’t have it all.

Thankfully, before she had to answer, Dax took the stage. He had been one of the partners in Hot Cakes, but then he’d met Jane. She had refused to date one of her bosses. She didn’t like how that looked. Whitney should talk to Jane. Jane would surely see her side with this whole Cam thing.

But Dax being, well, Dax and the master of the grand gesture, had simply sold his shares so Jane would say yes to a date. She had said yes. And they were now madly in love and planning to get married next summer.

Would Cam be willing to give Hot Cakes up to be with her? Maybe. Cam was known for bucking convention. But she didn’t want that either.

She was a businesswoman, whether her family saw it or not, and she understood the importance of having talent. Cam was not only a great attorney, but he cared about Hot Cakes more than any other attorney they’d ever be able to hire. He

would protect the company from any threat because he was protecting Aiden, Grant, and Ollie too.

“Welcome everyone!” Dax said into the microphone with one of his incredibly charming grins. “We are so excited to have the town of Appleby, Hot Cakes’ home, as a part of this process,” Dax said.

Dax might not have a financial interest in Hot Cakes, but he had an emotional interest in it. Because of Jane and because of the four men who were like brothers to him. It made sense that he would use the term *we*. He’d weighed in with advice and ideas throughout the rebuilding of Hot Cakes.

“Come on,” Whitney said to Piper. “Let’s go convince Henry and his friends to bid on Ollie before things get really going.”

They made their way toward Henry and his group.

“Hey, Henry,” Whitney greeted.

“Hi.”

Henry knew her. He had been born their senior year of high school. She hadn’t spent time with Cam’s family. Their romance had been a huge secret from everyone but Aiden. The McCafferys wouldn’t have been any happier about their relationship than the Lancasters had been when they found out. But Appleby was a small town and Henry at least knew who Whitney was.

“I have a treat for you,” she said.

Henry looked interested and his friends turned to pay attention as well.

“How would you all like to spend an hour tonight with Ollie Caprinelli?”

Henry’s jaw dropped open.

They *of course* knew who Ollie was. In their world, he was a god. And someone they watched on YouTube regularly. He and Dax were celebrities in Henry’s corner of the world.

“Really?” one of his friends, Hunter, asked. “We could do that?”

The truth was, Henry could get an hour with Ollie any time. His big brother and the man who was practically a brother were Ollie’s best friends. She was shocked Ollie hadn’t been invited over for dinner at the McCafferys’. Aiden had already been a regular guest, dating back to even before his mom had died and Maggie McCaffery had become his surrogate mother. Zoe’s two best friends were regulars around that table as well.

But Whitney wondered if maybe the McCafferys had told Henry that he couldn’t have his own friends over when the *Warriors of Easton* guys were there. That could have become chaotic.

This was a chance for Henry to be a big shot with his friends.

“Yep.” Whitney pointed at the stage. “He’s going to make one of the desserts and then people are going to bid on eating that dessert with him. You get a whole hour.”

“But it’s like a date, right?” Jack, another of Henry’s friends asked.

“Nope,” Whitney said. “It’s just an hour of time. With dessert. Anyone can bid and the highest bid is the winner.”

“But a bid takes money,” Henry said.

“Right.” Whitney had to swallow hard as she met Henry’s gaze.

He had Cam’s eyes.

Or they both had their mother or father’s eyes.

But she definitely saw Cam in Henry’s face and she was struck by a twinge of sadness that she hadn’t gotten to know Henry. She’d love to see Cam as a big brother. She’d never really seen him with any of his family except from a distance. When they’d been at school events or social events around town, she’d had to stay away and pretend they were nothing more than classmates. But it had been clear that the

McCafferys were close and that Cam loved his family deeply. He'd been loyal to his family's legacy with Buttered Up and had stubbornly believed every bit of the story about how Didi had stolen the first Hot Cakes recipe from Letty.

They'd argued about it only once. Then they'd agreed to not talk about it.

But the feud between their families had still kept them from being a couple in public. From spending Christmas together. From getting to know the people that were important in each other's lives.

That's why it had been such a big deal when he'd told her he was willing to stay home, skip college, and come to work for Hot Cakes so he could stay in Appleby with her.

And it had been one of the reasons she had pushed him away.

"We don't have enough money," Henry told her.

"I've got ten dollars," Hunter said.

"I can ask my mom," Jack added.

Whitney shook off the thoughts of young Cam and all the things they'd missed out on back then. And since.

She grinned. "That's the even better news. *I've* got the money."

Henry, Hunter, and Jack's eyes all grew round.

"You would *give* us money to use?" Henry asked.

"Yep." Whitney gestured to Piper. "This is Piper. She's the only one that will take care of the money if you win."

"So what do we do?" Hunter asked.

"You get up there toward the front, and when it's Ollie's turn, you raise your hand," Whitney said. "You keep raising your hand until they say you won."

Henry looked downright amazed. "Wow. That sounds easy."

"Super easy," Whitney agreed.

“I’ll even go up there with you,” Piper said. “To help you with what you should do.”

Whitney smiled at that. Piper was very used to herding and taking care of a group of guys. Honestly, these boys being eleven wouldn’t faze her a bit—the Hot Cakes guys were sometimes very much eleven-year-olds in their behaviors.

“I’m going to go... check on the llamas,” Whitney said.

She for sure couldn’t be right up front for this. Watching Cam baking would be hard enough, but no way was she going to watch him get auctioned off.

Piper gave her a knowing look.

“They’re actually alpacas,” Henry told her.

With a surprised laugh, Whitney nodded, “Right. Alpacas.”

“Let’s go, guys. You want to be right down front,” Piper said, nudging them in the direction of the stage.

Whitney watched them weave through the crowd and took a second to appreciate that there *was* a crowd.

Then her eyes wandered to where Cam was standing on stage. He was behind the middle cooking station. He was wearing a bright yellow apron over his fitted black t-shirt now—a not-really-that-subtle nod to his family’s bakery which was all yellow and white from their décor to their take-out boxes to, yes, their aprons—but his tattoos and muscles and the black stud earring he wore in his left ear and his this-is-gonna-be-fun grin were all still on full display.

His eyes met hers, and even from the distance she felt the jolt of awareness.

“When we decided to introduce a new product, for the first time in the company’s history, we knew it had to be something special,” Dax was saying, having just explained how the baking competition and auction were going to work. “We wanted to make a big deal out of it, because it *is* a big deal. The new product represents the new directions and plans that we have for Hot Cakes. But it has to fit in with the Hot Cakes

history and story. And who knows that better than the people of this town who have been a part of it?”

Whitney felt her throat tighten unexpectedly. She hadn't known what Dax was going to say but that was so... nice.

It was no small thing that *her* family had owned Hot Cakes for the past three generations. And that it was *her* father who hadn't cared about the business and as soon as her grandfather passed away had been ready to let it fold.

Her family had almost caused three hundred and forty-seven people to have to find new jobs and, in most cases, uproot their families and move. Appleby was a very small town. There were only so many jobs. Those people would have all had to seek employment elsewhere. In some cases it would have meant taking their entire family away from Appleby. Many of those people had grown up here, had raised their families here. This was their home. Leaving because the factory closed would have been huge.

Of course, it would have affected the town in general too. All of those people leaving would have meant many would have taken spouses with them. That would have caused Appleby to lose teachers and nurses and business owners, daycare providers, community volunteers. The entire community would have felt it.

“And just so you all know,” Dax continued from the stage. “The guys up here have a bet as to who will go for the highest amount.”

The crowd laughed and Whitney had to smile. That sounded just like them. Max, who wasn't an owner, but a Hot Cakes employee, was just as cocky and fun-loving as the other guys. According to Aiden, he was thrilled to be included and was ready to ham it up for the crowd.

“And whatever that highest bid is, Hot Cakes is going to match it,” Dax said. “That means our local food bank is going to get an even bigger check. So be very generous. These guys will earn it.”

She really liked them all. Whitney took a deep breath. She really did. She liked the guys who'd taken over for so many reasons, and she particularly liked them all together. She loved sitting in the meetings and just watching them interact.

She really liked Cam.

That was why she would love to be his friend. Be someone he joked with and teased like he did Piper. Someone he could laugh with and brainstorm with and even argue with like he did the rest of the guys. They all butted heads at times but it never affected their relationship and it was always with the ultimate goal in mind. They all were also pretty good at admitting when someone else had a better idea. They encouraged each other even as they sometimes disagreed.

She wanted that. She wanted to work with a group of friends that she respected and knew respected her. She wanted to be proud of their accomplishments individually as much as she was with her own. She wanted to share a common purpose with people who were as passionate as she was, yet always wanted to do the right thing and really *cared*.

Whitney had pleaded with her father to let her take over operations if he was no longer interested, but he'd blown off her suggestion—as he had practically every other suggestion she'd ever made in relation to the business—and declared that he was tired of being tied down in Iowa and was heading to Dallas.

But now, thanks to these guys, she had the chance to be important.

She was grateful to Aiden, and Dax, and Grant, and Ollie, and Cam. Maybe especially Cam. He could have probably shut the whole thing down. He could have said fuck no to saving Hot Cakes and the Lancasters' reputation. But he hadn't. She was undeniably grateful for that.

Now that the Lancasters were no longer in control of Hot Cakes, she wanted Appleby to feel secure and happy about having Hot Cakes here and to know that it was going to be here for a very long time. She wanted to help the guys make

this business venture wildly successful. They'd taken a chance on all of it and she was going to make them glad they had.

That meant she and Cam had to keep from breaking each other's hearts. Period. And the only way to do that was to stay away from each other. Personally anyway.

That meant no sexy red dresses, no private time in her office, *no* dating.

They were going to be business associates and maybe, eventually, hopefully, friends.

So being an adult woman fully in control of her emotions, she turned on her heel and headed for the alpaca pen.

Chapter Five



Well, there was no way he was going to be able to be just coworkers or even friends with Whitney.

At least not until he tried to be more.

Cam was grateful that he could bake and flirt on autopilot—one of the perks to growing up in a bakery and having lots of practice. At both.

He was somehow pulling off the chocolate coconut bars while entertaining the audience by giving Ollie and Max shit about their own baking, while thinking about Whitney.

And how hot she looked in that stupid, ugly pencil skirt she was wearing today.

It was ninety-two degrees on a bright, sunny summer day in the town square. The event was casual and fun and *outside*. What was she wearing that stupid skirt and blouse and *heels* for? She should be in a sundress and sandals. Showing lots of creamy skin. And she should have her hair up in a ponytail. At least until he pulled it down to run his hands through it as he kissed her.

She should look like a small-town girl at a town event. Not a corporate shark trying to sell stuff to people.

Cam worked on not scowling as he melted the chocolate over a low flame on the built-in stove top in his mini kitchen. He didn't care about the auction except he'd be damned if he'd lose the top bid designation to Ollie or Max.

They both had date plants in the audience anyway. And surely that came with a budget.

Cam was on his own in upping his bid amount.

But he wasn't worried.

He was from here and knew all twelve of the ladies in the front row. He also had a reputation. And the best recipe.

He wasn't worried about fetching a big price.

He did wonder how Whitney felt about that though.

She'd gone off toward the petting zoo several minutes ago. Which was annoying. How was he going to impress her with his baking and flirting if she wasn't even here?

Not that he should have to impress her with either thing. He'd baked for her before. And he'd flirted her right out of her panties on numerous occasions. Including last night in her office. Okay, he hadn't quite gotten her panties off, but he'd proven she wasn't immune. That's all he'd really needed to know.

She'd never been immune to him. Even in high school, when their families were stubbornly feuding with one another and both of their grandmothers would have lost their minds if they'd known he and Whit were dating, it had only taken a dozen homemade chocolate chip cookies and a whispered, "sneak down to the park with me and I'll give you something even sweeter" to get her to say yes to him.

And now she was off looking at alpacas instead of watching this baking-auction thing? That had been *her* idea?

He realized that he'd been whipping the melting chocolate way too hard, and he made himself take a breath and slow down.

He glanced up at the girls in the front row. They were definitely still watching him. At least the whisking had made his arm muscles bulge. He almost laughed. He wasn't really the flex-for-it type of guy. Except when he was giving his friends shit about his muscles and tats giving him an edge with the ladies. But hey, you had to use what you had when you

were in competition. Mostly it was his intellect and stubbornness that he flexed in his job, but Piper had insisted on the t-shirt to show off his arms, so he was going to assume that was his greatest asset today. And his cookies. The literal ones.

“So once everything has heated up and is nice and firm,” Max was saying to Cam’s left. “That’s when you know it’s time to pour on the sticky stuff.”

Cam almost snorted. But they were all wearing mics so that everyone could hear their “baking” instructions. He had to admit, Max was good at the innuendo. It was partly the tone of voice he was using. And the way he was looking at Elliot, his date plant—and one of Fluke, Inc.’s best programmers—right down front.

But Max was a big, burly guy who also had muscles and tats and a beard, along with a very deep voice, and with the way he said some of the things he said, like “sticky stuff,” even the girls in the crowd who knew he was gay were watching him with interest.

“You have to be sure that everything is soft and warm and ready,” Cam agreed. “But you also don’t want to go too fast when it comes to the sticky stuff.” He removed his saucepan of chocolate from the burner and turned to the cookie crust he’d made a few minutes ago. “It’s okay to take it slow,” he said, letting his voice drop as well as he poured the chocolate over the crust. “There’s no need to rush. The firm parts and the soft parts need to come together easy.”

Max, on the other hand, did snort, the sound loud in his mic. The crowd laughed.

“I’m with you,” Max said. “Sometimes slow is the way to go. But if you get things firm enough before you even start the sticky stuff, you don’t have to be overly gentle.” He winked at the crowd. “Of course I mean the crust of this caramel crunch bar. You want that crust firm enough so it doesn’t fall apart when you’re... eating it.” That little pause before “eating it” definitely made those two words sound very dirty.

Cam loved it. Max was a ton of fun.

Cam nodded with a grin. “Though, honestly, things... coming apart...” He used that same pause and tone. “Once I get my hands on them isn’t that unusual.”

“So you... make a mess?” Max asked. “When you’re baking?” He said baking with a tone that clearly conveyed I-do-not-mean-baking.

“Hey, as long as the good stuff gets to my mouth, I’m absolutely okay with a little mess,” Cam returned with a grin.

Max gave him a nod. “I’m with you on that, brother.”

The crowd was completely with them. Grinning and laughing and nudging each other and whispering. Cam and Max were doing everything Whitney had asked—baking while making it fun and a little sexy but still family-appropriate since the innuendo would go over kids’ heads.

He glanced around again, trying to not seem obvious. Where the hell was she? She was missing all the fun. And why did he get the impression that was pretty usual for her?

He spotted her, and her ugly skirt, over by the alpaca pen.

She was choosing alpacas over watching him be funny and charming and kick ass at baking?

Well, she could run, but she couldn’t hide. Their conversation about getting back together—okay, *he’d* been the only one talking about that, but she’d been there—was not over.

“This doesn’t look right.”

Cam and Max glanced over at Ollie. Ollie wasn’t doing as well with the sexy innuendo and bro-banter. He had been far too preoccupied with following the recipe he’d been given. Piper had assured them that Ollie had practiced it prior, but he was clearly *not* a natural in the kitchen.

That made some sense. Ollie was a big-picture guy, much less concerned with details. Like the difference between a quarter tsp and a half tsp.

That was because the rest of them, including Piper, took care of that stuff for him.

So Ollie baking, in front of the whole town, was kind of a bad idea.

But very entertaining.

“What do you mean?” Cam asked, peering over at Ollie’s kitchen center.

Cam was in the middle—as he should be, in his opinion—and could see that the filling for the lemon bars Ollie was supposed to be putting together did, indeed, look odd.

As in, it was brown and not yellow. For one thing.

Ollie scooped up a spoonful of the brown liquid and then let it dribble back into the pan.

Yeah, that wasn’t right. It was the consistency of soup.

“Well, someone has to be the loser,” Max said, lifting one huge shoulder. “Better you than me.”

Ollie looked over at him. He was wearing his black rimmed glasses and a t-shirt that said *I paused my game to be here*. He didn’t always wear glasses, but Piper and Whitney had decided that Ollie should play up the “hot nerd” role—definitely their words, not Cam’s. Ollie was a nerd. In some ways, anyway. But Cam had always gotten the impression that women were drawn to his creativity and adventurous side more than his intellect. Or his glasses. Ollie was brilliant and very interesting, as long as you were talking about things he was interested in. He had the attention span of a fifth grader. But he was a hell of a lot of fun. And he *always* wanted to try new things, do more, go places. That was probably part of that short-attention-span thing, but he was always the one saying “let’s see what happens” and “no reason not to try it.”

He wasn’t quite as over the top as Dax. He also wasn’t the goofball that loved to make people laugh. He didn’t jump out of airplanes, buy a racehorse, or fly to Japan on a whim for the story or the YouTube video like Dax did. Ollie did the things he did for the experience of it.

Fortunately he’d found Dax to be there beside him so he wasn’t wandering in foreign countries alone. Or maybe

unfortunately. Ollie had never had an idea that Dax hadn't said, "hell yes, I'm in" too.

"Can we fix this?" Ollie asked Cam.

He seemed oblivious to the audience watching them.

Cam took pity on his friend though. "I think you just need to start over. You have to stir it the whole time." Clearly the sugar had burned.

Ollie sighed. "The *whole* time?"

"Yep." Cam tried not to grin.

Ollie turned to the audience. "I'll give someone a hundred bucks to come up here and stir this for me."

Cam rolled his eyes. He even had to make *stirring* a big deal?

There was a small shift in the front row toward the stage, but Aiden stepped forward and turned to face the crowd.

"That's against the rules," he said. "The guys each have to do all of their own baking."

Now see? Shouldn't *Whitney* be over here enforcing the rules?

Cam glanced toward the alpacas again. She was now petting one of their noses. Surely she could hear what was going on over here though. At least the stuff he and Max and Ollie were saying into the mics. Like that Ollie was trying to cheat.

"Yep, do it yourself, Caprinelli," Cam said, focusing on toasting his coconut.

Whitney is kind of toasting my coconut right now, he thought to himself.

"If you want anyone bidding on you, you better get going too," Max said, folding the "crunch" part of the caramel crunch bars into his own melted chocolate.

"I'll still bid on you, Ollie!" a female voice called from the crowd.

“I don’t need cookies! Just you!” another woman called.

“Yeah, I can get cookies anywhere!” someone else added.

Cam glanced over at his friend with a grin. Ollie pushed his glasses up his nose and looked out at the crowd.

“Well, in that case...” he started.

“Just make your stupid bars!” another woman called.

This voice Cam knew though. It was Piper.

He found her standing a few people back. She was easy to spot. She was wearing bright yellow today. As always, she stood out. In a very good way. Piper Barry wasn’t like the other girls in Appleby. She was funny and smart and blunt as well as incredibly capable and organized, keeping them all in line with barely an effort. Seemingly, anyway. Yet she had this high-maintenance way of putting herself together and an I-know-who-I-am-and-what-I-want air about her that kept her *just* shy of being completely down to earth.

Right now, her hands were propped on her hips and she was frowning at Ollie.

Cam and the rest of the guys suspected Piper had feelings for Ollie that went beyond employer-employee, but their friend was oblivious. Even while Ollie found himself jealous over Piper at times. For instance, he really didn’t like Drew Ryan, the alpaca farmer. And *everyone* liked Drew. But Drew flirted unabashedly with Piper, in front of Ollie, and that apparently rubbed the genius the wrong way. He just wasn’t genius enough to figure out *why*.

Ollie sighed. “I guess I’m making these bars,” he said dryly. “Though calling them stupid probably doesn’t help from a marketing perspective.”

The crowd laughed.

Piper’s eye roll was big enough to be seen from several feet away.

Ollie took his pan, dumped the contents into the sink, and sighed loudly into his mic. He turned back to the crowd and put on a truly excellent “sweet puppy” expression. “I will

remake the bars, but I'm just going to warn whoever bids on me... you might have to do the baking. I, however, can bring plenty of other... talents... to our time together.”

There was a collective *oooh* from the front row and Cam shook his head with a grin. Ollie could bring the flirty-sexy when he had to. Nice.

Ollie went back to the top of his recipe and Cam and Max continued to banter as they finished theirs. But Cam couldn't stop looking in Whitney's direction.

She had now moved down the fence and was talking to another alpaca. No one was that into alpacas. She was plainly avoiding. He just didn't know if it was the entire spectacle over here—which had all been her idea to start with—or him in particular.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a timer on this event so he couldn't stomp over to the alpaca pen and demand to know what Whitney was thinking.

The no-time-limit thing was good for Ollie though, who was mixing and muttering into his mic. Whenever they were all finished, the auction would commence, and then Didi Lancaster would sample each dessert and determine the winner. Then they'd meet up with their date for the evening and head to their preselected location.

Max was going to take his date—who would certainly be Elliot—to the picnic area on the other side of the park.

Ollie was going to be bid on by Paige Asher and Cam wasn't even sure if they were actually going to go on their “date.” Paige was a set up so that Ollie didn't have to deal with an actual date. The guy got plenty of women, but most of them were hot, fun, very short-term hookups. He didn't really do relationships. Mostly because Ollie sucked at things like remembering birthdays, or even showing up for dinner sometimes. Ollie was a great guy and a good friend, but he was also fortunate that he'd met the four men that were his best friends and partners. None of them ever took it personally that he forgot things like one of them having their appendix removed or one of their birthday parties.

Women, on the other hand, would get tired quickly of having their birthdays forgotten or him not showing up at the hospital. In his defense, he never would have been offended if they'd blown off *his* birthday or hadn't brought him balloons to the hospital either.

Last year, Piper had reminded Ollie it was his birthday, in fact.

So it was better that he hang out with women who wanted to talk about *Warriors of Easton*—yes, their fanbase included women—and were happy with a one-night stand with one of the creators.

Their groupies were kind of like the girls who wanted to hook up with a member of their favorite rock band just to say they'd done it. The *Warriors of Easton* groupies just happened to often dress up as elves and stuff.

Cam had decided to take his date to Buttered Up. Well, outside of Buttered Up. His sister's bakery had little tables set up in front of the huge windows in a sidewalk-café style. The dessert they'd be eating wasn't from Buttered Up, but he'd get coffee from inside and he wanted the people who would be following the date on social media to remember that he was a McCaffery and that Buttered Up was his family's business.

He would have taken his date inside but Zoe had forbidden it. Even after he'd pointed out what great publicity this would be showing how the McCafferys were now heading up all of the major dessert making in Appleby and that the two businesses, that were long-time rivals, were now coming together.

She'd said that if he brought a Hot Cakes product, even a future one, into her store, she'd cut him off from all Buttered Up desserts for six months.

The whole we're-not-rivals-anymore thing was a work in progress.

Cam also suspected that Aiden had brought Hot Cakes products into her bakery on at least a couple of occasions, but also figured they had been used in ways that Cam didn't want

to associate with his sister and best friend, so he hadn't pointed that out.

Aiden could likely get away with a lot of things Cam couldn't.

That was probably as it should be.

When you fell in love with someone, you gave them more slack.

Again, he glanced over at Whitney. Her back was to the entire baking-show-slash-auction setup. If she was avoiding him, why? Because he'd made her uncomfortable last night? Or because she couldn't stop thinking about last night? Or because she wanted everything he'd offered last night but she really did think it was a bad idea and avoiding him was easier than facing it?

He hadn't made her uncomfortable. He knew her. She had been surprised, and turned on—which also might have surprised her—but she hadn't been upset or nervous.

He liked the idea that she had been thinking about it nonstop. He certainly had. He also liked the idea that she wanted it, but thought she shouldn't, and the only way to avoid giving in to everything was to avoid *him*.

She couldn't avoid him indefinitely.

And they *were* going to figure this out.

Their history and their feelings for one another now was a huge-assed elephant in the room any time they were, well, in a room together. If she wasn't on board with outright dating and figuring it out, there were other ways for him to spend time with her, get to know her again, see how she reacted to him. They saw each other every day at work. Obviously, he could find some alone time with her.

And he already liked the reaction from her to that alone time.

Seeing her outside of the office might take some doing. Apparently, her high school friends had moved away and she wasn't very social now. This came from Jane and Piper. Yes,

he'd asked. He had no qualms about getting his friends and coworkers involved in this.

She lived with her grandmother, Didi, now, so he couldn't just show up at her house and say, "Hey, I want to date your granddaughter again. But it's okay because it probably won't work out."

Because, one, Didi hated his family and had likely been a part of Whitney breaking up with him before. And two, because he wasn't so sure it wouldn't work out.

That's what he needed to find out.

He needed to know if they were going to be friends or more. At this point, those two things were the only options. He didn't hate her. The past ten years might have been easier on him if he had. He could have just moved on. But he hadn't. And he thought he might still be in love with her.

The only way to get over *that* was to get to know her.

He was in love with the Whitney from ten years ago. He needed to know *this* Whitney to figure out how he felt. And she needed to know him.

Finally, Ollie was finished and his bars looked a lot more like lemon bars this time. Cam wasn't so sure he'd be willing to take a big bite of one though.

Dax took center stage again and kicked off the auction portion of the event.

"Okay, here we go, everybody! You've had a chance to see what the guys have to offer—"

"*Part* of what we have to offer," Max interjected.

Dax grinned. "Right. Of course." He turned back to the crowd. "You've seen *some* of their talents and you know what happens when they get their hands on some... sweet ingredients—"

Could a crowd collectively giggle? Because this one just had.

“And that they’re not afraid to get a little... sticky,” Dax went on.

Dax could certainly bring the innuendo as well.

There was more laughter and the front row moved closer to the stage, almost as one. Cam braced his hands on the countertop in front of him and just watched his friend with a grin. Dax loved the spotlight and loved helping people have a good time.

“And then you add a little *heat*, and, well, I’m guessing some of you can’t wait to get your mouths full of some of the stuff up here on this stage.”

Cam laughed along with everyone else.

“So without further ado, let’s get this auction started,” Dax said.

The crowd cheered and Cam shot Max a grin. Max was enjoying this.

On his other side, Ollie looked resigned. At best. That made Cam grin too. Paige would be fine. She could talk to anyone. Maybe she’d take him over to meet the cats at the yoga studio. It was also a cat café. It was also an adoption center. Except that the forms and interview process Paige put people through was intense and very few people passed it. So it was, actually, just a way for Paige to collect cats and not have anyone call her a crazy cat lady. To her face anyway.

“Okay, first up, Max!” Dax gestured toward the big guy with the caramel crunch bars.

Max played it up even though he knew Elliot was there and Max very much wanted the date with Elliot.

The bidding actually climbed past three-hundred dollars while Max watched amused and surprised. Elliot was bidding, but so was another guy... and three girls.

“Hey ladies,” Max interrupted at one point. “I’m flattered, but you do know that caramel crunch bars are the most I’ve got to offer you, right?”

One of them called out, “And lots of laughs and a ride on your motorcycle, right?”

Max grinned and nodded. “Can do.”

“I just need a selfie with you to send to my ex,” another called. “He’ll be totally scared of you.”

Max nodded again but added, “You need me to make a phone call or a visit to someone’s apartment with a warning?”

Cam’s eyebrows lifted. Having Max show up to tell some creepy ex-boyfriend to back-off might be something they should talk about having him do regardless of the auction.

“Nah, the photo will be enough,” the cute brunette told him.

“Let’s do that anyway, then,” Max told her.

Cam liked Max. They thought alike.

“Great,” the girl gave him a big smile. “And maybe a ride on your motorcycle?”

Max laughed. “Sure.”

“I’m totally in this for a ride on your... motorcycle,” the other guy said, moving in next to the girls right in front of the stage.

Max lifted a brow. “That right? You from out of town?”

“Yep.”

Max glanced at Elliot. “Huh.”

Elliot held up a wad of cash. “One thousand dollars.”

There was a beat of silence, then the three other bidders turned toward Elliot.

“Seriously?” one of the girls demanded.

“Dammit,” the other said. But she was going to get the selfie and maybe a ride anyway.

“One thousand and one dol—” the guy started.

But Elliot pulled more money out of his pocket. “Fifteen hundred.”

Max's laugh boomed over the mic. "He came all the way from Chicago for this... motorcycle ride," he said to the guy.

The guy frowned at Elliot and then turned to Max. "Well, how about my two hundred bucks for your number. For after "Chicago" here goes home."

Elliot had pushed his way to the front of the stage now too. "Two thousand for the dessert date *and* for you to not give him your number."

Max looked over at Cam, clearly feeling cocky now. "Hot Cakes is matching this bid, right?"

"If it's the highest," Cam told him mildly.

Max laughed. "You think you'll go for more?"

Cam lifted a shoulder. "I think we should find out."

Dax pointed at the guy next to Elliot. "You going higher than two thousand?"

The guy sighed. "No."

Dax looked at the girls. "How about you?"

The brunette shook her head. "We even talked about putting our money together and... nope."

"Selfie right after this though," Max told her.

"Okay." She gave him a grateful smile.

"Okay then, the caramel crunch bars and an hour with Max go to Elliot Even!" Dax pointed toward Piper. "You can settle up with Piper."

The crowd applauded, Elliot grinned widely, and turned toward Piper.

"Now it's Oliver's turn," Dax said. "Lemon bars and an hour with the brilliant creator of *Warriors of Easton* and one of the new owners of our beloved Hot Cakes!"

The group of women down front moved closer to the stage. Seemed it didn't matter that his lemon bars probably tasted like shit. Cam grinned and turned, settling his hip against his kitchen station, to watch.

“Who will start the bidding at fifty dollars?” Dax asked.

Ten hands, nine females and the one guy who had lost Max to Elliot, went up.

Dax looked surprised. And amused. “You’re in again?” he asked the guy.

The guy shrugged. “Love *Warriors of Easton*.”

“Free game tokens for a year if you take these lemon bars and let me go home,” Ollie told him.

The guy opened his mouth, but Dax cut him off. “Not how this works, Oliver.”

Ollie rolled his eyes.

Cam laughed.

“How about free game tokens for a year, a selfie for my social media, and *you* give me Max’s phone number?” the guy asked.

Everyone laughed. Ollie looked at Max. “Well...”

“You have to *bid*,” Dax said. “How much you want to put up?”

“Two hundred,” the guy answered.

Several of the girls in front of him turned on him with scowls.

“Ladies?” Dax asked. “Anyone going higher than two hundred?”

Cam scanned the crowd but didn’t see Paige anywhere. He frowned and glanced over toward Whitney again. She should be over here making sure this went according to plan, shouldn’t she?

Of course, Piper was here. And she didn’t seem concerned that Paige wasn’t one of the bidders. Maybe something had come up and they’d planted someone else. But whoever it was wasn’t bidding against this guy.

“Two hundred and fifty,” one of the women finally said.

Dax nodded. “Anyone got two hundred and sixty?”

“Two hundred and sixty!” one called.

“Two hundred and sixty-five,” the guy said.

“Two hundred and sixty-six,” the first woman called.

“Four thousand dollars!”

Everyone turned toward the voice a couple of rows behind the bidders. Cam’s eyes widened. He knew that voice. That was his little brother.

Henry and his friends pushed to the front of the crowd.

“Four *thousand*?” Dax asked him.

“No, not four thousand.” This came from Piper who moved in behind the boys. She leaned down and said something in Henry’s ear.

“Four *hundred*,” Henry amended.

Dax laughed. “Okay. You sure?”

“Yep!”

Cam frowned. Where the hell had Henry gotten four hundred dollars? He scanned the crowd for Zoe. Maybe she’d had something to do with it. But he didn’t see her.

“Dude, where’d you get that?” Cam finally asked.

Everyone in the crowd—or at least most of them—knew Henry was Cam’s younger brother.

“No, no,” Ollie said. “You can’t talk him out of this now.”

It made sense that Ollie liked the idea of an hour with three eleven-year-olds better than with any of the women. Ollie talked to eleven-year-olds all the time, both at cons and online. That was their target demographic. Even though their fans ranged anywhere from about eight to forty and were both male and female, their core was truly boys from about ten to twenty.

“Well, he can’t use Monopoly money or something,” Cam said.

“Sure he can,” Ollie said. “I’ll trade you your fake money for real.”

“It’s real,” Henry said. Then he looked up at Piper. “Right?”

She nodded. “Right.”

“*You’re* giving him the money?” Cam asked. Yes, he still had his mic on and, yes, everyone could hear this. But it was all for fun. And charity. No one would actually care if Piper was giving money to kids to bid on time with Ollie, right?

“Hey, he’s bidding for his mom? Does *she* get to go on the date too?” one of the women asked. “That’s not fair.”

Okay, maybe someone would care.

“I’m not his mom!” Piper said.

“Much older sister?” the woman asked, then turned to Dax. “Just because he’s a cute kid, doesn’t mean I’m just going to let him have this. Four fifty.”

Cam looked at Ollie. He did *not* look happy.

“She’s not his sister,” Dax said. “Just a friend.”

“Still, if *he’s* bidding then he’s the one that goes on the date. She doesn’t get to go along,” the woman insisted.

“Well, I don’t *want* to go along,” Piper said. “If I want to eat lemon bars with Ollie, I can do that anytime.”

“Oh really?” the woman said. “Well, maybe not after he’s spent an hour with *me*.”

Piper’s mouth dropped open. Then she turned to Dax. “Three thousand dollars.”

Chapter Six



The woman's eyes went round. "Hey!"

Piper looked at her. "What? Anyone can bid."

"I thought you didn't want to go on the date."

"Turns out I want *you* to go on the date even less."

Cam looked over at Ollie. He was watching Piper with an expression that was impossible to read.

Dax was clearly hiding a smile. He looked at the other woman. "You want to go higher than three thousand?"

The woman was clearly appalled by the whole thing. "No. Of course not. I don't have that kind of money!"

Dax shrugged. "Then it's going, going, gone." He pointed at Piper. "Lemon bars with Oliver Caprinelli to the lady in yellow."

Piper looked incredibly smug. She looked down at Henry. "You have a dollar?"

He nodded and held one up. She plucked it from his fingers. "And now *you've* bought the lemon bars with Ollie from me." She looked up at Dax and then glanced at Ollie, then back down to Henry. "Have fun."

Cam covered his mic and leaned toward Ollie. "You paying her back that three thousand for savin' you?"

Ollie shook his head, still watching Piper. "We didn't plan that."

“She’s digging into her savings for you?”

Ollie finally looked over and gave Cam a little smile. “Well, I did offer her three thousand dollars to make me some of her sweet and sour meatballs yesterday.”

Cam laughed. “Did you get the meatballs yet?”

“Guessing I’ll have them tomorrow.”

Cam shook his head, grinning.

“And last but not least, Camden McCaffery,” Dax announced, pulling Cam’s attention back to the center of the stage.

Cam straightened and gave the crowd a big grin, even as he stupidly wished Whitney was over here.

Wouldn’t it be a nice twist if she came walking over and bid a couple thousand on him to take everyone immediately out of the running the way Piper had for Ollie?

Better yet, Whitney could bid a cool five grand and make him the big winner, while she was at it.

“Five thousand dollars!” a voice called out.

But it was *not* Whitney’s.

Everyone, including Dax and, of course, Cam, turned toward the voice.

It was Didi Lancaster. Whitney’s grandmother. The ex-owner of Hot Cakes. The founder. Cam’s grandmother’s ex-best friend and nemesis for the past half century.

She was being helped up the steps that led to the chair they’d designated for her as the final judge. A place of honor, really.

“Didi?” Dax asked, casting a glance in Cam’s direction. “Are you... what did you say?”

She got to the top of the steps and let go of the young man who’d helped her up. She straightened the hat on her head that reminded Cam of the hats the Queen of England wore. It was a carnation pink that was the exact color of the lighter pink in

the Hot Cakes logo and it matched the skirt and jacket she wore over a buttoned-up white blouse.

Cam had a flash of *this is where Whitney gets it* but he shook it off. Kind of. Whitney looked very much like her grandmother and he couldn't help but think he was looking at Whitney at age seventy-two. Put together. Classy. Beautiful. Mildly intimidating.

"I *said*," Didi said, "that I'm bidding five thousand dollars."

The crowd was completely silent.

Dax gave Cam a *what the hell?* look.

Yeah, Cam had no fucking idea.

"You're bidding five thousand dollars for what?" Dax asked.

"To have dessert with Camden, of course," Didi said, giving Dax a look that clearly said she thought he was a cupcake short of a dozen.

"Oookay," Dax said.

Cam looked out over the crowd. But there was no one who had more than five thousand dollars. For one thing. For another, no one was going to tangle with Didi Lancaster.

"Looks like I just brought in the highest bid," Cam said. What the hell was he supposed to say? He wasn't going to decline time with the woman in front of the entire town. And she was feisty, but she wasn't exactly *scary*.

He was a little curious about what she had in mind here, honestly.

He'd spoken to Didi maybe twice in his entire life. But she'd grown up as his grandmother's best friend. She'd helped start the bakery where he'd grown up and where his mom had worked and that his sister now owned.

And she was Whitney's grandmother.

He wasn't going to disrespect her, and having a conversation—and some chocolate coconut bars—with her for

an hour or so could be interesting.

“Looks like you have,” Dax agreed, following Cam’s lead. “So... going... going... gone!” he said. He pointed at Didi. “You’re the winner.”

She smoothed the front of her jacket. “I’m ready to go. I certainly hope you’re going to drive the Roadster.”

The 1960 MGA Roadster was actually Dax’s car but Cam looked at his friend and Dax nodded.

It was a helluva nice car and Cam wouldn’t turn down the chance to drive it. He was surprised Didi knew the car even existed, but hey, she’d just agreed to pay five thousand dollars to eat cookies with him. He’d drive her in whatever she wanted.

“I guess I’m ready too,” Cam said, pulling the apron off over his head. He wasn’t sure how this part was supposed to go.

“Well, hang on there,” Dax said quickly. “We need Didi to pick the winning recipe first.”

Piper was suddenly up on the stage next to Didi.

So she hadn’t gone far. Cam grinned. He should have known she wouldn’t let them too far out of her sight.

Piper handed Didi a pink plastic fork. “Let’s get you a taste of each,” she said.

She led Didi to Ollie’s station first. Ollie slid his pan of lemon bars closer to the two women. With Piper’s hand on Didi’s elbow, Didi took a forkful from one corner. She lifted the bite to her mouth. After a moment, she frowned. Then her nose wrinkled. Then she shook her head. “Too much lemon,” she announced, setting her fork down.

Ollie’s eyes went wide. “But they don’t suck?”

Didi gave him a reproachful look. “You seem like an intelligent young man.”

“Thank you.”

“Isn’t there another word you could use to express what you mean?”

Ollie thought about that for a moment, not looking even the tiniest bit ashamed. “Probably,” he finally told her. “But *suck* communicates clearly so I don’t see a reason to find another word.”

Didi studied him for another moment. “It’s a little crude.”

“So was the taste of my first batch,” Ollie told her.

Ollie wasn’t being impolite. He said what he meant. Often without a filter, but with pure honesty. It was one of Cam’s favorite things about him.

Didi finally nodded. “All right, then. No, they don’t suck. But you can do better.”

“Don’t know that I’m cut out for baking,” Ollie said.

“What are you cut out for?” Didi asked.

Cam glanced at Max and then at Dax. They hadn’t expected Didi to have a conversation with each of them.

“I’m the lead of our creative team,” Ollie told her.

“And what’s that mean?” Didi asked.

That seemed to stump Ollie for a moment.

“It means I come up with the ideas.”

“What kind of ideas?”

“Ideas for our video game,” Ollie said. “I write the stories, create the characters. Then Dax designs them.”

Didi nodded, considering this. “What about Hot Cakes?”

“I helped with ideas for this event,” Ollie said.

“Like what?” Didi wanted to know.

Ollie glanced toward the alpacas. “The petting zoo.”

Didi looked in that direction as well. “Well, what do alpacas have to do with cake?”

Ollie just blinked at her.

“So you don’t *do* anything?” Didi asked him. “You don’t get your hands on the things you do? You don’t *make* anything?”

“I, um... surround myself with people who have talents far beyond mine for those things,” Ollie said.

Didi didn’t roll her eyes. That seemed like it might have been beneath her. But she gave every impression that she was rolling her eyes internally.

“You might be pleasantly surprised by how rewarding it is to be directly responsible for something that makes someone else happy,” Didi told him.

Then she turned and headed for Cam.

She actually left Piper a few steps behind.

Everyone on stage was stunned.

The only person who challenged Ollie, really, was Piper, but she didn’t really *question* him. She pointed out when he was being a pain in the ass or when one of his ideas was just way too crazy to work out, but she didn’t really make him explain himself. None of them told him to do something himself rather than making them do it. They all just accepted that Ollie would say and do some big, crazy things and that their jobs were to mitigate it. They didn’t really ask him why.

Speaking of stunned, Cam noticed Whitney had finally joined the crowd. She was at the back, on the very edge, closest to the alpacas, but clearly her grandmother’s voice had drawn her over.

She looked like she wasn’t sure if she should come intervene with Didi. Or disappear entirely.

He wondered if Whitney had caught the detail about Didi bidding on him. Well, she would find out soon enough.

“Camden,” Didi greeted him as she came to stand directly in front of his cooking station.

“Hello, Mrs. Lancaster,” he said.

A faint smile curled the side of her mouth. “I already know that your bars will be good.”

“Why is that?”

“Your grandmother was the best baker I’ve ever known.”

It was a fact that Letty Lancaster had been the best in the eastern part of Iowa if not the entire state. But hearing her ex-best friend, the woman she’d feuded with for most of her life, say so struck him as particularly complimentary.

“Is baking talent genetic?” he asked with his own smile.

“Fabulous baking is fifty percent about practice,” Didi said. “And I know you’ve been in the kitchen since you were a little boy.”

He nodded. Buttered Up had been a second home to his whole family. He knew every inch of the bakery.

“The other fifty percent is about love,” Didi said. “And I know that you were taught to put love into the things you make.”

That also hit him hard. Directly in the chest. Letty had been proud of her bakery. Stubbornly so, in fact. She’d never changed her menu in all the years she’d owned the place. All of the recipes were original and were as familiar to the people who bought them as the goods that came from their own grandmother’s kitchens. There were families in Appleby that had never had a pie or a cake that *hadn’t* come from Buttered Up.

But a lot of Letty’s emotion about the bakery after she and Didi had parted ways had been about proving that she was better than Didi and didn’t need Didi to be successful. He’d always had the impression that there was as much resentment there as there was love. It had always made him sad for his grandmother, actually, and he’d hated that she’d passed it on to his sister.

Thankfully, Zoe had changed her mind and was looking at it differently now that the guys had taken Hot Cakes over. Aiden had had his work cut out for him though. It had

definitely helped that Zoe was in love with him before the guys had bought the business. Even if she hadn't realized it.

"I was taught to do everything I do with an eye toward being the best," he finally said.

That wasn't saying that it *wasn't* about love. He did love the company and product that he and the guys had created together, but he knew that it was more that he loved having created it with the four men who were like brothers to him. He wasn't sure he was quite *in love* with Hot Cakes or those products. Yet. Maybe it would come.

His gaze found Whitney over Didi's shoulder.

She loved the company.

That made him want to at least like it.

And he should probably examine that more closely later.

"You undoubtedly got that from your grandmother too," Didi said. "She always wanted to be the best."

He nodded. He was aware that a portion of the town that was here was witnessing this conversation. That could be important. Listening to Didi Lancaster, founder of Hot Cakes, say nice things about his family could show that things were good between their families and would make everyone feel more secure about him being one of the new owners.

He and Aiden felt strongly about keeping Hot Cakes open and solid because it did matter to their hometown. It was important the factory stay here.

But, yes, Cam wanted it to be even better than it had been under the Lancasters. Not just a bigger operation but a better place to work and with better products.

"It's too bad she was a stubborn ass," Didi finally said. "We could have made something great together."

Cam huffed out a surprised laugh. It wasn't often you heard women referring to other women as asses, and certainly not older women wearing pearls.

"She was a bit hard-headed," he finally had to agree.

Didi nodded. “The Hot Cakes cakes could have been better with her on my team.”

He lifted a brow. It was probably not a great marketing move to have the original baker and founder of the company saying that their products weren’t the best they could have been. But he couldn’t help but love that she was complimenting his grandmother in front of the town they’d split with their feud.

“You think so?” he asked.

“No question. She was always the better baker of the two of us,” she said. “But Dean had the big business ideas.” She glanced at Ollie as she referred to her late husband, the man who had made Hot Cakes the huge multistate company that it was today. “It’s wonderful to have ideas. You just need to have the goods to back it up. Otherwise it’s just a lot of hot air, and sooner or later, people catch on.”

Cam looked over at Ollie. Didi seemed intent on teaching his friend some lesson. He wondered why, exactly, but if Didi saw something in Ollie that she wanted to nurture then...what the hell?

Ollie hadn’t had a lot of nurturing. He was an only child and his parents were similarly brilliant people who were pretty detached. It had taken years for him to get *truly* comfortable joking around with the guys. But he was still puzzled by things like family dinners at Cam’s mom’s house once a week that also included Zoe’s two best friends and now, their significant others. The idea of big family gatherings and friends-that-turned-into-family seemed foreign to Oliver, even after a decade of being close to the four men who were his business partners.

“I’ve got the goods,” Cam said, pulling Didi’s attention back to him.

She smiled. “You sound like a typical McCaffery.”

Fair enough. He tipped his head in acknowledgment.

“The problem there is that you’re not as open to being taught or changing,” she said.

That was also fair. The McCafferys were well-known for being stubborn as hell. But he wondered if Didi had an underlying meaning or lesson for him as well. It wasn't as if the McCafferys were the only ones in the family feud. The Lancasters had been just as stubborn. Hell, it had been Didi who had taken the recipe for Butter Sticks from Letty and turned them into her own business.

"If you think there's a way to improve this, you let me know," he told her.

She dipped her fork into the edge of his pan of chocolate coconut bars. Her nose was already wrinkled by the time she lifted the fork. "Well, the first way to improve them is to take the coconut out."

He laughed. "They're chocolate coconut bars."

"Yeah. So they already"—she looked at Ollie—"suck."

Ollie grinned. Cam laughed.

"You're not a fan of coconut?" he asked.

"You didn't wonder why none of the Hot Cakes have coconut in them already?" she asked.

He sighed, pretending to be hurt. "So I've lost before you even taste it?"

"Yes," she said simply. "But you still get to have dessert with me," she added. "So that's a win. We're just going to have to go to your sister's bakery for something good to eat."

Cam was again pleasantly surprised by Didi's public compliment of something to do with his family. "I can arrange that," he told her.

Didi handed her fork to Piper. "But I also want to be fair. Here. What do you think?"

Piper tasted the chocolate coconut bar. She nodded. "Delicious actually."

"Do you want to taste the lemon too?" Didi asked her.

Piper glanced at Ollie. "No. Oliver never adds enough sweetness to anything."

Cam coughed to cover his laugh. She was annoyed with Ollie today, clearly. He looked at Ollie. He had his arms crossed and was watching Piper as if he was equally annoyed, but also confused as to what he'd done wrong.

“So I guess that means I win,” Max said from the end of the stage.

Didi looked at him. “Well, it *is* possible that I won't choose any of these.”

Piper frowned. “I don't know. We do need to have a new product to launch.” She glanced toward the crowd, probably looking for Whitney.

Cam looked for her as well. She was still standing at the back, chewing on her right thumbnail. That was the sure sign she was nervous about this. Well, she needed to get her sweet ass down to the front, or better yet, up here on stage, and take control.

He lifted a brow as she caught his eye.

She didn't move.

“I'm not going to choose a subpar product for Hot Cakes,” Didi said, lifting her chin slightly.

The move was so familiar to Cam that he had to shake his head. Whitney's stubborn, don't-mess-with-me expression was an exact replica of her grandmother's.

“The town helped choose these,” Piper said. “We had nearly a hundred entries. I promise these are not subpar.”

“Well, we'll see,” Didi said, moving toward Max.

Piper handed her another fork.

Max held his pan out.

Didi lifted a forkful of caramel crunch bar to her mouth and tasted it. She chewed. She swallowed. She thought for a moment. But there was no nose wrinkling.

“These are delightful,” she finally said.

Max's mouth spread into a huge grin. “Thank you.”

“Very good,” she said, nodding and setting her fork down.
“But—”

Everyone froze. Piper actually groaned.

“You shouldn’t let other people tell you how to express yourself,” she told Max. “I would have expected more from you. Something bolder. Something with more... flavor. Cinnamon and cayenne,” she said. “Or maybe raspberry and dark chocolate.”

Max lifted a brow. “Because I’m gay?”

Didi looked surprised. “You’re gay?”

“I am.”

“Huh.” She seemed to think about that. “No, I meant because you’re a big, bold personality,” she said. She studied him for a moment. “But if you wanted to put rainbow chips in something I suppose that would—”

“Grandma!”

Finally Whitney arrived in front of the stage.

Didi looked down at her. “What?”

“That’s... enough.” Whitney’s cheeks were bright pink.

“I’m being *supportive*,” Didi said. “If Max wants to express his sexuality—”

“He is a *baker*. Not everything has to be about his *sexuality*,” Whitney said. She cast an apologetic look at Max. “I’m sorry.”

Max shrugged one big shoulder. “It’s okay, Whit. This is how people learn.”

Whitney visibly sighed. “Grandma, let’s just focus on the baking.”

Didi put her hands on her hips. “Listen up,” she said. “Talking *is* how people learn. So I’m going to teach you something about baking. Baking because it *matters* to you is when it’s the best. If you’re making caramel crunch bars because they are your favorite, or because they were what your

favorite uncle always brought on road trips, or because they were what your mom tucked into your lunch box, then that's one thing. But if you're doing it because other people told you to, they are going to lack something. If you want to make something with rainbow chips because it makes you happy because rainbows are beautiful representations of gay love and you want to help people see that in their everyday life, then that's wonderful. Or if you want to make a dark chocolate raspberry cake because, dammit, people might need something more than chocolate and vanilla and strawberry cake with vanilla icing!"

Everyone, including Whitney, was completely quiet, staring at Didi.

"Buttered Up bakery does better baked goods," Didi said. "They are made from scratch and are made with care and love. But Hot Cakes are a part of everyday life and little moments that people don't even think about until later. They are just the cake that your dad pulled out when you were out fishing or the cakes that your mom put out on the little plates in your tea set when you had picnics in your backyard. Until one day you've outgrown those fishing trips and picnics, or your dad or mom is gone, and then you'll pull out one of those cakes and suddenly it *means* something. So Hot Cakes have the potential to be important too and *that's* something you better keep in mind as you're going forward adding to the list of cakes we... I mean *you*... offer."

Didi sniffed, lifted her chin, and then started for the steps on the end of the stage opposite of where she'd ascended.

After a stunned moment, Whitney seemed to shake herself and hurried after her to help Didi down the wooden steps.

Didi paused at the top and looked back. "And the caramel crunch bars win," she said. Then she looked at Cam. "I'll meet you beside the Roadster. I'm actually in the mood for pie."

Then she descended the steps regally.

Piper turned wide eyes to Cam. "Um, wow."

“Yeah,” Cam agreed. But he was already covering his pan of bars with the aluminum foil provided.

“So...” Piper said, clearly expecting Cam to fill in some blanks.

But he had no idea how to do that. Didi Lancaster was a force and it seemed that giving up Hot Cakes wasn't something she was blasé about. He had to admit, the idea of spending a little time talking with the woman was intriguing. He'd never had a one-on-one conversation with her and she surely had some interesting stories.

Dax finally turned to the crowd. “Well, that's that. The new Hot Cakes snack cake will be a caramel crunch bar!”

The crowd applauded on cue.

“Thank you all so much for joining us for this important event,” Dax went on. “We hope that you had some fun and that you know how much it means to us to be a part of the Appleby community,” he said. “We hope to be here for many, many years to come.”

More applause.

“Be looking out for the name announcement for the new snack cake and our big kick-off event for that!” Dax said. “You all, of course, will be the first to get a taste!”

Cam lifted a brow. They hadn't talked about next steps. But now it looked like they'd be having a kick-off event. Well, okay, then.

But Cam was going to put his foot down about having alpacas at *that* event.

Chapter Seven



“I promise that I tried to talk her out of it.”

“Why’d you do that?” Cam asked Whitney as he helped Didi into the passenger seat of Dax’s Roadster.

“Because this is crazy,” Whitney said. She was standing by the front bumper of the car, watching them with a very worried expression.

Cam shut the door and turned to his ex-girlfriend. “Crazy because she’s your grandma? Crazy because she was my grandma’s nemesis? Crazy because she’s paying five thousand dollars for a conversation she could have had just by asking me?”

Whitney studied him for a moment, then said, “Yes.”

He chuckled and walked toward her, stopping right in front of her. “Maybe those are all the best reasons for us to have this conversation,” he said.

Whitney frowned. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “I think I need to explain to her that she could have just asked to talk if she wanted to. I’m sick of this feud, Whit. I think everyone is. Zoe and Aiden have started the healing process and I can do my part.”

The wrinkle between her eyebrows got deeper. “Because you think Appleby needs it to be over?”

“Because I need *you* to be over it,” he told her honestly.

She looked surprised. “You do?”

“You’re going to be *a lot* more amenable to the idea of us dating if you know that our families don’t hate each other and that we don’t have to sneak around this time and that the town isn’t whispering about us.”

Her eyes were wide. “I told you I’m not going to date you.”

“You did. And I’m working on convincing you otherwise. One way to do that is to remove as many barriers as possible. Like the fifty-two year feud between our families.”

“That’s not why I said no,” she told him.

He didn’t even think twice about lifting a hand to Whitney’s face. He smoothed the pad of his thumb over the crease above her nose. “Then you have nothing to worry about with me taking your grandma out for dessert.”

Whitney’s breath caught as he touched her, and she stared at him even after he slid his hand down her cheek and then dropped it.

“The business is more important to me than a relationship,” she said. It was clear she was warning him. “If I have to choose, I choose Hot Cakes. Why would you set yourself up to be hurt again by that?”

He gave her a slow smile. “Because you don’t have to choose.”

She swallowed hard. But it was clear from the look in her eyes that she didn’t believe that.

Well, he’d have to deal with that later. Because he had another woman waiting in the car for a date with him at the moment.

“I’ll have her home by curfew,” he said, stepping back and grinning. He pulled the keys from his pocket and started to turn away.

He was startled to feel Whitney’s hand on his arm. “Cam.”

He looked back. “Yeah?”

“She’s...” Whitney pressed her lips together and glanced at her grandmother through the windshield. She smiled affectionately, then looked up at him. “Her memory is not great. And she sometimes loses track of what’s going on. She might get a little lost while you talk.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

She wet her lips. “Really?”

“It’s going to be fine. We’ll talk for a little bit, we’ll have some pie, and I’ll bring her home.”

“Okay.” She still looked unsure. “Call me if you need anything. If anything gets... weird.”

He smiled. “There are things I need from you, Whit, and I’m going to take you up on that offer to call you. But it won’t be about your grandma.”

She looked startled, and with that promise hanging between them, he took the chance to get in the car and start the engine. He was not going to let Whitney believe anything was settled between them, and the more she had to think and wonder about the things he said, the better. He wanted to be on her mind.

Cam looked over at Didi rather than watching Whitney watch them with that slightly dazed, slightly worried look on her face.

“So you need some pie, huh?” he asked.

Didi gave him a big smile. “Thank you for loving my granddaughter.”

Okay, so speaking of startled...

Cam tipped his head. “You think I love her?”

“You’ve always loved her,” Didi said with a nod, looking at Whitney through the windshield. “Even when that made things really hard on you.”

Cam thought about what Whitney had said about Didi getting lost on details. “You knew about us being together?”

They'd done their damndest to keep their relationship from their families. He knew that Zoe had known about them. She'd caught them up in Cam's bedroom once and another time in the basement. But Zoe had kept the secret. So had Aiden. But Cam wasn't sure who had known about them on Whitney's side. He'd always figured no one. She'd had a couple of girlfriends in high school, but he knew they hadn't been people she trusted implicitly. He'd always thought it was really sad she didn't have people she knew had her back no matter what.

He knew for a fact that her dad and brother hadn't known about them because they'd never confronted him. And they would have.

So to think that Didi had known made him curious.

"I knew that she was in love for a long time before I figured out who it was," Didi said.

"How?"

"You gonna take me somewhere there's pie or not?" she asked.

Cam laughed and nodded. Right. They had a whole hour "date" ahead of them. "Sure. Of course. I know just the place." He put the car into drive and headed for Buttered Up.

And, yes, Whitney stood in the parking lot and watched them drive away. He gave her a little wave.

She didn't return it.

Okay, well, he'd just bring her grandma home safe and sound and she'd see everything was fine.

They pulled up in front of Buttered Up a few minutes later. Everything in Appleby was only a few minutes away from everything else. He helped Didi out of the car and into the bakery.

Zoe and Josie were expecting them and apparently there were several other people in town who were curious enough about this date to show up to witness it themselves. The bakery was full. Every one of the little round white tables that

dotted his sister's bakery had people at it, except one. They'd left one open. The one right in the center of the room.

He shook his head but escorted Didi to the table that was clearly for them, smiling and nodding at people as they went. What else was he going to do?

Zoe was behind the counter and she gave him a look that said *well, this is weird*, but it was Josie that came out to wait on them.

"Hi," she greeted. "How are you?"

"In desperate need of pie," Didi told her. "I would like peach, with the cinnamon whipped topping, and a cup of coffee with cream on the side."

Josie looked at her. "Cinnamon whipped topping?"

It was an extra thing that only those "in the know" were aware of. His grandmother had always added cinnamon to her whipped cream topping for peach and apple pies. Those were the only things she put it on and she'd only done it at home. Not in the bakery.

Cam leaned in. "Did you have cinnamon whipped topping with my grandma?"

Didi looked like that was an extremely stupid question. "Well, of course."

"They don't do that here," Cam said. "That was something she only did at home when she made pies."

"Well, *that's* ridiculous," Didi said. "Tell her to do it now. I've been looking forward to having that topping on my pie again ever since Dean died."

Dean, her husband, had passed away about a year ago. Cam blinked at her. "Why haven't you come in before this?"

"I've been very busy with the funeral preparations," Didi said.

Cam nodded. "I suppose so. When was the funeral again?"

He knew when it had been. He'd thought about coming home for it. For Whitney. But his friends had talked him out of

it.

But it had killed him to know that Whitney might be sad and hurting. He'd finally sent flowers. To her directly. With only, *I wish I could meet you at the bridge* on the card. She would know it was from him. *Meet me at the bridge* was the note he'd slip into her locker or leave on the dash of her car.

"Last week," Didi answered. "It was lovely."

She thought Dean's funeral had been just last week? Cam glanced at Josie, who just lifted a brow. She was clearly letting him take the lead here. "Do you think... the kitchen... could make something special?" he asked.

Josie *was* the kitchen here. Along with Zoe, of course, but Josie was the more creative cook of the two.

"I think we can manage it," Josie said with a bemused smile.

"Thanks. I'll have the same," Cam told her.

Josie nodded and moved off.

"Dean wouldn't have wanted you having Letty's whipped topping?" Cam asked Didi. If Didi thought the funeral was just last week, that was something much different from her just getting a date mixed up from a year ago.

"Oh goodness no," Didi said. "Dean didn't like anything having to do with Charlotte."

Very few people called his grandmother Charlotte, but it seemed that Didi was one of them. "Did she call you Dorothy?" he asked, very curious about their relationship. He had been at various times over the years, but Letty hadn't liked talking about Didi so he didn't know much. He liked the idea of getting more history about them from Didi.

"She does," Didi told him, referring to Letty in the present tense. His grandmother had also passed away.

"Dean didn't like you to have anything to do with my grandma then?" Cam asked.

“Oh, no. I couldn’t even make any of her recipes. He knew which ones were hers and he wouldn’t eat anything I’d learned from her.”

Cam felt his eyes go wide. “Wow. Really. How did he know which ones were hers?”

Didi smiled at him. “Because she cooked for him all the time when they were dating.”

Cam stared at her for several seconds. She was a little confused, obviously, thinking Dean had died last week and that Letty was still alive. But *this* was interesting.

“They dated?” he asked. “I didn’t know that.”

In fact, he wondered who did know that. He wasn’t sure his mom and dad even knew that. If they did, it was a well-kept secret. The Lancasters and McCafferys had hated each other Cam’s entire life. It had always been understood that it was because Didi stole Letty’s recipe for the now famous Butter Sticks that had launched Hot Cakes.

But damn, there might be even more scandal behind it all.

“Oh, yes.” Didi leaned back in her chair, folding her hands on her lap. “She turned down his proposal and he never got over it.”

Cam swallowed hard. “Dean Lancaster *proposed* to my grandmother?”

“Of course. She was a catch,” Didi said. “Beautiful, independent, smart, sassy.”

Yep, that was his grandmother.

“Why did she say no?”

“Because Dean was an ass.”

Again Cam was speechless for a moment. “But... *you* married him.”

Didi nodded. “Horrible mistake. Except, of course, I have Whitney because of him.”

Her granddaughter. Not her two sons, not her three grandsons. Didi only named Whitney.

And Cam had to agree that Dean had been an ass. Along with their son, Eric, and their grandsons, Whitney's brothers Wes and Will and her cousin Brent.

Cam leaned in. Didi seemed in the mood to share and he was going to take advantage. Maybe she was always like this, but in case she wasn't, he wanted as much of the story as he could get.

"So tell me what happened," he said.

Didi shrugged. "He and Charlotte dated for a few months. He fell in love, she didn't. He proposed, she said no. He never got over that. Though part of it was his ego and the fact that people didn't say no to him. After Charlotte and I split up and I was on my own, Dean asked me out. He was very handsome and charming and I was feeling very alone. I said yes. He romanced me and I got pregnant." Didi lifted a shoulder again. "And that's that. He took over the business and made me a very rich woman."

Cam was happy that Josie delivered the pie and coffee just then. He had to process all of that. There was nothing about the story that was familiar to him at all. Other than that part where she and Letty split up.

"Let me know what you think of the topping," Josie told Didi, setting her plate down.

"Oh, it will be perfect," Didi said, sitting forward and picking up a fork. She seemed genuinely eager. "Charlotte's concoctions are always perfect."

Again with the present tense reference to his grandmother. Cam and Josie shared another look. He didn't know much about Alzheimer's. Letty had been sharp until her very last day when her heart had given out. Should he correct Didi or let her go on thinking Letty was still around?

That was a good question for Whitney. He could text her.

Or he could wait and talk to her after he dropped Didi off at home.

He grinned, picking his fork up as well. That was a great reason to linger at Whitney's after this date.

Josie went back to the kitchen and Cam and Didi ate without talking for a few minutes.

Didi seemed completely immersed in enjoying the pie.

Letty hadn't made it but it was her recipe and the girls never strayed from Letty's recipes by even a half a teaspoon. Letty's desserts really were the best he'd ever tasted and as he'd traveled extensively over the past few years with Fluke, Inc. he'd made a point of trying various desserts in all the places he visited. He'd never found better than his grandmother's.

It was a damned travesty that Didi had gone without Letty's desserts for fifty-two years.

"How long were you and Dean married?" Cam asked after a few bites.

"Fifty-one years," Didi replied after taking a sip of coffee.

"So you and Dean started dating shortly after you started Hot Cakes."

She nodded. "It wasn't even officially Hot Cakes then. Dean was the one who pushed to make it grow. I got to name it. That was about it." She said it with a tone that clearly said what she thought of that.

Cam knew the basic story. Letty and Didi had worked at Buttered Up together. Some of the local men wanted to take cake and pie in their lunches to the local factories and farms. Didi tried to talk Letty into individually packaging some of their best sellers. Letty had refused. Didi had done it on the side just so she could prove to Letty that it was a good idea. Letty had been furious. They'd broken up and Didi had gone on to open her own business individually packaging treats and selling them out of her house to start.

"Of course, the business was *why* he asked me out," Didi said, taking another tiny bite of pie.

"What do you mean?"

“He saw the potential in what I was doing. He knew he could make it into something big. And he wanted to hurt Charlotte that way.” Didi met Cam’s gaze. “That’s why I had to stay away from Charlotte completely after Dean got involved. He said we couldn’t risk having a legal battle, but I know he knew that I would have kept asking Charlotte to be involved. He didn’t want the complication of working together with the woman he was in love with and the woman he’d married.”

Cam was almost speechless over this whole story. Almost. He *really* wanted to know more. “You think he was still in love with my grandma?”

“Oh yes. At least a little. And he wanted revenge. He wanted to show her that she’d made a mistake not marrying him.”

“That didn’t bother you?” Cam would have never imagined having this conversation with Didi Lancaster or pushing her for personal details about her marriage, but she seemed willing to talk. She could always tell him to fuck off. In a very sophisticated way, of course.

“Well, I was naïve for a long time and didn’t realize it,” she said. “And when I did, we’d been married for nearly eight years. We had children. We had a business. I would have had to let Dean have Hot Cakes and everything that went with it if I left him. He wasn’t a *bad* husband, he just wasn’t that good at it. And I did, of course, enjoy the privileges that went along with the money and status.” She looked sad for a moment. “I liked that too much for too long. That doesn’t last.” She looked up at Cam. “When I realized that Dean was preparing the boys to follow him into the business and to continue to push it and make it bigger, I started to have regrets.”

“Like what?”

“Charlotte,” Didi said, her voice softer. “And Dean making my sons selfish, shallow men motivated by money.”

Cam wasn’t sure what to say to that. She seemed truly sad and he wasn’t sure how to comfort her. Besides, he thought she probably should regret those things, at least a little.

“And, of course, what almost happened with you and Whitney.”

He jerked his head up and met Didi’s eyes. What had *almost* happened? “What do you mean?”

“I know Whitney felt she had to choose us or you.”

Cam swallowed hard. He hadn’t realized that anyone knew about that. He didn’t know how the conversation had gone with Whitney and her family. He didn’t know who she’d said what to. He didn’t know if she’d announced she was running off with him and they’d forbid it or if they’d somehow found out she’d been seeing him and they’d told her she had to break it off or if she’d asked for a job for him and they’d refused. All of those scenarios and a few others had gone through his mind over the years when he’d let himself think and wonder about it—usually after he’d been to Appleby for a visit and gotten incredibly drunk.

But mostly he’d told himself that it didn’t matter and he didn’t care.

It *didn’t* matter. The end result was the same no matter who had said what to who.

He still wondered.

“That was a long time ago,” he finally said.

“I’m so glad you stayed together anyway,” she said.

He blinked at her. “Um—”

“The company was so important to Whitney. But I’m just so, so glad that you stayed together even if you had to keep it a secret. Love—true love—is worth whatever it takes.” Didi was staring off into the distance. “You don’t want to get to be seventy-two years old and realize that you completely missed it.”

Cam felt his chest tighten. Didi hadn’t been in love with Dean. She’d missed out on true love and she was realizing it now, late in life. That was incredibly sad.

But she thought that he and Whitney had stayed together.

“The way you look at her is the way every woman should be looked at by the man she’s sharing her life with,” Didi told him. She sat forward and took the last bite of pie from her plate.

Cam didn’t know what to think. Didi seemed so resolute about so many things, but she was clearly confused about a few things. A few important things. Like how long ago her husband had died. And Cam and Whitney’s entire relationship.

“I’m not sure Whitney is convinced this is forever,” he finally said. That was true enough.

Didi looked shocked. “Why not?”

“The business is still very important to her,” he said. “She thinks us working together could make that complicated.”

“No.” Didi frowned and leaned in, grabbing Cam’s hand. “No. You have to show her that’s not true. That business... it’s done some good things. It’s important to Appleby. But it can *not* be the reason that another couple spends their life without love.”

Whoa. That was intense. Cam squeezed her hand. “I want to convince her we belong together.”

That was his mission even before this.

Didi’s eyes filled with tears and she squeezed him back. “You *must*. Whitney deserves love. She hasn’t had nearly enough of that. Her father was also completely involved in that company. I think he loves his wife, but he did not show that little girl enough love when she was growing up and he hasn’t respected her since she’s been a part of the company.”

Cam’s chest got tighter. He’d suspected that Whitney had been working to gain her father’s approval and that Eric had been a workaholic at best and a neglectful father at worst. But hearing Didi say it, about her own son, made Cam want to punch Eric Lancaster. And made him want to go straight to Whitney, wrap her up in his arms, and convince her—however he had to—that she could have it all. She did not have to choose between Hot Cakes and love.

“I will do whatever I can to show Whitney that this can work,” he said.

Didi drew in a long breath and let him go, sitting back. “What are you doing each day between one and four p.m.?” she asked.

“I’m... at work.”

“But you’re one of the bosses, right?” she said.

“Yes.”

“And I’ll bet that you work until nine at night or on Sundays if needed.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“So you can take a few hours off each day.”

He could. Of course. His work wasn’t really eight-to-five work. Sometimes it was twenty-hours a day for several days in a row. Sometimes it was just a couple of intense days. Some days were very routine. Others, he had almost nothing to do.

“What do you have in mind?” he asked.

“Whitney has a woman come over each day. She makes our dinner, does some light housekeeping, runs errands for us.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to do all of that.”

He waited for her to go on, but she didn’t. She simply finished her coffee.

“You want me to come make dinner for you?” He could do that. It would give him a reason to see Whitney outside of the office. And he was a great cook.

“I want you to come babysit me each afternoon.”

Okay, that wasn’t what he’d been expecting. “Babysit you?”

She nodded. “Whitney feels like I shouldn’t be alone for more than an hour or so at a time.”

“Why’s that?”

“I set the kitchen on fire.”

That was a good reason. He lifted a brow. “On accident or on purpose?”

Didi laughed at that. “I *accidentally* set a kitchen *towel* on fire by setting it on the stove. But to hear Whitney tell it, it was a five-alarm blaze.”

“It could have turned into a five-alarm blaze,” Cam said. A fire, of any kind, wasn’t nothing.

“That’s what she said,” Didi agreed. “She was especially mad that I called her instead of the fire department.”

Cam’s eyes got wider. “Yeah. 9-1-1 is always first.”

Didi nodded. “I remembered that after Whitney told me.”

After the fire was started and she’d wasted time calling Whitney. Yeah, that wasn’t good.

“Maybe you shouldn’t use the stove when you’re there alone,” Cam suggested.

“She reminded me of that rule after the fire too,” Didi said. “And then she had Katherine start coming over.”

“That doesn’t seem like a bad idea. If it’s hard for you to remember things,” Cam said carefully.

“I suppose. But she’s annoying.”

“Katherine is annoying?”

Didi nodded. “She wants me to exercise and she always wants to watch me do things like make my coffee and start the washing machine. She treats me like a child.”

“Have you talked to Whitney about it?”

“It makes her anxious. She wants it to all be good. She wants me to be safe and happy. That’s why I’m moving into Sunny Orchard,” Didi said. “It will be easier for Whitney to relax and concentrate at work once I’m living there.”

Cam frowned. “You’re moving into the nursing home to make things easier on Whitney?”

“Of course.” Didi dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. “But it’s fine. It’s a lovely place. I’ll have a new suite. And I know a lot of people who live there. I like to play cards and things.” She gave Cam a smile. “It’s a great solution. But my new apartment won’t be ready for another month. I can’t tolerate Katherine for another week not to mention a month. And this is the perfect chance for you to show Whitney what it would be like to live together and make a real life together. You can show her what being married to you will be like.”

Cam was glad he was done eating. His throat was suddenly tight and there was no way he could have swallowed anything.

Didi was simplifying this, of course. You didn’t just move in with a woman and her grandmother and start making dinner and entertaining that grandmother in the afternoons when that woman was still unsure how she felt about you.

But that was the part that made him pause.

He wasn’t so sure that Whitney didn’t know how she felt about it. He was pretty sure she knew exactly how she felt but knew that could be complicated.

So he needed to show her it wasn’t complicated. Having him around could actually make things so much easier. She could have it all. Hot Cakes, him, *and* her grandmother safe and happy.

Hot Cakes was important to her? She wanted to prove that she belonged there? That she could contribute to the company’s growth and success? She wanted a chance to be a kickass corporate tycoon? Fine. What did she need to make that happen? A partner. Not in business but in life.

He wanted to know if they could still fit. He wanted to know who Whitney was now, ten years later, and how he felt about that woman. He wanted to know if they could have a relationship now. He needed to be *with* her to do that. They needed to spend time together for that.

This was just about the most perfect setup for them both.

“You’ve got a deal,” he finally said to Didi. “But I have to warn you... I’m not going to let you win at checkers or cards

or whatever we're going to be doing all day."

Didi lifted her chin. "I would be insulted if you did."

"Good." He grinned at her.

"And you'll have to move into the house."

"Why's that?" he asked. He wasn't opposed to that at all. Didi's house was huge. He was sure there were at least six bedrooms. He was currently staying in one of the rooms at Zoe's house. But so was Aiden. Well, Aiden was staying in *Zoe's* room with her.

He was happy for his sister and his best friend, but it was a little weird being there with them when they were cuddling on the couch, or flirting in the kitchen, or coming out of the bathroom at the same time, wrapped only in towels.

"I'm a night owl," Didi said. "I always have been. But Whitney feels strange about going to bed before I do. So she sits up with me. Then gets up so early for work. She's sleep deprived." Didi frowned. "And grumpy because of it. It would be great if someone else could sit up with me. You can sleep in until noon if you need to. I do."

Cam thought about that. He didn't mind staying up late at all. He wasn't an early morning person. Thankfully, the Fluke guys all liked to get a later start in the morning so their team meetings were certainly not first thing in the day.

And this was for a month. Just until Didi moved to Sunny Orchard. He could flex his hours for a month. Or work from Didi's house. The Hot Cakes offices were a five-minute drive. If he needed to go in he could pop over there, not leaving Didi alone for too long. Or he could take her with him.

"You have an extra room for me?" he asked.

"I have five extra rooms."

"How many bedrooms does your house have?"

"Seven."

"Good Lord."

"I know."

He grinned at her. “When do I start?”

“Tonight.” Didi slid her chair back and stood.

“Oh.” He got to his feet as well and dug his wallet out.

Josie was there a minute later. “Don’t you dare try to pay for this,” she said, gathering up their plates and cups.

“Oh, I’m not paying,” he said. “I’m tipping.” He slipped a one hundred dollar bill into the pocket of her apron.

She lifted a brow. “You realize I’m in love with and living with one of your partners, right?”

Yes, Grant had as much money as Cam did. He grinned and nodded. “Be sure to tell him I tipped you a hundred bucks. That will annoy the hell out of him.”

She shook her head, but laughed. “Of course.”

Annoying Grant Lorre was entirely too much fun and since he’d met and fallen for Josie, he’d gotten a bit more laid back, making it harder to rile him up.

“Tell him I said you look hot in that apron too,” he added. *That* would irritate Grant.

Didi slapped his arm. “If you’re going to marry my granddaughter you need to cool it with the flirting with other women.”

Josie gave him a wide-eyed questioning look.

Cam simply nodded. “That’s a good point.” He took Didi’s hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. “At least when her grandmother is around.”

Didi smacked his arm again, but she chuckled.

Josie looked very interested.

“Tell Zoe I’ll see her later. And we’ll see you all at dinner at mom’s tomorrow night.”

“We?” Josie asked.

Cam looked down at Didi. “Yep. We.” He was going to take Didi and Whitney to dinner at his mom’s house.

That was really weird.
He couldn't wait.

Chapter Eight



Whitney couldn't believe she was actually pacing the foyer of her house waiting for her grandmother to get home from her *date*.

With Cam.

Where were they? They'd been gone for far longer than an hour. The auction had clearly been for an *hour* of time.

Of course, she was sure that Elliot and Max were spending more than an hour together, and if Henry and his friends got Ollie going on *Warriors of Easton*, they could easily hang out the rest of the evening. Ollie might even come to the office with a bunch of new ideas for the game tomorrow.

But Didi and Cam? What were they possibly doing for this long?

She heard a car in the circle drive in front of the house and sucked in a quick breath. She started for the door. Then she stopped. She couldn't meet them at the door. That would make it seem like she'd been waiting for them. And possibly pacing.

Whitney bolted for the couch in the sitting room off to the side of the foyer and grabbed for the first thing on the coffee table just as the front door opened.

Cam and her grandmother were laughing as they stepped into the house together.

For a moment, Whitney felt her heart flip at the sound of her grandma's laughter. Didi and Whitney used to laugh like

that together when they played dolls or had tea parties or were reading books inside her princess tent.

Didi had always been the one to play with Whitney. Everyone else had been too busy or not even home much of the time. But Whitney hadn't missed anyone. Not until she was older and realized just how little time her parents actually spent with her. She'd always had Didi to go to the park with and to play dress-up with and to bake with.

She felt her eyes stinging as she thought about how long it had been since they'd spent time like that—just silly, fun time enjoying something together. They hadn't baked together in years probably.

She blinked the water in her eyes away as Cam and Didi came around the corner. Whitney looked up as if she'd just heard them and smiled. "Welcome home."

"Hello, darling."

Whitney had to take a second look at her grandma. She realized Didi was glowing. Actually glowing. She looked happier than Whitney had seen her look in far too long. It made her seem younger.

Whitney couldn't help but look at Cam then. He was smiling too, looking genuinely happy, and the way he had Didi's hand on his arm was very sweet and gallant.

Cam had made her grandmother look like that. Wow. He hadn't just put up with the crazy date idea and taken her out for a quick piece of pie. They'd been out for nearly two hours and they both genuinely looked like they'd had a great time.

Dammit, that didn't make it any easier to *not* think about kissing him.

Whitney had to take a deep breath before she said or did anything.

She stood from the couch, trying hard to look as if she'd been lounging and reading, hardly aware of the time.

"Why are you sitting in here?" Didi asked, blowing Whitney's nonchalant cover immediately however.

“I just... thought I’d read for a bit until you got home.” Whitney waved the book she’d picked up from the coffee table.

“In here?” Didi asked, looking around as if confused.

It made sense that she’d be confused about that.

This room was for looks only. Didi and Dean had occasionally sat in here with someone who had just dropped by. Usually someone wanting a donation to some cause or fundraiser or campaign. This room was for entertaining uninvited guests. For short periods. This room at the front was very pretty. And entirely uncomfortable.

Invited guests and family used the living room and the even less formal family room at the back of the house.

Whitney sighed and set the book she held back on the table. She glanced at the front. It was a coffee table book about neckties.

Neckties. Who put together books about neckties? More, who bought and displayed a book like that?

Dax Marshall would. Whitney actually smiled at the thought. Dax loved crazy ties and had a whole collection.

“You’re reading in here?” Didi asked.

Whitney nodded. “I was thinking about giving this book of grandpa’s to Dax.”

Didi looked at it and smiled. “I like Dax. Yes, give him the book.”

“Great.” Whitney picked it up again and handed it to Cam. “Are you going to see him tonight?”

Cam shook his head. “Actually no.” He glanced at Didi, then back to Whitney. “You can give it to him tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She looked at him for a long moment. “So thanks for bringing Grandma home.”

“Of course.”

There was another long pause where it seemed everyone was waiting for someone else to do something.

“I’m going to make tea,” Didi announced, turning toward the kitchen. “Whitney, take Cam upstairs.”

Whitney blinked. Then frowned. Then blinked again. Her grandmother was not as clearheaded as she used to be and she’d undeniably lost some of her filter. But she wanted Whitney and Cam to go upstairs together?

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“He’s going to pick a bedroom,” Didi said, as if it was the most obvious thing. “Show him the way. He didn’t sneak into *this* house to see you, so he doesn’t know his way around.”

Whitney heard the little surprised squeak that came from her own throat.

Cam, on the other hand, laughed. “Are you guessing, Didi? You think we’re going to give up secrets?”

“You *didn’t* sneak into her bedroom? Not even once? What kind of teenage love story was that?” Didi asked.

Whitney opened her mouth but was only able to squeak again.

Cam looked a little offended even as he smiled at Didi. “Of course I snuck into her bedroom. More than once.”

“I figured,” Didi said.

Cam chuckled. “Should I take that as a compliment?”

“Of course.” Didi glanced at Whitney. “Every woman deserves a man who will scale buildings for her.”

Whitney felt her eyes widen and she looked at Cam. He didn’t seem shocked. In fact, he was nodding. And looking at Whitney.

“You’re absolutely right, Didi.”

“Anyway, I don’t want you falling and breaking your neck,” Didi said, turning toward the kitchen again. “You can

now use the front door and the stairs. Whitney will get you a key tomorrow.”

Didi headed down the hallway.

When she was out of view, and earshot, Whitney swung to face Cam. She was going to get him a *key* tomorrow? “What is going on?”

He gestured to something behind him and Whitney moved closer so she could see. But she only got as close to him as was absolutely necessary.

“I need to take my stuff up to my room.”

There was a suitcase sitting in the foyer.

A suitcase.

Whitney propped her hands on her hips. “I leave you alone with my grandmother for two hours and now you’re best friends and moving in here?”

He was watching her with one corner of his mouth curled. “Pretty much.”

“Cam, *what* is going on?”

“Your grandmother doesn’t like Katherine. She asked me to come and stay and keep her company during the day while you’re at work.”

Whitney stared at him. None of that made any sense.

Well, she knew that Didi didn’t really like Katherine. She’d told Whitney that a number of times. But the truth was that Katherine just made Didi do some things she didn’t like but that were important. Their daily walk for instance. And eating something other than cereal. And not spending the day watching *Golden Girls* reruns.

Okay, so Didi wanted a replacement for Katherine. But *Cam?*

“How, exactly, did that come up and why in the world would you agree to that?”

He took a step closer and Whitney had to fight the urge to back up. She didn't actually want to get away from him. On the contrary, she wanted to get a lot closer. But she couldn't. That would complicate things enormously.

A lot like having him hanging out here every day and being sweet to her grandmother.

Not to mention him *moving in*.

"It came up in our conversation," he said with a shrug as if he didn't remember exactly how. "And she and I have a common goal, and me being here a lot helps us toward that goal."

Whitney narrowed her eyes. "What's the goal?"

"Making you happy."

That wasn't exactly what she'd been expecting him to say so it took her a second to really process it.

"You think you being here with my grandma is going to make me happy?"

He nodded. "You want to focus on Hot Cakes and being a part of the team and showing your new bosses that you're dedicated and valuable. But your grandma being here and needing company is distracting and causes you to need to leave work in the middle of projects sometimes. Like when she sets things on fire." The corner of his mouth curled again as if Didi starting things on fire was amusing. "If I'm here, Didi is happy and you're free to concentrate on work."

Whitney swallowed. She really did need someone to help with Didi if she was going to put in the time and concentration she needed at work. Her father's departure and the guys coming in and taking over had been a blessing in a lot of ways. Whitney was starting fresh with the guys. Even slightly ahead. They valued her experience with the company over the past ten years.

But the changes and increased demands on Whitney's time and attention were coinciding with a crucial time with Didi. It was another month before Didi could move into Sunny Orchard where she would have more activities and

supervision. Her meals would be provided—and would include vegetables—and she wouldn't have to use a stove at all.

Whitney had really been hoping that Didi could tolerate Katherine for another thirty days. Surely it wasn't *that* bad with Katherine.

“Why would *you* do this? Really?” she asked. “Why do you care if Didi is happy with Katherine?”

He took a moment to answer. He took another step closer and tucked his hands into his pockets. The movement drew her attention to his arms. He'd always been muscular and solid, but he definitely had the arms—and shoulders and chest and abs—of a man now. The last time his arms had been around her, making her feel comforted and loved and sexy, he'd been a boy. She couldn't help but wonder how they would feel around her now.

She shook that off quickly though. *That* was even more complicated than having him getting along with her grandmother. It was one thing for them to see each other regularly and to have something in common with Hot Cakes. It would be a lot more convoluted between them if he was a part of her personal life as well. But if there was a physical connection too, she wasn't sure she'd be strong enough not to just fall headfirst in love with him. Again.

“I've been really clear about what I want, Whit,” he finally said. “I want a chance to see what, if anything, is between us now. It's been ten years but I wouldn't say we had a lot of closure. If we spend time together and decide to be friends, great. If we can only manage to be coworkers at Hot Cakes, then, fine. I guess. But if we can be more, then I absolutely want to know that.”

“So you're using my grandmother to get closer to me?” she asked, crossing her arms, feeling suddenly raw and jumpy.

Her life had been easier when Cam had lived in another city and only came home occasionally. It had always hurt to see him. She'd always wanted more than the few minutes of interaction. She'd wanted more than acting as if they were just

acquaintances, like she did with any of the other guys she'd gone to high school with who were home for the holidays and passed her on the street.

It had never felt right with Cam. It had never been *enough*.

But then he'd leave and she'd forget about him again. Or at least push him to the back of her mind.

Until she heard a song that reminded her of him. Or passed his family's bakery. Or passed the house where he'd grown up. Or passed the road to the river where they'd spent lots of time in his back seat. Or... any of the other dozens of places in Appleby that reminded her of him and their past together.

Which was almost every day.

Yeah, it was *incredibly* difficult to forget about an ex-boyfriend in a tiny town where you'd spent a year in love with him.

Especially when you hadn't really ever gotten over him.

And you hadn't found a guy who could replace him in any way.

Him moving into her house and becoming a co-caregiver to her favorite person in the world was *really* not the way to move past any of that.

"I think *she's* using *me* to get out of doing crosswords with Katherine," he said, lifting a shoulder. "But I'm not going to turn down a chance to be around you more, Whit."

"I don't think this is a good idea." She pressed her arms into her stomach.

"Why not?"

He knew. He *knew* why it was a bad idea in her mind. It was because it was going to be hard for her to hold herself back from him. But he wanted her to say it out loud.

"You have a job."

He gave a short laugh. "I own the company. I'm best friends with—and have dirt on—all of the other owners. I can

do a lot of my work from here. And if I need to be in the office, it's a five-minute drive."

"So you would leave her alone," Whitney said. "I can't have you—"

"I would never do anything that wouldn't be completely safe for her," he broke in, looking annoyed that she'd even suggest that. "I will handle this."

"How?"

"You don't need to worry about it," he said. "That's what's so great about this. I'm taking this off your plate."

"To get on my good side."

"Yes."

He didn't even try to hedge.

Now she wanted to hear *him* admit something. He was trying to get her into bed. And he was willing to use her grandmother to do it. Gross.

Though it didn't *really* feel gross. It felt... good. Someone wanting to be with her so badly that he'd pull out all the stops? She honestly wasn't used to people wanting to be with her as much as Cam seemed to.

And it was Cam. There was just nothing gross about him. Period.

"Why?"

"Because I care about you."

That made her stomach flip in spite of how tightly she had her arms crossed.

"And because you want to—"

"She cried, Whit."

Whitney stopped and frowned. "What?"

"She cried." He sighed. "She regrets so many things that happened with my grandma. With your grandpa. With the business. But she's so glad that *we* stayed together. I didn't have the heart to do anything but agree with her."

Whitney's frown deepened. "You told her we stayed together?"

"No. But I didn't correct her, either." The way he lifted one brow was almost as if he was daring her to tell him he'd been wrong to placate her.

Whitney pulled in a breath. She wasn't going to tell him he was wrong. Grandma tears were the worst. If he'd been able to resist feeling bad and doing whatever it took to make Didi feel better, he would be a bad guy.

And Camden McCaffery was definitely not a bad guy.

"She believes it though," he went on. "She thinks that we stayed together and have kept the relationship hidden all this time."

Whitney pulled in a deep breath, then nodded. "She also probably thinks it's only been a year or so since you left town."

That made her heart ache. She didn't want to lose Didi. Her grandmother was her only family left here in Appleby. But, in many ways, Didi had always been her only family. At least in the make-her-feel-supported-and-comforted way families were supposed to function. Didi was the one Whitney had her best childhood memories with. Now she was slowly losing the bright, funny, sweet woman who had been her advocate and had always believed in her.

Whitney was going to be on her own soon. Maybe the Alzheimer's would take a few years to steal Didi completely, but already her grandmother was changing. Their relationship was changing. Eventually Whitney would be alone. And there was nothing she could do about it. She felt like there was a sharp, hot poker jabbing her just below her ribs when she thought about that.

She needed her work. She needed to secure her place at Hot Cakes. She needed to be vital there. That was all she had and she needed to be a *part* of something. Her family was gone, the family business was gone, her grandmother would be gone. Hot Cakes was the one place she could belong.

Of course, even Hot Cakes had changed on her, but she was still there and she had a better chance now at being truly essential to the business. It was the only thing she could control. She could control her work and her performance. Everything else involved other people, and, as she knew too well, other people were out of her control completely.

“Even if that is what she thinks,” Cam said about Didi’s poor perception of time. “It makes her happy. Really happy. She wants us to be together. She wants to know that someone is loving you and taking care of you.”

His words made Whitney’s stomach swoop and then dive. She felt the air between them heat. This was different than how he’d talked to her in her office last night but it affected her similarly. Being loved and taken care of by Cam was absolutely as tempting as being seduced by him. Honestly, with Cam, all of that had always gone together.

“So you’re going to lie to her?” Whitney asked.

That was so stupid. She wanted to hear him say it wasn’t a lie. She wanted to hear him say that he did love her and wanted to take care of her. But what if he said that? That would make all of this so much harder. She had to resist. Hot Cakes was her focus. She couldn’t do anything to jeopardize her position there.

“It’s a month,” he said after a long pause. “Right? A month until she can move into her new apartment.”

Well, he certainly hadn’t said, “Let me be your knight in shining armor.”

And she was *glad* he hadn’t said that. That would have been ridiculous. He couldn’t love her. He didn’t really know her anymore.

Which was the point he was trying to make when he said they needed to date and figure things out.

Whitney pressed her lips together, telling herself to stop being ridiculous. She finally nodded. “Right. A month.”

“A month should be enough time to figure out what we are.”

“What we are?” she repeated.

“Coworkers, friends, or...”

Whitney felt that she was holding her breath waiting for him to fill in that last word.

“Or?” she prompted when he just stood watching her.

“Everything,” he said.

Her breath caught again. They were going to find out if they were coworkers, friends, or everything.

“I feel like I’m not getting much say in this,” she managed, noting that her voice sounded scratchy.

She knew that Cam heard it too when he stepped forward one more time. Now they were only inches apart. Close enough to reach out and touch. Close enough that if they *didn’t* touch, it would be very obvious they were making that choice.

“You can say no to anything I suggest,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t make the suggestions.”

She wet her lips. “Suggestions like?”

“Like that we should sit on the front porch with a couple of beers and talk. Like that we should sit on the couch and watch old movies. Like that we should go for a midnight swim in the pool out back.”

Those all sounded relatively safe. And tempting as hell. Which made them *not* safe.

“And like we should make chocolate chip cookie dough,” he went on.

Okay she could maybe do this. Chocolate chip cookie dough and playing in the pool. Maybe they could end up being friends. That was a nice, safe compromise between coworkers and... she swallowed hard... everything.

“And you should let me lick it off your nipples.”

Chapter Nine



Whitney sucked in a sharp breath and her eyes flew to his as he turned the sweet, date-like ideas into sexy and oh-my-God-yes in a blink.

Her nipples definitely liked the idea. They tingled as if he was already covering them with cookie dough and tightened in anticipation of the licking.

He reached up and cupped her face. “Let me stay.”

She had to clear her throat before she could answer. She also noted that she didn’t pull back away from his touch. She probably should. In a second.

“I didn’t realize I was in a position to *let* you stay... or not,” she said.

“I’m not staying if you’re completely against it,” he said, brushing his thumb over her cheek.

“What if I’m a little bit against it?” she asked.

He gave her a half smile. “That I can work with.”

They just stood staring at each other for several heartbeats. His touch felt hot against her cheek, but she also wanted more. More of her body getting hot from him touching.

“We need to figure this out. You have to realize that,” he finally said. “I don’t know if this is all just left over from ten years ago or if it’s real now.”

She knew exactly what he was talking about. The chemistry. The wanting to be closer. The wondering about his

life and what he was like now.

She did want to know.

She was just scared.

Because she was pretty sure that she would like all of it. A lot.

“Okay,” she finally said softly.

She did want her grandma to be safe and happy and she wanted to let Didi make as many decisions for herself as possible as long as she could. If Didi wanted Cam around, then Whitney shouldn't be against it.

She'd be at work all day anyway. She'd be here, with Cam, only a few hours a day. And Didi would be there with them. How intimate could it be?

And maybe if he was here all the time, in her space, in her way, she'd realize that she was over him. That she didn't want him around all the time. That they didn't match up anymore. That they'd outgrown each other.

Yeah.

Maybe.

“You know those suggestions I'm going to be making and you're going to have the chance to say no to?” he asked huskily.

She nodded.

“Here's one.”

He leaned in, close enough that she could feel his breath on her lips when he said, “Let me kiss you.”

Oh damn. She wanted that. She wanted it so much. She was weak. Some of it was that she simply didn't feel wanted very much. Not just in the man-woman-naked-bodies way but just in general. That *sounded* pathetic, she knew, but it wasn't so much that it made her sad, it was just what she was used to. She wasn't sad about not being wanted. It was more that she was surprised to *be* wanted.

No one sought her out for her opinions, no one gave her big, important tasks. People always took her no answers seriously. If she was invited to a function and she declined, that was it. No one pressed. If someone asked her out and she said no, the guy always let it go. She knew it came from being a Lancaster. The Lancasters had power in Appleby and she knew that people were, in general, intimidated by them. Her grandfather and father had put a lot of effort into making sure that people believed the Lancasters were better than everyone else.

So to have Cam pressing to be with her, to get closer, was new. And felt good.

Plus, it was Cam.

She'd never stopped wanting him.

"I—" she started.

"The tea is getting cold!" Didi bellowed from the kitchen.

Whitney and Cam stilled. Then she felt him sigh. But he didn't pull back. "You going to let me do this or not?"

He was already practically kissing her. When his lips moved as he spoke, they brushed hers ever so lightly. His body heat surrounded her. She swore she could feel his heartbeat pounding. Or maybe that was hers.

She found it funny that they were standing so close, almost kissing, talking about kissing, but not really doing anything. It still felt incredibly intimate. They were very much in each other's personal space. They both clearly wanted this. She certainly wasn't pushing him away or stepping back. But the only actual connection was his hand on her face. And their mingling breaths.

Clearly he was going to *insist* that she make this decision. He wasn't going to just sweep her up and kiss the hell out of her before she could protest and then let the chemistry take over.

That also seemed intimate. Him coming as close as he could but then wanting actual acquiescence from her. Verbal acknowledgment that she was agreeing.

“Whit,” he said, his voice low and rough. “Push me back or pull me closer.”

She slid her hands up to his chest, not sure until the last moment if she was going to fist his shirt and pull him in or push him away.

Cam, however, didn't look surprised when she pushed.

He let go and stepped back though. He didn't seem angry or even frustrated. It seemed that he'd been expecting her reaction actually.

“Okay,” he finally said.

She wet her lips. “Thanks,” she said, hoarsely. And she meant it. She appreciated that he was giving her these choices. Kind of.

It would be *a lot* easier to just climb him like a tree and give in to everything zipping between them if he'd just back her up against the wall, seal his mouth over hers, and start running his big hands over her body. Then she could pretend she was just caught up in the moment and enjoy the hell out of it without actually admitting she wanted any of that.

Which he knew.

She could see it.

He knew that she *wanted* him, but that she didn't want to admit it.

So, of course, he was going to make her confess before he did anything more.

“In case you've forgotten, I'm very stubborn,” he said.

Whitney gave him a nod. “I remember.”

“And something you should know about me and the past ten years,” he said, holding her gaze steadily, “I've also gotten very used to winning. “

That actually made her heart trip and her inner muscles clench.

See, she should really feel trepidation at that implied promise from him. But she didn't. Right along with liking the feel of being wanted was a flutter of excitement over being *pursued*. No one came after her. Outside of invitations to fundraisers or, again, the occasional dinner date that she almost always said no to, she wasn't asked for much. And no one ever asked more than once.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, trying desperately not to act *excited* about the idea of him trying again and again to get close to her.

He looked at her for a long moment and a thought flickered through her mind—*he knows*.

It was possible. Cam knew her well. Or he *had known* her well. But back in high school she'd been a lot more sought after. People had wanted her on school committees and projects. She'd been a cheerleader, runner-up for Homecoming Queen, invited to parties. She'd been popular. Wanted.

For stupid things like picking a winter dance theme or helping girlfriends do their hair for pool parties.

But she'd absolutely been wanted by Cam back then. He'd wanted everything then. He'd planned on them getting married. He'd planned for them to spend their lives together.

But now, no one wanted her for important things.

Until Aiden and the guys had taken over Hot Cakes.

Until Cam had decided he wanted to date her again.

She blew out a breath. It was crazy how important both of those things were to her.

She shouldn't lead Cam on. She shouldn't tease him and make him think there was a chance if there wasn't.

But maybe it was okay to relish being wanted for a little while.

And for sure Camden McCaffery could handle being teased. He might even enjoy it.

“You gonna show me to my new room?” he asked, his tone changing to a more playful note. His eyes told her that he was onto her.

“I’m sure you can find your way,” she said, feeling a jolt of... something. Playful and teasing could be fun. It was clear that Cam was going to let her call some of the shots. That made her feel less jittery about everything. “Third door on the left is probably the best choice.” She moved to step around him, planning to join Didi while he headed upstairs. She didn’t need to show him the way. She *shouldn’t* show him the way. They might not make it back down here.

“Why is that?”

“It’s one of the bigger rooms,” she said. “It has its own bathroom.”

“And how many doors are there between that one and yours?”

Her belly flipped and she felt warmth rush over her. She glanced over her shoulder feeling something she hadn’t felt in a *very* long time. Sassy.

“A couple. And several squeaky floorboards,” she tossed back to him. She paused. “But it’s not like Didi can hear squeaky floorboards when her hearing aids are out.”

Then she turned and headed down the hall before he could say—or do—anything else.

* * *

It wasn’t as if he’d never been mixed up and wound up because of Whitney Lancaster before.

She was the only woman who had ever actually *confused* him. But he knew why. She was the only woman he’d ever cared enough about to try to figure out. He was sure that had he ever tried to figure another woman out, he would have been confused then too.

But as he took his suitcase up to his new temporary bedroom, he was trying to figure out what was going through Whitney's mind for sure.

She'd given in on him staying here with Didi far easier than he'd expected. It *was* a little crazy when he first thought it or said it out loud. But when he was talking to Didi about it, or explaining it to Whitney, it actually made sense.

Bottom line, he wanted to be here, Didi wanted Katherine to *not* to be here, and Whitney needed someone to be here with Didi.

Win-win-win.

Whitney had agreed, if reluctantly. Then she'd let him almost kiss her. Sure, in the end, she'd pushed him back, but she hadn't done it with any feeling. She'd seemed reluctant about that too.

He meant it when he said he was stubborn and used to winning.

The question really was, what was he trying to win?

He'd gone into this with Whitney thinking that they just needed to figure out what they were going to be going forward. They needed to see what was still there and what was real now.

It had taken less than twenty-four hours for him to shift to wanting her. Period. Not just physically—though that was as strong as ever, if not stronger—but just her. He wanted to be the one she leaned on when she needed help. He wanted to be the one coming home to her as he'd done tonight. He wanted to be the one she came home to.

He was shocked by how quickly that shift had happened and how strong those wants were.

They still needed to get to know each other again. They still needed time to go over the past ten years. And for what the next ten would look like.

He was still going to have to come to terms with how important Hot Cakes was to her. He was willing to help her do

what she wanted at work. He wanted to support her. He wanted her to feel included and valued the way her family apparently hadn't included or valued her.

But he also wanted to show her there was more to life than that company.

He felt a ball of frustration tighten in his gut thinking about how much she'd given the company and how determined she was now to make it the most important thing in her life.

He knew many strong, independent women. He'd been raised by two, was the older brother to one, got to work with one—Piper—every day. He loved strong women. He wanted Whitney to be one.

But his grandmother, mom, sister, and friend knew there was more to life than work.

Whitney didn't seem to.

He wanted to show her that as well.

And, yes, he wanted to be one of those things that mattered more to her than work.

This was complicated.

But complicated was something he was used to. It was something he was good at. He was the lead attorney for a multimillion-dollar company. He loved a good fight. He loved going toe to toe with people who could stand there and argue back and make him work at it.

That was Whitney.

She knew what she wanted. She'd fight him on it. He just needed to have his arguments ready.

Feeling better about everything, he tucked his clothes into the drawers in the dresser in the bedroom. He checked out the bathroom, felt the mattress, and looked at his view out the window.

It was all nice. Very nice. Five-star hotel-level nice.

He still really mostly cared about where Whitney's bedroom was from here.

He left the room, heading back for the kitchen. He thought for one second—maybe two—about opening doors along the hallway to find her room.

But he didn't.

He wanted to be invited into that room. He wanted her opening that door for him.

And she would.

Eventually.

Probably.

* * *

Cam slipped back inside from the back patio. He'd given Aiden a call to let him and Zoe know he wouldn't be home tonight. He'd left a message, feeling a little relieved that Aiden hadn't picked up. He wasn't sure what his best friend's reaction would be to him *living* with Whitney and he wasn't sure he wanted to hear about what a dumb idea it was at the moment. There would be time for that later.

There was a single light glowing over the sink. The rest of the first floor was dark. And quiet.

Uh-huh. Whitney had taken advantage of him being outside to slip upstairs.

Cam had cooked. Pasta primavera with grilled chicken. They'd had a nice meal, during which Didi had told stories about her and Letty growing up. Stories he'd never heard before and loved. They'd been like sisters from the time they'd met as little girls. He and Aiden had been like that.

He'd snuck glances at Whitney as they talked. She'd seemed happy. Didi had been downright delighted. Maybe it was because she had a bigger audience than usual for her stories. Or maybe the two women didn't actually spend their mealtimes talking and sharing stories. He could imagine Whitney reading files or working on her laptop while she ate.

Well, that ended now. If he had anything to say about it.

Which he probably didn't.

At least he could listen to Didi's stories. He enjoyed hearing about his grandmother as a little girl.

But he couldn't help but wonder if Whitney had a friend like he and Aiden had been or like Didi and Letty had been? She'd had friends in high school, but they hadn't been close like he and Aiden had. She'd been amazed by how close he and Aiden were and often commented on how nice it would be to have someone like that. What about now? Did she have people—even one—that she could truly confide in and be herself with?

Well, she did now.

He was going to be that friend. Even if that's all she would let him be.

Of course, she had to stay up past 9 p.m. if they were going to talk and share and get to know each other.

He debated his move here. He didn't know which room was hers and he wasn't about to go knocking on doors when one of them was Didi's. Also, he should give Whitney space. He knew that spending time together on more neutral territory—where there weren't beds a few feet away or a tub big enough for two—was probably a good idea.

Then again, he thought maybe just kissing the hell out of her, getting her naked, and showing her some other ways he'd gotten better over the past ten years might not be a terrible idea. They could talk after. After he made her face, very directly and intimately, the chemistry that was still alive and well.

Or he could play it cool. Be patient. Do what he'd come here to do, hang out with Didi, make Whitney's life easier and wait for her to come to him.

He wanted to do that.

But he was really afraid that the kissing the hell out of her and getting her naked part would take a lot longer with that approach. And he wasn't sure how long he could wait on that.

He'd liked talking dirty to her that first night. He'd loved watching her respond.

He pulled out his phone and texted her.

I'm making chocolate chip cookie dough. You should come down.

He set the phone on the counter and moved around the kitchen, checking the cabinets and pulling out ingredients. He was a great baker, taught by one of the best ever. But chocolate chip cookies were his specialty. He knew that the sound of that didn't impress most people. How special could chocolate chip cookies really be anyway? But that's because they'd never had his. He was the best. Even better than his grandmother.

And, yes, she'd even admitted it to him. Though only to him. And only when they were alone.

It was several minutes later, but finally Whitney replied.

I'm already in bed.

Cam grinned. That was almost too easy. *Okay, I'll bring it up to you. The horizontal surfaces up there are probably softer than the ones down here.*

He started measuring and mixing, knowing that it would be a bit before she responded again.

But he'd only gotten the flour and baking powder combined before his phone chimed.

He looked over, wiping a hand on a dish towel.

I don't want to have to shower tonight. I'm a morning showerer.

He grinned. Yes, this had the potential to get sticky.

I promise to be sure to remove all traces of cookie dough from your nipples. And elsewhere. I'll be very thorough.

He waited, just in case she got right back to him.

She didn't.

He went back to mixing. He got everything but the chocolate chips mixed in before he heard anything from her.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me. That was a jerk move, Cam.”

He turned toward the kitchen doorway.

And nearly dropped the bowl he was holding.

Chapter Ten



She'd apparently come straight down, without bothering to change her clothes.

Her hair was up in a high ponytail on the top of her head, the long strands falling around her freshly washed face. She had a bed sheet wrapped around her body and tucked under her arms but he could see the spaghetti straps of the pale green nightgown she wore underneath. He *really* wanted to know how far down that nightgown hit on her thighs. And if she was wearing panties.

She looked just-out-of-bed, adorably mussed, and... a little pissed. Her cheeks were flushed and she was *not* smiling.

Still, he couldn't stop staring. Not even when the one, very tiny, part of his brain told him that this was *not* playing it cool.

Of course, texting her about licking cookie dough off her nipples wasn't really *cool* either.

Speaking of her nipples... Surely she wasn't wearing a bra underneath that nightgown either. Women didn't wear bras to bed. He knew that much. His entire body reacted to the thought, the way the sheet molded to her breasts and the smooth pale bare skin of her shoulders.

She didn't cross her arms. She didn't move closer so that the breakfast bar on the other side of the kitchen island would block his view. She didn't even fidget. She just let him look.

So he did. He drank her in.

This was not the pretty, thin, young innocent girl whose virginity he'd taken down by the river.

This was a gorgeous, trim, curved-in-all-the-right-places confident woman.

Who was calling his bluff by showing up in the kitchen after the texts he'd sent.

His gaze found its way back to hers and he could see the challenge there.

"I never kid about nipple licking," he finally said.

She sucked in a quick breath but it was hard to tell if it was surprise or lust. "You have to stop."

"Why?"

"You can't tease me. And flirt. And get... dirty. Not when you're *living* here. That is all kinds of inappropriate."

Inappropriate. Maybe. With anyone else it would be. But it did not feel inappropriate with them.

Cam reached for the bag of dark chocolate chunks and dumped them into the bowl. He folded them into the dough, then set the bowl down, and tossed the spoon into the sink.

He braced his hands on the counter and met her eyes.

"I know I should say I'm sorry. I'm not."

She took a breath and let it out. "Cam, I understand that you're teasing. But I have to be able to be comfortable here in my own home."

"I make you uncomfortable?" He frowned. He didn't quite believe it, but he hated the idea that might be true.

"You... could very easily make it difficult to sleep," she said.

Oh, well that was different. He grinned. "Dirty dreams never hurt anybody."

She lifted her chin in that sexy, stubborn way that he didn't remember but kind of loved and kind of hated at the same

time. “They will if they keep me from being fresh and sharp at work tomorrow.”

He shouldn't like the idea of getting her so wound up she couldn't sleep.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, clearly noticing the small grin he was trying to hide.

“I shouldn't say. It would be inappropriate.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Is it something about helping me work off the pent-up energy and play out the dreams so I can sleep peacefully?”

He let the grin go. “Yep.”

She sighed. “Cam, this isn't going to work.”

He straightened. “It will. I promise. I'll be good.”

It was clear that she didn't believe that, but she didn't *quite* roll her eyes. She drew herself straighter and wet her lips, then said, “You're my boss. And my ex. Having you here is weird. Having you sexting me is even weirder. We have to have some rules.”

“First, that wasn't sexting.” That wasn't even close to the things he'd say and ask her to do if they were sexting. “Second, having me here shouldn't be weird, Whit.”

“But it is. Because...”

He lifted a brow. “Because?”

Her eyes dipped to the bowl of cookie dough then back to his. “Because it's all tempting.”

Damn right it was. “Well, good.”

“*No*,” she said it with force and with a frown. Then she pulled in a breath and said more calmly, “I'm sorry, but I think that if you're living here we need to work on the friends part of this whole... situation.”

Their relationship was a situation? And why did she keep taking those breaths and changing her tone of voice while they

were talking? “I told you that I want more than that. That’s partly why I’m here.”

“You’re pushing.”

He gave her a nod. “A little. I need to push with you.”

She frowned. “I don’t like that.”

“I think you do.” He crossed his arms. “I think that you don’t like that you like it. But I think you do like that I’m pursuing you and seducing you.”

“You’re not *seducing* me.”

“Talking about putting cookie dough on your nipples?” he asked.

She shifted her weight and dropped her gaze to the bowl again and he wondered what sensations were going through her body. Was she tingling and hot? Were her nipples hard? Because he was hot and hard, for sure.

“You have to respect what I’m feeling,” she finally said, meeting his gaze again. “This complicates things in a way that concerns me.”

He studied her. She seemed to be holding back. Which was interesting. Whitney had always been happy and sweet and confident. The girl he’d dated ten years ago had been accommodating and roll-with-it and always up for whatever he wanted.

“You’re the one who pointed out the doors and squeaky floor boards between your room and mine,” he said.

She nodded. “Momentary lapse of judgment.”

“Can we have a few more of those?”

She didn’t smile at that either. She shook her head. “No. I shouldn’t have said that.” She sighed and her shoulders slumped slightly. “It’s fun to flirt and tease with you. But it’s a bad idea. It’s distracting, and with you here all the time now”—she frowned at that—“I think it could be very easy to go... offtrack.”

“The track being Hot Cakes?” he asked.

She nodded. Then bit her bottom lip.

Them being together was offtrack? That was not how it felt to him. At all.

But they were, evidently on very different tracks. He had accomplished what he wanted with work. Hot Cakes was great. He wanted it to be successful too. Absolutely. But his huge accomplishment had been Fluke, Inc. and *Warriors of Easton*.

He'd absolutely been focused and determined when it had come to building the company and making it a fucking *phenomenon*.

Whitney hadn't had a huge business accomplishment yet.

He got where she was coming from. But it *was* possible to have that *and* a personal life.

Probably.

He didn't really know. He hadn't had a *relationship* when they'd been getting Fluke off the ground. Hell, he hadn't had a *relationship* since Whitney.

But she was trying to be successful with Hot Cakes. She wasn't doing it alone. But she didn't believe that. Or she didn't know what that really meant. Yet.

"I don't think I can keep from flirting with you," he finally confessed. "Especially when you come down here at night in your nightgown looking..." He almost said *totally fuckable*. But that would likely go on her inappropriate list. "...so sexy."

Then he cringed slightly. That was a little better, but he probably should have said "beautiful." Or maybe not have said anything at all about how she looked.

He shrugged before she could say anything. "It's going to be impossible for me to not notice how you look, Whit."

She blew out a breath. "Which is another reason this is a bad idea."

"Because it tempts you?"

Her eyes flashed. “Because I should get to come down to *my* kitchen in whatever I want to wear and not worry about getting hit on.” Then she took another breath. “I’m not used to having guests.”

He didn’t want her to think of him as a guest. That was for fucking sure. And he wasn’t *hitting on* her. That sounded like they were two strangers meeting for the first time in a bar or something.

They were hardly strangers.

Aren’t you? a tiny voice whispered at the back of his mind. Yeah, maybe they were. They’d been apart for years. And a lot had happened to them both in that time.

There was something else niggling at him. The way she kept seeming to calm herself. She’d never had a temper. Not that he’d seen anyway. She’d never snapped at him. Hell, he wasn’t sure they’d ever fought. They might have disagreed a few times, but they’d never had an actual argument. He’d never made her cry. He’d never laid awake at night regretting something he’d said. They’d never raised their voices.

Not until the end. They’d fought the night she’d broken up with him. She’d cried. He’d laid awake that night. He’d regretted more than a few things from that night.

But the idea of an angry Whitney was intriguing. If he could talk about bending her over her desk and licking cookie dough off her nipples, then she could certainly tell him if she thought he was being an asshole.

Not this “inappropriate” or “uncomfortable” stuff. Those words made him itchy. They weren’t right between them. But she could definitely be angry or frustrated.

“Are you actually uncomfortable around me?” he finally asked. He didn’t think it was true but he needed *her* to know it wasn’t true.

He couldn’t quite name the emotion that flickered across her face with that. It was surprise maybe, mixed with confusion. And maybe relief?

“Not exactly.”

“We still have chemistry.”

She swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“But you don’t want it. You’re afraid of it.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know if I’d say that.”

“You do want it?” He knew that wasn’t what she meant.

“I’m not *afraid* of it.”

Good. That was really fucking good. “You just want to ignore it.”

“Yes.”

“But I’m pushing you on it, making you feel it and face it.”

She shifted her weight again and her hand tightened on the sheet where she was holding it between her breasts. “Yes,” she finally said.

“And that doesn’t make you *uncomfortable*. It makes you mad.”

She met his eyes. “Yes,” she said after a moment.

“Then tell me that,” he said.

She just pressed her lips together.

“Don’t try to make it polite and business-like,” he said. “Tell me how you *really* feel.”

“You’re my boss,” she said.

For fuck’s sake. “Not in this house, I’m not,” he said, letting his own exasperation show.

Her eyes widened. “You’re my boss no matter where we are.”

He shoved a hand through his hair. “No. I’m not even really your boss at Hot Cakes and you know that.”

“Do I?”

“Of course you do. You know I’m not going to fire you. Even if I wanted to, which I don’t because I’m not a fucking idiot, the guys would never let me do it.”

Again emotion flickered over her face. It looked like she really wanted to believe him but didn't quite.

"I don't want to give you all *any* reason to think I'm not up to the job."

"Your job is safe." He was trying hard not to grit his teeth. She'd never been this obstinate before.

She's not the same girl, that annoying voice whispered.

Yeah, yeah.

"Even if I *don't* sleep with you?" she asked.

For just a second, the obstinate, contrary part of *him* reared its head and he wanted to tell her that she was absolutely required to be in his bed every single night. The job was that important to her? Then fine, he'd use that to his advantage.

But, of course, he didn't say that. He would never say that.

"What happens outside of the office has nothing to do with your job," he said.

Though that was maybe not entirely true either. Because the more he was around her, the more he wanted to be sure she stayed working for them so that he could see her every day.

"What about if something happens *at* the office?" she asked.

"If you do finally let me bend you over your desk and hike up one of those ugly skirts, then no, that will have nothing to do with your job," he said, unable to hold back.

Her eyes narrowed at that. "I meant what if I tell you one of your ideas is terrible or tell you that you're being an asshole in the office sometime?"

His brows rose. "Your job would still be safe," he said. "In fact, if I do have a terrible idea or I'm acting like an asshole then you *better* tell me."

She didn't look entirely convinced but she didn't say that she didn't believe him either.

"Tell me that right now," he challenged.

She chewed on her bottom lip.

He moved around the edge of the kitchen island, closer to her. “Whitney. Tell me right now what you’re feeling.”

“This is a terrible idea,” she said softly.

He nodded. “Okay.”

For a second she looked a little sad. Then she lifted her chin again. “And it’s an asshole thing to do to text me about cookie dough and nipples when I’m trying to go to sleep.”

He stopped moving but not truly outside of her personal space. He could reach out and touch her easily.

“So I should do it earlier in the evening going forward?” he asked.

She shook her head but there was a ghost of a smile on her lips. “Not what I meant.”

“*Tell me* what you mean,” he said.

She swallowed. “Fine. I want you. I know that doesn’t surprise you and I know it’s just going to make your ego even bigger but, yes, I want you. Yes, there’s chemistry. But I want to do a great job at Hot Cakes too. Maybe more.” She didn’t seem entirely sure of that, however. “Even if it doesn’t affect my actual job, even if you wouldn’t fire me if we had a fight at home or whatever, it affects my performance because it distracts me and makes me jumpy and makes it hard to concentrate on work. I want to do a good job for *me* too, Cam. I haven’t had a chance to prove myself to others before, but at the same time I haven’t had a chance to prove myself to me either. Because I’ve never been able to really implement my ideas or projects, I don’t actually know if they’re good. I think they are. They seem to be. But...” She pressed her lips together. “Ollie thinks my ideas are good.”

“Of course he does,” Cam said.

“But Ollie also thought having a petting zoo at the cake tasting was a good idea,” she said.

Cam couldn’t help his grin. “Everyone loved the petting zoo.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, implementing ideas, actually *doing* the things I think up, is new to me. I have no idea if I’m actually good at any of this.”

“You are.”

“You have *no* idea if that’s true,” she said. “And you have to stop saying it until you do. Don’t placate me. Don’t compliment me because you want in my pants. Just let me do my job and do it the best I can and let’s see how it turns out.”

She had a point.

Dammit.

He figured she was good at it, but honestly, if she hadn’t had much to do with Hot Cakes other than having her name associated because of her family then... well, maybe she *wasn’t* good at it. He didn’t believe that, really, but she had a point about wanting to prove it. To them and to herself.

This was important to her for *her* too.

“Fine,” he finally conceded. “No more compliments on your work until you prove yourself.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“But I can still say that you look hot as hell wrapped in a sheet with your hair up like that?”

Heat flickered in her eyes. The only sign that he wasn’t way off base here.

Still, she shook her head. “No, you can’t say that.”

“Because it makes you uncomfortable?” he asked.

She hesitated, then said, “Because it makes me think about how hot *you* would look wrapped in only a sheet.”

That hit him with heat but also satisfaction. She wasn’t uncomfortable with their chemistry. She was distracted. That was okay.

“I would look really good wrapped in only a sheet. Down low. Around my waist.”

She pulled in a long breath. “Stop it.”

He grinned. “Okay.”

Her gaze tracked over his torso, then she sighed. “Asshole thing to do before I go back upstairs.”

She could take that thought with her when she went back upstairs to bed. He wasn’t apologetic about the idea of keeping her awake for a bit.

“Not sorry.”

“I know.”

Then she narrowed her eyes again. Though this time it seemed she was just thinking about something. “So I can do whatever I want? Say whatever I want? No consequences? No issues?”

He hesitated for some reason, but then nodded, mostly curious. He wanted her to be totally honest with him. He wanted her to feel free to feel and think anything and to tell him. “Yep.”

“Okay.” She stepped close, took the front of his shirt in her fist, rose on tiptoe and kissed him.

It was the first time their lips had been against the others in a decade. Far, far too long. Which had to be why it took him a good three seconds to respond. Just as he was lifting his hand to cup the back of her head and deepen the contact, she pulled back, smiled up at him, and then turned and left the kitchen.

He stood staring at the doorway for a good minute, his hand suspended in the air.

She’d tasted like toothpaste. She’d smelled like soap. Not a specific aroma, just soap. Clean and fresh and sweet.

But mostly she’d *felt* like... home.

He had never forgotten what it felt like to hold her, to kiss her, to make her laugh, to taste her—all over—and it all slammed into him in those moments after she left him in the kitchen.

It was like when memories came flooding back when he heard a song from the past or tasted one of his mom’s recipes

he hadn't had in a long time or when he saw one of the photos that hung on the wall on the way up the stairs to his childhood bedroom.

It was as real as if it had just happened and yet seemed a little like a dream.

Holy hell.

He wanted more of that. A lot more.

Yeah, moving in with Whitney and her grandmother on a whim had to be the best idea he'd ever had.

Grinning and feeling pretty fucking good about everything, he wrapped and stored the cookie dough in the fridge for baking tomorrow and cleaned up.

A few minutes later, he clicked the light off and started down the hall to the staircase.

He heard footsteps coming down as he got to the foyer. His heart kicked against his ribs. Had Whitney changed her mind about leaving him with just one kiss?

"Whit?" he asked softly.

"No," came the answering not-quite-a-whisper.

He smiled into the darkness. "Hey, Didi."

"Hi, honey."

"You okay?"

"Sure."

He heard a step creak as she came down further.

"What are you doing?"

"My show is on."

It was eleven at night. He doubted her show, whatever it was, was on. But Whitney had mentioned that Didi was up at odd hours.

"Which show?"

"*Magnum, P.I.*"

Cam grinned. Okay, so maybe there were reruns on. “The old one or the new?”

“There’s a new one?” she asked.

“Yeah. They remade it.”

Didi stopped on the third step up and he could now see her with the light spilling in through the tall windows on either side of the front door from the lamps on the porch.

“Why in the world would they remake it? Tom Selleck can’t be replaced.”

He had kind of figured she’d feel that way. His mother did. “The new guy is pretty handsome,” Cam told her. “According to my sources.”

“Hmph,” Didi said. “I’m not interested.”

“You don’t even want to check it out? Dark hair. Lots of muscles. Really nice cars.”

She hesitated. “Well…”

He grinned. “It won’t hurt to watch an episode or two.”

“I suppose.”

“And I assume you like Tom Selleck’s new show then? *Blue Bloods*?” he asked.

“Tom Selleck has a new show?”

“He does. Pretty popular.”

“Can you find that one too?”

“I absolutely can.” If Whitney didn’t already have all the streaming services needed, Cam could fix that in about two minutes.

“I knew having you move in was the right thing to do,” Didi said. She came the rest of the way down the steps.

“Oh… now?” he asked. “How about we watch tomorrow?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, moving past him to head down the hall to the family room. “We’re both awake, we might as well do it now.”

Cam heard another creak on the steps and he glanced up. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dark, he could see more clearly. Though obviously it was Whitney. There was no one else in the house.

“She wants to watch *Magnum, P.I.*?” Whitney asked.

“Yeah. Is that the usual routine?”

“Yeah. She’s seen all the episodes a dozen times but...” She sighed. “She doesn’t remember them so they’re all new to her.”

He smiled slightly. “That’s kind of great. I’d love to see some of my favorite shows and movies for the first time again.”

“Yeah, well, *I’ve* also seen them all a dozen times now. It’s not so great.”

He gave a small laugh. “Then it really *is* great that I’m here. I’ve never seen a single episode of *Magnum, P.I.* Old or new.”

“She’ll be up until three a.m., Cam.” Whitney sounded exhausted just thinking about it.

“But then she sleeps in late tomorrow right?” he asked.

“She’ll sleep past ten. Probably. Though...”

He could see that she was chewing on her bottom lip. “What?”

“This will sound bad.”

“Come on, Whit. Tell me.”

“Okay, I put a bell on her doorknob when she goes to bed so I can hear her when she gets up.”

“Seems like a good idea. Why do you think that sounds bad?”

“It’s something people do for little kids. I feel bad that sometimes I use techniques like that.”

Cam moved to stand directly at the bottom of the steps. Whitney was five steps up but this way he could see her fully.

And she could see him. “You’re doing it to keep her safe,” he said. “You’re not harming her in any way. And it probably helps you sleep more soundly because you’re not worrying about what she’s getting up to.”

She nodded.

“So stop feeling bad. It’s all good. And now tonight you can put some earplugs in or put some music on or something and sleep like a baby. I’ve got this.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Does it make you like me a little more? Make you a little softer toward me? Make you a tiny bit closer to wanting to take your clothes off with me?” he asked lightly.

He could see her fighting her smile even from five steps away. “The first two things, yes.”

“Not the naked thing?” he asked, lifting a brow.

“Well, I already want to take my clothes off with you, so this doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with that.”

Okay, he had not been expecting that. But he liked it. *A lot*. He grinned. “Of course you would say that when there’s a sweet little lady wide awake and wanting to watch TV—”

Just then the clatter of a tea kettle hitting the floor broke the relative quiet of the house.

“And needing some assistance in the kitchen,” he finished with a little grimace.

Whitney laughed. “If you think I wasn’t completely aware of the situation when I made that confession, you’re crazy.”

“I’m not going to forget it,” he told her, his voice husky.

There was just a beat and then she said, “I know.”

She turned and headed back upstairs.

Cam appreciated that she was going to let him do this—stay up and take care of Didi. That was why he was here, of course. Well, one reason. But, while she’d resisted at first,

once they got over all her arguments, she was now letting it go.

She was either totally trusting him—or she was really exhausted.

He couldn't imagine staying up until 3 a.m. every day and then getting to the office by eight. It was possible that before the guys had taken over Hot Cakes that she'd come in later, but she was always there well before he strolled in at nine. She was trying to impress them. She didn't know that early birds weren't the guys' style. Though Aiden had been showing up earlier at the office since he'd been with Zoe. Grant probably would be too now that he was living with Josie. The girls went into the bakery at 6 a.m.

Still, no one judged anyone else for what time they got to work. Well, not beyond the usual ribbing about what—or who—had kept the guy up late the night before and had him guzzling coffee the next morning.

Of course, that had all changed a lot too. Three of the guys were now in serious relationships and Cam did *not* want to hear about what Aiden and Zoe had been up to late at night.

He heard another clatter from the kitchen and he headed in that direction before the sounds changed from the sound a tea kettle against the ceramic tile to something more like a tea *cup* hitting the floor.

“Let me get that,” he said, taking the kettle from Didi where she was filling it with water. “I assume you like chocolate chip cookies?”

She gave him a wide-eyed look. “Who doesn't like chocolate chip cookies?”

He nodded. “Weirdos.”

“Exactly. Never trust someone who doesn't like cookies.”

“Sage advice.” He filled the kettle and set it on the stove.

He could have made her tea from the Keurig sitting on the counter about a foot away from the stove, but he figured Didi was a lot like Letty had been.

His grandmother always maintained that cutting corners was for things like shopping for pants and dusting bookshelves. She said when you found pants you liked, you bought two pairs in every color and were done with it for a good long while. She also kept her books at the front edge of the shelf so she only had to dust the tops of the books. As she said, no one ever looked *behind* the books.

But cutting corners was never for food preparation. That included tea.

He got Didi settled in front of the TV. He started *Magnum, P.I.* at season one, episode one. If she didn't remember them anyway and he was going to be watching with her, he might as well see it from the beginning.

He could see her and the TV from the kitchen with the open-concept design of the less formal rooms at the back of the massive house. He put the cookies in the oven as the first episode rolled. Didi sat on one end of the sofa with a blanket covering her lap and her tea cup cradled between her hands. She looked completely content and Cam smiled. It was late at night, but otherwise there was nothing wrong with this. And Lord knew he'd spent plenty of nights up late reading briefs or writing proposals or exchanging snarky emails with the attorneys for other companies who put in similar long hours when needed.

"I'm so glad Whitney finally has someone to appreciate her," Didi commented as he joined her on the couch. "Besides me, of course."

"I absolutely do," Cam said sincerely.

"Good. Fuck her father and brothers."

Cam snorted. Didi's words made him feel amused, for sure. But also... protective. No one was going to treat Whitney the way her father and brothers had any more. Yeah, fuck her dad and brothers.

He smiled at Didi and she returned the grin. Then she looked back at the TV. "Okay, shh... Tom Selleck is on."

Yeah, he and Didi were going to be fine.

Chapter Eleven



“What if we make them in the shape of alpacas?” Ollie asked.

Whitney looked at him. She still wasn’t entirely sure how to tell when Ollie was being serious. Though she was starting to learn that he was always about half serious. He threw ideas out and left it to his partners to decide which ones would stick and which ones were ridiculous. But he never said things he didn’t mean at least a little.

“You think we should make the new bars in the shape of alpacas?” Grant asked.

“Why not?” Ollie asked. But when he asked the question he sincerely wanted to know the reasons why that might be a bad idea. “Everyone loves alpacas.”

“I do *not* think that’s true,” Aiden said.

“Okay, *most* people like alpacas,” Ollie countered.

“The petting zoo was a huge success,” Piper said, handing Grant a folder.

She wasn’t officially part of the meeting but she never hesitated to give her input. And her input was always excellent. Whitney couldn’t figure out why the guys hadn’t made Piper a business partner yet. Of course, they needed her in the role she held, keeping track of everything and everyone. Maybe that was it. They certainly paid her well for it. Whitney had seen her employee file. She saw all the employee files. But over the past few months it had been clear that Piper earned every single penny.

“I don’t know if it was *huge*,” Ollie said with a little frown.

Aiden nodded. “Oh, it was.”

Piper gave Ollie a smug smile.

Now that Whitney knew the petting zoo had been Piper’s idea and had stemmed mostly from the fact that she thought Drew Ryan was cute—and she liked making Ollie jealous—Whitney rolled her eyes.

“These are the caramel crunch bars we’re talking about, right?” Dax asked.

Whitney was glad Dax still came in for the 9 a.m. meeting. He was fun to have around, had great ideas, and she’d noticed that when all five guys were together, they were much more creative and relaxed.

Of course, they were missing Cam today. Again. This was day three of Cam living with her and Didi. And missing the morning meeting at Hot Cakes. Because of her.

Well, because of Didi. Actually because of *him*. He was the one who had decided to insert himself into their situation. So she didn’t feel guilty exactly. But as someone who wanted Hot Cakes to be the very best it could be, she was aware that they were missing a piece of their puzzle.

Ollie nodded. “Yeah, the new bars.”

“So they’ll be brown—because of the chocolate,” Dax said. “And a little lumpy because of the crispy-crunchy pieces.”

Ollie shrugged. “Yeah.”

“And then you want to make them look like an animal.”

Ollie frowned. “What are you getting at?”

“Alpaca poop,” Dax said. “That’s what I’m getting at. They could remind people of alpaca poop.”

“I thought you liked alpacas,” Ollie said.

“Love them.”

“So...”

“But they poop, Ollie.” Dax shrugged.

“But they’ll be *shaped* like alpacas,” Ollie said. “Not like poop.”

“Sure. But the color and texture could be reminiscent of poop. Add in the animal shape and it might put that thought in people’s heads,” Dax said.

“It might just be you,” Ollie told him.

“No, I think he has a point,” Piper said, picking up plates that had held muffins from Buttered Up.

It was a really good thing that they’d smoothed over the tension between the two businesses if for nothing else than because it meant they could have breakfast pastries at morning meetings now. Zoe’s muffins and scones were amazing.

“You’re just saying that because you’re being contrary,” Ollie said.

Piper gave him a look with one arched brow. “I am?”

“You are,” he said with a frown. “You’re disagreeing with everything I’ve said lately.”

“Maybe you’ve been wrong a lot lately,” Piper said.

“I figured you would love the alpaca idea,” Ollie replied. “What with your new fascination with the Ryan farm and all.”

“That’s sweet of you to think of me,” Piper said with a big—totally fake—smile. “But my *fascination* with the farm isn’t really about the alpacas.”

Ollie’s frown deepened. “Should we just make the new bars look like Drew Ryan then?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Piper said.

Ollie relaxed slightly. Whitney was probably the only one who noticed, but she’d been watching him carefully. He was jealous of Drew. She just wondered if he realized *why*. Did he know that he had feelings for Piper? Oliver Caprinelli was brilliant but he seemed oblivious to everything having to do

with Piper and *her* feelings for *him*, and, for some reason, Whitney wouldn't be surprised to find out that Ollie didn't even realize that he was annoyed by Drew because *Ollie* was in love with Piper himself.

"If we were going to make Drew into a snack cake it would be *devil's food* with a *sweet, smooth, creamy*, filling." She paused. "And it would have to be *jumbo* sized."

Whitney pressed her lips together to keep from laughing and Grant, Aiden, and Dax all swung to look at Ollie.

Clearly those guys realized that Ollie had some feelings besides appreciation or admiration for his assistant.

"We already have chocolate cake with cream filling," Ollie finally said.

It was not a great comeback. But it was very funny. To everyone else.

Piper just nodded. "Yes, we do." She looked at Aiden and pointed at his computer. "By the way, Cam is joining via video."

Aiden opened his laptop and clicked a few buttons. "Hey, man," he greeted a moment later.

"Hey," Cam's voice returned. "Sorry I'm late."

"No problem. We're discussing the shape of the new snack bars."

When it was said like that, it sounded stupid, Whitney had to admit.

Aiden turned the computer to face the rest of the table.

"We should give Cam a chance to weigh in on the shape," Ollie said. Though he didn't look like he actually cared what Cam thought. He was watching Piper as she moved around the room. "What do you think of alpacas?"

"Um," Cam said.

"No," Grant said. "Dax has a good point about the poop."

"The poop?" Cam echoed.

Aiden sighed. “Yeah, maybe you did miss a few things.”

“Alpacas,” Ollie said, his eyes still on Piper. “The new bars—”

“That will look like poop,” Dax interjected.

“Should be shaped like alpacas,” Ollie finished.

Piper faced him with a hand on her hip. “I thought that we’d already—”

“It will be far more cost effective to keep them squares or rectangles,” Whitney said quickly.

Everyone stopped talking and looked at her.

“We’re already set up to do squares and rectangles. And circles, of course,” she said.

Grant nodded. “Good point.”

“Squares and rectangles are boring,” Dax said. “No offense,” he added to Whitney.

She smiled. “None taken.” It wasn’t as if she’d been the one to decide the shapes of their snack cakes. Then again, she doubted much thought had been given to it at all. Back when her grandparents had started Hot Cakes there probably hadn’t been a lot of shape options in the big machines they’d installed to make their cakes. “But it really will cost less to keep doing the shapes we’ve already got. No need to reconfigure the machines that way.”

Grant and Aiden both nodded. Looking slightly relieved if she wasn’t mistaken.

“How quickly can we get the new bars into production?” Aiden asked. “If we stick with common shapes?”

The question was directed to Whitney. Of course it was. None of the other people in the room knew as much about snack cake production as she did.

She nodded. “Keeping with the common shapes will cut that time down dramatically as well. A couple of weeks,” she said. “It’s less about making the snack cakes themselves—we have the base recipe and can pretty easily adjust it for mass

production and shelf life—but it’s about the process of transitioning machines.” She looked around the table. They all seemed interested, and as if they weren’t sure what she was talking about.

No one else said anything.

So she went on. Trying very hard not to fidget. Or look at Aiden’s computer. Too much. She felt Cam’s eyes on her though, even through that screen. It was all made stranger because he was sitting in her kitchen at the breakfast bar. Where he’d offered to lick her nipples...

“Whitney? You were saying something about the Cinnamon Curls?” Grant asked.

See? *This* was why it was a problem for her to be involved with Cam. She’d get distracted in the middle of explaining that the Cinnamon Curls were their lowest selling cakes so that machine could possibly be used part-time for the new bars, but that because the new bars were chocolate and the Cinnamon Curls were not it would be a bigger transition than using a machine that already used chocolate.

She blew out a breath. She was *not* going to think about Cam and her breakfast bar and that he probably *really* hated what she was wearing today. It was all gray.

“Right. As I was saying...”

She explained how adding this new product would affect their production line. It could mean decreased production of other cakes, that they needed a plan to transition existing machinery, that it might mean increased shifts for workers and the need to hire additional employees, that they might need new equipment entirely, and even an addition to the factory. No matter what or how they did it, it would mean more manpower and money.

Grant was nodding as she finished, and Aiden sat forward in his chair.

“That all makes sense to me,” Aiden said.

“Do you think we can draw up some projections?” Grant asked.

She nodded. “Of course.”

“Great,” Aiden said. “Just let us know where we should start.”

Whitney lifted her brows. He was just going with it? She felt a moment of panic. They were just going to trust her completely? They didn’t have any questions? No concerns? No alternatives to offer?

“Unless I’m missing something,” she said.

She wasn’t. She’d sat in on meetings about production dozens of times. They’d never launched a new snack cake but they’d upped production on most of the cakes in their product line. They’d expanded to new markets and needed to meet that increased demand.

She’d always found the meetings pretty boring and wouldn’t have believed that she’d absorbed much knowledge from them, but it had all made sense. If you needed more cakes, for whatever reason, you needed to be sure you had the machines for it and the people to run those machines.

“I don’t think you’re missing anything,” Aiden told her. “We need a machine to produce the new cakes and we need more people. Seems easiest to use what we already have until we see what the demand is like.”

She nodded. It did. It was pretty straightforward.

“And I don’t think hiring will be a problem,” she said, not sure why she felt the need to throw that out there. “Everyone here is talking about the great changes you’ve already made to benefits and work shifts and such. We’ve had more applications coming in than usual.”

The men all smiled at that and she realized why she’d said it. It really mattered to these guys that their employees were happy and that they had a reputation as good guys to work for. She liked that about them so much.

Dax looked especially pleased. “Awesome.”

She also liked how much it mattered to him even though he was no longer one of their bosses. He’d been a huge part of

the changes they'd made for their employees from benefits to work environment.

“We should offer a couple dollars more an hour for the later shift, of course. We can have a job fair. But—” Then she hesitated.

These were big decisions. She did *not* want to get too far ahead or in too deep in case things didn't work.

“But?” Aiden prompted.

Whitney took a breath. She'd known Aiden for a long time. He was Cam's best friend. He'd been one of the few people who had known about her and Cam in high school. He'd kept their secret for a very long time. He had Cam's back whether he agreed with every decision or not. He was a great friend.

She wanted him to be her friend.

The thought seemed to come from out of the blue. It seemed misplaced in the midst of a business meeting. But these meetings always showcased how these people fit together. They each had strengths and weaknesses and they balanced each other almost perfectly. They'd found each other and together had created not just a wildly successful business partnership but an enviable friendship.

And she wanted to be a part of it. She wanted to fit somewhere the way they all did.

Aiden had come back to Appleby for Zoe. He'd bought Hot Cakes as part of his new life. And the rest of them had come with him. To help him. To support him. To back him up. But also because they probably couldn't imagine being in Chicago without him.

She didn't have anyone following her. She didn't have anyone staying for her. Hell, her family—the people she'd given *her* dedication to—had left to go to Dallas, leaving her here.

She supposed she could have gone with them. But they hadn't asked her to.

“But what, Whit?” Aiden asked.

She did *not* want to screw this up. They were trusting her to know how they should move forward with this new product. What she knew came from listening in and observing. She’d never actually *done* it. She’d never really done anything. She’d led a few meetings, met with a few accounts, gone to a few conferences, but she hadn’t really led anything important. Certainly not launching an entirely new product including everything from the recipe to the labor needed.

This whole new-snack-cake thing had been her idea.

And they’d ended up with alpacas at the taste-testing event.

She swallowed. “I just think we should start small,” she said. “Maybe we can transition one of the machines for a night shift three nights a week. We’ll offer overtime and hire a small crew and let them know it’s temporary work for now. I don’t want them to think they’re coming on full time if it doesn’t take off the way we’d like.”

Aiden watched her for several seconds. Then he nodded. “Whatever you think.”

She felt her gut tighten. That might have been the worst thing he could have said.

Grant glanced from Aiden to Whitney then back before he nodded. “We’ll follow your lead, Whitney.”

Her gut tightened even further and she felt a little sick.

Whitney forced herself to take a deep breath. She needed to relax. This was how a new product launched. Probably. They had to actually *launch* the product to see how it went. It couldn’t be successful if they didn’t put it out there.

She never should have pitched the idea of a new snack cake to the guys. Or she should have gotten all of this together before she did. Why hadn’t *they* asked about all of this before they put together a big event to choose what kind of snack cake they’d be adding? Obviously they needed machines to *make* whatever it was. And packaging. And a name for it.

She felt her heart racing.

They hadn't asked because they didn't know how to do this. They'd been trusting her to do it. They'd been following her lead. *She* was the one who should have known the proper steps to take and what all they needed to do.

Fuck.

"Cam!" A voice called on the computer. A voice Whitney knew very well. "I need the food processor!"

Cam met Whitney's eyes through the computer screen. "She does *not* need the food processor."

Whitney felt a little tension leave her shoulders as she smiled. "No, no she does not."

"I can't make guacamole without it!" Didi called.

"You most certainly can!" he called back. "Hand mashed guac is the way to go. As we discussed this morning."

"So you *hid* the food processor from me? In my own house?" Didi demanded.

"Yes. But I'm not sure I needed to," he told her, "since you're looking for it in the bathroom!"

"Are you making fun of me having memory problems?" Didi asked.

He grinned. "Of course not." He turned back to the group. "I need to go." He disconnected without waiting for anyone to say anything.

Whitney wasn't sure if she should laugh, or hide under the table, or head straight home.

The guys all laughed as Aiden closed his laptop.

"I so fucking love that he's being kept on his toes all day and that it's a seventy-something-year-old woman doing it," Dax said, shaking his head.

"Cam and Didi Lancaster," Aiden said. "I did not see that one coming." His gaze landed on Whitney. "This is... an interesting development."

“Talk about grand gestures,” Dax agreed.

Whitney suddenly found herself ready to tell everyone what was going on. That was weird. She recognized it was very unlike her—or anyone in her family—to tell personal details, especially to work acquaintances. But she still heard herself saying, “My grandmother is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. She needs someone with her for all but very short periods. She didn’t like the woman I hired, so during their dessert date she talked Cam into being her companion until she moves into Sunny Orchard.”

They all took a moment to process that.

Aiden was the first to speak. “I’m sorry, Whit.”

“Thanks. It’s been hard,” she admitted. “But I know it’s going to get worse. I’m grateful she’s excited about Sunny Orchard,” she said to Dax. “That will be better for her. But we’re just in this in-between stage right now since my family went to Dallas.” She frowned. It wasn’t as if her family had been a ton of help when they’d been here, honestly. A lot of it had still fallen to Whitney and she and Didi had both preferred it that way. But Whitney had been left out of so much at Hot Cakes that she never felt that she was missing anything at the office by not being there.

“You’re okay with Cam being there?” Aiden asked.

She glanced up, refocusing on the men around the table. She wasn’t missing out now. In fact, they were all looking to her to lead them through this next stage.

She should have kept her mouth shut about a new product until Didi was settled at Sunny Orchard. She’d just gotten caught up in excitement and things had snowballed with the brainstorming with Ollie and... she hadn’t expected them to listen to her, honestly. She’d tossed it out there the way she had a dozen other ideas over the years with her family, but she was so used to those ideas barely making a blip on anyone’s radar that she hadn’t been prepared for anyone to actually say, “Let’s do it!”

“What do you mean?” she asked Aiden. Now that she was really looking at him, she saw there was something in his expression that looked almost like concern.

“Cam can be damned pushy and stubborn as fuck,” Aiden said bluntly, sitting forward.

Whitney straightened.

“If you don’t want him there, we’ll get him out,” Aiden told her. He looked at Grant.

Grant nodded. “Just say the word. We can deal with him.”

Whitney’s eyes widened. She felt a strange surge of an emotion that was hard to name. They were... protecting her? Coming to her defense? Willing to “deal with” one of their best friends for her? That felt good in a weird way. She really didn’t have people taking care of her. Other than Didi. And even then there had been a lot of “pick your battles” advice from her grandmother. The idea that these guys would be on her side rather than Cam’s was surprising and really nice.

But there were no sides here. That was the truth. She just did not want these men to get into a conflict with Cam. There was no need. She wasn’t upset with Cam. Now.

“No. It’s... okay.”

Aiden shook his head. “I’m not sure it is.”

Whitney felt her head shaking as well. “No. Honestly it is.”

Even before the kiss, it had gotten okay. But since the kiss... well, she wanted him to stick around. It hadn’t even been a *kiss*. She wanted a *kiss* now. Which was really stupid and a pretty great way to ensure that she made a really big mistake—an even bigger mistake than kissing him in the first place. But she was sure of one thing...she didn’t want him to leave.

“When he first told me about helping with Didi, I thought he was crazy, I’ll admit. But you should hear him explain it.” She gave them a grin.

Aiden didn't smile back. "Cam can convince most people of most things. It makes him an amazing attorney."

She lifted a brow. "You think he somehow tricked me into this?"

"When Cam wants something, he gets it," Dax said. He said it in a very matter-of-fact way.

"So he wants to help my grandmother out," Whitney said.

Dax gave her a look. "I don't think that's all he wants."

"Oh, Cam will be great with Didi." Piper swept back into the room. She proceeded to set cold bottles of water in front of each of them.

None of them had asked for water, but three of the four men reached for the bottles right away. Whitney smiled, amazed by the dynamic. Either Piper could *sense* when the guys were thirsty even from fifty feet away, or the guys just assumed they were thirsty if Piper was giving them water.

"You think so?" Ollie asked. "Cam doesn't seem like the... nurturing type."

Piper shrugged. "Exactly."

"What do you mean?" Ollie asked.

"I'm guessing a woman who started her own company and helped grow it into a multimillion dollar company isn't the type to want nurturing," Piper said. "If she's in the early stages, then she's probably aware of the fact that she's forgetting things or that usual tasks are more difficult now. The last thing she'll want is to be *taken care of*. She'll understand that she needs to be safe and she needs some help. So why not choose a hot guy who's funny and who can be sweet, but who won't coddle her, to spend time with if she has the chance?"

"Cam can be sweet?" Ollie asked. "I haven't really noticed that."

"He can be very sweet," Piper confirmed.

"Give me three examples."

“He sent a plant to Conner Daniels when his father passed away.”

Ollie looked surprised. “He did? Or *you* did?”

“He did. He asked me for a florist but he even made the call.”

“Isn’t Conner the lawyer who sued us over the use of the name Vandragon Dungeons?” Dax asked.

Whitney could have kissed Dax. On the cheek of course. But she was so glad he’d clarified who Conner was so *she* wouldn’t ask. She knew she should *not* be, or act, interested in Cam and details like who he was sending plants to, but dammit, she was.

“Tried to,” Grant said with a nod. “Cam won. Of course. But yeah, he and Conner were absolutely *not* friends.”

“See?” Piper said to Ollie. “That was sweet. They were on opposite sides in business and Cam kicked his ass, but he still sent his condolences over a personal issue.”

Ollie narrowed his eyes. “Fine. Two more.”

“The donations he makes to Appleby.”

“You mean the donations he makes that get his name in big block letters on the side of things?” Aiden asked with a smile.

Okay, Whitney knew about those. He’d donated money to build the youth sports complex, and that did, indeed, have his name—his last name anyway—on the side of it. He’d also donated to various projects around town when the community needed something but had trouble coming up with the funds.

“Those,” Piper said. “But also the scholarships, the medical bills, the service dog training.”

Whitney glanced around the table and saw that Cam’s friends looked as surprised as she felt.

“The what?” Aiden finally asked.

Piper nodded. “He has a foundation where people can apply for funds for all kinds of things. Help paying medical bills or help buying a handicapped accessible van or anything

like that.” She looked smug. “He never makes a big deal about that.”

Clearly. Whitney had never heard about any of that.

“He knows that the people needing the funds don’t want to make their needs public and he’s fine just helping out behind the scenes. Believe it or not,” she added with a little smile.

“Huh,” Ollie finally said.

“Sweet, right?” Piper asked. Her eyes met Whitney’s.

Dammit, that was sweet.

“Fine,” Ollie conceded. “One more.”

“You think he gets stupid drunk after seeing Whitney every time he comes home because he’s emotionless and cold-hearted?” Piper asked.

Whitney felt her chest tighten.

“Only a guy who’s *sweet*, down deep anyway, would still have get-drunk feelings for a girl ten years later,” Piper said.

Now Whitney’s throat tightened too.

She didn’t get drunk after she’d seen him, but she knew exactly how he felt.

“Fine,” Ollie said. “I guess *maybe* he has a sweet side.” He rolled his eyes.

Piper laughed. “He does. But he’ll be good with Didi. He won’t baby her and he won’t let her get away with anything that’s not safe.”

Ollie laughed. “Yeah, Cam is *not* the type to baby someone.”

Piper nodded. “He’ll make her behave.”

“How will she take that?” Dax asked Whitney.

“Well.” Whitney shrugged. “My grandpa was pretty domineering.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. But...” Whitney started actually thinking about the question. “Grandma kind of did whatever the hell she wanted anyway, honestly.”

“That sounds like Letty,” Aiden said with a small smile.

Whitney returned the smile. Aiden hadn’t been Letty’s grandson by blood, but he’d still been her grandson in the ways that counted. His mom and Cam’s had been best friends and the boys had grown up together. After Aiden’s mom had passed away when he was fourteen, he’d more or less moved in with the McCafferys. He’d spent as much time at the bakery and with Letty as Cam had, truly.

Whitney nodded. “Her motto was always *it’s easier to get forgiven than get permission*. She embezzled money from the company forever.”

All the eyebrows in the room went up. “What?” Grant asked. “How? It was *her* company.”

“Okay, it wasn’t really embezzlement,” Whitney said. “But she took money from the company that my grandfather and father never knew about. My grandfather took the business over early on, figuring he was better at the ‘money stuff’ than she was. He let her be in charge of the recipes and overseeing the bakers and production lines for the most part, but he was in charge of all the money and marketing. But she had employee loyalty and the company accountant paid money into a private account that was Didi’s alone, that my grandfather never knew about.”

They all laughed and shook their heads.

Ollie finally said, “Cam might have his hands full.”

Whitney nodded. “Seriously.”

“That’s awesome,” Dax said with a huge grin.

“Is it?” she asked. She wasn’t so sure. Not if she wanted him to stick around.

Then again, if she wanted him to leave her alone, this was maybe the perfect solution.

It did not feel like a good solution. Because she didn't want him to leave her alone.

“Yeah, it's awesome,” Ollie agreed. “Cam is pretty used to getting his way with beautiful women. I think having a couple he has to work a little harder with is perfect.”

A couple. Ollie had said a couple. That meant someone other than Didi.

Whitney did *not* ask him who else he meant.

Chapter Twelve



The doorbell rang and Cam jogged to the front door. His mom was bringing some of her homemade cleaning solutions over. He needed something to get the upstairs tubs clean and he hadn't been able to find anything good in the closets and cupboards at Whitney's. He suspected she had a cleaning service come in or that Katherine had done the cleaning and had taken the supplies with her.

He hoped Maggie included some furniture polish too.

He pulled the door open with a big smile.

But it wasn't Maggie.

He sighed.

Dax, Aiden, and Grant were on the front step. Grinning like dumbasses.

Aiden held up a plastic grocery bag. "Special delivery from Maggie."

"She asked *you* to bring it over?" Cam asked.

"No. We *totally* volunteered when we heard where she was going," Dax said. He took in Cam's appearance from head to toe, including the yellow Buttered Up apron Maggie had dropped off to him yesterday and the rubber spatula he held in his left hand. "You have a little something..." Dax pointed at his right cheek.

Cam wiped at his cheek, his hand coming away with powdered sugar. He sighed.

Dax grinned. He turned to Grant. “Yes. This was definitely a good idea.”

Grant nodded. “Oh, yeah, this makes me very happy.”

“You’re all jerks,” Cam told them, turning on his heel and heading back into the house. “Come on. I’ve got cookies in the oven. I don’t want them to burn.”

His friends followed with laughter.

“Hey, Henry!” Aiden called as they all stepped into the kitchen.

Henry waved absently over his shoulder. He and Didi were on the couch in the family room playing *Warriors of Easton*.

“Maggie said to bring him home if he’s bored or driving you nuts,” Aiden said.

“He’s fine.” Cam grinned at the back of his little brother’s head. “He’s been kicking her ass, of course, for two hours, but he’s telling her she’s winning and she’s delighted.”

Aiden grinned as he set the plastic bag of bottles and jars on the counter. “Henry would probably let her win but I’m not sure he knows *how* to lose at *Warriors*.”

Cam chuckled. “Exactly.”

He pulled on an oven mitt and crossed to the oven, taking a dozen perfectly browned lemon cookies from the rack. He set them to the side and slid another pan in, setting the timer, then pulling the mitt off and tossing it to the side.

He turned to find his friends watching him, clearly amused.

“This is very... domestic,” Dax said.

Cam lifted an eyebrow and planted his hands on his hips. “And?”

Dax nodded. “I would never have guessed you’d be house-husband material.”

Cam shrugged. That didn’t bother him at all. “I’m good at *everything* I do.”

Dax laughed. “Touché.”

“I asked Maggie if we should bring some food over. Or dessert,” Grant said. “But she said you and Didi have been over for dinner every night and that you leave before dessert because you’ve been making stuff here.”

“I have.” Cam gave him a challenging look. “My stuff is better than my mom’s.”

Dax’s eyes grew wide. “That better not be true, McCaffery.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because that means you’ve been depriving me of your goods for ten years? I might never forgive you.”

“I’ve been giving you plenty of my goods,” Cam told him. “Just not the baked kind.”

“You’re a bastard,” Dax said.

Cam grinned. “Wow, news flash.”

“I don’t know.” Aiden had come around the breakfast bar and was now lifting a cookie from the cooling rack. “Zoe thinks all of this”—he gestured, encompassing the kitchen and Didi and Henry and everything—“is really sweet.” He lifted the cookie to his mouth.

Cam plucked it from his fingers before he could bite into it. “It *is* really sweet,” he said, putting the cookie back with the rest.

“Hey.”

“What? You don’t need those cookies. You’re living with and practically married to someone who *owns a bakery*. Those are for Didi and Henry.”

“And Whitney?” Dax asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Cam grinned. Whitney never ate the desserts he made in front of him, but there were always at least a couple missing by the time he checked on them the next day. He already knew that she especially liked anything with chocolate and caramel.

But he'd bet there would be some lemon cookies missing tomorrow too.

"Whitney too," he said with a nod.

"And is the toilet bowl cleaner and dusting solution for Didi or Whitney?" Aiden asked. He swiped another cookie and quickly got it to his mouth before Cam could grab it back.

"Both," Cam said. But then he shrugged. "Mostly Whit, I guess. I mean, she'd be the one doing it, or paying to have it done, if I didn't."

Aiden chewed and swallowed. "Damn, man, you *are* good at that."

Cam smirked. Then tossed cookies to Dax and Grant too.

"So you're seducing a woman by cleaning toilets," Dax said. "I can *totally* relate to that."

"I'm *helping a friend* out with some things," Cam said.

But damn, he wanted to seduce this woman. Not with toilets. Or furniture polish for that matter.

But, yeah, maybe with cookies.

"About that," Aiden said.

"It's great," Cam told him. "We've got a routine. Didi and I start our day after Whitney's already left for work. We hang out. We go to Mom's for dinner. I bring leftovers home for Whit. She works late, so we're already upstairs by the time she gets home. She's in bed by the time Didi is up to watch *Magnum, P.I.* We stay up with cookies and reruns until two or three and then sleep in. It's working."

For now.

He hated not seeing Whitney more. That part wasn't really going according to plan. But he was fine keeping things running at home and, it was clearly allowing Whitney to do some pretty awesome things at Hot Cakes.

And he couldn't get over the look on her face during that meeting.

She'd looked worried. Almost scared. As if she was suddenly realizing she was in over her head and was panicking a little.

It was true the guys were giving her full lead on... well, everything. And, from what he'd gleaned from both Whitney and Didi, she hadn't had that before.

So he was doing what he could to make work all she needed to focus on.

Even if that meant there was no time or attention for him, either.

"Oh, hot damn!" Didi crowed from the room off the kitchen.

"You're really good at this," Henry said.

The men all laughed, assuming he was just trying to make her feel good.

"I was always a fast runner," Didi said. "Way faster than your grandma. But she was a better climber."

"He has to keep pausing it," Cam told the others. "She wants to keep telling him stories about when she and Letty were kids. I just overheard about the first time they baked cookies for a tea party and burned them but were determined to make them seem delicious so their mothers wouldn't tell them they couldn't bake anymore so they ate them all anyway."

Cam had felt a strange urge to yell into the living room to wait for him. He wanted to hear stories about his grandmother as a little girl.

"Like the other night at dinner," Aiden said with a grin.

"I couldn't believe when Jane and Josie and Zoe followed Didi and Henry into the living room after dinner instead of heading out to the patio," Dax said, his smile affectionate.

Usually the girls went out to the back patio with spiked lemonade or wine while the guys cleaned up after dinner. Instead, Zoe, Josie, and Jane had followed Didi and Henry into

the family room where they were going to resume the *Warriors of Easton* game they'd started before dinner.

Didi had talked almost nonstop through dinner, telling stories about her and Letty, stories about the early days in the bakery, and even stories about the origins of Hot Cakes. She'd laughed and smiled through it all, seeming lost in her memories and very nostalgic about Letty. Even the chicken had reminded her of her old friend.

It had instantly endeared her to all of the McCafferys and their friends, and within minutes any awkwardness was gone. And having the woman they'd all spent years believing was their family's nemesis passing the chicken and potatoes around Maggie's dining room table seemed completely normal.

"She reminds me so much of my grandma," Cam agreed. He looked at Aiden. "Her sense of humor is almost identical. And she is a handful."

Aiden nodded. Letty had been his adopted grandma just as Maggie and Steve had been fill-in parents after his mom had died and his dad had disappeared into his work and his bottle of liquor. He grinned. "She kept you on your toes today?"

She most certainly had. "The crash you heard on the phone earlier wasn't her dropping anything," Cam said. "It was her *throwing* stuff. She was trying to find something in the cupboards. She nearly gave me a heart attack when I walked into the kitchen and found her *standing on the counter* and rummaging through the cupboards. She was just tossing the pots and pans out of her way." Cam paused in his dish rinsing. "Ask me what she was looking for."

Aiden lifted both eyebrows. "What was she looking for?"

"Tequila."

Aiden, Grant, and Dax all snorted.

"It was nine thirty a.m.," Aiden said.

Cam nodded. He was aware. "She said it was time for margaritas."

"What did you do?" Dax asked.

“Made her margaritas.”

They all looked surprised.

“Orange margaritas. With no tequila in them,” Cam clarified. He’d blended orange juice with ice and a bit of lime juice and poured it into a margarita glass and served it to her by the pool. “She said it was the most delicious margarita she’d ever had.”

“You lied to her,” Grant said.

“Yes, I did.” Cam didn’t feel even a flicker of guilt over that. “It made her happy and kept her safe.”

They all nodded. He hadn’t really expected any of them to give him a hard time.

“Were you able to get any work done today?” Dax asked, seeming amused.

Cam lifted a shoulder. “A bit.” He reached for a towel and dried his hands. “I took the laptop out to the patio while she sunbathed with her margarita and answered some emails on my phone while she was watching her Spanish soap opera.”

“Didi speaks Spanish?” Dax asked.

“No. She said that makes it better because she can pretend they’re saying whatever she wants them to.”

Dax laughed. “Well, if you need to come into the office, bring her with you. Some of the girls watch soap operas in the break room and there’s a couple of Spanish ones. Didi could hang out with them.”

Cam grinned. “I might do that. I took her to yoga yesterday.”

“No way,” Aiden chuckled. “How’d that go?”

“It was perfect. She laid down to do the deep breathing, a kitten crawled up onto her chest and started purring, and within two minutes they were both asleep.”

“She just took a nap during yoga?”

“Yep.” Cam shook his head. “So I went through a few of the moves and... two hours later, Paige woke me up because her pregnant mom’s class was coming in and they were a little louder and she didn’t think I’d be able to sleep through it.”

The guys all paused a beat and then started laughing. “You napped at Paige’s?”

Cam grinned. “Yeah. There was no class after ours, and then there was one for older gals and they all decided I must need the sleep.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “Which I did. Didi had me up watching *Magnum, P.I.* ’til the wee hours.”

Aiden pushed away from the counter. “This is going to be interesting.”

Cam glanced toward the family room. “But good, I think. It’s kind of nice already.”

Aiden nodded. “Henry misses Letty.”

“We all miss her,” Cam said. His chest felt a little tight.

He’d come home fairly often for a guy who lived in another city and had a demanding job, but Letty had passed away quickly. He had regrets about not being there more and only barely getting home before she died. Having Letty in his life was something he’d always taken for granted and he was sorry about that now. Henry wasn’t the only one who was enjoying having someone around who reminded him so much of his grandmother.

Aiden clapped him on the shoulder. “Yes, we do,” he agreed. “And it seems that Didi is really enjoying this.”

Cam nodded. “Maybe Whitney isn’t the only one that the Lancasters didn’t pay a lot of attention to.”

Grant’s and Dax’s eyebrows rose but Aiden actually nodded. “And speaking of Whitney...”

“We already talked about Whitney.”

“We need to talk about her some more.”

Cam had known this was coming. “Whitney and I are fine.”

“Are you?”

This actually came from Grant rather than Aiden.

All three of his friends faced him fully. Grant folded his arms, Dax put his hands on his hips and Aiden braced a hand on the counter beside him, which blocked Cam’s escape from the kitchen.

Cam sighed. They were feeling protective of Whitney. He’d been expecting this. His friends were all protective types, in one way or another. Dax the lesser of the three, but he was still not about to let one of his friends mess with a woman that he liked and respected. Well, *any* woman really, but it was clear they all liked Whitney and that meant Cam wasn’t going to get away with so much as looking at Whitney wrong.

Good thing he didn’t want to look at Whitney wrong at all.

“We need her,” Aiden said firmly. “We knew it before, but she has absolutely confirmed it now. She has to lead us in... most of the things we have coming up.”

Cam knew that. It had been obvious during the meeting, even over his computer screen. “Of course we do.”

He wanted Hot Cakes to be successful, of course. But not because of his own bank account, and less and less because of wanting to throw it back in the faces of the Lancasters. It was about his friends. This was important to Aiden. And Grant now that he was staying in Appleby with Josie. It was also important to Whitney.

That was the ultimate reason Cam wanted this to all go forward and be huge. Aiden and Grant could make it work, somehow. They’d probably have to hire some more people. Consultants and shit. But they’d figure it out. Eventually. Possibly not on the timeline they’d laid out that morning though.

But they were both already millionaires, for fuck’s sake. And they were also entrepreneurs who had previously built a

business from the ground up. They'd find something else if Hot Cakes flopped.

This was a lot bigger deal to Whitney. It was all she had.

So yeah, he was going to be her friend. So that she would feel she could confide in him so he could help her. But also because she'd made it clear that was what she wanted. She hadn't bullshitted him or taken her panties off to try to get her way—which definitely would have worked. She'd been clear about what she wanted.

Now, she needed help. And he and his friends were, obviously, the best ones to give it to her.

“So don't piss her off,” Aiden said. “Or turn her off about working for us.”

Cam frowned. “Which is why she and I are going to be just friends.”

“And boss-employee with no extra shit,” Grant said, almost as if he hadn't heard Cam. “You can't be making her uncomfortable or to feel like she has to worry about—”

“I know,” Cam said. “I think we should offer her a partnership.”

All the other men were quiet, clearly surprised.

“She's doing more to move things forward than the rest of us,” Cam said. “She deserves it. That will help her feel like she's truly an equal part. That we trust her. And that she doesn't have to prove anything to us.”

“So you can sleep with her then without it being weird?” Dax asked. He'd given up his share in the company so he could date Jane, an employee.

“No.” Cam sighed. “I'm trying to be mature here.”

“Sorry,” Dax said with a grin. “Mature isn't really something I'm used to. Hard to recognize it.”

Cam nodded. “Fair enough. Especially with me. When it pertains to Whitney.”

They were good enough friends to not confirm they agreed with that. At least out loud.

“I’m trying to be a good guy,” Cam said.

“This is a one-eighty in five days,” Aiden commented.

“It is,” Cam agreed.

Aiden shook his head. “I really expected fireworks from you two.”

Cam nodded. “Me too.”

“But you’re *not* at each other’s throats?” Aiden asked. “It’s not tense or awkward?”

He hardly saw her, really, so no it wasn’t either of those things. But honestly, it wasn’t tense or awkward anyway. He’d expected them to fight. Or at least bicker. But... it didn’t feel right. She made him feel protective and hell, proud. Yeah, *proud* over the things she was doing at Hot Cakes. Of all the crazy things.

Laughter from the family room made him smile and he said, “Whitney and I have bigger things going on than a breakup from ten years ago.”

Aiden gave him a little frown. “You sure?”

“We were kids. We’re both different people now.” Cam took a breath and looked at the other men. They were his best friends. They knew him better than anyone. They had his back. “She and I haven’t talked, not really, in years. We haven’t spent time together. When I think of her, I think of the girl I knew. I’m just getting to know the woman who is now my business partner for all intents and purposes. How can I be angry with her? Or hurt by her? Or... in love with her? I’ve just met her in a lot of ways.”

The guys just looked at him. Dax looked confused, Grant looked skeptical, and Aiden looked worried.

Cam shrugged. She might physically want him. They did have chemistry. And a history. But she didn’t want *him*. Not as a boyfriend. Not as someone she confided in. Not as someone she turned to for help.

Not as a friend.

She might let him kiss her. Maybe even strip her naked and smear cookie dough all over her. But when it came to brainstorming at work, she clearly loved doing that with Ollie and Dax. Obviously she respected and admired Grant and Aiden because it was important to her to impress them. She'd rather work late than come home and hang out with him and Didi.

He wanted to be important to her somehow. Someone she needed. And it was clear that what she needed most was a friend.

"I might be a different guy than I was ten years ago, but there's something that just makes me want to be what she needs."

"And she needs an ally right now," Grant said.

Cam looked at him. "Yeah."

Grant nodded. "I noticed she seemed nervous, or worried, during the meeting the other day."

Cam didn't like that the other man could read Whitney like that. But then again, maybe her discomfort had been *really* obvious.

"She was," he said. "I saw it too. She wants to impress us, show us that she can be valuable to us."

"She *is* valuable to us," Aiden said.

"I know. But she has to prove it. She doesn't just want words. She needs to pull this project off, make it successful."

Aiden took a breath. "So we just back off? Tread carefully? Be sure to, what? Praise her a lot or something?"

"Nope," Cam said. "You guys don't treat her any differently. Treat her like a colleague. Ask her opinions, question what she's telling you. Nothing different than how you've treated her in the past. When she pulls this off, she'll know it's because she really did it. There won't be a question about if you were easy on her or anything." He paused. "I'm

the one who's going to treat her differently than I have in the past."

After a moment, Aiden nodded and clapped him on the back.

Cam was expecting to hear, "Good job, buddy. Proud of you."

Instead Aiden said, "Good luck."

To which Grant and Dax simply nodded.

Cam blew out a breath. Yeah. He was going to need it.

Chapter Thirteen



Whitney hadn't been killing time at the office. Exactly. She'd wanted to dive into the huge to-do list she'd ended up with after the meeting two days ago. But it had been really nice to think that she *could* stay late. She didn't need to rush home. She'd never *had* to rush home. Katherine had been there with Didi. But Didi had been grumpy when she'd gotten home too late and left her with *that woman*. Tonight Didi was with Cam.

And this had been Didi's idea. Whitney felt a lot less compelled to get home and "rescue" Didi if she didn't like how things were going.

Of course, Didi would have to remember that the whole thing had been her idea.

Didi was delightful. She really was. But she had always been a high-energy person and that hadn't diminished at all with her cognitive decline. In fact, she now got her time mixed up and got bored more easily which made her boundless energy harder on family, friends, and caregivers. She liked to be entertained and, like getting up around midnight to watch *Magnum, P.I.*, she didn't follow the clock that others did. She just did what felt good in the moment. At times, when she wasn't sleep deprived or watching an episode of *Magnum, P.I.* for the seventh time, Whitney actually envied that about her grandmother. Whitney would love to just do whatever felt good when it felt good.

Didi might be in the mood for a burger at seven in the morning or pancakes at seven at night. She might want to go to

bed at 10 a.m. and sleep for eight hours or she might want to go for a swim at ten at night.

It was all harmless, for the most part, but Katherine had wanted to try to keep her on a “normal schedule” and they’d butted heads. In Katherine’s defense, it was a little tough for a caregiver to adjust to things like sleeping the day away and staying up all night, but Whitney had been torn between understanding where Katherine was coming from and wondering why the hell you couldn’t just have a burger at 7 a.m. Or 3 a.m.

Whitney had tried to just roll with Didi’s schedule and her family had been lenient... okay, that wasn’t true. Her family hadn’t noticed when Whitney came and went from the office. Because she was never considered vital and was never in charge of anything important. If she wasn’t at a meeting, it didn’t make a difference. She didn’t have deadlines. So she could sleep late with Didi after being up grilling burgers by the pool at 3 a.m. and watching *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*—one of Didi’s favorites—on a huge movie projector from their chaise lounge chairs until five.

Now she couldn’t do that. Not only would the guys notice—something she actually appreciated—but she now *did* have work to do. Work she *wanted* to do. Work she wanted to do well.

Work she couldn’t do while a little hung over from 3 a.m. hard root beers that Didi insisted went with the burgers—she wasn’t wrong—or the heartburn that went with eating the french fries dipped in spicy aioli—that Didi also insisted went with the burgers and that she also wasn’t wrong about—at 3 a.m.

Whitney let herself into the house, wondering what shenanigans Didi had been up to today and how Cam had handled it. Because Whitney was sure there had been shenanigans. Of course, the way Didi had talked him into this crazy plan of moving in here in the first place had Whitney pretty sure that Didi was getting her way with Camden McCaffery. The big, tough bad-boy lawyer was probably wrapped around Didi’s little finger.

Then again, Didi had a thing for muscles and tattoos—something Whitney had found out watching movies with her grandmother and hadn't particularly needed or wanted to know. So Whitney wouldn't be surprised to find out Cam had charmed Didi into doing whatever he told her to do.

Either way, honestly, it had been nice to not feel the need to rush home and to be able to focus at work until she got through what she'd determined to be the top things on her to-do list.

The house was quiet. Surprisingly so.

Lights were on and she heard the sounds of water running and a hand mixer from the kitchen. She glanced up the stairs. The upper hallway light was on, as it was once Didi went to bed so that when she inevitably got up in the night, she wouldn't stumble in the dark.

It was likely Cam in the kitchen.

Whitney's heart thumped at the realization. She also realized she'd been anticipating seeing him.

She shouldn't.

She shouldn't get used to him being here. She shouldn't *like* him being here. It was nice that he was here helping if Didi really did want him here. Whitney definitely wanted her grandmother to be happy, of course. And it was only for the month. That made it not one-hundred percent crazy. Maybe only eighty percent.

But the strongest emotion Whitney should feel was gratitude. Gratitude that she could work late. And that Didi was happy. And that her house hadn't been on fire at any point in the hours since she'd left it that morning.

As far as she knew.

If there had been a fire, it had been taken care of and the house was still standing. That was fine in Whitney's book. As long as *she* didn't have to deal with it.

She stopped in the doorway to the kitchen.

Cam was at the stove, his back to her. He was stirring something in a bowl on the counter next to the stove. There was a pan of something *on* the stove and she noticed a cake pan next to him as well. It smelled heavenly. Chocolatey. Rich.

He was wearing one of her grandmother's aprons too. Over a dark gray t-shirt and a pair of jeans. The t-shirt fit snugly to his shoulders and back which tapered to his waist and tight ass. His muscles bunched as he stirred, drawing her attention, as always, to his tattoos.

Yeah, her grandma wasn't the only one who liked muscles and tattoos.

Whitney sighed.

Gratitude was not the only thing she felt about him being here.

She felt hot and like there were bees buzzing around in her stomach. Not butterflies. Nothing as gentle and sweet as that. The sensation was a lot more insistent and absolutely not sweet.

She also felt conflicted.

So Cam wasn't really her boss in the way that she might have to worry if she was the VP of Marketing and Sales in any other company. The owners of the company, including Cam, trusted her and needed her. They didn't treat her like a subordinate. She didn't actually think they'd fire her if she and Cam slept together. Even if it ended badly and she threw one of Zoe's muffins at him during a meeting. Or something.

In fact, she had the impression that she might even have the other guys on her side if she threw a muffin at Cam. Provided she had a good reason. Which she would. Of course.

If they were to try to have a relationship and he left dirty socks all over the bedroom rather than putting them in the hamper or something, she'd just throw muffins at him at home. She'd save work muffin throwing for work-related issues.

Not that she and Cam were going to try to have a relationship.

At least not one that involved his socks on her bedroom floor.

They were going to be... something that had nothing to do with socks. She supposed they had a relationship in the strictest sense of the word. The way she had a relationship with Aiden. There was history, sure, but she had history with Aiden too. Hers and Cam's was more complicated and involved but she was now as involved with Cam as she was with Aiden.

Though Aiden wasn't in her kitchen right now. With chocolate. Making her think about how chocolate sauce would be far better for nipple-licking than cookie dough.

She really wanted to go into that kitchen right now.

So instead she turned and headed upstairs to check on Didi.

Didi was in bed but not asleep. She had her favorite pink nightgown on and was sitting up, propped against her headboard, reading. Whitney smiled as she stepped into the room. She'd listened to so many stories sitting on that very bed in that same position with Didi.

They'd started with the usual childhood bedtime stories and nursery rhymes but they'd quickly gotten to *Little Women*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *A Little Princess*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Little House on the Prairie* and *Nancy Drew*. They'd read *The Diary of Anne Frank* together, a first for both of them, and gone on to read other classics that Didi hadn't read before, discussing them under the down comforter in their own little world. It had been their own tiny book club and Whitney would always be grateful to Didi for her love of reading.

"What are you reading?" she asked, moving into the room.

Didi looked up and smiled. She turned the book so Whitney could see the front. "I've had this book forever, but I don't think I've read it."

It was *Anne of Green Gables*. Whitney kicked her shoes off, making sure they landed over near Didi's armchair and out of the path Didi would take from the bed to the door when she

got up in the night. Whitney pulled her blouse from the waistband of her skirt as she joined Didi on the bed, sliding in next to her, and cuddling close. “You have. We read it together.” They’d read it three times, actually.

Didi laughed softly. “Well, it’s like reading it for the first time. Which is actually lovely.”

Whitney put her head on Didi’s shoulder and took her hand, cradling Didi’s between her own. “I would love to be able to read some of my favorites again for the first time. You’re lucky.” She meant that. There were so many unfair things about Alzheimer’s and she dreaded most of them, but she’d take the few silver linings she could find.

Didi kissed the top of her head. “I think so too. I’m very lucky to have you and Cam taking care of me.”

Whitney smiled. Of course Didi already loved Cam. “You had a good day?”

“Oh we’ve had a lovely few weeks,” Didi said. “He’s so funny and kind. Yoga is fun, the kittens are so cute. I’m so good at the east warriors. I had four purple diamonds and killed three trolls just today. I’ve never met a man who can make good mashed potatoes. And the margaritas are the best I’ve ever had. He didn’t even get mad about the dented pot.”

Whitney repeated all of that silently, trying to figure each thing out. Okay, yoga and kittens did actually go together in Appleby. Had they gone to Paige’s? It was possible. Cam did go to yoga at Paige’s studio. It was why Whitney had changed the class time *she* attended. Watching Cam stretch and bend and flex the one time they’d been in class together had been too much for her. Apparently, it had been too much for several women because, according to Piper, who also attended regularly, Paige had asked Cam to move to the back of the room for future classes.

But Whitney had never thought about taking Didi to yoga. She’d assumed Didi would be bored after just a few minutes and they wouldn’t make it through a whole class. She hadn’t wanted to disrupt class for everyone else and, if she were being honest, *she* wanted to have a full class. She loved yoga.

As for the east warriors, she assumed that was something about *Warriors of Easton*, the guys' video game, but she'd had no idea that Didi knew how to play, not to mention being good enough to win. Then again, Whitney knew nothing about the game. She'd stubbornly ignored learning anything about it over the years because, while she was happy for Cam and happy to have been proven right, it was also a reminder that she had, in fact, been right about him being better off without her.

Moving on from that, Whitney thought about the rest of what Didi had said.

It was possible that Cam had made her grandmother mashed potatoes and margaritas today.

But Didi also thought Cam had been here for a few weeks.

“He’s such a good man, Whitney.”

Whitney tipped her head to look up at her grandmother. Didi might not know what day it was for sure or how many she'd spent with Cam, but Whitney could see that she was perfectly aware of what she was saying right now.

And she was right. Cam *was* a good man. “I know.”

“Different than what we’re used to.”

Whitney felt her chest tighten. He was that too. So different. She and her grandmother had never specifically talked about the sexism and neglect in their family. It would have been like discussing ugly furniture. Why mention it when it was right there and so obvious and they both clearly saw it and hated it? But it had bonded them. Didi’s support of her had always meant so much and it was why Whitney really wanted Hot Cakes to be the company it *should* be—a company that Didi could be proud of, run the way she would have run it.

“He’s definitely very different,” she agreed.

Didi’s hand squeezed hers. “I’m so glad. You deserve that. He sees what you’re worth. And he’ll help you see it too.”

Whitney felt her eyes prickling with tears. She sniffed. “You’ve always helped me see what I’m worth.”

“I’m glad.” Didi leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “But you can never be loved too much. And I think Camden is going to love you like you’ve never been loved.”

Whitney felt her breath catch in her lungs and she had to force herself to breathe out.

Wow. That was... a lot. A lot that she really couldn’t deal with right now.

How many margaritas had Didi had today? Maybe that explained some of this.

Well, there was one person who would know for sure. She should probably go talk to Cam. About the margaritas. And how Didi’s day had been from *his* perspective. Yes, that made sense. She should for sure check in with him. About the margaritas.

“I love you, Grandma,” she said, lifting Didi’s hand to her lips and pressing a kiss there.

“I love you too, my darling.”

“I’m going to go say goodnight to Cam and then head to bed.” Whitney pushed herself up to the edge of the bed. “Are you good? Need anything?”

“I’m fine, darling,” Didi said with a wave of her hand. “Go spend time with your man. Give him a big kiss for me.”

She winked. Didi actually *winked* at her.

Whitney was torn. She really should correct Didi about Cam being her man and him loving her and everything being wonderful now going forward. But then again, it was harmless, right? Just like letting her eat burgers at 3 a.m. Okay, it might be a gray area. Just like the middle-of-the-night burgers were. But Cam staying here was temporary and Didi would, unfortunately, eventually forget about it. Just like, eventually, she wouldn’t be able to eat those burgers anymore. At 3 a.m. or otherwise.

Whitney felt her eyes stinging as she headed down the stairs. For as long as she could, she was going to do things that

made her grandmother happy. Even if it involved Cam and spicy aioli.

She stepped into the kitchen and found Cam apron-less with the most decadent-looking chocolate bars on the counter in front of him.

As if she needed anything else to make him tempting.

“Hey, you’re home,” he greeted.

“Yeah. A little bit ago. I was just up with Grandma.”

He nodded and stretched plastic wrap over the top of the pan. “She settled down?”

“For now.”

“She had a big day so I’m wondering if she’ll be up a little later than usual.”

Whitney crossed until she was on the opposite side of the island from him. That was closer to him, which she wanted to be, but with a barrier between them. Not that she thought she needed it because of *him*. She was feeling like *she* was the one who was on the verge of doing something stupid. Something naked... but stupid.

She was surrounded by the smell of chocolate and he had a smear of it on his left biceps. As if she didn’t want to lick the swirling tattoo there already.

“I wouldn’t bet on it. But tell me about this big day.” She eyed the bars. That were now covered.

“Let’s see. It started with margaritas by the pool.”

Whitney lifted her brows. “So that was real.”

“She told you?”

“Yeah. But she also thinks you’ve been here for a few weeks already, so I wasn’t sure.”

He laughed lightly. He seemed to be in a great mood. And didn’t seem tired. She always felt tired this time of night.

“Well, they were real in that we had drinks in margarita glasses out by the pool, but I didn’t put any tequila in them.”

“Oh, really? I always...” Maybe she shouldn’t admit that she let her seventy-six-year-old grandmother drink whatever and whenever she wanted to.

“You always?” Cam asked, bracing his hands on the counter across from her and leaning in.

She was distracted for a moment by the way his triceps bunched and how big his hands were.

“I, um...” She winced but said, “I let her drink whenever. She gets her time mixed up and I figured it wasn’t the worst thing. It’s not like she’s driving anywhere or going to work with a couple of martinis in her.”

“She likes martinis too?” Cam asked.

Whitney laughed. “She likes all of it. Any of it. I don’t always know what inspires her to want certain drinks. I mean, she wants the hard root beer with burgers and usually saves the margaritas for fajitas or nachos, but she likes martinis and pina coladas and fuzzy navels almost any time. Oh, and Kahlua and cream. She loves Kahlua and cream.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Whitney just stared at his smile. She couldn’t remember when she and Cam had just smiled at each other over a minor shared amusement. That was stupid.

“You think it’s okay I let her drink?” she asked.

He looked surprised for a moment. “I have no idea. I didn’t let her drink because I didn’t know if it was okay and was going to ask you. I didn’t know if it would interact with medications or anything.”

It probably was surprising that she was asking him if something was okay for Didi. Wasn’t *she* supposed to be the one who knew that stuff?

She shook her head. “It’s not a problem with medications. She’s very healthy. Other than the... Alzheimer’s.” Dammit, she always tripped over that word. Whitney took a breath. “She’s always been very healthy. She’s also always been a big personality. A little...”

“A little what?” he asked when she trailed off.

“I was going to say kooky. That’s what my dad and grandpa called it.” She met Cam’s eyes. “But that’s not right. She was fun. That’s what it was. It was just that they were allergic to fun. Or just incredibly unfamiliar.” She sighed. “That made me sad when I realized it. I think my dad must have thought she was fun when he was growing up, right? At some point when he was little? But my grandpa convinced him it was weird and he got serious and took after his dad instead.”

She sniffed, then lifted her chin. “Anyway, that’s why it took so long to realize something was going on with her mentally. She was always fun and liked to do off-the-wall things. If it wasn’t for her not remembering TV shows and books and how to do basic things, I wouldn’t know now that anything was really wrong.”

“Well,” Cam said after a moment, his voice a little gruff. “For what it’s worth, I think you can stop using the word *was*. She *is* fun. We had a great day.”

Whitney felt her heart melt a little at that. Yes, Didi was fun now too. She got a little confused and the fun happened at strange times of day, but it was definitely still entertaining.

Whitney gave him a smile she was sure looked wobbly. It felt wobbly. “I’m glad you think so.”

He simply nodded. He was looking at her but the smile was gone. Now he was *watching* her.

She drew in a deep breath. “So the margaritas were real. Mostly. What about the trolls? She said she killed three.”

He nodded. “Also true.”

“*Warriors of Easton?*”

He nodded again.

“Did you let her win or is she a natural?”

“Henry just told her she was winning and she believed him. He would have let her but it’s hard to do that.”

Whitney felt her eyes go round. “Henry? Your brother was here?”

“Yes. Though the first time they played was at Mom’s.”

“Your mom’s? You took Didi to your mom’s house?”

“After yoga. We went for dinner.”

Whitney straightened away from the counter, staring at him. “The mashed potatoes were your mother’s?”

He smiled slightly at that. “Didi ate *a lot* of mashed potatoes.”

“She said you made them.”

“I peeled them.” He lifted a shoulder. “She was in the living room with Henry killing trolls. I was in the kitchen. I don’t mind her thinking I made the best mashed potatoes of her life though. Goes along with the margaritas.”

Whitney stared at him. “You took *my grandmother* to *your mother’s* house for dinner.” She was still processing that. Clearly.

“We’ve eaten there every night,” he said. “We all have dinner at Mom’s once a week anyway. Sometimes I’m there more often. Mostly because I’m staying with Zoe and Aiden and they get disgustingly romantic. But yeah, we’ve been there each night this week.”

“Who’s *we all*?” For some reason Whitney felt very tense suddenly.

It had never occurred to her that Cam might take Didi to his mother’s house. Why would that have ever occurred to her? Their families had been sworn enemies forever. At least for all of *their* lives. Actually, for all of their parents’ lives too. The fallout between Didi and Letty had happened before either woman had been married or had children.

“My sister, Aiden, Dax and Jane, Josie and Grant.” Cam shrugged. “Everyone.”

Whitney felt her stomach clench. Wow. That really was everyone. Didi had not just gone into the lion’s den, but the

lions had invited a few tigers and panthers over too.

Okay, that wasn't fair. It was a huge overreaction as a matter of fact. Didi was clearly fine. She was in great spirits. And the mashed potatoes had practically rocked her world.

But she'd spent the evening with the *McCafferys*? That was bizzare. A few days with Cam and already everything was turned all around.

If Whitney's family were still in town...

But they weren't. And even if they were, it would have been easy enough to hide this from them. They never paid much attention to what Whitney and Didi did.

Still, this felt very strange.

She frowned at Cam. "I don't love this."

He frowned back. "Why not?"

"Because her cognitive issues are private," Whitney said. "The fact that she needs help is private. We don't want the entire town to know."

He narrowed his eyes. "You had help coming in."

"We had Katherine sign a nondisclosure. Everyone thought she was just cooking and cleaning. And she was doing those things, so it wasn't a total lie."

"And what are people going to think about me being here?"

"That we're dating," Whitney said. "Isn't that the story? That's what you and Didi came up with at the bakery, I thought. I thought she thought that we've been together all this time and now that you're back in town and my family is gone, we're no longer keeping it a secret."

His jaw ticked for a moment, but then he nodded. "That's what she thinks. At least sometimes."

"So the rest of the town can think that."

"You're fine with that?"

"Better that than them thinking she's got dementia."

“So us being together is at least better than a horrible, progressive neurologic disease,” he said. “Got it.”

Whitney pulled a breath in through her nose. “Now that Hot Cakes is in new hands, speculation about the business and what might happen is less of an issue. It never would have actually been an issue, but people didn’t know that my family didn’t let Didi have much to do with the company after the first few years. Didi was always the face of the company. People might have worried about what would happen if she was sick. Now that’s not a problem. But her condition is private. I’d like to keep it private and preserve her dignity as long as possible.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Cam said, scowling. “It’s not her fault, or yours, that this is happening. Alzheimer’s is a terrible, unfair condition that is indiscriminate in who it affects. In fact, it might be a great thing if people knew she had it. Show others who are going through it that no matter how much status and money you have, this disease can still hit. We could use it to increase awareness. Do some fundraising for—”

“No.” Whitney crossed her arms, her chest tight. “No, Cam. We’ve donated money to research. We’ve donated money to Sunny Orchard. We’ve done all of that. We don’t need to make it public.”

“Then just to show some solidarity with other families who are going through shit,” he said. “Jane’s dad has a neurologic condition that has him living at Sunny Orchard. You and Jane could talk about how it feels to watch a loved one go through something like that.”

“No.” Whitney shook her head adamantly.

Jane Kemper was a strong, smart, no-bullshit person. Whitney liked Jane. But they had nothing in common. Jane was, frankly, more than a little intimidating.

“This is private,” Whitney went on. “Didi has always been someone who kept to herself, who kept things within our family, and I don’t think she’s in a state where she can make a

decision about going public now. And we can't make that decision for her."

Cam's jaw tightened again and he took a breath. "Did she keep to herself or did your grandpa keep her to herself?"

The tightness in her chest increased and she had to swallow twice before she said, "That's none of your business."

"Isn't it?" he moved around the edge of the counter.

Whitney felt her heart rate increase as he got closer. It wasn't fear. Her brain recognized that. But that was what the surge of adrenaline felt like.

"Fine. It's one thing for you to know what's going on with her," Whitney said. "You're my boss."

His frown was deep and swift. "Stop fucking saying that."

She lifted her chin. "It's true. And, yes, eventually you'll all have to know because things will deteriorate with her health and I might have to miss work and might have to adjust deadlines. But that's all the more reason for me to get things in place and going well before that happens."

"Things in place," he repeated. His voice was low and almost angry sounding. "At work, you mean."

"Yes. This new product launch and everything," she said. "And, of course, there will always be more going on but I'm hoping that we'll be past all of this newness and we'll be working well together and you'll all know what I can do and will be able to trust that I can handle my part even if I'm away from the office more at times."

Cam's eyes glittered and he *looked* a little angry now. "That's what you're thinking about when you're working late? How to get ahead now for the eventuality of when your grandma gets sicker and you need to be gone? So we trust that you can handle things and, what, don't fire you while you're taking care of your grandma?"

"Yes."

"Jesus, Whit." He shoved a hand through his hair. "You think we're that big of assholes?"

She swallowed. “Of course not. But it’s only fair that I plan ahead.” She could feel the tension coming off of him. He seemed... not angry, actually. Annoyed. And frustrated. That seemed more accurate.

“And for now,” she went on. “I would really appreciate if you could keep my family’s personal business *personal*. You came into this situation because you and Didi got together and she got a wild hair. You weren’t really invited. Not by anyone who knows every piece of this. But you’re here now. Because *Didi* wants you to be. But that doesn’t give you permission to bring a bunch of other people into it.”

She saw that he’d noticed her emphasis on *Didi* when she’d said who wanted him here. His eyes narrowed again. “And you think my family is a bunch of assholes too.”

She sighed. “Cam...” She shook her head. “I don’t know your family. I know what my family felt about your family. I’ve had it ingrained that your family doesn’t like us and wants us to fail.”

“You know *me*. You fell in love with me.”

She flinched as he put that out there so bluntly.

“You think assholes would have raised a guy you could fall in love with?”

He was closer again. How did he keep doing that without her noticing him moving?

Then she realized that it was *her* who had moved. Closer to him. Into his personal space. Close enough to feel his heat. To see the gold flakes in his green eyes. To feel his warm breath on her cheek. And lips.

But he didn’t move back.

“You think that you could fall in love with a guy who had friends who were assholes who would blab all over town about your grandma’s situation?” he asked.

But his voice was softer now. Huskier. And his eyes dropped to her lips.

“I think that this is complicated and it’s temporary. Can’t you just keep this between us for a few weeks?”

“No.”

He didn’t even hesitate. He didn’t even think about it for a second. He didn’t even pretend to consider what she said.

She frowned. “No? Just no?”

“No. Your grandma has had several great days. My family and friends have enjoyed having her around. I’ve had a good time. There’s no reason to not have other people involved, Whit. They can make things better.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” she exclaimed. “You’ve been here for a few *days*! Maybe they’ve been particularly good days but it’s still new. Tomorrow might be bad. Eventually it *will* be bad. You can’t bring all these people in.”

“Whitney.”

“People who don’t know her,” she went on without pause. “People who don’t know about her condition. They won’t know how to handle things if they go bad.”

“Whit—”

But she was on a roll. “What if she gets confused or scared? What if she gets angry? What if she can’t figure out why she’s suddenly surrounded by people she’s always believed hated her? What if—”

Suddenly Cam took her chin between his thumb and first finger and brought her mouth to his, cutting off her words. And her air supply. And every thought other than *Cam’s kissing me*.

She had no idea what she’d been saying. She vaguely recalled her heart beating hard a few seconds ago, but it was drumming against her rib cage now and the reason for that completely consumed her.

Cam was kissing her.

For about two seconds his lips had simply pressed against hers, as if to only stop hers from moving. But then *he* moved. Both his body—up against hers, his other hand going to her lower back and pressing her close—and his mouth, tipping slightly to make the contact more complete, and opening.

His mouth was hot and insistent. The hand that had held her chin, slid along her jaw and into her hair, cupping the back of her head. He tipped her head too, taking the kiss even deeper.

His tongue stroked over her bottom lip and she went on tiptoe to get closer to all of that while opening her mouth. He groaned, the hand on her lower back gripping her silky shirt now. The silky red shirt she'd paired with the dark gray skirt that he surely hated since it was one of her work skirts.

She gripped the front of his shirt similarly, pulling him closer or using it to pull herself closer to him—she wasn't sure. It didn't matter. She was as against him as she could get with the height difference and her heels still up in Didi's room. Damn, she should have left those on.

Then Cam helped her out. He turned her and, without breaking their lip-to-lip contact, boosted her up onto one of the high-backed chairs that faced the breakfast bar. He tried to step between her knees, but the skirt was too fitted for that.

“Hate these,” he muttered. But his big hands dropped to her thighs and before she realized what he was doing, he'd slid the skirt up so she could part her knees. Which he also helped with.

He moved her knees apart as he stepped in and before she could so much as gasp, he took her face in both hands and put his mouth on hers again.

Now she was at the perfect height. She really had no choice but to kiss him back, sliding her arms around his neck and wiggling to the edge of the stool so she could get as close as possible. That made her skirt slide even higher until her silk panties were against the seat of the stool. And Cam's denim-covered erection was against the front of those panties.

They both groaned and Whitney swore her leg lifted itself to wrap around Cam's thigh. He felt so good. Right. There. She hadn't had anything so good right there in far too long.

"Whit," Cam said gruffly, dragging his mouth from her lips to her ear.

"Yes." She didn't know what she was saying yes to exactly. But she was pretty sure it didn't matter. Any idea he had tonight, in this room, seemed like it would be great. There was kissing and cake. As far as she was concerned, Cam was two for two in this kitchen tonight.

But he didn't really ask her a question. Maybe he'd been kind of asking permission though, because his hands dropped to the front of her blouse and started unbuttoning.

Great idea. Her hands went to the bottom of his t-shirt and pulled it up, putting her palms against the hot bare skin that covered his ribs.

He groaned against her ear as she explored the contours of his abs. He pushed her blouse off her shoulders and she dropped her hands only long enough to let it slide to the floor.

Then he was kissing her neck and across the top of one shoulder. He cupped that opposite breast in one big hand and Whitney sucked in a quick breath. He kneaded the flesh through the silk cup and ran his thumb over her hardened nipple, while pulling the bra strap out of the way of his mouth. The strap slid down her arm, making the cup of her bra fall partially away from her breast.

He gave a low growl as he looked down, then teased her nipple with his fingers, plucking and rolling.

Hot shocks of sensation jolted through her and she tightened her knees, squeezing him.

"Oh, I like that," he told her roughly, pulling on her nipple again.

"*Cam*. Please."

"I've got you." He dipped his knees, putting his mouth to her nipple and sucking.

It was relief and torture at the same time. It eased the ache there but started a new one pulsing between her legs.

“*Cam!*” She was louder this time.

His tongue licked over her hard tip as his hand squeezed her hip. He kissed his way up her chest and over her shoulder to her neck where he sucked lightly before he dragged his mouth to hers again.

Her fingers bumped down his abs to the front of his jeans as he kissed her. His tongue slid along hers and she worked the button on his jeans loose, then the zipper. She had to touch him. She slipped her hand past the denim and cotton a second later, gliding along the hard, hot length of his cock.

His breath hissed out as he ripped his mouth from hers. He pressed into her hand even as his hot gaze collided with hers.

“Whit.”

His voice was tight. He sounded like he didn’t have enough air to even say the word.

“I’ve missed you,” she said, wrapping her fingers around his shaft and squeezing.

“*Jesus,*” he groaned.

He put his hands on her shoulders, tipped his head back and dragged in air. Then he dropped his hands to her wrists and pulled her hand from his body.

“Wha—” But she didn’t need to finish the question. She saw it in his face. He’d changed his mind.

“We need to stop,” he told her gruffly.

“No.” She pulled out of his grasp and grabbed the bottom of his shirt attempting to pull him in again. If she could get her mouth on his *she* could keep *him* from talking.

For some reason she sensed that she should keep him from talking.

He wrapped a hand around her wrist and held her. “Yes. Stop.”

He reached for the bra strap he'd slid from her shoulder and pulled it back into place.

“What? Why?” She demanded as he stepped back.

He wasn't out of reach, but his body language was saying clearly that he didn't want her to reach out.

“We need to just be friends.”

Chapter Fourteen



Whitney blinked at him.

He waited for a few beats, giving her a chance to respond, she assumed. But then he said, “Whit? Just friends.”

She nodded. “I heard you.”

“So that’s okay, right? That’s good? What you want?”

She wet her lips, looked down at herself—her skirt hiked up, her blouse on the floor—then at him and the very obvious erection behind his open fly.

“No, not good,” she said.

He blew out a breath and rezippered his pants. Then he tucked his hands into his back pockets. To keep from reaching for her maybe? “Why not?” he asked. “You were the one who was against the idea of us dating again.”

She nodded. “I’m against *dating*, yes. But I can honestly say I would very much rather have sex in this kitchen than talk about my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s in this kitchen. If being friends means talking about that, or my family being a bunch of assholes, or how you think my personal and professional priorities are all screwed up then... no. Not really interested.”

She pushed him back and slid to the floor, smoothing her skirt down as she went. She bent to retrieve her blouse and slipped it on, buttoning only the two buttons between her breasts just to keep it closed until she could get upstairs.

She faced him again. “Also,” she said as she ran a hand through her hair, knowing it was mussed from Cam’s fingers,

and really wishing his fingers were there again, “If you *don’t* want to have sex with me, then no more kissing.”

Cam winced slightly. “I did that to shut—stop you from talking.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“You wouldn’t stop, and raising my voice might have woken Didi up and putting my hand over your mouth seemed unnecessarily aggressive.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yelling and hands over mouths are definitely aggressive.”

“It was just an impulsive reaction.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. Okay, so he hadn’t been planning to kiss her. That was maybe good.

“So why *your* sudden change of heart on us dating?” Whitney asked.

“Because I saw your face on the video call the other morning.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“You’re nervous about the project.”

Her heart thumped hard in her chest and she took a moment to answer. He’d seen that in her face? *Via video call?*

She wet her lips. “I didn’t hide that very well, huh?”

“But I don’t think you’re just worried about impressing us. You need to impress yourself.”

She just nodded. There was no sense in arguing with him about that, considering he had read her expression correctly.

“I’ve never had a big project like this.”

He nodded. “And it’s important to you.”

“Yes.”

“So I’d say that means you need a friend more than you need a date.”

She studied his face. Wow, that was sweet. Insightful. *Nice*. Finally she nodded. “You’re right.”

“And we’ve never been friends,” he said. “We were nemeses because of our families. And classmates. Then boyfriend-girlfriend. Then...”

“Exes,” she said with a shrug. She’d never considered him an *enemy* exactly, but they hadn’t stayed friends after their breakup, either. And no, they hadn’t really been friends before they’d started sneaking around.

“Yeah. Exes. So maybe we should try the friend thing. Hot Cakes needs you and I have a vested interest in things going well there. And you need help with Didi to make that project happen.”

She nodded. Her throat was tight. This was nice. Almost a relief. Having someone realize that she was nervous without her having to confess it was nice. Having someone say, “let me help” was nice. Having it be someone who was making her grandmother happy was nice.

“Okay. Friends.”

“And you have to stop putting work *between* us,” he said. “We’re on the same team. That’s going to take us some getting used to, I know. But it’s true. You’re not doing *all* of this yourself. You’re doing the stuff that the rest of us can’t do. For now, the ball is in your court. When you’ve got your part done, then the rest of us will take our pieces and do our stuff.”

That also sounded really nice. A team. She hadn’t had that before.

“Okay,” she agreed.

“And if you don’t want Didi with my family then, say it. But don’t make this about boss-employee-work bullshit.”

She lifted a brow. “Okay. I don’t want Didi with your family.” She wasn’t sure she really meant that. But she was curious about his reaction to her saying it.

He gave her a nod. Then said, “Too bad.”

“What?”

“Didi will be going to my mom’s with me for dinner whenever you work late.”

Whitney’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “Is that just a ploy to get me to not work late or—?” She glanced at the cake. “Do you bake but not cook?”

He shrugged. “You can take it however you want.”

That wasn’t a no. Did Cam want her here for dinner some nights? And if so, why? The friend thing?

“But it’s silly to cook when my mom is already doing it and wants us there,” he added. “And Henry wants to see Didi again. And everyone loves hearing her stories, especially the ones about my grandma.”

Whitney felt her heart flip again, but it was a softer feeling this time. “She might be in a mood one night and tell them *bad* stories, you know.”

He smiled. “Maybe. But Letty told us plenty of bad stories about Didi. It’s probably only fair that we hear a few from the other point of view.”

“Your grandma told you bad stories about my grandma?”

“Of course. They were archenemies, remember?”

No one in Appleby could forget.

“It’s actually even more likely that you’ll hear the same stories over and over,” Whitney said. “She probably won’t remember what she’s already told you.”

He shrugged. “We don’t mind. Letty did that too.”

There was a sadness mixed with affection in his expression.

“You miss her,” Whitney said.

“A lot,” he agreed with a nod. “I came home to visit, but the last few years I wasn’t around as much and I missed out on a lot.”

“And Didi makes everyone happy because she reminds them of Letty?”

“Yeah. And Letty never played *Warriors* with Henry so he thinks Didi is especially awesome.”

“Didi *is* especially awesome,” Whitney said softly.

It was nice to think that her grandmother could fill in some gaps for a family who had just lost someone they loved. And she suspected Didi liked Henry a lot. Her own grandsons would have never thought to have her play video games with them. Whitney would have, but not her brothers. Maybe Henry would let Didi read some of her and Whitney’s favorite books to him. He was eleven, but if he was missing his grandma, cuddling up with Didi for a story or two might be exactly what he needed.

But she wasn’t going to let Cam off the hook quite that easily.

“So when you said that if I didn’t want her spending time with your family to just say so... you didn’t mean that it would matter. But I could feel free to say it.”

He smiled. “Exactly. You can always tell me how you really feel or think about something, even if it’s something that’s my idea.”

“But you won’t listen,” she pointed out.

“I’ll *listen*,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll always agree with you.”

She sighed. “Ditto.”

He nodded. “I know. But *friends* can be honest with each other.”

“Okay. Well, *honestly*, this is all really weird. All of it.” From them kissing to Henry and Didi becoming buddies.

“Yeah,” Cam acknowledged. “But if the way things were before was ‘normal’ I think I’m in favor of weird.”

He might have a point. It did feel better to think their families could get along rather than thinking she and Cam needed to keep the three-generation-old family feud going.

She sighed. “So you totally know what you’re doing?”

“No. Do you?” he countered.

“No,” she admitted.

Not with work. She’d never led a project before. And not with Didi. Alzheimer’s was a strange disease. There were commonalities among patients, of course, but no two people were alike. Whitney didn’t know for certain if she was doing something right or wrong when she let Didi drink margaritas in the middle of the night or when she said okay to Didi hanging out with the McCafferys. Or anything else, honestly.

“The main thing I’ve learned about having a group of friends who really care about me and my happiness is that if I fuck something up, I’ve got people who can help fix it,” Cam said. He paused, watching her. “Have you ever felt like you could screw something up and it would still be okay?”

Whitney shook her head slowly without even thinking about it. She had definitely never felt that way. Not with her friends in high school. Not with the acquaintances she had now. Not with her family.

“So that’s what you need most,” he said. His voice was a little gruff, but he seemed determined. “You need real friends. You need to have people who have your back.”

Whitney actually felt her eyes stinging slightly. That sounded amazing. She’d been watching these men together for the past couple of months and completely envying their relationships. She envied how comfortable Piper was with them as well. It was clear that even when they disagreed, they cared about one another. And when it came to Hot Cakes, they were all working toward the same goal and trusted and respected one another.

She wanted that.

All of it.

A lot.

Cam was right. Maybe it was because he knew her. Maybe it was because he was really paying attention. Maybe it was because she was not good at hiding her feelings and

vulnerabilities after all. But, yes, she wanted all of that. Trust and respect and a team and friends.

“It’s pretty pathetic that I don’t have any friends at age twenty-nine, isn’t it?” she asked softly. “And it should feel uncomfortable to admit to you that I didn’t have a good relationship with my dad and grandpa and brothers.”

Cam’s jaw tightened and his eyes flickered with emotion. “Does it?” he asked, his voice rough.

Did it feel uncomfortable or pathetic? Strangely, no.

“Not really.”

He gave a single nod. “Good.”

“I understand why you want me to feel comfortable at work,” she said. “That benefits Hot Cakes, and you. But why do you care if I have friends?”

He pulled in a breath and wet his lips. “Because I want to be the one who gives you what you need.”

His words were husky and they hit her in the gut. Heat spread and she sucked in a breath. That sounded very protective. Almost possessive. Yet, comforting at the same time.

“Really?” she asked. “You think I need this?”

He met her eyes directly. “Yes.”

“You could feel smug about that,” she said. “You could be happy that I’ve been pretty lonely and unhappy all this time.”

Again, his jaw ticked. “I guess. But I don’t. Not a bit. It makes me crazy knowing that you haven’t had what you wanted and needed.”

She stared at him. Wow. This was all so unexpected. Everything about Cam being back had been unexpected. From the chemistry still between them to how he’d just rolled with everything going on with Didi to... *this*.

“You wanted me to be happy without you?” she asked, her voice a little husky now too.

“No.” He blew out a breath. “I don’t know. No, I didn’t want you to be happy without me, exactly, but it makes me nuts that you’ve been alone and feeling... not good enough and not valued and not fulfilled. It’s... confusing as fuck.”

She laughed softly. “Actually, I get it,” she said, realizing that she really did.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been really happy that *you* have been so successful. I watched your football career and, of course, everything that’s happened with Fluke and I’ve been proud and happy about how that all turned out. Even though I really missed you and it made me sad to be without you.”

His eyes flashed at that and Whitney had the definite impression that he wanted to reach out and pull her in close.

“And,” she went on. “When I watch you with the guys, and with Piper, I’m so, so happy that you have them. Even while I’m jealous of how well they know you and all the memories they have with you.”

She saw him ball his hand into a fist, as if fighting that urge to reach out.

“So,” she said. “I get what you’re feeling a little, I think. I care about you enough to want you to be happy but I also care enough to be a little sad that I’m not a part of it.”

He nodded. “I definitely hate that you haven’t been happy. And I definitely want to be a part of making you happy. And I’m pretty thrilled that what you need is friends, because I have some of the best and I’m happy to share. That is, at least, something I can give you.”

She smiled even as her throat tightened. Being friends with him and him realizing how important this Hot Cakes project was to her was amazing. She didn’t have to worry about hurting him or choosing work over him and ruining everything.

And the intense desire to step forward and wrap her arms around him and beg him to cover her in chocolate sauce was just a product of that relief and gratitude.

Probably.

“For the record, it’s also nice to have a friend helping with Didi. I’m kind of winging it there too.”

He smiled. “When I first came back to town, if someone had told me this”—he looked around the kitchen—“is where you and I would be, I never would have believed them.”

She nodded. “I know.” It seemed crazy on the surface that the person who knew about Didi and was helping her with the caregiving was Camden McCaffery. Yet... it didn’t feel crazy. “And I—” She took a breath. “I trust you. If you think her playing video games with Henry is good, then... it’s good. I don’t know what I’m doing.” Whitney shrugged. “My philosophy is pretty simple—when I’m her age and I know I’m running out of time to remember the fun and the people that matter, then I’m going to do what I want, when I want. If I want burgers at three a.m. with my granddaughter or margaritas by the pool at nine a.m. with my granddaughter’s ex-boyfriend, then, yeah, I’m going to do that. And pray I’ve got people around me who will let me, while keeping me safe.”

Cam just looked at her for a few beats. Then he nodded. “So you *do* know what you’re doing.”

That surprised her. She laughed lightly. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re making her happy and doing it out of love. That’s what you should be doing.”

Whitney stared at him.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Just... thank you.”

“I mean it.”

“I believe you. It means a lot from you.”

“Because I’ve been an ass to you for ten years over other decisions you’ve made?”

She snorted. “Something like that.”

He tipped his head in acknowledgment. “Well, it’s come to my attention that I was angry at someone who... isn’t real.”

She felt her eyes widen.

“I thought I knew you, Whit. But I’m learning that I don’t. I knew the eighteen-year-old you. And I’m not sure I even knew her that well.”

He was right, of course. It had been a long time since they’d known each other and how well did two eighteen-year-olds really know one another? Or themselves for that matter? Especially when at least half of their time had been spent making out. They’d had to sneak around because of their families’ animosity toward one another, so she’d never seen him with his grandmother or gone to the movies with him or... anything else. Their time together had always been alone and it had been stolen, hidden time.

“You have a point,” she said. “We’re just getting to know each other. Like new acquaintances.”

“Well...” He gave her a slow smile. “We know *a few* things about each other. I mean... I do know that you’re ticklish behind your left knee and that tequila and Jason Aldean songs make you horny and you love when I kiss your ___”

She stepped forward, slapping her hand over his mouth.

He lifted a brow and she felt his mouth curve behind her palm.

“If I was taller, I would have kissed you to shut you up too because, yeah, the hand over the mouth is a little aggressive.”

He nodded.

She let her hand drop away. “But yeah, you need to shut up. That’s not stuff *friends* talk about.” The heat was still swirling through her body and she could hear Jason Aldean’s “Crazy Town” playing in her head.

He held up a hand. “You’re right. Sorry.”

She nodded. “Okay. So... friends.”

“Friends.”

She glanced at the cake pan on the counter. “And you didn’t make those bars to use the way you’d suggested using the cookie dough the other night then?”

He cleared his throat. “Um, no. They’re for Didi actually.”

“You made my grandmother bars?”

“Letty’s recipe. Something she never made for the bakery. Only family and close friends ever got those bars. Didi mentioned to me that she missed Letty’s baking and cooking all these years. Thought she’d enjoy tasting some of it again.”

Wow. That was pretty sweet. Nice even.

“What?” he asked when she didn’t react.

“You’re doing all of this, with my grandma and the bars and the support at work, and you’re actually insisting that we *not* sleep together.”

He cleared his throat again. “Right.”

“Huh.” She believed him. And that actually did make her relax a little. “Well, save me a bar? To eat.”

“Sure.”

She gave him a smile and turned to head upstairs.

“Hey, Whit?”

She turned back. “Yeah?”

“Just out of curiosity... if I *had* made the bars for that purpose...”

She grinned and her eyes went to the stool where she’d been very happily shirtless and *he’d* been the one to pull back. “Totally would have worked.”

He grinned. “Good to know.”

And even though they were talking about putting chocolate cookie dough on nipples, she felt a warm surge of happiness. Friendliness even.

Friends. Just friends. With Camden McCaffery.

Well, stranger things had happened.
Probably.

Chapter Fifteen



She was so fucking gorgeous.

Cam had always enjoyed the morning meetings of Fluke, Inc., but he'd never been hard and aching in the middle of one.

He was sure his friends and partners would be glad to know that.

But he was stunned by what a turn on it was to watch Whitney during the meeting a week later.

She was freaking glowing.

He knew he was staring at her like a lovesick idiot. He also knew that Aiden, Dax, and Grant had noticed. They kept casting glances in his direction. He felt their eyes on him. But he wasn't looking at them.

He was looking at Whitney. The way her eyes were sparkling, the faint flush to her cheeks, the smile that was so easy and genuine. He was even appreciating the way she looked in the boring-as-hell navy-blue pencil skirt and ivory blouse she wore. Hot. She looked hot. He still hated those skirts, but today the damned thing made her look hot. Of course, she could have been wearing a sack and he would have thought she looked hot, because it wasn't about the skirt. It was about how she was standing there, excited, confident, and she hadn't once lifted her chin in the way she did when she was gathering her fake confidence and meeting his eyes directly even though she didn't want to.

Today she was meeting his eyes directly. She was meeting everyone's eyes directly.

And the way she looked in that pencil skirt wasn't about the skirt at all. It never had been. He'd hated those skirts because she'd worn them to make herself feel like the corporate executive that she wanted to be.

Today she *was* that corporate executive. With or without that skirt.

Cam shifted on his chair as he thought about how much he'd love to see that skirt crumpled on the floor of her office next to her desk—while he checked out what kind of panties she wore underneath those stupid skirts.

Which was a completely inappropriate way for him to be thinking of his *coworker* and *friend*.

“Our focus group thinks this has huge potential,” she was saying. “It’s also a focus on younger customers. Kids are already a part of our demographic, of course, but we’ve never focused on them before.”

“But they’re still squares,” Ollie pointed out.

“Yes,” Whitney agreed. “But doing it this way won’t require a massive overhaul to our equipment.” She hit a button on her laptop to display the next slide. “Your suggestion to make them in the shape of alpacas got me thinking,” she told Ollie. “But this way will be not only more cost effective for us, but will make more sense,” she added with a smile. She pointed to the images on the screen. “Each bar will have an animal *footprint* stamped into it. It will look a lot like the footprint would look if a kid saw it out in nature, in the dirt or mud.”

“So instead of poop, people will think of mud when they see these bars,” Dax said with a grin. “Great.”

Whitney laughed. “I’m not worried. The focus group didn’t bring that up at all.” She turned back to the presentation. “We’ll start with five different animal footprints. They will all be wild animals native to Iowa. White-tailed deer, fox, jackrabbit, coyote, and a beaver.”

“No alpacas?” Ollie asked.

“Alpacas aren’t native to Iowa. Kids aren’t likely to see those in nature around here,” Whitney told him.”

Ollie frowned. “Shouldn’t we do interesting animals?”

“I think fox and coyotes are interesting,” Cam said, giving Ollie a knock-it-off look.

Ollie rolled his eyes.

“We can add to the collection,” Whitney said. “If it takes off. The idea is that kids will want to collect all the footprints, so they’ll keep going back to the store for more Critter Tracks.”

“But they’ll be eating the footprints,” Ollie said. “Right?” He looked around. “We don’t want them sticking these things under their beds, do we?”

“They each come with a collectible card,” Whitney said, clicking to the next slide. “The card has a colorful photo of the track as well as a photo and facts about the animal it belongs to.”

Ollie’s eyebrow went up. Cam grinned. Just like that, his friend was in.

Dax sat forward. “You know, it would be easy to set up a website to go along with this. Kids could get codes from the collectible cards. They could go to the site to learn more. We could have a little virtual world where they could follow the animals around, learn about their natural habitats, that kind of thing.”

Cam’s grin grew. Dax was in now too.

He caught Whitney’s eye. She clearly realized it too. She was positively glowing.

“Maybe the kids could become one of the animals,” Ollie added. “And interact in the world that way.”

Dax was nodding.

“This is a lot more than anything Hot Cakes has ever done before,” Grant said to no one in particular.

But Whitney nodded. “It’s a way for us to go above and beyond with our customer base. Be more than just a factory.” She smiled at Ollie and Dax. “To tap into the talents we have here rather than just sitting in offices and looking at spreadsheets.”

Her eyes widened and she looked at Grant quickly.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with paying attention to the spreadsheets and bottom line. That’s important too. Of course.”

Cam coughed and lifted his coffee cup to hide his smile.

Aiden didn’t even try to hide his. “No offense taken,” he said. “Everyone here understands that profitability will be an important factor. But it’s not the only factor. Especially when we’re talking about branching out and growing the brand.”

Whitney nodded, but she was still watching Grant for his agreement.

Grant just looked at Whitney for a long moment. Cam could see that Whitney was holding her breath. Cam was too. He knew that Grant and Aiden’s approval mattered to her. Ollie’s and Dax’s did too, but frankly theirs was easier to get. They were always up for something new and different. It was Grant and Aiden she’d have to convince the new idea was worth the money and investment of resources. And risk.

Finally Grant nodded. “I like it.”

Whitney let her breath out and her smile grew. “And...” She clicked to the next slide. “If things go well, we could reach out to groups that do animal education to see if they would want to include our treats as a part of their program. Zoos, of course. And the Department of Natural Resources does some educational programs. We could even do some specialized things. Maybe, for a group that does a lot with, say, penguins. We could do treats with penguin footprints.”

Cam looked at Ollie. Ollie’s eyes were bright and Cam could see his friend’s wheels turning.

“Fundraising,” Ollie said. “We could offer a portion of the proceeds to a program for penguin preservation or something.”

Whitney's eyes brightened as well and she turned more fully toward Ollie. "Yes. There must be an awareness day for penguins. There are awareness days for everything. We could do something to coincide with that."

"We could have various habitats on the website," Dax said. "They could click a tab to interact with animals in the prairies and then another tab to interact with penguins and polar bears."

"But penguins and polar bears don't actually live together, right?" Ollie said. "They're commonly put together in commercials and things, but they live on opposite poles."

Dax frowned at him. "Are you sure?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"But... the snow."

"Polar bears live in the arctic and penguins live in the Antarctic," Piper said, breezing into the room with a new carafe of coffee.

"Oh." Dax seemed disappointed.

"You could still do different habitats," Piper said, patting his arm. "Just have to put them on two different tabs."

"I guess that's true."

"Maybe Drew would want to do alpaca treats," Piper said, leaning over Ollie's shoulder to refill his cup.

Ollie's bright expression pulled into a frown. "Why would the alpaca farmer want treats? Nobody goes out there. Except you."

Piper gave him a big smile as she moved to Cam. He held his cup up for her to fill.

"He and his brothers are talking about opening up the farm to some tours for kids. Day cares and preschools and things like that. Making it a full-time petting zoo so that kids can learn about the animals up close and personal. I was going to talk with him about teaching the kids about some of these wild animals too. Maybe looking around their property for

jackrabbit and fox tracks. Drew and his brothers are real outdoorsy types.”

Typically Cam would have exchanged a what’s-going-on look with Aiden or Grant as Piper poked at Ollie—a not outdoorsy type at all. But he found himself looking at Whitney instead. She was watching him too. She gave him an arched eyebrow and he shrugged. But he also grinned. He liked sharing that little nonverbal communication with her.

Ollie scowled. “Kids will like Dax’s animals better, I guarantee.”

“I’m sure Dax can make it a lot of fun, but learning about *real* animals in the *real world* could be good.” Piper’s smile had faded. “You spend a lot of time in virtual worlds. Maybe some time in the real world where you don’t get to call *all* the shots would be good.”

Ollie swiveled in his chair and pinned her with a stare. “I call *all* the shots?”

She propped a hand on her hip. “You try to.”

“And then you go ahead and do whatever you want to anyway.”

“You mean, I fix the things that won’t work your way or that you mess up by forgetting that the real world doesn’t follow your rules all the time like Easton does,” she said, referring to the magical land in their video game.

“Piper,” Ollie said, his voice low and firm and far more serious than any of them were used to hearing. “Enough.”

Piper didn’t look intimidated. Or impressed. She looked pissed.

Cam felt his brows lift. Dax sat up straighter. Grant leaned forward in his chair. Aiden actually got to his feet.

“Okay. Let’s get back to Whitney and the presentation,” Aiden said in his best knock-it-the-fuck-off voice. “Piper,” he added, his tone gentler. “We can talk later.”

She stared at Ollie as she took a breath, then she looked at Aiden. “I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

Yeah, even Cam knew that when a woman said she was fine the way Piper had just said she was fine, she was most definitely *not* fine.

Whitney spoke up. “Piper.”

Their executive assistant looked at her.

“*We* can talk later,” Whitney said.

Piper nodded. “Great.”

Aiden looked at Cam. Cam grinned at his friend. Then they both looked at Grant. Who also smiled. Then they all looked at Ollie. Who was frowning. But not in a confused, what’s-going-on way, rather in a oh-shit-this-isn’t-good way.

On the contrary, Cam thought this was actually very good.

Piper had been putting up with the Fluke guys and the stupid levels of testosterone in their conference rooms for years now. It was time for there to be more estrogen balancing things out.

Piper and Whitney could be good for one another.

He loved everything about this.

“Whitney,” Aiden said. “Is there anything else we should know at this point about the new product?”

She shook her head. “I’ll send an email summarizing everything. If you’re all okay with where we’re at, I’ll move ahead with getting the stamping equipment and talking to our accounts about the new bars.”

“Great,” Aiden said. He glanced around the table. “Anyone have anything?”

“Good to move forward in my mind,” Grant said. He met Whitney’s eyes. “Great job. You’ve pulled this together quickly and you’ve got all the I’s dotted.”

It had only been two weeks since she’d first presented about how they needed to change up their machines and think about hiring more staff. It really had been fast. Then again, she’d been working until ten almost every night.

Cam shook that off. It was fine. It was what she needed to do and he'd said he was in full support of it.

Whitney smiled at Grant, clearly pleased. "Thank you."

"I fucking love it," Dax told her, shoving his chair back and standing. "I'm going to do some website brainstorming this afternoon."

"Don't you have a meeting with the Alzheimer's Association people today?" Whitney asked with a frown.

"He does," Piper confirmed. She turned to Dax. "They'll be in your office at one."

His office at Sunny Orchard, not here at Hot Cakes.

"Right," he muttered.

Whitney chewed on her bottom lip and Cam felt his shoulders tightening as he watched her worry.

"He'll be able to do both," Aiden assured her, pushing the papers in front of him into a stack and then rising. "Honestly, Dax is best when he's got a million things going on in his head."

She nodded. "Okay."

Aiden paused and reached out, squeezing her shoulder. "Seriously. Piper will be sure he stays on track. Sunny Orchard is a priority."

Cam didn't say anything, but he felt himself frowning. Sunny Orchard and the Alzheimer's programming better fucking be a priority for Dax. Aiden was right. Dax was a master multitasker and really did do best when he was juggling several balls. Cam had never been concerned about his partners getting their stuff done, and done well, before. One of the reasons Fluke worked well was because the guys all did their thing and trusted the others to do theirs.

For the first time, Cam was going to follow up with one of his partners on something that wasn't a legal matter and something that he didn't really know much about at all. Just to be sure Dax was doing it. Hell, Dax wasn't even a partner in

Hot Cakes. If he did the website stuff for their new product, he'd be doing it as an outside consultant.

But yeah, Cam was going to check in. He never did that.

“Hey, guys, hang out for a minute,” Cam said, coming to his feet.

Dax paused on his way to the door, looking back.

Grant kept his seat and Aiden dropped his hand from Whitney's shoulder and faced Cam.

“Everything okay?” his friend asked.

“Sure.” He was going to make *sure* everything was okay. “Just need to follow up on a couple of things,” Cam said. His eyes went to Whitney. “Thanks for the presentation.”

She looked flustered suddenly, but she nodded.

He didn't like her flustered, but right now he needed to deal with the guys.

“Of course,” she said as she gathered her things. She shut her computer and stacked her folder and notebook on top. She lifted them, wrapping her arms around it all. Then she took a breath and looked at him again. “I'll... talk to you... later.”

“At home,” he confirmed.

He liked how that sounded. He also liked how it made her cheeks get pinker. Surely she knew that everyone in the room was aware of where he was sleeping. And why. But yeah, it sounded intimate and he liked it. He liked the idea of going home to her, with her, at the end of a workday.

“I'll go check on Didi,” Whitney said.

Cam wasn't sure if she said it to inform him of where she would be when he was done meeting with his partners, or, possibly to remind him that Didi was waiting for *him*.

He nodded. “I'm sure she's happy with Max. They were drinking cappuccino and watching the Game Show Network when I left them.”

By now they were probably playing Ping-Pong on one of the tables Dax had brought in when he'd self-appointed himself in charge of employee morale. Before he'd sold his shares in Hot Cakes. They'd kept the break room with all of Dax's touches though. He really did know how to make a place one-hundred times more fun.

"I'll go get her when I'm done here," he told her. "I'll take her home and see you later."

Whitney lifted her chin. In that fucking way she did when she was gathering her resolve.

"Stop by my office before you go get her," Whitney said.

He gave her a nod. "Okay."

She nodded in return, then gave the rest of the men a smile. But this smile was forced. Cam felt his eyes narrow.

"I'll see you all later," she said. "Thank you for your time this morning."

Then she stepped around the edge of the conference table and left the room. Her chin still up.

"What the hell was that?" Aiden asked as the door shut behind her and Piper.

Cam turned and realized Aiden was speaking to him. "What do you mean?"

"You were pretty cool with Whitney there at the end. Basically dismissing her like that."

Cam lifted a brow. "I didn't dismiss her."

"You did," Grant said, sitting back in his chair and smoothing his tie. "You said you needed to speak to us, making it clear that you didn't want her to stay."

Cam opened his mouth, then shut it. Well, fuck. "I didn't want her to stay," he said after a second.

"Why not?" Aiden took his seat again.

"Because I wanted to talk to you all. About her."

Aiden gave Grant a look.

“Knock it off,” Cam snapped, scowling at them.

“What?” Aiden asked.

“Looking at each other like you know what’s going on in my head.”

“Okay,” Grant said, in the very annoying I-already-know-what-you’re-going-to-say tone he used. Often.

Which was a lot like the look that said he knew what was going on in Cam’s head.

“Why don’t you tell us what’s going on in your head?” Grant asked.

Fine. He wasn’t going to waste time and breath telling Grant he was being a condescending ass. Grant was doing it on purpose. And Cam needed to get down to Didi and get her home so they could get to yoga on time.

“You need to stop being stoic when Whitney’s talking to you about ideas,” Cam said to Grant.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You do. You do it to all of us all the time,” Cam said. He planted his hands on his hips. “You sit there, your face completely devoid of emotion or reaction so that none of us know what you’re thinking until you’re good and ready to let us know. The thing is, it doesn’t matter with us. We know that’s how you are. But Whitney... she...” He sighed. “She wants your approval. She wants you to like her ideas. You can’t just sit there like... you.”

Grant lifted a brow. “I told her I liked the idea.”

“After you made her sweat. I don’t like that. You have to let her see you engaging with her ideas.” He shook his head. “She had dealt with enough of that bullshit where people she cared about withheld their thoughts and feelings and left her out. She’s not going to get that here from us.”

Grant gave him an indecipherable look, but, to Cam’s surprise, nodded. “I hear you. I’ll work on that.”

Cam straightened. “You will?”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. I know how I feel when Jocelyn is proud of her work. I’ll do better with Whitney.”

Cam wasn’t sure what to say. “Okay. Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

“What about with us?” Ollie asked Grant. “Will you be nicer to us when we bring you new ideas too?”

Grant shook his head. “I doubt it.”

Ollie just sighed.

Cam looked at Dax. “And you—”

“What I’d do?”

“You better fucking pay attention to what’s happening at Sunny Orchard,” Cam said.

“Wow,” Dax said. “Relax.”

“I’m not going to *relax*,” Cam told him. “This is important.”

“You’re overreacting. I know that Whitney isn’t just some employee, but you don’t have to come to her defense here. There’s no enemy here.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Cam said. Defensively.

“You glared at me twice for *coughing* during her presentation,” Dax said. “Like you were pissed I was interrupting her or something.”

“I was pissed you were making it hard for everyone else to hear. And that you might miss what she was saying,” Cam said.

Dax nodded. “That’s not an overreaction at all.”

Cam shook his head. “You can’t be spacing out in your office, thinking about little video foxes and rabbits running around instead of getting that Alzheimer’s program going, Dax. That’s a big deal.”

Dax looked genuinely surprised. “I wouldn’t space out *that* far. Of course that’s a big deal.”

“You forgot you even had that meeting today,” Cam pointed out.

“For two seconds,” Dax protested. “I’ve got it. I can do both things.”

“He’s *best* when he’s not focused on just one thing,” Ollie defended Dax. “He’s great at juggling lots of balls.”

Dax gave his friend a grateful smile. “Thanks. I make a point of taking care of my balls.”

“And you don’t get worked up about how we all do stuff,” Ollie said to Cam. “What the hell? We all do our shit, our way, get it done. You don’t have to babysit us.”

“Yeah, well, Dax’s balls had never been this important to me before.” Cam winced as he said that out loud. He scowled as Ollie grinned. “I mean it. Now that Dax brought up the website, now Whitney’s thinking about it too. So now he needs to pull that off. But the programs at the nursing home matter because of Didi. So now he has to do it all. Well. *Very* well.” He frowned at Dax. “You drop any of those balls and you’ll have to answer to me.”

Dax didn’t look impressed, but he held up his hands. “It’s all good. I care about those things too, you know.”

Cam believed that he did. Just not as much as Cam did. Or as much as Whitney did.

“And you need to get your shit together too,” Cam said, pointing at Ollie.

“Me? I’m easily Whitney’s favorite person here.”

Cam felt a very stupid, very juvenile surge of jealousy at that. He shook his head. “No. You’re not.”

“Well, I’m her favorite when it comes to business ideas,” Ollie said, with a shit-eating grin. “I’m always up for anything. *I* never tell her no.”

Cam debated just letting that go. He knew he should definitely let that go. “What are you talking about?” he asked instead.

“I’m just saying, I don’t know how you do it,” Ollie said with a shrug, sitting back in his chair and propping one ankle on his opposite knee.

“Do what?” Cam asked.

“Say no to that girl. She’s gorgeous when she gets excited about work ideas. I can only imagine how she looks when she’s... just excited.”

Cam gritted his teeth. Ollie was messing with him. Oliver wasn’t usually the one to give the rest of them crap like that. That line right there was more of a Dax line. Or, honestly, a Cam line. He’d very much enjoyed saying stuff like that to Grant in the time between Grant meeting Josie and realizing that he was just going to fall in love with her and there wasn’t anything he could do about it.

“How do you know I say no to her?” Cam asked.

“You have definitely not said *yes* to her,” Ollie said. “Not *yes yes* anyway.”

Cam narrowed his eyes. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“That.” Ollie pointed at Cam. “You’re too wound up to have said *yes* to Whitney. Though I don’t know how you’re helping it.”

Cam took a breath. Okay, Ollie was assuming he and Whitney hadn’t slept together because *Cam* needed to get laid. That was fair. Kind of. “Maybe *she’s* said no to *me*.”

She had. Basically. Once. But he’d been the one to pull back from their kiss the other night. The kiss where her skirt had been hiked up and her shirt had been on the floor and her breast had been in his hand...

Ollie shook his head. “She doesn’t look at you like she said no to you.”

“She doesn’t?” Dammit. He didn’t need to act interested in that.

Dax was the one to answer that though. “Definitely not. She looks at you like *you* said no to *her*.” He tipped his head to

the side. “Like maybe you started something you didn’t finish?”

“You can *not* read all of that from me,” Cam said. Dammit. These guys knew him well, but there was no way they knew him that well.

“Jane looks at me like that,” Dax said. “When I start something in my office just before we have to go somewhere. The whole rest of the time we’re with other people she gives me these looks that are part I-want-to-smother-you-with-a-pillow and part I-want-to-tear-your-clothes-off.” He grinned. “It’s worth doin’ once in a while just because the anticipation makes it so great later.”

Awesome. Now Cam was going to get to think about *that* for the rest of the day. Was Whitney thinking about their kiss? Had she realized she was grateful he’d pulled back or was she thinking about repeating it sometime? Picking up where they’d left off?

She’d made a lot of progress on the project. Surely, she was feeling more secure here. Surely, she was feeling more comfortable and a part of the team and confident in her ability to pull this all off. He’d given her space and time to get the work done as well as all the resources she needed. Piper had even been assigned to be her right-hand person for the duration of the project. She’d been given full latitude to do whatever needed done with staffing and the machinery and the supplies. She was fully in charge.

And she was rising to every bit of the challenge.

But maybe, once this was wrapped up and she’d realized she belonged here, she was valued here, and could pull all of this off—she’d relax and would be able to think about something else.

Cam shook his head. “Stop distracting me. Whitney is fully focused on this project. As she should be. We should all be thrilled about that. As you noticed from the presentation today,” he said, looking at each of them pointedly. “She’s doing an amazing job. She’s completely pulling this off. She doesn’t have time to be messing around.”

Ollie nodded. “So you’re *not* messing around. That’s why you’re so grumpy.”

“I’m *grumpy*,” Cam said, “because you need to stop giving Piper a hard time.”

Ollie scowled. “Me and Piper are fine.”

“Look, man, I don’t know what’s going on there but if Whitney wants to put alpaca prints on those damned bars, then we’re going to do that. Even if it means that you have to think about Drew Ryan’s handsome face every time you see one of them,” Cam told him.

Ollie blew out a breath. “Whatever. I don’t give a fuck about Drew Ryan.”

Yeah. That was definitely *not* true.

“Whitney is doing a great job,” Aiden said. “And we get that you’re one hundred percent in her corner.”

“We should *all* be one hundred percent in her corner,” Cam said.

“Yeah, well, maybe not the way you are,” Aiden told him.

“What does that mean?”

“You were watching her during the presentation like you were proud and awed and imagining bending her over the conference table all at once,” Aiden replied bluntly.

Cam opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“I know how it feels to watch a woman and think all of that...” Aiden trailed off and cleared his throat.

Yeah, the woman he was talking about was Cam’s *sister*. They didn’t really need to delve into that too deeply. “Great,” Cam said. “I appreciate your commiseration.”

“It’s just that I get how you can get knotted up when you want her to be successful, but she needs to figure it out on her own,” Aiden said. “Just... lighten up. We’re on your side. Her side too.”

Cam took a deep breath.

Okay, yeah, he was being hard on these guys. His friends realized that Whitney was important here and they were treating her with respect and including her in these decisions. Hell, they were letting her lead the way.

“Fine,” he relented. “Just... pay attention and do your shit. And... be nice.”

They all grinned.

Yeah, okay, *they* were usually the ones telling *Cam* to be nice.

Everything was different now. Because of Whitney.

Chapter Sixteen



Cam knocked on Whitney's office door five minutes later.

"Come in."

She was standing behind her desk, her arms crossed.

He shut the door behind him. "You wanted to talk?"

"If there's something about the new product idea that you don't like, you can tell me to my face."

That wasn't what he'd been expected at all. "I like everything about the new product idea."

"Then why didn't you say *one* word about it during the meeting and then kick me out of the conference room to talk to the guys about it without me?"

Cam crossed the room, coming to stand opposite her across her wide desk. "That's not what happened."

"You kicked me out of the conference room to talk to the guys about something," she said.

"I didn't mean for that to come off as me kicking you out."

She rolled her eyes and dropped her arms. "Seriously? How did you think it would come off?"

Okay, that was fair. "Sorry," he said honestly. "I was..."

Did he want her to know that he'd been coming to her defense with his friends?

"You were...?"

Fuck. Honesty. That's what he and Whitney needed a lot of. Open communication. "I was telling them how I expect them to treat you."

She opened her mouth, but seemed to process his words and shut it again, simply frowning.

"I didn't like how Grant wasn't giving you immediate feedback and how Dax was getting distracted with the website idea."

"You can't do that."

"Yes, I can."

She blew out a breath. "I need to handle all of that on my own, Cam. Grant doesn't need to treat me any differently than he does anyone else. Dax is just Dax and—"

"And while we're talking about how people are acting, you have to stop giving them passes," Cam interrupted.

She looked surprised. "Excuse me?"

"If Grant isn't communicating his thoughts about a project, you need to *ask* him for input and feedback. Don't let him just sit there with that infuriating nonexpression on his face."

She lifted her chin. "I will deal with—"

Cam was around the corner of her desk, his thumb on her chin before she even finished the word *with*. He pressed on the center of her chin, tipping it back down.

"Don't," he said softly.

Her eyes were wide as she stared up at him. "Don't what?"

"Don't lift your chin with me, Whit."

"What?"

"This." He pressed gently again. "You lift your chin whenever you're getting pissed but are trying not to yell at me. You don't have to act tough. You don't have to gather your... fortitude. Or whatever that is." He ran the pad of his thumb back and forth over the soft skin under her bottom lip. "Just talk. Tell me off. Tell me what you're really thinking."

She wet her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue and his gaze followed the movement.

“You find the way Grant sits there and doesn’t say anything infuriating?” she asked.

Cam met her eyes again. “Not until today. When he did it to you.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “I don’t find it infuriating.”

“No?”

She shook her head slightly, causing his thumb to slide over her chin again. “No. He’s just taking it all in. I know he’ll tell me what he thinks eventually.”

Cam thought about that. So it was all *his* problem. That didn’t surprise him, actually. “Guess I’m feeling a little protective of you.”

That corner of her mouth fully curled now. “You don’t need to.”

“I do. Those guys are used to working together only. And with Piper. They don’t know how to be gentlemen with a woman who doesn’t know them and their quirks and how to read them. I want you to know that they all think you’re amazing and they’re completely impressed with you and what you’re doing.”

Something in her expression softened and she fully smiled. “And all this time I expected *you* to be the one that wasn’t a gentleman when we worked together.”

He nodded. “I expected that too. I guess...” He swallowed. “I didn’t expect soft feelings. I expected fighting and fireworks. Especially when it came to this company.” He felt himself smile. “Who would have guessed that the thing I’d want most would be for you to be successful and happy at Hot Cakes?”

She gave a soft, surprised laugh. “Crazy.”

“Yeah.” His voice was gruff and his eyes were on her lips again.

“What did you think of the new ideas?” she asked.

He looked up. “I love it. All of it.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“You didn’t say that. You didn’t say *anything*.”

“I knew you wanted to hear from Aiden and Grant,” he said.

A slight frown pulled her eyebrows together. “I did. But I certainly wanted to hear it from you too.”

“But...” He shrugged. “You know I think you’re amazing.”

She stared at him. Slowly she shook her head. “No. I don’t.” She leaned in slightly. “I don’t even know if you want to kiss me anymore.”

“Liar,” he chided softly. “You know very well that I want to kiss you.”

“You’re the one who said we don’t know each other anymore. I don’t assume anything about how you’re feeling or what you’re thinking,” she said. Now her gaze dropped to his mouth.

Damn. He really had assumed they’d be arguing a lot more. Fighting. Hashing the past out. Maybe angry fucking in the kitchen. Instead, every time he was with her he felt soft. Protective. Proud. Amazed. Happy.

“You’re right,” he said, moving his thumb from her chin to her bottom lip and stroking back and forth. “We both need to be *very* clear about what we’re thinking and feeling. And wanting. And needing.”

The tip of her tongue darted out to wet her lip, but touching his thumb in the process. He felt the jolt to the soles of his feet.

“You first,” she said.

“Okay.” He looked into her eyes. “I think you are completely different from the girl I was in love with in high school. That girl was confident and daring and knew who she was and where she fit.”

She sucked in a little breath and almost pulled back, but Cam caught her upper arm, holding her in place.

“Now you’re a grown woman who’s a little broken, a little hurt, but even if she’s not sure where she fits, she knows what she wants and is willing to work her *ass* off for it. You’re creative and sweet and a little too humble and you’ve never been more beautiful. Seeing you keep trying, keep working, keep *wanting* in spite of years of being taken for granted and overlooked kills me and inspires me and makes me want you so much more than I ever did when you were sure of yourself.”

He saw the shock in her eyes but knew he had to keep going.

“I thought I could encourage you to yell and argue and push and fight but... instead, *you* make *me*... softer. I’m quieter and more patient and more open just since being around you. I’ve been knocking heads and fighting and being a pain in people’s asses for the last ten years. I thought I liked that. It made me strong. No one overlooked me or got away with anything. I thought I was tough.”

He gave a soft huff of laughter and shook his head.

“But I had no idea what tough was. Tough is being ignored but not leaving. Tough is being overlooked, but knowing you have something to contribute. Tough is being able to see long term in spite of the short-term shit you have to plow through. Tough is... you.”

Whitney pressed her lips together and blinked rapidly, but she didn’t say anything. He was glad she wasn’t arguing with him. He wanted her to hear this. All of it.

“You’ve been knocked around, emotionally, by people you loved and trusted and looked up to, but you’re still here. Most people would have said fuck it and walked out by now. That’s

sure as hell what I would have done. Making a lot of noise and trouble as I went out. That's what I *have* done in some situations. But you believe in something deeper and bigger—this town or these people or your family legacy or... something—and you're still here.”

Her eyes were shiny now and Cam thought maybe she was on the verge of tears. But he knew she wasn't sad.

He shook his head. “After just a few weeks being around you, I just want to be quiet and hear old stories and watch TV reruns and bake cookies.” He gave a short laugh as the words came out without him really planning them. “I don't know how you're doing it, exactly, but you are showing me how to be a fighter in a whole new way. Just by being there and taking care of things behind the scenes, quietly, being supportive and letting someone else... you... do the ass-kicking. I'm shocked but, I like it. I really do.”

She took a shaky breath. “The stories and reruns and cookies are Didi,” she finally said, her voice husky.

“No. Those are all the by-products of the things you're making me feel,” he said, not letting her make light of it. “You're showing me how to be in for the long haul and how to be a part of something bigger by being the guy behind the tough girl.”

She swallowed hard.

“Even back in high school you understood that. I was ready to give up my scholarship and even college to stay here with you, but you understood the big picture, even then. You knew I had to leave. You realized that putting up with things sucking in the short term would matter for the long term.”

“You make me sound a lot more insightful and smarter than I am,” she said softly.

“Maybe you don't *think* you're those things, but that's just because your brain isn't recognizing it. Because it comes from your heart,” he said.

She just looked at him for several ticks from the clock on her desk. Cam let her look. He hadn't planned on saying any

of this. He hadn't put most of this to words even in his own head before this. But it was all true. He'd spent the past ten years fighting and being hardheaded and driven. Now he felt... content. With her. Not because Whitney was content. She clearly wasn't. She had a lot of unfinished business here. But because he now knew that what he needed to do was be here so she could finish that business.

That didn't seem as strange as it maybe should.

"How you feel about me and my ideas here matter more than anyone else's," she finally said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?" He sincerely wanted to know. He wasn't the CEO or CFO of the company and he was already a huge fan of hers. "You've already won me over," he told her with a smile.

"I think because..." Her brow furrowed. "Well..." She was clearly thinking it through.

Cam grinned. "That's what I thought."

"No. Honestly." She pressed her lips together, then said, "Okay, it's sad, but, there's not a lot of difference between my personal life and my work life. Hot Cakes has always been a family business, so it's always been a part of my home life too. But it's also because I'm a workaholic and don't have a lot of friends. I simply can't separate Hot Cakes into any kind of compartment. It's a part of everything."

She drew a breath. "But with you, I suppose I want you to feel like all the extra time you're putting in helping with Didi and everything is worth it. That believing in me is worth it. That makes this personal in a way it's never been before."

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth as she waited for him to respond. He couldn't for a second as his heart actually kicked painfully against his ribs.

Finally he moved his hands to hold her face. "Well, then, it's very important for you to hear me say that it's *all* fucking amazing," he said gruffly.

Her smile was bright even as her eyes were shiny with tears again. “Yeah?”

“Very much so. It’s very worth it to me to see you happy and proud of yourself and feeling fulfilled.”

She looked legitimately touched by that. “Thank you, Cam.”

“You’re welcome.”

She gave a soft laugh. “I can’t believe this.”

“What?”

“This. Us. The fact that you’re helping me do more at Hot Cakes, of all places, and you’re involved with my family and…” She shook her head. “Just all of it.”

“We couldn’t have been here ten years ago,” he said. “I realize that. I had to grow up to get past the company and your family and the details to see the big picture of you and me. You were right.”

She smiled sadly. “I had no idea that we’d end up here, Cam. I’m glad we did, but I had no way of knowing that it would work out. It wasn’t about you and me. Me breaking things off was just about you.”

“You sent me away for me.”

Whitney nodded. “You couldn’t have stayed here. That was a ridiculous idea.”

“You did it because you wanted me to be happy.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded.

“Because you loved me.”

She swallowed hard. But nodded again.

“I totally get that now.” His voice was thick and he hoped she could see what all he meant by that.

Suddenly she leaned in, putting her lips against his and wrapping her arms around his neck.

His hands went to her waist, squeezing and bringing her up against him more fully. Nothing had ever felt as right as this

woman did in his arms. Resisting her was getting more and more difficult every day and when *she* touched *him*... he was a goner.

Whitney opened her mouth with a little sigh and Cam immediately swept his tongue against hers. His hands moved down to cup her ass and press her against his growing erection.

She gripped the front of his shirt, arching closer, making a frustrated sound at the back of her throat when it wasn't close *enough*. She turned, tugging him with her, until the backs of her thighs were against her desk. Then she pulled her mouth from his.

But only long enough to give him a sexy, mischievous smile, and to slide her skirt up her thighs.

His heart thundered and his cock hardened as she wiggled the navy blue skirt up high enough that he could see her panties.

Yellow. Bright freaking sunshine yellow. That was what his girl wore under her boring freaking skirt.

Then she pushed herself up onto her desk and spread her knees.

He was there immediately, stepping between them, pulling her ass to the edge of the desk, and cupping the back of her head, his fingers gripping her hair with just a slight tug as he tipped her head back.

He pressed his aching hard-on against the hot, wet center of those cheery-as-fuck panties and ground into her as he kissed her deeply, making her gasp and moan into his mouth.

The vision of knocking her day planner and the boring black pencil holder and matching lamp to the floor so he could lay her back and fuck her on her desk was vivid in his mind. He wanted to do things to her that she would think about during *every single* conference call and meeting she had in this office from now on.

Cam reached out and sent the pencil holder skittering over the surface of the desk, pens scattering, before it *thunked* to the

floor.

Whitney jerked her head to look at it, then back to him.

“What was that?”

“I’m going to—”

His phone started ringing.

And he was jerked back to reality and how this was all *way* friendlier than he’d intended to be.

The phone kept ringing.

He sighed.

He thought about ignoring it, but he couldn’t. The ring tone was the theme song for *Magnum, P.I.* The original, of course.

Whitney started laughing. “You gave her her own ring tone?”

Yeah, the moment was gone.

He grinned as he reached for his back pocket. “Of course.” He swiped to answer and lifted the phone to his ear. “Hey, Didi.”

“I’m ready to go,” she announced. “It’s almost time for yoga.”

It was, indeed. He looked at Whitney. Then at Whitney’s lips. Then at Whitney’s yellow panties. Then at the pencil holder on the floor. Then back to the panties. Dammit.

“We need to stop at the store on the way home too,” she said. “I told Maggie I’d bring salad and I need lemons for my lemon vinaigrette. Don’t forget.”

He grinned in spite of being cock-blocked by a seventy-two-year-old. “Got it.” Didi might have her times mixed up and she might forget things once in a while, but she didn’t forget everything. She and Maggie had talked about that salad three days ago. “I’m on my way.”

“Hurry up.” Then she hung up on him.

Grinning, he looked at Whitney. Holy hell, she looked so hot with her blouse pulled loose from her skirt and her hair mussed and her cheeks flushed. “I need to go.”

Whitney was watching him with a strange expression. It was part amused and part puzzled and part affectionate, if he wasn't mistaken.

“This is all so... weird,” she said.

It was. And a little terrible, he thought, as she slid off the desk and smoothed her skirt down.

“It's all good,” he told her.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “It seems to be.”

“So go, kick some more ass and I'm going to go... relax and meditate with some kittens.” He grinned and stepped back.

Immediately he missed the feel of her body heat and her scent.

“Okay.” She stood watching him for a moment. Then she stepped close and pressed her lips to his again.

The high heels put her at the perfect height.

Screw it.

He cupped the back of her head and tasted her deeply for a moment.

When they separated they were both breathing a little harder again.

Whitney licked her lips. “See you later.”

“Yeah.” He glanced at the pens scattered over her desk. “Sorry about the pencil holder.”

She let out a little sigh. “Worth. It.”

He grinned. He didn't know what was going on with them *exactly*. But he knew that his feelings were real and they were growing and he fucking liked everything about how things were between them.

Except there wasn't nearly enough naked time.

That was his fault. Well, maybe not *fault*. That was his *doing*. And he didn't regret it. If he'd been sleeping with Whitney this whole time, it would have been hard to separate loving having her in his bed and making her want him again and just... loving her.

It hit him hard.

It had been teasing around the edges of his consciousness for a while now. Like when he'd realized that she maybe really had loved him even as an eighteen-year-old kid and that he maybe hadn't *actually* felt the same way. But now it was clear. He'd fallen back in love with her. In the midst of 3 a.m. viewings of *Magnum, P.I.* and baking cookies and watching her bloom and seeing her have quiet, happy moments with her grandmother because she wasn't stressed and pressed for time and weighed down by a million other things. Like guilt.

It was ironic that it was Hot Cakes that had brought them back together, but here they were and it felt good. Right.

Giving into the urge, he leaned in and kissed Whitney once more. Just a quick, sweet kiss on the lips, then he looked at her with the knowledge that he'd see her at home later. And maybe they could sneak in some quiet time before *Magnum, P.I.*

* * *

Whitney took a deep breath as she pulled her phone out and stared at the screen.

She never did this.

Never.

It was completely foreign territory.

Her phone was used for emails and the occasional call when she was away from her desk and pulling up her boarding pass when she was traveling.

She almost never texted.

And she never texted like *this*.

She wasn't even sure she was going to do it right.

She swallowed. But she really wanted to.

Opening her contacts, she scrolled to the one she needed and pulled up the number. Then she typed, *I got done early today and I'd love to just have some fun tonight. Are you up for something?*

She stared at the words.

Then she frowned.

And typed, *This is Whitney, by the way.*

Then she sat and waited. And wondered if she should have said something else. Or said it differently. Was that enticing at all? Was it stupid? Is this how people started this stuff?

Finally, after about four years—or maybe about two minutes—she saw the little dots dancing, indicating she was going to get a response.

LOL. I know it's you! And dammit! I'm so sorry! I've got plans.

Whitney felt her heart drop to her stomach. But she forced herself to actually smile, even though Piper couldn't see it, as she typed back. *No worries! Of course you do. This is really last minute. Sorry!*

Don't be sorry! Piper replied. *I love that you're done early! That's awesome! I would love to do something but I'm... out at the alpaca farm.*

Whitney paused with her thumbs over the keys and reread that. Piper was at the alpaca farm? As in Drew Ryan's farm? Uh-oh.

We were going to talk about all of this, she finally typed back, suddenly feeling less silly about texting Piper for an impromptu girl's night. Her nerves about asking a girlfriend out for drinks—something she'd literally never done before—disappearing in light of her concern over Piper getting cozy with Drew. Drew Ryan was a great guy. Good looking, kind, funny, successful. But... he wasn't Ollie.

Whitney couldn't explain it any better than that.

Ollie was a handful. She knew that. Especially for Piper. But he seemed to be *Piper's* handful. He was Cam and Grant and Aiden and Dax's handful too, but there was something about Ollie and Piper that just seemed to click. And Whitney knew that Ollie had feelings for Piper. He just wasn't good at showing that. Or maybe even admitting it.

But she was rooting for them. And Drew Ryan would be fine. He could have just about any woman in Appleby. Drew wasn't lonely, that was for sure. He didn't need Piper.

We were going to talk about it, Piper replied. And we will. Promise.

Whitney felt terrible suddenly.

She and Piper had had a moment in the conference room earlier. A moment Whitney never had with other women. That moment of silent understanding that said *I've got you, girl*. Piper was like the little sister at Fluke and the guys all cared about her. It was obvious. But they were *guys*. And Piper had moved here from Chicago with them. Or because of them. She wasn't from here and probably didn't know many people. Piper maybe needed a girlfriend as much as Whitney did.

But what had Whitney done? She'd gone back to her office and gotten immersed in her work. Of course she had. That's what she did. Today had been almost worse than usual. She'd flown through her to-do list, high from the meeting and knowing that the guys were excited about the new bars and then her talk with Cam.

Her heart flipped even now thinking about *that*.

It had been so much more than a *talk*. The way he'd looked at her. And cupped her face in his big hands. And looked into her eyes. The intensity in his voice when he'd told her that she was amazing and creative and sweet. And a little broken and hurt.

Her heart twinged now remembering that.

Cam saw her. He saw her now in a way he hadn't in the past.

Maybe because there was more to see now. Maybe because he was more mature and more *able* to see it. She wasn't sure. But they were not the same people they'd been ten years ago. This man she had very much had a huge crush on was *not* the same guy she'd crushed on in high school.

It all felt new and exciting and scary.

Scary because now they were adults and it could actually mean something now.

She took a deep breath and focused on her phone and Piper.

This was something else she needed to work on. If she wanted to have friends, she had to *be* a friend. That meant paying attention when people needed her.

Are you sure you can't get away for a drink? Whitney asked. *We should talk now. I'm concerned.*

Don't be concerned, Piper texted back almost immediately. *This isn't about Ollie.*

Whitney took a breath. Something she knew even less about than girlfriends was romantic relationships. Cam had been her only one. And they'd been kids. And now, in retrospect, it was clear that a lot of that excitement had been about a whole series of firsts—her first boyfriend, her first kiss, first sex, first defying her parents—and the rush of sneaking around and breaking her family's rules.

She hadn't done that. Not before Cam. And not really since.

Her parents had been married for thirty years. They'd been high school sweethearts and, well, they'd just done what they'd been expected to do—go to college, get married, take over the family business, have kids.

Her grandparents had been married for fifty-one years. But she knew it hadn't been all that happy. Her grandpa hadn't been abusive. At least not physically. She was realizing now that both her grandfather and father had been emotionally abusive, and her grandfather had been financially abusive toward her grandmother, making all of the money decisions

and doling money out to her like she was a child, requiring her to get his “permission” for the things she bought. And he’d taken over *her* company. The thing she’d first taken a chance on. The thing she’d lost her best friend over.

Yeah, Whitney didn’t know much about strong relationships. Except with her grandmother. And she wasn’t going to win any granddaughter of the year awards over the past couple of years.

I can come over to your house, Whitney finally typed to Piper. Piper was a woman she wanted to be friends with. Because she had a feeling Piper could *teach* Whitney how to be a good friend. Piper would tell Whitney when she was falling down on the job and she’d tell her exactly what she wanted Whitney to do to make her feel better. *I can bring cookies or liquor. Your call.*

The cookies were ones Cam had made but she didn’t think he’d mind if she swiped them for this.

In fact, she smiled thinking about telling him that she was “borrowing” the caramel-and-toffee oatmeal cookies he’d made last night to have some girl talk with Piper.

He’d approve. He’d like that she and Piper were getting close. He’d like that she was developing a friendship. He’d like that his cookies were a part of that.

Whitney felt a wave of heat sweep through her.

He was so damned sweet. And she wanted him so damned much.

She’d always been attracted to him and they’d had some hot moments over the past few weeks. But it was the freaking cookies and the dusting and the way he was caring for Didi and—more than any of that—the way he seemed so *happy* to be doing it all. He truly seemed to be happy to be doing all of it with the knowledge that Whitney could then focus better on work.

It was the weirdest turn of events.

And it made her want to strip his clothes off of him and cover him in cookie dough and lick every swirl of every tattoo

on his body.

She *really* hoped he had some she hadn't seen yet because they'd been covered by his jeans and shorts and...

Her phone pinged, pulling her attention back to her texting conversation with Piper.

The woman she wanted to be *friends* with.

Man, she really sucked at this.

Cookies and liquor both sound awesome. But honestly, it's not like that. I'm out here talking to Drew about a project. It's truly about alpacas. It's not a date. Rain check on the drink? And the cookies?

Whitney sighed. A project with Drew? About alpacas? Okay, well, she was launching a new snack bar with fox footprints on them and she'd had alpacas *and* goats at her dessert tasting. Who was she to judge?

Deal, she texted back. *Soon*.

Definitely.

Whitney sat back in her chair. Well, that had not gone the way she'd expected. She chewed her bottom lip. There was one other woman who she would like to have drinks—or cookies—with. It was more of a longshot than Piper, who she saw every day and had gotten to know better over the past few months the guys had been in town. They at least had Hot Cakes and the guys in common. But there was one other option, and she really was in the mood to go out and be social.

She could just go home, of course. She always wanted to go home and see Didi. And take her heels and bra off. And now Cam was there and that made it even more enticing. Plus the house always smelled amazing now. A combination of cleaning products, which she knew were homemade by his mother because she'd overheard the guys joking about it one day, and food. Usually baked goods, but he also made casseroles and he'd talked Didi into burgers at an actual decent dinnertime the other night. They ate at Maggie's most nights, but they ate at home every once in a while. And they always saved Whitney some food. They either brought her a plate

from Maggie's or they saved her some of whatever they made. So the house always smelled very *homey* when she walked in.

She was *really* getting used to having Cam around.

Not just because of the housekeeping/cooking/caregiving tasks.

But not *not* because of those.

Throw in some naked baking and/or orgasms and she'd never let him leave.

Hell, she'd be okay with him just walking around without his shirt on a regular basis.

Huh, it seemingly took just a few minutes of free time with her to-do list crossed off and her brain immediately, happily, shifted into another gear all together.

But she couldn't just go home and throw herself at Cam.

Probably.

Until later. When Didi was in bed.

No, she scolded herself. Not even then.

She'd made a big deal out of the fact that she didn't want to do the relationship thing, and then he'd made a big deal out of supporting her in that and she should really let him. And respect that. And stuff.

Free time was obviously a problem. If she had too much time to think about things other than Hot Cakes, she got into trouble. She needed to keep busy.

She took a breath and pulled up Paige's number in her phone.

Paige was quite a bit younger but she was very... Whitney wasn't sure of the word. Mature sounded dumb. She was, of course, but there was something else about Paige that made her seem older than her just-turned-twenty-two years. It was her calm spirituality. Or something. Paige was just very sure of herself, who she was, what she wanted. She did yoga and collected cats and was a vegetarian in a little town in Iowa

where that was regarded as a bit strange. But she did it all with a smile and a general disregard for what others thought of her.

She was just... calm. She was very soothing.

It was why Whitney loved her yoga classes and just enjoyed talking with Paige whenever she had the chance.

Whitney probably needed more soothing in her life.

So she should definitely invite Paige for drinks and a girls' night out with her.

Whitney typed and hit send quickly before she could think about it too hard.

Hi! It's Whitney. Wondering if you'd be up for having a drink tonight?

Again, the two-minute lag time between sending and receiving a response felt like years.

Hi! I'm so sorry, Whitney! I have plans tonight. I would love to do it another time.

Oh, no problem. It's last minute, I know, Whitney typed back quickly.

I can't believe you're asking me to go out on the ONE night that my friend is back in town from Louisiana and can get together! Paige texted back.

It's fine! Whitney assured her. *You should see your friend.*

She moved to Louisiana because she fell in love a few months ago. Paige sent an eye-rolling emoji at that.

Whitney had to laugh. Paige was really not into falling in love and people upending their lives to be with Their One True Love.

Paige loved to date and didn't sit home on the weekends unless she wanted to. But she did *not* get serious. Every time someone asked her when she was going to settle down, or worse, get married, she got another cat.

We can do it another time, Whitney replied. Maybe Paige would talk her out of all these mushy, semi-in-love feelings

she was having for Cam.

Would that be a good thing? Or not?

Tori is a vet, Paige went on. She's the one who took care of all my cats. Lol! So she's looking at my new stray for me. She's here to collect her own animals and take them back to Louisiana with her.

Whitney smiled. *Seriously, no problem.*

Well, she did bring her boyfriend and his HOT cousin with her. Paige sent a smiley face emoji with the tongue hanging out and then a fire emoji. *So I'm not exactly upset.* She included a winking emoji.

Whitney laughed. *Have fun!*

Oh, I will! This Louisiana drawl is doing it for me. Paige sent a grinning emoji. *But I really want to go out with you sometime soon, okay?*

Whitney nodded. She wanted to do this too. She had rain checks for two girls' nights out now. That was a lot more than she'd had an hour ago. *For sure. And then I can hear all about how things went with this guy.* She hesitated before sending that, but that was the kind of stuff women talked about on girls' nights out, right? She finally pushed the button.

Sounds good! Paige sent a GIF of a girl fanning her face. Then she added *And then I can hear all about you and Cam.*

Oh.

Well... if Paige was going to spill about this guy and whatever happened, then Whitney probably had to tell her *something* too. She just didn't have much to tell. Well, nothing physical anyway. She had a whole lot of emotional stuff she could spill.

And suddenly having someone to bounce all of that off of sounded kind of great. She could use some advice.

Okay.

She sent the response, feeling like she was making a huge commitment.

The heart emoji she got back from Paige made her feel good though and she put her phone down smiling.

A second later though, she blew out a breath as she looked at her especially clean desk. She really was done for the day.

Well... fuck. She'd finally gotten her nerve up to reach out to potential new friends and they both, of course, already had plans. Normal people probably did make plans ahead of time. Whitney never really made plans because she worked all the time. But if she were going to do something other than work, she probably wouldn't be able to plan it too far ahead. She never knew how long she'd be at the office.

But she sighed as she thought that.

It wasn't entirely true.

She was in control, to an extent at least, of how long she stayed at the office. She worked a lot, yes, but she did it intentionally.

And she'd been realizing more and more over the past few days that it was, in part, because she'd been trying to prove herself. First to her family. Then to the Fluke guys. But it was also because she hadn't really liked going home. Because she'd felt pretty damned useless there.

She wasn't a cook or a baker. She didn't enjoy keeping house. Not that anyone probably *loved* cleaning toilets, but she knew people liked decorating their homes for different holidays and changing up the little touches like throw pillows and centerpieces. She got the impression that Maggie McCaffery enjoyed things like making the little sachets Whitney had found in her drawer the other day. There was no way Cam had *made* those and she would bet half her salary he'd gotten them from his mother. Just like he'd surely gotten the hand soaps in the powder room on the first floor from Maggie.

Some people enjoyed that stuff. Cam even, clearly, enjoyed baking.

That wasn't Whitney.

And she hadn't known what to do for Didi, to make her happy and to help her. She'd struggled with things like the little parties at 3 a.m. and knowing if it was right or wrong. She'd struggled with juggling those things with work. She'd struggled with feeling that she was really doing a good job with *any* of it.

At work, at least she'd known what she was doing. Her dad and grandfather hadn't *let* her do much, but she understood what was going on and enjoyed the atmosphere at Hot Cakes. It was more familiar. Her grandmother and mom had always had people cooking and cleaning for them, so she hadn't seen that as a nurturing, happy thing people did.

Until Cam.

Cam had been raised with a mother who clearly loved to cook and have her family and their friends around in big groups, feeding and taking care of them.

It made Whitney wonder about Letty. Had she been like that too? She'd certainly been a baker. And she'd apparently staunchly stood by the idea that fresh-baked, homemade baked goods were superior to mass-produced snack cakes.

And that made Whitney wonder if Didi had missed that part of Letty too. Cam had told her that Didi said she missed Letty's baked goods. But Whitney wondered if Letty had had that nurturing spirit too and if Didi missed that as well. Or more. She was certainly soaking that up from Cam. And his family.

Which gave her an idea.

A crazy, maybe-I-shouldn't-do-this idea.

But as she pushed away from her desk, she felt a little flip in her stomach that told her she *was* going to do it.

And she couldn't wait to see how Cam reacted.

Chapter Seventeen



Wanting to tell his parents and friends and little brother that they needed to get the hell out of the house so he could put Whitney Lancaster up on his mother's kitchen counter and do very, very dirty things to her where he'd just helped make a chicken and ham casserole was probably not appropriate.

That was still his reaction when his mother came back into the kitchen with Whitney in tow.

Maggie had gone to answer the doorbell because Steve had been taking corn on the cob out of the pot on the stove, Grant, Aiden and Dax were setting the table, Zoe, Jane and Josie were out on the back patio, and Henry and Didi were in the middle of a quest in *Warriors of Easton* and couldn't stop according to Henry's shout from the family room.

No one came to the front door anyway, so they'd all assumed it wasn't anyone all that important.

They'd been wrong.

Cam was literally standing in the middle of the kitchen, holding a hot casserole dish, his mouth hanging open, staring at Whitney.

She looked shy and unsure and completely gorgeous.

Her hair was down, falling in loose waves around her shoulders. She wasn't wearing any of her usual "office" makeup. No eye shadow or lipstick. She also, thank you Lord, was not wearing one of her office skirts. She wore a pink sundress and cock-hardening scuffed brown boots. She looked

every bit the girl next door in a small Iowa town and he wanted her with every fiber of his being.

“I knew better than to bring food, and especially dessert,” she said with a little smile. “So I brought liquor.” She held up a bottle of lemon vodka in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other.

Maggie laughed and took both bottles. “Brilliant girl,” she praised. Then she nudged Whitney toward Cam. “We’re so happy you’re here.”

Someone—he wasn’t sure who—took the casserole dish from Cam, then slipped the oven mitts off his hands, and nudged him toward Whitney.

They met partway across the kitchen.

“Is this okay?” she asked him softly.

Right. He still hadn’t said a fucking word. Like how happy he was to see her. Here. At his parents’ house. On a weeknight. For one of their big group dinners.

“This is...” He couldn’t properly express himself here in the middle of the kitchen with people around. “Come on.” He took her hand and tugged her toward the hallway and into the bathroom just past the stairs that led up to the bedrooms.

He pushed her into the tiny room in front of him then stepped in behind her and kicked the door shut.

They wouldn’t be able to hide out in here long. And they weren’t *alone*. At least not enough to do all the things he wanted to do to her. But he needed a few minutes without eyes on them.

“Cam, is every—”

She didn’t finish that thought because his mouth was on hers a moment later. He slid his fingers into her hair, holding her head still, and stepped her back until she was against the wall by the sink. Then he *kissed* her. Hard, deep. With tongue and moans and his fingers curling into her scalp and her hands gripping his shirt at his waist.

She arched into him. She moaned too. She opened her mouth and let his tongue stroke deep.

He heard footsteps in the hallway outside of the door and knew their time was running short, but he couldn't let her go just yet. He dropped his hand to her hip and skimmed it down to where the hem of the dress hit her thigh, then he dragged his hand up the silky smooth skin, bunching the skirt as he went.

She shuddered under his touch. He didn't stop until he hit the skin-warmed silk of her panties. He slid his hand over the slick fabric to cup her ass and then dragged his mouth along her jaw to her ear.

“*This* skirt is so much better than the others.”

She gave a soft laugh and nodded. “I agree.”

He squeezed her ass, then reluctantly let her go. He leaned back, looking down at her. “I'm so happy you're here.”

“You are?”

“Surprised, but yes.”

“I got done early and... realized I wanted to do something.” She lifted a shoulder, then admitted, a little sheepishly, “I actually invited both Piper and Paige out for drinks first. But they were busy.”

Cam felt his grin. She'd reached out for a girls' night. He loved that.

“I've got you,” he said. He took her hand and turned toward the door.

“Wait.” She grabbed his forearm with her other hand.

“What?”

“What was *this*?” she asked, looking around the bathroom and then at him, her gaze dropping to his mouth.

He immediately turned back and leaned in. “This was holy-shit-you-look-gorgeous-and-I'm-so-fucking-happy-to-see-you-and-I-love-that-you-came-over-here greeting.”

“Really?” She looked happy. “I know your mom is too polite to turn me away but—”

He laughed. “She is. But I promise that’s not what this is. I’m so glad you’re here. I would have been bringing you over here every night if you’d been at home and...” He cupped her cheek again. “I love that you knew you could show up here with all of us.”

She frowned slightly but then nodded. “Yeah. I guess... I didn’t even think about it. I was focused on surprising you. But it didn’t occur to me to be nervous that the other guys would think it was weird that I was here.” She looked like she’d just had a realization. “That’s new.”

He smiled, his heart expanding. “It is. You know you belong with us.”

Her smile grew and, damn, the brightness in her face almost brought him to his knees.

“And you can still have your girls’ night,” he said, starting for the door again, tugging on her hand. “Zoe and Jane and Josie are out back.”

Whitney immediately stopped moving, jerking him to a stop.

He looked back.

She wasn’t smiling. *Now* she looked nervous.

“Whit?”

“I... oh my God, how did I not think of that? Of course they’re here.”

“Of course they are,” he agreed. Dax and Grant were good friends of his but they hadn’t started showing up at Maggie’s dinners until they’d fallen for Jane and Josie. Well, Grant had come once... and he’d then been officially ass over nose for Josie after that. Jane and Josie, however, had been coming to dinner here for years.

“I can’t crash their girl time,” Whitney said, frowning at him. “I can’t just show up at their regular thing and expect them to include me.”

“They won’t see it like that.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Whitney—Jane and Josie are two of the nicest women I know.”

“You didn’t say Zoe too,” she pointed out.

He shrugged. “My little sister is sassy,” he said. “But she’ll be sweet to you.”

“I’m the granddaughter of her grandmother’s arch nemesis. I’m the daughter of the family that owned the business she’s always thought of as her primary rival.”

“She’s over that,” Cam said. And she was. Mostly. Aiden had helped Zoe see that they were just two completely different businesses, on two completely different levels. Though, yes, Zoe could hold a grudge almost as well as Letty had.

“But she’s felt that way for a long time. It’s easier for her to not think of Aiden as her competitor because they’re in love,” Whitney said. “And you’re her brother and Grant and Ollie are your friends. But I’m...”

“The woman I’m crazy about.”

Whitney stopped, her mouth open, ready to keep going. But then she snapped it shut.

He couldn’t help but grin. “You know that.”

She took a deep breath.

“Whitney,” he said. “You know that.” He wanted to hear her admit it. He hadn’t told her how he was feeling, but he hoped that when she really thought about it, that she would know.

He thought he knew how she was feeling about him.

Of course... yeah, it would be nice to hear.

“I know that we’ve been getting along well,” she finally said.

He grinned and pulled her in close, resting his forehead against hers. “We have been. Things have been great. But for the record, I’m crazy about you. And I’m so fucking happy that you’re here. And I’d really love it if you spent some time with the girls. That would feel really good. I want my family and my friends to know you better.”

She swallowed and nodded her head against his. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Well, she wasn’t saying she was crazy about him too, but that could come later. She was stubborn and proud and she’d been hurt in the past by people she loved. He could give her time. Some time. A little bit of time.

“Cam?” she said softly when he leaned back.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He lifted a brow. “For?”

“Being crazy about me. I know it’s not easy.”

He gave a soft laugh. “It’s stupid easy, Whit. It’s like I can’t even help it.”

She gave him a smile that he could have sworn he’d never seen. She seemed touched and maybe a little surprised and turned on and maybe a little bit in love.

He wanted her feeling that, whatever it was exactly, for the rest of the night.

With a lingering look at *that* expression, he finally led them out of the bathroom and back to the kitchen.

All the guys and Cam’s parents were in the kitchen and they all jerked to action as he and Whitney came around the corner, clearly attempting to look busy.

Cam rolled his eyes, but he was grinning and he was certain that his best friends and parents—people who had known him very well for a very long time—would be able to read that grin as *stupidly in love*. That was okay.

“Dinner is ready,” Maggie said, handing Cam a plate of chicken and Whitney a bowl of salad.

No one said anything about him pulling her off to the bathroom immediately or even about her being here in the first place. They just all gathered food and drink and headed for the dining room.

Aiden went to the back door and pulled it open. “Dinner!”

Soon the dining room was full. Henry and Didi came in from the family room. Zoe, Josie and Jane joined them from the back patio. There was already an extra chair for Whitney—Cam gave his mom a quick smile for that—and Didi greeted Whitney as if she’d been expecting her granddaughter to show up tonight.

Even Zoe and the girls didn’t seem shocked to see her.

Henry was the only one who said anything other than “Hi” and “Welcome.”

“Didi says you should play *Warriors*, but that it will be tough for you,” Henry told her, scooping cheesy potatoes onto his plate.

He was seated between Whitney and Didi, a move that Cam knew was not random but that he wondered about. Why had Maggie chosen that seating arrangement?

Henry added potatoes to Didi’s plate and then passed the dish to his father. The last time they’d been at dinner and Henry had dished up for Didi and they’d asked him why, he’d said that the casserole dishes were too heavy for her to hold, so he did it for her. He’d said it so matter-of-factly that they’d all just nodded and later agreed that, even though they were playing video games together, spending time with Didi had matured Henry. As the baby of the family, by a lot, there just weren’t many chances for him to care for others. Didi had changed that and it was pretty cool to see his baby brother stepping up to help someone out.

“She said *Warriors* will be tough for me?” Whitney asked him, bemused. “Why is that?”

Henry was only eleven, but he’d grown up with much older siblings and a constant houseful of people older than himself so he wasn’t shy and he could hold a conversation

with nearly anyone. “She said you don’t sit still very well,” he told Whitney.

Whitney nodded. “She’s right.”

“But she said no one needs a chance to kick bad-guy ass more than you,” Henry said.

“Henry!” Maggie admonished.

He looked at her. “What? Didi said it.”

Didi nodded. “I did. And it’s true.”

Didi thought Whitney needed a chance to kick bad-guy ass? Cam looked at Whitney and thought about that. Didi saw how Whitney tamped down her urges to yell and fight, he realized. He wondered if she noticed the little chin lift Whitney always did when she was swallowing back sharp words. He’d bet good money that she did.

So Didi thought Whitney would enjoy swinging a virtual sword and chopping off some troll heads, huh? She might have a point. He’d have to introduce Whitney to the game. He could let Henry do it, but he had the sudden inkling that seeing Whitney glaring at the screen, her hair wild from not doing it for a couple of days because she was engrossed in the game, growling softly as she chased down trolls and ogres and monsters and kicked their asses in the name of saving the kingdom and freeing the people would be pretty hot. *He* wanted to see that.

“Can we use the word *butt* instead?” Maggie asked, but her expression said she knew the answer to that.

Didi looked at Henry. “*You* need to remember to use the word *butt* when you’re repeating this stuff to your mother.”

He nodded. “You’re right.”

Maggie sighed, but didn’t say anything more.

Cam grinned and took a bite of cheesy potatoes—which were the best thing to ever come out of his mother’s kitchen. He loved that Henry and Didi were coconspirators.

“You don’t want salad?” Henry asked Didi when she shook her head as he held the bowl out to her.

“No.”

“But you made it,” Henry said, slightly exasperated.

“So?” Didi asked.

“You made something you don’t like?”

“I put cucumbers in it.”

“You don’t like cucumbers?”

“No.”

“Why’d you put them in then?”

“You said you like them.”

Henry grinned at her. “I do.”

“So that’s why.”

“You can pick them out of yours and give them to me,” Henry offered.

Didi shook her head. “I cut them up really small.”

He sighed. “Okay.” He passed the bowl to his dad. “But next time, make them big so we can pick them out.”

“Okay.”

Cam grinned and took the basket of rolls from his sister, but when he glanced at Zoe, he could see tears in her eyes. He frowned. She smiled and shook her head. Then he looked at his mother. She had a wobbly smile and shiny eyes too. He glanced at Whitney. Her eyes were wet and she was watching Henry and Didi with a look of wonder.

Cam shook his head. But couldn’t help smiling. It was sweet. And he was glad Whitney was here to see it.

They ate and chatted comfortably and casually, but Cam couldn’t stop from glancing at Whitney over and over. She didn’t say much but she had a happy look on her face as she absorbed the conversation.

“So we have an announcement,” Josie said as Maggie started to push her chair back at the end of the meal.

Maggie had mentioned cinnamon roll cheesecake and Dax’s mouth had fallen open in amazement.

Maggie paused.

Dax looked from Maggie to Josie to Maggie and then back to Josie. “But... can you make the announcement over dessert?”

Josie shook her head and looked at Grant.

“You can’t wait two more minutes?” Grant asked Dax.

“You heard what she said, right?” Dax asked. “*Cinnamon roll cheesecake*. There’s not one word in that name that says I can wait two more minutes.”

“What if it’s something that’s really important to two of your best friends?” Josie asked.

Dax gave her a look, one eyebrow up. “*Cinnamon. Roll. Cheesecake*. You better be getting married or something if I’m waiting on that.”

Josie’s amused smile curved into a wide grin.

It took a second, but Dax’s eyes narrowed. Then he sat forward. Then he looked from Josie to Grant and back. “Are you getting *married*?”

Josie’s grin grew even wider; she nodded and held up her left hand. A gorgeous diamond ring twinkled under the light that hung over the dining room table.

There was a beat of silence and then all at once, everyone erupted into gasps and squeals and laughter and congratulations.

Except Cam and Whitney.

They looked at one another and grinned. They had a shared secret. Grant and Josie were already married. They’d gotten married when Josie had needed her gall bladder removed and hadn’t had the health insurance to cover it. They’d both thought it was a simple favor, a temporary marriage of

convenience. Cam and Whitney had realized early on that it wasn't simple and it shouldn't be temporary.

Grant had asked Cam to act as his attorney to make sure the insurance claims went through smoothly. And to draw up the divorce papers.

He'd done both.

But he hadn't wanted to draw up the divorce papers. He'd seen that Josie was exactly what Grant needed—and vice versa—and so he'd gone to Whitney to ask her what he should do.

It had been an impulse, but he hadn't regretted it.

She'd been shocked. Then she'd been pleased. And inspired. Together, they'd come up with the idea to make the divorce papers only mostly official.

And it had worked. Once Grant and Josie thought they were officially divorced, they'd immediately realized they didn't want to be. They'd been relieved, if surprised, to find out that Cam had kept them married.

Things had shifted between him and Whitney then. Things had gotten easier. They'd been a team. One small thing. Not about them. About two people they cared about. But they'd both recognized the love and that Josie and Grant needed each other, and that had felt like a particularly important bond for them to share.

Now, smiling about it across the table made him feel like he'd love a lot more *bonding* with her.

Yep, across his mother's dining room table with cheesy potato remnants between them.

"This definitely calls for cinnamon roll cheesecake!" Dax announced.

They all laughed.

"What do you see in me?" Jane asked. "I don't bake, and with your sweet tooth, I don't know why you're with me."

"Well, honey, there's sweets and then there are *sweets*," Dax told her, sliding his arm over the back of her chair and

leaning in to nuzzle her neck.

Grant and Josie were beaming about their engagement, Dax and Jane were nuzzling, Zoe and Aiden were whispering about something and... Cam wanted that. All of that. Looking across the table at Whitney gave him a sense of anticipation and nostalgia at the same time. Nostalgia didn't completely make sense. They'd never had this. They hadn't been a couple in public. They'd never sat at his mother's table together. They'd never hung out with friends together. But he'd wanted to. He'd imagined it. *This*. He'd wanted and imagined this.

And now he had it.

And he wanted so much more.

* * *

Whitney couldn't believe how nervous she was to step out onto that back patio. She trailed behind the other women as they headed outside with glasses of lemonade. Spiked lemonade. Apparently it was the drink of choice with the girls of the group, and when they'd heard Whitney had brought lemon vodka they'd declared they *had* to try it.

She swallowed hard and thought about chugging the drink in her hand. She wasn't sure why Zoe, Jane, and Josie made her nervous. They were nice women. Jane and Josie were in love with two men that Whitney liked a lot. Men who were on their way to being her friends. That felt strange to think about, but it was true. She and Dax and Grant were getting to be friends. And Cam liked and cared about Jane and Josie. That was a big plus. Surely Whitney would like them too.

But that wasn't the problem. She wanted *them* to like *her*.

And then there was Zoe. She was Cam's sister. She was the sister to the man that Whitney was falling for. If she and Cam were involved, if they really tried to make this happen, it would mean more dinners around that very table in that very dining room in this very house and...

She felt her heart start racing. She was so glad that she'd been caught up in Didi and Henry and watching everyone interact and then the excitement of Josie and Grant announcing their *engagement*. The shared smile with Cam when they announced they were getting married had made her heart race too, but not in the panicky, I-need-*a-lot*-more-vodka way she was experiencing at the moment. It had been a very intimate and strangely hot moment between them. Having a shared memory, a shared secret had made her want to have a lot more of those. Secrets like the sound he made when she ran her tongue over the ridges of his abs and down the V on either side that she'd been fantasizing about since seeing him in the hallway in only a towel the other day.

But also secrets like what they'd gotten Maggie for Christmas. *They*. Not him, but they. As in they were giving her a gift from both of them. As a couple.

Or secrets like that they'd let Henry stay up extra late and have brownies for breakfast when he spent the weekend with them. Secrets like that they were going to sneak out of town for a romantic getaway and were only going to text to say they were fine and they'd see everyone on Monday morning. Secrets like a new idea for Hot Cakes that Cam was in on before any of the other partners because he'd sat up at the kitchen table with her designing the presentation and helping her brainstorm. Secrets like that they were engaged for a few days, or even hours, before telling anyone else. Or that the pregnancy test had been positive.

Her heart squeezed hard. She was getting *way* ahead of herself here. They weren't even dating. They were... friends. Good friends. Friends who wanted to get naked together.

"Hey."

She felt Cam move in behind her, his voice low as he spoke just to her.

"Hey," she said softly, still looking at the back door that had closed behind Josie a couple of minutes ago.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded.

He laughed lightly. “Liar.”

He knew her. She loved that. “I don’t know if I’m a hang-out-with-the-girls girl,” she admitted.

“Well, you don’t have to be,” he said. He turned her to face him. “You can do dishes with us guys. You can go play *Warriors* with Didi and Henry. You can go talk to my mom and dad. You can slip upstairs and hang out in my room and I’ll join you as soon as I can. Or you can head home.”

She looked into his eyes, feeling her heart rate slowing. “Really?”

“Of course. I want you comfortable being here. I want you to come back. A lot. I want dinner here with all of us to be something you look forward to, not that you dread. Whatever you want.”

She believed him. And she felt a strange mix of gratitude and affection and silly suddenly. “I’m making a big deal out of lemonade on the patio, aren’t I?”

He shrugged.

She was. Not because those women would automatically like her because she was charming and funny and they had a lot in common. Those things weren’t really true. But they would like her because Cam liked her. They loved Cam and Cam cared about Whitney and so those women would care about her because of Cam if nothing else.

That was friendship. That was love. That was acceptance.

She was catching on. She could learn this.

Those women were important to Cam and he would like nothing more than to see Whitney hanging out and getting along with them. So she could do this. For him.

She lifted on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his quickly. “I’ll be okay,” she said as she pulled back.

He nodded. “You will.”

“But thanks for giving me the option not to be.”

Something flickered in his gaze. She thought for a second he was going to grin and say something flirtatious.

Instead, he said, “You can always be not-okay with me, Whit.”

Her heart squeezed hard and for a second she couldn’t take a deep breath. But she knew exactly what to give him in return. She nodded and said, “I know.”

His gaze intensified and she knew she’d said the right thing. He leaned in and kissed her again, then set her back from him. “Go hang out. We’ll head home in a bit.”

Home. Together. She was shocked by how good that sounded.

They were friends. Hell, he might be her *best* friend. Yes, she realized a moment later, he *was* her best friend. He knew her, well, and he liked her anyway. She could be herself with him. She could be raw and real.

But they were more than friends. Already. Without getting naked. Without it being official.

But she definitely wanted to get naked with him. More now than before.

They needed to do that soon.

“Heading home sounds nice,” she told him. “So yeah, give me a little bit with the girls, but I’ll be ready whenever.”

He looked at her a moment longer, then nodded. “Good.”

Yeah, it was good. It was all good.

Or, it would be after this patio thing anyway.

Chapter Eighteen



Whitney took a breath, then turned and opened the back door. She stepped out onto the patio, pulling the door shut behind her, closing her off from Cam. Her lifeline.

No, that was stupid. She wasn't *scared* to be out here. She wasn't in danger. Except of making an ass of herself.

Zoe, Jane, and Josie all looked over. With smiles. Whitney felt some of the tension in her shoulders ease. These were Cam's friends. Family. Even the two that weren't his blood relations. She could spend time with them.

"Here, sit with me." Josie reached out and snagged Whitney's hand, tugging her down onto the love seat she was occupying.

Zoe and Jane each had a chair. The patio furniture was gathered around the stone firepit on the back patio. There was a fire but it was turned low and giving off little to no heat. Clearly it was for ambience as the night was warm.

The women all seemed relaxed, their drinks still mostly full.

"We were just talking about how amazing it is that Josie kept this engagement a secret from us," Jane said to Whitney. "She's the romantic of the group and I cannot believe she didn't call us *immediately*."

"She was just about to tell us how Grant proposed," Zoe said.

Josie cast Whitney a look, then smiled.

Jane's eyes narrowed. "Hey, what was that?"

"What was what?" Josie asked, her eyes round with innocence. She lifted her glass for a sip of lemonade. Or to hide her expression.

Whitney also took a drink. Did Josie know that she and Cam had known about their marriage and "divorce"? She assumed that Josie knew about Cam's involvement, since he'd been the attorney to draw up the papers, but did she know Whitney had been in on it?

"That look you gave Whitney," Jane said. She sat forward, looking at them both with suspicion. "What do you know?" she asked Whitney. "You two have a secret."

Whitney's eyes widened. "Um."

Josie shook her head. "You don't know what you're talking about," she told Jane.

But Jane focused on Whitney. "Did you know they were engaged before you came to dinner tonight?"

Whitney thought fast. Had she known they were *engaged* before she came to dinner tonight? No. Because they weren't engaged. In her mind. Because she knew they were already married.

"No," she said truthfully.

But she made the mistake of taking a beat too long. And glancing at Josie right after answering.

Now Zoe sat forward too. "Nuh-uh. There's something going on." She wiggled a finger back and forth between Josie and Whitney. "What's up?"

Whitney *really* wanted Josie to take the lead here. This was *completely* Josie and Grant's secret. They should tell—or not tell—whoever they wanted to *when* they wanted to. Oh, man, she could not screw this up.

"Nothing is up," Whitney said. "I had no idea that Josie and Grant were going to announce they were engaged at dinner tonight." Totally true.

“But you showed up tonight for the first time,” Zoe said, her expression suspicious. “That’s just a coincidence?”

Whitney nodded quickly. “Absolute coincidence.”

“So you know *nothing* about Josie and Grant being engaged and planning to get married?” Jane asked.

Whitney lifted her chin, in that way that Cam called her on. Yes, it was the way she summoned her moxie. He’d told her not to do it with him and no, she knew she didn’t need to anymore. But with these ladies? Oh yeah, she needed all the spunk she could muster to hold her own.

“I know that Josie and Grant are perfect for each other and I’m thrilled they’re together.” She glanced at Josie. “No matter how it happened.”

Josie gave her a big grin and Zoe and Jane looked at one another. Then Jane nodded. “Nicely done.”

Whitney lifted a brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we know that you already knew they got married. And you managed to keep their secret *and* not flat-out lie to us. I’m impressed.”

Whitney felt surprise course through her. “Wait, you know they’re married?”

“I confessed earlier before we came inside,” Josie said.

Whitney slumped back against the cushion behind her. “Thank God.”

They laughed and Whitney felt a funny feeling of accomplishment. “You were testing me?” she asked.

“Of course,” Zoe said. “If you’re going to be a part of the group, we have to know you can keep secrets.”

Another emotion surged through Whitney. Was she going to be a part of the group? That sounded so nice. At her age, she should *not* want to be included and liked this much. It was pathetic. But it was still real.

“But not flat-out lie,” Whitney said. “That could be complicated sometimes.”

“Oh, you might have to lie sometimes,” Zoe said.

Jane nodded. “Sometimes.”

“Really? Like when?” Whitney asked. She needed to understand these rules if she was going to be a part of the group.

She lifted her glass to hide the smile that thought brought to her lips. She wasn’t twelve and being asked to sit at the cool-kid table in the cafeteria.

But it felt like she was.

She’d *been* one of the cool kids for God’s sake. She’d been fine in high school. Which meant she was one of those sad women who’d peaked in high school, stayed in her home town, and never quite gotten past those years. Ugh. She really hated that. These women had all stayed in their home town—the same one incidentally—but they’d changed and gotten better.

Whitney regarded them as she thought about that. Zoe and Josie still worked at the same bakery they’d always worked at. They were still best friends, just like they’d been in first grade. Zoe lived a block away from her parents and was now involved with a guy who had been a part of her life as her brother’s best friend forever.

Josie lived in her grandparents’ house, worked in the bakery she’d started working in after school as a teen, and saw her family every day.

Jane worked in the factory, where she’d worked since she’d been sixteen, and, again, saw her family all the time.

Still, they were content. Happy. Had grown and changed and didn’t see the things that *hadn’t* changed as failures. They actually protected them. Jane was a huge advocate at Hot Cakes and continued to work there even though she was engaged to a millionaire. Zoe had always fiercely protected her bakery and its reputation. Josie, too, took Buttered Up and its place in the community very seriously, guarding its recipes as if they were her own.

Whitney could learn a lot from these women, she realized.

“Okay, times for lies,” Jane said. “Like, if I say, ‘is it time for strawberry pie yet?’ The answer is always yes. Even if it’s four a.m.”

“But,” Whitney said, pretending to be confused, “that isn’t a lie. It’s always time for strawberry pie, but *especially* if you’re asking at four a.m.”

Jane grinned and lifted her glass. “Exactly.”

Whitney took a deep breath. This was going well.

“So we know that you already knew Josie and Grant were married. But I want to know *how* you knew,” Zoe said, glancing between Josie and Whitney. “Have you been baking for her on the side?” Zoe asked Josie.

Josie worked for Zoe but she also had a side baking business. One that she’d kept from Zoe for a long time. It had never been anything that competed with the bakery. Josie only made things that Buttered Up didn’t offer. Zoe had been a stickler for following in her grandmother’s footsteps right down to every single recipe and every single product on the menu, so that hadn’t been difficult.

But Josie had come clean about a month ago and now worked part-time for Buttered Up and part-time for herself.

Whitney shook her head. “No, nothing like that. Grant was in my office discussing the launch of the new snack cake when Cam came in and told him the insurance claims had all been paid and handed him the divorce papers.”

“Insurance claims?” Jane asked.

“For her gall bladder surgery,” Whitney said. “Since they’d just gotten married for the health insurance, Cam was letting Grant know it was all covered and over with. Cam handled all of that paperwork and drew up the divorce papers.” She smiled. “Well, kind of.”

Then she realized the other women weren’t smiling. She looked from Jane to Zoe and then to Josie.

Josie was draining her glass of lemonade.

“What did you need health insurance for?” Zoe demanded.

Oh. Crap.

Whitney grimaced. “You hadn’t told them that part?” she asked Josie.

Josie swallowed her lemonade and vodka. “Nope.”

“Shit.” Well, it *had* been going well.

“It’s fine.” Josie took a breath and quickly explained that she’d needed to have her gall bladder removed and had been worried about it because she didn’t have health insurance through Buttered Up. Grant had stepped up and offered the idea of getting married, temporarily, so she’d be covered under his.

“But we fell in love and it all worked out wonderfully,” she said. “So the gall bladder thing doesn’t matter.”

“But you were going to get *divorced*?” Zoe asked. “Cam even drew up the papers?”

“Well, they were really just cat adoption papers,” Whitney jumped in, hoping to help the situation. “They weren’t real divorce papers.”

Zoe and Jane both looked at her with confusion. “Cat adoption papers?”

Whitney nodded quickly. “He came to me upset because Grant thought he wanted to go ahead with the divorce.” Dammit, that didn’t sound right either. She swung toward Josie. “I mean, he *didn’t* want to get divorced, but he did because he wanted to give you the chance to date him and fall for him for real.” She grimaced. “I mean, not that you didn’t have real feelings for him... he wanted to be *sure* that you were together because of real feelings rather than because of the insurance.” *Dammit*, she wasn’t saying this right. She grabbed Josie’s hand. “He *knew* that he was in love with you,” she said. “When I talked to him he was really torn up about it all. He just wanted a fresh start. To have the relationship develop from the beginning without the money and everything in the way. He didn’t want you to *need* him. He just wanted you to want him.” *Fuck*. This still sounded wrong. “I mean... Dammit,” she finally said out loud. “I’m messing this up.” She

took a deep breath. “Grant was in love with you and he just wanted to be sure that he was doing the right thing.”

She finally stopped, pressing her lips together.

No one said anything.

She lifted her glass and took a huge gulp, welcoming the feeling of warmth from the vodka spreading down her limbs. And hopefully stopping her runaway tongue.

Finally Zoe spoke. “Wow.”

Yeah. Well, that wasn’t a terrible summary.

“So these cat adoption papers,” Jane said. “Is this why you have Melody, Val, and Alan?”

“Melody, Val, and Alan?” Whitney asked.

“The cats. Two girls and a boy,” Jane said. She grinned. “They’re named after characters from *Josie and the Pussycats*. Of course.”

Whitney laughed out loud. “Of course. That’s awesome.”

Josie looked pleased. “Grant’s idea, but I think it’s hilarious. Was the cat adoption your idea?”

Whitney shook her head. “Cam. He knew he needed to give you papers for you to both sign, but didn’t want them to be divorce papers.” She looked at Zoe and Jane. “He knew that as soon as Grant and Josie thought they were officially divorced, they’d realize they didn’t want to be. But I agreed. And I helped get them back together by keeping Grant busy at work while Josie planned their romantic dinner.” She looked back to Josie. “And I’ll admit that the *three* cats might have been me.”

Josie grinned. “Good call.”

“Wait.”

They all looked at Zoe.

“So you’re telling me that my brother, Camden asshole-extraordinaire-never-met-a-fight-he-didn’t-want-to-have-will-argue-with-anyone-about-anything McCaffery recognized that

Grant and Josie should be together and worked to keep them married?”

Josie and Whitney both nodded.

“But... asshole extraordinaire is a little harsh isn't it?” Whitney asked.

Zoe shook her head as if still processing what they'd told her. “Are you trying to tell me that Cam might be... romantic?” She wrinkled her nose as she said it, as if it were just too hard to believe.

But no one answered her. Instead they all looked at Whitney.

She lifted her glass for another drink.

Her last.

There was no lemonade and vodka left when she lowered the glass.

“Well?” Jane asked, lifting a brow. “Is Cam romantic?”

“And why are you assuming I would know?” Whitney asked. Asking a question rather than answering a question turned out to be a great way to avoid lying. She would have to remember that.

The three women snorted.

“Sure, no reason,” Josie said.

“He's been... sweet. Very supportive. Helpful,” Whitney hedged. Was that romantic? He'd been hot and dirty a couple of times. Sweet and charming several times. But romantic? That she wasn't so sure of.

“He's been making you cookies and cake and bars,” Josie pointed out.

“Yeah, Aiden told me about the apron and everything,” Zoe said.

“Oh, Dax told me too,” Jane said. “The housekeeping too. And of course, Didi's been singing his praises every time we see her.”

Whitney couldn't help but smile. "Like I said, sweet, and supportive, and helpful."

"And romantic," Josie said.

"Dusting my house and sitting up late with my grandmother is *very* nice," Whitney said. "He's been a good friend. That's what we've been working on. But I'm not sure I'd call doing laundry and taking my grandma to yoga *romantic*."

But suddenly she wanted these women to tell her it was romantic.

The things Cam had said, the way he'd looked at her, the way he'd kissed her—even tonight when she'd showed up here—the way he wanted her to succeed, the way he wanted her to have girlfriends and feel supported at work... those were all... something. Was that romance?

Hell if she knew. Just like she didn't know how to do girl talk, she really knew nothing about romance.

"It is," Zoe said. "It's how he loves people. He takes care of things. He gets things done. He takes care of their problems so they can do the things they want and need to do. It's why he's the company's attorney. He does the messy legal shit so the other guys can do the creative stuff. Or, in Aiden's case, the leadership stuff he loves. Or so Grant can just play with his spreadsheets and calculator all day and not worry about the contracts and stuff."

"He doesn't like the legal stuff?" Whitney asked, realizing that had never occurred to her.

"He does," Zoe said. "Because, like I said, he loves confrontations and fights. He likes the legal stuff. But what he *loves* is being a part of something with his friends. Taking care of stuff for them. Making their jobs and lives a little easier. I'll bet he loved doing the insurance paperwork and the divorce-slash-cat-adoption-paperwork for Grant and Josie. That way Grant could just concentrate on what was making him happy... Josie." Zoe gave her friend a soft smile.

Whitney thought about all of that. The way Cam had been happy to stay at the house with Didi, not caring about not being in the office, fine with some of the other in-house attorneys doing some of the legwork so he could be with Didi.

So it wasn't the actual legal work he liked. It was the taking care of the people he cared about that he liked.

That fit, she realized. Of course. The guys had met in college when they'd been undergraduates. He and Aiden had started in business classes together and they'd met Grant and Dax and Ollie in their second year. Dax and Ollie had already created the beginnings of *Warriors of Easton*. They hadn't known the game would take off like it had, but she could imagine they'd all sat around and dreamed of turning it into something big and talked about what each of them could contribute. It had been clear, she was sure, that Dax and Ollie were the creative parts of the team. Grant was older and was clearly the financial mind of the group. Aiden was a natural leader and CEO type. Cam had possibly chosen law as the piece that was still needed and that he could fill in order to contribute and be an integral part of the team.

She was fascinated by this.

"So him dusting her end tables *is* romantic," Jane said. She said "dusting her end tables" with innuendo that her fiancé would have been very proud of. Clearly Dax was rubbing off on her.

Zoe laughed. "For sure."

Josie shook her head. "There's more."

Whitney looked at her. "There is?"

Josie gave her a smug smile. "The baking."

"He does that for Didi," Whitney said. "She told him she's missed Letty's recipes all these years, so he's making them for her."

"Oh," Zoe said, her voice soft and her expression touched. "That's so nice. That she's missed them and that he's doing that."

Whitney agreed. “It is. She loves it.”

“But,” Josie said. “He’s been doing more cookies and bars lately, right?”

Whitney looked at her suspiciously. “How did you know that?”

“Because you haven’t gotten any from me in a while,” Josie said with a grin.

“Well, he’s...” Whitney thought about what Josie was clearly implying.

“He’s been baking the ones *you* like.” Josie sighed. “You’re getting them from home and don’t need me anymore.”

“Hold *on*,” Zoe said, scooting forward in her chair. “You bake for her on the side?”

“No. We’ve been secretly selling her Buttered Up products for a long time.”

Zoe frowned, then her eyes widened. “What?”

Whitney’s eyes were also wide. “You knew?” She’d always been so careful. She’d paid two little girls to go into the bakery for her.

Josie laughed. “I knew. The Swanson girls spilled the beans the second time they ever came in for you.”

Whitney groaned. “You must have thought I was an idiot.”

Josie shook her head and looked at Zoe. “No. I always thought the feud between your families was ridiculous, but I respected it.”

Whitney nodded her agreement over the ridiculous part. “But you never told Zoe?” She looked at the other woman.

“I would have forbidden her from selling them to you,” Zoe said with a little frown.

“And no one should go without our sugar cookies, and caramel bars, and cinnamon rolls,” Josie said. “So I kept quiet.”

Whitney gave her a smile, but she focused on Zoe again. “You would have forbidden her to sell to me?”

Zoe nodded. Then shrugged. “I was pretty stubborn and bitchy about your family and Hot Cakes. Until Aiden.”

Whitney saw the softness in Zoe’s expression when she mentioned her fiancé. “I’m glad that’s changed.”

“Me too.”

“Really?”

“Really. It makes having you and your grandma here for dinner a lot less awkward.”

They all laughed lightly, but Whitney couldn’t help but ask, “Do you think Cam would have brought Didi here if you still felt the same way about Hot Cakes?”

Zoe snorted. “For sure. Cam’s never shied away from something just because it’s awkward or tense. He loves a good confrontation.” She grew quiet, regarding Whitney for a long moment, then said, “Until recently.”

Whitney wet her lips, but didn’t say anything. The attention shifted fully to her.

“Yeah,” Jane said softly. “*That’s* romantic.”

“What is?” Whitney asked.

“When a man changes because of how he feels about a woman. Not that he becomes an entirely new man, but when he becomes... a better version of himself.”

Whitney felt her throat and chest tighten. Had she done that for Cam? He’d definitely done it for her. She was more confident, more willing to speak up, more willing to believe she was valued.

He’d said that she made him softer. She’d really thought that was Didi but... maybe not. Maybe she was influencing him for the better too.

Josie, the hopeful romantic, sighed happily next to Whitney. “This is nice,” she said, settling back in her seat. “I’m so glad I have you girls.”

And damn if Whitney didn't believe she was a part of that.

Chapter Nineteen



They were home and Didi was upstairs listening to an audiobook forty-five minutes later.

Whitney joined Cam in the kitchen after settling her grandmother. She slid up onto the tall stool at the breakfast bar and watched him put the leftovers from Maggie in the fridge.

“I had fun tonight.”

He looked over his shoulder at her with a smile. “I could tell when you came back in that the patio time was good. I’m glad.”

She nodded and ran a finger over the swirl pattern in the marble of the counter top. “So I guess the point of girl talk is to get advice, compare notes, or rant,” Whitney said.

He came to stand across from her. “Makes sense.”

“I didn’t really have any work notes to compare. I do that with you guys.”

“Okay.”

“And I didn’t have anything to rant about. My new bosses are pretty great and things are good with my grandma and my mom and dad are in Dallas and I’ve barely talked to them and they don’t have anything to really do with my stuff anymore.”

“That’s all good.”

She nodded. It was good. Very good.

“And I only need advice on one thing. And I think I have another friend who can give even *better* advice about that than

they could.”

Cam braced his hands on the counter, his muscles flexing, distracting her for a moment. “You got something you need to ask Piper about?”

“Nope.”

“Paige?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Then who?”

“You.”

He seemed to have been expecting that. One corner of his mouth curled. “You know I’m here for whatever you need.”

That made her heart *thunk* at the same time it made heat curl through her lower stomach. She nodded. “I know that.”

“So what do you need advice on?”

“Well, there’s this guy.”

That curl to his lip turned into more of a smirk. “I do know something about guys.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I would very much like to know what you think I should do with this one.”

“I think I can come up with a few suggestions.”

The curl of heat turned into more of a swoop. She smiled. “Good.”

“So is he hot?” Cam asked.

She laughed lightly. “Very. Though he knows it so there’s this cockiness about him too.”

“Is that a turn-off?”

She shook her head slowly. “Not exactly.”

He was still smiling but his gaze was more intense. “Have you told him how you feel?”

Her heart *thunked* again but there was a swirl of nerves along with this one. “Not in so many words. Not lately. But we

have history.”

“Good or bad history?”

That was a great question. A year ago she would have said bad. Their time together had been wonderful but it had ended so painfully that the bad had colored the rest for a long time. “Good,” she finally answered. “There were some hard times, but they were important.”

“Yeah?”

“For sure.” She said it with surprising confidence. “I think we both realize that all of that had to happen to get us to where we are now. It’s a part of both of us.”

He gripped the edge of the counter, making his forearms bunch. He nodded. “That’s probably true. But it’s made things better now? Now that you’re back... together?” He met her eyes. “Or are you back together?”

“I think we’re coming back together,” she said softly but with an assurance that swept through her as she said the words out loud. “It’s interesting though... I think we both keep thinking our past has something to do with all this, but I’m not sure it does. We’re different people than we were before. It’s been a long time. A lot has happened to us both. It’s almost like we’ve met for the first time and have gotten to know each other and have... started falling for each other for the first time.”

He looked at her, saying nothing for long seconds, then suddenly pushed back from the counter top, straightening. “You’re falling for him?”

She nodded.

“And you think he’s falling for you?”

She nodded again.

That should have felt scary. He’d said he was crazy about her, but that wasn’t love. Still... she *felt* it. She felt it in the way he encouraged her with work, the way he took care of her from the little things like the way her room smelled to the way he made her grandmother smile to the way he called her

grandmother out when she was being mean. It was in the way he looked at her. Strangely, it was in the way he *hadn't* gotten them both naked yet.

“So what advice do you need?” he asked. His voice was gruff now and his gaze was burning into hers. Even across the granite countertop she could feel the heat.

“I guess I just want to know if you think he’ll be annoyed that I’ve changed my mind.”

He arched a brow. “About?”

“I made a big deal about not wanting to get involved because I wanted to focus on work, but... I’ve changed my mind. I’m still very focused on work, and I’m really proud of what I’m doing there, but”—she took a deep breath—“I want him.”

Cam’s eyes flared, and Whitney felt her reaction deep in her belly and between her legs.

She went on before he said anything. Or did anything. Because once he *did* something, she wasn’t going to want to talk much anymore.

“I want to be with him. And it’s amazing because he gets it. He wants me to be successful at work. He knows how important that is to me. But he’s fully supportive of it. Not just that, but he’s helping me make it work. He’s a part of all of that success. It feels like we’re a team and he’s totally behind me. I’m feeling like I—we—can have it all and I guess...” She took another breath. “I want to know how to let him know that.”

A muscle ticked along Cam’s jaw and he just stood looking at her, not saying a word.

She finally asked. “Do you think he’s going to be annoyed that I changed my mind?”

He cleared his throat. “No. I don’t think annoyed is how he’s going to feel about that.”

Then he stepped back and bent to open the cupboard under the breakfast bar. He pulled out a mixing bowl and the hand

mixer. He got a spoon and a spatula from a drawer, then the measuring cups and spoons from another drawer. He set them all out on the counter between them. Without a word, he went into the pantry and came back with an armful of ingredients. He put them down before going to the refrigerator for butter and eggs.

She watched him measure everything out, melt the butter, and cream the eggs, butter and sugar before saying, “What are you doing?”

“Making chocolate chip cookie dough,” he said without looking up.

O-kay. She wasn’t worried here. At all. He wasn’t ignoring her. He hadn’t missed what she’d said. This wasn’t him blowing her off or changing the subject.

This was, somehow, part of the subject.

So she just watched him mix. Until he got to the point of adding the chips.

“No semisweet chips?” she asked.

He looked up. “No.”

“You use two kinds instead?”

He nodded. “Milk chocolate. The super sweet ones. And dark chocolate. A little more bitter and stronger. Together they make the overall semisweet flavor. But this way each bite has both distinct flavors.”

“That’s your secret with these cookies?”

“Part of it. Yeah.”

“From your grandma?”

“Nope. This is all mine. She liked mine better than her own.”

“Why do you like it this way better?” She somehow knew there was a reason.

“The semisweet chips aren’t really anything in particular. They’re kind of sweet and kind of dark. I think that if you’re

going to be something you just *be* it. Be sweet. Be dark. But really *be* it.”

“People can’t be both? They can’t have times they feel sweet and times they feel dark?”

“Of course. But too often we try to cover the sweet times with a little self-deprecation or nonchalance because we don’t want to be too sweet. Or we try to cover our dark with more sugar because we don’t want to be too sad or too scary.”

“Like when we’re suddenly working from home and baking cookies with a friend’s grandma all day?”

He nodded without a smile. “We should embrace that. There’s nothing wrong with a soft, sweet side.”

There wasn’t. At all. It was hot as hell that this tough guy who loved to fight big corporations in court, who had tattoos and muscles and a smirk that wouldn’t quit and sarcasm that was as natural as breathing, had a secret to his chocolate chip cookies and had learned to love lemon drop martinis and liked looking at photo albums with his grandmother’s best childhood friend.

“And there’s nothing wrong with having a dark side sometimes,” he told her. “You don’t have to cover it up with sweetness. Sugar isn’t the answer to everything. It’s okay to be a little bitter, to have a little bite. It just makes the sweet stuff sweeter when it’s time for that.”

She nodded. He was right. Her being bitter about her family and the business and how things had been at Hot Cakes for the past ten years was okay. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t how she would have chosen it to be maybe. But it made everything now—her new bosses who were more like partners and were becoming friends, and their new ideas, and the new successes—even sweeter.

And the same was true with her and Cam. The little bit of bitterness between them was making *this* now sweeter.

“How long will those cookies for Didi take?” she asked. She assumed he was making them up now so they were done

for when Didi woke up later. So that maybe he and Whitney could steal some time together before that happened.

“These aren’t for Didi,” he said. He met her eyes. “They’re your favorite, right?”

She swallowed. There was a heat in his eyes that she’d seen before, but there was something else there now. Something new.

Intention.

This wasn’t going to end with him pulling back and telling her that they couldn’t keep going.

“Yes,” she said. “Those are my favorite.” She wasn’t even going to ask how he knew that. She didn’t know if he remembered it from years ago or if Didi had told him or if he’d noticed that she’d eaten nearly a dozen of these when he’d made them before, whereas she’d only swiped maybe half a dozen of the others.

It didn’t matter. He’d been making cookies and bars for her. And, yes, Josie was right, that was romantic.

“You asked me what you should do with this guy you’re falling for,” he said.

She nodded.

“Take off your clothes.”

* * *

It was time.

He’d wanted to give her a chance to feel secure, to know he was here for her as a friend first, to figure out what she really wanted.

But... It. Was. Time.

Cam watched her take a deep breath and braced himself for her to lift her chin, gathering her nerve.

But she didn’t.

She slipped off the stool, stepped around the corner of the counter so she was facing him fully, and stripped her dress off.

The sweet little sundress that was nothing like those fucking corporate pencil skirts she wore that made him nuts.

His heart was thundering and he felt everything in his body tighten almost painfully. He wanted her. So much. She was gorgeous. Physically. Any man would think so. He'd always wanted her.

But now he wanted *her*. This woman. Not the girl he'd been missing for the past ten years, not the woman he'd run into here and there over the years when visiting Appleby, not the woman he'd thought he was sparring with in the offices at Hot Cakes. *This* woman.

The one he'd gotten to know better and watched grow and who now stood in front of him naked. Literally, but also figuratively. She was letting him in again and this time there was even more on the line than their parents finding out about them back in high school and making them break up.

It would have felt like the end of the world. It *had* felt that way when it had ended. But what they'd lost were stolen kisses and some messing around in the dark and some laughter and, yes, friendship. But kid friendship.

Now... if they messed this up it was so much more.

Now their hearts and their futures were wrapped up in all of this.

Now they really would lose a true friendship. With each other.

Yeah. That was true.

But if they did this... they could have all of this forever.

“You didn't have panties on? This whole time?” he asked, his voice gruff, but trying to lighten the mood. Trying to make things playful and dirty. Because if he didn't, he was going to propose to her and *that* might have been too much.

She also didn't have a bra on so when she propped her hands on her hips, he could see everything.

Every-fucking-thing.

“I wore panties to your mother’s house for dinner with your family and my grandmother, of course,” she said, one eyebrow up. “I took them off upstairs when I brushed my teeth.”

He smirked. She’d been classy enough to have underwear on while having dinner with their families. Of course she had. Whitney Lancaster wouldn’t go to a family dinner without underwear on.

But she’d also taken them off—and brushed her teeth—before coming back down here to talk to him in the kitchen while he made cookies. Gee, what had she thought might happen? Maybe the *take your clothes off* hadn’t just been his idea. Maybe she’d been on her way to seduce him. He really liked that thought.

Proposing *might* have been too much tonight.

But maybe not.

“Well, maybe you’re more prepared than I am here,” he said. “I had no idea we were having pantyless kitchen time tonight.”

She came forward, her hips swaying, her breasts bouncing softly, completely distracting him as she moved.

“You had *no* idea that we were having pantyless kitchen time tonight?” she asked, stopping right in front of him.

Yes, he very much loved this more confident side of Whitney.

“I might have *hoped* for pantyless time tonight,” he said. “But the room doesn’t really matter.”

She reached for the bowl of cookie dough and scooped up a spoonful, lifting it to her mouth and then sucked it from her finger.

Cam’s body heated and hardened.

She looked up at him. “So you have underwear on under those jeans?”

“I do.”

“Guess that makes *me* the optimist here.”

“Makes me damned grateful.”

She smiled. “Good.”

“Can you do that thing with the cookie dough again?” he asked.

She took another dab on her fingertip and lifted it to her lips, but he caught her wrist at the last moment and brought it to his mouth. He slid it past his lips, over his tongue, then closed around it and sucked.

Her eyes darkened and she swallowed hard.

“I was actually going to bake these for you,” he said.

“Let’s see if there’s any left for that.” She took his hand, dipped his finger into the dough and lifted it to her lips, licking, then sucking as he had.

The feel of her hot, wet mouth around his finger made his cock ache and press insistently against his zipper. He wanted her mouth around his cock. She could coat it in cookie dough if she wanted to. He didn’t care if he could get her lips around him.

“Whit—”

She dipped more cookie dough out of the bowl and then painted it over one nipple.

Or they could do this.

Without a word, he bent his knees, placed a hand on her back to hold her steady, and licked the dough off her nipple, sucking to be sure it was completely clean.

Her hand cupped the back of his head as she arched closer. “Oh my...*Cam*.”

He wanted to hear a *lot* more of that. “Fuck.” He straightened and reached for the bowl.

She reached for his pants.

He let her.

She unzipped his jeans, shoving them and his boxers just low enough to free his erection. She sucked in a quick breath as she took in the sight, then circled him with her hand.

Cam gripped the counter and locked his knees as lust and heat coursed through him. “Whitney,” he said, his jaw tight. “Babe.”

She stroked up and down his length, not taking her eyes from the action, or saying a thing.

“Whit.”

“Just give me a minute,” she told him.

He huffed out a laugh, then a groan as she squeezed and stroked.

“I need more tattoos,” she said, suddenly, pulling her hand from his cock and sliding both palms under his shirt. She pushed the cotton up his torso and he lifted his arms, letting her strip it up over his head. When she got it higher than she could reach, he grabbed the shirt and pulled it the rest of the way off, tossing it over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she said softly, almost reverently, as she slid her palms back down his body, over his shoulders, chest, and down his sides.

He watched her looking at him. She ran her hands over his tattoos, her fingertips tracking the lines, her eyes studying them all. She had him turn so she could see them all. His ink covered one arm from shoulder to wrist, his other arm elbow to wrist, his left shoulder blade, his right ribs, and his right abs.

“This is all so beautiful. You’ll have to tell me what they all mean.”

“Okay.” His voice was thick. He would do this however she wanted. But he really didn’t want to talk about his tattoos at the moment. “This one is—”

“Oh, later.” She laughed lightly, running her hands up his ribs on either side and lifting her eyes to his, leaning in to press her breasts against his chest. “Much later.”

He bent and captured her lips with his, cupping her face and taking the kiss deep immediately. Their tongues stroked, their groans mingled, their bodies pressed skin to skin. Mostly.

Growling, he pulled away and dropped his hands to his jeans, pulling his wallet out and tossing it on the counter, then shoving them down. He went back to kissing her, but her hands went back to stroking him and before he could reach for the condom in his wallet she'd reached for the cookie dough.

And gone to her knees.

Again he gripped the edge of the counter as she smeared the cookie dough down his length then dragged her tongue along the hard shaft, licking it clean. Cam worked on breathing, cupping the back of her head, not pulling her hair, not thrusting, just breathing. And watching. Absorbing it all.

It was clear she was no expert, and that thrilled him more than anything else she could have done with her mouth. Of course, any blow job was a great blow job. He let her lick and suck, loving her little moans and the feel of her hot mouth and hands on him until he simply couldn't take it anymore.

He pulled back and stared down at her, breathing hard.

I love you and *marry me* were both on the tip of his tongue but immediately after having her greedy mouth on his cock wasn't the right time for either of those. He'd thought them both prior to her licking cookie dough from his dick, but it might be hard to convince her of that.

Besides, he didn't want to talk. And he didn't need to in order to show her how he felt.

He pulled her to her feet, then lifted her onto the counter, shoving the bowl of dough back and stepping between her knees. She spread her thighs, welcoming him against her with her arms going around his neck and her legs going around his waist.

They kissed, long and deep. He ran his hands up and down her back. She gripped his back and arched close. Her pussy was hot and wet against his cock and he rocked against her gently.

She was moaning softly and saying his name as he dragged his mouth down her neck and then bit down where it curved into her shoulder.

“*Cam.*”

“You want to do this here?”

The kitchen seemed appropriate, but they were sleeping together tonight. All night. In a bed. They could move this show upstairs right now.

“Yes. Here. Now.”

Didi wasn't going to be coming down. He'd told her that he needed to talk to Whitney—Didi had agreed—and asked if she'd stay upstairs tonight until her alarm went off on her phone. She'd thought that was a great idea. So he had until 3 a.m. to worship every inch of Whitney Lorraine Lancaster.

That was five hours.

That wouldn't be enough time for him to come even close to getting enough of her. But it would be a very good start.

He reached for his wallet, pulling the condom from between the bills. He kept kissing her as he ripped it open and rolled it on. Then he pulled her butt forward on the counter.

“I've missed you so fucking much,” he said.

“This feels like the first time,” she told him softly, running her hand over the side of his face and into his hair.

She was right. It did.

“I'm in love with you, Whit.”

Okay maybe *immediately* after having her mouth on his cock hadn't been the right time but this felt good.

He hoped.

Her eyes widened for a moment. But then she smiled and breathed out. “I'm in love with you too.”

Neither of them said *again*.

Because this was different than before. This was new.

But when he pulled her forward and she wrapped herself around him and he slid into her hot, tight body, it felt like they'd been doing it forever.

“Oh yes Cam,” she half whispered, half moaned.

“Whit. Damn. Yes,” he answered. Sort-of. It was more of a grunt-groan honestly.

He pulled out and thrust again. And again. She clung to him, her body—from her arms to her pussy—tight around him, not letting him go far. But he had to move. The friction, the push and pull, the heat and wetness everything he needed.

He gripped her ass, felt her hot breath on his neck, her silky hair against his chest.

“Please,” she whimpered.

“Anything.”

“Just... more. Harder.”

Well, that he could do. “Lean back.”

She shifted, looking up at him.

He kissed her and then pressed her back until she was leaning on her elbows.

“Gorgeous.” He ran a hand up one thigh to her stomach then up to one breast, playing with a nipple and feeling the resultant tightening around his cock.

The angle was gorgeous too. He could see everything where they were joined.

“You're incredible,” he told her, pulling out and sliding back in, watching her body take him then lifting his eyes to her face.

She was breathing hard, her eyes on him, her cheeks pink.

“Ditto,” she told him breathlessly.

He pulled back then thrust forward again, sinking into her welcoming sweet, wet heat. “I will never get over this,” he told her sincerely.

“Good. I’m already addicted.” She ended that on a gasp as he hit a particularly good spot.

“Oh, like that?” he asked.

“Yes. Please. Again.”

He complied.

And again.

“Harder.” She tightened around him. “Faster.”

He did. Both. He watched her breasts bounce. Watched her head fall back, her hair trailing over the countertop. He watched the flush climb up her chest.

“Yes! Cam,” she gasped.

He gripped her thighs where he held her and picked up the pace even more. He was pumping into her hard and deep and he felt his climax building. He moved a hand, pressing his thumb against her clit, then rubbing.

“Oh! Yes!”

He circled the spot, feeling the beginnings of her orgasm, watching her mouth fall open as she panted and the way she gripped the edge of the counter.

“Cam!”

He circled and thrust faster and then she clamped down on him, one hand gripping his wrist as her pussy milked him and she cried out.

He let himself go, thrusting three times, and coming hard, calling her name.

“Whitney! Yes! Yes!”

She immediately pulled herself up and wrapped her arms and legs around him. He held her tightly, feeling the goosebumps pebbling her skin. Then he yanked his pants up, scooped her up with his hands under her ass, and turned toward the hallway, heading for the stairs.

“Our clothes. And the cookie dough,” she protested weakly, her face against his neck.

“I’ll take care of it all later,” he promised.

She reached out and flipped off the light as they passed it, leaving only the soft glow of the light over the sink.

He loved that she just let him take care of things. He hadn’t realized how important that was to him until he’d moved in here. His mom had always taken care of things in their home. His grandmother had single-mindedly taken care of their family business. He absolutely contributed to Fluke, Inc. and now Hot Cakes, but... he was an attorney. He was easily the most replaceable of any of the guys. He knew they never *would* replace him, but what he contributed was much more in the category of friendship than it was anything legal that another lawyer couldn’t handle.

But here with Didi and Whitney it was different. He was doing something here that he truly felt no one else could do as well. It was very domestic and very full of fat and sugar at times but it was important.

He turned to climb the stairs, loving the feel of her in his arms.

“You can’t carry me all the way up,” she said.

“Watch me.”

He started up the steps.

“This is so hot,” she murmured.

“You like being carried?”

“Yeah, but don’t tell anyone.”

“No one would believe me anyway,” he said against her head with a smile.

It made him feel stupidly manly. And he would never tell anyone *that* either. Probably not even her. She wasn’t some “little lady” who needed a big strong man to take care of her.

But she liked when he did. And so did he. So, yeah... no one else needed to know.

He turned down the hall heading for her room. He could take her to his, of course, but his room was a guest room. He

wanted to be with her in *her* room, in a permanent place. And, yes, a place where she'd think of him every time she lay down.

He hoped to be in there with her every time she lay down from now on but... they still had some talking to do. They were absolutely on their way to permanently lying down together though.

He got it. That's what she'd said earlier. He knew what she wanted and needed. She was falling for him because he understood her needs with her career.

Cam frowned as he put her down on the bed.

"Come here." She pulled him down with her.

He went willingly. Of course.

She turned her back and snuggled her body right into his, spooning like they'd done it every night forever.

And it felt right.

But he was still frowning.

No. She wasn't falling for him *just* because he was supportive of her career and made it one-thousand times easier on her to pursue it. But he'd helped her see that she could have it all. Him and Hot Cakes.

And... she could. It had stung a little to realize that part of what she needed was for him to *not* need her. Not need her there for regular family dinners or even every night by a certain time. To not need her to remember appointments or to meal plan or dust.

But she did need him for orgasms, dammit.

And cookies.

She sighed and snuggled closer and pulled Cam's arm around her body and he sighed too.

Orgasms and cookies. Yeah, he could work with that.

Chapter Twenty



Something woke them up at 4 a.m.

But it wasn't an alarm. Or the theme song to *Magnum, P.I.*—on TV or on Cam's phone.

But it was Didi. Shaking them awake.

She was at the bottom of Whitney's bed, shaking the entire mattress. "Whitney! Camden! Wake up! Wake up! It's bad!"

They both sat bolt upright.

"Grandma! What's wrong? Are you okay?" Whitney started to get out of bed, realized she was naked, realized Cam was beside her weighing down the other side of the sheet, yanked it hard, then realized that would leave *him* naked.

She grabbed for a pillow and tossed it over his lap and then yanked the sheet again, pulling it over her body and sliding out of the bed.

"Henry called. It's Maggie," Didi said.

Still half-asleep, Whitney stood at the side of the bed, blinking.

Henry? That name was familiar...

"What did he say?" Cam was off the mattress, the pillow clutched against his midsection, moving toward Didi.

Henry. Cam. Right, Cam's little brother.

"Why did he call you?" she asked.

Okay, maybe at 4 a.m. that wasn't the most important part of the situation. And it was 4 a.m.? She blinked at the clock. Why hadn't Didi gotten up to watch *Magnum, P.I.*?

"He said Maggie got sick and they took her to the hospital," Didi told Cam.

He reached her and put a hand on her shoulder, the other still holding the pillow in place. "Maggie is at the hospital?"

Whitney felt her stomach tighten as her grandmother nodded.

Then Whitney realized that Didi was dressed. Fully. She had on pants and a blouse and shoes. She even wore a necklace and had her purse in one hand. She had her hair brushed and—Whitney blinked—Didi was also wearing lipstick.

"We need to go," Didi told him. "Right now."

"I need to call Henry. Or Dad. Or Zoe." Cam looked around for his phone, turning to face the bedside table.

Didi's gaze dropped to his backside. "I already told you what he said," she replied.

Whitney rounded the bed quickly, turning Didi by the shoulders and pulling her grandmother's attention away from Cam getting dressed.

"Did Henry say what happened?"

"Maggie got sick and they called the ambulance and to tell Cam."

"Fuck," Cam swore.

Whitney glanced at him as her stomach roiled. This was not good.

"Can I see your phone?" she asked Didi.

She was praying that Didi had imagined the call, she could admit. It was 4 a.m. Usually Didi would have been up for a few hours by now and downstairs watching TV. Maybe Didi was sleep walking? Or just confused since it was the middle of

the night. Why would Henry, of all the McCafferys, call Didi of all the people?

“Okay.” Didi dug her phone out of her purse.

There was, indeed, a recent call from a number that was labeled HENRY. About thirty minutes ago.

She decided not to tell Cam about the time since the call. Clearly Didi had taken that time to get ready to go before coming in to tell Cam what was going on.

“My phone is down in the kitchen,” Cam said, now with his jeans on and the pillow back on the bed.

Whitney assumed hers was as well. She’d laid it and her keys and purse down when they’d first gotten home. Typically she brought it upstairs with her when she came to bed but, nothing about coming to bed last night had been typical.

She watched Cam stomp toward the door and listened to his steps on the staircase.

“We need to go,” Didi said again, taking her phone back. “Henry is really scared. He wanted to know when I’d be there.”

Whitney looked at her grandmother. “We can’t go. Cam will go and let us know what’s happening.”

The last thing the family needed was extra people around to take care of. And that’s what Cam would do. He’d try to take care of everyone. It was better if she and Didi stayed behind.

But... Whitney blew out a breath. She had a huge meeting today. Hot Cakes’ biggest account was going to be the first to see the plans for the new bars. It was a perk of being loyal and long-term customers. They were flattered and excited, but the CEO, Gordon Perkins, a long-time friend of her father’s, was skeptical. The new ownership, particularly with no one with the last name of Lancaster and no one over the age of thirty-five was making him nervous.

The Perkins family owned the largest chain of convenience stores in the Midwest. They’d been in business with the

Lancasters, carrying Hot Cakes products, since Gordon had taken over from his father about the time Whitney's father, Eric, had taken over Hot Cakes from *his* father.

She had to convince Gordon that everything would be fine. That new didn't mean bad, that change didn't mean that quality would go down or prices would go up or that he wouldn't be able to enjoy a good relationship with the new owners. He was already frustrated that there were four men to contend with instead of one. And that none of the four particularly liked to golf.

Grant and Aiden had decided she should lead the meeting since Gordon knew her. They would be there too, to meet him and his team and to reassure them that everything was going to be even better going forward. But she had to be there. She was a Lancaster. Gordon would not be as friendly with anyone else.

She supposed that meant Didi would be coming with her to the meeting.

On one hand, that could be amazing. Didi was, after all, the founder of Hot Cakes. The original Lancaster behind it all.

As long as she was having a good day and didn't start telling Gordon about cat yoga or *Magnum, P.I.* or her kicking ass at *Warriors of Easton* or anything else that would make Gordon question the validity of the other things she might say about how well the company was doing.

"Didi!" Cam called up the stairs. "Come on!"

Didi turned and started out of the room.

"Wait!" Whitney went to follow her, but tripped on the bottom of the sheet. She yanked on it, gathering it up above her feet, wadding it in her hands and ran after Didi.

Cam was standing at the bottom of the staircase texting and Didi was a third of the way down.

"She can't go with you."

He looked up from his phone. "Why not?"

“To the hospital? Where your family is with your mother?” Whitney shook her head. “No, she can stay with me.”

“Do you want to come later?” Cam asked Didi as she got to the bottom. “You’re all dressed up like you were coming now.”

“Oh, I’m coming now. I told Henry I’d be right there.” She held up her purse. “I have books.”

Whitney couldn’t help but smile at that. She would guess *Alice in Wonderland* was in there. And that was a great choice. It would maybe help keep Henry’s mind off of what was going on with his mom. It would also be comforting to Didi.

Cam nodded at Didi as if that made perfect sense. He looked up at Whitney. “She can come with me now since she’s ready. I need to get right over there.”

Whitney wasn’t going to argue with him. He was right that he needed to get there as soon as possible and Didi was already crossing the foyer to the front door. “Okay. Is... what’s going on?”

“They think a heart attack.” His voice was thick. “They’re doing tests now. I talked to Aiden. He and Zoe are there.”

“Oh, good.” That did make her feel better. Aiden was a natural leader. He’d take charge and make sure they got the answers they needed.

Except... this was his mother too. Not biologically, but he was a part of the McCaffery family. He wasn’t just there supporting his fiancé and best friend. He was probably scared to death too.

“So...” Cam glanced at the front door.

“Go,” she said quickly. “Of course. Go. Let me know what’s going on when you can. And if you need me to come get Didi.”

“I—” He frowned. Then nodded. “Okay.”

She watched them leave. The door shutting behind them made her heart ache. She wanted to be there for him. With

him. She wanted to go to the hospital and sit and hold his hand. She wanted to... help.

But Cam would be the helpful one. He was the one that took care of everyone. He'd take care of their dad and Henry and Zoe and... Didi.

And he'd have help taking care of Zoe. Aiden was there. He and Cam could support each other. The way brothers would.

Then she realized that Grant and Josie would be there too. Josie had been close to Zoe their entire lives. She'd be scared about Maggie and would want to be there. Which meant Grant would be there to support her. And Cam, who was one of his best friends and like a brother.

Jane and Dax would be there too. Jane was close to the McCafferys and Dax would want to support her and Cam.

Yes, Cam had plenty of people around him for support and help. He didn't need her. Especially when she would be no help there. She had no experience with this. Her grandfather had died of a massive stroke. He'd been there one minute and gone the next. There had been no medical testing or procedures, or hospital stays. If there had been, her family wouldn't have looked to her for coordinating anything anyway. She knew nothing about heart attacks and procedures and tests for that. She'd be no help there at all.

But staring at the front door, she realized that there *was* something she could do. She *would* be helpful at Hot Cakes.

She could run this meeting with Gordon Perkins for the company.

That was what she could contribute. She could manage things at Hot Cakes while they were all out of the office and focusing on Maggie.

She could reassure Gordon that everything was fine and that he not only wanted to continue working with them, but that he wanted to be the first to introduce the new snack bar to the public in *his* stores. He'd want to put up huge displays in

all his stores and do big promotions and really push this out to the public.

That was exactly what Hot Cakes needed as the next step with this new product. A big partner in their public launch. Gordon Perkins would be perfect.

Whitney could make this happen. For her bosses.

For her *friends*.

* * *

Three hours later, Whitney strode into the executive office suites of Hot Cakes in a bright, cherry red pencil skirt. The red color was out of the ordinary for her. She'd ordered it online on a whim last week. She'd been waiting for the right moment to show it off to Cam.

Today was the right moment to wear it though. She was ready to be in charge. That was what the skirt said to her. That's what mattered. She didn't need to say that, or show it, to Cam.

The red heels made her happy as well. Rather than getting them for the extra inches they'd add, she'd gotten them because of the sassy straps and the big red bow on the toe. Those were also for her.

The crowning touch was the black blouse with white polka dots. She'd seen it on the webpage and immediately wanted it.

No, none of this was the red wiggle dress of Piper's Whitney had tried on in her office the night Cam had said her tits looked amazing. But this was her. This made her feel confident, like she was bold and confident and stretching her wings.

Dammit, she *liked* the pencil skirts and how they made her look and feel.

Yes, she also liked the color red.

"Hang on. Ollie's on his way." Piper rose to her feet as Whitney approached. Then she stopped and looked Whitney

up and down. “Wow. You look amazing.”

Whitney smiled. “Thanks.” Then she tipped her head. “Ollie’s coming?”

“He’s going into the meeting with you. We both are.”

“You... are?”

Piper smiled, but she looked like it was a bit of an effort. “Of course. We’re the only ones here, but we’re here for you while everyone else is at the hospital with Maggie.”

Whitney felt her heart squeeze hard in her chest. She’d been trying to concentrate on the meeting and not on what was happening in Dubuque.

Gordon Perkins, his son Matt, and his business partner, Stephen McDonald, were driving in. They were from Minneapolis but had been doing a tour of their stores throughout Minnesota and Iowa and were planning to go on into Indiana. They’d visited their Iowa stores, finishing with the six in Dubuque yesterday. They didn’t have a store in little Appleby but had been willing to stop by for this meeting while in the area. She had to focus here and make it worth their stop.

“And everyone thought I needed help?” Whitney asked. Ollie and Piper both knew the basics about the new snack bar, of course, but the details that Gordon and his team would need would come from Grant and Aiden. Or Whitney.

“Oh, we’re purely moral support,” Piper said, shaking her head. “Mr. Perkins and his team should be here in about thirty minutes. I made coffee here and ran over to Cedarville for muffins since the bakery is closed this morning.”

Whitney took a deep breath. She hadn’t even thought about that. *How* had she not thought about that? Of course, Buttered Up hadn’t opened this morning. Zoe and Josie were both at the hospital. The main person who filled in when they couldn’t be there was Maggie.

She felt a pang in her heart. *God, please let her be okay.*

She focused on the bakery. Not only was that a problem for them business-wise—obviously they couldn’t make money

if they didn't sell anything today—though that was less of an issue with both Zoe and Josie being engaged to millionaires—but it was a problem for the waste of the food inside the bakery and, well, it was a problem for the town. Not a horrible, natural disaster type of problem, of course, but if there were a way to have the bakery open, it would be best for everyone.

She thought quickly. “Can you check with Paige?” she asked Piper. “Maybe she could go over and open the bakery. At least for a little bit?”

Paige also filled in once in a while for her sister and Zoe. She liked to add zucchini and carob chips and almond flour and other healthy things to the recipes which drove Zoe a little nuts, but Paige wouldn't be baking today. She could just run the register.

Piper nodded. “Oh, that's a good idea. I'm sure she would. It's a little later than they usually open, but we could put something up on the town Facebook page and send out a text to the community list.”

Whitney frowned. “There's a community text list?”

“Yeah, Drew told me about it. It's for announcements like the school closing because of snow. Things like that. But they also use it for things like announcing retirement parties for people. Funeral services. Birth announcements.”

See, that was why small towns were so great. “Do you think this qualifies?” Whitney asked.

“I think everyone will want to know that Maggie is in the hospital and that the bakery is open so people can go support the McCafferys,” Piper said, already typing into her phone.

Whitney thought about that too. The McCafferys were beloved in Appleby. That was just a fact. *Her* family had feuded with them for half a century, but that didn't mean the rest of the town didn't realize how loving and sweet and generous they all were.

She sighed. Wow, things had really been messed up for a really long time. She was so grateful that Aiden had started

breaking those walls down and that now she and Cam could maybe help further the healing.

“You know what?” Whitney said. “I’m good here. If Ollie stays and represents the new partners with Gordon Perkins and his team, I think we can handle this. Could you go help Paige at Buttered Up? Then I could come over and help after this meeting.”

“You would help at Buttered Up?” Piper asked.

She nodded. “I actually did once before. When Aiden proposed to Zoe and swept her off her feet, literally, I got behind the counter and waited on customers. It was a great way to show the town that things were changing between the two businesses.”

“And this is all about the two *businesses*?” Piper asked.

Whitney blew out a breath. “No. Not anymore. This is about me supporting the McCafferys. But there are only so many ways I can do that. I can be here and make this meeting successful and I can then go help at the bakery and make that work.”

Piper hesitated. She opened her mouth. Shut it again. Frowned. Then said, “You could also just... be there. At the hospital.”

Whitney shook her head. “There are plenty of people at the hospital. But if I’m not *here*, there’s no one who can do this meeting and if we don’t go to the bakery, there’s no one there.”

“But *being there* for people... it’s about *being there*, Whit,” Piper said. “You don’t always have to *do* stuff or be accomplishing things or working.”

Whitney felt a shiver of... something... go through her. She was pretty sure it was that she wanted to believe Piper. But that she didn’t quite.

Cam took care of her by taking things off her plate, making it so she didn’t have to worry. That’s what she was doing here. Or trying to do here. She wanted to take care of Cam.

“It’s a work in progress,” she finally said.

Piper nodded. “Okay. Well then, I can go to the bakery with Paige and Ollie will be in there with you and... when it’s over we can go from there.”

Whitney nodded and looked down at the files in her arms. This she knew. This she was comfortable with. *This* she could pull off.

Ollie joined her in the conference room a few minutes later. “‘Mornin’,” he greeted. His smile was a lot less bright than usual.

She understood. “Morning.”

He took a chair as his phone chimed. He pulled it out and opened the message. Whitney felt her heart kick. Was it news about Maggie? How was she? How was everyone else?

“They found a blockage in three vessels,” Ollie read. He scrubbed a hand over his face. “She’s going in for surgery.”

Whitney felt her throat tighten and she forced herself to swallow.

“Dammit.” He laid his phone on the table and took a deep breath. “Poor Cam and Aiden.” He looked up. “And Zoe, of course. And Steve and Henry.”

Whitney nodded. She knew he hadn’t meant to leave the rest of the family out. But Cam and Aiden were two of his best friends. Of course they were in the front of his mind.

“Who’s—” She had to clear her throat and try again. “Who’s texting you?”

“Grant.”

Her air swooshed out. She’d hoped it was Cam. That would mean, in her mind anyway, that he was taking some control by relaying the information and keeping people informed. But of course it was Grant. He was the calm, cool one. Of course Cam wouldn’t be calm and cool right now.

She imagined him pacing the waiting room, growling at everyone, and snapping at staff when they couldn’t give him

the answers he wanted *right now*. Then again, she could also picture him sitting with his arm around his dad or holding his sister's hand or taking Didi and Henry to the cafeteria for brownies at 8 a.m. as a distraction.

She would *really* love to know for sure how he was and what he was doing.

“Has Cam said anything more to you?” Ollie asked, leaning forward. His eyes were tired. He looked worried. Very worried. And Ollie never looked worried.

She shook her head. “I haven't heard from him.”

Ollie was clearly surprised by that. “Oh. I just assumed he'd be wanting to talk to you.”

Yeah. Well, he was surrounded by people who could support him and make him feel better. Who had been a part of his life over the past nine years and knew Maggie well and loved his mother as much as he did.

“He knew I was covering this meeting,” she said, lifting a shoulder. “Maybe he didn't want to distract me.”

Or maybe he figured you wouldn't want to be distracted.

The little voice that whispered through her mind surprised her. She wasn't here because she wanted to have this meeting. Not exactly. She was here because she was trying to help her partners... well, her bosses. Her *friends* with something they couldn't handle themselves right now.

But it was something she would have done in the past too. For different reasons. To prove herself. To take the chance to make a business contact without her bosses breathing down her neck. To further the business just to, well, further the business.

Her throat tightened again and she felt the backs of her eyes sting. She blinked rapidly.

Ollie's phone dinged again and he looked at it. “Dax,” he said, swiping the message open. “They're doing a bypass. Surgery could take four to five hours. And she won't be awake

for another two or three after that.” He shook his head. “This is going to be a long fucking day.”

Whitney agreed. And watching Ollie now made her chest ache. No doubt Dax and Grant looked much the same. Maybe worse. Their girls were worried and emotional too so they’d be supporting them as well as Cam. And then, of course, there were Cam and Aiden. Their mother was going into a major surgery. It would be hours before they knew how things were going to turn out.

Whitney had to blink again as her eyes stung and her throat got scratchy.

She didn’t know exactly what Cam was doing but he was at the hospital and surrounded by people who loved him, who would make him feel stronger by being there and would make sure he had whatever he needed.

She trusted that.

No matter how much it hurt to not be one of those people.

“Did Grant or Dax say—”

Her question was cut off by the conference room door opening.

She took a breath and forced a smile as Gordon, Matt, and Stephen came in. She glanced at Ollie as she stood. He was also smiling and pushing to his feet. But she knew him. Oliver Caprinelli was upset. He wasn’t the business meeting type in the first place and it was clear it was bothering him a lot to not be at the hospital with his friends.

“Good morning, Gordon,” she greeted, pulling her attention from Ollie.

“Hello, Whitney. Good to see you again,” the older Perkins greeted her with a handshake.

“Hello, Matt,” she said, turning to his son.

“Hi, Whitney.” Matt Perkins was good looking, charming, and sophisticated. And knew it. He gave her a grin and a glance that went from the top of her head to the flower on the toe of her shoe.

She ignored him. She turned to Stephen. “Mr. McDonald.”

“Hello, Whitney.”

She should probably ask them to call her Ms. Lancaster. Or they should just call her that without her having to ask. But they’d known her since Gordon and her father golfed together and she and Matt hung out at the country club swimming pool.

“This is Oliver Caprinelli, one of the new owners. Oliver, this is Gordon and Matt Perkins and Stephen McDonald.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Ollie said, shaking each man’s hand. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Gordon said, taking in Ollie’s disheveled hair from where he’d been running his hand.

Ollie had put a tie on for the meeting and Whitney smiled to herself. That was a huge gesture and she appreciated it. But it was loose at the neck and his shirt wasn’t tucked into his pants tightly and his pants were, well, jeans. He was also wearing Converse tennis shoes.

It didn’t matter. Ollie was an owner of Hot Cakes and had as much, if not more, money than the Perkins men did. And he didn’t really care what they thought. In fact, Whitney would have bet her month’s salary that Ollie didn’t even notice the way Gordon had looked him over.

“Please have a seat, everyone,” Whitney said, pulling her own chair out. “Help yourself to coffee. We won’t keep you long. I know you made a special stop here today.” Whitney took her seat at the head of the table where Aiden usually sat.

She glanced at Ollie out of the corner of her eye. He was looking at his phone again.

It wasn’t rude. She knew he wasn’t ignoring her. He was checking in at the hospital. And she really wanted to know what the text said. He also wasn’t going to be presenting here today. She was fully in charge. He was here as a face for the new owners only.

Piper slipped in just then. She gave everyone a bright smile and asked, “Just seeing if you need anything, Ms. Lancaster.”

Whitney fought her grin. She loved Piper.

“This is Piper Barry,” Whitney introduced. “She’s our executive assistant.”

“Hello, Piper,” Matt said, sitting forward in his chair and giving her a big grin.

Ollie looked up at that. He frowned at Matt and looked over at Piper. He also sat forward in his chair. “Thought you were going down to Buttered Up?”

“Paige is getting things opened up. I thought I’d see if I can help Ms. Lancaster with anything before I go.”

Ollie looked at Whitney, then back to Piper. “I’ve got Ms. Lancaster covered.”

Piper didn’t *quite* roll her eyes at him, but it was definitely implied. “Ms. Lancaster?” she asked, dismissing Ollie.

“I’m fine, actually,” Whitney said. “But thank you.”

“Absolutely. We’ll talk later.”

“Of course.” Whitney watched as Piper slipped back out.

She was relieved to know that Paige was already at Buttered Up and that Piper was on her way.

She still wanted to get this meeting over with.

That was new. She never wanted to rush through meetings. She always wanted to be sure every T was crossed. Twenty-four hours ago, she’d been excited about this meeting and showing business associates of her father’s and her bosses what she could do. Now she just really wanted to get these men out of here and on the road to Indiana.

“Why don’t we get started?” she said. “In front of you, you’ll see the information I’d like to go over today.”

For the next twenty minutes, she filled them in on the details of the new product and her ideas for the launch and how Perkins Foods could be a part of it. But her mind was only partially on the presentation. She couldn’t stop looking at Ollie who couldn’t seem to stop looking at his phone. What was going on at the hospital? How was everyone?

She wrapped things up without going over the details for the television commercials in local markets or the Facebook ad plan.

“I’d love to hear your thoughts,” she said, closing the folder in front of her.

But just then she noticed Ollie scowling at his phone.

Dammit. What had happened?

Gordon opened his mouth, but Whitney put up a finger. “But if you could just give us one minute, Gordon?” she asked. “I need to speak with Oliver about something pressing. Why don’t we take a short break? You can refill your coffees.” She pushed her chair back and stood. “Please help yourself to more muffins. The restrooms are just down the hall to the left,” she spoke as she moved toward Ollie’s chair. She snagged the sleeve of his shirt and tugged. “Can I see you in my office for a moment?”

He looked confused and it was clear that he hadn’t been paying attention. “Uh, yeah. Sure.” He got to his feet and followed her out the door and to the right.

Once they were in her office she faced him. “What’s wrong?”

“They were going to do a bypass for two blockages. Now it’s three.”

“Dammit.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“You should go over there.”

“What?” He frowned. “No. I’ll wait until you’re done.”

“No. Go. You’re worried sick and they would want you there with them. I’ve got this.”

“But—”

“Ollie, what are the in-store displays going to look like?”

“Uh...”

“Come on. Are they going to have alpacas or bobcats on them?”

“Alpacas.”

“Wrong.” She smiled. “Neither.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just distracted.”

“I know. And I get it. But I don’t need you in there. I can answer all of their questions. I promise.”

He was thinking about it, she could tell. So she pressed.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Then please go. Take care of your friends. And send me an update as soon as you get there.”

He finally breathed out. “Okay. I know you’ve got this. You’ll be fine without me. I just wanted you to know you were supported.”

She felt her chest warm as she realized that she already knew that. “I do know. The people who need your in-person support right this minute are in Dubuque.”

She wanted those people—all of them but, yes, one in particular—to have everything, and everyone, they needed to feel supported. Ollie being there would make them feel better. He’d make Cam feel better. Piper would too.

“Go get Piper from the bakery. If it’s too busy for Paige on her own, just close it up again. I think Piper needs to be at the hospital too.”

Ollie nodded. “She’s worried.”

“I know.”

Ollie reached out and squeezed her arm. “Go kick ass. I’ll text you.”

“Thanks.”

He left and she stood staring at a door through which someone had left her again. But this was okay. She was where she needed to be.

She rejoined the other men in the conference room. They'd just settled back in with fresh coffee. She smiled as she took her seat.

"Where's Oliver?" Gordon asked.

"A friend's mother is in the hospital," Whitney said. "He left to be with him."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

It sounded like he said it more because he felt it was the right thing to say, but Whitney nodded.

"What questions do you have?" she asked.

"I'm curious what your father thinks of the plan."

She blinked, then stared at Gordon. Then frowned. Then blinked again. "My father?" she finally asked.

"Yes. I haven't spoken to him in a while but he didn't mention anything about a new product the last time we did talk."

"I'm sure he didn't," Whitney said, confused. "He doesn't know anything about it."

Gordon seemed confused now. "He doesn't?"

"No." Whitney leaned in. "My father doesn't own Hot Cakes anymore, Gordon. He's not a part of any new plans or products anymore."

"Well, yes, I know that's technically true," Gordon said. "But surely you're talking with him about decisions and turning to him for advice."

Whitney felt her eyebrows rise. "Actually, no, I'm not. There are four men who are making the decisions now and who I get advice from. And give it to, incidentally. Aiden Anderson, Grant Lorre, Oliver Caprinelli, and Camden McCaffery. The new owners."

"All young men with no previous experience in the food industry," Gordon said.

She nodded. "Which is why I'm here."

“Also young and inexperienced.”

“Young, perhaps, but I’ve been involved with Hot Cakes all my life. It’s been my family’s business for almost fifty-two years.”

“I’m aware of that.” Gordon gave her a placating smile. “But I meant inexperienced in *actual* business.”

Whitney expected to feel the typical frustration welling up. The anger at being dismissed. The exasperation.

Then... she started to laugh.

Gordon’s eyes widened. He looked at Matt and Stephen.

Whitney glanced at them as well, laughing and shaking her head. She was actually... amused. These men were misogynistic fools. They were treating her the way her own father, grandfather, and brother always had. They wouldn’t get it, no matter how she explained it to them.

And it didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter who they thought had come up with the ideas or who thought they were great. It didn’t matter if Gordon Fucking Perkins thought she could handle this.

All that mattered was that Aiden, Grant, Ollie, and Cam thought she could handle this.

And they did.

All Gordon Perkins needed to know was that Hot Cakes was no longer a Lancaster family business.

She was the idiot. She’d put time and energy into this. She’d worn her new skirt for this. She’d stayed here instead of going to Dubuque, where she *really* wanted to be.

For these jackasses. Who would never get it. And whose opinions didn’t matter.

“What’s so funny?” Gordon finally asked.

“That you think my father, who nearly put this company out of business, is someone that any of these men would listen to,” she said. Honestly. “Look, Gordon, your choice is simple

—do you want to continue working with Hot Cakes or not. If yes, then you'll be a major partner in helping us launch our new product. If no, then..." She pushed her chair back and stood. "You're an idiot. You will never find four men more dedicated to doing the right thing and making their business successful than these four. But they will do it their way. You can come on board or you can miss out." She gathered her folder and stepped out from behind the table. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've already given you enough of my time today. There's someplace else I need to be.

Someplace else she should have been a long time ago.

"Now wait," Gordon protested, coming to his feet. "I didn't say I wasn't interested."

She looked back. "Like I said, I've already given you enough time. We can schedule another meeting after you've thought about everything."

"I'd like to do this now. We can hash out the launch plan for our stores in Iowa right now."

"I want more than Iowa."

"Fine. All of our stores," Gordon said.

Whitney smiled. "Great. I'll have Piper put that on our agenda. For our *next* meeting."

As she walked out of the conference room, she thought about the fact that she'd maybe just ruined the relationship with the biggest account Hot Cakes had.

She might have just let her bosses down. Her friends down.

But as she put her folder on her desk and grabbed her purse so she could head to the hospital, she knew that wasn't true.

She was going to Dubuque. To the hospital to be a friend. Finally.

Chapter Twenty-One



It had been a shit day.

A really shit day.

Right on the heels of the best night of his life.

Whitney was in love with him. They'd reconnected, in every way.

And now his mother was on an operating table and a surgeon was cutting into her chest.

He rolled his neck and shoulders and looked around.

Aiden was holding Zoe. Grant was holding Josie. Dax was holding Jane. Didi was holding Henry. Or maybe Henry was holding Didi. The only two people without someone holding their hand or someone's arm around them were Cam and his dad.

That was because the person his dad wanted to be holding was the one with her chest split open right now.

And because the person Cam wanted to be holding was in Appleby in a fucking business meeting.

"Wow, you really look like crap."

He turned to find Piper handing him a muffin and a bottle of water.

"Hey." He was surprised to see her. Then he shook his head. "You can't bring a McCaffery a muffin. Buttered Up or homemade are the only kind we're allowed to eat."

She nodded. “That’s from Buttered Up.”

He frowned. “But—”

“Paige opened the bakery and I went in to help her. Stayed open until we ran out of stuff. Well, besides the stuff I swiped for you guys.”

He looked around again and noticed that everyone now had food.

Cam looked at Piper. “Wow,” he finally said. “Thank you. For the muffin and for managing the bakery this morning for Zoe and Josie.”

“It was Whitney’s idea.”

His chest tightened painfully. “Oh.” That was... nice. Awesome even. She’d been thinking of him and his family. She’d come up with a way to help.

In Appleby. From a distance.

It wasn’t as if he believed she *hadn’t* been thinking of him. Or them.

But she wasn’t *here*.

She’d stood on those steps, wrapped in a sheet, probably still smelling like him and cookie dough, and she’d let him leave without her.

There was a big meeting today. A big meeting that mattered a lot to her. A big account, one she had history with. One she wanted to impress.

And of course it mattered to Hot Cakes, too. But it hadn’t even occurred to her to reschedule.

“You okay?” Piper asked.

“Sure. I mean...” He gave a soft, humorless laugh. “No. Fuck no, even.” He took a breath. “My mom’s in surgery, my dad’s a mess, my sister and brother are scared, and there’s nothing I can do.”

Piper nodded. “And Whitney’s not here.”

He thought about asking what she meant. Or maybe even denying that was on his mind. But Piper had been helping him nurse his hangovers after seeing Whitney for ten years now. She knew him and the other guys better than they knew themselves sometimes.

He finally nodded. “Yeah. And Whitney’s not here.”

Piper sighed and turned to lean on the windowsill next to him.

He twisted the top off the water bottle and took a drink, preparing to hear her say that he should have specifically asked Whitney to come. Or that Whitney was doing what she thought she needed to do by keeping the meeting. Or that Whitney thought she was helping by having the meeting and keeping things going so the guys could all be here with him and his family.

But instead, Piper said, “You’re going to have to decide if you can handle having only part of her.”

Cam frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... I get it. I get how it feels to be in love with someone who can only give you *part* of themselves. And, the thing is, that’s not their fault. We know who they are, Cam. They’ve been honest about it. It’s our stupid fault for still wanting to be with them. So—” She looked at him. “You have to decide if you can be happy with only having part of her. Having her be gone, sometimes physically, a lot of the time mentally. Giving her heart and time and energy to something else.”

“That’s how you feel about Ollie?”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

Cam sighed. “Yeah. Okay. But...” He looked at the floor and thought about what she’d said. “I think you’re wrong.”

Piper snorted. “I’ve been in the front row for five years, Cam.”

“Right. But... they can learn. They can change. They’re not doing it because they don’t care. They’re doing it because

they don't think they'll be good at the love thing."

Piper studied him. "You think that's what's going on with Whitney?"

He nodded, realizing it was true. "She's not *here* because she doesn't know what to *do* here. She doesn't know how this works. She's in Appleby because she does understand all of that. She can do that right."

Piper nodded. "Doing things right is a big thing with her."

"It is."

"But, ironically, she's doing it wrong."

He nodded. "I know." But he felt the bitterness and hurt fading as he understood what he was explaining to Piper. "She's still figuring out the unconditional thing. It's only been a couple weeks. She'll get there."

"Only been a couple of weeks of what?" Piper asked.

"Of being loved like that," Cam said. "Didi's the only one who's ever done it. And I think the unconditional part just kind of takes time to learn and understand."

Could he give her time? Could he wait while she figured out that when he said "no matter what" he meant it?

Yes. For sure.

"That's what's going on with Ollie too?" Piper asked, her eyes finding Ollie across the room.

"I think Ollie is very used to doing things and trusting the rest of us to tell him when he's off track."

She nodded.

"And he's especially used to *you* telling him when he's off track," Cam said.

Piper looked up at him.

He nodded. "Yeah. I think you need to talk to him. Tell him how he's screwing this up with you."

She pulled in a deep breath and then looked back at Ollie, blowing it out. "Huh."

Cam grinned.

The door to the waiting room opened and he turned, hoping it was the doctor.

But it wasn't.

It was Whitney.

He actually felt a little light-headed as relief coursed through him.

He felt Piper's hand on his back. "Well, I'll be damned. Maybe they *can* learn how to do this."

He huffed out a laugh and then headed straight for Whitney.

Her eyes were wide and she was chewing on her bottom lip.

"Hi," she said as he came to stand in front of her.

"Hi."

She gave him a wobbly smile. "I knew better than to bring food, and especially dessert. And I thought liquor was probably not the right call this time. So..." She shrugged. "I'm empty-handed here."

He reached out and pulled her into his arms, hugging her close, and burying his face in her neck, breathing in her scent.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him. "I could have brought—"

"Shh," he said against her ear. "This is all I need."

"But—"

"Nope," he interrupted again. "Just this. You. Here. With me."

Her arms tightened around him and they just stood, holding each other like that. And it really was exactly what he needed.

Long moments later—two minutes, thirty, a week, he didn't know—the door opened again.

This time it *was* the doctor.

Cam unwrapped himself from Whitney as everyone stood and came to cluster in the middle of the room to hear the news. He kept her tucked tightly against his side though. He'd been getting okay with her *not* coming but now that she was here, he wasn't sure he was going to be able to let her go.

Aiden and Zoe hugged each other. Dax had Jane tucked securely under his arm. Grant stood behind Josie with his arms wrapped around her. Didi and Henry stood holding hands. Even Piper and Ollie were standing together. He had a hand on the back of her neck and she was leaning into him slightly. Cam's dad, Steve, stood at the front of the group.

The doctor focused on him. "It went well," he said.

The room let out a collective sigh. Cam felt his knees actually weaken. Whitney's arm tightened around him as if she sensed that.

"We got all the blockages taken care of," the doctor went on. "Her vitals were strong throughout and are strong now. It will be another hour or so until she's awake. She'll be in the ICU for a day or two. She will need cardiac rehab after she goes home. But I expect she'll do well with all of it."

A tear slipped down Steve's face as he let out a breath and extended his hand to the surgeon. "Thank you so much."

"Delivering good news is my favorite thing to do." The doctor smiled at them all. "She clearly has a wonderful support system here. But, let's limit the visitors to just a couple tonight."

He answered a couple of questions and then left them.

Steve turned to face everyone. "Thank you all so much for being here."

They all nodded. There was nowhere else any of them would have been.

"I'm going to go in and see her when she's awake," he said. "But maybe the rest of you should head home for now. You can come back later when she's a little stronger."

“But I want to see Mom,” Henry protested. He looked scared.

Cam felt his chest tighten. The last time someone Henry loved had gone to the hospital, she hadn’t come home.

“Oh, you know what Whitney did for me when I was in the hospital?” Didi asked him.

He looked up at her. “You were in the hospital?”

“Oh sure, a few times,” Didi told him, waving her hand as if it was no big deal.

Cam smiled. That was perfect. She was reassuring Henry by letting him know that people *did* come out of the hospital.

“I had my tonsils out,” Didi said. “And my appendix out. And three babies. And, the time I was going to tell you about with Whitney, I had a broken leg that needed surgery to put it back together.”

“What?” Henry asked.

“Yep. They put metal pins and screws into my bones.”

Henry’s eyes were wide. “No way.”

“Seriously. I can show you the x-rays.”

“Yes,” Henry said emphatically. “For sure.”

Everyone laughed.

“Anyway,” Didi went on. “When I was in the hospital that time, Whitney was about eight and she made me decorations for my room. Hospital rooms are so plain and boring. So Whitney drew pictures and got balloons and streamers and stuff. I think we should do that before we go see your mom.”

Henry thought about that. “That would be nice.”

“And the sooner we get home and make that stuff, the less time she’ll spend looking at plain old white walls,” Didi said.

Henry nodded. “We could do it while she’s still asleep.”

“Good plan.”

Cam smiled and looked down at Whitney. She was doing that smiling-with-shiny-eyes thing she did when she watched Henry and Didi together.

“I can’t believe she remembers that,” Whitney said softly.

“It obviously mattered a lot to her.”

She nodded. “And now she’s taking care of Henry instead of the other way around.”

“That’s what friends do,” Cam agreed.

Whitney looked up at him and gave him the sweetest, most loving smile he’d ever seen. “I love you, Cam.”

He was surprised, but inordinately pleased. “I love you too.”

“And I think you should stay here with your dad.”

He nodded. He should. But that meant Whitney was going to take Didi and Henry home. Which was fine. It really was.

“And I’ll see who can take Didi and Henry home.”

“Wait, not you?”

“I not going anywhere,” she told him, squeezing his arm. “I finally figured out *this* is where I want to be. No matter what.”

He couldn’t believe how those words affected him. “Whit —”

“We’re going to head out,” Grant said, stopping with Josie. “I’m so glad she’s going to be okay.”

“Thanks for being here,” Cam told him.

They shared a quick hug and then Cam hugged Josie. “We’ll tell her you were here and that you’ll be back when she’s feeling better.”

Josie wiped at her eye. “Thank you. My God, I was so scared.”

Aiden and Zoe came up beside them.

“We’re going to stay,” Zoe said. She looked at Whitney. “Piper told me about what you guys figured out for the bakery. Thank you so much.” She reached out and pulled Whitney into a hug. “That was... amazing.”

Whitney squeezed her back and Cam felt his throat tighten at the sight.

“Of course,” Whitney told her. “Anytime you need anything, I’m here.”

Zoe gave her a wobbly smile. “That’s so weird. Great,” she added quickly. “But weird.”

Whitney laughed. “I know.”

“Okay, so we’ll all hang out with Steve,” Aiden said. “You guys able to take Didi and Henry?” he asked Grant and Josie.

“Of course.” Grant looked at Whitney. “We can stay at your house with them. If that’s okay.”

Cam braced for her to decline their offer or to realize that if she didn’t go with them someone *would* need to stay with them, which meant she’d probably decide to leave.

He was shocked when she said, “That would be so great. Thank you. If she can’t find her keys, there’s a spare under the cherub just to the left of the porch. And help yourself to anything.”

He wanted to kiss her so badly.

“Hey, how did the meeting go?” Grant asked her as he was turning to leave.

She winced. “Oh. Well...” She looked up at Cam, then at Aiden, then at Grant. “I might have ruined that entire relationship. I wanted to get out of there so I could get over here and Gordon started asking what my dad thought of everything—”

“Wait, your dad?” Aiden asked with a frown.

Cam was scowling too.

She sighed. “Yeah. He was shocked to learn that I hadn’t consulted him and was concerned that we didn’t know what

we were doing. So I told him he'd be an idiot to not want to work with us and he could take the offer on the table or not but I didn't care and I was leaving and I walked out."

"Well, good," Grant said, also frowning. "Fuck him."

Whitney smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way."

Aiden was studying her. "You already have another idea anyway, don't you?"

She glanced up at Cam. "No. I just—"

Wow. She did already have a new idea. He was really going to just have to accept that it was always going to be like that. He grinned. "Go ahead," Cam said, nudging her.

"I... it wasn't like I was thinking about it on purpose," she said. "It just came to me as I was driving over."

"What is it, Whit?" Aiden asked with a smile.

"Well, okay. We don't *need* Perkins Foods. I mean, yes, they're the biggest chain, of course. But we're *Hot Cakes*," she said. "We're one of the biggest snack cake companies out there and we're the best. So... what if we only put our products in small stores. Family owned, independent grocery stores and gas stations. We wouldn't have as many locations, *but* if people want a Hot Cakes snack cake, they'll be willing to go looking for them. That would bring business to those smaller stores *and* make Hot Cakes a more exclusive item."

Grant seemed to be thinking about that. But he did not, for once, keep an unreadable expression on his face. He nodded, then smiled, then said, "I like it. Let's talk more about that."

"Yep, and if Gordon Perkins comes crawling back," Aiden said, "we'll let *you* decide if we work with him or not."

"I might tell him to fuck off."

"That's your call," Aiden said with a wink.

Whitney turned a huge grin up to Cam.

He gave in then and bent to kiss her.

It was just a quick, sweet one, but it seeped into his bones and made him, quite simply, *happy*.

“Mr. McCaffery?” a nurse asked from the doorway.

Cam turned, but he knew she was talking to his father.

“You can come with me now,” she said.

Steve was clearly relieved. Cam, Zoe, Aiden, Josie, and Jane gave him hugs. He knelt before Henry to give him instructions to be a good listener and to text him if he needed anything.

“I’ll call you later and you can talk to your mom if she’s up to it,” Steve told him.

Henry nodded. “Okay. But I’ll be all right.”

Steve looked up at Didi, then stretched to his feet. “I know you will, son,” he said. He met Didi’s gaze. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure,” she told him. Then she reached up and put a hand on Steve’s cheek. “I wish I could have known you sooner.”

Steve looked a little choked up. Letty had been his mother. This was her childhood best friend. What wounds Letty and Didi hadn’t been able to heal, *he* was able to heal with Didi. At least a little.

He put his hand over hers on his face and said, “We have time for that.”

She smiled. “I look forward to it.”

Then Steve turned and left with the nurse.

Everyone else just stood quietly for a moment.

Until Didi asked Josie, “If we’re riding back with you, does that mean we can stop at the bakery for pie?”

The mood officially lightened, everyone laughed and Josie slipped her arm through Didi’s—the one that wasn’t holding Henry’s hand—and said, “Absolutely. Pie makes everything better.”

“We will be right behind you,” Jane, the ultimate pie lover, announced.

She and Dax stopped and hugged Cam and Whitney and Zoe and Aiden. So did Ollie and Piper.

And then it was just the four of them.

Cam settled on one of the waiting room couches near the far wall and pulled Whitney down beside him, while Aiden and Zoe took the couch closer to the door. They were together, but this way the couples could chat in private.

“So you know,” he said as Whitney snuggled into him. “I’d really love to have your grandma stay at the house and not move into Sunny Orchard yet.”

Whitney stiffened in surprise and looked up at him. “Really?”

“Really. Things are going great. She’s doing well. I love being with her. I know we haven’t had any really bad days yet and I know things will get worse. There may be a time when Sunny Orchard is the right place for her but...” He’d been thinking about it a lot over the past week as the end of his month with Didi had been getting closer. “I think we could keep her at home longer.”

Whitney didn’t say anything. She just studied him, a soft smile on her face.

“What?” he asked finally.

“I really like hearing you say *we* and *home* and talk about the future like that.”

His heart kicked hard in his chest. “Me too.”

“And, yes,” she said. “I mean, I love having her there. If that’s what she wants. And you’re up for it.”

“Turns out that Hot Cakes needs *a lot* less legal work than Fluke did and, well, I’m damned good at being a stay-at-home grandson.”

Whitney’s expression softened. “Oh, man. You really are sweet. Those tattoos and muscles are a total cover-up.”

He laughed. “Just with you. And Didi.”

“And your mom. And Henry. And your sister. And Piper. And—”

“Okay, so my badass reputation is trashed.” He grinned down at her.

“Totally trashed,” she said with a nod. “But... at least you still have the tattoos.”

“You like those, don’t you?”

“So much,” she said in a lusty sigh.

He kissed the top of her head. “Maybe we should get you some.”

She didn’t say no. He looked down at her.

“Whit?”

“Just thinking about what I would get and where,” she said. “Especially if you would want to lick them as much as I like licking yours.”

Predictably, hospital waiting room or not, his body responded to that. “I would,” he said. “Very much. And I have some very specific ideas about what and where if *that* is part of the criteria.”

She grinned up at him. “Oh good.”

Yeah, he was definitely in love with her.

One month later...

“A toast!” Dax announced.

Everyone quieted and turned to face him. Except Maggie and Steve. They were sitting in the chaise lounge chairs off to one side. Still, they were facing Dax.

Maggie was doing great, but it was late and she still got tired easily, especially at these big group gatherings. Though she loved them more than anything.

Of course, anymore, *all* of their gatherings seemed to be big group gatherings.

Whitney had been amazed to find out over the past month that she was actually an extrovert. She'd thought so in high school, but the last few years, she'd been *fine* at home alone or just with Didi. Now though, with this group, she loved getting everyone together and talking and laughing and joking and encouraging each other.

"I don't know what the hell we were thinking, but I'm sure glad we bought Hot Cakes," Dax said.

Everyone laughed and raised their cups.

"Lord knows there were about a million ways we could have screwed that up," Dax went on. "*But*, thankfully, we had Whitney."

Everyone turned to hoist their cups toward her.

Whitney felt her eyes stinging.

"You are our fearless leader, our cheerleader, our visionary and... our friend." Dax's voice got softer on that last word and he gave her an affectionate smile. "You've also made our most ornery partner into a freaking teddy bear."

Everyone looked at Cam who was, of course, right beside Whitney. She grinned at him.

"And for that we do truly believe you are magical," Dax said.

Whitney gave a little curtsy.

Cam pinched her ass when she straightened.

She giggled.

He always acted growly when they teased about how *nice* and *sweet* and *cuddly* he was now, but the truth was, he freely admitted it. He was downright domestic. Not only was Didi still living with them, but they were now also fostering kittens. Or Cam was, anyway. Whitney still wasn't entirely sure how Paige had talked him into that, but honestly, seeing the big guy with the bulging, tattooed biceps bottle-feeding a kitten was

even hotter than watching him bake cookies. And that was saying something.

“So it is long past time for us to finally make you, Whitney Lancaster, an official *partner* at Hot Cakes,” Dax said. “Thank you for saying yes when we asked you.”

Her eyes were stinging again but she smiled widely. “I’m thrilled.”

“To Whitney,” Dax said.

Everyone repeated, “To Whitney!”

“Now can we jump in?” Henry called as everyone drank.

Whitney laughed.

“Yes, now you can jump in,” Cam said. “But stay in the—”

Didi and Henry jumped into the swimming pool at the same time, throwing water up onto the patio and making Dax and Jane jump back, laughing.

“Shallow end,” Cam finished, as he watched them head for the slide. In the deep end. “Guess I’m going in for lifeguard duty.”

Yes. The party was at Whitney and Didi, and Cam’s, house. On the back patio. At 3 a.m.

And they were grilling burgers and drinking hard root beer.

No one was going into work tomorrow.

Whitney kissed him quickly. “You’re the best.”

“If you *really* loved me, you’d join us. In that red bikini I got you.”

“I thought that was for swimming when it was just the two of us.”

“Okay, sunrise swim. Just the two of us. And the red bikini.”

“Deal.”

She watched him head for the pool and her grandmother and his little brother. He stripped his shirt off, tossed it to the

side, and then gave her one more look over his shoulder before diving in.

Yeah, those tattoos and muscles were all hers. As were the cookies he'd made just for her, hidden inside where the friends and family who they loved—just not enough to share *every single* cookie with—would never find them. She was in a really good place.

Speaking of really good places... Whitney looked around the patio. Everyone was here. Even Paige and Piper and Ollie. She sighed a happy sigh.

She'd spent time with her own mother and father and brothers on this patio over the years.

But she'd never actually been with *family* here.

Until now.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading *Semi-Sweet On You!* I hope you loved Cam and Whitney's story!

Next up is Paige and Mitch's story in

Oh, Fudge!

It's a Hot Cakes story with a splash of the Boys of the Bayou series! You do not have to have read that series *at all* to enjoy this story! But it might make you want to take a trip down south to Louisiana when you're done!

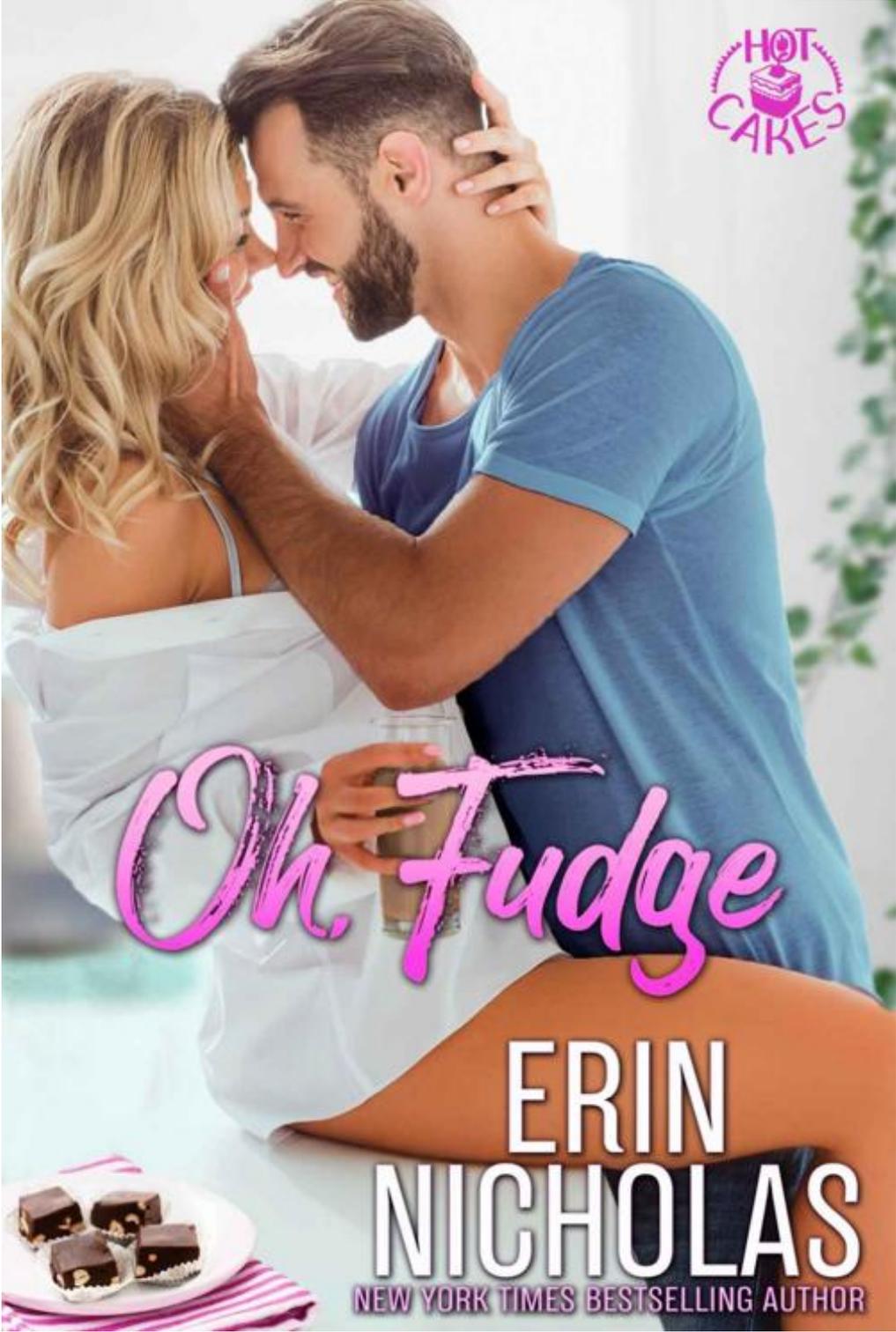
A sassy, small town Iowa girl.

A hot, rugged Louisiana boy.

A surprise visit. A nosy family. A winter festival.

Dang, is this was falling in love feels like?

Oh, fu...fudge.

A romantic couple in a close embrace, about to kiss. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a white, off-the-shoulder top. The man has a beard and is wearing a blue t-shirt. They are holding hands and looking at each other. In the bottom left corner, there is a small plate of chocolate fudge squares on a white plate with a pink and white striped napkin.

Oh Fudge

ERIN
NICHOLAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

About Oh, Fudge

Paige Asher likes her men the way she likes her coffee: hot, slightly sweet, and only to-go.

The hot friend-of-a-friend she had a scorching single night with was just about perfect — tall, rugged, with a sexy drawl... and on the road out of town by six a.m. the next morning. Long before her mom could start picking out wedding flowers.

But now she can't stop thinking about the Louisiana boy. His texts make her smile and she suddenly has a craving for gumbo all the time... hot and spicy and far from home.

Mitch Landry had no idea Iowa would be so hospitable to a visitor. He knew the Midwest had a reputation for friendliness but his welcome gift — a sassy, sweet blond who is as no-strings-attached as he is — was a dream come true six months ago.

But why is he still texting her? And why did he jump at the chance to come back to Iowa? And why is he so annoyed by her phobia to commitment this time? And why is he pretty sure leaving Paige this time is going to be one of the hardest things he's ever done?

Damn, is this what falling in love feels like?

Oh, fu... fudge.

Chapter One



He had the best hands. Big, hot, slightly callused, causing a delicious drag over her skin. And confident. This guy knew what he was doing when he put his hands on a woman.

His big palm slid up the side of her thigh to her hip, then under the edge of her half sweatshirt onto her bare skin. The hot touch made her suck in a quick breath and then let it out in a soft moan as he ran his hand up and down her ribs.

As his hand was moving, so was his mouth. He dragged his jaw along her neck to her collarbone, the scruff on his face abrading her skin and sending goose bumps dancing joyously down her arms and tightening her nipples.

“Paige.”

She loved the way he said her name. Low and needy. The deep voice combined with the slow Louisiana drawl made heat pool in her belly and then slide lower, making her feel achy and tingly. In spite of the fact that she was wearing loose, soft, comfortable yoga clothing—a sports bra, a half sweatshirt that hung off her shoulder and had been washed so many times it felt like cashmere, satiny soft leggings, no panties so as not to pinch or restrict any motions, and nothing on her feet—she was aware of every bit of her clothing rubbing and pressing and she wanted to tear them all off. She *needed* to be naked. She needed to be free to wrap herself around him and feel every inch of him against every inch of her. She wanted his hot skin and his possessive hands and his wet mouth and—

“Paige!”

That wasn't a deep moaning sound. That was a sharp whisper.

Paige's eyes snapped open.

Piper Barry, a friend and one of the women in her afternoon yoga class, was staring at her with wide eyes.

Paige abruptly came back to the moment.

And the yoga class she was teaching. Or that she was *supposed to be* teaching.

Damn. She'd gotten caught up in dirty daydreams about Mitch Landry.

Again.

She never did that. *Never*. Guys were fun, no doubt about it. She loved guys. She loved the things she did with guys—and no, she didn't mean sex. Okay, she didn't *just* mean sex. She did love sex. But she also loved dancing and... okay, she loved men for sex and dancing. Still, that wasn't *just* sex.

But she didn't *daydream* about men when they weren't around.

She cleared her throat and straightened her spine. No more prolonged periods of meditation. She needed to kick this class up a notch. Take her mind off Mitch. And the fact that he was going to be here in two days. After not seeing him for six months. And four days.

She also *never* kept track of how long it had been since she'd seen a guy.

Of course, all the guys she typically saw for sex and dancing she could see any time. For the most part. They didn't live a thousand miles away in another state like Mitch did.

That was probably it. She just wanted what she couldn't have.

The sexy, sweet texts didn't help though. And the fact that the one night they'd had together had been the hottest she'd ever had. And the fact that—

Piper cleared her throat.

Right. Yoga. And the fourteen people facing Paige at that very moment waiting for her next instruction.

“Deep breath in. Feel your ribs rise,” she said in her soothing I’ve-got-your-peace-and-enlightenment-right-here voice. And as if she hadn’t been having them sit and quietly center themselves for the past several minutes. And as if her heart wasn’t racing and her nerve endings weren’t popping and her brain wasn’t full of rugged, big-handed, slow-smiling, how-about-you-bend-over-the-end-of-the-bed-so-I-can-hold-on-to-that-sweet-ass-while-I-fuck-you Louisiana-boy thoughts.

Paige shook her head and forced herself to move her class, and *herself*, through the next three poses without any thoughts of how great dirty talk was when done with a soft drawl.

Paige moved them from their beginning sitting pose to their stomachs and then into their first standing pose.

She caught Cam McCaffery eyeing Whitney Lancaster’s butt appreciatively.

She could understand how it might be distracting having your girlfriend in yoga class.

If Mitch were here, bending over, or behind her watching *her* bend over... Paige wobbled as her thoughts drifted again, and she pulled in her core and forced her mind onto her practice.

She *loved* yoga. She never had trouble concentrating like this. She looked forward to her practice so she could block out all of the thoughts racing around and the distractions that grappled for a hold on her attention. She was a master at blocking it out. It was why she’d gotten into yoga in the first place.

“Pull your navel toward your spine. Roll your shoulders forward, up, and back. Hug your elbows in, and squeeze your shoulder blades in, together, and down.”

Her life in tiny little Appleby probably didn’t seem stressful to anyone looking at it from the outside. Appleby was a sweet Midwestern town where everyone looked out for each other. Local businesses were supported. Neighbors brought

casseroles over when someone was sick or a family member died. There were town festivals—including the Apple Festival starting tomorrow—and holidays were not just family events but entire community celebrations.

Paige’s family had lived in Appleby for generations. Her sister Josie lived in the house that their great-great-grandparents had built when they’d first come to Appleby.

All of that was why Paige did yoga. And collected cats. And drank vodka cranberries.

A lot of cats. And vodka cranberries.

“Now inhale, lift, and lengthen up through your spine,” she coached softly and steadily.

Fred, a big, long-haired, orange cat, came strolling past her mat and stopped to have his head scratched. Which she did while still holding her pose, engaging her core, and breathing. The cats were part of the practice, and everyone who came to Cores and Catnip knew they’d be joined by feline classmates.

The cats lounged and watched. Or wound their way between participants, getting petted and cooed over. Sometimes they’d choose a mat and join one class participant for the duration. Sometimes they made their rounds. Sometimes they slept and sometimes they played.

The yoga studio was a cat café and adoption center as well. Actually, Paige’s business had *started* as a cat café and adoption center. People could come in, get coffee, smoothies, and healthy treats—oatmeal, multigrain bars, cereal mixes, and low-fat muffins—and work or read with a cat curled up by their feet or in their lap. She ran a used-book swap and offered free Wi-Fi. It had been a great idea. People especially found it interesting since her sister worked at the local bakery, Buttered Up, a business that had been a part of the town for more than fifty years. Buttered Up offered all the typical treats—cupcakes, full-fat muffins, cookies, scones, and pies. Josie was a master baker and decorator. Buttered Up’s offerings were absolutely delicious. And a sharp contrast to the food that Paige offered. But she and Josie had fun with it, and recently

Josie had started her own side business and now made healthy muffins and bars for Paige as well.

That was just one example of how her family was interwoven into everything Paige did. She loved and hated it.

Her family was here. Everywhere. All of them. All the time. She couldn't run an errand without running into someone she was related to. She couldn't go to the doctor's office without her family knowing—her aunt was the head nurse. She couldn't even dance with a guy without her mother wondering if it was serious and telling her how nice his grandmother/sister/mother/aunt/cousin was. Or how bitchy his grandmother/sister/mother/aunt/cousin was. Sometimes a girl just wanted to *dance* and for it to have nothing to do with his female family members' dispositions.

Actually, a lot of the time a girl just wanted to dance with a guy without involving their families and the fact that his mother once hit her mother in the face with a dodgeball in PE class. On purpose. Or the fact that his aunt was the best Sunday school teacher her sister had ever had.

As if those were reasons for her to get involved, or not get involved, with a guy.

But this was what she lived with. She couldn't have the doctor check her for a rash without her mom and grandmother calling. She couldn't grab a low-fat yogurt without her dad telling her she needed to worry less about her weight and that she should just have a steak or burger once in a while. And since her apartment was upstairs from her yoga studio, heaven forbid someone park their truck along the curb overnight. She'd absolutely have family members asking about who had spent the night and picking up bridal magazines from the bookstore.

This was all absolutely why she did yoga. And collected cats. And drank.

“Keep the bright and energetic lift. Focus on your foundation. Awareness in that front foot,” she encouraged, checking on the class. “Hips level. Then lift that back leg slightly.”

Why was she thinking of all of this now though? She could always push all of that out of her mind.

But it was like Mitch had wedged open the door she normally shut and locked while she practiced, and that little crack was letting all kinds of thoughts sneak in.

She couldn't wait to see him. She almost wished that he *hadn't* texted to let her know he was going to be in town again. He could have just shown up and surprised her. That probably would have been better.

She wouldn't have spent the last couple of days cleaning her apartment and shopping for food that he could eat while they were holed up together—he did *not* seem like the tofu and edamame type—and juggling her schedule and coming up with lies to tell her mother and various other relatives when they wanted to know why she wouldn't be at the Apple Festival on day three.

She wasn't going to tell them that she intended to spend day three in bed. All day. Naked. Wrapped around a hot Louisiana boy who turned her insides to pudding and made her smile stupidly over his texts as if she were in high school again.

Without warning, she would have just rolled with it the way she usually did when a certain feeling or mood struck her. He could have put up with her dust bunnies and could have gotten food to go from downtown, and she could have just left him in bed to go teach a class or two.

Except leaving him would have been *very* difficult.

“Elongate from the top of your head to your tailbone,” she reminded the class. “Then reach.”

Bernie, the gray-and-white, short-haired cat, jumped up on the windowsill next to Paige and meowed before yawning widely.

She smiled at him and reached to scratch under his chin. She had to really stretch, pulling in her lower stomach, breathing, and challenging her balance to give him the love but that was one way the cats were such a fun part of the yoga

classes. Just having them around also made people smile more, and it was scientifically proven that spending time with animals brought blood pressure and stress levels down.

Paige heard someone clear their throat and with her fingers still grazing Bernie's chin, she glanced toward the door.

Her eyes went round, both arms dropped, and her back leg dropped while her supporting leg gave out. Her brain just stopped keeping her upright. All of her mental energy was immediately focused on the man in the doorway.

She fell to the mat, and the entire room gasped and dropped their poses as well.

Piper was beside her a moment later. "Paige! Oh my God, are you all right?"

Mitch is here! He's here! Early! Already! But he's right over there! Yay! Gimme!

But she simply pushed her hair back and gave Piper a smile. "Yes, of course. Bernie threw me off-balance."

Piper eyed the cat who was still on the windowsill, now licking a paw and looking entirely unconcerned about, well, anything. Typical.

"Did you... hurt yourself?" Piper asked.

"Nope."

The rest of the class was leaning in as if to hear, and Cam and Whitney moved closer.

"I just got a little distracted," Paige said softer. She caught Whitney's eyes, then Piper's, then looked toward the doorway.

Mitch was leaning against the doorjamb. He was wearing faded blue jeans and an olive-green t-shirt that she knew matched his eyes. They wouldn't be able to tell from here but it was exactly the right shade. His hair was a little shorter than the last time she'd seen him, but he still had the short beard and, even more dangerous to her libido, that smirky half smile that said he knew she'd just fallen down because of him.

He wasn't wearing a jacket even though it was January. She assumed he had one. Though it never got all that cold in Louisiana. Not heavy-winter-coat cold anyway. And yes, she'd looked that up. She'd freaking done research about where this guy lived. That was... crazy.

He did, however, have boots on. They weren't exactly winter snow boots. More like scuffed-up work boots. But they'd keep his feet warm while tramping through the six inches of snow that blanketed Appleby currently. One booted ankle was crossed cockily over the other as he leaned against the doorframe watching her unfold herself from her yoga mat.

His arms were also crossed as if he were settled in to watch the rest of the class.

As if their thoughts were connected, his eyes traveled over her as she stretched to her feet again. A flash of heat went through her as he took in what she was wearing.

The same outfit, essentially, that he'd stripped her out of the last time he'd been here.

I love this fucking sweatshirt. The way it hangs off your shoulder, tempting me with these sweet tits right underneath. He'd hooked his finger in the neckline of the sweatshirt and pulled it down underneath her left breast. He'd pulled her bra up and then fastened his dirty-talking, hot mouth right on her nipple.

Now that nipple tingled with the memory and the sight of that mouth just a few feet away.

Piper and Whitney both looked in the direction that Paige was clearly looking.

She grabbed them both, forcing them to look back at *her* before the entire class swung to look at Mitch.

“Don't—”

But it was too late. The other twelve people in the room turned as if they'd choreographed it. Mitch didn't even blink. All he did was lift one hand in a little wave.

Even that made her hot.

He was laid back. God, she loved that.

She needed that.

Not that she needed *him*. Or wanted him. Not like that. She didn't want a man. Not long term for leaning on or anything like that. She shuddered. She was twenty-two, for God's sake. In spite of the fact that her mother and grandmother were convinced she was going to never love anyone the way she loved cats—a fact she hadn't disputed—she had time.

But she *appreciated* spending time with laid-back people. And if those people also said deliciously dirty things, and *did* deliciously dirty things, to her while also making her laugh, then... yeah, that was good. Really good.

Before he headed out the door and got back on the road with his truck pointed south. Very far south. Out of reach and out of you-should-bring-him-to-family-dinner-on-Sunday range.

She couldn't help but smile as everyone turned back to face her, their eyebrows up, a mix of questioning and curiosity and *oh, good for you*. That mostly came from Piper and Max—the big, burly gay man who looked the exact opposite of anyone you would see in a yoga class but who had *amazing* core control and balance.

Yeah, Mitch Landry was something to look at.

Hot. That was just the best word. Hot. Rugged. He clearly worked outside and was completely comfortable in worn denim and t-shirts that molded to his lean, hard, muscled body that could do things that she hadn't ever had done to her before.

He was older than her. Twenty-seven to her twenty-two. And his, ahem, experience showed. She also appreciated that. Along with his laid-back-ness.

She knew more about his sexual skills, of course, since 90 percent of the time they'd been together they'd been naked and doing a lot more than talking.

But when he'd asked for her number and she'd told him that she wasn't looking for anything serious he'd said, "*That*

mouth, those eggs, and you don't want any strings attached? I take back everything I've said about the perfect woman not existing."

Yes, he'd complimented both her mouth—and the blow jobs it had given him—and the eggs she'd made him the next morning. Well, at 4 a.m. when they'd finally taken a break and realized they were hungry. He'd added a shit ton of hot sauce to his, but he'd said that had nothing to do with the eggs and everything to do with the fact that his Cajun roots had ruined his taste buds for anything less than a six on a zero-to-ten heat scale.

Then he'd looked her up and down and said that was why when he'd seen the blond who was a ten out of ten on the hot scale he'd had to have her.

It was corny and predictable. But even as she'd rolled her eyes, she'd laughed and maybe even blushed a little. Mostly because yeah, he'd *had her*.

"So looks like the guy is here to check... your heating system," Piper said, stepping forward onto Paige's mat and putting her hands on her shoulders, making Paige focus on Piper's face. "I'll finish the class for you so you can go talk to him."

"Oh, um..." The guy and her heating system...

"He's not from here," someone in the class said.

"I want to get his card though," someone else—someone *female*—said.

That snapped Paige out of her stupor.

Shit. She couldn't have Appleby-ites standing around gawking at Mitch and wondering what he was doing here.

What *was* he doing here? He wasn't supposed to be here for two more days. And it was still early. Or, at least, it wasn't past closing time which was when he was supposed to come by. So she needed to hide him.

She headed for him. "Right. Yes. Mr. Landry. Thanks for coming on short notice. The heating..."

She got close to him, and those green eyes actually twinkled at her. *Twinkled*. Just like the twinkling lights in the big front window in the lobby behind him. His grin grew too. And then she was close enough to feel him. Not with her hands. She didn't reach out and grab him, though she was *itching* to. But she could just *feel* the electricity in the air as she got close. The heat. The chemistry. The magnetism that seemed to pull her body toward his.

He straightened away from the doorframe, his six feet and four inches towering over her. She wasn't as short as her sister or mom, but she needed heels to get to five seven. And she hated heels.

God, he was big. She remembered the way he could lift her and shift her, the way he could position her body *just right*. The way he could...

"The heating?" he asked.

She licked her lips. Right. She'd been talking. About something. "The heating... thing"—Fuck, what did you call the thing that heated a building—"is in here."

She grabbed his sleeve, wanting, *needing* to touch him, and pulled him with her into her office. It was a tiny space behind the front desk. She didn't really need an office except as a place to put stuff. Extra mats and foam rolls and... okay, it was more of a storage room. She did most of her bookwork on her computer while on her couch upstairs in her apartment.

She tugged him inside and shut the door behind them. The furnace... fuck, *furnace*, she hadn't been able to come up with the word *furnace*?... was not in here, but she was hopeful that the people in her class didn't know that or hadn't seen where they'd gone for sure.

"Mitch, I..."

He was right there, all of a sudden, his big body caging her in against the door, his forearms braced on either side of her head, his heat, his scent, his just-being-*him* right there. Finally. After all these months. And, well... to hell with it.

She lifted on tiptoe, put her hand at the back of his neck, and kissed him.

He gave a deep growl and returned the kiss.

And. Then. Some.

Chapter Two



Six months. He'd been without soft lips, soft curves, soft skin for six months. Because the only lips, curves, and skin he wanted had been in Iowa.

Of all places.

Mitch pressed Paige against the door behind her, gripping her hips, and kissing her deeply.

God, he'd thought about her every single day since he'd met her last July. Her bright, sparkling blue eyes, her silky blond hair, her sweet breasts and ass, her sassy mouth, the way she kissed him and touched him like she couldn't get enough either, the way she returned his dirty talk and her humor.

She was perfect. Fucking perfect.

Even though she lived one thousand and forty-two miles away from him.

Which just made her all the *more* perfect. Okay, a few less miles would have been good so they could have met up before six months had passed, but there had been no worries about bumping into her downtown after their hot night together, that was for sure. There'd been no chance that his grandma, Ellie, would return her bra to *her* grandma after Ellie borrowed his truck and found it tucked between the seats.

Yeah, that had happened once.

There'd been no chance of Paige bringing him a pie the next day and sitting on his porch waiting for him to get home. For two hours. And then him showing up with another girl.

That had also happened once. Or twice. The second time the woman had brought brownies, not pie. But still.

Those things wouldn't happen with Paige though. Mostly because he hadn't had even a flicker of interest in another girl since setting eyes on Paige Asher.

But also because Paige wasn't a bake-a-pie-from-scratch-and-show-up-at-a-guy's-house kind of girl. Or brownies. At least, not ones that didn't have zucchini and almond flour in them. She'd only had vegetables and yogurt in her house the next morning when he'd gotten up. No sugar. Not even syrup for the pancakes he'd offered to make. She also hadn't had any regular flour.

She'd also been pretty fine with him getting right on the road and out of town, sans pancakes. So, no, he did not think she'd show up at his house with pie. And she definitely wouldn't wait two hours on his porch swing for him.

Though she might throw the pie in his face when she saw him with another girl the very next night. That's what Abby had done, and he couldn't say he blamed her.

Paige moaned into his mouth, and her fingers slid into his hair, gripping his head and stroking her tongue against his hungrily.

Mitch slid his hands to her ass, clad in the yoga pants that molded to those curves and made him certain that yoga should be a spectator sport, and lifted her.

Her legs wrapped around his waist and he leaned in, pressing her between the door and his hard-as-wood cock. She gasped as he ground into her, wiggling her hips in response, rubbing against him wantonly.

He could easily hold her petite frame with one hand and the press of his body, so he slid a hand up under the short sweatshirt she wore.

This damned thing drove him crazy. Was it coincidence she was wearing the same shirt she'd had on in the kitchen when he'd left her spent and panting on her kitchen table in

July? Maybe. Maybe she had a dozen of them. Or maybe it was fate.

She'd come into the kitchen that morning when he'd been rifling through her cupboards, trying to pull together breakfast, in yoga pants and that sweatshirt falling off one shoulder and showing flashes of the smooth skin of her stomach and low back as she moved.

He'd picked her up and pulled that sweatshirt down, sucking on her nipples, making her writhe against him almost instantly, before laying her back on the kitchen table and fucking her thoroughly.

She'd come hard, twice, before his ride pulled up at the curb.

Best. Breakfast. He'd. Ever. Had.

Now he slid his hand up to cup her breast, finding the nipple hard behind the sports bra she wore. She moaned as he plucked at it. She had fantastic nipples. Gorgeous. Sensitive. Playing with them made her pussy clench in the most delicious way.

He pulled the front of the bra down, needing bare skin. The position didn't give him a really good look, but he could feel that soft mound and the sweet, hard tip. He squeezed her nipple as he kissed her and felt her knees tighten around his waist and her press against him more insistently.

"Mitch," she rasped as he dragged his mouth from hers to kiss his way along her jaw to her ear.

"I need to be inside you. I want to talk and catch up too, I swear, but I need to feel you."

"God." She gave a soft half laugh, half moan. "Yes."

"Here? Now?" He'd take her wherever she'd let him have her. But he was aware they were just a few feet and a couple of thin walls away from her yoga studio.

"I want to say yes," she said, letting her head fall back against the door as he kissed down to her neck and then licked the satiny, sweet-smelling skin.

“So say yes.”

“I have... people.”

He grinned against her collarbone as he rolled her nipple and squeezed her ass. She hadn't been able to come up with the word “furnace” earlier either.

“Those people can find the door,” he told her.

He didn't care if she stopped long enough to get rid of everyone. He got it. He wasn't a *complete* Neanderthal. But he also didn't really do a lot of customer service or making-nice in his job. He worked for his cousins and grandparents and was pretty behind the scenes. His cousins ran a swamp boat tour company, Boys of the Bayou, down on the bayou in Louisiana. He did general repairs and cleanup and odd jobs on the buildings and boats and other vehicles they needed for the business. His grandparents ran the local bar and he did the same for them. Basically he was the go-to guy for anything nonspecific that came up for either business and he just took care of it. No matter what it was. He loved it. He was behind the scenes, had a flexible schedule, was valuable to his family's businesses, but also the businesses weren't going to fold if he wasn't there. It was nearly perfect.

“I need to...” Paige started, but then he shifted her, hoisting her higher and put his mouth on her nipple. “Oh. My. God.” The words came out on a soft breath and she arched closer to him.

He knew she was hot and wet now, and he could easily slide inside her sweet body and take them both to the peak within a matter of minutes. If he didn't move his mouth down to her clit and make her come before he fucked her.

They'd only had one night together but they'd covered a lot of bases. He knew her body pretty well and, because she was *so* willing to tell him exactly what she liked, he had a good feel for how to wring every drop of pleasure out of her tight, wonderfully flexible body.

“If you stay in here with me, I'll let you sit on my face,” he said against her nipple.

She loved oral sex, but she liked to be on top, controlling the angle and the pace and telling him what to do while she held her pussy above his mouth.

God that had been hot. He'd been *very* willing to follow her directions.

She gave another little groan-laugh. "Suddenly I don't even remember why I thought I should leave this room. Ever."

"That's my girl." He sucked hard on her nipple, ignoring how great it sounded to call her his girl. That was stupid.

Just then the doorknob rattled, and the door shook slightly as someone tried to open it.

"Paige?" a woman's voice called.

Mitch's head came up and he met Paige's eyes. She put a finger to her mouth.

He glanced at the doorknob that rattled again. There was no lock on that knob. The only thing keeping the door shut was their body weight against it.

He pulled Paige's bra back up over her breast, with a touch of regret at having to cover it up, then straightened her shirt.

"Paige Elizabeth! What is going on?"

Paige took a breath and called. "Just a second, Mom!"

Mom? *Mom?* Well, shit.

Paige wiggled against him and he let her slide to the floor. She licked her lips and smoothed her clothes as she pushed him back.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked through the door. "What is going on?"

"I'm just... rearranging the office. I've got the desk in front of the door!" Paige told her. She was frowning and sounded annoyed.

Yeah, he was annoyed too—and very uncomfortable behind his zipper. Mitch adjusted himself and then noticed the doorknob turning.

He quickly moved, leaning into the door, playing the part of a desk, preventing Paige's mom from opening the door.

Paige rolled her eyes. Then she crossed to her desk and shoved it across the floor a few inches, making the scraping noise that her mom would surely hear.

"I'm coming!" she told her mother. She faced Mitch and pointed at him, mouthing. "Hide."

He widened his eyes and shrugged, silently asking, *Where?*

She pointed behind him and he looked over his shoulder. There was a closet. A very small closet. He looked back at her, one eyebrow up. He was a big guy. All over. Something she'd not only enjoyed physically but that she'd commented on more than once when they'd been together. He'd inherited his six-four and wide frame, but he also did manual labor for a living. Working on the bayou just kind of naturally lent itself to brawn.

"Paige!" her mother snapped through the door again.

Paige came close and whispered, "Look, if you don't want to have to propose to me at family dinner on Sunday and have a spring wedding and have constant discussions about which family name we should use for our first child's middle name between now and then, you'll get your cute ass in that closet and stay quiet."

Proposals, Sunday family dinner, wedding planning and family names used as middle names... all of that was *way* too familiar. He knew exactly what she was talking about suddenly.

He was going to learn more about her family once they were alone—seemed they had something in common besides burn-the-bed-up sex—but yeah, for now, he could hide out.

He gave her a nod and turned for the closet and slipped inside. Barely. It was definitely a tight fit.

The tiny space was filled with hoodies and coats, a couple pairs of boots on the floor, and a shovel—he assumed for the snow outside, which, he couldn't deny, made him grin. He'd

never spent time in a place that got regular snow and that was going to be fun.

The door had barely closed behind him when he heard Paige open the office door.

“Good heavens!” her mother said. “I was starting to get worried.”

“I’m fine. I was looking for some... files... and got to rearranging and had the desk in front of the door,” Paige said.

“You look flushed. Are you feeling okay?” her mom asked.

Mitch grinned. She did look flushed. But she was feeling just fine. Well, horny, he’d bet. But not sick.

“I’m *fine*,” Paige said, sounding exasperated. “What are you doing here?”

“Why aren’t you doing your class?” Mrs. Asher asked.

“Because I had something to take care of in here.”

Again, Mitch grinned.

“Shouldn’t you take care of your business things and files and rearranging between classes?” her mother asked. “You don’t have *that* many classes to start with.”

Mitch could hear Paige’s sigh even through the closed closet door.

“Mom, I’m handling my business just fine.”

“But if you have to pay someone else to lead a class, then it’s less money—”

“*Mom*, it’s fine!” Paige snapped. “What are you doing here?”

Now Mitch heard her mother’s sigh. The dramatic sighing was genetic. Yeah, he could understand that too. He also had very passionate women in his family.

“Your sister said that you had a headache last night and couldn’t come over and help the kids with their projects. So I brought you some medicine.”

There was a long pause. So long that Mitch thought maybe they'd moved out of the office into the outer lobby and he just couldn't hear them talking any longer.

But a moment later, Paige said, "You mean, you came over here to find out why I wouldn't go help Amanda's kids with their festival projects because you don't believe I had a headache. But you passive-aggressively brought me medicine to pretend to be concerned."

Mitch could have sworn she was talking through gritted teeth.

"Paige, I would never do that," Mrs. Asher said. "I was concerned. You rarely have headaches."

"That's true," Paige said. "Because I'm very good at taking care of my body, and if I *do* have a pain or ache, I have many ways of taking care of it."

"Oils and herbs," her mother said.

Mitch could practically hear the eye roll that accompanied that comment.

"Yes," Paige said. "Oils and herbs. And trigger-point work. And meditation. And rest. None of which I could have at Amanda's house."

"Well, I brought you this in case none of that worked."

"You know I'm not going to use this," Paige told her.

"You don't have to admit it. I won't ask. But you have it just in case you need it. It's your own little secret."

"If I *did* use ibuprofen secretly, don't you think that I would be able to get it myself?" Paige asked.

"Where would you get it? You wouldn't want anyone in town to know that you were using a real medicine."

"First, the things I use to deal with aches and pains *are* just as real as this," Paige said. "And secondly, I'm not trying to say that ibuprofen doesn't work, Mother. I don't judge people who use it. If I needed it and wanted to use it, I'd go buy it at the store."

“You wouldn’t,” her mother said. “You want people to believe that what you do is the best choice.”

“It’s the best choice *for me*.”

“So you wouldn’t go buy ibuprofen at the store.”

“Because I don’t use ibuprofen. Not because I’m trying to trick people into thinking that what I do works when really I’m using over-the-counter painkillers secretly.”

Mitch had to squeeze his hand into a fist to keep from bursting through the door and interrupting. Paige’s mother was annoying her and he wanted to intervene.

Which was absolutely ridiculous. He barely knew her, and he sincerely doubted that she needed his help. Plus it was her *mother*. That was not the right first impression to make. Probably.

It was possibly because her mother was meddling and he knew a lot about that. Meddling in the Landry family was like game night in other families. Something they all got together to do on a regular basis.

“How’s your head today?” Paige’s mother asked.

“Fine.”

“So you could help your niece and nephew with their projects tonight?”

“No. I have plans tonight.”

“Doing what?”

“Mom, we’ve talked about this. You don’t need to know every single thing I do.”

“So it’s a boy.”

“I’m twenty-two. I don’t date boys.”

“But it is a date?”

“No, it’s not a date.”

Mitch grinned. So wild, up-all-night sex wasn’t a date in her book? He could live with that. He was hoping for some snow time though, he wouldn’t lie. Snow was a novelty to a

guy born and raised in Louisiana. He'd seen it twice and it had lasted for about two hours each time. It had been years. When Tori, his cousin's fiancé and the Iowa girl who had introduced him to Paige in the first place, had been preparing him for this trip north in January, she'd talked about boots and coats and gloves and when she'd told him that Appleby had about six inches of snow on the ground currently he'd admit that he'd felt a definite boyish rush of excitement. Maybe he could talk Paige into making a snowman or sledding or ice skating. He had no fucking idea how to ice skate, but he felt that was very winter wonderland-ish and that he might regret returning south without having at least *tried*.

And hot chocolate. He really wanted hot chocolate.

"But it involves a b—man?" Mrs. Asher asked.

"Mom, I said I have plans. I can't help with an art project. That's all you need to know."

"I just care."

"You're just nosy."

"I just think you could help your sister out once in a while."

"I just think my sister could have figured out how to use her birth control before she had little people she needed help with."

"Paige Elizabeth!" her mother gasped.

"You act like that's the first time I've said that," Paige said. Her tone was exasperated but also held a hint of amusement.

Mitch wished he could see her face.

"I'm always shocked when you say things like that," her mother said, definitely sounding shocked. "I keep thinking that you're going to get over this anti-marriage and family thing you have going on."

"Maybe. But I wouldn't hold your breath."

She was anti-marriage and family? Mitch felt his eyebrows rise. A part of him liked that. All the women he knew back home were very pro-marriage and family. He was twenty-seven. The girls on the bayou had been trying to tie him down—or their mamas had, at least—for five years now.

His own family had laid off on that for the most part. Or the attention had been focused on his older cousins. Until recently. His cousins had all spent the past summer falling ass over boots in love. Even his new buddy, Chase, who spent most of his time in medical school at Georgetown, had found himself smitten, somehow. Mitch had really thought Chase would be immune. They'd had a hell of a good time partying together. But Bailey Wilcox had happened and Chase was now a goner too.

Now the attention had shifted to Mitch. No one had yet said anything like, *when are you going to settle down?* But if they knew he was up here visiting a woman he'd met in July and hadn't been able to stop thinking about, they'd all be *very* interested.

There were three things the Landrys believed in with their whole hearts. One, crawfish boils were the way to fix any rift, disappointment or broken heart. Two, everyone's business was everyone else's business. And three, falling in love was the ultimate goal in life... even if you had to do it a few times to get it right.

Mitch couldn't help but wonder what his family would think of Paige. She was a yoga-doing-meditating vegetarian who clearly liked to keep her personal business personal. None of that would make sense to them.

And the Landrys would, most likely, horrify Paige.

He grinned thinking of it. His family was loud, and their idea of meditation was sitting in a boat and fishing without talking for twenty minutes straight. Other than swearing at the fish, and the fishing line, and the tree branches hidden under the surface of the water that messed with those lines.

He'd known Paige was a fling-with-no-strings girl. He'd texted her first and it had taken a couple of days for her to

respond. He'd given up on hearing back from her by the time his phone had dinged with the message from her. The message that read *I can't believe you texted me.*

He'd laughed and texted back—right away, incidentally, which might have been a mistake—and said, *why can't you believe it?*

Because I'm not sending you naked photos.

I don't need photos. I got a very good look at everything and I have a VERY good memory.

It had taken a few minutes after that and he'd wondered if he'd screwed up but then she'd replied, *so what do you want?*

And he'd had to really think about that.

Clearly, she hadn't been thrilled to hear from him. She hadn't been waiting with bated breath to see if he'd text or call. She hadn't been flirtatious or encouraging in keeping the conversation going.

At first.

But as long as he was okay with twelve to twenty-four hours passing between messages from her, he did hear from her, and every damned time she made him smile.

He'd ask stupid shit like, *what did you do today?*

And she'd say, *scooped cat poop, did yoga, rinse, repeat.*

He hadn't been able to resist asking, *what about a shower? You probably took a shower right?*

She'd reply, eventually, *I did.*

That was it. Nothing flirtatious or dirty.

Until about three weeks in when, in answer to his question about what she did that day, she texted, *scooped cat poop, did yoga, got off with my vibrator while thinking of you, rinse, repeat.*

He'd almost swallowed his tongue. He'd typed three messages before finally sending, *please tell me the repeat was with the vibrator and thinking of me too.*

Her reply, *Definitely. Twice last night. Once this morning, Once just now.*

She'd texted him *right after* using her vibrator and thinking of him.

Now *that* was what he was talking about.

Strangely, from there, their conversations had gotten more in depth. She'd told him more about her cats and why she loved yoga and she'd even drunk texted him after a girls' night, and, instead of getting dirtier, she'd told him that she wished they'd had more time together and that she'd made vegetarian gumbo. Which wasn't really gumbo at all—how could it be without shrimp or sausage or at least chicken?—but he'd been stupidly touched that she'd tried something from his world and he hadn't had the heart to tell her it didn't count.

He'd told her about the bayou and what he loved about it, how he loved the outdoors, and about his family. Which now, listening to her and her mother, he realized might have been a mistake.

He came from a very big, very nosy, very involved family. If she had too much of that here, she would have very little desire to meet his intrusive relatives.

But why was he thinking about her meeting his family?

That wasn't going to happen. That was the beauty of this situation. She lived *far* away. To see her, it took him miles away from the bayou and his family, and their time together would always be temporary. It would be impossible to get serious. Even if either of them were interested in that at all. Which they clearly weren't.

Suddenly the closet door opened and Paige stood there.

He must have missed her mom leaving.

“Sorry about that.”

“No problem.”

She grimaced. “I'm not so sure about that.”

He reached for her. “I have lots of other things for your mouth to do rather than apologize.”

But she backed up before he could catch ahold of her.

“And while I would *very much* like to use my mouth in *all* of those ways and few others, we need to cool it for a little bit.”

He frowned, stepping out of the closet. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, there are going to be other family members stopping by over the next few hours.”

“There will be?”

“Oh, for sure.” She paced away from him. “Mom’s suspicious now, and I kind of admitted, stupidly, that my plans tonight involve a guy.” She turned back to face him from several feet away. She was frowning. “That was really careless of me, of course. But I blame you.”

“Me?”

“You scrambled my brain and then you were just *right in there*.”

“I was totally quiet,” he protested around a grin about her scrambled-brain confession.

“Yeah, but you were *there*. Just a few feet away. Being all hot and stuff.”

“I was being hot? From inside a closet? With the door closed?” He liked that a lot. And knew what she meant, actually. He’d been very aware of her just on the other side of the door as well.

“Yeah.” She shook her head. “It must be the testosterone. You’ve got so much oozing out all over that it got on the floor and seeped out from under the door and soaked into me.”

He laughed softly and crossed the space between them. He reached out before she could move back and caught her wrist, bringing her up against him. He bent to put his face against her

neck, breathing deeply of her scent and loving the feel of her hair against his cheek and the way she shivered in his arms.

“The oozing doesn’t sound particularly sexy, but I love the idea of soaking into you,” he said, gruffly against her ear. “Does it make you hot?”

She sighed. “Yes.”

“So you were distracted because your panties are wet, and your pussy is aching knowing that the cock you want more than anything is just a few feet away and is all ready for you.”

She shivered again, and her arms went around him as she arched closer. “Yes.”

“You want my cock so much you couldn’t even come up with a lie for your mama?”

She huffed a soft laugh. “I guess.”

“So we just have to hide out while these people stop by. We’ll keep the lights off, and I’ll just flip you on your stomach while I’m fucking you so you can scream into the pillow.”

Paige gave a lusty sigh and then shook her head. “Won’t work unless we hide my car. And change the locks.”

He pulled back. “They have keys?”

“A few of them. My two sisters do. And one of my friends. She won’t give it up though.”

“Your sisters might?”

“You don’t understand my mother’s powers.”

Actually, he kind of did. In his case, it was his grandmother, but he understood how manipulative a matriarch could be when she really put her mind to it.

“So what’s the solution?”

“I answer the door each time and convince them that nothing is going on and that I was making the guy up and that I’m just a bitch who doesn’t want to do art projects with her niece and nephew.”

He squinted at her.

She laughed. “You’re nice not to ask it out loud, but, yes, they will be able to believe that.”

“Your family will believe that you’re willing to lie to get out of family activities?”

She shrugged. “They think the fact that I like cats better than people is a huge character flaw and they mourn my lack of maternal instinct. They also think that I’m selfish when I don’t want to be Super Aunt. Especially because my other sister Josie *is* a super aunt. And she’s completely into romance and marriage and family. It took her until age twenty-five to find Mr. Perfect, but she was always hopeful and open to it. So they never gave her any crap about being single and nearing spinster age.” Paige rolled her eyes. “They secretly hope that if I spend time around my sister’s kids that it will flip the biological clock switch in me, but the truth is, I’m not that into kids. Even ones I’m related to.”

He was from a family where everyone helped raise all the kids, and the kids were as close to their aunts and uncles and grandparents as they were to their own parents. In his case, he was *closer* to his relatives than to his mom and dad. His dad had been a single dad and had happily accepted the help offered from his extended family. Mitch had been an only child but had essentially grown up with a huge family with cousins that felt more like siblings.

His Aunt Hannah had absolutely been like a mother with plenty of influence from his grandmother, her best friend, and his other aunts as well.

He had to admit, as much as he related to Paige not enjoying the nosiness of her family, he didn’t really understand her not wanting to be involved in their lives, at least to an extent.

But it didn’t matter. He didn’t need to know how Paige Asher felt about kids. He needed to know how she felt about incorporating flavored body lotion into foreplay. At most.

“So how’s this going to go?” he asked, focusing on her breasts and hips and the fact that it was awesome that she wasn’t looking at him as potential marriage material.

She rolled her eyes. “Various people will need to borrow something or drop something off, or they’ll claim I wasn’t answering my phone, and they *had* to know how I felt about something. So we can hang out and *make out*,” she said with a mischievous smile. “But I’ll have to stay somewhat dressed, and we won’t be able to get *totally* into it until my grandpa comes and goes.”

“Your grandpa?”

She nodded. “He’s always the last one. Because he’s the one I have the hardest time saying no to. Because he’s actually sweet and sincerely concerned about me. But once he leaves, we should be good.”

“So...” Mitch settled his hands on her hips and brought her close again. “Kind of like the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*.”

She looked surprised, then laughed. “How so?”

“Visitors over the course of the evening trying to teach you something.”

She laughed again. “Trying to teach me what exactly?”

“About keeping secrets from your family?”

“Maybe.”

“That they care and just want to be sure you’re okay?”

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “Nope. You can’t get soft. If you start to side with them, you’re sleeping at Tori’s tonight.”

He wasn’t worried. He knew she wanted him in her bed. He shook his head. “Can’t. They dropped me off and left me. I’d have to hitchhike. And I don’t have a winter coat,” he added with a grin. “I’d freeze my nuts off. And you like my nuts.”

“I might like them less if you start to sympathize with my busybody relatives.”

He pressed said nuts—more or less—against her. “Nah. You’re addicted.”

“I’ve gone without them for six months.”

“Ridiculous to go without them any longer,” he said with a nod. “I promise not to say nice things about your family as long as you have your mouth or pussy against those nuts.”

Her eyes flared with heat. “Hmm... you drive a hard bargain.”

He pressed his cock against her. “Very hard.” He couldn’t pass that pun up.

She licked her lips and he swore that he got even harder. If that were possible.

“So you’re up for this?” she asked, emphasizing *up*.

“What I heard you describe was *lots* of foreplay and creativity with prolonged release,” he said. He dropped his voice. “Basically it means that you’re going to be hot and dripping and desperate by the time you shut and lock that door for the last time. *That* sounds like a fucking fantastic belated Christmas present with a big old red bow around it, sweetheart.”

She just looked at him for a long moment.

Sweetheart hung in the air between them.

He wondered if she’d call him on it. She didn’t seem like the type to like endearments. She wasn’t soft and sweet and romantic. She was sassy and sexy and fun.

And that’s what he wanted.

Never mind that he had a package of the pancake mix his grandmother’s best friend used in their restaurant in his bag. Just in case Paige would let him make her breakfast in the morning.

“Fine,” she finally said, her voice a little husky. “Then you can stay and help me... kill time... in between visitors.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

Chapter Three



She was playing with fire. And it was so much fun.

Paige was grinning as she stepped in front of the mirror that hung in her office and straightened her clothes and ran her fingers through her hair.

Mitch was here.

It was going to be a pain now that her mother had smelled a secret, but it was also going to be fun. He hadn't batted an eye at the idea of multiple relatives stopping by and repeatedly interrupting their naked plans.

Prolonged foreplay sounded pretty great. Frustrating, of course. But great.

They definitely hadn't done it that way the first time. They'd pretty much made some stupid excuse why they both had to leave the alpaca farm at the same time—yes, they'd met at an alpaca farm—and had barely gotten through her apartment door before they'd ripped each other's clothes off. They'd been fucking up against her door within five minutes. She hadn't *needed* any foreplay. She'd been so, so ready for him.

That had been wild. She'd never wanted a guy that much that quickly.

In spite of the fact they'd met over the back of an alpaca.

Her friend and veterinarian, Tori, had come back to Iowa to gather her menagerie of special-needs animals she'd been collecting to relocate them to Louisiana with her back in

March. Her boyfriend, Josh, and his cousin Mitch had come along to help. It wasn't a small feat to move cows and pigs and a passel of cats and dogs a thousand miles to a new home.

But it wasn't until Tori had come back to visit her parents in July—and to take another few goats and another cow back with her—that Paige had met them. She'd simply gone out to Tori's place to say hi. She hadn't expected to get the hottest one-night stand of her life out of it. But she'd been more than happy with how the visit had turned out.

And now he was back. To see her. Tori didn't need his help this time. Yes, she was taking an alpaca back to Louisiana with her, but she and Josh could handle one animal. Mitch was here to see Paige. And that made her belly flutter and her chest feel warmer than it should have.

She shook that off. She needed to just focus. On getting Mitch out of here and up to her apartment before anyone planned a bridal shower and then getting him naked as soon as possible.

“Okay, we'll go out together and pretend to be talking about the heating system,” she told him.

“Furnace,” he told her with a grin. “It's called a furnace.”

She swatted his arm. “Yeah. Okay. The furnace.” So he knew that she'd lost her ability to think of the word furnace. It was okay he knew that he affected her. He did. And what would hiding that get her?

“So we're going to talk about the work I did on your furnace?” he asked, somehow making the question sound dirty.

She laughed. “Yes.”

“Without any tools?” he asked, turning his empty palms up.

She shrugged. “There might not be anyone outside anyway. But I guess we can talk about the work you're *going to do?*”

He wiggled his brows. “I definitely have a lot of thoughts about what I’m going to do to your heating system.”

It was the drawl. It had to be. How did that cheesy teasing make her stomach flip and her want to giggle? It was the most obvious line he could have used. *Any* other guy probably would have said the same thing. But Mitch Landry said it and her libido started dancing to “Single Ladies.” And singing.

NO. No, no, no.

He was *not* going to put a ring on it.

“Yeah, so...” She cleared her throat. “Say something about...”

“Nuts?” he offered. “Or screws, maybe? I could talk about things I need to bang. Or pound. Or what a tight fit it will be.”

She put her hand over his mouth, shaking her head, telling her libido to knock it off. “How about you make something up about a duct or something?”

She felt him grin behind her hand. His fingers wrapped around her wrist and he pulled her hand back. But not before kissing her palm and sending tiny electric shocks to her belly.

“I can do that,” he said.

“Okay, great.” Her voice was breathless. Maybe even more so than when he’d had her pinned against the door. What was that?

She didn’t want to analyze it.

She took a breath and turned toward the door.

“I really think it’s your blower motor,” Mitch said from behind her.

She started to snort as she stepped out into the lobby.

And into a small crowd of women.

She came up short, surprised. “Uh, hi, ladies.”

There were only three women left over from the earlier class, but the way they’d all swung toward the door and had

wide eyes and expectant looks on their faces made them seem more numerous somehow.

Paige felt Mitch stop directly behind her. Not quite bumping into her but not with any real *space* between them.

Her blower motor. Uh-huh.

“I was hoping you could take a look at my furnace too,” Linda Ritter said.

To Mitch.

Her gaze had slid right past Paige to the man over her shoulder.

“Oh,” he said. “Well... yes.”

Paige frowned and turned to face him. “You don’t have to do that.”

“He’s a repairman, right?” Linda asked.

“He’s just...”

“Passing through,” Mitch supplied.

“But you’re looking at Paige’s blower motor?” Linda asked. “How long will that take?”

Mitch cleared his throat and Paige knew he was *not* thinking about her furnace. She wanted to elbow him but that would have been very obvious to their little audience here.

“I probably won’t be available for anything else until tomorrow,” he said.

He sounded as if he actually meant to take a look at Linda’s furnace. And Linda was fifty-something, happily married, with four kids, and was a first-grade teacher. Paige thought she *actually* wanted Mitch to *actually* look at her *actual* furnace.

“Tomorrow is fine,” Linda said. “We’ve been at my mom’s for the past two days. One more night will be okay. We’d just be so grateful.”

Paige frowned and focused on Linda. “Your furnace has been out for two days?”

She nodded. “And with the big storm this week, Larry and Mike have been swamped with work on a couple of roofs that had tree branches come down, so they can’t get over to look at furnaces.”

This was not good. Linda didn’t just need her furnace filters cleaned out or something. She actually needed it repaired. And now, because of her lie about who Mitch was, Linda was going to have the hopes that she’d be back in her own warm home tomorrow night.

“Oh wow, if you’re completely without heat, I’ll stop by this afternoon,” Mitch said.

Paige turned back to him again. She was going to have whiplash. She frowned at him. He just lifted a brow at her.

Did he actually know how to fix furnaces? Huh. That hadn’t occurred to her.

“Do you know anything about gas fireplaces?” Melanie Carter asked.

Paige tipped her head, curious about the answer too.

He nodded. “I could take a look.”

Paige widened her eyes at him. He widened his eyes back at her.

Damn, he knew about furnaces and fireplaces. That was... lucky. Or something.

Like hot. And not in the those-were-both-ways-people-heated-their-homes way. It was sexy that he knew how to fix things. And that he was willing to go help complete strangers like that.

“Are you in town for a few days?” Carol Lemming asked Mitch.

He nodded. “I am. I’m passing through, meeting up with some friends in a couple of days, but heard there was a great festival here and thought I might stay for a day or two.”

“How did you know he works on furnaces?” Melanie asked Paige.

“Um...” Paige was distracted by the *day or two* thing. She’d thought this was a one-night thing again, like last time.

She was going to have to hide him for a day or two?

Except now he was going to be going out all over town fixing things.

Okay, he was going to go to *two* houses and help a couple of people out. But now all of these ladies knew he was here, *for a day or two*.

Her mom was so going to hear about this.

She was absolutely going to have to be *sure* her mother thought that Mitch was *just* a friend of a friend who had taken a look at her blower motor.

In a very not dirty way.

“The friends I’m meeting are mutual friends,” Mitch said, when Paige had failed to answer Melanie for too long. “They mentioned that she’d been having some issues here at the studio and I offered to stop by on my way through.”

“You’re so sweet.”

“That’s so fortunate for you, Paige.”

“Are you single?”

The three responses came right on top of one another, and the question about his relationship status was almost lost.

Almost.

“He’s engaged,” she said, before she really thought it through.

It was a great excuse for her mother *not* to think Paige should spend romantic time with Mitch for the *day or two*—why had he not mentioned that?—he was going to be in town.

Mitch gave a little choked sound behind her, but Paige covered it by saying brightly, “To Tori Kramer. Do you ladies know her? Veterinarian?”

But that made Mitch choke and cough again.

“Tori and I have been friends for a while,” Paige went on, talking quickly so that no one, including Mitch, could insert anything until she’d laid the whole story out.

“She went to Mardi Gras last year and met J—Mitch, and they kind of fell for each other, but she came back to Iowa, and they made a deal to meet up at Mardi Gras again this year if they were still interested in one another. She was, but she also happened to be down there for her best friend’s wedding, and she went to find Jo—*Mitch*, she went to find Mitch again, and all the old feelings were still there and bam, they fell in love and now she’s moving down there to be with him.”

Paige finished the actually true story about Tori—it just happened that the guy in the story was Mitch’s cousin Josh—with a bright smile. “So Mitch is just here, in Appleby, to help with my furnace because Tori told him it went out.”

“Oh, how nice,” Melanie said. But she sounded disappointed.

Paige frowned at that as well. Melanie was also married but had only been with her husband for a couple of years. Surely she wasn’t looking for a hookup with a hot repairman? Well, stranger things had happened.

“It doesn’t feel cold in here,” Carol commented.

Right. The building was warm. Which was strange if the furnace was out. “Well—”

“It’s not *out*,” Mitch interjected. “Not exactly. The blower motor just isn’t working efficiently. So the furnace is on, but the air isn’t circulating as well as it should be.”

Wait a second... the blower motor was a real thing? And here she’d been thinking that was a pretty great innuendo.

“So you’re staying with your fiancé tonight, then?” Carol asked.

Mitch looked down at Paige. “Well, I was thinking maybe I should stick around here and offer some help with all of the trees and roofs.”

Paige gaped at him. “Seriously?”

“Tori will understand,” he said dryly. Then he shrugged. “Sounds like it’s a town-wide issue. I’m not used to snow, but I know how to use a chainsaw.”

“I bet you do,” Melanie said.

When Paige glanced at her, Melanie’s gaze was on Mitch’s right bicep.

Stupidly, Paige found herself moving to block Melanie’s line of sight. Not that she totally could, of course. Mitch was a big guy—something she *really* liked about him—but she still felt the need to insinuate herself between him and the other woman.

“But you don’t have a winter coat,” Paige pointed out to Mitch.

“Know anyone who would loan me one?” he asked her with a smirk that said he’d noticed her move between him and Melanie.

“I—”

“Coats and anything else you need,” Carol assured him. “I was going to ask you if you knew anything about electrical wiring.”

Paige looked at her. Of course they could come up with coats and hats and gloves and anything else. Everyone in town had multiples of all of those things. Carol had three adult sons herself who probably had coats that would fit Mitch. “Why do you need help with electrical wiring?”

“My booth for the festival has a glitch,” the woman said, lifting her shoulder.

“But you had no idea Mitch would be here,” Paige pointed out. “What was your plan?” Carol was a friend of her mother’s. She would absolutely be reporting all of this back to Dee Asher.

“I was going to do without the lights,” Carol told her. “Liam hooked it all up for me yesterday, but then he had to head to Dubuque for work,” she said of her son. “I hated to call him back when it all went out this morning. I just thought,

since Mitch was here and was obviously so capable, that I might as well ask.”

Mitch was already nodding. “I can definitely take a look. No problem.”

“Well...” Carol said.

Paige bit back a sigh. “There’s something else?”

“It’s not just my booth. Apparently, the problem is a wider electrical issue for the whole square. None of the booths have electricity.”

“And normally Mike and Larry would be fixing it but they’re repairing roofs,” Paige filled in, letting a tiny sigh out.

“Mike and Larry work for the city. They’re the general repairmen,” Linda explained to Mitch. “The branches that came down were on trees in an older part of town. The houses are close together, and the four that were damaged all had older roofs.”

“*Four?*” Paige interrupted. “Mike and Larry are crawling around on snowy roofs on *four* houses in this cold?”

Linda nodded. “Roof holes obviously take precedence over lights on the festival booths.”

“Well, of course,” Paige said. She hadn’t known there were people with *holes* in their roofs or that Larry, who was easily sixty, and Mike, who wasn’t much younger, were up on rooftops that had icicles dangling and snowy patches. “Why aren’t they hiring a roofing company?”

“The trees should have been trimmed back before this happened,” Carol said. “That was the city’s responsibility, so the repairs are too.”

“They’re risking Mike and Larry’s necks to save a few bucks?” Paige asked.

Carol just shrugged.

“The wiring won’t take long, I’m bettin’,” Mitch said, his drawl slow and easy, making Paige take a long, deep breath.

She felt his fingers brush against her lower back and found the gesture reassuring.

Of course, he was supposed to be engaged, so she shifted away from the touch.

“I’ll get the furnace up and going,” Mitch said. “I’ll take a peek at the fireplace, check the wiring quick, and then go help Mike and Larry.”

That was going to really cut into the naked time they could be having, Paige realized. But she’d not realized they were going to have *days* of it.

What was she going to do with him for *a couple of days* anyway? Besides the obvious. But they couldn’t just have sex for forty-eight hours straight. Could they? Of course not. She had to work. For one thing. And if he was off doing other things, then it was less time they’d be together and making her mother suspicious. The Tori story was solid. Her mom knew of Tori. Paige had talked about her often enough. Dee had maybe even met Tori once when she’d been here looking at the cats.

Yeah, this wasn’t a terrible plan.

“Oh, you need to go do the furnace first and then help Mike and Larry,” Melanie said, waving her hand. “My fireplace can wait. It’s not our main heat source.”

“And our lights can wait,” Carol agreed. “If you can get to it, that’s wonderful, but Mike and Larry can use the help.”

“Okay, then,” Mitch said. “I assume Paige knows where y’all live?”

Paige could tell the drawl affected the other women as well. Their smiles all got a little bigger when he said *y’all*.

“She does, of course,” Linda said. “You can stop by any time. If you want to come around dinnertime, I’d—”

“No,” Paige cut in on the dinner invitation. For fuck’s sake. Linda was going to, what? Adopt him as a pseudo-son? Or had she been eyeing his biceps too? Or was it the drawl?

“No,” Paige said again. “Mitch will be fine. He can stop over and look at the furnace tonight and then get in touch with Mike and Larry. Then I’ll be sure he’s fed tonight.”

“And Tori?” Melanie asked. “She’ll be okay with sharing you with us?”

“She’s with her family tonight,” Mitch said. “I was gonna check on Paige’s furnace and then head over there, but she’ll completely understand if I hang out here and help y’all out.”

Blatant lying for her, Paige noted. That should not be sexy. She should not condone lying. Though she had put him in the position to have to. She shouldn’t have done that either. She was clearly a bad influence on a man who was turning out to be a really good guy.

This had been a lot easier on her conscience when all she’d known about him was how good he was with his hands and mouth and... other body parts.

“Oh, you’ll have to invite Tori over to the festival,” Carol said. “And the friends you’re meeting up with. Especially after you save the entire thing by fixing the wiring.”

Well, *that* was a terrible idea.

Tori would probably love to come. She was now a Louisiana girl, but she’d maybe missed Iowa and the snow and other wintery things her new home didn’t offer. But that would mean she’d have to pretend to be Mitch’s fiancée. How would Paige get her to do that? And then what would they do with Josh? Make him stay with Tori’s family? No. He’d be a hot, single guy in town with Tori and Mitch, and Paige’s mother would try to set her up with *him*. That would be more than a little awkward.

“Tori’s mom has really missed her,” Mitch said smoothly. “As much as she’d love the festival, I’m sure, I think they want to spend every minute together that they can. I don’t want her to be even more annoyed with me for stealing her little girl to the South.”

A slow, sexy smile accompanied his explanation—that totally fixed the problem *and* kept Paige from having to lie

even more—and the other women visibly melted a little.

Paige almost rolled her eyes. Except that she completely understood what they were feeling. The guy was potent. And quick on his feet. And could, apparently, fix just about anything.

Damn, she was in trouble.

“Well, you still be sure to tell her how her man saved the entire Apple Festival,” Carol said.

“It’s just a few lights,” Paige said with a smile. “I mean, saving the entire thing is a little dramatic, isn’t it?”

“It’s all of the electricity,” Carol said. “It’s the light and the sound system for the music and the PA system. It’s the outlets that will keep the cider and kettle corn warm. It’s everything.”

Paige stared at her. “You... didn’t say that.”

“I didn’t want Mitch to feel bad if he couldn’t fix it.”

“But he might not be able to fix it,” Paige said.

“Oh, he can,” Carol said with conviction and a huge smile at Mitch. “I mean, I didn’t know that when I first asked. It was just a hope that if he knew heating, he’d know electrical. But he’s clearly very confident.”

Paige agreed that he seemed sure of himself but to pin the success of the Apple Festival on him... a stranger... who had stumbled into the situation... and who she would really like to keep naked in her bed while he was in town...

But dammit, Mike and Larry shouldn’t be up on those roofs. Not that they weren’t able, but it was *cold*. An extra pair of hands—very capable and strong and big hands—would definitely help them out.

She felt a little pinch at the base of her spine. She looked over her shoulder at the pincher.

“It will be fine,” Mitch said, meeting her eyes before looking up at the other women. “I might need to borrow some tools, but I can do whatever needs done.”

“Tools aren’t a problem,” Carol said quickly.

“For sure,” Linda added. “Someone in this town will have anything you need. More than one someone, I’m sure.”

“Great,” Mitch said. “Then I’m your man.”

“Yeah, you are,” Melanie said, not quite under her breath.

Paige frowned at her again. That was so inappropriate. “Okay, so,” she said, stepping forward and gesturing toward the front door, “I’ll fill Mitch in on the festival, tell him where you live, connect him with my... some tools.”

Dammit. She’d almost said her dad. She was *not* going to introduce Mitch to her dad even in order for him to borrow tools. Her family was going to hear about Mitch soon enough, and she was certain the information would include that he’d been recruited at her yoga studio and that he was engaged to a friend of hers.

Fortunately, the word *engaged* would very likely be used and that would save her from having to answer questions about her interest in him.

But there was a niggle in the back of her mind that said she didn’t like the idea of having to pretend she had no interest. Or that he was connected to someone else.

A really stupid niggle.

She didn’t *want* them to think she was interested. She wasn’t *interested*. Not in a let’s-pick-out-bathroom-tile-and-maybe-a-couple-of-kids’-names way. And that’s what her mom would think “interested” should mean.

The women filed past her out into the chilly afternoon with various versions of “Nice to meet you, Mitch” and “See you later.”

She let the door close behind them and turned the lock. She didn’t have another class for an hour, and she could do without any more people ambushing them. What had started with a simple secret visit to town for a quickie had suddenly turned into Mitch helping the entire town with fix-it projects. And saving the entire Apple Festival.

She pivoted back and said, “Come on.”

She rounded the front desk and pulled open the door that revealed the staircase to the upper floor where she lived.

Paige was aware of his eyes on her ass as she climbed the steps in front of him, but he didn't touch her or say anything until they were both inside her apartment and she had that door shut and locked as well.

"I'm engaged to Tori?" he asked.

That wasn't what she'd been expecting. "It was the first thing to come to mind."

"It's really that big of a deal your mom think there's no chance anything could happen between us?"

"It really is."

He looked at her for a long moment. Then nodded. "Okay."

She blew out a relieved breath. "Really?"

"I get it."

She tipped her head. "You do?"

"I didn't tell my family about the sassy, sexy blond I was coming all the way up here to see."

She smiled softly. "Why not?"

"Because they've already noticed that I haven't been going out as much, and I haven't had a woman at my place since July."

Her eyes were totally round, she was sure, by the time he finished. Oh boy, huge, flashing, cherry-red sign. He hadn't had a woman at his place since they'd met? She had the impression that not having women over on a regular basis was very unusual. She hadn't been with anyone since she'd met him either and that was giving her a very itchy, uncomfortable, uh-oh feeling. But to know it was the same for him...

"You should definitely go look at Linda's furnace," she said. She crossed the room and grabbed her phone off the short breakfast bar between her kitchen and tiny living room.

She glanced up at him as she scrolled through to find her friend Max's phone number.

Mitch was watching her with an unreadable expression. She blew out a breath. "You do actually know how to do all the things you told the women you could do?"

"Yes."

"You're sure you can fix all of it?"

"One hundred percent."

She dropped her arm and regarded him. "What do you do for a living?"

"Whatever my grandma's restaurant and bar, or my cousins' tour company, needs me to do. I can fix anything. Motors, electric, plumbing, brickwork, roofs, drywall. You name it."

Without meaning to, she let her gaze travel over his body. His big, hard, muscled body.

In three seconds he was in front of her, crowding close.

"What are you doing?" she asked breathlessly, feeling her body lean into his instinctively.

"You can't look at me like that without me coming over here and taking you up on what you're offering."

"Was I..." She had to stop and wet her lips. "Was I offering you something?"

"This sweet body spread out on that countertop behind you," he said with a nod.

"I was checking *you* out."

"Yeah and wanting everything you know I can do to you."

Well, that was true.

"I... you... need to go get those repairs done."

"You're throwing me out because I freaked you out."

"I..." She pressed her lips together and nodded. "Yeah."

"I haven't wanted anyone but you since we met."

“Yeah, that’s... a little freaky.”

“You’re sorry I haven’t fucked anyone else since you?”

God, when he talked like that how was she supposed to stay on topic? Especially the topic of *not* wanting him to be all hers all the time, and to hell with the fact that she was too damned young to be serious about someone.

“Not sorry,” she confessed.

“Me neither.”

Her heart kicked in her chest. “You’re not falling in love with me,” she told him softly.

“That would be ridiculous,” he agreed.

“It would.” But it really should have felt more ridiculous than it did.

“But,” he said, “I don’t want to be with anyone else. And I’m afraid I might not get over that.”

Another kick against her rib cage. And a shot of fear. Because she felt the same way if she were being totally honest.

“You don’t want to move to Iowa,” she pointed out.

“I don’t mind it so far.”

She gave a soft laugh. “Give it time.”

“Okay.”

She sobered immediately. “Mitch—”

He lowered his head and covered her mouth with his. He kissed her long and deep, cupping her face with one hand and her hip with the other in a sweet, possessive hold.

When he broke the kiss long seconds later, he simply said, “Don’t freak out.”

Too late.

Chapter Four



An impressive fifteen minutes later, Mitch was in a bulky winter coat with a toolbox in hand—thanks to Paige’s friend Max—and was walking up the front sidewalk to Linda Ritter’s house.

He wasn’t even sure how that had all happened. It was like Paige snapped her fingers, and everything she needed to get him out of her apartment and, most importantly, out of her personal space, had appeared.

The door had almost hit him in the ass on the way out.

You just want her because she’s safe. She lives a thousand miles away and she doesn’t want a relationship. It’s safe to think you want more than sex with her because you barely know her.

That was all true.

Somehow, it wasn’t making him wonder *less* about the men in her life since July.

He hadn’t *meant* to be celibate. He hadn’t met her and thought *she’s the one for me forever*. But all the women he’d met since then had just been, well, *less*.

Which was crazy because he barely knew Paige.

“Mitch!”

Linda’s voice calling to him from the porch of the big, two-story house, pulled his attention away from his infatuation with the blond who had practically dressed him in this coat and shoved him out the door.

“Hi, Linda.” Mitch gave her a smile and climbed the steps.

“Thank you so much for coming over.” The older woman gave him a bright, sincere smile.

“Of course. You don’t need to go without heat if I can do something about it.”

She looked genuinely touched by that. “But you don’t even know us.”

“Well, I don’t need to know you to know you get cold when it’s twenty-two degrees outside,” he said with a smile.

Twenty-two fucking degrees. He’d never been in weather this cold. It was great. He certainly wouldn’t want to work outside in it on a regular basis, but the air was brisk and fresh and he found it exhilarating.

And he didn’t have to know Larry and Mike to know that they wouldn’t use that word to describe the weather when they were up on those rooftops trying to mend the holes.

He might not feel exhilarated after he climbed up to help them out either.

“I guess you’re right,” Linda said. “I really didn’t want to ask you, but when I heard you were looking at Paige’s furnace...”

“It’s completely fine,” he assured her, feeling a twinge of guilt over Paige’s furnace story. It hadn’t even been *his* story. Thank God he did know about heating and air-conditioning. And all of the other things the ladies, and town, needed help with.

He shook his head with a grin as he followed Linda into her house. This was exactly how Autre, Louisiana worked. If someone needed something and you could do it or provide it or help with it, you did. Period. No questions. He liked that Appleby and Autre had that in common. Just with a seventy-something-degree temperature difference separating them this time of year.

It also fit that a Landry would be in town for about two hours and would already be involved in the town festival and

pitching in to help. His grandparents would be so proud. His dad too. Sean Landry had always told him, “Don’t be any trouble. Help out and do your part. Make ’em glad you’re there.”

Mitch had been doing that since he’d been a little boy.

Linda led Mitch through the house to the kitchen at the back. The entire house was decorated with an apple theme. The sofa had throw pillows with apples stitched on them and a red-and-white blanket draped over the back. The rocking chair near the window had an apple-patterned cushion. The mantel over the fireplace was decorated with a variety of ceramic apples. The entire room looked like a picture postcard.

The rest of the house was similarly decorated. The dining room table had a red runner down the center with a bowl full of apples as a centerpiece. The kitchen even had a set of fat-apple canisters on the counter and a large red apple rug covering the wooden floor.

Mitch took it all in as he followed Linda to the basement door and down the steps. The house was a wonderful, old, two-story that was well kept, and it was a damned shame this family hadn’t been able to be here enjoying it all because their furnace had conked out. He was happy to be here to help.

He wasn’t, actually, the Landry most people called for help with things. Leo, his grandfather, or Sawyer, his oldest cousin, were most often the go-tos. There were plenty of others who were always around and willing to help out, of course, and if Leo or Sawyer couldn’t be found, Josh, Owen, Ellie, Cora, Maddie, Kennedy... just about any of the others could be. Mitch was the one the Landrys then called. He was in the background. The supporter. The one who had their backs. Quietly. He could always be counted on and his family knew that. He just wasn’t in the town’s spotlight. Or anyone’s spotlight.

Being a Landry, it was pretty easy to play the wallflower, actually. The Landry clan was loud and boisterous and loved to one-up one another. They laughed and teased and loved and

joked loud and often, and it was easy to just sit back and be there without adding to the noise.

“Right in here.” Linda led him into the room that held the furnace, water heater, and what looked like box upon box of Christmas decorations.

“Great.” He moved to the furnace and set the tools down.

“Do you need anything?” Linda asked.

Mitch could tell she was feeling a little guilty about him being here. There was no way he would have been able to let anyone go cold if there was anything he could do about it, but she didn’t know him and didn’t know that about him. Paige had already turned down Linda’s dinner invitation, which was fine; he’d much rather spend his non-furnace-fixing time with Paige, but he also knew the dinner invite had been about repaying him somehow.

He guessed Linda would try to give him money at some point. Which he would, of course, turn down. But she needed to feel she wasn’t putting him out entirely.

“I could use somebody to hold the light, actually,” he said, pulling out the big work light that Max had included with the tools. That wasn’t completely true. He could have found a way to set it up on boxes or something, but having Linda hold it and move it for him would be helpful.

Her face brightened. “Oh, of course.” She took the light from him and plugged it into an outlet a few feet away.

“And you can entertain me while I work,” he told her with a grin as he shrugged out of the coat and tossed it over a box labeled *front yard blow ups*.

He hadn’t noticed blow-up decorations in the front yard so clearly they’d been deflated. Which was too bad. He wanted to get this furnace going again so this family could get back to this house and blow those things up.

“Like singing or something?” she asked with a smile.

“That would work. Do you know any Taylor Swift?”

“You like Taylor Swift?” Linda asked, her smile growing.

“Well, and now you know one of my deepest secrets,” he said. “So I’m going to have to do a really good job on this furnace so you don’t spread that around.”

She laughed. “I do know Taylor Swift, by the way. My oldest daughter is a fan. But you do *not* want me to sing.”

“Okay, then something else,” he said. “How about town stories.”

“Stories about Appleby?” Linda asked. “Oh, I can do that for days.”

He chuckled. “I figured.” He met her gaze. “I’m from a small town too. I know how that goes.”

“And you’re interested in our little town?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Seems like a good place.” He was supposedly engaged to another woman so he couldn’t seem too interested in a certain citizen of this town, but he could hope that Linda knew Paige or at least *about* Paige. For some reason, he had the feeling that Paige didn’t let a lot of people close. Of course, she’d spent her life here so people surely knew things *about* her.

“It’s a very good place,” Linda said with an affectionate smile.

People in Autre definitely got a similar look on their faces when asked about their little town.

He crouched next to the furnace and started pulling tools out of Max’s toolbox. “So why a festival in January instead of a holiday festival at Christmastime? Or in the fall when it’s warmer?” he asked with a grin, opening the access door on the furnace.

Linda moved in, shining the light over his shoulder on what he was doing.

“Oh, in the fall we have football,” she said with a grin. “And Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas. People are happy and full of excitement for all of that. But January,” she said, shaking her head, “is a long, cold, dark month here in Iowa. We need something to look forward to.”

Mitch located the problem in the furnace easily enough and set to work fixing it. “What all happens at the festival?”

“Oh goodness,” Linda said.

He could hear the smile in her voice even from behind him.

“It’s all about our apples. We have booths with lots of treats. Pies and cobblers and crisps and cookies and cider.”

Mitch chuckled. “I’m not sure I’ve ever fully appreciated all you can do with apples.”

“You should certainly stick around. We’ll make you love apples. We also have ice skating and sledding and a snowman-building contest and karaoke and sleigh rides and even a snowball fight.”

“An organized snowball fight?” Mitch asked. “That sounds interesting. Nobody worried about kids getting hurt, huh?”

She laughed. “It’s adults doing the fighting.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “No way.”

She nodded. “Yep. It gets wild. It happens in the town square. It’s kind of like paintball. Each team has a different color snowball—watercolor paints work great—and they have to wear white sweatpants and sweatshirts so you can see the colors show up. That’s how you know who wins.”

Mitch knew his eyes were wide. “That sounds awesome.”

Linda nodded. “It’s a lot of fun. There are rules and referees, of course.”

He was nodding, thinking about his cousins and friends. They would have a blast with a colored-snowball fight. Or any snowball fight. It was really too bad a snowball would last about a minute in Louisiana.

Maybe he’d just have to haul them all along next year to Iowa...

He quickly shut that down and turned his attention back to Linda’s furnace. Paige hadn’t even wanted to hear how he hadn’t been with another woman in six months. She definitely

wouldn't want to hear about him planning to come back next winter. And bringing a bunch of his relatives with him. She clearly was up to her neck in relatives as it was.

"I'm so glad you were able to stop by and help Paige," Linda commented after he'd worked for a few minutes.

He didn't miss how his heart gave an extra *thunk* when Linda said Paige's name. Damn, that wasn't good. "Happy to," he said, trying to sound casual about the first woman he'd felt very *un-casual* about in a very long time. "She's a friend of Tori's. That makes her a friend of mine."

That was true enough. He was very fond of his cousin's fiancée. Everyone who knew Tori was fond of her. She was sweet and funny and had a huge heart and the way she loved Josh made her automatically a Landry family favorite. She'd made Josh happier than Mitch had ever seen him. And Josh was generally a pretty happy guy, actually, so that was saying something.

"Well, Paige is... a little difficult but she's wonderful," Linda said.

Mitch glanced at her before he could stop himself. "Difficult?"

Linda nodded. "I teach with her sister, Amanda, and Paige worries her."

"Her sister?"

"She has two older sisters. Amanda is the oldest."

The one with the kids, likely. So Linda was on Paige's family's side. Wanting Paige to settle down and have a family and be happy. "Paige seems to be doing okay."

She was young. He was aware they were five years apart in age and that at her age the idea of settling down and getting married had been completely laughable to him. It still was, really. His life was good. He had everything he needed. He was happy. Was he a little addicted to a woman who lived too far away to scratch his itch as often as he'd like? Well, yeah, apparently. But if that was the worst thing that ever happened to him, he'd be just fine.

“Oh yes, of course, she’s doing okay. Her sister just worries about Paige’s decisions.”

“What decisions?” he asked. Was it okay to be talking about his fiancée’s friend? Well, Linda had brought it up.

“She runs a yoga studio. It’s not really an... essential business, you know? And she has cats. Lots of cats. Especially for such a young woman... that’s different. Every time someone asks her when she’s going to settle down or if she wants to have kids, she gets another one,” Linda said. “And she’s a vegetarian.”

Mitch hid his smile by ducking his head to study the furnace. She got another cat anytime someone asked her about settling down. That was funny.

“I thought the cat thing was an adoption center,” he commented, his face in the furnace. Tori had actually filled him in on that when she’d explained how she knew Paige. Tori had been the vet to all of Paige’s foster cats.

“It’s that,” Linda said. “Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Well, she calls it that, but the process to adopt a cat is crazy,” Linda said. “There’s a ton of paperwork and she does a home visit and then does follow-up visits after the cat’s been adopted for the first six months. Very few people make it past her process.”

“Has she ever taken a cat back after letting someone adopt one?”

“She has, actually. Twice.”

He couldn’t fight his grin this time. That was awesome. “So she’s protective of the cats.”

“Oh, I think she always intends to keep most of them. That’s just her way of pretending to her family that she’s *not* a crazy cat lady.”

Linda seemed like a nice enough lady. She really did. And he liked her decorating. But he was liking her attitude about Paige less and less all the time.

“Is it a bad thing that she likes cats?” he asked, turning the screw he was tightening a little harder than necessary.

“I suppose not. Her family just worries about some of the things she likes.”

“Why?”

“They just worry,” Linda said again. “Her business isn’t very stable, and she clearly wants to nurture something, but she’s choosing cats instead of having a family and she’s a vegetarian.”

Yeah, she’d mentioned that before too. “So her family worries because they think she’s financially vulnerable and that she actually wants children but is filling that need with cats and they’re worried she’ll...” He shook his head. “I’m not sure why they’re worried about the vegetarian thing.”

He wasn’t sure why they were worried about any of it, frankly.

“Nutrition, of course,” Linda said. “They worry about her health.”

Right. Well, he knew people who wouldn’t understand someone choosing not to eat meat too, but Paige was twenty-two. And clearly in good health. Smart, sassy, confident. She didn’t really need people telling her what to do and questioning her decisions.

And suddenly it made sense why she’d gotten annoyed when he’d pointed out that she might have needed to learn a lesson about interacting with her family.

She clearly had a lot of people questioning how she lived her life. She didn’t need a guy—especially one she barely knew—telling her that he thought she needed to give her family a break.

He pushed back from the furnace. “All done.”

Linda gave a little gasp. “Really? That’s it?”

“Yep. Good to go.” Mitch stretched to his feet.

“Oh my goodness!” Linda threw her arms around him, nearly knocking him back into the furnace. “Mitch! Thank you so much!”

He patted her back. “Happy to do it.”

She pulled back and smiled up at him. “You’re a great guy. Tori’s really lucky to have you.”

For a second he really regretted the lie. It didn’t matter in the overall scheme of things, of course. None of these people needed to know what his relationship was to Paige. Or to Tori, for that matter. But he kind of wanted them to.

Except that he and Paige didn’t really have a relationship.

But he kind of wanted them to.

At least enough that it would make sense for him to tell all of Appleby to mind their own damned business and let Paige do what she wanted however she wanted to do it.

Of course, one of those things she wanted to do was to let everyone think he was Tori’s fiancé so that they didn’t hound her about what was going on between *them*. So he would keep playing along.

He smiled at Linda. “Thanks.”

Linda led him out, chatting more about the festival and how he should invite Tori and how he should be sure to stop by the booth where she and her best friends would be selling caramel apples. He, apparently, gave the correct responses because she smiled and kept talking. But the whole time he was wondering what the chances were of him talking Paige into going to the festival with him and if he’d be able to keep from holding her hand or hugging her or stealing a kiss if they did go together. That would be inappropriate for a guy engaged to her friend.

The alternative was, of course, to just stay at her apartment. In bed.

But for some reason, as amazing as that would be, he suddenly wanted to go to the festival with her. Too. He definitely wanted the bed time. But he was going to be here for

a couple of days. And yeah, he wanted to make her pancakes. And he wanted to walk through a winter wonderland festival and drink hot cider with her too.

Maybe showing up early had been a bad idea.

Or maybe it had been the best idea he'd had in a long time.

He drove Paige's car back to her studio and apartment. The streets were clear and dry, but he wondered what it would be like to drive on ice and snow. Might be kind of fun. Could be like driving through a downpour or thick mud, both of which he'd done plenty of.

He had thought about dropping by the houses where Mike and Larry were working and then swinging by the town square to see if he could figure out what was going on with the electrical wiring down there, but he had to see Paige first.

He'd do all of that. He was used to pulling long days. He simply put together a to-do list at the start of the day and then worked until it was done. He'd do the same here.

But first he needed to see Paige.

He let himself in the side door of the building with the key she'd given him and took the steps up to the second floor two at a time.

He knocked.

It only took a couple of minutes for her to open the door.

She was still wearing the sweatshirt that drove him crazy and those silky pants. She gave him a smile that hit him right in the gut.

He stepped in, nearly on her toes, backing her up, and swinging the door shut behind him.

"How did it—"

He cupped her face and kissed her.

She was clearly startled but only for about two seconds. Then she was gripping his biceps and going on tiptoe and arching close.

This at least made sense.

She was a gorgeous blond with delicious curves who smelled heavenly. *Of course* he wanted her. That was absolutely rational. As were her responses to him. He wasn't too full of himself, not like his cousin Owen, but he knew women found him attractive. He hadn't slept alone for the past six months because there weren't any women interested.

Their attraction was completely reasonable. The rest of it... the wanting to defend her and know her better and *date* her was all completely... unreasonable.

So they'd just focus on the part that he could explain.

He swept his tongue into her mouth as he backed her up against the nearest wall. He slid his hands down to her ass and dipped his knees to fit his cock against her softness.

She gave a quiet moan, and Mitch felt the resultant lick of fire in his belly. He pressed into her, suddenly hungry and completely focused on eliciting that same moan from her again and again.

"Mitch," she whispered raggedly against his mouth as he curled his fingers into her ass.

"Need you, Paige."

"Yes."

That's all he needed to hear. He slid his hand up under the sweatshirt that teased him with glimpses of her skin whenever she moved. He drew it up, making sure his big palm met as much of her silky skin along the way as possible. The soft cotton bunched as he dragged his hand up her rib cage, causing her to suck in a breath, and then around to her back and up to her shoulder blades.

He lifted his head, needing to see everything now. "Arms up," he commanded softly.

She met his eyes as she followed his direction. Her arms stretched up so he could whisk the sweatshirt over her head. He tossed it to the side, his gaze on the gorgeous breasts behind the pale blue sports bra.

He cupped her breasts firmly, the wide band circling her ribs, and crisscrossed over her upper back, and, honestly, he had no idea how to get it off. There were no hooks or snaps or zippers. It occurred to him that he'd never removed a woman's sports bra. He'd seen them, but now that he thought about it, those must have been in photos or something. Most of the bras he'd been up close and personal with were of the tiny, silky, lacy type. That was interesting. Kind of.

Paige must have read that he was stumped in his expression because she laughed lightly and then gripped the bottom of the spandex piece and pulled it up and over her head.

Just pull it off. Noted.

Then he was all about the naked breasts. Because he was really, like most guys, always all about the naked breasts. But Paige happened to have a pair of the best he'd ever seen.

"God, you're gorgeous," he told her gruffly as he studied her.

"Thank you." She reached for one of his hands and brought it to her breast. "Touch me, Mitch."

"Fucking gladly." He cupped her, running his thumb over her hard nipple and relishing her moan.

She leaned into him, kissing him as he played with her nipple, rolling it and plucking and squeezing just hard enough to get a quick gasp and then a louder moan.

He'd just bent his knees and taken a taste when there was a knock at her door.

Chapter Five



They both froze.

Then Paige's head fell back against the wall.

"I told you," she said.

Her family. Stopping by as predicted.

He pulled in a breath. Well, fuck.

He straightened. "Okay."

She stepped around him and bent to grab her sweatshirt, pulling it on sans bra. He quickly grabbed that up too. Then she was pushing him toward the bathroom. "Hide in the shower."

"What if they come look in there?"

"Josie was here while you were gone. She brought some leftovers from their dinner last night." Paige rolled her eyes. "She checked out the kitchen. You know, to see if there were two wineglasses or signs that another person was here eating with me. So *this* is Amanda and she'll fake that she needs to borrow clothes so she can check out my bedroom and see if the bed is unmade or if there are men's socks on the floor or something."

He grinned as he stepped into her tiny bathroom. "They're predictable."

"Painfully so," she said with a nod. Then shut the door on him.

He looked around, then down at the bra in his hand, then sighed. And took a seat on the edge of the tub.

“Hi, Amanda.” He heard Paige greet her sister.

The apartment was tiny, and he appreciated how well that allowed eavesdropping.

“Hi! I can’t stay long but wondering if I could borrow your pink sweater?”

“Oh, a sweater? Sure,” Paige said.

Mitch smirked. A sister here to borrow clothes. She’d nailed it.

“Let me go grab it,” Paige said.

“I can get it. No problem.”

Mitch heard her move past the bathroom door on the way to Paige’s bedroom.

“Sure, help yourself to anything,” Paige said.

Mitch could almost picture the eye roll.

“What do you need the sweater for?” Paige asked, her voice a bit louder as if she was standing outside the bathroom and calling down the hall.

“I was going to wear it to help at Emily’s Girl Scout booth at the festival.”

“Oh, okay. So, like under your coat where no one would see it anyway.”

Mitch didn’t think Paige was buying it. He grinned.

“Well, it will be nice and warm,” Amanda answered, her voice louder. Clearly she’d moved closer to the bathroom door again.

“Sure. That makes total sense,” Paige said.

Mitch guessed her older sister noted the touch of sarcasm in her voice.

“So... things seem nice and warm up here,” Amanda said.

“Yep.”

It now sounded like they were standing right outside of the bathroom.

“I mean, you’re hardly wearing any clothes.”

“I’m wearing what I wear to teach yoga. Which I was just doing.”

“So no problem with the heat?”

“Nope, toasty warm, thanks.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to be cold up here. All by yourself.”

“I appreciate that. But I’ve got ways to stay warm.”

“Right.”

There was a pause. “Okay, so, you have the sweater.”

“Yep.”

No one was moving. They were definitely still standing outside the bathroom door.

“So I’ll see you at the festival maybe.”

“And you can’t stop over tonight and help the kids?”

“Sorry. I’ve got stuff to do.”

“You don’t look like you’re getting ready to go out.”

“I didn’t say I was going out.”

Finally, Amanda sighed. “Okay. Thanks for the sweater.”

“No problem.”

Wow. Mitch had to admit, Paige was good at holding her ground.

He listened to them move to the apartment door and say goodbye. He heard the door shut but waited for Paige to come give him the all clear.

“You can come out,” she finally called.

He pulled the door open. She was leaning against the back of the sofa facing him.

“When I came back over here, I meant to tell you that I’m sorry I tried to tell you how to handle your family earlier,” he said from the doorway. He needed to tell her this before he got closer to her. Because then he’d touch her. And once he touched her, he’d kiss her. And once he kissed her, he’d be done talking except for telling her to take her clothes off and bend over.

And he really did want to tell her this.

He also really wanted to ask her on a date to the festival, but he *was* going to resist that urge, dammit. Neither of them wanted to date. Even if there wasn’t a thousand miles between them making *dating* pretty much impossible.

They wanted to have a hot I’m-only-in-town-for-a-couple-of-days hookup. *Maybe* they would call it friends with benefits, if he could come up with other reasons to come to Iowa from time to time. But other than accompanying Tori on her trips home to see her family, he couldn’t really think of anything. And he wasn’t sure that tagging along with Josh and Tori for the next twenty years or so made a lot of sense.

Paige crossed her arms and watched him. “What do you mean?”

“Earlier I told you that you needed to maybe give your family a break because they care about you. That was not my place. I don’t know your family. I don’t know how things work with your family. I don’t get to tell you how to act or react with them. I’m sorry about that.”

Her eyebrows were up by the time he finished.

She dropped her arms. “Wow.”

He stepped out of the bathroom. “I was going to go over and check in at the town square but I had to come over and tell you that first. And then...”

“You kissed me.” She gave him a little smile.

He nodded. “Well, that was your fault.”

“My fault? You started it.”

“No. You opened the door.”

“I let you in.”

He took a step closer. “Yeah, but that meant you were within reach. And whenever you’re within reach, I kind of forget about everything else but touching you.”

She took a little breath, her smile fading. But she was still watching him intently. “Now, see, usually when guys say stuff like that, I find it pretty intense and consider it a red flag and immediately want to get some space.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets and nodded.

“But with you... I don’t want space.”

Mitch felt his chest tighten. “You pushed me out of this apartment pretty quick when you found out I hadn’t been with any other women.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded.

“You didn’t think that was pretty intense?”

She nodded again.

“And it made you want space, right?”

She took a breath. “I pushed you out before I could tell you that I haven’t been with anyone since we were together either.” She paused. “*That* made me want space.”

Mitch let that sink in.

She hadn’t been with anyone else either.

She hadn’t been with anyone else either.

She hadn’t fucking been with anyone else either.

He felt a little like beating his chest and shouting, *Yes!*

But he simply cleared his throat and said, “I’m not going to say I’m sorry.”

One corner of her mouth curled up. “What would you be sorry for?”

“Ruining you for all other men.”

The other corner of her mouth tipped up and she shook her head. “That’s not what I said.”

He nodded. “But that’s what happened.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite that way.”

“I would.”

She lifted a brow. “Well, you would be wrong.”

“I don’t think so.”

“So I ruined *you* for all other women?” she asked, crossing her arms again.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure.”

Her eyes widened. “Now *that* makes me want space.”

He shook his head and stepped toward her. “You can’t ruin me and then push me away.”

“Oh, I think I can.”

“That’s just cruel.”

He stopped right in front of her. He didn’t touch her. But he saw her take a quick breath in. Her arms were still crossed, but she was watching him with wide eyes, her pupils dilated.

“This can’t get serious,” she said quietly.

“I know.”

“We live too far apart.”

“I know.”

“And I’m... too young to be serious.”

“I know.”

“And I’m a vegetarian who doesn’t have a real job and collects cats.”

Yeah, all of those life choices that made her happy that everyone had been judging and questioning and being *concerned* about. “I know.”

“I just want to do my own thing. How I want to. When I want to. I don’t like explaining everything I do, and I don’t like defending my choices that don’t really have anything to do with anyone else and don’t hurt anyone.”

Mitch felt his chest tighten again. A woman had never done that to him. Well, a woman he wanted to sleep with anyway. The women he loved—his cousins and aunts and grandmother—made him feel protective and like he wanted to fix things. But he'd never felt that way over a woman he was dating. Certainly not a woman he'd had a one-night stand with. Which was what Paige Asher was essentially.

"I know," he said again. "You shouldn't have to explain yourself or defend your choices."

"So a long-distance relationship would be difficult," she said. "You'd wonder what I was doing when we weren't together. You might not like it if I went out with another guy. And I wouldn't want to explain any of that either."

No, he really fucking wouldn't like it if she went out with another guy. And no, it really wouldn't be his damned business.

He nodded. "You're right about that too."

"Which part?" she asked.

"All of it."

"You wouldn't like it?"

"Absolutely not."

Her expression was *I knew it*. "But I shouldn't have to explain that. We would be seeing each other, what? Twice a year? Maybe?"

He nodded. "You shouldn't have to explain that."

"So it would be better to just not think this was anything more than a hookup while you're in town with Tori." She actually sounded a little sad about that.

Which made sense to him. He definitely felt a little sad about it. Which was really dumb. What had he thought this could possibly be?

"We should really get on with this hookup thing, then," he said, reaching for her and catching the front of her sweatshirt in his fingers and pulling her up from the back of the couch.

She went willingly, and he whipped her shirt over her head before bringing her in to kiss her. She slipped her hands under the edge of his t-shirt, running her hands up his sides and making his skin heat instantly. She traced her fingertips over the ridges of his abs, sliding up to his chest and then his shoulders, gripping them and using them for leverage to arch closer.

Mitch let her go long enough to jerk his shirt over his head, then lifted her against him, feeling her breasts pressing into his chest.

Her arms went around his neck, molding her to his body as he gripped her ass and walked them to the breakfast bar that separated the living room from the kitchen. He set her on the edge of the counter and pulled his mouth away to kiss down to the breast he'd left wet and needy when her sister had knocked.

He sucked and licked, making her wiggle against him. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. Her pants and gasps heightening his own need.

He tucked his fingers into the top of her yoga pants and started to slide them down.

“Lift up, sweetheart.”

She did, immediately—he really did love how compliant she was to his commands during sex—and he slid the pants down her legs.

She didn't wear panties with her yoga pants.

He paused, studying her completely nude body.

“Panties ride up and pinch,” she said as explanation.

“I'm a huge fan of yoga, if I haven't mentioned that before,” he said.

She smirked. Then spread her legs farther. “Because of yoga, I have fantastic core control. Which includes my pelvic floor,” she informed him.

“That might be the hottest thing anyone's ever said to me,” he told her, stepping between her knees.

She laughed. “That’s maybe a little sad.”

He cupped her ass—he really loved her ass—and dragged his beard against her jaw. “Well, maybe I should explain that what I *heard* you say was *Mitch, I can grip your cock and milk it with my pussy to the point it will make your eyes cross, and you might not be able to walk afterward.*”

He felt her throat work as she swallowed hard. “Well, when you put it *that way...*”

He chuckled, kissing her neck, then biting down gently on the spot where it curved into her shoulder. “I mean, you *can* grip me like a fist with that sweet pussy, right, Paige?”

“Oh... yeah,” she said, breathlessly.

“Show me.” He moved his hand down along her thigh, then shifted his hips so he could move his hand to cup her, sliding his middle finger over her clit.

She moaned and tipped her head back, moving her thighs even wider.

She was so sexy. So open. Not just literally opening her legs, but in this, at least, she was willing to be vulnerable. She wasn’t trying to cover any part of her body or hide anything. She was bare naked on her kitchen counter with daylight spilling in through the big window across the room.

Of course, she had nothing to worry about. She was gorgeous. Tight and trim, with lots of smooth, sweet skin and curves in all the right places.

He circled her clit, loving the way she tried to get even closer to his touch. She braced one hand on the counter behind her, using it to lift and press closer. He lifted his head to watch her face as he teased her. She was so responsive. Hungry and greedy and yet had been so willing to please him in every way last time they’d been together as well.

Watching her, he moved his hand so his thumb continued to rub that sweet spot as his thick middle finger slid into her.

His knees nearly buckled. As if *she* were touching *him*. Her pussy was tight and so fucking hot. Wet. Sweet. She did,

indeed, grip his finger as he pressed inside.

Her throaty *yes* made his cock ache and he pumped his finger deeper.

“Oh God, Mitch.”

He added a second finger. “Show me that amazing core, girl,” he told her.

Her head was back and her eyes closed, but she smiled at that. Then tightened her inner muscles around his finger.

Damn. His cock was screaming *mine*. He wanted to plunge deep and hard. Then he wanted to fuck her slow and steady. He wanted to feel all of that sweet heat gripping and clenching around him.

Just then there was a knock at the door.

They both stiffened in shock.

No. *No*. Not now. They couldn't just leave her the hell alone?

Her thighs instinctively started to close. Not that they could with him standing between them.

He put his mouth to her ear. “You're not going anywhere.”

His finger was still buried inside her. He moved it in and out to remind her.

“But...”

“Shh...” he coached softly. “I can't let you go, sweetheart. I can't leave this sweet body like this. I need to feel you come apart.”

Her pussy tightened around his finger. Yeah, she wanted this too.

There was another knock.

Her body stiffened but he stroked her—her back... and her pussy. “Ignore them. Concentrate on me.”

Wow. That sounded pretty damned great. Certainly at this moment, but just in general. Maybe she just needed someone who could make her not think about them and their seemingly

constant demands and “worry” that she was doing things wrong.

He kept his mouth against her ear. “I love your body. I could lose myself in you for days.” He moved his fingers as he talked, feeling her body relax and soften around his fingers and against him.

He thought he heard another knock, then he heard, “Paige!”

“I want to make you come like this,” he said in her ear, circling her clit. He bent to take a nipple in his mouth, sucking hard as he pumped his fingers in and out. Then he said, “Then I want to turn you around, bend you over this counter, and fuck you from behind.”

“Yes, I want that,” she said, her pussy tightening.

Okay, good, she was with him.

He put his mouth on hers. “But you have to stay quiet,” he told her. “Can you come quietly?” he asked, kissing her before letting her answer.

“I don’t know,” she said, teasing back, even though her voice was ragged.

“Let’s try it. I don’t mind if the world hears me make you come apart,” he confessed.

“You can’t let up on me a little? So I don’t scream?”

He loved that she was teasing him even as she was on the brink of an orgasm.

“I can’t let up on you,” he said, shaking his head and looking into her eyes. “I need you dreaming about me when I’m not here.”

She wet her lips. “I don’t think you have to worry.”

He liked that. Too much. He gave her a wicked grin. “Prepare yourself for some *very* dirty Zoom calls.”

Her cheeks actually got pink. She was bare-assed-naked on the kitchen counter with his hand in the most intimate place it

could be, but she was blushing about the idea of a dirty Zoom call? He grinned.

“That’s not really having space,” she pointed out.

“Nope,” he agreed. He wanted zero space.

He’d worry about that later.

Then he circled her clit and she let out a lusty sigh.
“Okay.”

“Okay to the Zoom call? Or the quiet orgasm now?” He thrust his fingers deep.

“Both.” Her eyes were shut again.

“Deal.” Then he bent his knees, pulled her ass to the edge of the counter, and put his mouth on her clit, licking and sucking as he finger fucked her.

“Oh, oh, oh...”

He looked up. She was gripping the edge of the counter, her eyes shut, her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Be quiet, sweetheart,” he coached with a grin.

He had no idea if whoever had stopped by was still outside her door. And he didn’t care.

He sucked on her clit again and curled his fingers and pumped in and out and suddenly her hand flew to his head, gripping his hair as her thighs tightened around him and her pussy clenched and she let out a long, but very soft, “Yessssss.”

He released her clit with a gentle lick and then slowly eased his fingers from her body. He looked up at the most beautiful sight.

She was leaning back, propped on her extended arm, her chest rising and falling with her rapid breaths. Her eyes were shut, her cheeks flushed, and she had a smile on her face.

He rose and her eyes opened. She watched as he lifted his fingers to his mouth and licked the taste of her from them.

“Wow, that’s dirty,” she said appreciatively.

He just grinned. “You’re amazing.”

“I’m—”

Her phone started ringing.

She stopped. Rolled her eyes. Sighed. And then laughed. “In trouble.”

“That’s whoever was at the door?” he asked. Jesus, these people were relentless.

She nodded. “Or my mother wondering why that person told her I wasn’t here.”

She pushed him back and hopped to the floor, again grabbing her sweatshirt and pulling it on. It didn’t cover much. Definitely not the sweet ass he was obsessed with.

Her phone stopped ringing.

“So the bending you over the counter...” he said.

She tossed him a mischievous look over her shoulder. “Well, you did talk about the whole delayed-satisfaction thing.” Her gaze dropped to his fly. “But I guess that’s more *you* than *me* at the moment.”

He nodded, lowering his voice. “Maybe I should barricade the door, hide your phone, and put you on your knees.”

Her breath hitched and her eyes heated. “Maybe...”

Her phone started ringing again. With a sigh she reached for it. “Hello?”

She paused, listening.

“No, I’m fine, why?”

Pause.

“I couldn’t come to the door.”

Pause. She looked at the ceiling.

“Because I couldn’t. I don’t just sit around here waiting for one of you to stop by, you know.”

She frowned as she listened to the reply.

“Of course I know that.”

She listened again, taking a deep breath. “Yes, I have plenty of eggs. Have him come back over.”

She disconnected and gripped her phone tightly, before meeting Mitch’s gaze. “You want to hide in my bedroom closet this time? Since Amanda was already in there, my Uncle Tim won’t check in there when he stops by to install my new showerhead.”

“You need a new shower head?” Mitch asked. “I could install—”

“No,” she stopped him. “I don’t need a new showerhead. But that’s a good reason to check the bathroom for signs of a ‘guest’. My sisters already checked the other rooms.” She looked around. “I mean, everyone can see the living room.”

Wow, these people would impress his family if he were being honest. All of this was Landry-level meddling.

“Well, how about I head to the town’s square now?” he asked, pulling his shirt on. “That way I’m *really* not here and I have an alibi.”

She smiled but sighed. “I really prefer you here without the shirt on.”

“Ditto.”

“But, yeah, okay.”

“The square is close enough to walk to,” he said. “I’ll slip up the alley and won’t even need to move your car.”

She frowned. “It’s really cold, Mitch. And you’ll need the toolbox, right?”

He arched a brow. “I can carry a toolbox four blocks.”

“But... it’s cold. You’ve got Louisiana blood. You might not make it a block before you’re an ice cube.”

“Sweetheart—” He pulled her up against him and kissed her. “That Louisiana blood means I’ve got enough stubborn and cayenne in my system to keep me going for a long time in the cold.”

She went on tiptoe to kiss him again, then said, “Well, maybe get *a little* cold so I can warm you up when you get back.”

“I’ll *never* be too warm to not need you warming me up.” He squeezed her ass, then let her go, grabbing the coat he was borrowing and heading for the door. “If I swing by to see how Mike and Larry are doing too, would that give your family time to send everyone over that needs to stop by and check on you?”

She narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. “It’s bugging you that there’s work that needs to be done and you’re not helping, isn’t it?”

“Well, I mean, it’s *cold* out, and those boys probably haven’t eaten enough gumbo in their day to counteract it.”

She laughed. “Fair enough.” Then she nodded. “Yeah, I think Tim will stop by and then maybe my grandpa. He’ll want to check the furnace and be sure you did a good job.”

Mitch paused with a hand on her doorknob. “Your grandpa can fix furnaces? Will he think it’s weird you didn’t just ask him in the first place?”

She shook her head. “He’ll just roll his eyes and tell me that I don’t have to be so damned independent all the time and that I can ask family to help out and I don’t always have to hire help.”

“You hire help instead of asking your family?” He immediately regretted the question and his raised eyebrows.

She frowned. “I do. It’s my business and my apartment. I can handle taking care of it.”

“You’re an independent little thing, aren’t you?”

She lifted her chin. “I am.”

“Noted.”

He was *not* used to that. Everyone he knew leaned on everyone else he knew. That was just the way of it. But *everyone* helped *everyone* out. Each person did their part. If someone couldn’t fix a furnace, they could sure as hell make

an amazing étouffée, or would help with plumbing or painting, or would do your laundry. Or they might just tell you when you needed to pull your head out of your ass when you needed it. Which was, honestly, a lot more helpful than being able to fix a furnace. Anyway, it wasn't as if anyone was a freeloader or getting away with anything.

“And don't call me a little thing,” Paige added. “That sounds patronizing as hell.”

Also noted. He nodded. Then gave her a little grin. “You know, with that attitude, you'd fit right in with the bayou girls.”

“Oh yeah?”

“They don't take any shit from anyone.”

She tipped her head. “And you respect that?”

“Completely.” He shrugged. “It's what I know. Of course, if I *hadn't* respected it, my grandma would have smacked me upside the back of my head. *And* made me clean up after the crawfish boils for a month. By myself.”

“Big job?”

“Very.”

She smiled. “Well, with *that* attitude, I might let you stick around.”

He really wanted to. *A lot.*

But as the words hung between them, and he felt that she was thinking about maybe clarifying that she meant *for a couple of days*, he quickly pulled on his coat, gave her a wink, and stepped out the door before she could.

He was in so much trouble.

Chapter Six



He thought about that as he walked with Max's toolbox in hand on the way to the town square. He *didn't* want Paige to point out that this was a couple-of-days-only fling? Hell, shouldn't *he* have been the one making sure that point was made and made often? That they were absolutely in agreement there? That's how it would have been with any other woman.

That's the way it *had been* with every other woman.

But this one was... different. That was the best word he could come up with and it wasn't a great word, honestly. He was intrigued by her. Intrigued enough that these few days with her didn't feel like enough.

So what did that mean?

He thought about that as he checked the wiring for the multiple small booths and the large main stage that dotted the grassy area in the center of town. The paved walkways that crisscrossed the space had been cleared of snow, and the pine trees that were scattered through the square were decorated with twinkle lights. Those along with the ones adorning the wooden booths and the front of the stage were all dark at the moment, however. As was the lighted APPLE FESTIVAL sign that hung from the archway that declared this the Appleby City Park.

Linda had said there would be music and heaters that needed to be plugged in to keep cider and other treats warm. He also noted tall standing heaters placed among the booths

for people to gather around in case things got especially chilly during the festival.

Mitch shook his head. He'd fixed a few furnaces in Louisiana but couldn't say there was much call for large outdoor heaters.

"You must be Mitch."

He turned at the male voice behind him. He smiled at the older man approaching. "Yes, I am. You were warned?"

The man laughed and extended his hand as he came to stop. "I'm Phil Custer. I agreed to help set up the booths and stage and everything here. I was the one that ran into the no-power problem."

The man was in his late sixties or so and wore his long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail under his stocking cap. Even though it was early January and the ground was covered with snow, the man's skin was tanned and wrinkled in the familiar way of so many people who worked outdoors.

"I'm happy to take a look," Mitch said, shaking Phil's hand.

"Good deal. I'm good with hauling and building but not so much with electrical and such," the other man said. "I was an over-the-road trucker all my life. I can look at most motors and know what I'm doing and I thought I could maybe figure this wiring problem out, but this is a little beyond me." He looked around the square with a grin.

"Well, no guarantees that I can make it work either. I know motors and wires and plumbing and all of that," Mitch said. "But sometimes shit just breaks and you gotta start over."

Phil nodded. "That's for sure. Really hoping that's not the case here though. Not sure we've got time to rewire all of it."

Mitch looked around. There was a lot to check out. But if *nothing* was working, it had to be a pretty centralized problem.

Phil showed him around and he got to work.

And thinking.

A long-distance relationship? Was that what he wanted with Paige? Could they make that work? Did he even have the first clue how to do that?

No, he didn't have the first clue. But yes, he thought maybe he did want it. Not the distance so much, but Paige. He wanted her.

He wasn't a relationship guy, really. Short distance or long distance. But hell, maybe long distance was the way to go. He wouldn't have to be sweet and thoughtful every day that way.

By the time he'd found the wiring problem, fixed it, and had the square lit up, the sun had dropped behind the horizon. The glow of the white lights reflecting off the snow made him smile.

"Nicely done!" Phil said, joining him in front of the stage.

"Thanks. Looks good."

"It really does, thanks to you. Everyone will be so happy to know that things will be ready and working tomorrow. Thank you." Phil clapped him on the shoulder.

Mitch couldn't help his grin. This felt good. It was just some electrical wiring. It had taken him less than an hour. But this kind of work always made him feel good.

It was productive and it mattered. It was behind-the-scenes stuff. Stuff that most people attending the festival wouldn't even think about, but it made a difference. *Without* it, people would notice. They'd notice the cold cider and the lack of light and music. Fixing that wiring mattered. Just like fixing broken pipes at his grandma's restaurant and repairing tires on the bus that brought tourists to his cousins' swamp boat tours and repairing the motors on the boats all mattered.

It was stuff that the tourists, and sometimes even his family, didn't really think about but without which, things wouldn't work and wouldn't be as good as they could be.

He didn't need recognition for it. Just seeing those lights glowing and knowing that tomorrow the cider would be hot was enough for him.

“My pleasure,” he told Phil.

“If you’re going to keep working outside in January, you need to get yourself a good pair of gloves,” Phil said, noticing Mitch’s red hands.

Mitch rubbed them together and then shook them. “I’ll admit I didn’t come prepared to be outside in this weather.”

“Well, here.” Phil pulled his own gloves off. “Damn, boy, I’m sorry I didn’t notice before now.” He handed the gloves to Mitch.

“Oh, I couldn’t have worked with those on anyway,” Mitch said, holding up a hand. The bulky gloves would have gotten in the way of the fine work he’d needed to do on the wires.

“They can warm you up now, then.”

“I can’t take your gloves.”

“I’ve got a dozen pairs at home,” Phil said with a laugh, wagging the gloves. “These were just the first I grabbed. I’m not attached.”

Mitch grinned.

“And,” Phil went on, “I’m guessing you might have more need for them. Once people find out that you saved the festival, you’ll have more people with things that need fixing calling you up.”

Mitch wasn’t so sure about that, but he had planned to stop and see how Larry and Mike were doing on the roofs about two blocks away. He took the gloves. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“You bet,” Phil said.

Mitch pulled the gloves on, then shook the other man’s hand.

“See you at the festival tomorrow,” Phil said.

Mitch just nodded. He hoped so. If Paige wanted to keep him in bed all day he wouldn’t exactly object, but he was now very interested in this festival. Hell, he even kind of liked the cold weather. He wasn’t sure he could live and work here, but

if he had a hot, sassy blond at home to warm him up after a day in the cold, it might not be so bad.

He was actually thinking about how he could *live* here?

He was definitely in trouble.

Because as nice as this little town seemed and as charming as the snow was, he couldn't leave his family. They needed him. Sure, they could find someone else to do the things he did for them, but... he wanted to be the one doing it. He owed them everything, and he wanted to take care of them in return.

But Paige might like the heat...

Fuck. He had to stop thinking about either of them relocating. That was ridiculous.

He headed up the block, determined to focus on fixing the roofs and then going back and stripping her naked and stopping all this craziness that included words like *long term* or *committed* or *relationship*.

"Hey, guys," Mitch greeted as two older men came toward him across the snowy front yard of one of the big old houses that Max had described to him.

"You must be Mitch," one of them said with a smile.

"Yeah. Can I lend a hand?"

"Actually, we're done."

The men stopped in front of him, looking pleased.

"Already?" Mitch asked, looking up at the roof of the house behind them.

"Seems some of the ladies mentioned to their husbands and sons about a total stranger offering to help us out and they felt guilty, and a bunch showed up to help us get things done."

Mitch grinned at that. "I didn't make the offer to guilt anyone else into helping."

One of the men laughed. "Even better. You just pricked at their consciences."

“But we appreciate your willingness,” the other man said. “Decent of you.”

Mitch shrugged. “If I’m able, there’s no reason not to.”

“Funny that you’re not from the Midwest,” the taller of the two said. “That’s a pretty Midwestern attitude.”

Mitch smiled. “Maybe Iowa and Louisiana aren’t that different.”

Both men nodded. “Maybe not. Nice to know.”

They parted ways, also mentioning that they’d see Mitch at the festival the next day.

It seemed everyone in town showed up to the event. Mitch could understand that too. Autre, Louisiana was the same way. If there was a get-together, a party, a celebration... or just a random Friday night... nearly the whole town would turn out.

The crawfish boils at his grandma’s bar was one such event. Tourists and locals alike gathered around the ramshackle building and ate fresh-caught crawfish, corn, and potatoes, drank beer and moonshine, and just generally celebrated the important things in life—friends, family, good food, good music, the great outdoors, and the roots and history of the area.

It seemed very much like Appleby. Families stayed close, friends had known each other most of their lives, the community came together in good times and bad, and people appreciated tradition and the little things. Or the things that seemed little but actually mattered a lot.

Paige would be at home in Autre. Sure, there was a huge, noisy, and nosy family to contend with, but he’d love to see her chatting with the other women in his life, charming the men, clutching the side of an airboat and laughing as he opened it up on the bayou, tipping back a mason jar of moonshine, dancing to some good old Cajun music.

Of course, he’d also love the alone time he could imagine clearly. Taking her down to the bank to lie in the bed of his truck to look at the stars. Passing a lazy Sunday afternoon, napping with her in the hammock in his backyard. Cuddling

on his couch watching a movie on a Friday night. Going for breakfast at his grandma's before heading out to work. Sneaking in a quickie over his lunch break. Sitting on his front porch with sweet tea and watching the lightning bugs come out.

He was getting incredibly sappy. And too comfortable with how easy it was to picture all of that.

With a sigh, he pulled his phone from his pocket as he hit the sidewalk in front of the yoga studio. He opened Paige's car and tucked the toolbox behind the front seat. Then he slid into the driver's seat so he didn't freeze his nuts off while talking to Chase.

Because, yeah, it was time to call his buddy. The one who was just starting a long-distance relationship himself.

But Chase wouldn't be alone. No one was really ever alone in Autre unless they grabbed a boat when no one was looking, headed out on the bayou, and found a quiet nook.

City boy Chase Dawson, however, would not be able to do that. He was mostly hopeless with boats. Though if he and his stupid frat-boy friends hadn't stolen one of the Boys of the Bayou swamp tour boats and crashed it into the dock, his sister would have never met her true love, Sawyer, and Chase wouldn't have been hanging out in Autre repairing the dock and becoming smitten with the cute, nerdy alligator conservationist Bailey.

The girl he was now head over heels for.

Mitch hit the button that would call Chase, wondering if he was going to regret this. Chase wasn't going to be able to convincingly talk Mitch *out* of trying a long-distance deal with Paige.

Chase was going to medical school at Georgetown while Bailey worked in Louisiana at her dream job. They were going to do the long-distance thing, with as-frequent-as-possible trips between DC and Autre, with the hopes for a residency in New Orleans.

Mitch expected that Chase would eventually be a small-town Southern doctor seeing everything from fish hooks stuck through thumbs to chicken pox to cancer. And he was going to love it. Which was hilarious considering the guy had gotten pretty green the first time he'd seen them cleaning fish or when Leo, Mitch's grandpa, had pulled a rusty nail out of his own foot.

The born-rich city boy was going to have to toughen up some, but Mitch was thrilled to think his friend would eventually be around for good. It was crazy how well they'd bonded. They had almost nothing in common, and Mitch was about four years older than Chase. Still, they'd quickly become friends, and Mitch missed the dumbass when he was back in DC.

"Dude," Chase greeted on the second ring. "I told you that you should never unzip your pants outdoors in Iowa in January. That's dangerous, man. But you just don't listen."

"So no sympathy at all?" Mitch asked with a grin. "No magic cure?"

"We're gonna have to chop it off," Chase said, sounding sad. Fake sad, but still. "Good thing you had so much fun with it when you did."

Mitch shuddered. "My dick is fine. But the fact that it's on your mind so much is really touching. Weird. But touching."

"Never use the word *touching* when talking about me and your dick in the same breath." Chase paused. "Actually, how about we not talk about your dick and me in the same breath at all?"

Mitch laughed. "Well, I just have to say, if I got frostbite on my dick, your phone would be the first one I'd send the photos to."

"Trust me, that would go out to all my med-school friends, and we'd talk about how guys like you will keep guys like me in business."

Mitch suddenly had a pang of homesickness. Which was strange. He hadn't been gone *that* long. And Appleby was a

great place. And Paige was here.

But the thoughts of Paige down on the bayou with him and his family and friends had sunk in deep and quick. He wanted to take her down there. To have her meet everyone. To see how she reacted to cruising along the bayou. To see how much she'd love the otters. Yes, otters.

The Boys of the Bayou's main dock had been adopted by a river otter they'd named Gus. Gus had then gotten a girlfriend. And then they'd had a family. And those otters had moved into a more formal home outside of Leo's old trailer, complete with a plastic swimming pool and slides and everything. Of course, they spent time with animal-crazy Tori and Mitch's cousin Kennedy as well.

That was all temporary though. Mitch was in the process of building a bigger, better enclosure for them as a part of a new side business for the Boys of the Bayou.

Yeah, he wanted to see Paige playing with otters. Definitely. Maybe even more than he wanted to see her in short shorts. So that was... idiotic.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I do have a problem," he said to Chase.

"Does it involve your dick?"

"N..." Then he thought about that. It was perfectly fine to include talk of Paige and his dick in the same breath. "I mean... kind of."

"The girl," Chase said.

Mitch huffed out a breath. He shouldn't have been surprised Chase figured that out. "Yeah. Paige."

"You *just* got there, man."

"Sounds familiar, right?" Mitch asked. He'd been shocked by how quickly Chase had been distracted and fascinated by Bailey.

Chase sighed. "Yeah."

Mitch could hear the grin in his voice. He'd fallen fast and hard for Bailey. In spite of telling himself—and Mitch—over and over that it made no sense. Chase and Bailey were total opposites. Total. Opposites. And Bailey had been pretty unimpressed with Chase's charm and good looks and money. All things that Chase was used to using to get his way with women. Well, with everyone.

Add into that the fact that Bailey and Chase hadn't even been able to execute their first kiss without almost breaking a nose and some toes, and they seemed like a total mess.

But Mitch could tell that Chase was happier than he'd ever been.

"So you're calling for love advice," Chase said.

Oh shit. Chase had just raised his voice slightly. That meant someone, or more than one someone, was close by. Which meant that someone, or more than one someone, was about to chime in.

"No worries, I'm here!" Mitch heard Owen Landry, one of his cousins, say.

"Where are you and Owen?" Mitch asked, praying they'd snuck down to the dock with a couple of beers to escape the chaos that was every Landry family get-together.

"Ellie's," Chase said.

There was a rise in noise on Chase's end of the phone, and Mitch realized that Chase had ducked into the back room or just outside to take the call initially. And now he was back in the main room of Ellie's bar. Where *everyone* would be.

"You're a bastard," Mitch told him.

"This will just keep me from having to repeat everything later," Chase said with a laugh.

No one had a big enough house for them all to really spread out and chat and eat. They'd gather together for gift opening, practically sitting on top of one another, but for meals and hanging out, they'd all move over to the bar.

The building was really just an extension of Ellie's home in many ways. Most family meals were served there, and every member of the family stopped in at the bar at some point during the day. If Ellie and Cora, her best friend and business partner, didn't see everyone at least once a day, they got worried and sent someone to hunt the missing person down. And drag them in for some grits. Because grits were good for everything—happy, hungry, feeling sick, feeling awesome, lonely, sad, or newly in love.

“So what do you need to know?” Owen asked.

Mitch realized he was now on speakerphone. Great.

“I just...” He blew out a breath. What the hell? Owen was also madly in love. With a sassy, smart, too-good-for-him woman named Maddie. Owen might actually have some advice. “I guess I'm thinkin' about a long-distance relationship.”

“They suck, man,” Chase said.

“You don't even know,” Mitch told him. “You *just* officially got together with Bailey.”

“And I already know it's going to suck,” Chase told him.

“But you're gonna do it anyway?”

“Well... yeah.” Chase sounded like that was a really stupid question.

Maybe it was.

“Why's it gotta be long distance?” Owen asked.

“Because...” Well, fuck. Because it would be crazy for one of them to move to be with the other at this point.

“If you're doin' things right, she's not gonna want to live without you,” Owen said. “So start doin' things right.”

“If I remember correctly, Maddie was ready to move back to California even after *you* were doing things.”

Owen laughed. “'Cause I wasn't doin' things *right*.”

“I’m not sure I want details about what you were doing wrong,” Mitch said dryly.

“Oh, nothin’ like *that*,” Owen said, clearly catching his meaning. “Trust me.”

“So what?” Mitch asked, hoping he wasn’t making a mistake.

“I just had to figure out that living anywhere *with* her was better than living at all *without* her. It just works out.”

“So your advice is to move to Iowa to be with a woman I’ve known for like two days. Other than a few months of texting.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Owen asked. “It doesn’t work out and you move back here.”

“That’s...” He really should have finished that thought with *crazy*. Or *ridiculous* would have fit too. But Owen had a point. Didn’t he? Mitch could move to Iowa. He wasn’t in medical school. He didn’t own a business he couldn’t move. He had a huge family that he’d miss like hell, but was this thing with Paige at least worth giving some more time to?

“I’m good,” Owen said. “I know.”

“She hasn’t exactly asked me to stay,” Mitch said.

“Well, she can’t really *keep* you from moving somewhere. You’re a grown man. She can’t keep you out of Appleby,” Chase pointed out.

“That doesn’t seem a little stalkerish?”

“Why do you boys always make this all so difficult?”

There was now a new voice in the conversation. And Mitch would know that voice anywhere.

Ellie. His grandmother. The tough, no-bullshit matriarch of the Landry family.

“Tell her what you’re thinkin’, Mitchell,” Ellie said. “Don’t be weird about it. Just say, *I think I’m crazy about you, and I want to find out if this can work out*. For God’s sake.”

Mitch could picture her rolling her eyes at them all. He also knew she had her hands planted on her skinny hips.

“You all make this seem like some huge mysterious, magical thing. You don’t have to wait for planets to line up or for some big sign like your favorite song to play just as the full moon comes up over the hill when the scent of lilacs drifts through your window.”

Now she was most definitely rolling her eyes.

Owen laughed. “You and this family are the biggest fuckin’ romantics in the entire universe, Ellie.”

Yes, they all called their grandmother Ellie and their grandfather Leo. Because *all* of their grandparents on both sides of the family lived in town, so simply referring to them as “grandma” and “grandpa” had never been specific enough.

“Sure, we’re romantic,” Ellie said. “We know when it’s right and we’re willing to go big when that happens.”

It was true that the Landrys were known for their grand, romantic gestures. It was countywide legend, actually. But he supposed that didn’t mean they thought the falling-in-love part was all that complicated.

“Well, I won’t tell Cora that you think her love potion is bullshit,” Chase said.

Cora made all kinds of “potions”. She also made balms and salves and other homemade “cures”. The thing was, even skeptical physician-to-be Chase had to admit the stuff worked. Mitch fully expected Chase to incorporate some of those things into his medical practice when he came back to Autre for good.

“Oh, she knows it’s bullshit,” Ellie said. “Who would believe a love potion? You can’t *make* love happen.”

“But... wait... what else of hers is bullshit?” Chase asked.

Mitch snorted and heard Owen laugh as well.

“Oh honey,” Ellie said, and Mitch could picture her putting her hand on Chase’s cheek.

“The only stuff that’s bullshit is the stuff that doesn’t work,” Ellie told Chase placatingly.

“But...” Chase was clearly thinking on all of the things he’d tried while in Autre. “All of it worked. Didn’t it?”

“Then I guess it’s all real,” Ellie told him.

“That’s not how science works,” Chase said. He sounded tired.

The Landrys had that effect on people. Chase was still getting used to them all.

Ellie laughed. “Oh well, we aren’t talking about science.”

“Then what are we talking about?”

“Love.”

“Love isn’t science?” Chase asked.

“Is it?” Ellie challenged in return. “You tellin’ me that what you’re feeling for that beautiful accident-waitin’-to-happen over there is all just synapses and endorphins?”

“Well...” was Chase’s only response.

Mitch assumed that Bailey, who was indeed a beautiful accident-waiting-to-happen, was across the room and Chase was now gazing at her adoringly.

Mitch shook his head even though he was grinning.

“Exactly,” Ellie said after a moment. “You’ve probably had your hormones get all stirred up before. Chemistry and whatever. But what you feel for Bailey is different. And I don’t think you can explain it with science.”

“But,” Chase tried again, “science is real.”

“Well, of course it’s real,” Ellie said in her no-shit tone of voice. “Germs and stuff are real. You come out of the bathroom without washing your hands or cough on my bar without covering your mouth, and I’ll slap you upside the head and cut you off from gumbo for a week.”

“So...” But Chase didn’t add on to that start.

“So science and things beyond science can both be true at the same time,” Ellie said.

“Then Cora’s potions and creams do actually work?” Chase asked.

Mitch knew his friend was rubbing his head.

Ellie blew out an exasperated breath. “I’m tellin’ you that you boys are bein’ nitpicky dumbasses.”

“Dumbasses?” Chase repeated. “To want to prove something is true?”

“Good lord,” Ellie muttered. “Do you need a research paper to tell you something is working if you can see it and feel it with your own eyes and heart?” she asked.

“If millions of people use condoms and there are fewer women gettin’ knocked up, then you know that the condoms are working, right? If people start wearin’ seat belts and more people walk away from car crashes, you know the seat belts are working. If you burn your hand and put a salve on it and it feels better the next day, then it worked to make your hand feel better. And if you find a woman who makes you think about turning your whole life upside down to be with her, then you’re falling in love with her.” Ellie’s voice softened. “Nothing changes a life more than love does.”

“I...” Chase trailed off. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Ellie scoffed. “Of course I’m right. I’m old. I know a lot of shit by now.”

There was a pause and the sound of shuffling on the other end of the phone.

“Well, there you go,” Chase finally said to Mitch.

“She’s gone?” he guessed.

“Dropped her knowledge and then went to harass someone else,” Chase said. “You feel better?”

“I don’t know how we got from salves to me moving to Iowa, but, yeah, I guess I do.”

“So I need to pack your stuff and haul it up to Iowa?” Owen asked.

“Maybe,” Mitch said, feeling a warmth in his chest. “I need to talk to Paige.”

“Okay, good luck,” Owen told him. “But, in all seriousness, Ellie has a point. When you find the girl that makes you feel *different*. Different from the other girls but also like you’re a different person, better than you were before, then she’s worth a U-Haul and a change-of-address form at the post office.”

Mitch felt his smile spreading. “Yeah. You’ve got a point.”

He and Paige hadn’t been together enough for him to *be* different, but he thought maybe he *could be*.

“I’m jealous,” Chase said. “Bailey and I can’t really do the change-of-address-U-Haul thing. I mean, she could move to DC, I suppose, but she’s happiest down here on the bayou, and I’m only in DC for a couple of years before I’ll hopefully be heading back down here anyway.”

Mitch grinned. His friend had already decided he wanted to be back closer to Autre. “You think you can do the long-distance thing?” he asked.

Chase paused, and again Mitch imagined he had located Bailey across the room. “Yeah,” he said, his voice softer. “Fuck, yeah. We’ll get together as much as we can, and the future together is worth however hard it is now.”

“And with the way you two are when you’re together, it’s probably safer if the two of you are mostly together on Zoom or FaceTime,” Mitch teased.

Just the other night, they’d disappeared down to the docks for some alone time and come back dripping wet because they’d fallen into the bayou. Bailey was definitely accident prone and she took Chase right down with her.

Chase chuckled. “Good thing I’m going to medical school, huh?”

Mitch laughed. “For sure.”

“Okay, so go tell your girl that you’re going to need to buy some warmer clothes, and I’m going to go try not to get my nose broken under the mistletoe.”

Laughing, they disconnected. Mitch got out of the car and looked up at the light shining in the window of Paige’s apartment over the yoga studio.

Here went nothing.

Chapter Seven



Man, she was in so much trouble.

She wanted him to stick around. A lot.

The words had just hung in the air between them after she'd said them and then he'd winked at her and left before she could emphasize, "for the *next couple of days*."

Not that she'd rushed to say that.

It wasn't like she thought there was a chance he might stay more than that.

He lived in Louisiana. He worked in Louisiana. His entire family—which was, evidently, quite large—was in Louisiana.

Plus she did *not* want him to stay. Not like *stay stay*. She was the one who got itchy when a guy wanted to go out two days in a row. Of course, around here, two dates two days in a row meant they were going to discuss honeymoon destinations.

So, no, she did not want Mitch to stay any longer. The story about him and Tori would only hold up so long anyway.

But then he walked into her apartment.

Just let himself in as if he belonged there. Shrugged out of his coat—well, Max's coat—tossed it on the chair as if that was where he always tossed his coat when he came home and stalked toward her.

Her heart started pounding. His nose was a little red from the cold but otherwise, he looked very hot. She realized she'd

been imagining him with a tool belt on, even though she'd known he hadn't used a tool belt, while confidently fixing anything and everything anyone threw at him. Smiling and being charming the whole time he did it. Saving the damned Apple Festival that she honestly hadn't cared much about since she was a teenager and she and her friends would go and hope to get caught under the mistletoe.

Now she dodged that damned weed like it was poison ivy.

But the idea that Mitch had fixed the power in the town square, and everyone would know he was the big savior... like Santa, albeit a few weeks late, or maybe like the Grinch when he came blazing into town with all the decorations and gifts after finding his Christmas spirit...made tingles spread through her body. And made her wish for mistletoe.

Though the look on his face at the moment made her pretty sure she wasn't going to need it.

"Hi, how did it—" she started.

He cupped the back of her head and brought her in for a kiss. A very hot, deep, wet, backing-her-up-against-the-wall kiss.

Merry Late Christmas indeed.

She wrapped herself around him and gave a little hop to help when he scooped his hands under her ass and picked her up. He set her on the countertop next to the stove. Where she'd been stirring chocolate and marshmallow fluff together for fudge.

Shit.

She pulled back from him, breathing hard. "Welcome back."

He grinned. "Take your clothes off."

"In five minutes," she said, pushing him back and sliding to the floor.

"Now," he insisted, catching the hem of her top and slipping his hands up underneath it to her stomach as she turned to face the stove.

“I can’t let this burn,” she said, her inner muscles clenching hard as he dragged his palm back and forth over her stomach.

“You don’t have to cook for me.” He put his mouth against her neck, rubbing his beard up and down the sensitive skin.

Goose bumps broke out over her whole body making her wiggle against him. And the very prominent erection pressing into her back. She wiggled again just for good measure.

He gave a low growl. “Keep doing that and I’m tossing that whole pot in the sink, and you can just angry fuck me over it.”

Her shiver was stronger this time and she sighed. He surprised her with the dirty talk and it always had a strong, immediate effect on her body.

“We need this fudge,” she told him. But she had to concentrate on the stirring as his hands moved up to cup her breast.

She hadn’t put her bra back on, and he teased the bare nipple making her whimper softly.

“Don’t need anything but you,” he said gruffly against her ear, tugging on the hard tip.

“We need it for bribery,” she said, her eyes sliding closed as she gave the bubbling chocolate a half-assed stir.

“Who are we bribing?”

“Drew Ryan.”

“Why does Drew need to be bribed?”

“Because he knows that you’re not Tori’s fiancé,” she explained. “We need to ask him to play along with our story when he’s out and about at the festival and hears about the fix-it guy who saved the day.”

“And he won’t just do it because he’s a nice guy?”

“Well, the fudge won’t hurt.”

Mitch slipped the hand not tormenting her breast into the front of her pants. She also still did not have panties on. His finger slid over her clit making fire lick down her legs and her have to grip the counter with her free hand.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for a fudge maker,” he said. “You’re pretty sugar-free, gluten-free healthy.”

She nodded. “I know. I’m an enigma. I happen to make the best damned fudge you’ve ever tasted. I started making it before I became a full ‘health nut’ as my father calls it. So now people beg me for it and what can I say, I’m flattered, so I give in.”

Or she said something like that. There was no way she could have repeated any of it. Mitch’s finger was circling her clit in lazy loops, and her whole body was melting just like the blob of marshmallow fluff in the pot.

“How much longer?” he asked, sliding his finger lower and teasing her opening.

Her knees wobbled slightly, and she had to take a second before cracking one eye—not realizing her eyes were shut—and peeking at the timer. “Just another minute.”

He slid his finger into her and she gasped, clutching the counter.

“Stir, Paige,” he said softly, moving his finger in and out.

“You’re so mean,” she said, practically whispering.

“You want me to stop?” he asked, sliding deeper. “Really?”

“No. God, no.” She stirred a little faster and focused on *not* coming.

But damn, he was so good at this. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been with a guy who got her going the way he did.

She was never going to be able to make fudge without thinking of this.

The timer went off, the beeping the best sound she'd ever heard.

"I have to move," she said, picking the pot up from the burner.

He did remove his hands from her body, which she definitely regretted, but as she poured the liquid fudge from the pot into the rectangular pan to set, she heard the rustle of clothes and glanced over her shoulder to find him toeing his boots off and shrugging out of his shirt.

She stopped and stared. *Yes*. God, she loved this man naked.

Something sharp stung her foot and she jumped, looking to find that fudge was dripping from the spoon in her hand onto her foot.

Dammit!

She quickly dumped the pot and spoon in the sink and checked the cake pan. The fudge was spread evenly, and she, somehow, hadn't burned it. She carried it to the fridge and slid it onto the lowest shelf. Then she turned to Mitch, pulling her shirt up and over her head.

"Anyone else coming over?" he asked, his hot gaze on her breasts and his hands on his fly.

"Grandpa's been here and gone."

"That's great news."

She watched him unzip and shove his jeans to the floor, kicking them off. Behind the plain black boxers, he was huge and hard. And she was suddenly hotter than she'd ever been.

She slipped out of her yoga pants leaving them in the middle of the kitchen floor. Naked, she padded to him.

"Now what?" she asked, stopping right in front of him and looking up at him.

"You'll do anything I want?" he asked, his voice rough and his eyes hot.

"Definitely."

“How hot is the fudge?”

Her eyes widened. “Hot. Too hot for smearing on body parts,” she said, reading his mind.

One side of his mouth curled. “Damn.”

“But,” she said, “I have some fudge we could heat up a little.”

“You have some already made?” he asked. “Why was I waiting for you to stir that up?”

“The fudge I’ve already got is for you.” She felt her cheeks get a little pink. She was *shy* about this? She was buck naked at the moment, and he’d done a lot of *intimate* things to her already, but admitting she’d made him fudge made her blush?

“You made me fudge?”

Dammit. He looked pleased by that. He was so going to get the wrong idea. Especially when she told him the whole story. She sighed. “Yeah. I made it around Christmas. I was going to mail it to you but then... I changed my mind.”

“You were going to *send* me fudge for Christmas?” he asked, his grin growing. He lifted a hand to her cheek.

“Yes. But then I realized that you’d think it meant I liked you and was thinking about you,” she said with an eye roll.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said, his voice dropping and that drawl becoming more pronounced. “I *know* you like me and have been thinking of me.”

He was cocky. A little. Not overly. Not obnoxiously. But enough to be... hot. She did like confident men. “Well, you can *not* think that the fact that it’s chipotle fudge means *anything*,” she said.

His grin definitely grew with that. “You made me spicy fudge?”

“Spicy and sweet go together really well.”

He nodded, his grin turning into an almost smirk. “They sure do.”

“But it was just something I wanted to try, and since you eat all that crazy spicy food I thought you were someone I could send it to.”

“But then you realized that I’d think it meant you liked me.”

She blew out a breath. “Yeah.”

“Do you normally make chipotle fudge?”

“No.”

“Huh.”

“You’re thinking it, aren’t you?”

“That you like me? Yeah, I’m thinking it.”

“Well, if you’re going to be all smug about it, I’m not going to melt it down and coat your cock with it so I can lick it off.”

His smile dropped and his eyes blazed. “Oh yes you fucking are.”

“What if the chili powder in it burns you?”

“I can handle that,” he told her. “For sure.”

The powder, especially mixed in with all the other ingredients, probably wasn’t much of a risk. There was just enough in the fudge to give it some kick.

“That’s pretty sensitive skin,” she pointed out anyway.

“True. Guess you’ll have to lick fast.”

“And thoroughly,” she agreed.

“Definitely.”

“But I don’t want to use it all up. I want you take some of it back to Louisiana with you.” She gave him a grin that she was sure looked very please-fuck-me. At least that’s what she was thinking. “And think of me... and what we’re about to do... while you eat it.”

“Yeah, we need to talk about me thinking about you from Louisiana,” he said.

Oooh, that sounded like he maybe wanted to take their texting to sexting. Or maybe even phone sex. Or the Zoom sex he'd mentioned earlier. She was on board.

“Later. We can talk and... do a lot of other things... *later*.” She ran her hand down his abs and stroked his cock through his boxers. “But we have other things to do right now.”

She turned and reached to grab the container of spicy fudge from the counter. She was glad she'd mentioned it. She wasn't going to. She wasn't going to confess that he'd made her do something special and different. But somehow it felt right to admit that now.

Then she took his hand and led him down the hallway to her bedroom.

She pushed him toward the bed and shut the door behind her. No one else was coming over. Probably. Okay, there was a 5 percent chance that someone else would stop by. At least this way she'd hear them unlock the front door and could stash him in her closet before whoever it was made it down the hall.

If she heard them.

She had some plans here that just might end up being kind of noisy.

Mitch sitting on the edge of her bed, his hot, hard, tanned body and black boxers against the multicolored quilt and pillows was about the sexiest thing she'd ever seen. He looked out of place on the squares covered with stitched flowers and swirls. Her pillows were encased in different pillowcases as well. Something that, for some reason, drove her mom crazy. They were a mismatched bunch from different sheet sets. A couple had come from childhood sets, a couple from her grandmother, and she had no idea where the purple one had come from. But why did everything always have to match? Why did things have to go a certain way all the time? Why did there have to be a *plan* for every damned thing including matching sheets?

She took a deep breath. That didn't matter. At least not at this moment. Mitch looked out of place and she *loved* that. He

didn't match and that was awesome. He wasn't like the guys here. He wasn't from here. Her mother didn't know his mother and grandmother and every aunt and cousin. *She* didn't know his mother. Nor would she.

This was perfect.

She pulled the top off the fudge container and took a piece out. Then she tossed the box on top of her dresser and walked toward Mitch.

He opened his knees, welcoming her between them, his hands going to her butt.

She lifted the fudge and took a bite, then offered it to him. He bit into it, his eyes locked on hers.

The candy was incredibly sweet. She didn't eat much white sugar and very, very few candies. But she was definitely happy to make an exception here. The chili powder kept it from being too much as the chocolate melted on her tongue and the spiciness gave her a little tingle.

Mitch's fingers curled into her butt as he let the fudge melt in his mouth as well. Paige shifted to put a knee on the mattress next to him, pressing her body against his. She lowered her mouth, meeting his lips in a chocolatey, sweet and spicy kiss. This was by far her favorite way to eat fudge.

Except...

The piece of candy had grown a little sticky as she held it. She put it in her other hand and lifted her chocolatey fingertips to her nipple. She coated it in chocolate and then lifted her head from the kiss.

Mitch's gaze immediately found her sticky nipple and his lips followed.

He took the tip in his mouth, swirling his tongue around it, then sucking.

Her fingers gripped his head as she sighed. God, this was so good. Sex had never been like this before. No one had ever turned her on like this man. No one had ever known how to touch her, how to talk to her, the way he did.

“My turn,” she said breathlessly, pushing him back.

She went to her knees in front of him, pulling one side of his boxers down. She still held the piece of fudge in her other hand, so needed his help—which he gladly gave—to slide his boxers down. She shifted out of the way so he could get them off his feet, but her gaze and her hand, immediately went to the impressive cock he exposed.

“You have to tell me if this hurts you,” she said, looking up at him from beneath her lashes as she moved the fudge from her fingertips to her full palm. She closed her fist around it, letting it get melty.

“Oh babe, give me some good hurt,” he said, his hand going to her head.

She was so glad he wasn't going to try to talk her out of this or even say something like *you don't have to do this*. She *did* have to do this. She *needed* to. She wanted him to get hard as soon as he opened that box of fudge when he was home.

Paige reached for him with her sticky hand and ran it up and down his hard length, leaving a chocolatey mess behind.

He hissed out a breath as she touched him, rubbing and squeezing, his fingers tightened against her scalp.

Then she leaned in and put her tongue to work cleaning up the mess. She licked and sucked until he was gripping her hair and breathing raggedly.

“Paige. Fuck. God. Sweetheart.”

He could only manage single words it seemed, and she felt a definite surge of power knowing she was making him lose the ability to speak.

She took him deep and felt his whole body stiffen.

“No. Not like this.”

Suddenly she found herself hauled to her feet, swung around, and tossed onto the mattress.

He immediately crawled up her body. He took her mouth in a deep, searing kiss and she arched into him, seeking full-

body contact and heat. She needed all of his hardness against all of her softness.

He drove his fingers into her hair, holding her head still as he kissed her, his tongue stroking deep and amazingly making her clit ache as if he were licking it. She gripped his shoulders, wrapping her legs around him.

His cock pressed against her, hot and heavy and she whimpered. "Please, Mitch."

"Anything you want."

"You. Just you. All of you. Please."

"I don't know if I can take you slow, sweetheart." He moved his mouth along her jaw. "I'm trying to get some control here."

"No. Not slow." She tried to shake her head, but he still held her. She looked up at him. "Hard. Please."

He blew out a breath. "The first time... we got a little wild. But this time, I've been thinking about you, *waiting* for you, for a long time now. This might be... really hard."

When he'd told her before that he hadn't been with anyone else it had sent a shot of adrenaline through her that had felt a lot like panic. This was too intense, too fast, too much. She didn't want to be totally absorbed in someone. She didn't want someone who would be totally absorbed in her.

But now when he said it, she felt a surge of a different kind.

Mine.

She had *never* felt that way about another person. She didn't feel that way about a single possession, her apartment, or her hometown. She didn't even feel it when she looked at her yoga studio or thought about the business she'd created. She felt it about her cats in some cases. Technically they were all available for adoption, but she kept *her* cats, the ones she just felt needed *her* and no one else, in another room when people came to look to adopt.

But in that moment, with Mitch, with him telling her that he'd been *waiting* on her, she felt it.

Mine. She wanted him to be hers.

She was so screwed.

“Yes,” she said softly. She pressed one heel into his ass, but she moved her hands to hold his face. “Hard. Deep. Take me, Mitch.”

His jaw tensed as he stared into her eyes for a long moment. Then he gave her a nod. “Glad we’re on that same page.”

She had a feeling the page they were on was not the fuck-me-hard page. It was more than that. Deeper. More serious.

But it didn’t make her stomach tighten with trepidation. It made her whole body tighten with anticipation.

“Condom,” he said, shifting slightly. “Dammit. They’re in the other room.”

She shook her head and pointed at her bedside table. “In there.”

She had condoms in her bedside table. She rarely used them in here. Mostly she just grabbed them and stuffed them in her purse if she was going out with someone that she might want to use one with. She, frustratingly, couldn’t keep them in the bathroom where her mother might see them. Not that she was embarrassed that her mom knew she had sex. It was that her mom would want to know who the guy was and how serious it was and did he have a good job and did he like meatloaf.

She just couldn’t handle all of that, so she hid her condoms. Like a teenager sneaking around. Ugh, she hated that.

But Mitch didn’t seem too annoyed by the idea that she had, and had needed, condoms in her bedside table. He shifted and reached, grabbing them out of the drawer and tossing about five on the quilt next to them.

His eyes locked on hers as he pushed up to kneel between her thighs, and rolled a condom on.

Damn, that was hot.

Then he lowered himself on top of her again and kissed her.

It was the sexiest, sweetest kiss of her life.

She wasn't sure what was different about it. It was still lips and tongues. But there was more there now.

Lord, just please don't let him propose.

Then as he lifted her leg a little higher and pressed forward, sliding into her, and her neck arched, her head pressing back into the mattress with the sheer delicious bliss of it, she added, *And don't let me propose to him.*

Mitch slid in deep and then paused.

She tightened around him and he groaned.

“Hard,” she whispered.

“Okay.” He pulled in a breath. “Hang on.”

She grinned. “You break my bed, you have to fix it.”

“Can do.”

She didn't know if he was referring to breaking her bed or fixing it, but she knew he could do both.

Mitch shifted to brace his arm on the mattress next to her ear. The other gripped her thigh, lifting it, and spreading her a little wider.

And then he went hard. Braced above her, he was able to thrust deep and hard, and her headboard began banging against the wall just slightly louder than her gasps and cries of, “Oh, Mitch!” and “Yes!” and his growls and, “Fuck, yeahs” and “God, you're amazing.”

Her hand gripped his shoulder while the other grabbed on to the quilt under her. But she couldn't do much more than lay there and take it. And she loved every second of that.

She was not the submissive type. At all. But something about letting Mitch do any dirty thing he wanted to made her hot and needy.

And all his.

Did he ever think *mine* about her? Surely not. They barely knew one another. She had no idea why *she* was thinking those things. There was no way he was thinking them too.

“Paige. Baby. Honey.” He was panting as he thrust.

She arched closer. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

And then she was coming. Hard. The waves of pleasure washing through her took her breath away, and for just a second she thought *I can't live without this*.

Mitch's pace picked up, his body tensing, and he was coming, her name a long groan as he let go.

He held himself up from her for several seconds as they both breathed hard. Then he leaned down and kissed her. This was soft, but still as hot as the hungry ones from before. His lips clung to hers for a moment, then he kissed his way along her jaw and down her neck to her shoulder, before rolling to his side and bringing her nearly boneless body up against his until she was half draped over him.

“Holy. Shit,” he said, breathing out in a very satisfied way.

She smiled against his chest. “Ditto.”

It had been good. So good. Better than the first time they'd been together last summer.

But, of course, she could live without it. That had been a crazy thought. It was just sex. *Really good* sex, but still. It wasn't like it was oxygen or water.

But as he shifted and settled more fully into her mattress, his hand possessively splayed over her ass, she had a twinge of *I don't want him to leave* that was very concerning.

A huge yawn hit her just then, and she stretched as she pulled in the long, deep breath before settling against him again.

She was definitely going to need to think about all of her crazy thoughts and feelings about this guy and figure out what the hell was wrong with her and how to get over it.

Mitch kissed the top of her head and she smiled and sighed.

She'd figure out how to get over it—*him*—tomorrow.

Or maybe the day after that.

Chapter Eight



He woke her up twice during the night. Normally that alone would have been enough for her to put a lot of distance between them immediately. Not having anyone dictating or interrupting her routines and schedules was one very big pro of being single.

But Mitch really made the waking up worthwhile.

Until he started talking after the second wake-up call via orgasm.

It had been going so well too. His hot mouth. His hot hands. His hot... everything else. Who cared about sleep when you had a big, hot, dirty-talking, sexy, sweet Cajun in your bed?

No one, that was who.

But big, hot, dirty-talking, sexy, sweet, *chatty* Cajuns were another thing.

“I was thinkin’,” he said, his drawl more pronounced in the dark, and after his second orgasm.

“Uh-oh,” Paige said. Out loud. Sincerely.

He gave her butt a squeeze. “I’m serious.”

“Exactly why I said *uh-oh*.” She shifted and propped up on her elbow. The room wasn’t pitch black. Lights from the street outside filtered in through the gauzy curtains, and she still had twinkle lights up around the window.

He definitely looked serious. Hot. Sexy as hell. And serious.

She sighed. “Is there any chance you’ve been thinking about asking how I feel about being tied up in bed or nipple clamps or something?”

He cleared his throat, and she felt his hand tighten on her butt. But he shook his head. Unfortunately.

“I’m pretty sure you’re a solid don’t-you-fucking-dare-tie-me-up girl,” he said.

She nodded. “You wouldn’t be wrong.” She never wanted to give up that much control. To anyone.

But nipple clamps might be something else...

“I want to stay.”

Four words. No preamble. No easing into it. Just *I want to stay*.

And her heart flipped over. Then plummeted.

“Stay? Like here in bed rather than going to the festival? Or for a couple extra days? Or...”

“For good.”

Dammit. She sighed and shifted farther away. For a second his arm tightened around her as if wanting to hold her in place, but then he relaxed and let her slip out from his arm. She pushed herself up to sitting and leaned over to grab her sweatshirt off the floor. The first garment she touched, however, was his t-shirt. She pulled it on anyway. She just needed to be covered.

Then she faced him.

He had shifted so he was propped up against her headboard. The sheet covered him from the waist down, but not his shoulders, chest, or abs.

Dammit. *Willpower. You have to have willpower.*

“So,” she started, folding her hands in her lap and resting her elbows on her thighs, “that’s crazy.”

He nodded. "I know it seems that way."

"It doesn't just *seem* that way, Mitch," she said. "It *is* crazy. People don't just spend a couple of days together and then move a thousand miles from home to be together."

"People in my family do stuff like that all the time," he said, lifting a shoulder.

"Even more reason to stay far away from you and your family," she muttered.

"Tori's doing it."

Paige shook her head. "She knew Josh longer than we've known each other."

"Not that much."

"Well, I'm not Tori." She frowned.

He chuckled. Actually *chuckled* at that.

But it was true. Tori was fine with falling in love and making a long-term commitment. Paige was... not.

"What?" she asked.

"So you like your life the way it is? Your family drives you crazy being in your business all the time. The town drives you crazy being in your business all the time. You're judged for everything you do from your work to how you spend your free time to what you eat."

Paige opened her mouth to reply. But then she snapped it shut. Well... fuck. He was right, of course. How did he know all of that? He'd just figured it all out?

"So the last thing I want," she said, grabbing on to her argument. "Is *another* person in my business."

"I don't want to tell you what to eat or what job you should do."

"But you want to change how I live."

"No... I..." He frowned. "That's not what I'm trying to do."

“But it’s what would happen. *Any* relationship changes my life, brings one more person in that needs to be a part of decisions and choices from what I do in the evening after work to how I spend my birthday. I’ve been *considerate* of the men who want to date me by saying no to anything more than a casual fling or hookup.”

He scowled at that. “It’s been *considerate* of you to not spend their birthdays with them, to not want to hang out with them and go to the festival or movies together?”

She threw up her hands. “Yes! If I don’t want to spend every moment with them or have their opinions or advice on how I’m living my life, then it’s *nice* of me to not lead them on thinking that I *do* want those things.”

“That’s not—”

“And I’d *especially* feel obligated to share my life with someone who would have moved *his* entire life a thousand miles just to be with me. I couldn’t just let you sit at home by yourself here without feeling guilty. You wouldn’t know anyone else here or have anything else to do.”

“I’m not asking...” He shoved his hand through his hair.

She lifted a brow. “Then what are you asking?”

“For you to give this a chance. A *real* chance. To honestly see if this could be something.”

“Right. To date you. Seriously. Exclusively. To go to movies and spend my birthday with you.”

“*Yes*,” he finally said, exasperated. “Yes. I want to be with you. A lot. I want to see what this could be if I lived here, or close enough, to see you more often. I want to get to know you. So, yes, Paige, I want to move here and see you every single day and be a part of your life.”

Her stomach flipped at his words. But she wasn’t sure if it was dread... or temptation.

“I’ve been proposed to four times.”

He paused, his hand partway through his hair again. It dropped as he stared at her. “What?”

She nodded. “I’ve been proposed to four times. Twice by the same guy, so three guys. But four proposals.”

He looked completely confused. “You’re twenty-two.”

“Yeah. The first time was right after my high school graduation.”

“Um... wow.”

“And I said yes to that one.”

He scowled. “You’ve been *engaged*? Already?”

“Yep. Guy I’d known my whole life. My mom’s best friend’s son.” She shrugged, her chest aching the way it always did when she thought of Garrett. He had been such a great guy. Still was a great guy. And she’d not only broken his heart and ended their lifelong friendship, but she’d broken his mom’s heart and the heart of everyone in her family.

They would have been a little frustrated or even mad if she hadn’t dated him at all, but nothing like the hurt and disappointment after she’d ended the engagement.

Now she really tried with everything in her not to break hearts. Any hearts.

Her mom didn’t like her yoga studio or cat collection, but Paige was upfront about those being what she wanted, so Dee was just frustrated... and worried... but not *heartbroken* about those choices.

“Jesus.” Mitch blew out a breath. “What happened?”

She shrugged. “We turned sixteen and our moms had always said they wished we’d date. So we did. And then... it’s how things go here. You date. You get engaged. You get married. You get jobs. You have kids.”

“But...” Mitch frowned. “You didn’t.”

She shook her head. “I was trying on wedding dresses. My mom was all teary-eyed about it. Amanda was so excited. Everyone was so happy. Except the girl in the mirror. I realized I was doing it for them and that I didn’t want to get married. Not at age nineteen for sure. But not to Garrett any

time. So I took the dress off, told them it was over, walked out, broke up with him, and... they've never fully forgiven me."

Mitch was just staring at her. "And..." He shook his head. "The other two?"

"Adam was the next one. We had some chemistry—I mean, I didn't hate kissing him or anything. And neither of us were planning to go off to college so I guess he figured why not."

"That is..." Mitch shook his head. "Wow."

"He was the one that proposed twice. After his dad passed away and he took over the farm completely just last spring, he asked me again."

"Had you been dating then?"

"Nope."

Mitch shook his head again. "And the other one?"

"Similar thing. Guy I've known forever who settled down here and getting married is the next thing on his to-do list. He looked around, saw a girl who seemed to be in a similar place, took me out to dinner a couple times, had some not-terrible sex, and then popped the question."

"You slept with them?" he asked with a frown.

"Not Adam," she said. "The one who asked twice. Garrett, the one I said yes to, sure. And the other one..." She shrugged. "Yeah."

Mitch seemed to be gritting his teeth. "You didn't explain the hookup-only rule to him?"

"Actually, I did." She leaned in. "But he didn't listen. Because that's not what he wanted to hear."

Just like *he* wasn't listening. She knew that he got the point.

"Everyone here is just marriage crazy?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It's just... what you do. It's just the natural progression. Or a bad habit. Or a contagious disease. Or

something.”

He snorted.

“You think I’m kidding? My *three* best friends from high school are already married.”

“And they’re all your age?”

She nodded. “And they all married their prom dates.”

His eyes widened. “Prom is like a giant mass engagement event here or something?”

“It’s serious. No one here believes in just... fucking around. Having fun. Doing anything... temporary. Everything is long term and about futures.” She sighed. “One of my friends married the only guy she ever *kissed*. They started ‘dating’ when they were ten. Another married the guy who asked her to prom. I mean, they had *a little bit* of an excuse. She got pregnant prom night.”

Mitch snorted again. “Prom is trouble around here.”

“Oh, for sure. But they’re still together and have *two more* kids.” She rolled her eyes. “And *another* friend, the one I had big hopes for, left her high school boyfriend behind to go off to college, but she only lasted a semester before she was back here, going to school in Dubuque, and planning their wedding.”

“Wow.” Mitch nodded. “Okay, so there’s a lot of pressure.”

“Oh, and that’s not even my family,” she said. “My grandparents eloped when they were seventeen. My parents were childhood sweethearts. My sister married her high school boyfriend and had two kids by the time she was twenty-four and she wants two more.”

“Josie didn’t marry her high school boyfriend,” Mitch pointed out.

“Only because she didn’t have one. Sure, she’s marrying an outsider, but she’s always been a romantic, wanting to settle down and the whole thing. And they’re living in a house that’s been in my family for five generations. She’s working a job in a business that’s been a staple in this town for fifty years.

She's seeing the same people she always sees. She sees my family *all the time*."

"She must like it." Mitch was frowning.

"She does." Paige didn't doubt that for a minute, and she didn't begrudge her sisters their happiness. It was just that their lives made *her* feel restless and itchy.

"So what do *you* want?" he asked.

She took a breath. "It's going to sound selfish." Her oldest sister had flat-out told her it was selfish as a matter of fact.

"Hit me," he said, making a *come on* motion.

"A Year of Aloneness."

He studied her, then one corner of his mouth curled. "A Year of Aloneness?"

She nodded. "I want to go to Colorado and have a Year of Aloneness. I want to live alone in a new place where it's not weird to be a yoga-doing, cat collecting, vegetarian. Where no one has known me for even six months not to mention since I was born. And where *no one* will propose to me."

Mitch didn't say anything for a long moment. "For a year, huh?"

"At least." She could go a hell of a lot longer than a year not being proposed to. Or even just not being considered a weird failure. But a year seemed like a great starting point.

"And when does this year begin?"

"When I have enough money saved up."

"Why Colorado?"

"Steamboat Springs is a gorgeous place with a happy, healthy population. They have hot springs and tourists. Seems like a good place to have a yoga studio. And while I save up money, I'm getting my massage therapy license too. Yoga and massages seem to go with hot springs and gorgeous walking trails with stunning mountain views, don't you think?"

“I guess I’ve never given hot springs and yoga a lot of thought,” Mitch said. “But I’ll take your word for it.”

She shrugged. “I actually hope I can just work for someone else. That would be easier. No roots.”

“You’re against roots?”

“I’ve got so many roots right now that I can barely pick my feet up.” She sighed. “I’d like to be rootless for a while.”

“For a year.”

She tipped her head. He was hung up on that it seemed. “*At least,*” she added.

“Right.” He seemed to be thinking that over.

Paige frowned. “Told you that it sounded selfish.”

“It doesn’t,” he denied. “You have... a lot here.”

“I do.”

He shifted, sitting up a little straighter. “So it’s not marriage you’re against. Just the importance your family has put on it.”

She frowned, wondering why he cared so much how she felt about marriage. She swore to God, if he proposed to her, she’d throw him out in the snow. Without Max’s coat.

Maybe without his pants.

“It’s the idea that I’m weird or failing if I don’t have the marriage and family and mortgage thing.”

“So that’s what you want to get away from. Their expectations and pressures.”

“Yes.”

He sat forward. “Come to Louisiana.”

Her heart flipped in her chest. “What?”

He’d better not be proposing. Though asking her to come to Louisiana was *not* just a movie date.

“For the wedding. Josh and Tori’s,” he added.

She breathed out. But she couldn't deny there was a tiny twinge of disappointment. "Oh. Yeah, I could—"

"Then stay."

She felt her mouth drop open.

"Shake it up. Tell your family you're going to do your own thing. In Louisiana. They won't have a front row for your life there. They won't even know what you're doing, so they can't judge it."

That was crazy.

And it sounded nice.

"Just move to Louisiana?"

"Yep. I can give you a place to live. Free by the way." He gave her a little wink. "And a job. You can save up money there just as easy as you can here. Maybe easier. No rent. No paying business overhead."

She also sat forward. "I'm guessing the place to live would be with you?"

"In my house," he said with a nod. "But it's got four bedrooms. There's another guy living there too. Works for our family business. He's our veterinarian."

Her own bedroom. But in his house. Uh-huh. "What's the job?"

"Otter yoga."

Her eyebrows rose. "Um... what?"

He chuckled. "I mean, you can do more than that. But there are no yoga studios in Autre."

"Hmm..." She quirked an eyebrow. "Otters?"

He grinned. "We have otters. A whole family of them. We've decided to start an otter encounter as a part of the Boys of the Bayou business. People can come and interact with the otters, feed them, play with them. Seems like a girl who is used to doing yoga with cats, could figure something out with otters too."

That sounded fun, actually. Otters were adorable.

“We have alligators too. Turtles. Lizards.”

“Yoga with *alligators*?”

“Maybe the babies?”

She laughed.

“And we’re getting a llama. Tori is taking one back with us. Maybe two. Knowing Tori, actually, probably three.”

“From Drew and Dallas Ryan?”

“Yep.”

“They’re alpacas, actually.”

“Right. Alpacas.”

Alpaca yoga. Otter yoga. Seeing Mitch every day. Hmm...

“My family would assume that we’d run off and, of course, gotten married,” she said.

“And when we don’t, that will *really* make them wonder,” Mitch said. “They’ll just have to guess about what the hell is going on.” He leaned closer. “Admit it, that could be kind of fun.”

It could be.

A chance to have a relationship without any outside influences? To spend time with a guy and actually see what could happen without anyone else’s hopes getting up? A chance to really date someone without worrying about breaking her mom’s heart if it didn’t work out?

“You *promise* you’re not going to propose?” she asked.

“I think I can resist.” He gave her a half grin.

That wasn’t an *I promise*, but she smiled back.

“Living with you and some other guy isn’t really *aloneness*,” she pointed out.

“No.” He nodded. “There’s not a lot of space or alone time in my life, I’ll admit.”

Yeah, see that was a red flag. She didn't want to trade one crazy big family for another.

"But you're still saving up for the Year of Aloneness, right?" he asked.

"Right." She was probably six months away, honestly. She wanted to have enough to pay rent for at least part of the year in Colorado without worrying about her job situation.

"So come do that in Autre. Away from the proposals that keep happening up here." He actually frowned slightly at that.

She grinned. Was he jealous? She hated herself for liking that idea.

"You worried they might wear me down and I'll finally say yes to one just to shut everyone up?"

His frown deepened. "Let's just say I don't hate the idea of you being away from all the marriage-minded guys that seem to populate this little town."

Paige laughed lightly. "That should be a huge reason *not* to come to Louisiana, you know."

He reached out and snagged her wrist, tugging her up the bed.

She went. Willingly.

He rolled her under him and kissed her long and deep. When he lifted his head, he said, "Come to Louisiana and be my friend with benefits for a few months."

"That's it? That's all you want?"

"I want you to have what *you* want," he said, his eyes sincere.

A little bit of her resolve melted. She actually felt it turn to liquid and slip away.

"And I do want men to stop proposing to you," he added. "Louisiana seems like a good place for you to land temporarily."

She smiled and ran a hand up the side of his face. “You’re very tempting.”

He pressed his cock against her hip and she felt her body heat instantly. “I promise the benefits will be nice.”

“Your other roommate is a heavy sleeper?” she teased.

“He can get his ass out if he doesn’t like it,” Mitch said gruffly, dragging his jaw along hers.

She shivered and arched closer.

A place to land temporarily. A little adventure. A chance to save up the money she needed but be out from under the magnifying glass of Appleby. Well, her family in particular. The whole town seemed to think that marriage and family were the ultimate goals, but her family was particularly obsessed.

Her Year of Aloneness was still the plan, but she couldn’t afford to do it yet, and the idea of spending another six months here did give her a little *ugh* feeling.

And otter yoga? Come on. That sounded really cool.

“How about I come for Tori and Josh’s wedding and we see how it goes?” she asked.

He shook his head, but he was smiling. “Can’t even commit to six months?”

“Six months is a *long* time.”

“Okay... six days. Promise six days when you come to the wedding. I want to really show you the bayou.” He lowered his head and kissed her neck, then dragged his mouth up the sensitive skin to her ear. “And everything you can have if you stay there.”

She arched into him, unable to help it. The *stay there* gave her pause. But he meant for six months. That wasn’t too long. Not long enough to mess up any plans, anyway. Probably.

Then he dragged his mouth down her neck, past her shoulder, to her breast. He pushed his shirt up and took her

nipple in his mouth, and all she could think was *I'll give you six of whatever you want, Mitch Landry.*

Chapter Nine



Paige rolled over and eyed her clock. Then sat straight upright. Nine a.m.?

Nine? How had she slept till nine? She had yoga...

Wait, no, she didn't. It was the first day of the festival and everything else in town shut down.

She started to lay back down. Why was she so tired though?

Then sat straight up again.

Mitch.

She was tired because of Mitch. The sex. The *talking*. The sex. And geez, the *talking*.

She looked around. Where was he? His side of the bed was still ruffled, but it was cold when she touched the sheets, and there wasn't a sound in her apartment.

Had he actually snuck out and *left*?

Had he realized that everything he said last night about her going to Louisiana for a few months was batshit crazy and gotten out before she woke up and he found himself with a live-in girlfriend he barely knew? And her twenty-three cats?

Hmm... the cats. She was going to have to figure something out with the cats. She'd thought she had a few months before she moved to Colorado and had been figuring out a way to take them with her...

She shook her head. She needed to focus. She didn't need to figure out what to do with her cats when she went to Louisiana if Mitch had snuck out and taken off for Louisiana without her.

That would be such a good thing.

So why did she feel really disappointed?

Paige threw back the sheets and got out of bed. She was *not* disappointed. The whole conversation had come on the heels of major orgasm endorphins in the middle of the night. No rational life decisions should be made in that circumstance.

But two minutes later, she did at least admit to herself that she was looking for a note from him.

He couldn't even leave a note?

She reached for her phone, thinking maybe there was at least a text. Maybe he'd waited until he was safely driving through Oklahoma...

Her phone rang just then.

It was her sister's number.

"Hello?"

"Good morning," Josie greeted brightly.

Paige leaned back against her counter. Josie was a morning person. Paige was not. Paige got up early. But she liked quiet and meditation and slow, gentle stretching first thing. Josie was bright and bubbly and thought the day should be started with caffeine and sugar.

It made the fact that she worked in the local bakery very convenient.

"Morning," Paige said.

Josie was calling her to come help at the bakery. Paige could feel it. She often filled in at Buttered Up. It was a block away and sometimes they needed extra hands. She was happy to do it. Usually. Right now she was feeling very *unbubbly* and sweet this morning.

Which was so stupid. Mitch realizing his suggestion was crazy and getting out of town, thereby keeping her from having to tell him it was crazy and say no in the morning light when she wasn't hopped up on endorphins was a *good* thing.

"You should stop by the bakery this morning," Josie said.

She knew it. "You guys swamped?"

The bakery didn't close completely on festival day, just early. But they opened so people could get breakfast and coffee before hitting the chilly town square. In fact, it was a big business day.

"We are," Josie said. "You should stop by."

"I'm not really hungry." She was grumpy. About a guy. Wow, she needed... something.

"You don't have to eat."

"So what would I do?" Help at the register, probably. Which would at least take her mind off Mitch. Maybe that was good.

"You could just talk."

"Talk?" Paige frowned. "We can talk later."

"I mean to Tori."

Paige froze. Then straightened away from the counter. "Tori?"

"Tori Kramer. She's here with her fiancé. And his cousin. Who is *hot*. You should totally come down here and meet him."

Tori was at Buttered Up? With Josh? And... Mitch?

Paige's heart *thunked* so hard in her chest she actually lifted her hand and pressed it over the spot.

Wow. She was in so much trouble here.

But... *fuck*.

If Tori was there with Josh, then it would be clear that *Mitch* was not her fiancé, and if anyone walked in who thought he was—and that was *very* possible—they were

screwed. Linda, Carol, Melanie, Mike, Larry... hell, the whole town...were regulars at the bakery.

As was Paige's mother.

Ugh.

"I'll be right there," she said quickly, heading for her bedroom.

"Awesome," Josie said happily.

Paige stopped. Crap. She'd sounded enthusiastic about getting down there to meet Tori's hot cousin. But... she couldn't deal with her romance-loving sister right now. "See you soon." She disconnected and tossed the phone on the bed and headed for the shower.

Fifteen minutes later, Paige let herself in through the back door of the bakery. That was a friends-with-the-owner privilege that Paige happily used this morning. She couldn't just walk in through the front without checking things out.

She came up short when she found the kitchen full.

"What are you all doing here?"

Whitney and Jane both grinned.

"Packing apple pies up for the booth at the festival."

Every business in town had a booth in the square, including the bakery. Even though everyone had spent the holidays overeating and most of the town stopped in here this morning on their way over there. The stuff at the booth was taken home and saved for when people were in the mood for sweets again. Like in a couple of days.

Jane and Whitney didn't work at the bakery but they were Zoe and Josie's best friends. They had big boxes and tons of packing peanuts in front of them and were filling the boxes with little mason jars. Zoe had started doing cakes and pies in jars and they'd been a big hit. They were especially great for expos and fairs.

Paige focused on Whitney. She and Whitney had also become friends over the past few months. Whitney had been a

regular at yoga and a few months back had reached out for a girls' night out. Paige had turned her down the first time but since then they'd gone out a few times.

That first time, she'd had to decline because Tori was in town. With her fiancé. And his hot cousin.

Paige had also spilled about that hot cousin to Whitney over hard ciders at Granny Smith's, the local bar.

She crossed the room, braced her hands on the worktable across from Whitney and narrowed her eyes. "What did you do?"

Whitney's eyes widened. "About what?"

"What did you tell my sister about Tori's fiancé and his hot cousin?" she asked, shooting a glance at Jane.

Jane kept packing her box. But she was clearly fighting a smile.

Shit. They all knew. Paige could tell.

Whitney shrugged. "I just..." Then she blew out a breath. "You should have told me it was a secret."

"You told Josie who Mitch is?"

"I just said that you had a hot night with a guy with a sexy Louisiana accent."

Okay, so that would...

"And I might have said the name Mitch." Whitney bit her bottom lip.

"You totally said the name Mitch," Jane said with a snort.

Paige groaned. "Whit."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you trying to hide this?" Jane asked.

"Oh, hey!" Josie swept into the kitchen just then from the front of the bakery. She gave Paige a big grin. "They're right out front. He's *very* cute."

Paige shot Jane a glance. Jane met her eyes and gave a nod. Yeah, she got it. She knew Paige's family. She knew Josie best, of course, and Josie's romantic streak was just an adorable part of Josie's adorable personality. When that romantic streak was about her own life. But when it was turned on the people around her and she wanted everyone to fall in love, it wasn't quite as cute.

Jane had experienced that too.

"Have you talked to them?" Paige asked her sister.

"I waited on them," Josie said with a nod. "But it's crazy out there, so we didn't really *talk*."

"Oh, do you guys need help?" Paige asked. Hey, she was here now. She could pitch in. And avoid the table with Tori and Josh and Mitch and whatever they had told everyone about... whatever.

"Nope. Maggie and Cam both came in to help bake this morning," Josie said of Zoe's mom and brother—Whitney's boyfriend. "And Grant and Aiden are out there helping Zoe wait on everyone." Her smile was soft and affectionate as she mentioned her fiancé, Grant, and Zoe's, Aiden.

Well, they really were covered. With all of those people, two of them big guys, there probably wasn't room behind the counter anyway.

And, really, she probably did need to go find out what Mitch had told Tori and Josh about their little lie about Mitch and Tori being engaged. Paige's cover wasn't entirely blown because Josie still, apparently, thought Mitch was Tori's fiancé.

Plus she wanted to see Mitch. She wasn't able to forget the disappointment she'd felt thinking he'd hightailed it back to Louisiana. She liked him more than she'd wanted to admit.

"Go introduce yourself to the cousin," Josie urged. "You and Tori are friends. Just go out and join them."

Okay, so apparently Whitney had slipped about Mitch in front of Jane but not Josie? That was fortunate. She supposed.

And Josie was reading Paige's hesitation as nerves about meeting a new guy. Well, that was better than her guessing that Paige was nervous that Mitch was going to upend all of her carefully laid plans.

"Oh my gosh!"

Paige had to jump back as the swinging door that led to the front of the bakery suddenly swung in, almost whacking her in the face.

"Hey, Kelsey!" Josie greeted Jane's younger sister.

"Hi," she said to everyone collectively. Then she focused on Jane. "Guess what?"

Jane turned and faced her. "What?"

"Look what Matt gave me for my birthday!" Kelsey held up the little heart-shaped charm hanging from the chain around her neck.

"Oh wow," Josie said, moving in before Jane could. "That's so pretty!"

Kelsey nodded, nearly squealing. "He said that now I can *actually* take his heart with me wherever I go."

Paige caught herself before she rolled her eyes.

Josie, on the other hand, audibly sighed. "That's so romantic."

"Oh wow, Kels, that's awesome," Jane said.

Was it? Maybe. What did Paige know?

"That really is," Whitney agreed.

Okay, so all of the women who were in *actual* relationships thought Matt had done something good here. Fine. The kid was a senior in high school giving another senior in high school a birthday gift after dating for about six months. He was Kelsey's first serious boyfriend. There had probably been some pressure to make it meaningful. Paige probably needed to lighten up.

"His birthday is two days after mine," Kelsey said.

“No way,” Whitney said.

Kelsey nodded. “Cute, right?”

They all laughed. “Very cute,” Josie agreed. “What did you get him?”

“It’s not as good as this,” Kelsey said, shaking her head. “I told him I’d play *Warriors of Easton* with him for an entire weekend.”

“That *is* good,” Jane said. “He loves *Warriors* and always wants you to play but knows you don’t really like it. That’s sweet. You’re putting him first and willing to do something that matters to him.”

“You think so?” Kelsey asked. “I mean, I’m going to suck at it.”

“How did he react?” Paige heard herself ask.

Kelsey looked over and shrugged. “He was thrilled, actually.” She looked back at her sister. “But it’s not something he can *keep*, like this.”

“It will be a memory.” Paige frowned. Why did she keep talking? But when they all looked at her, she tipped her head. “It will. You show up with all his favorite snacks and a *Warriors of Easton* sweatshirt and hat on to show him that you’re really committed to doing it right and truly settle in for the whole weekend, no interruptions. He’ll think that’s super hot.”

Then she winced. Oops, maybe she shouldn’t tell teenagers how to be hot.

But Whitney, Josie, and Jane were nodding.

“It’s true,” Josie said. “Our parents were all about making the little things sweet and romantic.” She shot Paige a smile. “Memories really matter. They *do* stay with you.”

Oh crap, Paige thought as Josie looked at her with what could have easily been described as pride. She was right. And her sappy, romance-crazy parents had rubbed off on her after all.

Dammit.

“I need to go.” She looked around. “Up front.”

At least up front she wouldn't be opening her mouth in front of Josie and acting like she actually thought about romantic weekends and knew how to make things special and meaningful.

Paige took a deep breath and pushed through the swinging door to the front of the bakery. She immediately found Mitch in spite of the crowd of people.

I'd play stupid video games with him all weekend. For sure. Or go out on fishing boats on the swamp.

Dammit.

It seemed that he sensed her as well. He was sitting closest to the window at their table, not facing the kitchen door, but he looked over as soon as she stepped out. Their eyes met, and his mouth curled in a grin that sent heat skittering through her body. It was a knowing smile. A smile that said he knew her. Knew her body. Knew her thoughts. Knew that she would be here.

That idea made trepidation slip down her spine.

Turn around and go right back out of here. That was her first thought. Her first instinct.

But then he gave her a wink and leaned over, draping his arm across the back of the chair where Tori sat.

For some reason, that made Paige relax. So Josh and Tori were playing along? That was nice. And awkward. She felt bad. Her crazy family, and her own crazy commitment issues were causing Tori and Josh and Mitch to have to lie.

She sighed and made her way from behind the counter over to their table.

“Good morning.”

“Paige!” Tori bounced up from her chair and hugged Paige. “Hi!”

Paige squeezed her back with a huge smile. Tori Kramer, soon-to-be-Landry, was impossible not to like. She was sweet and kind and genuine and slightly awkward in a very adorable I-just-want-to-take-care-of-her way.

Over Tori's shoulder, Paige noticed Josh watching them. He was smiling with an affectionate look that, if anyone had been looking, would have *clearly* said he was madly in love with Tori.

Paige let Tori go and grinned at her. "It's so good to see you. But I didn't know you were going to come over for the festival."

"Oh, it's the perfect reason to come see you," Tori said, taking her seat again. "When Mitch said that he was—"

"When he said how much he missed her but that he needed to stay to make sure all the electrical worked once things kicked off, Tori wanted to head right over," Josh interrupted, sitting forward.

Tori pressed her lips together and nodded, glancing at Mitch. "Right," she said. Then giggled. "I couldn't stay away from him another day though."

"Aw, love you, Tori," Mitch said. Then he pulled her in and kissed her.

It was just a quick peck on the lips, and his grin was full of mischief, but Josh's grin fell away and his body tensed.

Tori blushed.

Paige thought about knocking the rest of Mitch's coffee into his lap.

Chapter Ten



Of course, *all* of those reactions were what Mitch was going for.

“Dammit, Mitch,” Josh muttered, too low for anyone else to hear.

But Mitch was focused on Paige. And she realized that he was trying to see how she’d react.

With jealousy. That’s how she was reacting.

With stupid, makes-no-sense-because-she-knew-it-was-a-lie jealousy. Even more, she couldn’t feel jealous over a guy that she didn’t want anything long-term with. That was her call. That was her rule. That was her decision. She couldn’t be jealous over other women or how he spent his time or if he didn’t text or call her every day.

Even *more*, she *never* felt jealous. That was the truth. She had never met, dated, kissed, or even had a hookup with a guy she felt jealous about over anything.

She was going to have to get a handle on her emotions about *this* guy.

And it was definitely a red flag that her emotions were not handled even when she knew that he was just messing around.

Paige made herself sit back in her chair, cross her legs, and smile.

“Got to sell it,” Mitch said to his cousin.

“I’m keepin’ track,” Josh told him. “I’m going to make you pay for *every* one of those.”

“I’m so sorry,” Paige said. She kept her voice low too. The bakery was busy and there was a lot of noise, but this was Appleby. It sometimes felt like the walls and trees even had ears. “He’s helping me out and I realize it’s ridiculous.”

“It’s fine,” Tori said. “We’ve all got each other’s backs. Mitch told us what was up before we even headed over here.” She gave Josh a look. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Josh nodded and gave her a wink. Then he leaned in and took Paige’s hand in his on top of the table. “So, how are things at the yoga-cat café?”

Paige was surprised by the hand holding but she slid a glance at Mitch, knowing immediately what was going on. Mitch was looking at his cousin with his eyebrow arched.

Paige leaned in, closer to Josh too, feeling a touch of that same mischief that was in the air. “It’s good. Very... relaxing.”

Josh grinned and Paige completely understood what Tori saw in him. He was very good looking, but even more, he had a confident, laid-back charm about him that was definitely appealing.

“I mentioned she should look into otter yoga,” Mitch said from across the table.

Josh’s brows both arched. “You have otters?”

She laughed. “No.”

“But *we* do,” Mitch said.

Josh nodded. “Ah. Got it. Is that something you could do?” he asked Paige.

She shrugged. “I’d have to learn a lot about otters.”

“Otters are not going to lie still and just stretch out like the cats,” Tori said. “They’re pretty active. If your yoga class is distracted by the otters, they won’t be getting much meditation done.”

Paige laughed. “Noted.”

“Now, now,” Mitch said. He moved his hand to rest it across Tori’s shoulders rather than on the chair.

His big hand resting on the other woman made Paige’s eyes narrow and she had to tell herself to relax.

“Let’s not talk her out of things before we give it a fair try. I told her about the otter encounter and just said there wasn’t a yoga studio in Autre. Let’s not get excited about what *won’t* work.”

Josh looked interested in his cousin’s interest in yoga. He slid his chair closer to Paige’s.

Mitch’s eyes followed the movement and he did the same, sliding closer to Tori.

Paige almost grinned. Tori laughed lightly.

“Well, how do you feel about alpacas?” she asked. “We’re taking four back with us.”

Paige did laugh then, sharing a look with Mitch. “Four?”

Tori grinned. “We went to talk to Drew. The one he thought I should take back with me is just a baby. An orphan. His mom died about a month ago. They’ve been bottle-feeding him but they don’t really have the time to give him.”

Drew and his brother Dallas were young bachelor farmers. They raised the alpacas for their wool. They weren’t doing it because they wanted to spend all their time being fill-in moms, she was sure. They were nice guys but they had a huge farm to run, and whenever they had a runt kitten or found a stray, they called Paige rather than caring for it themselves.

“So, of course, they thought of you,” Paige teased.

She and Tori had absolutely bonded over their love of animals, especially cats. Tori had told her that she’d been called Cinderella in elementary school after her classmates found out she’d had a pet racoon, rabbits, even mice. All animals liked her. And vice versa. When she’d lived in Iowa, she’d collected “special needs” animals, including a pig that was afraid of thunder, an English bulldog that had been born with a cleft palate and had needed to be fed by hand, and a

mountain lion she'd saved after it had been shot as a cub, along with a few "regular" animals like goats and dogs and a whole bunch of cats. She'd even had an alpaca that loved it when she sang to him. Paige had no reason to believe that the sweet veterinarian was any different now just because she lived in Louisiana. And clearly Josh was very willing to indulge her.

"So what about the other three alpacas?" Paige asked.

"Well, I said..." Tori's cheeks got pink and she looked at Josh.

Paige looked at Josh too. The guy who was holding *her* hand. He was looking at Tori like he thought she was fucking adorable and hot as hell all at once.

"One of them came up and kissed her on the cheek," Josh said.

"Come on," Paige said with a laugh.

"Well, pretty much," Josh said. "Saw her across the pen and came straight over and put his mouth on her cheek. She, of course, was smitten. Then *his* girlfriend had to come. And their baby girl. Which, if things go well, will maybe be the other little llama's girlfriend someday, right?" he asked Tori.

Tori smiled at him like she thought *he* was adorable and hot as well.

Paige rolled her eyes. She hoped no one in the bakery was *really* paying attention because no way would they not realize these two wanted to tear each other's clothes off and sit on the porch in their rocking chairs at age ninety together.

Paige looked at Mitch. He was watching *her*. It made her feel warm and she smiled at him. Even though she knew that her smile didn't look casual to anyone looking on either. It was mostly tear-his-clothes-off. But there might have been a touch of rocking chair in there.

Dammit.

"Tell her about the whole plan," Mitch said to Tori. He picked up a strand of her hair and twirled it around his finger.

Josh shifted to put his arm around Paige.

“Well,” Tori said, her eyes on Josh’s arm. “We’re starting a whole petting zoo and animal encounter as an offshoot of Boys of the Bayou.”

“We’re calling it Boys of the Bayou Gone Wild,” Josh said. He grinned. “Totally tongue-in-cheek since otters and alpacas aren’t very wild.”

Paige laughed. “I love it.” She looked at Tori. “That sounds like your kind of thing, for sure.”

“Yeah, otters and alpacas and goats and my pot-bellied pig and who knows what else.” Tori said with a smile. “But I’m not doing it. I mean, most of the petting zoo animals are mine and I’ll help out, but a friend of mine from vet school has joined me in my practice and Gone Wild will be his thing. And we still need someone to run that part of the business. Josh and Owen and Sawyer don’t have time. That’s where Mitch comes in.”

Paige looked at Mitch. He shook his head.

“I’m just building pens and things.”

“No you’re not. You’re going to be great managing it,” Tori said, pivoting on her chair to look at him more fully. “You’re going to do what Josh and Owen do on the boats.”

Mitch grinned and looked at his cousin. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

Tori rolled her eyes. “Uh-huh.” She looked at Paige. “The Boys of the Bayou is a fantastic tour of the bayou with a lot of information and great experiences built in. They talk about the plants and animals of the bayou as well as the history and legends of the area. They make sure the tourists see alligators and other animals in the wild, and they take them to see some of the old cabins and talk about the people who settled the area. It’s a great tour. But...” She cast another affectionate glance at her fiancé.

“But?” Paige asked, looking from Josh to Tori.

“But the *boys* of the bayou are a huge draw. Josh and Owen and even Sawyer are a part of the fabulous reviews. They flirt. They talk hunting and fishing. They turn on the Southern charm and those drawls.”

Paige nodded, but she was looking at Mitch now. “I know exactly what you’re talking about.”

Tori laughed. “Yep. The women think they’re hot and charming when they’re teasing and flirting, and it’s really weird how often the guys end up shirtless and wet.”

“Hmm, that is really *weird*,” Paige said sarcastically to Josh.

He just grinned.

“And the men think they’re cool. They drive airboats and hunt alligators and all kinds of manly man stuff.” Tori rolled her eyes again, but she was still smiling.

Paige shook her head, fighting her own smile. “That does sound pretty cool.”

Josh nodded. “And then there’s how great we are with kids.” He looked at his fiancé. “Admit it. That makes your panties melt, Iowa.”

Tori didn’t answer right away, but she didn’t deny it either.

Paige knew that guys interacting well with children were a lust button for a lot of women. A lot of her friends, for that matter.

“So you’re going to manage the petting zoo and otter encounter?” she asked Mitch. She wasn’t going to think about him with kids. That didn’t work with her. She had nieces and nephews. She liked kids fine, but she wasn’t ga-ga over babies or little kids, and her biological clock wasn’t even wound up not to mention ticking.

“No. I’m building the pens and enclosures,” he said again. He gave Tori a look.

She sighed. “You’d be so good.”

“You want me puttin’ up fences with my shirt off?” he asked, giving her a small smile. “I can do that.”

He should *absolutely* do that. And charge admission, for sure, Paige thought.

But she noted his smile seemed forced.

Interesting. He didn’t want to be more involved with the animal portion of the business? Why not?

“Well, *at least* that,” Tori teased. “You’d just be so good talking about the animals. You love them. And you’re as charming and sweet and funny as Josh and Owen.”

“Hey, now,” Josh said. But his tone was light.

Tori shot him a smile. “You know what I mean. All the charm you turn on for the tourists. Mitch can do that. I’m not talking about the you-and-me charm.”

The way she said *charm* made Paige’s eyes widen. It looked like the sweet, small-town farmgirl had been a little corrupted by the Louisiana boy who was now giving her hot looks over sweet, small-town muffins and coffee.

Paige glanced at Mitch. She understood that. She really did. She wanted to be a little corrupted herself.

“There’s no other charm like that, babe,” Josh said, his voice dropping low.

“Okay,” Paige said, squeezing Josh’s hand to remind him not to eye-fuck Tori across the table in the bakery.

Tori fanned her face and gave Josh a wink, but she said to Mitch, “And you love the otters. Admit it.”

“Otters are cute.” Mitch shrugged. “Everyone likes otters.”

Tori blew out a breath.

“I’ve got Fletcher and Zeke helping me,” Mitch said. “They can take care of the tourists.”

“His mom specifically told me we’re supposed to call him Ezekiel,” Tori said with a grin.

Mitch and Josh both laughed. Mitch looked at Paige. “Zeke’s one of my cousins. Fletcher too. But Zeke and Zander are twins. Their mom hates that we shorten Ezekiel and Alexander.”

“But the family’s been doing it all their lives and they’re twenty-six,” Josh said. “You’d think she’d be used to it by now.”

Tori shook her head. “I think she was hoping that since I’m kind of new, she could at least get me to do it right.” She looked at Paige. “In the Landry family, the *more* something bugs you, the more likely it’s going to continue. You have to learn to roll with things on the bayou.”

Paige couldn’t deny she was fascinated.

The conversation about Mitch’s role with the tourists had gotten sidetracked. She was pretty sure he’d intended that, but the whole topic seemed to be an ongoing discussion. Paige wanted to ask him more about it later. Then realized that it was none of her business what Mitch did with his job and his family’s business. If he didn’t want to do more, that was his choice. She didn’t know what that was about and it didn’t matter.

Paige opened her mouth to ask a question when suddenly there was a murmuring in the crowd and the sound of chairs scraping and people started to pivot in the same direction.

Paige frowned and looked as well.

“I know we haven’t known each other very long, but I’m absolutely crazy about you.”

Elliot, one of the programmers who worked for Aiden, Grant, Cam, and Oliver, the guys who had bought the Hot Cakes factory, was standing in front of the bakery case. He was facing his boyfriend, Max, one of the factory workers, who everyone in town adored.

Max’s eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open.

“When I bid on you at the bachelor auction, I knew we were going to have fun,” Elliot said. “But I had no idea what I was *actually* winning.” He dropped to one knee in front of

Max. “A chance at everything I’ve always wanted.” He was holding a red velvet cupcake in one hand and a gold band in the other. “Max, will you marry me?”

The entire bakery sucked in a breath all at once and not a single person moved.

Including Max.

He just stood staring down at his boyfriend.

Paige felt herself leaning forward. Holy shit, was Max going to turn him down in front of everyone?

But Elliot didn’t look nervous. He just waited.

Finally Jane coughed from behind the counter. Her cough sounded like, “*Max.*”

Max shook his head. “Elliot.”

Elliot just kept the ring extended.

“Fuck, yes,” Max said, shaking his head slowly. “Damn.”

Elliot gave him a huge smile and got to his feet.

The big, burly man grabbed Elliot and pulled him into his arms, hugging him tightly.

The whole bakery cheered, and Jane came rushing around the bakery case to throw her arms around both men.

Paige tried to swallow and found that her throat was tight. She blinked fast. What the hell? Were her eyes a little watery?

She sat back in her chair and glanced over at Mitch. He was watching her with a smile. She rolled her eyes at him. He laughed.

“Oh my gosh!” Tori said, then gave a happy sigh. “That was amazing. Do you know them?” she asked Paige.

“I know Max,” Paige said. “Elliot is from Chicago. They just met this past summer.”

“When you know, you know,” Mitch said simply.

She frowned at him. “Watch yourself, Bayou.”

Josh laughed at that. “He can’t help it. He’s a Landry.”

“What’s that mean?” Paige asked, not sure she really wanted to know.

“The Landrys have a long, proud history of big romance,” Josh said, almost smugly.

Paige groaned.

Josh chuckled. “That’s a bad thing?”

“Don’t scare her off before I get her down there and can seduce her with beignets,” Mitch said.

“Romance scares you off?” Tori asked.

Paige glanced over to where Max and Elliot were accepting congratulations and she couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m not sure scared is the right word,” she admitted.

“That’s my girl,” Mitch said gruffly from across the table.

“Maybe you just haven’t—” Tori started but she gave a little, “*Eek*,” and then pressed her lips together.

Paige assumed Mitch had pinched her or something.

Well, good. At least he was getting the message not to *talk about it* all the damned time, no matter how he felt.

“Paige is gonna be my ‘plus one’ at your wedding,” Mitch told Tori, his eyes on Paige.

She should say no.

If she went to Louisiana she might not make it to Colorado.

“Oh yes,” Tori exclaimed, her eyes bright. “I was going to invite you anyway. Please come. Mitch will make sure you have fun.” Then she giggled. “I didn’t mean it like that but...”

“Okay, Tor,” Mitch said with a grin. “Paige knows what you meant.”

Paige didn’t care what Tori meant. She was concerned about what *Mitch* meant.

“It will be a ton of fun. You’ll love Autre and everyone,” Josh said. “Please come.”

Everyone. She was going to meet everyone.

The big, romantic everyone.

Ugh.

Paige looked back and forth between Tori and Josh. They were such nice people. Then she looked at Mitch. Then over at Max and Elliot and then at Kelsey who was standing with Josie and Grant and Zoe and Aiden wearing her new heart necklace.

Everyone was freaking in love.

There was romance and wedding stuff everywhere she looked.

She blew out a breath. Escaping sounded great, but escaping by going to a *wedding* in another little town with a whole bunch of people who loved love seemed like kind of the opposite thing she should do.

But then she looked at Mitch.

She wasn't ready to say goodbye to him yet.

Crap.

She felt herself nodding. "Yeah, okay, I'll come to the wedding."

Mitch's smile was definitely pleased. But also a little knowing.

She was going to have to limit the texting and calls between now and the wedding. She didn't want him to get the idea that they were *dating* or had a serious relationship going into that romantic weekend.

And she was only staying for a couple of days. Tops.

Twenty minutes later, they were wandering through the town square, stopping at every single booth.

They sampled hot cider—that was very hot thanks to the electricity flowing into the booth—and caramel apples and mini apple pies from Buttered Up and apple cookies and

applesauce and even apple wine. It was all homemade and, frankly, delicious.

Most people claimed they wouldn't touch another apple recipe for weeks after leaving the square but that never ended up being true.

They also checked out the craft stations where you could paint with apple cores and get a temporary apple tattoo along with the booths where people were selling everything from wooden apples to ceramic apples to towels embroidered with apples.

"Wow," Mitch said when they were through the square and on their way to the yoga studio so Tori could take a look at the cats. "I mean, when you people adopt a theme, you go all in."

Paige laughed. "For sure."

"Oh, you bayou boys can't talk," Tori said. "There are alligators on everything in Autre."

"The bayou is a way of life," Josh told her. "We have to celebrate it."

Mitch nodded his agreement.

After Tori checked over all the cats, which took a while considering all the ooh-ing and ahh-ing and cuddling that went on while she examined them, Mitch finally got to his feet.

"Guess we're heading out," he said.

Paige looked up, then scrambled to her feet. "Oh. Really? Today?"

Today was the day they were supposed to *arrive*.

But it was fine they were leaving. This was the amount of time she'd expected to spend with Mitch. Short and sweet. No big deal.

So why did it feel like so much had happened and that his visit had been a very big deal?

"Yeah, we need to get back," he said, shooting a glance at Tori.

“I’m sorry,” Tori said. “It’s my fault.”

“It’s *my* fault,” Josh said. “I should have known taking her over to the Ryan farm was the wrong move.”

“But I wanted to meet everybody,” Tori said.

“Everybody being the alpaca—the *one* alpaca—that she was supposed to be taking back to Louisiana,” Mitch added.

“And now it’s four alpacas,” Paige said with a smile.

Tori nodded.

“And...” Mitch said.

Paige looked at her with wide eyes. “There’s more?”

“There was a donkey,” Tori said, lifting her shoulder.

“Who now belongs to us too,” Josh said.

Paige shook her head. “Wow.”

Tori said, lifting a shoulder. “Drew asked if I wanted him.”

Mitch laughed. “And Tori’s never met an animal she *doesn’t* want.”

“Anyway,” Josh said, “now that she’s met her new babies, she wants to get them home and settled.”

Paige wondered if Josh *ever* said no to Tori. But she couldn’t help smiling. Clearly they were both incredibly happy.

She looked up at Mitch. And now she was going to get rid of him sooner. Before she started liking him any more than she already did.

“I am sorry to be taking Mitch back to Louisiana so soon though,” Tori said, truly looking regretful. “But we do need his help with the trailers and driving that far straight through and everything.”

“It’s fine,” Paige assured her.

Mitch lifted a brow as if to ask *it is, huh?*

Well, it *should* be. He was just some guy she’d met and had some sexy fun with. Hell, he already knew more about her

life than the last three guys she'd "dated". It was time for him to go.

But she was going to miss him.

She wasn't able to quite avoid that thought entirely.

"I need to grab my stuff from upstairs," he said to her. "Come with me."

There was not a question mark at the end of that sentence. Still, she nodded.

"I didn't realize you'd left your stuff up there," she said as she led him up the stairs.

"You thought I took it all to the bakery with me?" he asked.

"I didn't know you went to the bakery."

"Where did you think I went?"

"Louisiana."

She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He grabbed her wrist and swung her around. He wrapped an arm around her waist and brought her in for a deep kiss.

Her hands slid into his hair, and she went up on tiptoe to get closer.

This is what I'm going to miss she told herself. *All I'm going to miss.*

You're a freaking liar herself said right back.

When he let her go she was breathing hard.

"I've been dying to do that all morning," he said.

She nodded. Hanging out at the bakery and watching him pretend to be with Tori—and being stupidly jealous of it—had been bad enough, but walking through the square and watching him hold Tori's hand and feed her bites of cookie and brush glitter out of her hair had been irritating. Even though it was all fake. And she didn't want any of that herself.

It was definitely good he was leaving.

He was cupping her cheek and watching her. “I’ll see you in thirty-eight days,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Thirty-eight days? That’s not even two months.”

He grinned. “Exactly.”

“Are you coming back here for some reason?” Her heart thumped. She tried to tell herself it was because that idea made her nervous. But she was starting to think that she was not only a liar, but a pretty bad one.

“Do you want me to come back before then? I’ll be here. Just say the word,” he told her gruffly.

She wanted to say that word. Kind of. More than she did with anyone else anyway.

“Though you’ll have to somehow explain that to your mom.”

That would be interesting.

“I just... I mean...”

He finally chuckled. “Relax. I’m just giving you shit, you gorgeous commitment-phobe. The wedding is in thirty-eight days.”

She pulled back. “What? That means they’re getting married in February.”

She’d assumed the wedding would be in the spring. Or June. Like a normal wedding time. Several months in the future.

Why was nothing with this guy going according to plan?

“They’re getting married on Mardi Gras,” he said. “That’s when they met and when they got back together. So they almost have to.” He shrugged.

“Mardi Gras is in *February*?”

Why didn’t she know that? Why did Mardi Gras seem like a warm-weather event? Probably all the naked boobs associated with the holiday. Then again, it *was* a warm-

weather event since it was mostly celebrated in the South. February in Louisiana was definitely warmer than February in Iowa.

Which was a major draw to this wedding for this Iowa girl.

As if the big guy who was dragging his hand down the side of her body and settling it on her hip wasn't enough.

He is. He so is. And don't even try to lie about it.

Yeah, yeah.

“Well, I guess I'll see you soon, then,” she said.

He laughed and leaned in and kissed her before letting her go. “You need to work on acting enthusiastic about that before you get there, okay? My ego can only take so much.”

She grinned a genuine grin. “I'm not worried about your ego.”

It was probably a good thing he was sure of himself and cocky. He could handle her less-than-enthusiastic quirks about intimacy and commitment better than most men. The guys around here got their feelings hurt pretty easily. It was another reason she rarely said yes to dates with guys from Appleby. She mostly dated guys from other towns... the bigger and farther away, the better.

Mitch would be the farthest away of any guy she'd dated though—if that's what they were going to call it—and that didn't feel like a perk, exactly.

He pulled her in close again and put his mouth against her ear. “I can't wait to see you and have you for six months straight.”

She felt tingles racing through her body and she had to focus on what he'd said. “You said six *days* last night,” she reminded him. And she hadn't agreed to that. Yet.

“Okay, fine, we'll compromise at six weeks.”

“I can't.” Well, she *shouldn't*. She *could*. Technically, she supposed.

He kissed her, then lifted his head. “We'll see.”

“That should sound creepy. Like you’re going to lock me up or something.”

He didn’t grin. He cupped her face again. “*Does* it sound creepy?”

She wet her lips and then said honestly, “No.”

“We’ll take it... six days at a time,” he said.

She smiled. “You don’t take no for an answer very easily.”

“Actually, I’m pretty easy going about most things. Usually. But I’ve never wanted something this much.” His gaze was still serious and she felt her stomach flip. He dragged his thumb over her bottom lip. “But I won’t push you.”

“You’ll just *tempt* me?” she asked.

“Oh yes. That. For sure.” Now the slow, sexy smile curled his mouth.

“Thanks for the warning.”

He stepped back after another long look. Then he grabbed his bag from beside the door.

How had she not noticed that before? Well, she’d been on the phone with her sister, panicking about Tori and Josh and Mitch being at Buttered Up.

Mitch pulled the door open and looked back. “See ya soon.”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He smiled and then left.

As the door shut behind him, only one thought went through her head.

I already miss him.

Well, fu... fudge.

Chapter Eleven



One week later...

Josie and Grant's wedding was easily the most romantic thing Paige had ever witnessed.

Of course it was. It was Josie. The most in-love-with-love person Paige had ever met. And that included their own parents and grandparents.

Josie looked gorgeous, even with tears—happy tears, of course—streaming down her face. Grant had even choked up during his vows.

The flowers were gorgeous. The music was gorgeous. Josie's dress was gorgeous. Hell, even the bridesmaids' dresses—Paige, Zoe, Jane, and Amanda wore—were gorgeous. And when did that ever happen?

The cake was, of course, *gorgeous*. Zoe and Josie had made it themselves, and Paige had to admit, it was a work of art.

Paige tipped back her glass of champagne. Her first, but she intended to keep the free booze flowing. They were at the reception now, and she didn't have to make a speech—that was Zoe's job as maid of honor—so Paige could definitely get drunk.

She really wanted to get drunk.

She was surrounded by in-love people. Her sister and Grant. Zoe and Aiden. Jane and Dax. Whitney and Cam. Max

and Elliot. Even Kelsey was here with Matt, freaking *glowing* as they danced.

The worst part though, was that her and Josie's parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and, well, *everyone*, were so, so happy. No, it wasn't bad that they were happy. She didn't begrudge them that. But it did remind her that they were still sad about the Wedding Reception That Never Was.

Aka, Paige's fuckup.

They were learning though, because only two people—and neither relatives of hers—had commented that it was her turn next. So she only needed to add two cats to her collection.

Of course, part of being around her extended family at a *wedding*, of all things, was she knew they were all whispering to one another about how “too bad” it was that the handsome, charming man she'd been holding hands with in the bakery last week lived so far away. What they really meant was that it was typical that Paige would finally show some interest in someone and he'd be out of reach. But Josie telling them all that Josh was from Louisiana and he owned his own business there, and, no, there was no way he could move to Iowa, did keep them from bugging Paige about holding his hand in public.

Paige set the champagne glass down and sighed.

And admitted the *actual* worst part.

She wished that Mitch were here.

And not just because then her Aunt Vivian would stop giving her pitying looks as she sat at the head table alone, the only single bridesmaid. She and Oliver, one of Grant's best friends, were the only two single members of the bridal party, period, and everyone knew Ollie was in love with Piper.

Well, everyone except Ollie himself.

Ollie and Piper were dancing now too.

Paige wished Mitch were here because she'd love to dance with him. And drink champagne. And flirt and laugh and tease and just have fun.

Mitch would be fun to be with.

At the dance. At the *wedding dance*.

She wouldn't even mind that her mother would be pleased and hopeful watching her and Mitch together. She might even smile and say, "We'll see" when her mother asked if he could be The One. Instead of her usual, "You just added another year of spinsterhood to my calendar. At this rate, I won't be married until I'm fifty."

Her mother would always roll her eyes and mutter something under her breath, and Paige couldn't quite hear but assumed was along the lines of "Where did I go wrong?" or "I need to stop for wine on the way home."

"Hi, Paige."

She looked up and blinked, pulling her attention away from her thoughts. "Oh, hi, Carter."

"Would you like to dance?"

She looked from Carter Rogers to the dance floor then back.

No, not really. Not unless Mitch was here.

But Mitch wasn't here, and it was her sister's wedding dance, and, as much as she hated to do it, it would make her mom happy.

She sighed. She didn't hate making her mom happy. She loved her mom. She just wished that making her happy didn't involve her getting hitched. She'd given her mother *plenty* of grandkids to spoil. They had fur and couldn't talk, but they also potty trained *really* easily and could be left alone when she went out, like to a wedding, without her having to pay a sitter.

"Paige?"

"Oh right." She smiled at Carter. Carter had been a classmate of hers and she'd always liked him. He was one of the smartest guys in their class and he'd gone off to college on a full scholarship. He'd just moved back and started his business. Something about bringing up-and-coming tech to

rural areas of the Midwest. She was sure he was going to be successful. And in Appleby for the rest of his life.

“Sure,” she finally said. They could *dance* though.

He led her to the dance floor and she let him pull her close. It wasn't her fault that she instantly began comparing being against him to being against Mitch.

But as they danced she relaxed.

They talked and laughed. She'd forgotten Carter was funny. She hadn't forgotten that he was cute and they got along well though. She was glad he'd asked her to dance.

She participated in the bouquet toss—dodging the stupid thing when her sister practically threw it right to her. Carter took part in the garter toss. They did the “Hokey Pokey” and line danced to “Achy Breaky Heart”.

And when the dance was over, she let him walk her out to her car. She would have walked all the way home if it weren't for her heels and fancy dress and the sixteen-degree wind chill. Why her sister had wanted to get married in January was beyond her.

“This was fun,” Carter said, pulling her door open.

“It was,” Paige agreed. See? Why couldn't people just hang out and have fun without it meaning more?

“I've been thinking about you since I moved back,” Carter said.

Paige froze. *No*. No, no, no.

“What do you mean?”

He smiled. And it did *nothing* to her stomach.

“I was really glad you were still single when I got back,” he said.

Paige tossed her purse onto the passenger seat with a sigh. Well, dammit.

“I'm not looking for a boyfriend, Carter,” she said.

He moved in closer. “Well, good. Because I don’t want to be your boyfriend.”

Paige narrowed her eyes. Was he thinking about a fling? She *might* have considered that, but... Mitch had happened. And now she wasn’t attracted to Carter at all.

“Then what do you want?” she asked, not wanting to assume anything here.

“We’re both living and working here, settling down,” Carter said. “We’re at the same place in our lives. I think we should get married.”

Paige wondered for a moment if she’d had more champagne than she’d thought. But no. This was happening.

“You’re not even going to take me out to dinner?” she asked with an eye roll. “Pretend to work up to this?”

In one way, in the back part of her brain, she kind of appreciated the no-nonsense, skip the romantic bullshit approach.

That didn’t, however, make her appreciate that she was being *proposed to*. *Again*. For fuck’s sake.

Did she have a sign on her forehead? Had her mother signed her up on an online dating site with a description that read “Ready to marry immediately. Serious offers only”?

Actually, that last one made a little sense, and Paige made a mental note to check those sites tomorrow.

“Of course I’ll take you to dinner,” Carter said. “Anything you want. But I just don’t think we should beat around the bush. I want you to know that I’m serious about this. I’m ready to make a commitment.”

Otter yoga.

Those were the two words that went through her head.

She had to get out of here.

And there was really only one place she could even consider going.

“Well, that’s not really going to work for me,” she said, pushing Carter back and getting into the car.

“What? Why not? I’ve asked around. You’ve dated pretty much everyone here. If something was going to happen with someone here, it would have, don’t you think?”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well, gosh, for one... I don’t want to marry you.” She reached for the door and pulled it partially shut. Then she added. “For another, I’m leaving in the morning.” Sure, it was a month early, but the idea of showing up in Autre, Louisiana and surprising Mitch made her heart pound.

“Leaving?” Carter asked, clearly confused.

“Yeah. I’m moving.” She sounded completely confident. And happy. And she maybe *felt* both of those things too. “Away from Appleby.”

“Where are you going? My grandma didn’t say anything about that,” Carter said with a frown.

It was actually fair, sadly, for Carter to assume his grandmother would know all about any plans like that.

Paige smiled at her fifth proposal and said with relief and a sense of anticipation that she hadn’t felt in... ever, “South. I need a break and a little... heat.”

“Just south? That’s all you know?”

“That’s all *you* need to know.”

“Is it a guy?” he asked with a frown.

She didn’t answer right away. That would definitely get back to his grandmother, then to her grandmother, then to her mother...

But would that be so bad? She’d be out of state, away from here, away from the drop-ins to try to get information.

“Yeah, it is,” she finally said.

“Wow,” Carter said. “You must be in love.”

“No,” she said quickly. “It’s not that.”

“Paige,” Carter said. “You’ve never so much as changed your pizza order for a guy. But now you’re *moving* for one? If it’s not love, what is it?”

Well, she... couldn’t say for sure. But it *wasn’t* love.

Was it?

Was this what falling in love felt like?

Oh... fu... *fuck*.

* * *

Want to know what happens once Paige gets to Louisiana?
Yes, there’s more of their story!

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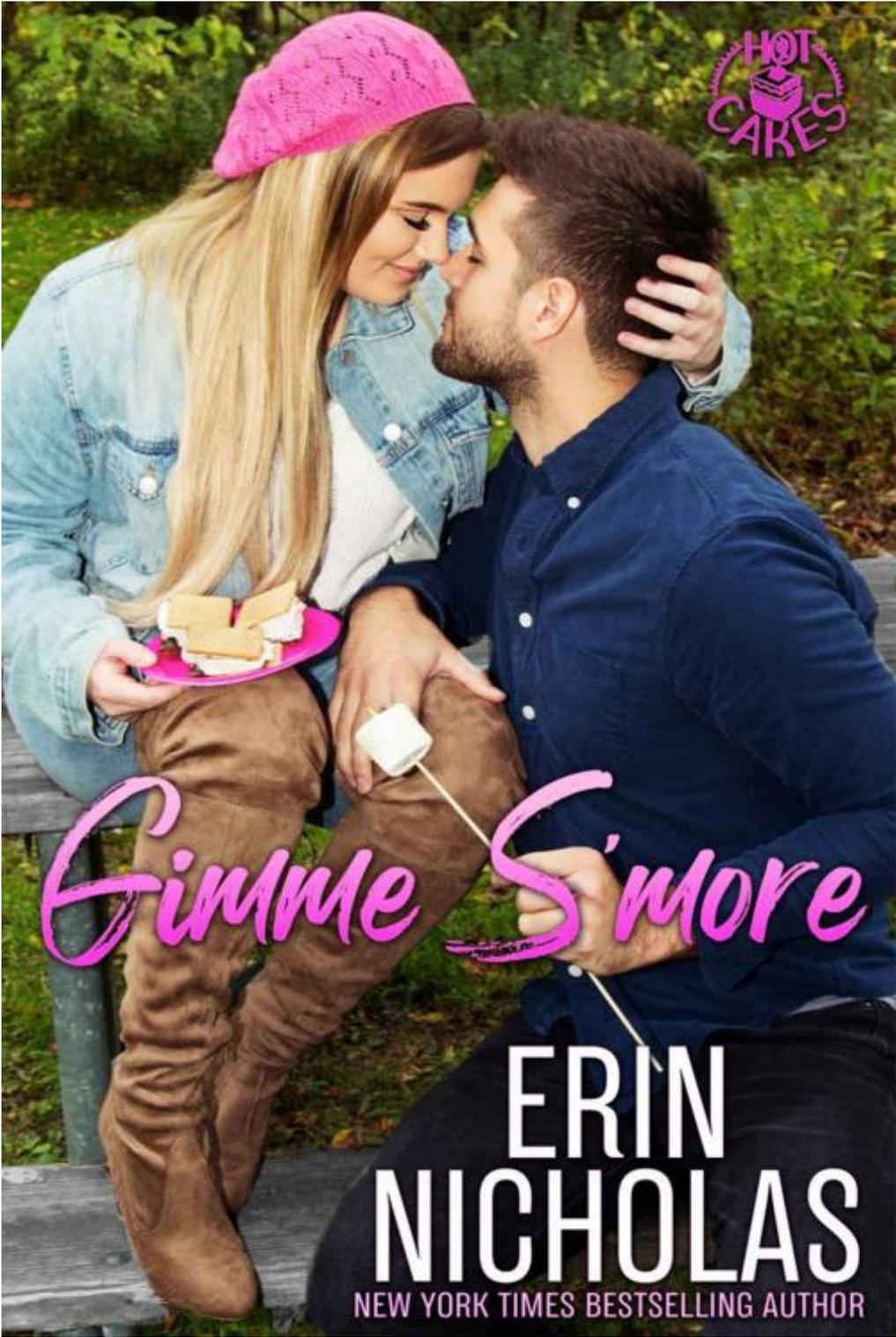
He can just be her friend and not commit the greatest sin of all...asking her for forever.

Probably.

* * *

Next up in the Hot Cakes series is Ollie and Piper in the funny, sexy, friends-to-lover, boss-assistant romance,

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HOT
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About Gimme S'more

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But does he want her as his assistant... or is there a sweeter spot in his life for the woman who's always had his back—and possibly even his heart?

Chapter One



Piper Barry was in love with an amazing, brilliant, funny, good-looking man.

Who, at least twice a day, she wanted to smother with the stuffed dragon that sat on the corner of his desk.

Okay, maybe not *smother*. That was extreme.

But duct tape over his mouth? Oh yeah, she thought about that often.

“Is spit better than snot?” Oliver Caprinelli, that man—and her boss—asked her as she crossed his office to refill the water pitcher by the window.

“In every single context, yes.” Piper was also aware that in any other workplace with any other boss, that question would be strange. Here though, not so much.

On her way back past his desk, she set the two folders and the manila envelope she carried in front of him. He was just one of her five bosses and the least likely to open those folders or that envelope. She put them down anyway.

“Grant said that a soda flavor called unicorn piss wouldn’t sell well,” Ollie said, almost as if he was thinking out loud.

He did that a lot. Thought out loud.

That never stopped Piper from chiming in though.

“And you think that calling it unicorn *snot* would make it sell better?”

This wasn't even the strangest conversation she'd ever had with Ollie.

"Wouldn't you assume that unicorn piss or snot tasted good?"

She wrinkled her nose. "No."

"Why not?"

"Uh, piss and snot."

"But *unicorn*," he insisted.

"I have never, not once, thought about the taste of unicorn... anything."

"Well, think about it now. Yes, good?"

What she thought was that working for Oliver Caprinelli would be a lot better if he didn't think out loud.

If he just sat there looking cute, things would be great.

"Why are we talking about unicorns?" she asked. "If you're adding something new to *Warriors*, you can do better. Unicorns are overdone."

The chances that this was about *Warriors of Easton*, the video game that Oliver and his four best friends had turned into the biggest-selling online game of the decade, was very good. It was nearly all Oliver thought about.

Ever.

Even when she wore her sexiest dresses. And the body oil that *all* of the other guys said smelled like spicy candy and that made them walk extra close by her desk every time they passed just so they could get a whiff. And when she worked late just so it could be only her and Ollie in the office after dark.

"It's not for *Warriors*," Ollie said. He still sounded distracted.

Honestly, he sounded distracted 90 percent of the time he talked about anything.

The man was a genius and his thoughts were always going in a million directions. It was one of the things that fascinated her most about him.

And that made her think about picking up the dragon on his desk and stuffing it in his mouth. Trying to get Oliver's attention was hard enough. Keeping it was nearly impossible.

"What's it for, then?" she asked, pausing in front of his desk with the water pitcher.

She was able to study him as she waited for his answer. He was leaning back in his big leather chair, one ankle propped on his opposite knee. He was wearing dark gray slacks that went with the dark gray jacket he had tossed over the armchair that faced his desk. She wasn't sure where his tie was. She found his ties stuffed in drawers, suit jacket pockets, seat cushions, and file drawers—wherever he happened to be when it started bugging him, and he yanked it off.

His white linen button-down shirt was unbuttoned at the top, revealing tan skin and a hint of dark hair. The hair on top of his head was sticking up a bit in the back where he had a cowlick, and she made a note to schedule a haircut for him as she resisted the urge to brush that hair down. He also hadn't shaved this morning. He never grew a full beard or even let it get too scruffy, but once in a while there would be a day or two of growth. It made him look older and more intense. When he shaved, he looked easily five years younger than his twenty-eight years.

He was looking at the dragon on his desk, but Piper knew he wasn't seeing Spark. The plush dragon was one of the toys from the *Warriors of Easton* merchandise line. Spark was the one dragon in the game that couldn't breathe fire no matter how hard he tried.

Piper didn't know anything more about Spark than that. She didn't play the game and her awareness of it was limited to the things she'd handled as Oliver's personal assistant. That consisted mostly of keeping his appearances organized, answering emails, and dealing with the paperwork he had to do as one of the company's owners.

He had never cared about the business side of things much. He was the creative director. Still was, even though he and his four best friends who had owned *Warriors* under the umbrella of their company Fluke Inc. had sold *Warriors* to a larger gaming company last year.

Oliver continued to write story lines and develop characters for the game world.

But it was obvious that since they'd sold *Warriors* Oliver had been a little lost. His job hadn't changed a lot, but his friends were not involved with *Warriors* on the same level they had been and Piper suspected Ollie missed that intensely.

Warriors had always been a passion project for the five friends. It had taken off unexpectedly and they'd become accidental millionaires from it. But at its most basic level, it had always been something they did together and just had a good time with.

"Oliver?" she asked. "What's the unicorn spit about if it's not *Warriors*?"

He looked up at her and she could have sworn for a second that he'd forgotten she was there.

Even after working for the man for five years, that was still a little insulting. Especially when she was wearing one of her favorite pin-up dresses. It was bright pink, hugged her hips and breasts, and gave a little peek of cleavage without being inappropriate. She wore a wide black belt with it, black pumps with a big pink bow, black fishnets, and a black hair scarf.

She looked great. Sexy even.

And she would bet that if she had him close his eyes and asked him what color her dress was, he wouldn't know.

"Trying to come up with names for the sodas," he said.

She froze. Then straightened and narrowed her eyes. "What sodas?"

But she knew.

He frowned as if confused by her question. "The new sodas we're going to launch when I buy the soda company in

Wisconsin.”

“But you haven’t bought it yet?” she asked. She’d thought he was over that idea. After she had told him it was a bad idea.

“We’re meeting at the end of the week,” he said. “It’s basically done.”

“I thought we talked about how this was a bad move,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm. “I thought we agreed that you’re bored now that Hot Cakes is doing well, and the other guys have all been spending more time with their girls, but that buying *another* new company is not the right move.”

Honestly, Oliver had only gone along with the purchase of Hot Cakes because one of his best friends, Aiden, had been determined to buy it and wanted all the guys in on it. And because Ollie loved Hot Cakes’ Fudgie Fritters.

He actually liked most of the cakes. Sometimes, he was essentially a fourteen-year-old boy in a twenty-eight-year-old man’s body. He loved video games and snack cakes. And he loved hanging out with his friends.

He didn’t, however, like soda. Interestingly. He didn’t drink it. Claimed to not like it. But after they’d bought Hot Cakes and gotten it running well under their new management and had very successfully launched a new product and rebranded themselves, things had slowed down a little and now Ollie was feeling restless.

In part, because very few of the things they’d done with Hot Cakes had been *his* doing anyway.

Aiden had taken the lead, since the company was based in his hometown and buying it meant not only saving the town from losing its major employer, but also giving him a great reason to come home and be with the woman he was crazy in love with.

Dax had come along because Dax was always up for an adventure and was great with people. All people. In all situations. They’d needed Dax to help smooth things over with the disgruntled employees.

Grant had come along because he was the money guy. He'd never intended it to be a permanent move to the tiny Iowa town but, then he'd fallen in love with a hometown girl and now he wasn't going anywhere.

Cam was also from Appleby and had rekindled his relationship with his ex. Who just happened to be the granddaughter of the founders of Hot Cakes. The two of them had been the force behind the new product launch and its huge success, and everyone knew that their next new product, which was already in the works, would be just as big.

So that left Ollie just... being here. Being here with his best friends because he truly didn't have roots anywhere else and he could do his creative work for *Warriors* anywhere.

Which meant Piper was here too. She ran Oliver's life. She definitely helped all the guys and Fluke at large, but she'd been hired to be Oliver's assistant and he definitely needed the most... caretaking.

But now Ollie was bored. He'd been a little bored along the way since he'd had less direct investment, other than money, in Hot Cakes. But he'd enjoyed supporting his friends and brainstorming things like new snack cake ideas and names and the big launch event.

Now that was all over and he was looking for a new project.

Why? Why wasn't *Warriors* enough? He was the imagination behind that entire world. Everything that existed in *Warriors*, even now under new ownership, was because of Oliver. Why wasn't that enough?

And if he did have free time and had room in his brain for more, why couldn't he do something more meaningful than *soda*?

Ugh.

"I think soda lines up well with my brand," Ollie said. "Video games, snack cakes, soda." He nodded. "That makes sense."

"Your brand? What brand is that?"

“Oliver Caprinelli... let’s have a good time.” He paused and looked at her. “I’m working on a tag line.”

Piper took a deep breath. “You need a tag line? Like you *individually* need a tag line?”

“I guess.” He shrugged. “The guys are done with *Warriors* for the most part. And I’m more than Hot Cakes.”

Piper wished she wasn’t holding the water pitcher because she really needed to rub her forehead where a headache was starting. She had two types of headaches. The one right between her eyes, which came on quickly and she assumed had to with eye-rolling and frowning. She called those the *Ollies*. The ones that started in her neck and crept more slowly up the back of her head were the *Olivers*. They were tension headaches that came from stress and holding in all the *are you fucking kidding me?* that threatened throughout her days.

And she said some of them. She didn’t have, or need, a lot of filter around her bosses. Which was great. They were more like brothers than bosses. They respected her, they *needed* her—and knew it—and they listened to her.

Except for Ollie.

“You’re more than Hot Cakes?” she repeated. She agreed. But she’d never heard him say it and she was curious what he meant.

He swiveled his chair back and forth.

He was a big guy. Six-three, two-hundred-ten-ish pounds. He was wide and solid. He ran to keep in shape. In part because of that love of snack cakes and the amount of time he spent sitting and creating behind the computer.

He was wearing a custom-tailored suit that cost more than a lot of people’s house payments in Appleby.

But he was pouting. And Piper wanted to put him in time out.

“I mean, I need something more to do,” he said. “Aiden was the one who branched out into Hot Cakes. Grant’s got his

consulting business. Dax is running the nursing home. Cam has turned into a house-husband. What's *my* thing?"

The guys did all have pursuits outside of Fluke that they were enthusiastic about now. Projects and people that took up a lot of their time and energy. Additionally, the guys were all-in with their new relationships and the families and time that went along with those.

They were happy. Happier than Piper had ever seen them. And they were all still a unit. But Aiden, Dax, Grant, and Cam definitely shared a bond in being boyfriends and fiancés that left Oliver out.

Ollie was the only one who was still involved with *Warriors*. And he didn't seem to have another passion.

"So you're bored and your idea to branch out is soda?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Yeah."

Clearly he was very passionate about this new company. Piper rolled her eyes, making the jab of pain in her forehead worse.

"Oliver, you need to find something to *care* about," she said.

Like me, a voice said in the back of her mind.

She told that voice to shut the hell up. She and that voice had been over this before. She couldn't explain why she loved Oliver, but she did. However, Oliver would make her crazy.

Oh, and he wasn't interested. Clearly.

"I care about growing my brand."

"Oh my God," she exclaimed. "Your brand? You want your brand to be video games and crap food? You can do better than that, Ollie!"

He lifted a brow. "Like what?"

He wasn't challenging her. He actually wanted her to tell him what he should do.

Oliver Caprinelli was a handsome, intelligent, charming-when-he-wanted-to-be, funny-usually-accidentally-but-sometimes-on-purpose, crazy successful creative genius.

Who drove her insane.

It was all Aiden's and Grant's and Dax's and Cam's fault.

They'd all been enabling this man since they'd met him. They treated him like he was delicate. Like if they pushed him too hard or told him no, he'd lose his spark and wouldn't be able to create any longer.

They treated him like he was a spoiled royal prince.

Oliver had never had an idea that Dax hadn't said, "Hell yes!" to. He'd never made a mistake that Grant hadn't bailed him out of. He'd never created something Aiden hadn't been able to sell for big bucks.

Oliver had also never booked a hotel room or a plane ticket on his own and had no idea how to even use the Instant Pot in his hotel suite. Because Piper did those things.

But that had been her job. She hadn't enabled him the way the guys had.

It was really *their* fault he was the way he was.

But as she studied the good-looking guy who *looked* like a very successful functioning adult, she admitted that a lot of this was her fault too.

Ollie was bored because he truly had very little to do or take care of.

They'd all given him so much time and space to be creative that he had very little actually filling his days. Nothing *real* anyway. Nothing practical. His entire job was to sit down and imagine stuff.

He was good at it. It was definitely lucrative. There was no question about it. But yeah, it made sense that he was bored.

And, like everything else, she wanted to fix this for him.

"Oliver," Piper said, making her tone more placating. "You can do better than soda. If you want a brand"—she did *not* roll

her eyes—“can’t you come up with something more in line with *Warriors*? That’s what people know you for.”

He and Dax were the face of the company. They did YouTube videos, discussing the creation of the game as well as more in-depth conversations for fans about the world and the character arcs and what was to come.

People discussed the game as if it were a beloved television show or book series. They knew the main characters and cared about their development and what would happen to them. It rivaled the fans of Star Wars and the Marvel comics and movies. But it was a video game. So the fans could participate in the world. They could truly be a part of it.

“You don’t think people drink soda while they play?” he asked.

She sighed. “Does it matter? Couldn’t you buy a... gaming controller company or something?” She didn’t love that idea either. How meaningful was that?

And yes, with that thought, she realized that she wanted Oliver to do something more *meaningful*. Not just because the world needed his creativity and intelligence, but because *he* needed to do more.

He didn’t even care about this soda company.

“There aren’t any controller companies for sale.” He sighed and swiveled his chair. It squeaked when he went all the way to the right.

That squeak made her eye twitch. She was going to have to come in here and fix that later.

“There’s one that wants me to endorse their controllers,” he said, sounding completely disinterested.

“Okay.” That wasn’t great, but it was better than soda. Especially soda called unicorn snot. “Are you going to?”

“I don’t like the controllers,” he said.

“Oh well, then...”

“But maybe.”

Piper blew out a breath. “You can’t endorse a controller if you don’t like it.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I could do some commercials or something.”

It wasn’t that he liked the spotlight, though it would seem that way. He just liked to *do* things. He liked to travel and meet people and have projects. The gaming cons were fun for him because he got to go places and interact with people who were enthusiastic about things he was enthusiastic about. Dax actually did better on stage and engaging with audiences than Ollie, but Dax could pull Oliver out and make him relax and be charming.

“Oliver,” Piper finally said firmly. “You should not endorse that controller and you should *not* buy that soda company.”

“They’re already coming on Friday.”

“I can cancel the meeting.”

“Nah.” He swiveled his chair again.

The squeak made Piper grit her teeth. She was going to have a combo headache today.

“You’re determined to go ahead with the soda?”

“Yeah.”

He sounded *so* enthusiastic.

“And you’re going to call one of the flavors unicorn snot?”

“Maybe spit. I haven’t decided.”

The biggest decision of his day was choosing between unicorn snot or spit.

She should *not* ask.

“What are the other flavors you’ve come up with?” she asked in spite of knowing that she didn’t want to know.

“Troll blood.”

She took a deep breath. At least there were trolls in *Warriors*. Maybe the labels could have something to do with

Warriors. That was on brand for Ollie.

Ugh, he did *not* need to be a brand.

“Fairy dust,” he said. Then he frowned. “But that’s not good. Dust isn’t liquid.”

Piper just nodded. Honestly, none of this mattered. None of it was good.

“Dragon fire,” he said.

“Fire isn’t liquid either,” she pointed out. She was on the verge of just laughing hysterically.

He nodded, frowning. “I know.”

“You should just call *all* of them spit,” she said. “Troll spit, fairy spit, dragon spit, unicorn spit. All different flavors and colors but similar theme. And,” she said, on a roll now, feeling like she was going a little crazy, “you should add unicorns to *Warriors* in your next story. Then it all goes along with *Warriors* and *can* be part of your brand. In fact,” she added, definitely feeling like she was about to crack. And that meant laughing uncontrollably, crying, or ripping the head off of Spark and strewing his innards all over Ollie’s office. “You should talk to Whitney about making some *Warriors* snack cakes. Troll turds.” She nodded. “Brown roll-up cakes. Or green. Is troll poop brown or green?”

She was breathing hard and her heart was racing.

Oliver, on the other hand, was still leaning back in his chair. He did, however, stop swiveling. And arched a brow.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said.

She laughed, sounding manic, but feeling a touch of relief. Ollie’s bar for ridiculous was high but it was good there was a limit.

“We can’t use *Warriors* on anything officially. We sold it off to Plus Gaming, remember?”

She stared at him. “Of course I remember.”

“They own all the trademarks and logos and stuff.” He sighed as if everything was just too much to bear. “So all of

that is out. Though I guess I could still call the sodas troll and dragon spit and stuff. People might make the connection. We could put my face on the labels or something.”

Piper opened her mouth to reply. Then snapped it shut. She started to reach for Spark. Then pulled her hand back. She pressed her lips together. Then pivoted on her heel and marched out to her desk.

She yanked open her middle right-hand drawer, lifted three folders out of the way, and withdrew the crisp piece of paper. She signed and dated it, then stomped back into Oliver’s office. She laid it in the middle of his desk.

He sat forward. That made the stupid chair creak too and Piper pulled a breath in through her nose.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“My resignation letter.”

“Oh.” He grinned and sat back again. “Okay.”

She raised both eyebrows. “I’m serious, Oliver.”

It was true that she’d quit twice before. But both times she’d done it verbally and once had been to Grant only. She *threatened* to quit about twice a month. It was her fault that he wasn’t taking this seriously.

But a lot of Oliver’s behaviors and attitudes were her fault.

Dax was the master enabler. Grant a close second. But she was easily number three. She could own that.

She could also fix it.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She tipped her head. “For?” She knew he had no idea what exactly she was pissed about. He *really* didn’t know that she was, in part, pissed at herself.

“For upsetting you.”

“But for *what*? Exactly?” she pressed.

He looked at her for a long moment. “For not liking your idea about the troll turds?” he finally asked. “It’s not that I

didn't like it. We just can't do it."

She sighed. He was going to need a little help here. Fine. She could explain this to him. Then she was leaving.

"You need to do *more*," she told him. "You need to do something important. You've been given every opportunity, and if you use your money and success and position to buy a soda company to make drinks for kids that are called troll spit, you are absolutely wasting all of it. And I can't be around to watch that."

He frowned. "I'm not wasting anything. I give money to charity."

"You do," she said. "But you randomly write checks to organizations. Those organizations appreciate it, I'm sure. But they don't really *mean* anything to you. They don't make you passionate. I know that Hot Cakes doesn't make you passionate either. I know you're here because of the guys. And *that* is awesome. Your friendships make you passionate. But *you* don't care about Hot Cakes. Not really. Hell, sometimes I'm not sure how much you care about *Warriors*. At least not as it is right now."

She felt herself frown as she said that out loud realizing that it was true. And that she was just now actually realizing that herself.

"I know that *Warriors* was your creation. Still is. But I think it's... not exactly what you want it to be. But instead of making it into more, you just keep doing the same thing with it. And I *don't* think you care about soda."

Ollie was frowning deeply now. "Does anyone *care* about soda?" he asked.

"I have no idea. It would be hard for me to imagine," she agreed. "But the point is, *you* need something to care about and I'm tired of you not looking for that. Not trying for that. I've been right here, for five years, supporting everything you've wanted to do—probably more than I should have—and made everything easy for you. I think that you need to figure out what you want and I think you need to work for it."

“Work for what?”

“For the things you want.”

“What are those?”

She blew out a breath. “That’s what you need to figure out, Ollie. You need to figure out what you *care* about. I think *Warriors* just happened to you. I’m not saying you regret it, but I do think you wish some of it was different. Hot Cakes just happened to you. That was all Aiden. And now, when you go looking for something of your own, you land on *soda*? And you want to call it troll spit? Come on. You’re better than that.”

Notably, he didn’t argue with her about *Warriors* not being what he wanted it to be, nor did he declare that he loved owning Hot Cakes and thought that was incredibly important work.

“And you think everything is easy for me?” he asked.

“Yes.” She laughed. “Very.”

“So you think I’m...” He lifted a brow, as if challenging her to fill in that blank.

Well, she was ready.

“Entitled. Spoiled. Brilliant. A little lazy. Creative. Infuriating. One of my favorite people. And full of yourself.”

He just sat blinking at her.

“And clueless,” she added after a few seconds.

“Is that it?”

She shrugged. “I’m sure I can come up with a few more. Those cover the basics.”

“You think I’m *lazy*?”

“I also said brilliant and creative.”

He studied her, his eyes narrowed. “You also said one of your favorite people.”

She nodded. “I did.”

“So why are you handing me a resignation letter?”

“Because my contract with Fluke Inc. requires I write one. The contract, by the way, that none of you even remember that I had to sign.”

She knew very well she could have gotten away with not turning that letter in. Sure, Oliver might have thrown a little fit and Cam might have dug into his paperwork when he had a tiny niggle in the back of his memory about a contract. But her bosses had become very dependent on *her* knowing all of the paperwork details about the business. If she'd told them she didn't have to write a letter, they probably would have believed her.

Which was why she couldn't do that. She'd never manipulate their trust in her.

“So you want to quit? Even though you just said you really like me and you know that I need to find something that matters to me? Don't you think I need you if I'm going to do that?”

She put a hand on her hip. Oh man, she'd love for this guy to need her. For more than booking plane reservations and writing emails and making sure he didn't eat room service every night at the hotel where they'd both been living for the past ten months. Not that she was complaining. They both had penthouse suites. The hotel room was nicer than her apartment in Chicago, and that had been really nice. The guys paid her well, what could she say?

“Why do you need *me* to help you figure out what you need to be doing with your life?” she asked, truly curious about his answer to that question.

“Because you know me better than anyone,” he said easily.

Her heart flipped in her chest, then fell to her stomach. He wasn't wrong. She did know him. Probably better than he knew himself. But that was the problem. Oliver needed to get to know himself. He needed to figure out what he wanted. He needed to stop being dependent on everyone around him to tell him what he should and shouldn't do.

“This is all on you, sorry,” she said.

“So you really are quitting?” He actually looked and sounded concerned now. Finally.

She nodded. “I am.”

“You’re really that pissed about the soda company?” he asked. “Fine. I won’t buy it.”

“No, Ollie, that’s not it.” She sighed. “Well, that’s not all of it. That’s just symbolic.”

“So why are you quitting, then?”

“Because... I can’t be in love with you and work for you. And the only one of those two things I can change is the working for you part.”

Chapter Two



The guys were going to kill him.

Ollie scrubbed a hand over his face.

They wouldn't be surprised, of course. But they were going to be pissed.

They'd all known that Piper quitting was a risk and that one day she'd probably wise-up and lose her patience and that would be it.

They'd also all known that when it happened there was a 90 percent chance it would be because of Ollie.

The other 10 percent chance was that it would be because of Ollie and Dax together.

And now it had finally happened.

If it came down to choosing between him and Piper, he wasn't sure he wanted to know how that debate would end up. Or how short the discussion would be before they decided they wanted and needed her more.

That was only one of the reasons he hadn't told them yet.

The other was because he was still processing the part where she'd said she loved him.

What was he supposed to do with *that*?

She wasn't just supposed to say that out loud right to him, was she? He had not been expecting that. The guys and their girlfriends had insinuated for a while now that Piper might

have a crush on him but no, he hadn't expected her to ever say anything herself.

It was a *might have*. A *crush*. Okay, they were adults and maybe adults didn't have crushes exactly, but everything anyone had said suggested that it was just that Piper thought he was interesting at times and that she didn't hate spending time with him.

But a crush wasn't *love*. For fuck's sake.

And it had to be Piper?

Piper Barry was amazing. She was gorgeous. She was smart. She was capable. She could do anything. She was funny and sweet and sassy and tough.

She was intimidating as hell.

What was he supposed to do with her now?

What was he supposed to do *without* her now?

Well, the solution seemed pretty obvious. She'd basically given him the answer herself—*I can't be in love with you and work for you. And the only one of those two things I can change is the working for you part.*

So he needed to get her to *not be* in love with him anymore. Then she'd come back to work and all would be fine.

Now he just had to get her to realize she could do a hell of a lot better than him.

Of course, he'd been a pain in her ass for five years now. If that didn't do it, he wasn't sure what would.

He could get her an alpaca. She loved those things. He could buy one from Drew Ryan, the alpaca farmer north of town. Even though Ollie couldn't stand the guy.

But she was living in a hotel at the moment. The hotel manager, Stan, liked Ollie a lot and Piper's suite was huge, but he wasn't sure Stan liked him *enough* to let him put an alpaca in one of the penthouses.

And if Stan did let him get Piper an alpaca, that wouldn't make her fall *out* of love with him.

Though she would definitely think he was crazy to even think of it. That was run-of-the-mill Ollie craziness though.

Dammit.

He could... get arrested. That would remind her that he was impulsive and didn't think through consequences and did stupid shit. Often.

Getting arrested was *really* not hard to do. He and Dax had done it accidentally twice. Surely doing it on purpose would be even easier.

Of course, Bernie, the Appleby town cop, was a really nice guy and super laid back. If Ollie did something like streaking across the town park or hot-wiring someone's car, Bernie would probably think it was funny, laugh and slap Ollie on the back, and tell him to not let it happen again.

Well, shit.

He could punch someone in the face and get locked up for assault, he supposed.

Drew Ryan came to mind.

That would piss Piper off. She liked Drew, and Ollie hitting him would definitely not make her happy.

Yeah, maybe he'd see what Drew was up to and ask him to meet up for a beer or something.

Ollie started to pull his phone out, but then hesitated.

Piper wouldn't be the only one mad at him if he punched Drew though. Whitney and Dax and, really, all of his friends liked Drew.

And Drew might hit him back. And Drew might be a better fighter than Ollie.

That wouldn't take much.

Okay, so no streaking, stealing, or punching.

He could... hire a skywriter. They could write out... son of a bitch, what would he have them write? And how would he even find a skywriter?

See, this was the kind of stuff *Piper* did for him. She found the skywriters and helped him figure out what they should write.

Metaphorically, anyway. He'd never actually hired a skywriter.

Piper would definitely think a skywriter was over the top though. No matter what he wrote.

Ollie groaned and his head fell back against the headrest of his chair.

The guys were *definitely* going to kill him.

He dragged a hand through his hair. He needed to talk to her. He needed to fix this. Before the guys found out.

He shoved back from his desk and started for the door.

Fixing this meant convincing Piper that she was wrong to be in love with him.

He just needed to ask her how to do that.

An hour later, he was standing outside her hotel room door.

“Piper! It’s me!” He pounded on the door with his closed fist. Again. He’d already knocked. Then pounded. Now he was pounding again and wondering how much he’d have to pay the hotel manager, Stan, to get a key to Piper’s room.

They had the only two suites on this floor so he wasn’t bothering anyone else with his yelling. He could maybe get the heavy lamp by his window and knock her door down. That would probably bother Stan, but Ollie could deal with that later.

“Pi—”

Her door swung open in the middle of her name.

Piper stood there staring at him with wide eyes. “Somebody better be in the hospital or you’d better be bleeding from a major artery.”

He heard what she said. But he couldn’t process an answer. Because Piper was standing in the doorway in a robe, with her hair wrapped up in a towel on top of her head.

The robe was black. And silky. And short. Very short.

It wrapped around her and tied in the front, as robes did, and created a deep V between her breasts.

Her gorgeous, very generous—and did he mention gorgeous?—breasts.

Ollie was a little clueless—even he would admit that—but he wasn’t dead. Which meant that he’d noticed Piper’s very generous curves long ago.

The way she dressed would have made it impossible not to. Her dresses were bright and unusual and even the ones that didn’t hug her hips and ass, caressed her breasts. She also drew attention to all those curves with big belts and bright scarves and other accessories.

The woman liked to draw attention to herself and he always happily gave it.

This robe was nothing like any of those dresses. It wasn’t brightly colored. There were no earrings, no wedge heels, no bows. Just a lot of silk—both in the robe and the skin that stretched below the short hem.

He’d never seen her dressed like this. Not in any of the five years he’d known her. She was always put together, perfectly coordinated, looking kick ass, and untouchable.

Now she looked... very fucking touchable.

Except for the look on her face. And the way she propped her hand on her hip.

“Oliver,” she said firmly.

His gaze lifted to her face. Away from her legs.

Damn, the girl had some great legs.

That shouldn't be a new revelation. She wore skirts and heels every day. He'd definitely noticed her legs before.

But there was something about this robe or her hair being up in a towel or the way she smelled or this doorway or... he had no idea, but this was different. Her legs had never looked like *this*.

"*Oliver*," she said again, snapping her fingers in front of his face.

"What?"

"*What?*" she repeated. "You're beating on my door, scaring the hell out of me, making me get out of the shower to come see what was wrong with you, and you're asking *me* what?"

He blinked at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You can't be in love with me."

She sighed and her hand dropped. "That's not how it works."

"Yeah, well, that screws everything up," he said crossly.

Everything had been fine that morning. Everything in his life had been fine. Normal. Easy.

And now Piper had quit, and she thought she was in love with him, and she was standing in front of him in a skimpy little robe, and he was noticing her legs and... everything was a mess now.

And Piper was the one who fixed the messes in his life, not the one who caused them.

"Sorry," she said, lifting her shoulder.

She didn't seem sorry at all. He frowned. "Can you put some clothes on?"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"This is *my* room. I didn't invite you. You got me out of the shower. I'm going to go get back in there when you leave.

So, no, I'm not going to go put clothes on while you stand here and tell me not to be in love with you."

"It's really distracting."

She looked surprised for a moment. Then, slowly, she smiled. A smile that made his heart thump and, at the same time, sent an *uh-oh* through his mind.

"Sorry," she said again.

She was definitely not sorry about that either.

"I just don't see why you want to be in love with me," he told her, resolutely keeping his eyes on hers.

He *really* wanted to look down. But he had a feeling she knew that and if he did he would somehow be admitting something he didn't want to admit.

"Well, I don't see why you wouldn't want me to be in love with you," she told him in the same tone he'd used.

"Because, apparently, you can't work for me *and* be in love with me. And I really need you to work for me."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, Oliver, maybe you think that's your choice because you've never really experienced me being in love with you."

"So this is new?"

"Not really."

"So I *have* experienced you being in love with me," he said.

She lifted a brow. "I haven't been acting on those feelings."

"So keep doing that."

She seemed to be considering that. Then she took a step closer. "No, I don't think I will."

He frowned down at her. Without her heels on, she was really short. The top of her head came to his chin. She usually *seemed* taller. Sure, it was probably the heels, but it was also just the way she presented herself. The way she walked, the

way she stood, the way she talked and met everyone's eyes directly and took care of everything.

Now she was in a freaking robe with her hair up in a towel. She seemed shorter.

And now, hearing her talk about being in love with him, it seemed a little less difficult to believe.

Dammit. What the hell was that?

“What’s that mean anyway?” he asked, feeling as grumpy as he sounded. “What do you mean you’re going to act on those feelings now? Quitting? Leaving me? *That’s* acting on being in love with me?”

She shook her head slowly and stepped closer.

He should step back. Part of his brain told him that. But a bigger part of him—like the entire rest of his body and brain—said *don't be a dumbass*.

She took the front of his shirt in her fist and pulled him down. And he went. Like a dumbass.

“It means doing things like this,” she said softly.

Then she kissed him.

Ollie was shocked. Actually shocked. The idea of kissing Piper had never occurred to him before. The idea of Piper kissing *him* had *never* occurred to him.

But the shock was quickly replaced by thoughts like *damn her lips are soft* and *she smells so fucking good*, and, *of course, she's good at this too*.

He figured as long as their lips were pressed together, he might as well enjoy it for a few minutes.

So he cupped the back of her head, tipped his head, and kissed her back.

He realized that he'd surprised her when she made a little squeaking sound as her towel fell from her head. But she didn't pull back or reach to grab it. She grabbed the front of his shirt with her other hand in fact. And moved in closer.

The wet strands of her hair fell over the back of his hand, reminding him she'd just been in the shower, and he suddenly *had* to touch her robe.

He ran his hand from her shoulder down her arm to her wrist over the black silk. The warm black silk. Warm from her body underneath.

He really liked it. A lot. He moved his hand to her waist and stroked the warm silk there, back and forth over the dip. Then up and down over her hip.

Her hand ran up his chest to the back of his neck, pulling him even closer.

Well, okay. They'd already gone this far. It was going to be complicated when he let her go whether he backed her up against the door or not.

So he stepped forward.

She stepped back.

The door swung shut behind him and he turned her, putting her up against the wood. Both of his hands went to her hips and she rose on tiptoe with a little moan.

Oh, that was nice. He felt heat lick through him. He really wanted to put his nose against her neck. Did she smell the way she did because of her soap or her shampoo or some perfume she put on after her shower? If it was after the shower, then she wouldn't smell that way now would she? But he swore it was just *her*. And he wanted to run his nose all over her body to be sure. And while his nose was there, his mouth would be there too...

But he didn't want to release her mouth. Her lips were everything he'd never known he'd always wanted.

He tipped his head the other way, opening slightly.

She followed his lead. Enthusiastically.

Piper gripped the back of his head and stroked her tongue into his mouth, hungrily.

That little lick of heat in his veins intensified to a full-on punch to the gut and he felt himself press closer. His hand dropped from her waist to her thigh. Sure enough, her skin was as warm and silky as the material of her robe.

Her hands went to his lower back and she brought him against her. He pressed into her soft body and this time he was the one who groaned. His palm slid up her thigh and under the hem of her robe to the curve of her ass.

The naked curve of her ass.

He felt his body harden and tighten and he finally dragged his mouth to her neck, breathing deep as he squeezed the warm flesh.

Her breath rushed out as her head fell back against the door and he kissed down her neck to her collarbone as her robe gaped at the top.

Yep, she just smelled like this. This was just Piper. He was definitely willing to keep going to be *sure*, but he was convinced that her skin was just created to feel, taste, and smell like heaven.

“Ollie,” she said softly, her fingers curling into his hair.

“Yeah.”

“We need to stop.”

He did. His nose was still against her throat and his hand still cupped her ass, but he stopped moving. He just breathed for a second. She didn’t push him back but he felt her hands slide down his neck.

Finally, he lifted his head, leaving his hand right where it was under her robe.

She looked... mused.

He’d never seen her look mused. Her lips were pink. From his. Her hair was wet and curling around her shoulders. Her robe was falling off one shoulder, hinting at far more than the tease of cleavage he saw in her other dresses. If he tugged on the bottom of the robe that rested on the back of his wrist, he could expose one entire breast.

He wanted to do that so much it was shocking. Almost more shocking than the kissing in the first place.

But he didn't feel the panic he would have expected.

He felt a desire that he'd never felt before.

This was Piper. *Piper*. Kissing her should have been really weird.

It hadn't been.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you don't want me to be in love with you."

Yeah, he really didn't. That seemed complicated. And like he was sure to mess it all up.

"But you *are*. Shouldn't you want this?" he asked.

She nodded. "Oh, I do." Then she pushed him back.

His hand slipped from under her robe and he sighed. "I don't get it."

"I know."

"Do I want you to explain it?"

"Probably not."

"Why I can't strip this little robe off of you and go for this thing that we both clearly want? I think I do."

She actually laughed at that.

"What?" he asked. She was *laughing*?

"You didn't even know you wanted this until I kissed you. You never would have kissed me first."

He tucked his hands into his pockets. No. He wouldn't have. Probably.

"And now you suddenly want this?" she asked.

"It was a really good kiss," he said with a shrug.

"It was."

"And you're sexy and sweet and smart and funny."

“Yes, I am,” she said with a nod.

He had to admit, one thing he really liked about her was her confidence. He felt one corner of his mouth tip.

“You *really* should have wanted to do this before now,” she said.

She pushed away from the door and he took an obligatory step back.

Watching her tighten the belt around her waist, he remembered the feel of her ass in his hand and her tongue against his. Yeah, he really should have wanted this before. Why hadn't he?

“I want it now. And you're in love with me. Seems like it's all going your way,” he said.

She laughed and pushed him back far enough that she could open the door. “Um, no.”

He looked at the open door, then back to her. “No?”

“I mean, sure, we could have some really hot sex,” she said. “But if that's all I wanted, I could have seduced you a couple of years ago.”

He opened his mouth to respond and then shut it, frowning hard.

She tipped her head, waiting for him to say something.

Finally, he brilliantly replied, “*What?*”

“Oliver, sex is easy. I could have kissed you some night when we were the only ones at the office after hours or one of the nights I dropped something off at your apartment that you'd forgotten. What just happened here could have happened a dozen times over the years.”

“But?” he asked, feeling a rising sense of panic that he didn't understand.

“But I wanted more than that.”

“You wanted me to be your boyfriend,” he said flatly.

“Yes.” She was clearly unmoved by his attitude.

“You couldn’t have just said that?”

“Well, I’ve been trying to decide if you’d be good at it,” she said.

“For how long?”

“About two years.”

He blinked at her. “It’s taken you two years?”

“Yes.”

He stared at her. Piper was a very unique person in his life. She liked him. She admired him. She encouraged him and helped him do all of the amazing things he and the guys did with Fluke. But she was also... unimpressed. She didn’t act like a single other woman he knew. At least not the ones who wanted to sleep with him. He knew women who wanted to date him because he was a good-looking—so he’d been told—millionaire. He knew women who wanted to date him because they were huge fans of *Warriors*. All of those women flattered him and fawned all over him and genuinely thought he was awesome.

Piper thought he was a pain in the ass.

She wanted him, evidently, and claimed to be in love with him. But it had taken her two years to decide if he’d be a good boyfriend.

And she was right to wonder about that.

Still, that rankled.

“So that’s it?” he asked. “You’re in love with me, but you’re quitting your job, and you don’t want to sleep with me?”

She nodded. “Yep. That’s it.”

“You’re just going to... what? Work on getting over me, then?”

She shrugged. “Yep.”

He scowled. “And you think you’re going to be able to do that?”

“I really hope so.”

Good. That was good. She needed to get over him.

He had no idea why that thought made his chest hurt.

“Will you come back to work for us if you can get over me?”

She looked at him, seemingly thinking. “Yeah. If I can get over you, I’ll come back to work.”

The pain in his chest intensified. He rubbed a hand over the spot. That was stupid. He *wanted* her to get over him. And to come back to work. For sure. The sooner the better.

He studied her, taking in the face, devoid of make-up, that was aching familiar, yet seemed brand new tonight.

“Are you going back to Chicago?” he asked, his voice gruff.

She shook her head and he felt some of the tightness around his lungs ease.

“I have something I’m working on here.”

“Like what?”

“Just something with Drew.”

“Drew?” Ollie felt his eyebrows slam together. “Drew Ryan?”

Ryan owned a farm outside of Appleby with his brother, Dallas, and friend, Justin. They had alpacas, among other animals, that Piper seemed especially enamored with.

At least, Ollie had been telling himself it was the alpacas. Truth was, it was obvious Drew liked Piper.

Of course, everyone liked Piper.

Drew Ryan had probably thought about kissing her. Already. After only knowing her for a few months. Whereas Oliver had known her for five years and hadn’t thought about it at all until tonight.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and he rubbed the sore spot in his chest again.

Now he wasn't so sure he'd be able to *stop* thinking about it.

"Yes, Drew Ryan," Piper said.

"You think Drew Ryan will be a good boyfriend?"

She seemed to think about that for a moment. "Yes, he probably would be." She narrowed her eyes. "But not for me. See, I'm in love with someone else. He would be, at best, a rebound. At worst, a consolation boyfriend. That's not fair to him."

That actually made Ollie feel better which, he knew, made him kind of an ass. He'd rather she be alone? Really? A woman as amazing and passionate as Piper?

No. Probably not. Dammit. He didn't know. He'd never thought about any of this before an hour ago.

"Don't date Drew Ryan. Like anyone else but him."

"You need to go," she said, gesturing toward the still-open doorway.

"You're kicking me out?"

"Yep."

"But you're in love with me."

She let her head fall back and she groaned. "Yes. And I'm tired of talking to you right now."

"You're tired of talking to the man you're in love with?"

She gave him a look that said she was out of patience. He'd seen that look a number of times over the years. "Get out."

He stepped into the doorway, but paused. "You should have a boyfriend, Piper. If you want one."

"Yes, I know."

"You shouldn't write men off because of me."

Her brows went up. "I'm not."

He frowned. “But you said you didn’t want Drew Ryan to be a rebound.”

“Right. Drew’s a friend. I don’t want *Drew* to be my rebound.”

“But you are going to find a rebound?” he asked, that chest pain back.

“Tired. Of. Talking. Good night, Ollie.”

Then she closed the door in his face.

Chapter Three



The next morning, Ollie was the last one to enter the conference room.

On purpose, though, rather than because he'd forgotten the meeting and he no longer had an assistant to remind him.

He knew he had this meeting. He usually loved this meeting. He and his four best friends got together almost every single morning before going their separate ways to work, even though they were now not even all working in the same building.

He did not want to have this meeting this morning though.

He'd barely slept. He'd tossed and turned all night thinking about what Piper had said. And how she'd felt. How she'd tasted. How she'd sounded. How she'd smelled.

And now he was about to face his business partners, and best friends, without her. And without any caffeine or muffins.

Because Piper brought him coffee and muffins every morning.

And as pathetic as it was, he couldn't make coffee.

Well, he could. But his coffee sucked. Piper had the magic recipe for exactly how he liked it. And he didn't know the right mix.

He took his seat next to Dax.

Thank God Dax was here. Dax wasn't an owner anymore, but he showed up for the meetings as a "consultant" and more

as a guy who liked to start his day with his best friends.

And coffee and muffins.

“Oliver.”

With a mental groan, Ollie looked across the table at Grant. “Morning.”

Grant lifted a brow. “What did you do?”

Busted.

“What do you mean?”

Dax snorted beside him.

Yeah, everyone knew that Ollie knew.

“Where’s Piper?” Aiden asked. He was giving Ollie an I-know-you-screwed-up look.

“She’s... not coming in this morning.”

“You’re in so much trouble,” Dax muttered to him.

Yeah, yeah. And these guys weren’t even his biggest problem.

“And why is she not coming in?” Aiden asked.

“Why do you assume I know?” Ollie asked.

“Because in the past when she’s been sick, she’s called me,” Aiden told him.

“Maybe she just needed a day off.”

Grant leaned in, his expression serious. “Did she?”

Well, yeah. But not just one day. He blew out a breath. “Fine. She quit.”

Aiden and Grant both sighed.

“What did you do to her?” Grant asked again.

Kissed the hell out of her. Felt her bare ass cheek. “Piper loves me.”

Aiden sighed and sat back in his chair. “Yeah, yeah. We all love you, Ollie. But what did you do, or say, or not do, or

whatever, that made her quit?”

Ollie shook his head. “That’s what happened. I guess. She fell in love with me.”

The other men all looked at one another. Cam leaned in. “Uh... she told you that?”

“Yeah.”

“And”—Cam cast a look at the other guys—“what did you say?” He asked hesitantly, as if afraid of the answer.

“Hey, I tried to talk her out of it.”

Dax gave a choked laugh. “How’d that go?”

“She kissed me.”

The guys all froze.

Okay, that wasn’t exactly the way it had gone, but those were definitely the highlights.

Grant, Aiden, Cam, and Dax all exchanged looks again. Ollie gave them a minute to let that all sink in.

“And”—Dax shifted on his chair and cleared his throat—“then what?”

“I asked whether she’d come back to work if she could get over me.” He looked around the table. “She said yes, by the way.”

Aiden rubbed the middle of his forehead. Grant seemed to be considering that. Dax snorted.

“And then?” Cam asked.

“Then she told me she was tired of talking to me and kicked me out of her room.” He skipped the part about rebound boyfriends and Drew fucking Ryan.

Dax nodded thoughtfully. “And that leaves us...”

“Without Piper. For now.”

Grant sighed heavily. “That’s not acceptable.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. She won’t not be in love with me right now so... I’ve done what I can do.”

Grant gave him a look that said *you're a dumbass*.

Aiden opened his mouth but then shut it.

"I..." But Cam clearly had nothing to add either.

"Dude," was all Dax said.

Ollie spread his arms out. "She has bad taste in men. What can I say? That's not my fault. I'm just sitting here, being me, and she fell in love with me anyway."

God, he was such a dick. But no one had ever been in love with him before. And he'd certainly never been in love with anyone. These four men were the closest he'd been and they were like brothers. They knew his limitations and they, thank God, also had each other, so the stuff he wasn't good at, someone else was. It worked in their personal relationships as well as their business partnership.

But, as Piper had said yesterday, all of that was in flux now. And yes, Ollie was feeling restless and kind of pissy about it.

All of the other men had interests outside of their business now. Fluke still existed but they didn't own *Warriors* anymore. Hot Cakes was fine, but that was definitely more Aiden's interest than anyone else's. Plus, he was all into helping Zoe with her bakery.

Dax had divested himself of his Hot Cakes shares and was running a nursing home now, of all things, and had become an instant family man, getting involved with Jane's dad and sister and stepsister. He'd even handled a bunch of stepmother drama. Grant had his side business in financial consulting and was all distracted by Josie and her new business. Cam was back together with Whitney and helping with her grandmother.

They all had other stuff going on, including being in love.

And Ollie was just here. The same as always. Which was more boring every day.

Now Piper wasn't here either. Everything was changing. It sucked.

He'd admit that coming into work this morning had felt off. Wrong. Bad. Not seeing her at her desk when he rounded the corner at the end of the hall, not hearing her morning greeting, not having her in the room now, picking up papers, delivering coffee and water. It wasn't the coffee and water that he wanted. It certainly wasn't the papers that he wanted. He wanted to see Piper.

Not seeing her behind her desk that morning had made him realize that he had always been eager to see what she was wearing, how she had her hair done, what bright colors she'd put together.

Then he'd immediately flashed to how she'd looked answering her door in her short robe with the towel on top of her head.

It had been like looking at someone new. Someone who maybe didn't have every single thing together in her life. Someone who could be caught off guard. Someone who didn't know every thought in his head before he had it. Someone he *could* touch.

Piper was too... much... for him usually. She was too good, too on top of things, too perfect. She didn't screw up, she didn't get things wrong, she didn't doubt herself.

She doubted *him* on a regular basis.

Why the *hell* was she in love with him?

He was scattered and forgetful and inconsiderate and messy.

"You need to fix this, Oliver," Aiden finally said. "We can talk to her. Try to offer her more money or beg her or whatever, but I don't think it will matter unless it's coming from you."

"Really?" Ollie asked, his annoyance with Piper falling for him spilling over. "Why would it matter if it comes from me? Either she falls out of love with me or I say 'yeah, sure, let's be in love and live happily ever after.' Those are the only ways to fix this."

"So say that," Dax said.

Ollie looked at his friend. “What?”

“Say that to her.”

Dax was the most laid-back person Ollie had ever met. Ollie hadn't even realized how much he needed laid-back in his life until he'd met Dax. Dax had given him space, literally, in their dorm room to be messy and unorganized. He'd also given him figurative space to be unorganized and scattered. Oliver forgetting things and misplacing things had never bothered Dax. He rolled with things and living with him had felt like taking a huge, deep breath of refreshing, restoring air. *A breath of fresh air* had taken on true meaning for Oliver when he'd met Dax.

Dax Marshall had saved him. More than Dax would ever know.

So when Dax got serious, Oliver paid attention. Everyone did.

He looked serious right now.

“Ollie,” Dax said, meeting his eyes directly. “If you're *not* in love with Piper, you're a complete moron. And I know that's not true. That woman is amazing. And she's good for you.”

Ollie couldn't argue with any of that.

“It doesn't always work that way,” Grant pointed out. “There's loving someone and there's being in love with someone. There has to be a spark. A chemistry.”

Ollie looked across the table. Grant was studying him.

A spark. Chemistry.

He remembered every single thing about kissing Piper last night. Every touch, every inch of skin, every sigh and moan.

The spark wasn't a problem. But he'd felt it for the first time last night. Or he'd *let* himself feel it for the first time. Or something.

Still... not a problem.

“There's chemistry,” he finally said simply.

“Then there you go,” Dax said. “Go get her.”

The conference room door opened and they all looked over hopefully.

Clearly everyone thought it was possible that Piper had changed her mind.

Except Ollie. He knew it wouldn't be Piper. And he rubbed his hand over the painful spot on the left side of his chest.

“Morning, everyone,” Whitney greeted as she swept into the room. She stopped by Cam's chair and leaned over to kiss him, but then continued to her usual chair beside Aiden.

She took her chair, opened her folder, clicked her pen, and looked up.

She glanced around the table. “What's going on?”

“Piper quit,” Cam said.

Whitney immediately focused on Ollie. “What did you do?”

He sighed.

“She's in love with him,” Dax summarized. “Oh, and they kissed. But she threw him out before they had sex.” Dax looked at Ollie again. “Wait, right? That's what you made it sound like.”

Ollie nodded. He was feeling a really weird mix of miserable and horny.

Dax looked back at Whitney. “Yeah, she got tired of talking to him before there was sex. We were just telling him that he should go sweep her off her feet and marry her this afternoon.”

Whitney had her phone pulled out and her thumbs were flying over the screen. Clearly, she was texting Piper. The women had become friends since the guys had taken over Hot Cakes. The two had a lot in common in their love for organization and hard work. Piper had confidence in spades where Whitney had needed to grow into hers a bit, but Ollie knew they'd been out on a few girls' nights.

He wondered if they'd talked about him. Then figured, if so, he wasn't so sure he wanted to know what had been said.

"I can't believe you kissed and she didn't tell me," Whitney said, almost to herself.

"Hey, Whit," Cam said.

She looked up at her boyfriend. "Yeah?"

"Maybe some advice? Like how Ollie can get her to come back?"

Whitney looked from Cam to Ollie. And frowned. "Oh."

"Just oh?" Ollie asked.

"Well..." She looked at Cam again and winced. "Not sure he can."

Ollie had been expecting that, but it stabbed to hear Whitney confirm it.

"There's *nothing*?" Aiden said. "An apology?"

"An apology for being him?" Whitney asked. She glanced at Ollie. "No offense."

"None taken," he said dryly.

"She's just..." Whitney sighed. "I don't know how much to say."

"Say it," Ollie said. "Whatever it is."

"She is in love with you," Whitney said, lifting her shoulder. "And she said she knew at some point there would be a time when she couldn't deal with being near you every day and not having more."

Ollie felt that painful area in his chest twinge.

"I'm not that great," he said.

No one at the table argued.

It wasn't that he thought they thought he was a bad person or a loser, but he wasn't exactly *charming* or anything. He wasn't particularly thoughtful or sweet. Lots of twelve-year-old boys thought he was pretty close to God because of

Warriors, but even that he knew had a lot more to do with Dax and his online and conference personality than Oliver. Ollie's name was on the game as the creator, and that gave him a certain amount of notoriety. But, like all of the good things in his life, Dax had even given him that. Without Dax, all of the *Warriors* characters and stories would still just be scribblings in Oliver's notebooks.

"She said she'd come back if she gets over me. I guess we'll just wait for that to happen." Surely that wouldn't take long.

There had to be about a dozen better-than-him guys just waiting to ask her out.

As long as none of them were Drew fucking Ryan.

"Ookay," Whitney said slowly.

She didn't sound convinced. But she and Piper were new friends. It was possible that she didn't actually know how easy it would be for Piper to get over him.

"You're not going to go tell her you're in love with her, then?" Aiden asked.

He sounded resigned.

"Piper can do better than me," Ollie said.

Again, no arguments from around the table. They all looked worried, but no one jumped in to say, *you're the perfect man for Piper*.

Exactly. He would make Piper crazy. Not in a good way. Crazy like he had his mother.

"You need to go after her and either fall in love with her yourself or make her fall *out* of love with you," Grant decided.

"I'm not going after her for either of those things," Ollie said, feeling very grumpy. Dammit. This wasn't his fault. He'd just been minding his own business, being his usual fuck-up self, *not* kissing her, *not* noticing her breasts and eyes and legs—much—and she'd gone and fallen in love with him anyway. And *she'd* kissed *him*. This was not his fault. He hadn't done anything wrong.

Actually, he'd done everything wrong. All his usual things. He'd forgotten meetings and lost paperwork and blown off dinners and missed deadlines. As always.

Piper really did have bad taste in men.

"We'll just hire someone else to do all the Piper stuff around here," he said.

"Oh sure," Cam said. "We'll just hire someone to replace the woman who's been with us for five years, knows all of us better than our own parents, and knows and loves our business as much as we do."

"I only need someone who can get me coffee in the morning," Ollie said. Grumpily.

They all scowled at him. Yes, he was reducing one of their favorite people to a coffee-gopher. But they all knew he didn't really mean that.

Or did he?

Piper didn't help him with his *actual* work. The writing. The creating. That was all him. He did it alone. That was all his.

Sure, once it was done, Dax took it—well, now the other designers took it—and turned it into graphics and moving parts. Aiden and Grant and Cam dealt with the legal and business parts of everything that was necessary for his writing to turn into *Warriors of Easton*.

Piper booked him flights and hotel rooms and ordered him lunch and kept track of which documents needed his signatures and if there were calls and meetings he needed to be a part of.

But she didn't help him *write*, dammit. And that was the most important part.

Grant had initially hired Piper to babysit Ollie. Ollie was okay with that. He liked having people who would rein him in. He had no gauge for what was over the top and what was brilliant. Hell, most of the stuff he wrote into his scripts

seemed over the top to him and ended up being called brilliant, so he really didn't know.

The guys were the guardrails for him. So was Piper. Piper looked things up like how much liability insurance would be if they brought in acrobats to ride unicycles across tight ropes at a town festival. Then she said they couldn't do it.

He was disappointed when people told him no, for sure, but he was okay with it too. He knew they, collectively, were being creative but reasonable.

That's what he needed. Someone to keep him reasonable. And someone to make reservations and keep track of paperwork and run errands for him and yes, get him his coffee the way he liked it.

He pushed back from the table. "Let's get an ad out. Online. Newspaper. Tack it up at the bakery," he said to Aiden. "Whatever. However this works."

That was the kind of thing Piper would have done for them.

Grant gave him an annoyed but longsuffering look. "You going to be able to handle it if Piper comes in to train the new person?"

Ollie shrugged. "Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

She was the one in love with *him* to the point that she couldn't work near him anymore. Who got that worked up over *him*? Maybe she was a few bananas short of a bunch already.

And hey, Piper training the person would require zero input from him. She'd be able to tell the new person that if they *really* wanted Ollie's attention on something, they needed to print the paperwork in eighteen-point font and put it in a bright-red folder. She'd definitely be able to inform them he hated onions. On anything. She'd certainly mention that he couldn't work with music or conversation around him, but he also couldn't work *without* his white-noise machine on. Or Norah Jones music on. He didn't know why Norah worked for him, but she did. Something Piper had discovered.

But that could all be passed on to someone new. He turned on his heel and stalked toward the door.

“You’ll have to tell her or him how you like your special coffee, Princess,” Grant said dryly.

“Piper knows,” he said, pulling the door open. “I’ve got work to do.” As if he had a prayer of getting anything done with Piper on his mind and his severe lack of caffeine. He slammed the door behind him.

* * *

“Um, so I probably need to get back to work,” Drew said suddenly, cutting off what he’d been saying.

Piper frowned as he focused on something over her shoulder. “What? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m just about to become a third wheel,” he said with a grin, lifting his coffee cup to drain it.

Piper looked over her shoulder. And felt her heart flip.

Ollie had just entered Buttered Up bakery and stood looking around. His gaze landed on her and their eyes met. He started in her direction immediately.

God, he looked good.

She wasn’t the only one who noticed either. Several women in the bakery stopped and checked him out. He didn’t seem to notice. He had homed in on Piper. She swallowed hard as her heart rate kicked up.

He was in a suit. No tie, of course—it was probably in his pocket. It was a dark navy blue. The button-down shirt under it was crisp white and unbuttoned at the collar. He looked hot and in charge and... on a mission.

Oh boy... She pivoted back to face Drew at their tiny round table.

“You don’t have to leave,” she said quickly.

For some reason, she kind of wanted someone with her when she talked to Ollie for the first time in over a week.

She'd never felt that way before. From the first day she'd met him, she'd been perfectly comfortable with Ollie, in every situation, whether they were alone or not. Sure, she felt butterflies when he smiled at her in a certain way—when he was fully focused on her and amused or pleased with something she'd just said. Sometimes she felt warmer when watching him squeeze one of his many stress balls with his big, wide hands, or when he licked his lips while eating or drinking, or when he linked his hands behind his neck and his shirt stretched over his abs and chest.

But she'd *never* felt anxious about being alone with him.

Now she did.

Of course she'd never gone over a week without seeing him at all. And she'd certainly never had a hot, deep, sexy kiss and his hand on her bare butt as the last memory of him.

Now it had been nine days since she'd kicked Ollie out of her hotel room and she'd been thinking about all of that every single day—well, mostly every single night—since then. She could still *feel* his hand on her ass if she let herself think about it.

She really tried not to do that.

“Oh, I think I do have to leave,” Drew said. “He’s never liked me much and he looks particularly... intent, right now.”

Dammit.

“Stay.”

“Nope.” Drew pushed to his feet. “Hey, Oliver,” he greeted as he pulled his ball cap back on.

“Hey.” Ollie didn't sound friendly.

Ollie never sounded friendly to Drew. It made Piper roll her eyes every time. He acted jealous. Yet he acted shocked to think that she had feelings for him and *clearly* the idea of wanting *her* for something other than her fixing his stupid

coffee perfectly—in a way he hadn't even known about until she'd done it the first time—had never occurred to him.

He'd wanted you during that kiss...

Yeah, okay, so he'd discovered he *wanted* her. But he didn't *want* want her...

She took a deep breath and focused on Drew. "Thanks for breakfast."

"Of course." He gave her a grin. "Talk to you later."

"Oh, you're leaving?" Ollie asked, pulling Drew's chair out and sitting down in it before Drew even answered.

"Yeah. Got some stuff to do."

"See ya," Ollie told him.

Drew laughed and headed out.

"He leave because of me?" Ollie asked.

"Yeah."

"He thought I was going to beat him up or something?" His tone was bored.

"I think he thinks you're weird," Piper said, sipping her coffee.

"I am weird," Ollie said with a nod.

"I know."

She'd missed him. And his weirdness. Drew was great. Nice. Polite. Reasonable. And not a bit weird. Weird drove her crazy but it was also interesting and fun. She'd always known that but this past week without it had been a bit boring.

That had not been a pleasant realization. The first couple of days had been great. Relaxing. No fires to put out. No strange research to do.

Then by day three she really wanted some weirdness. Some Ollie weirdness.

"Well, I don't care what Drew Ryan thinks of me," Ollie said, slouching in his chair and throwing an arm over the back.

He was frowning.

Or, more accurately, he was pouting.

He looked ridiculous. He was huge in the tiny white chair with the wrought-iron back that swirled into a heart shape. And the pout on his face.

“I’ll break it to him gently that you don’t care about his opinion,” she said.

“Don’t talk about me with Drew Ryan at all,” Ollie said, his frown deepening. “Better yet, don’t talk to Drew Ryan about *anything* at all.”

She thought it was funny that he always referred to Drew as *Drew Ryan*. She didn’t bother to even comment on his ridiculous demand. She sipped her coffee again.

“Hi, did you want something, Ollie?” Josie asked, approaching the table in her Buttered Up apron.

Piper had to smile. She’d become closer to Whitney and Paige than to Josie, but she liked Grant’s wife a lot. Especially since Josie could come over and ask him what he was doing here under the guise of waiting on him.

“I haven’t had a muffin or good coffee in a week,” he said, mostly to Piper.

Sulkily.

“So I’d love three muffins and a large coffee.”

“Great.” Josie scribbled that on her pad. “What kind of muffins?”

“Uh...” Ollie looked at Piper.

She just looked back at him.

“Which ones do I like best?” he finally asked.

“Seriously?” She sighed. “How are you not dead after a week of no one feeding you?”

“I’ve eaten,” he said. “Just not any muffins. Or Parmesan chicken bake.”

So sulky.

She cooked for him a couple of times a week. Each of their suites had a full kitchen but Oliver couldn't boil water, so when she cooked for herself, versus take-out or making do with salad or sandwiches, she took him half. His favorite was her meatballs, but he did love the chicken-and-pasta bake with the spinach and loads of Parmesan cheese.

"You don't know what kind of muffins you like without me telling you?" she asked.

"I know what I like. I just don't remember my *favorites*. They're all good here." He gave Josie a smile, then frowned at Piper again. "I've been without *any* for a week so thought I should have my favorites now."

"You could have come down here and gotten your own. All week long."

"Was hoping my new assistant would do that. But so far, no go."

"You could *ask her* to do it," Piper suggested. She was going to help train this new girl, but they'd only hired her a week ago and Whitney was getting her settled. Whit said she would be great. Young, perky, organized, eager to do a great job.

Piper supposed she should start making a list of all the dumb extra things the girl would have to do for Ollie. Muffins and coffee at the top of that list.

"Grant said I have to give her a few days to acclimate before I start asking her for things."

Piper snorted. Grant had a point. The girl would be overwhelmed if Ollie went to her with his list of "needs."

But as Piper watched him sulking across the table from her, it occurred to her that he was far too old, successful, and intelligent to not freaking know what kind of muffins to order when he walked into a bakery.

And it was her fault that he didn't realize that.

"Cranberry orange, blueberry crumble, and caramel apple," she said to Josie.

“Got it.” Josie turned away to get the muffins.

Piper pointed to the coffee station behind him. “You take a cup, fill it up, and put whatever you want in it.”

He glanced over his shoulder, then back to her.

She leaned in, resting on her forearms. “Medium blend, three vanilla creamers, and one caramel.”

He looked at her for three beats, then sighed, and got up to get his own coffee.

For the first time in five years.

She’d done that to him, Piper realized as she watched him get his coffee. She’d coddled him from day one. He was the genius of the group. He and Dax were both treated as if they had some kind of superpowers and needed special handling.

Dax milked that for all it was worth. He had gummy bears and bean bag chairs in his office, a Ping-Pong table in the break room, and just generally got away with goofing around almost constantly, chalking everything up to helping his “creative process.”

She thought there was some truth to that probably, but over the five years she’d spent with these men, she’d observed them when they weren’t putting on a façade too. Moments of frustration and moments when they were unsure. Arguments, flat-out panic a couple of times when things looked bad, and moments of pure joy and pride when things were really good.

The guys let Ollie get away with all kinds of crazy crap. They didn’t always let him put his full plans into place because Ollie tended to think outside of the box, *and* the circle, *and* the triangle, *and* the octagon. He had wild and crazy notions and relied on the guys and Piper to keep him on track.

Maybe they did realize he was the softer of the personalities. But she wasn’t sure their coddling was good. The guys didn’t care if he blew off birthdays and meetings. They let him keep whatever schedule he wanted. They didn’t get upset if one morning he called in to tell them that he was in New York and would be back on Thursday. If he said he’d just

suddenly had the urge to be on top of the Empire State Building, they'd all just nod and say, "that's Ollie."

He got away with so much. Because of all of them. Because of her.

He returned to the table and took his chair, this time leaning forward onto the table, his coffee cradled between his hands.

"You look nice," he told her.

She looked down. She was wearing one of her usual office outfits. This was how she typically dressed. This dress was red with white polka dots. It had a halter top that tied behind her neck and a flared skirt that hit her knees. She had white wedge heels on and a big white bow sitting askew on her head.

"Thanks."

"I like those dresses. The ones you wear to work."

She smiled. So he had noticed. "Thank you." Then again, she'd never had his attention in those dresses the way she had the other night. She leaned in. "Better than the robe?"

His eyes met hers. There was definitely a flicker of heat there. "Yeah, better than the robe."

She lifted a brow. "I don't believe you."

"I like the dresses on you. I wanted the robe *off* of you."

Chapter Four



Piper froze with her cup halfway to her mouth. She stared at him. She set her cup down. “Oliver, that was very...”

He just waited for her to fill the blank in.

“Sexy.”

He looked mildly amused. “You sound surprised.”

“I think I am.”

“I can be sexy.”

He could? Really? She found him sexy, but it had always seemed unintentional. She was attracted to things that she wasn't sure he was even aware he did. Like how he egged Dax on. How he said things just to get Grant to roll his eyes. The times he asked Aiden for advice just so Aiden could feel that he was leading the way. The “troubles” he'd had that he needed Cam to intervene in.

And his big plans and ideas—even when he was asking her to find out how much it would cost to rent or buy an actual circus tent—and the way he laughed and the way he appeared with Dax for their fans even though he didn't enjoy the spotlight.

And a million other things.

Josie returned with Ollie's muffins, setting the bag on the table. “I look forward to seeing more of you, Ollie,” she said with a grin.

He sighed. “Until I can get this new assistant trained.”

“Or you could keep coming in after that,” Josie said. “We give special secret treats to our friends. But they have to come in in person.”

Ollie gave her a little grin. “Like the special cupcakes you make for Grant?”

Josie blushed and Piper laughed. Everyone knew about the X-rated cupcakes Josie had made for Grant months ago. She’d even turned it into an off-menu specialty item in her side baking business. But she blushed every time someone mentioned them.

“Yeah, something like that,” she said.

“That’s all you had to say, Josie,” Ollie said with a smirk.

“Okay. So... great.” She smiled, then hustled away from the table.

“Yeah,” Piper said.

He looked over at her.

“I know you can be sexy,” she told him. He was very sexy when he didn’t mean to be. Like when he said things he knew would make Josie blush. He didn’t mean that to be sexy. Josie was very much one of his best friends’ girl. But Ollie teased her because she was a friend and yes, Piper found that sexy.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Yeah. I just haven’t ever experienced you doing it with *me*. Directly anyway. Like the robe comment.”

The corner of his mouth curled up. “Have I done it indirectly?”

“Every day,” she said honestly.

They sat just looking at one another for several seconds.

“I miss you,” he finally said.

That surprised her even more than the compliment on her dress and the comment about her robe.

She nodded. “I’m very hard to get over.”

“And I’m mad at you.”

“You’re caffeine deprived.”

“For that.” He nodded. “And because I haven’t written a fucking word in a week.”

“That’s my fault?”

“Entirely.”

“That’s ridiculous. You wrote for four years before you even met me.”

“And it took me twice as long then and it was easier to write this stuff before there was such a big world with so many plots and characters.” He scowled at her. “I can’t find my character files.”

She sighed. He could *never* find his character files and he never would. Even when they were in the folder in the center of his computer’s desktop and labeled CHARACTER FILES.

“It took you twice as long as it does now?” she asked, shaking her head in disbelief. Ollie was not a fast writer.

“Yes. No one made me sit at my desk and I had no reward for getting shit done.”

She fought a smile. She had implemented the writing sprints and reward system after reading about other writers doing it on Twitter. He had to write without doing anything else or getting up for twenty to thirty minutes. Then he got a five to ten minute break. And each time he got to his daily work goal, he got a reward. It was often food. He loved her cooking. But sometimes it was a game of Ping-Pong with Dax—if he hadn’t managed to convince her he needed one during his breaks for his “creative process”—or a gab session with Cam. Again, if he hadn’t taken a detour for one of those during his ten-minute breaks that often turned into forty-five minutes if she wasn’t on top of him. And yes, she called them gab sessions. The two men were gossipy as hell and could go on and on about the stupidest things.

“The office is distracting too,” he said. “The new girl doesn’t respect my need for Norah.”

“So turn Norah on for yourself,” Piper said.

Ollie couldn't work with any noise, except Norah Jones. Piper found Norah relaxing, herself, and one night when they'd been working late and she'd had Norah playing, Ollie had claimed to get more done than he had all week. They'd experimented and found Norah was magic for his concentration.

"I did." He looked grumpy. "It didn't work."

"Maybe you need her greatest hits album."

"I need you."

He said it flatly. It didn't sound sweet or like a compliment, for sure, but Piper's breath still caught. "Ollie—"

He suddenly shifted to sit forward. "I need to work with *you* around. So you need to get over me. But for now, here I am."

"Here you are?" she repeated.

"Yes. To work." He reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out a little notebook and a pen.

"What do you mean?" She watched him open the notebook and uncap the pen.

"I'm going to have to come to wherever you are to get any work done, I guess," he said. "Until you're over me." He narrowed his eyes. "How's that going? Are you there yet?"

She had to fight another smile. When she'd agreed that she would go back to work for Fluke if she got over Ollie, she hadn't been lying. If she wasn't in love with him, it would be easy to work there. She missed it already. But she wasn't expecting to get over him. Ever.

"Nope. Sorry. Still love you."

He sighed, very put-upon by the news.

"That's annoying, Piper."

It certainly was.

"And what if I don't want you to just follow me around?" she asked. "What if that will make it *harder* to get over you?"

He frowned. "I guess I can go sit at another table and hope that being near you is enough."

She shook her head. "You don't actually think just being in the same general vicinity as me is what helps you write." That was stupid. He was just pissed that he wasn't getting his way and shaken that she'd finally walked out and dumped his world upside down when all of them worked so hard to keep his world so steady and easy.

"Look, I've been sitting at the same desk, listening to Norah, trying to write the same scene for the past week and can't. The only change is you. And the coffee."

"You're being a baby."

He shrugged, unconcerned. "There are millions of people expecting this new installment in two months. Designers and marketing people who need this to put food on their tables. I don't care what it says about me that I need to be near you to produce. I just can't gamble on it or try new things right now."

Or ever. But she didn't say that out loud. Ollie wasn't good with change and "new," it was true. And yes, it sounded dramatic, but he wasn't wrong about the people depending on him. His world—his words—made a lot of people happy and kept a lot of people employed. And it was impossible to ignore that she missed him and liked the idea that he wanted to be near her to work. Begrudgingly maybe, but still.

He wanted her to get over him? Well, she wanted him to fall for her.

Seemed that being together was the best way for one of those things to happen.

But that didn't mean she was going to let Ollie totally get his way.

She was sure that was going shock him.

"Fine." She pushed back from the table and stood. "Come on then."

"Wait." He frowned. "Where are you going?"

“Well, you didn’t think I was going to be sitting at the bakery all day, did you?”

“I...” He sighed. “I have no idea what you’re doing if you’re not with me,” he groused.

“Of course not,” she said with an eye roll. “But you’re about to find out.” She lifted her bag from the floor by her chair and slung it over her shoulder. “Just give me a second to change and we’ll go.”

“Change?”

“My clothes.”

He straightened. “You’re going to change clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She tipped her head, narrowing her eyes. Why did he care? “Because this dress and these shoes aren’t appropriate for what I’m going to be doing.”

“What are you going to change into?”

She frowned. “Jeans and a t-shirt. If that’s okay with you?”

He frowned too, but he was studying her dress. “I’m not sure.” He seemed to be saying it to himself rather than to her.

“You’re not sure if it’s okay if I change my clothes?” she asked.

He sighed. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not even a little.”

“Then I guess it doesn’t matter.”

She started to respond, then shook her head. This was a ridiculous argument. “I’ll be right back.” She started for the back of the bakery where Zoe and Josie said she could use their private powder room to change. She turned after two steps though. “You only like me in these dresses?” she asked.

He sighed and didn’t look at her. “I didn’t say that.”

“You’ve never seen me in jeans before.”

“I’m aware.”

She and Ollie spent a lot of time together but, again, they were both workaholics. Even their after-hours time was generally spent at the office, so, in office clothes. When she did take food to him or dropped things off at his hotel room or apartment, it was always when she was still dressed for work.

She wasn’t sure why that was.

Okay, she *did* know. She loved how she looked in her dresses and heels and she’d wanted to look good for him whenever she saw him.

As ridiculous as that was when it came to “impressing” a guy who was not detail oriented. Which was a nice way of saying that she often had to tell him the date on the calendar and the mailing address of the hotel—his *home* for all intents and purposes for the past ten months—at least once a week.

He wasn’t stupid. Far from it. But he was a dreamer.

Which was a nice way of saying that he could be a flake.

“So why do you *not* want me to put jeans on now?” she asked. This was such a dumb conversation.

He finally looked at her. “Just do it,” he said. “Let’s see what happens.”

Ookay. Well, she’d never argued that he wasn’t weird.

She changed into the faded, worn jeans and the tee she’d tucked into her bag. She slipped on simple tennis shoes and pulled her hair up into a high ponytail.

But she couldn’t resist adding a scarf around the base of the ponytail.

It was bright blue and matched the sparkly words on the front of her t-shirt that said *Feminism is my second favorite f-word*.

Yes, the shirt had sequins. She wasn’t exactly an *outdoorsy* girl. She just knew that her heels didn’t combine with the dirt out on Drew’s farm very well. Because she’d worn her heels out to the farm before and that had been a big mistake. Partly

because it was hard to walk over dirt in heels. Partly because there was more than *dirt* out there on Drew's farm.

She added some lip gloss, spritzed her perfume on her neck, and then left the bathroom.

Ollie was halfway through his second muffin by the time she got back to the table.

Piper couldn't help but smile. She was sure he had missed them. But damn, what a baby.

"Okay, you ready?"

He looked up.

And immediately started choking.

She watched him as he coughed. He reached for his coffee and took a drink. He seemed fine for a moment. Then he took a breath and started coughing again.

He didn't need the Heimlich. Thankfully. She could have done it, but he was a big guy and it would have been difficult. But he got to his feet, bending at the waist to cough hard.

"Good lord!" Josie exclaimed, appearing next to Ollie. She handed him a glass of water. "Are you okay?"

He shook his head but took the glass, downing it in three gulps.

The entire bakery was looking at them now.

He lowered the glass slowly, took another breath, coughed once. Then swallowed.

"Are you all right?" Josie asked again.

"Yeah." He nodded. "I guess."

"Okay." She took the glass from him.

"What was tha—" Piper's question was cut off as Ollie took her arm and steered her toward the door.

He marched her to the door and swung a right when they hit the sidewalk. He directed her into the alley that ran between the bakery and the antique store next door. It was wider than a usual alley. There were twinkle lights strung

between the buildings overhead and benches and planters full of flowers along the cobblestone-paved pathway that ran from Main Street to Railroad Avenue.

“Oliver, wha—”

He stopped and backed her up against the side of the bakery.

“I really like the dresses you usually wear,” he said. His voice was gruff.

Totally confused, she nodded. “You’ve mentioned that.”

“I think I should only spend time with you when you’re wearing those.”

Annoyance slammed into her. “Is that right?”

“That would really be better.”

“Well, I suppose if I really cared what you thought about how I dress, I’d take that into consideration.”

What an ass. She pushed him back. And spread her hands down her t-shirt. It molded to her breasts and the V-neck highlighted her cleavage. Much as her dresses did.

She wasn’t thin. She didn’t have a tight ass. She liked *everything* they made at Buttered Up. But she liked how she looked in this tee and jeans and in all of her dresses and Oliver Caprinelli could fuck right off if he didn’t. Plenty of men liked curves, and just because she’d been stupid enough to fall for her flaky, self-absorbed boss didn’t mean she couldn’t get over him. Probably. Maybe.

“You don’t care what I think about your dresses? And jeans?” he asked.

He actually seemed confused.

He was *a lot* of work. But, as she had for the past five years, Piper couldn’t let the moment pass without trying to help him understand. She knew she and the guys were his gauge for what was normal. Kind of, anyway. And she knew that part of her job, even if no one had given it conscious

thought, was to help keep Oliver on this side of weird as much as possible.

“I didn’t even know I was going to see you today,” she said, working to keep her tone conversational rather than exasperated. “How does what I’m wearing today have anything to do with you?”

His gaze dropped and traveled up and down her body. She felt her heart rate pick up and told herself to calm down. Oliver was studying her because she’d just asked him a question. He wasn’t trying to be flirtatious or sexy.

“Okay, maybe not today specifically,” he said, bringing his eyes back to hers. He looked confused. “But you said you’re in love with me. Doesn’t that mean you want me to like how you look?”

That being in love with him confession had really been a mistake, she realized. He was obsessed with it. Which was amusing on one level. Maybe Ollie had never had a woman tell him that before. Or maybe he was just that shocked that she felt that way. But on another level, it was annoying. It had made him uncomfortable. He certainly hadn’t said that he felt the same way. Yet he had to keep bringing it up.

“I guess I would like to think that you like how I look in whatever I wear and that you would like me because of a lot of things other than how I dress.”

“But attraction is about physical appearance,” he said. “And how you dress is part of that.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Attraction is about a lot more than that.”

He frowned. “So, your attraction to me is not about how *I* look?”

Piper sighed. Patience. This man took more patience than anyone she’d ever met. “It’s not *just* about how you look.”

“What’s it about?”

What was going on? He needed reassurance? From her? Why? “You want to know why I’m in love with you?” Might

as well put that right out there.

“I would like that. Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I really don’t know.”

Piper felt her heart squeeze at that. Wow. He was hardly lacking in confidence. Sure, they sometimes had to pull him back on his big, crazy, circus-tent-level ideas, but he knew his value to the company and his friends. He knew he was brilliant. Sometimes *that* was the problem, honestly.

“Your creativity.”

“Everyone thinks I’m creative.”

“Well, you are.”

“So is Dax.”

“Yes.”

“Are you in love with Dax?”

“No.”

“Then that can’t be it.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “You’re going to argue with me about what I love about you?”

“It just needs to make sense,” he said.

“It does?”

“It’s a huge complication, Piper,” he told her without a touch of amusement. “It at least needs to make sense if it’s going to mix everything up.”

Ah. Well, she wasn’t so sure that love *made sense* all the time. But she knew this man. He’d created an entirely fictional fantasy world and then pulled millions of people into it with him. Things in *Warriors* were fantastical, but they made sense according the laws of the world. The world, and laws, he’d created. Of course, he could also add to those laws any time. Didn’t want gravity for a particular plot point? Then suddenly a certain part of the planet didn’t have gravity. If someone questioned him in a meeting about it, he was ready with

explanations that sometimes went way back to the very first version of the game. Or sometimes he'd just say, "we never said the *entire* planet had gravity." It really depended on his mood.

She often got the impression that Ollie's biggest frustration in life was that the real world had rules that he didn't agree with and couldn't change.

He was not going to appreciate her telling him that love didn't always make sense or saying things like *the heart wants what the heart wants*.

"Okay, you're right, it's probably not your creativity," she said. She'd long ago learned to pick her battles with Ollie.

"Then what is it?"

"Your dedication to the company and the guys."

"They make me very rich."

She lifted a brow. He was not dedicated to his friends and their company because of the money. Why was he so damned grumpy today?

"You don't care about the money," she said.

"I don't? The private plane I happily use, the penthouse suite I currently occupy, the custom-tailored suits I wear would all seem contrary to that statement."

Yeah, he was going to argue with everything she said. Oliver didn't care about the money.

The private plane was, actually, more practical at times. And the guys didn't use it every time they traveled. And they shared it with another company anyway.

The penthouse made sense, considering he'd been living there for ten months now. It was more like an apartment than a hotel room, really, and in the beginning anyway, he hadn't known how long he was staying in Iowa. Now it seemed he was considering staying for good since the guys all were. But he hadn't made the decision to look for an actual apartment yet.

The custom-tailored suits... well, okay, he really did like those. He could have easily gotten by wearing jeans and his geeky t-shirts, like the one that said *I'm sorry for what I said while I was gaming*. Or his favorite *I paused my game to be here*. They had an entire line of *Warriors* apparel as well. He so rarely met with anyone but fans that he really had no need for the suits. But he liked them.

And he looked damn good in them.

"I love that you would do anything for any of your friends," she said. "You make up problems for them to solve because you know they need that. I love the way you fully embraced Whitney becoming a part of the company and finding herself. I love the way you encouraged all of your friends in their relationships with their girls even though it was going to take them away from you."

He didn't have an immediate argument for those. He just stood looking at her.

She looked back.

"I'm not a total ass," he finally said.

"I know."

"So you love me because I'm not a total dick," he said. "That's kind of a low bar."

She sighed. He was such a pain in the ass. "Okay, brace yourself, Oliver."

He actually straightened slightly. He frowned. "For what?"

"For the *truth*. I can't totally explain *why* I love you, but I can tell you how I know that I do."

Suddenly he looked worried. "Never mind. You don't have to do that."

"Oh yes, I do."

"No, really—"

"I love how I feel when I hear your voice first thing in the morning—the way it makes my heart lift."

He seemed to be frozen, except for his throat when he swallowed hard.

“I love how I feel when I hear you laugh—the way it makes my stomach flip,” she said. “I love how I feel when you actually focus on me, *really* focus, and listen to me—the way my chest feels warmer.”

She didn’t get his full focus often, but when she did, it was powerful. And she had noticed that it was easier for her to get his attention than it was for anyone else. That also made her stomach flip.

Right now, she had that full focus. He was staring at her. His jaw looked tight and he was clenching his hands at his sides, but he wasn’t moving or speaking.

“I love how I feel when you talk about *Warriors*—the way your voice gets more excited, the way your eyes light up—it makes me feel like I just swallowed a drink of hot chocolate. I love listening to you and Whitney brainstorm. It makes me just want to giggle... and try to make it all happen. Even the acrobats. And you know very well that I usually would *not* want to make acrobats happen.”

She took a breath. She probably shouldn’t admit the rest of this but, she was on a roll now.

“About two years ago, I started to realize that I was trying harder to make your crazy ideas happen. I now have to *make* myself pull *you* back. Because I really just want to make you happy.”

He pulled in a long breath.

“And,” she added before he could say anything, “since we’ve come to Appleby, I’ve watched you watching your friends falling in love and I see how happy it makes you. I know you wish things could stay the same, but you want them happy even more. Seeing you so happy for your friends shows me how much you truly love them and that makes me love you more.”

She swallowed. “And yeah,” she said. “I do love how you look. I love your hands and your eyes and your hair and your

smile and your body. I want to get naked with you and have hot, dirty sex with you all night long every night.” She took a breath. “And yeah, I do care how you think I look in my dresses *and* in my jeans. And that’s how I *definitely* know how I feel about you. Because I never really care what people think of me. But I care what *you* think. The guy who can’t even remember if he ate lunch some days.”

She blew out a breath and straightened, waiting for him to say or do something.

Finally, he said, “I have a hard time attaching to people and forming relationships.”

She felt her lips curl. Then she laughed.

He scowled. “I’m serious.”

“How long have you been telling yourself that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oliver, you are incredibly attached to Dax, Aiden, Grant, and Cam. And, maybe you haven’t noticed, but you’re attached to me too. And you’re getting attached to Whitney. I think Jane and Josie and Zoe are getting pretty close too.”

“Well...”

She smiled as he trailed off. “Well... you’re full of crap.”

“Dax...” Ollie tucked his hands into his pockets. “Dax made me attach to him.”

She laughed again. She understood what he meant. Dax was very difficult to not like. “He forced you to be his friend?”

“He made it impossible to ignore him and then... impossible to not like him.” There was a smile teasing Ollie’s mouth.

Yeah, that smile, especially the reluctant ones, made her stomach flip.

“And the other guys?”

“Dax brought them in and before I knew it, I had this group of friends.” Ollie shrugged. “I didn’t do much. Mostly

tried to stay out of their way.”

She knew the story of how *Warriors* had come to be. Oliver and Dax had been assigned to be roommates at the University of Chicago. They were a year younger than Cam and Aiden. One night Aiden and Cam had been passing by Ollie and Dax’s room. There had been a bunch of guys gathered in their room and Aiden had stopped to see what was going on. They’d been watching Ollie and Dax play a new video game. As soon as they’d realized that Ollie and Dax had *created* the game, they’d shooed everyone else out of the room and had kept the game under wraps until they could develop it further and trademark it and get all of their ducks in a row. Which was where Grant, a guy Aiden had met in one of his business classes, had come in.

Grant had understood the business side. Aiden had been more of the marketing and networking guy. Cam had researched trademarks and incorporating and contracts and had handled the paperwork long before he’d headed to law school. In fact, Piper had learned from Whitney that Cam had gone to law school *because* of the guys and *Warriors*. It was kind of the puzzle piece that had been left and he’d wanted to be a part of it, so that had determined his direction.

Dax and Ollie, in the meantime, had kept working on the game. Ollie wrote the story lines and developed the characters, and Dax brought them to life on the screen, taking Ollie’s words and making them first into pictures and then into moving graphics.

But Piper didn’t believe that Ollie didn’t “do much” and had just stayed out of the way. The five men she’d worked for over the past five years loved each other. They were like brothers. Oliver included.

“Ollie, they need you,” she said.

He scoffed.

“They do. Dax needs someone beside him when he jumps out of airplanes and wades in the fountains in Rome.”

“He could have found a hundred guys to do that with him.”

She shook her head. “Come on, Ollie. You guys, together, have created a place where you can all be who you are. You make sure Grant has some fun and doesn’t take everything so seriously. You validate Aiden and give him a place to really shine. You give Cam people and something to protect, which is one of his best strengths. And you keep Dax safe even while he’s being... Dax.”

“How do you know Dax isn’t keeping me safe?”

She smiled. “You keep each other safe.”

He just sighed.

“Fluke is where you all belong, where you all *fit*, and it wouldn’t be what it is without any one of you.”

“But they’ve all found other things,” he said.

Right. The thing he’d created, that had brought them all together, that had been their initial bond, that had kept them together for nine years, was still there. But they were all moving on. Not entirely, but they weren’t all living and breathing Fluke anymore.

She knew that bothered Ollie. And she understood it. It had bothered her a little too. She’d been afraid that Fluke was breaking up. And it was true that it had changed. But what she’d learned over the past few months since the guys had fallen in love and found other places and people to put some of their passion—they kept coming back together.

They met every morning. For sure. Sometimes more often. They saw each other socially too. But those morning meetings mattered the most. They didn’t have to have those. Dax wasn’t a part of Hot Cakes, officially anyway, and Cam often joined via Zoom because he was at the house with Didi, Whitney’s grandmother. But they still all found themselves gathering together, even if it was for only fifteen minutes, every morning whether it was necessary or not.

Because they needed each other. They needed to touch base, to start their day from their foundation. No matter what else changed in their lives, where they’d started, together, still drew them.

“You need something else too,” she told Ollie. “You feel like this because you’re the one that hasn’t added anything new. You need somewhere else to put some energy too.”

“Like dating you?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

She rolled her eyes. “I will not be tricking you or talking you into anything, Oliver. I’ve put it all out there. What you do with the knowledge of how I feel is up to you. But you could do a lot worse than putting some energy and time into *me*,” she said.

He sighed. “Yeah. Probably.”

A little more enthusiasm from him than that would be nice, but he was adjusting and she knew that took time.

“I do think you could use a change of pace, though,” she told him.

“Like what?”

“You want to work wherever I am? That’s fine. I can get you set up.”

He looked suspicious.

He should. He was starting to figure out that Piper-lets-me-get-away-with-almost-anything time was over.

This was going to be very different from what he was used to. But it might be good for him. And at least she’d have him around. For a day or so before he bailed.

“Let’s go.” She started toward the front of the bakery and her vehicle.

“Where are we going?” he called after her as she kept going.

“You’ll see.”

She was probably enjoying his worry far too much, but she was definitely grinning when he finally joined her in her small, fully-loaded SUV, with the custom neon-blue paint job.

Hey, her bosses at Fluke Inc. had paid her very well.

And as she turned north on the highway and Oliver realized where they were headed and groaned, she rolled her eyes and reminded herself that she'd earned every penny.

Chapter Five



She was taking him to Drew Ryan's farm. For fuck's sake.

And she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. A t-shirt with sparkles on the front that drew his eyes directly to her breasts and the V-neck that showed the smooth, creamy upper curves of her breasts.

He had no idea what the t-shirt said. He was aware that the sparkles were in the form of letters, but he hadn't read them. Why would he look at the words when those glorious breasts were right there?

He'd managed to make it past those curves to the ones of her hips and ass in those jeans though.

Blue jeans. Denim. Faded, worn, molded to her body, denim blue jeans.

If someone had asked him if Piper Barry even owned a pair of jeans, in any color, he would have said no. But damn, she not only owned them, she wore the hell out of them.

Why was she wearing jeans and a t-shirt?

Why did her wearing jeans and a t-shirt make him so crazy?

He could have chalked it up to him being muffin-less for the past week. Or just missing her for the past week. Or being generally grumpy about everything for the past week because he'd been sleeping like shit and unable to get a damned thing done on his script.

But none of that explained why she'd made him crazy in her robe the other night.

He knew what it was. But he didn't want to admit it.

As she turned in at the sign that declared them to be at the Ryan Alpaca Farm, Ollie let out a little growl.

She glanced over. "You okay?"

"I've just had my fill of Drew Ryan for the month."

"You saw him for about three minutes."

"Yep."

She laughed. And kept driving.

No one took his dislike for Drew Ryan seriously. But it was serious. It was stupid. But it was serious.

Drew was a nice guy. He'd never done a thing to make Oliver think otherwise.

Even the day he'd started really hating the guy, Drew had been nice.

That was a lot of why Ollie hated him. He was nice. Normal. Very capable of having normal relationships and remembering things like birthdays. And that it was Wednesday. And March.

Ollie and Piper had been out at the farm looking at animals that Drew said would be great for a petting zoo at the big cake-tasting event Hot Cakes was putting on. Everyone had told him that a circus theme was too much and that they couldn't bring in a tent and acrobats, but that they could have bouncy houses and a petting zoo. That had been a pretty uncool substitute in his opinion. But Piper had wanted to go along to look at the animals and getting out of the office always seemed like a good idea, and before he knew it, Drew had Piper holding baby goats and petting alpacas—standing *way* closer than he needed to for either of those activities and making her laugh—and Ollie had said no way to the petting zoo.

Then Drew had put his hand over Piper's as they brushed one of the alpacas and Piper had looked up at Ollie and said,

“come on, Ollie, please?” and somehow they’d ended up with alpacas, a pot-bellied pig, goats, and an emu, of all things, at the cake tasting.

Much to Whitney’s chagrin.

Yes, he was jealous of Drew Ryan. And how much he seemed to like Piper and how much Piper seemed to like *him* and how *normal* Drew was—did it get any more normal than a guy named Drew Ryan who was a farmer in Iowa, for fuck’s sake?

Yes, he was aware of his jealousy.

He was clueless at times, but he wasn’t an idiot.

“Do you come out here every day?” Ollie asked Piper grumpily as she pulled up in front of one of Drew’s barns.

“Yep,” she said, shutting off the engine.

He looked over. “Really? Every day?”

“Well, since I don’t have a job anymore anyway.” She started to get out.

“Are you and Drew Ryan sleeping together?”

He realized that he’d made a big mistake one second before she swung back to look at him, her eyes flashing.

“*What?*”

“Nothing.”

“No, that’s not a nothing. I told you the other night that Drew and I are friends.”

“Yes. And that you don’t want him to be your boyfriend. But that doesn’t mean you don’t have a friends-with-benefits thing going on,” Ollie pointed out. Stupidly.

“So the only reason I might come out here every day would be for sex?” she asked, her voice tight, her eyes narrow.

“Well, you’re not exactly farm material.”

That was true, dammit. The woman dressed in pin-up dresses and heels every damned day. She wore long fake eyelashes and did her nails and matched her hair accessories

with her belts and shoes. How was it possibly an insult to point out that she didn't exactly exude an outdoorsy, muck-around-with-animals vibe?

But it seemed that it was an insult.

"I find it fascinating," she said after a moment during which Ollie was pretty sure she'd counted to ten, "that you think you know me so well."

"We've known each other for five years," he said. "We've spent a ton of time together."

"Yes. And I know exactly how to make your coffee and order your burgers and all the different places where you stick your neckties when you get sick of them, and that, for reasons I still haven't figured out, if I use my shaped sticky notes you *never* see the notes, but if I use the plain old yellow ones you do. But you know nothing about me, Oliver."

He thought about that. Then asked, "You have sticky notes that are different shapes?"

She made a noise that seemed like a muted scream and got out of the car, slamming her door hard.

He scrambled out his door as well. "Wait! I just asked a question."

"I have notes that are flowers, lips, high heels, coffee cups..." She pulled in a breath. "Yes, I have sticky notes that are different shapes."

He'd never noticed that.

A fact she was clearly aware of.

She turned on her heel and started for the barn.

"I know that blue is your favorite color," he said, hurrying after her. Damn, for a short woman, she could move. "I know that—"

She stopped and spun and he nearly plowed her over. His hands went to her shoulders and hers went to his chest.

He realized he was breathing hard as he stared down at her.

“Everyone knows blue is my favorite color,” she said. She pushed on his chest and stepped back.

He didn’t want to let her go. But he did.

“It doesn’t hurt my feelings that you don’t know details about me, Ollie,” she said, her voice quieter. “I was your assistant. It was my *job* to keep track of details about you.”

Exactly. That was exactly why all of this was so frustrating. She’d been *paid* to put up with his weirdness. She’d *had* to be there, no matter how nuts he made her.

Now... she could just walk away from him.

“I don’t know Grant’s favorite color,” he said.

“Does Grant have a favorite color?” Piper asked.

“I don’t know. I just... what I mean by that is, it doesn’t mean anything that I don’t know details,” he said. “I don’t do details. It’s just me. It’s not... you.”

She sighed and nodded. “I know.”

And she did. She probably knew him better than anyone.

“My point is,” she went on. “You don’t get to say things like I’m not farm-material or act all freaked out when I wear jeans or assume that I’m coming out here because I’m sleeping with Drew as if you know me so well. You don’t.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m not sleeping with Drew. Not that it’s *any* of your business. But it’s not a friends-with-benefits. It’s just *friends*. And that’s because of *me*. And you. Drew has asked me out. I said no. Because of how I feel about you. So now, *please*, for the love of God, shut the hell up about Drew.”

Shutting the hell up seemed like a really good idea.

Every time she talked about how she felt about him and being in love with him, it made his chest tight. Not in a bad way, but in an I-want-that way. And that scared the shit out of him.

He would make Piper crazy. He already made her crazy. They would last about five minutes. And, just like she'd said back at the bakery, she would be very hard to get over.

Very likely impossible.

“Yeah. Fine. Tell me what you are doing out here,” he said, changing the subject.

He was definitely curious about what she was doing out here at the farm every day. Especially if it had nothing to do with Drew Ryan and her having sex.

Even if it *did* involve her in blue jeans.

At the barn, she grabbed the handle and pulled, sliding the big door open.

Inside it looked like... a barn. Or what Ollie would have imagined the inside of a barn would look like.

It was full of stuff like tools and machinery and was dirty and dusty.

Again, not the type of place he would have pictured Piper, but he wisely kept his mouth shut about that this time.

She headed for the beat-up green pickup that was parked near the door.

She looked back at him as she pulled the driver's side door open. “You coming?”

“We're driving that?”

“We are,” she told him with a smirk.

If she was thinking that he wasn't the outdoorsy, barn-type guy either, she'd be right.

Of course she was thinking that.

He rounded the front of the truck and climbed in. “Why can't we take your car?”

“Because it might get muddy,” she said, starting the pickup. “And it doesn't have room for all of that.” She gestured over her shoulder with her thumb.

Oliver pivoted to look into the bed of the truck. It was filled with stuff. Most of which appeared to be painting supplies. Buckets of paint, a ladder, brushes, a toolbox, and miscellaneous other things he vaguely recognized but had never used himself.

“You’re painting something?”

She nodded, grinning, and maneuvered the truck through the door and around the side of the barn, pointing it toward one of the fields.

There was a path through the long grass but not one that was evident until they were on top of it.

“What are you painting?” They were clearly heading away from the house and other buildings around Drew’s property.

“A cabin,” she said simply. Then she added, “Well, more than one, but today, obviously, just one.”

“A cabin? What kind of cabin?”

“A cabin,” she said with a shrug. “Like a... cabin. A small, house-type structure.” She glanced at him. “What other types of cabin are there?”

“Well, there are log cabins,” he said. He didn’t really know much about cabins. Or anything about cabins except what he’d seen in movies and read about in books. “Hunting cabins. Mountain cabins.”

She looked amused. “This is a camping cabin.”

“What’s a camping cabin?”

“A cabin that people stay in when they’re camping,” she said, grinning as they bumped along over the very uneven path. “You’ve surely seen movies about kids who go off to summer camp.”

“Well, sure.” He couldn’t recall any titles or plots but he had a general image of cabins clustered around a lake and kids dressed in matching t-shirts doing things like canoeing and archery and making s’mores around campfires.

“That’s what these cabins will be,” Piper said.

“Camping cabins? For kids?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Really?”

She looked at him. “Yes.”

“And you’re painting them?”

“I’m helping. Just like I helped build them. Well, except the first one. That one was already there. We just fixed it up a little. It was Drew’s grandpa’s hunting cabin. But we built the rest. I helped.”

“When did you do that?” It was March. It had been cold and snowy for much of the past three months. Even he knew that wasn’t building weather in Iowa.

“Last fall.”

“Huh.” He definitely noticed that she and Drew seemed friendly but he’d had no idea she’d been spending so much time out here. He didn’t like it. But she’d asked him to stop talking about Drew.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to stew about it though.

“We started talking about it after I helped get the farming program going with Sunny Orchard,” Piper said. Sunny Orchard was Dax’s nursing home. They’d set up a program with Drew where they brought residents who had farmed or enjoyed gardening and animals out to the farm a couple of days a week to give them some activities they’d loved and missed. It was actually pretty cool. And one of the reasons Dax told Ollie he should lighten up about Drew.

“We built a greenhouse,” Piper went on. “And had such a good time that one night when we were sitting around talking about other ideas and Drew mentioned the cabin and brought me out here to see it.”

“Drew just casually brought you clear out here to see his hunting cabin just the two of you, just as friends,” Ollie said. Hey, *she* was the one that had brought up Drew’s name, not him.

“Well, Drew didn’t think we should just be friends,” Piper said casually. “That was the night he kissed me.”

Ollie felt his hands ball into fists. That made his gut tighten and he actually saw red. “He *kissed* you?” he ground out.

“Yep,” she said cheerfully.

Cheerfully. As if his heart wasn’t somewhere down around his knees and he didn’t want to put Drew’s head through the first wall he saw.

He could definitely get arrested for the pummeling he suddenly wanted to give Drew Fucking Ryan.

“But you’re just friends,” Ollie said.

“Yep.” That was also pretty damned cheerful. She cast him a glance. “That was also the night I told him I was in love with you so we could only be friends.”

“And he just said, ‘oh okay, that’s fine’?” Ollie asked, somehow getting the words past his tight jaw.

“Pretty much.” She lifted a shoulder. “Drew’s a good guy.”

“Hey, Piper?”

“Yeah?” Even that sounded cheerful. Like maybe she was enjoying his obvious jealous rage.

Yeah, yeah, he was jealous.

So what.

“How about *you* shut the hell up about Drew Ryan?”

She gave a little snort-laugh and yeah, she was enjoying this. But she said, “Okay.” She paused but in the distance a cluster of buildings came into view. “But,” she said. “I did help design these cabins. And the entire idea of making this into a kids’ camp was mine.”

He stared at her. He was surprised. He’d admit it. She could be mad about that if she wanted to be. It was true.

She shot him a glance. “You weren’t expecting that, huh?”

“You starting a kids’ camp and actually helping build it wouldn’t have been in the top twenty-five things I would have guessed you’d been doing in your free time,” he said honestly.

“And full-time since I quit my job.”

Right. She’d been working out here full-time. On Drew Ryan’s farm. In blue jeans. While Ollie had been stuck in a coffee-less office unable to write a fucking word on his script.

Awesome. Just awesome.

A minute later, they pulled up in front of a building that, sure enough, looked like a cabin. It was basic. Four walls, a roof, a few windows, and a front door with a single step up from the ground.

He looked around. There were five others just like it. They were clearly new. Only one exterior was painted. It was a bright blue that matched her car. He’d guess Piper had picked the color. The six buildings were arranged in a circle around a large area of dirt and grass. At the very center was a fire pit surrounded by rocks and wooden benches. About a hundred yards away to the east was a stream, a tributary of the small river that ran past the property and eventually fed into the Mississippi. There were trees about two hundred yards to the north and a vast grassy field to the west and south.

“This is all Ryan’s property?” Ollie asked as Piper shut the truck off.

“I thought we weren’t talking about Drew.”

He honestly didn’t even like her saying Ryan’s name. “We’re not.”

“Okay.” She seemed to be fighting a smile.

“Why a kids’ camp?” Ollie asked.

She looked out the windshield at the buildings. “My younger brothers have always loved camp. It’s been so great for them. They’ve met amazing friends, people who are like them and who helped them understand that no matter what they’re into, they can find a place to belong. But they also learned about people who are different from them and how

easy it really can be to find something in common with everyone at least on some level. They learned about teamwork and putting others first and how rewarding it can be to help others.” She sighed. “Just a bunch of really great things.” She looked over at him. “My brothers were—are—wild boys. They’re awesome. Smart, good-hearted, kind, but wild. Camp was so great for them when they went. And they loved going back every year. So, when Dr—when *we* were talking about things to do with a big area of land that was *not* plant or animal based—”

She laughed as if she and Drew had some private joke about him not wanting any more plants or animals, and Ollie frowned. He didn’t like her having private jokes with Drew Ryan. But more, he didn’t like that he had no clue that Piper had younger brothers.

“We just thought maybe this would be the perfect place for a camp.” She shrugged. “Maybe it won’t work, but if we want to give city kids a taste of rural living, then there’s no place like this. They can come see a real farm, get up close to animals they would never see in their usual lives, meet kids from different backgrounds.”

“You’re going to bring city kids here?” Ollie asked.

She finally looked over at him. “Yeah. I mean, why would we bring small town or country kids here?”

“So this isn’t for Appleby kids?”

She shrugged. “This *is* Appleby. How would it be fun for Appleby kids to come here?”

“I just...” He frowned. He had so many thoughts swirling in his head.

Piper had helped *build* these buildings. Drew had seen her in those blue jeans. She was starting a kids’ camp. She had younger brothers. Who had grown up in the city. Which meant she had too. He knew she was from Chicago, but he didn’t know she’d grown up there. And that bugged the shit out of him suddenly. Almost as much as it bugged him that Drew Ryan had seen her in those blue jeans.

It also bugged him that they weren't doing something here for Appleby.

And why did he care about that?

This wasn't his hometown. They'd helped save the biggest employer when they'd kept Hot Cakes open. That was enough good-doing for Appleby, wasn't it? He supposed Aiden and Cam, and yeah, even Grant and Dax since they'd fallen for born-here-will-die-here girls, had just made it a habit to think that everything was about making this town better.

This was Piper's thing. Well, and Drew Ryan's thing. They could do whatever they wanted with it.

"Where'd you get the money for this?" he asked, getting out of the truck when she did and following her up onto the porch of the cabin they parked in front of.

"Drew and Dallas donated the land," she said. Dallas was Drew's brother. "We've done some fund raising for the rest."

"Have the guys helped?" Ollie asked. He was going to be pissed if Aiden, Grant, Cam, or Dax had given her money for a project he hadn't even known about.

Why, he couldn't really say. The guys could spend their money on whatever they wanted to, of course, and they certainly didn't have to tell him about it. And Piper could talk to them about whatever she wanted to. Including pet projects that she needed donations for.

It just bugged him to think that he was the only one who hadn't known about it. And that she hadn't asked *him* for money.

"No," she said as she pushed the cabin's door open and stepped inside. "I've funded some of it and we've gotten a few grants and some private donations."

"You've funded some of it?" Ollie repeated, watching her walk to the middle of the room.

It really was just a box. It was just one big room with windows in the three walls besides the one with the door.

She turned to face him. "Yes, I've funded some of it."

“You have that kind of money?” he asked.

That was *none* of his business.

But she laughed. “My bosses have been very generous.” She propped a hand on her hip. “Four of them realize that my job responsibilities with the fifth are worth quite a bit.”

Ollie rolled his eyes, but he didn’t argue. He wasn’t surprised to hear that Grant and Aiden—he knew they were the ones that had decided on Piper’s salary—were willing to pay big bucks for her to babysit him.

“I don’t have a lot of expenses, other than my wardrobe. And my car. And Grant’s taught me a lot about investing,” she said.

That was one of Grant’s specialties. He even taught seminars about it. He taught single women—specifically single moms and widows, but really any single women—to manage their finances so that they would be financially independent and never in a relationship because of money.

He was glad Grant had helped Piper. Piper needed to be independent. She didn’t need to lean on anyone, especially any guy.

Especially him.

But there she was, standing ten feet away, in blue jeans, looking hot as hell, and supposedly in love with him.

How was he supposed to ignore that? *Any* of that?

He shoved a hand through his hair and looked around. “So you also got other people on board,” he said.

“I’ve met a lot of interesting people through my work with Fluke,” she said. “I’ve been thrilled with the number of people who have been willing to listen to my ideas and who have been interested in helping out with the funding.”

“That’s impressive,” he said.

“Is it?” She tipped her head.

“Of course.”

“You don’t even know that much about it.”

“You’re always impressive, Piper.”

She didn’t respond to that. She just kept standing there, looking like sex. He felt the growing urge to take the five steps that separated them, so he tucked his hands in his pockets and made himself turn around, pretending to study the room from another angle.

“So what is this going to be?”

“One of the sleeping cabins. We’ll put bunk beds in here. Some cubbies for personal belongings. But this is basically it.”

“Where are the bathrooms?”

“We built a separate building for toilets and showers. It’s finally been warm enough for them to turn the water on this past week.”

He turned back. “Wow, primitive.”

She smiled. “I think having to get up in the night with a flashlight and walk to the bathroom, worrying about serial killers and tigers along the way, was very character building for my brothers.”

“I didn’t know you had brothers.”

She opened her mouth and he braced himself for her to point out that he didn’t really know shit about her.

Which was true. It had been on purpose. But it was still true.

Getting close to Piper would have been trouble. She’d been hired as his assistant, paid to put up with him. That was a much simpler scenario than getting close to her, liking her, and then worrying about driving her crazy. It would have messed with his head. And probably his heart. As seemed more obvious every second he let himself think about kissing her the other night.

She didn’t say that though. She just nodded. “Four. One set of twins. All younger than me. Wild and crazy. Handfuls, all of them. Especially together.”

Four wild younger brothers. He smiled at that. “Makes some sense why you’re so good at dealing with all of us.”

She nodded. “I grew up wrangling them. I knew I’d be good at it as soon as I met you guys.” She shrugged. “Actually as soon as I read Grant’s job description. I was supposed to just be *your* assistant initially. Coming off of my four brothers, having just *one* to keep track of sounded really good.”

He’d known that Grant had hired her just for him. He’d been insulted for about thirty seconds when Grant had said he was hiring Ollie an assistant. Then he’d realized it was perfect. An assistant was exactly what he had needed. What he still needed. But dammit, not just any assistant. He needed *Piper*.

“What did the job description say?” he asked.

“That he was looking for someone who was energetic, incredibly organized and detail-oriented, had a sense of humor, and was patient beyond all expectation. Someone who was open to working strange hours and doing a variety of tasks from errands to event planning. Who could deal with no two days being alike.”

“It didn’t mention that you’d be babysitting a twenty-something-year-old man-child with picky eating habits, zero attention span, and hyperactive tendencies?”

He couldn’t believe he’d just said all of that. He *never* pointed those things out about himself. They were facts and the people closest to him knew them well, of course, but he didn’t talk specifically about those issues. Ever.

“No,” Piper said. She paused, then added, “Those all came up during the interview though.”

He couldn’t help a small smile. “He gambled on telling you up front what you were getting into and you still taking the job?”

“Wasn’t that better than me finding out after the fact?”

“I would have bet the other way.”

“What’s the other way?”

“You taking the job and realizing how charming and funny and interesting I was before finding out that I’m...” He trailed off on purpose, wanting her to fill that in.

“*A lot* of work?” she asked.

He grinned. “Yeah.”

She regarded him thoughtfully. “That would have turned out okay too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You are charming and funny and interesting.”

“And a lot of work.”

“Definitely.”

“I’m glad you stuck with it as long as you did.”

He hadn’t been expecting to say that. But he realized it was true. And losing her was exactly what he’d figured would happen eventually and why he’d tried not to care and, well... he’d screwed that up. And that’s why he was so damned crabby since she’d walked out.

Her expression was soft when she smiled this time and she looked sincerely touched. “Me too.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “It’s been good.”

“You could come back.”

“I know.”

He shouldn’t want her to come back. Being around her every day knowing that she was in love with him would be torture. And now that he’d kissed her—or she’d kissed him, or they’d kissed, or whatever—he’d want to kiss her at work. Constantly. Okay, maybe not *constantly*, because she wouldn’t be wearing blue jeans. Or her short bathrobe. She’d have her regular dresses on. That would help. But he’d want to kiss her a lot.

And he’d want to fall in love with her too.

“I think this is going to be better,” she said.

“What is?” he asked, feeling the grumpiness start to build again.

“Us not working together. But spending time together.”

She started toward him. But he didn't move when she got close. She stopped in front of him and tipped her head to look up at him.

“I can write out here?” he asked.

“Sure, in the finished cabin. It's fully furnished. It's painted inside and out. There's electricity and the kitchen is all hooked up. The Wi-Fi isn't great, but that's probably a good thing. Then you won't get distracted. We have to use the bathroom building for toilets and sinks and stuff, but it's just right there.” She pointed to a long, tan brick building behind the blue cabin.

A separate building for the bathroom. This was... interesting.

“I could really drive you crazy, you know,” he said. “Just the two of us working out here together.” But for some stupid reason his heart *thunked* hard at that thought. Being alone with Piper all day sounded pretty amazing. Alone, clear out here, away from, well, everything. Yeah, that sounded damned good.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Or it could be better than ever.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one thing, I don't work for you anymore,” she said with a little grin. “So I can tell you to shut up and fuck off if you bug me.”

Chapter Six



Her response was sassy and teasing. And it made him want to kiss her. As if he needed anything else adding to that.

“You already tell me those things. Even if it’s not in so many words. You even kicked me out of your hotel room the other night when you were tired of talking to me.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Even after a really hot kiss.”

Now why had he said that? As if he needed reminding of that. He needed to *not* think about that.

Her eyes heated and her grin grew almost sly. “Yeah, I did. So this will be fine.”

Ollie couldn’t look away from her mouth. And then he couldn’t stop thinking about how her lips had felt on his. And then he couldn’t stop thinking about how her body had felt against his and how she’d sounded and tasted and smelled.

This was what happened to him all the time. He’d be on one train of thought and then something would distract him and he’d lose all track of what he’d been doing.

Of course, this particular train of thought was making out with a gorgeous woman who he really liked and who really liked him, in spite of knowing him very well. So, it wasn’t quite so strange that he’d get distracted just now, he supposed.

“This is where I’m going to be, so if you want to be with me, you have to be here too,” Piper said. She tucked her hands in her back pockets.

He really wished she hadn't done that. The position thrust her breasts forward and the sparkly writing on the front of her t-shirt caught the sunlight, making it even harder to not look at it.

It was *literally* a shiny object pulling at his attention.

“Ollie?”

He closed his eyes. “Yeah?”

“I said, this is where I'll be. So if you need to be with me to get your writing done, then you need to be here too. And I think it might be good for you.”

His eyes opened. “Good for me how?”

“The fresh air and sunshine won't *hurt* you and getting away from the office could be good,” she said. “And when you get restless and fidgety, instead of playing Ping-Pong or distracting Cam, you can go for a walk by the stream or you can help me paint or plant flowers.”

“You make me sound like a kindergartner who can't sit still for story time.”

She just lifted a brow.

Okay, sitting still wasn't really his strong suit. It made being a writer difficult, for sure. He had to write in sprints. He could focus and write for about thirty minutes at a time. An hour if he was really on a roll. Then he needed to get up and do something. Technically, pacing would have been enough. Or twenty push-ups. Or jumping jacks. Those were the things his therapist suggested. He only needed about ten minutes of break time before he could get back to work.

Instead, he usually took a walk. Which took him past his friends' offices. Which meant he usually popped in to see what they were doing and to chat, and an hour later or so, he'd make it back to his office for another thirty-minute sprint.

It wasn't efficient. He knew that. He knew he shouldn't leave his office.

But knowing it and doing it were two different things.

Plus, when he was messing around with Cam, it meant he went by Piper's desk. And it meant that after about forty-five minutes she'd start coming in and nagging him to get back to work.

Huh.

He'd always rolled his eyes at that. And of course, dragged his screwing around out for another fifteen minutes or so. But now that he thought about it... he'd liked knowing that Piper was keeping track and that she wouldn't let him mess up his *entire* day.

Once Cam had stopped coming to the office as much because he was hanging out with Whitney's grandma so Whit could come to the office and be her kick-ass corporate self, Ollie had missed Piper's nagging. And his productivity had slowed.

That was probably why he'd started going into Whitney's office and "brainstorming" with her.

Whitney was awesome because she would get going on big ideas just like he did. The whole gang had to work to reel them both in. Whitney was almost more fun than Dax.

Dax always said, "sure" whenever Ollie proposed a plan or adventure, but Whitney added to the plan. He knew she'd deny it until the day she died, but the acrobats at the cake tasting had actually initially been *her* idea.

"Manual labor during my breaks, huh?" he asked Piper. More importantly, activity *with* Piper. In blue jeans.

The damned truth was that for the past week, even though Whitney was still in the office, Ollie had been bored and grumpy. He could have blamed it on the fact that Dax and Cam weren't around anymore. They were *way* more fun to hang out with in the middle of the afternoon than Aiden and Grant. Mostly because Aiden and Grant liked to actually *work* in the afternoon.

But he knew the truth was that Piper was gone.

Dax had been gone for months now. Cam had been in and out for a while too. Yes, he'd missed them, but he could have

gone down to Dax's nursing home to hang out—and play Ping-Pong—or over to Cam's place. He could have played Ping-Pong with *Didi*, Whitney's grandma, and had cookies over there.

But no, he hadn't gotten truly grumpy until Piper was gone.

Awesome.

Feeling that way was one thing. Realizing it and admitting it to himself was something else. Now he was screwed.

Piper misinterpreted his sigh as annoyance over the manual labor she was suggesting.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “It will be great. It's routine stuff. Like the painting. Once you're doing it, you just... do it. You can think and plot and work through your story lines. But you'll also be moving and working. I think it could be the best of both worlds. The planting will be the same. We'll be putting in grass and some bushes. That won't take a ton of brain power, so you can use the time to think about what you're working on.”

Ollie studied her for few ticks. “I didn't realize you'd paid that much attention to how I work.”

“Well, you have been my full-time job for the past five years.”

He nodded. “And I didn't even know you had brothers.”

She lifted a shoulder. “I was paid to pay attention to how you work, Ollie.”

Right. That's what he'd liked about the set-up. She was there, taking care of him, putting up with him, for money. Good money. Great benefits too. He didn't have to worry about annoying her or making her nuts. It was her *job*.

Now it wasn't.

What if he drove her nuts now?

But he didn't have a lot of choices here.

His options were to leave and *not* help her out here. To leave and go back to the office and work on his stories at his desk and pace the hallways and maybe actually do a few jumping jacks—he'd never really given those a chance—and not see her. And not drive her crazy.

And probably not get any writing done.

And leave her out here in her blue jeans with Drew Ryan.

Or to stay. And potentially actually write. And paint. And plant grass—whatever that entailed. And bushes. And see how long Piper tolerated him without a paycheck coming in.

Well, hell. “Okay, let’s do this.”

She grinned and he nearly groaned.

She really was so damned beautiful, and she looked genuinely *happy*. Because of him.

“Okay. I’m painting the outside of this cabin today.”

“Bright blue again?” he asked.

“Yellow, actually. They’re each going to be a different color.”

She stepped around him, the sparkles catching the light again, and he looked up at the ceiling.

“You started with your favorite though,” he commented as he turned to follow her.

“Oh, because that cabin’s mine,” she said. She looked over her shoulder at him.

“Yours?”

“Yeah. As the camp director.”

“You’ll be staying out here when camp’s in session?”

“Definitely. And for the next two weeks.”

Ollie tripped over... nothing. Just his own feet.

“You’re *staying* out here this week? Like *tonight*? You’re not driving back and forth?”

“Dubuque is a long way and it seems like a waste of time and gas to go back and forth just to sleep. Plus, I think it will be so fun to camp out here and see what it will be like while we finish the buildings and grounds up, and I get plans in place. We’ll wait a little bit to start hiring staff, but we want to start training them on weekends in April and May so we can start camp in June. So I’ll be out here a lot anyway.”

She was going to be running a camp. That was so... weird.

But who was he to judge weird?

“You’re staying out here alone?” he asked.

“Well, I was going to be,” she said. “But now you’re here.”

He tripped again and nearly fell down the one step outside the door.

“I am?” he asked.

“Sure. I mean, I guess you can drive back and forth to Dubuque but that’s a long way and just think of all the... writing... you could get done out here.”

There was something in her tone that made him narrow his eyes. She sounded... tempting. Yeah. That was exactly how she sounded.

Like she was going to try to seduce him.

Which would work.

Absolutely.

But she’d want him to fall in love with her in return and he didn’t want to do that. Because he wouldn’t be good at it.

Of course, she should know that. Of all people, Piper should know that.

So if she seduced him and he fell in love with her and she stayed in love with him and he messed it all up, then it was really her fault in the end, right?

“Where will I stay?” he asked.

“In the cabin with me,” she said as if it was obvious.

He supposed it was. He wasn't exactly the type to sleep outside under the stars, and the other cabins weren't finished. Or furnished. Though he could fix that with a phone call.

He eyed the truck. He should drive back and forth to Dubuque. Or he should drive back to Dubuque and fucking stay there and save him and Piper both some heartbreak.

That short robe was probably in her bag.

But it was a long way to Dubuque.

And he needed to write. And he sure as hell couldn't do that at the office. Apparently.

"I thought you wanted to get over me."

She turned and regarded him with a hand on her hip. "I did. When that seemed like the only option."

His heart squeezed. "And now there's another option?"

"Yep."

"What's that?" But he knew what she was going to say.

"Having you all to myself. Just us. Together. Alone."

See, that should sound creepy. She had him out here in the woods in a secluded cabin. No one knew he was here. She could tie him up and make him write, like that woman in *Misery*.

But, as difficult as writing was for him sometimes, Piper wanted something a lot bigger, and more complicated, from him.

"And then you'll get over me," he said. "If we spend all this time together, I mean. That should definitely help with that." It would be so great if that were true. But his stupid chest hurt now that he'd said it out loud.

Piper tipped her head and gave him a soft smile. "I don't think that's what's going to happen, Ollie."

He swallowed. "What do you think is going to happen?"

Why couldn't he just shut up? Why did he keep talking? Why couldn't he just ignore all of this? Deny it? Like he'd

been doing for the past two years since the guys had started hinting that Piper felt more for him?

But he didn't. He asked the damned question.

And she, of course, answered it.

"I think you're going to fall in love with me."

Yep, there it was. The shoe he'd been waiting to drop. The nail in the coffin. The gauntlet thrown down.

So it made no sense that his heart kicked against his ribs and he felt a rush of adrenaline. Sure there was the "oh shit, man, you're going to screw this up so badly" thought that went racing through his head. But his heart wasn't listening.

"You're pretty cocky, you know that?" he finally managed.

She nodded. "Yeah, well, you can't even look at me in blue jeans without almost choking to death, so I think there's something there."

There was something there, all right. A huge freaking mistake about to happen.

But hey, she was going in eyes wide open, right?

"You think you know what you're doing?"

"Dating you? Yes."

His eyes went wide. "Dating me?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He looked around. "This is dating?"

"Spending time together. Getting to know each other. Seeing if we're compatible." She paused. "Physical intimacy." She lifted a shoulder. "That's dating."

"I... but... we..." He scowled. She had to call it *physical intimacy*, didn't she? She'd totally done that on purpose. Obviously his body heard *hot dirty sex* but that wasn't how his head heard it. It wasn't how she'd meant it either. Intimacy was a whole other thing.

Not what he had at Comic Con, that was for sure.

And Piper knew it.

People thought she had her hands full dealing with him, but they had no idea how much trouble this woman had the potential to be for him.

“You could have had ‘physical intimacy’ with me the other night,” he said dryly, knowing that she was going to deny that.

She laughed. “I could have had hot sex against my hotel room door the other night.”

Yep, called it.

“Would have been good,” he felt compelled to say.

She nodded. “Too bad you annoyed me by talking.”

He almost laughed at that. “I wasn’t talking when you stopped things.”

“But I remembered the talking you’d done *before* the kissing.”

“Which talking was that?”

“The part about you not wanting me to be in love with you.”

He blew out a breath. “The talking and annoying you thing is *sure* to happen again. And you can’t send me back to my room if you get tired of talking to me out here,” he pointed out.

“Hmm, that’s true.”

“What are you going to do in that case?”

She studied him, a gleam in her eye.

A gleam that should have made him nervous.

Instead, it made him hard.

“I think if you start annoying me out here, I’ll just have to come up with some other way for you to use your mouth.”

Oh, that short robe was definitely in her bag.

Awesome.

And dammit.

* * *

She was now officially dating Oliver Caprinelli.

At least, she'd just informed him that she was and he hadn't said no. So that made it official.

Piper couldn't help grinning as she went to the truck to retrieve the painting supplies.

Okay, so he was kind of stranded out here. They were about six miles from Drew's house and Drew's house was about nine miles from Appleby. But there was cell reception out here. Ollie could have called one of the guys for a ride. Or just asked her to take him back to town. He could have just said no about staying out here. He could have told her this was all stupid.

He hadn't said any of that.

This was going to be *great*.

She'd often thought that if she could just get him out of the office, away from the computer, and away from the other guys, that Ollie might actually *see* her.

She hadn't thought that at first, of course. The first year of her employment, she'd just been his—well, *their*—assistant. A lot of her daily duties had focused on Ollie and making sure he got the business stuff that he hated done on time. And that he remembered meetings. And that he ate. Basic things like that.

But it hadn't taken long before the guys had realized she was very capable and that Ollie didn't take 100 percent of her time and effort and they'd started asking her to do more for them all.

She'd loved her job. The guys were friendly and funny and creative and intelligent and no day was ever the same as the last. She was paid well and had amazing benefits and had been made to feel essential to the company from day one.

By year two, she'd considered them all friends. Brothers almost. Okay, very much like brothers. She was used to herding rambunctious, smart, funny boys. These guys were just older than her biological brothers. And she couldn't ground them. Still, it hadn't been that different than dealing with her brothers, really.

She'd gotten to know Ollie, Grant, Aiden, Cam, and Dax by then and was not only good at taking care of them, but enjoyed it. She liked ordering their lunches just the way they liked them without even having to ask. She liked introducing them to new things—a new sandwich shop or a new brewery—that she knew they'd like and then having them rave about what great taste she had.

She liked doing little things like booking a massage for Aiden at a hotel when he traveled and getting a text telling her how it had been just what he needed. Or emailing a suggestion for a Mother's Day gift to Grant and having him tell her she'd nailed it. Or making sure Dax and Ollie saw posts from fans, like the eight-year-old boy who'd been diagnosed with leukemia and wanted, more than anything, a phone call from one of them. They'd both called him, at the same time. She'd cried listening to the call outside their office door and then when she'd seen their faces afterward.

But it was year three when she'd realized that, somewhere along the way, she'd fallen in love with Ollie.

It had snuck up on her.

She felt love and affection for all five of the men that were her bosses, but it wasn't until Dax and Ollie were comparing—i.e., bragging about—their fan mail and Dax was crowing about how he was the only one who got emails from women their age that Piper realized she'd been deleting all the emails from fangirls to Ollie. Not the young ones. Girls age eighteen and under got through. But anyone older? Yeah, they were trashed. But come on. Twenty-two-year-old women didn't need to be writing fan letters to a man about a video game. Didn't they have more important things to be thinking about? Doing? Weren't there real men in their lives they could flirt with?

Of course, that didn't explain why all of Dax's emails were forwarded. Not the ones that said his seventh level of the ice cave was crap or he'd completely screwed up the design for the sea elves. Because the people writing *those* emails needed to get a life too. But the letters from the girls telling him how wonderful he was? Yep, those got forwarded. The ones where the women got really specific about the dirty things they'd like to do to him got forwarded with "Regarding your magical staff" in the subject line.

Oops.

She'd confessed. To Dax. And told him to shut up about his own fan mail because it was making Ollie feel bad. Dax had smirked and said that she could just send Ollie's messages through and he'd feel fine. Piper had said that wasn't an option. Dax had laughed, knowingly.

And Piper had been faced with not just the realization that she was in love with Ollie but that she wasn't the only one who had realized it.

"So I'm going to need a few things if I'm staying out here," Ollie said as he joined her at the back of the truck.

He'd shrugged out of his jacket and, she assumed, tossed it on the front seat. He was rolling up the sleeves on his dress shirt now and she stopped to watch.

After his thick, long fingers had rolled one sleeve up to his elbow, she lifted her gaze from his muscular forearms to his eyes. He was watching her with a bemused expression. Like all of this was really weird and he wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"Do you want me to call someone to bring some things out here?" she asked, lifting two buckets of paint. She was sure Whitney and Cam would go to Ollie's hotel room and get him a bag. She could meet them in Appleby to pick it up.

Ollie grabbed a bucket full of brushes. "I can go get my stuff."

She had to admit, she wasn't sure he'd come back. But she said, "Sure. Okay." She turned toward the cabin.

“Piper.”

She looked back. “Yeah?”

“I came to the bakery to find you.”

She stopped and turned. “I know.”

“So the chances of me coming back out here are probably pretty good.”

He’d known she was worried about that. Huh. But she nodded. “Because you need to write.”

“Yeah.”

Right. “You should go now,” she said. “Keys are in the ignition.”

“I’ll go later.” He carried the supplies to the side of the cabin.

“Why later? Why not now?”

“Why now? Why not later?” he countered.

“You’re not dressed for painting.” She let her gaze travel over the dress shirt, suit pants, and leather shoes.

“I can write in this though.”

The script. Right. They were dating, but he was in it for the word count. At least in part. At least for now.

She blew out a breath. “Fine. You should go now because later, you’ll have a better idea about what this is going to be like and you might change your mind.”

Chapter Seven



Ollie gave her a half grin. “You said the kitchen in the cabin is fully functional, right?”

Piper rolled her eyes but couldn’t help her smile.

The home-cooked food and his writing. She did have two pretty powerful reasons for him to stay.

He’d always been a sucker for her food and she loved cooking for him. She loved cooking in general, but there was something about Ollie, even back before she’d fallen in love with him, that had made her think that he hadn’t been nurtured much. Or something. All of the guys liked her cooking and were complimentary about it, but Ollie *loved* it. He especially loved when she made stuff just for him.

Of course, she’d also mentioned sex. But that was, interestingly, *not* one of his top two draws.

While he’d clearly been all-in on that the other night in her hotel room, it was obvious that calling it “physical intimacy” had freaked him out. She’d known it would. She’d done it on purpose. He needed to know what she was expecting here. She wasn’t a convention hookup. She wasn’t some woman who had just met him and thought he was hot and wondered what it would be like to bang a millionaire on his private plane. She *knew* him and she wanted a damned *relationship*.

She wanted to sleep with him. Very much. But she was beyond being able to have just a fling with him. If they tried a relationship and it didn’t work out, that was one thing. But if

they just hooked up and never tried for more, she'd always wonder. She'd always want it.

“Homemade chili and cornbread for dinner. Ghost stories and s'mores around a campfire tonight,” she said.

“S'mores. Of course.”

He chuckled and Piper felt heat swirl through her belly.

God, she loved when he laughed. He wasn't as jovial as Dax. He wasn't as outwardly friendly and outgoing as Aiden. But he wasn't as gruff as Cam—before Cam had gotten back together with Whitney—or as serious and stoic as Grant. He fell nicely in the middle.

His laughs were easy and natural but not a given.

Piper wondered for a moment if Cam and Grant's grins and laughter affected Whitney and Josie the same way. Did it feel as special to them as Ollie's did to her? Did it turn them on the way Ollie's did her?

She made a note to ask the women next time she had a chance.

She squatted and started opening paint cans. She handed him a stir stick and pointed to the can she'd just opened. “Stir that up.”

She watched him crouch and start stirring as if something was going to jump out of the can and bite him. She reached over and grasped his wrist. He glanced up at her and for a moment they just looked at each other. Then she pressed so the stir stick went all the way to the bottom of the can and she circled his hand with hers. “*Stir* it,” she said.

She let go of him, reluctantly, and he followed her direction, stirring deep into the can.

She turned to her own can of paint, pushing the thoughts of how big and solid his wrist and hand were. And how hot his skin was.

“Speaking of food, what have you been eating this past week?” she asked.

He sighed, heavily. Dramatically. “Pizza. Subs. Cam finally took pity on me and brought me some leftovers from his mom’s the other night.”

“And I’ll bet they’ve invited you over for dinner at her house at least twice,” Piper commented, watching her stir stick swirling through the sunshine-yellow paint, instead of looking at him.

“They have.”

“But you didn’t go.”

“Nope.”

She and Ollie had both been invited to Maggie McCaffery’s. A few times. Maggie had a big group dinner at least once a week at her house. It had always been Zoe and Josie and Jane. Aiden and Cam had, of course, joined them when they’d been home visiting. Long before Aiden and Zoe were anything more than friends.

When Aiden had come home to stay, he’d become a fixture. Of course. He was like one of Maggie’s own children. Then Dax had started going to dinner with Jane. Then Grant with Josie. Actually, the way Piper understood that story, Grant’s first appearance at Maggie’s dinner table had led to his and Josie’s first hookup.

Cam had not only become a regular again at his mom’s table when he’d moved back, but he’d brought, first Whitney’s grandmother, Didi, then Whitney with him.

It was a full house now.

But Piper and Ollie had never gone.

Piper because her only goal at the end of a workday was to head to her hotel room, get out of her heels and Spanx and be *quiet* and *alone*. She was an extrovert, for sure, but working for five brilliant men kept her busy and on her toes. Literally. She loved her work outfits and she loved getting *out* of her work outfits. Plus her room was twenty minutes away in Dubuque, unlike Aiden, Cam, Dax, and Grant, who had started shacking up in Appleby as soon as their pretty girls batted their eyelashes at them.

“Why don’t you ever go to the McCafferys’ for dinner?” Piper asked as she stretched to her feet.

She knew her reasons, but she wasn’t sure about Ollie’s. Sometimes it was because he stayed at the office long past mealtime. But that wasn’t always it. And she wondered if sometimes he stayed late at the office to have an excuse not to go to dinner.

“Not my thing,” he said, also straightening with his paint bucket in hand.

“Not your thing?” She laughed. “I happen to know that dinner is very much your thing. Especially when it’s homemade. And by an amazing cook.” All of the McCaffery women were legends in Appleby. Zoe and her grandmother more for baking and Maggie for cooking, but they were all rumored to be magical in the kitchen no matter what they were making.

Ollie shrugged.

“Come on. You know you’d be welcome there. Why don’t you go?”

He sighed, stirring the stick around in the paint. “I don’t do mothers. Or fathers. And now that they’ve added a grandmother too? No thanks.”

Piper widened her eyes. “You don’t do mothers, fathers, or grandmothers? What’s that even mean?”

He lifted his head. “It means that I’m not good with families.”

She studied him. “This is related to what you said about not attaching to people?”

“Yeah.”

That was all bullshit. He did attach. Completely.

But she knew he didn’t mean to.

And he didn’t attach to new people.

She’d been watching him for five years. At first to learn his habits and preferences so she could be a good assistant,

then because she was in love with him. So yeah, she'd seen him with his friends, a lot, and with people he didn't know well. He was friendly, but he held himself back from anyone new. He'd come to Appleby with every intention of being a really good boss and wanting to learn what their employees wanted and needed. Then he'd realized that things were not as happy and easy with the Hot Cakes factory as the guys had all hoped, and he'd been completely relieved when Aiden and Dax had stepped in to lead the way and fix things.

In fact, it was Jane, Dax's fiancée, who had approached Ollie in his office when he'd been the first of the new owners to show up at the factory. She'd demanded to know their plans and had laid out the problems and Ollie hadn't been able to respond to any of it.

But he hadn't needed to. Aiden and Dax were there almost immediately, taking care of things so Ollie didn't have to.

All of that was one of the reasons that him getting close to and brainstorming and enjoying working with Whitney was so amazing to see.

But as Piper stood studying him, she realized why he was comfortable with Whitney. It was partly that the woman was a big thinker and they got each other going creatively. But it was also because Whitney hadn't had many friends. She'd been very lonely when they'd all showed up to take over Hot Cakes. She'd been working for her family and generally getting overlooked. She'd given up a lot of other relationships, including one with Cam, to be a part of her family's business and they'd subsequently pushed her aside.

Ollie felt comfortable with Whitney because she had also had some trouble attaching.

Huh, maybe there was something to that attachment thing.

"Well, the chili tonight will be amazing," she told him, letting him off the hook when she really wanted to dig deeper. But she always had this conflicting urge to push him—make him do more, talk more, try more—and to protect him.

"I have no doubt."

Well, at least he had no doubts about her food. That was something, she supposed.

She went to grab the ladder.

Ollie was beside her before she'd even lifted it out of the truck bed. "Where do you want this?" he asked.

She pointed at the side of the building. He carried it to the spot and propped it against the side.

They didn't talk as he made sure the ladder was set securely and she poured paint into a tray, selected a brush, and climbed up the ladder. The cabin had been primed over the weekend and she was excited to get some color on another building out here. She'd been thinking about this project for months. The paint, furniture, and landscaping was going to start making it look *real*.

"Who helped you with all of this so far?" Ollie asked from below her.

She looked down.

"Drew."

Ollie rolled his eyes. She smiled and reached up, dragging her brush back and forth over the wooden slats.

"Dallas, too," she said. "Justin has been out a few times. We've hired a few kids from town that the guys have had help out at the farm from time to time. We're thinking about hiring a few more. And bringing them on as camp counselors."

"You could have asked us, you know." He sounded grumpy again.

Piper laughed. "Oh sure. I was going to ask Aiden and Grant and Dax and Cam to come out and help build and paint cabins."

"Why not?"

She looked down at him again. "My millionaire, suit-wearing, gaming sensation bosses? Really?"

"I never would have expected you to be out here on a ladder painting cabins at a camp that you've set up and plan to

run. In blue jeans,” he added, almost as an aside. “People can surprise you.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

She realized her starting a camp might seem weird. It seemed nothing like the work she’d done for the past five years for Fluke. But it wasn’t really all that different, honestly.

Her superpower was taking someone else’s idea, any idea, and forming it into a workable plan and then organizing every detail until it all fit together like a completed thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle.

Managing something like a summer camp with multiple schedules and activities and supply lists for a couple dozen kids and counselors at one time? Oh yeah, *that* she could do.

And now that she was unemployed, she had plenty of time on her hands. She wasn’t good at just sitting around, so she’d turned her full-time attention to the camp.

She could also admit, at least to herself, that she kind of wanted her brilliant, creative genius boss and the object of her affection, to be impressed with the camp and her plans.

She rested her elbow on the top rung of the ladder. “Why do the blue jeans bother you so much?”

His eyes dropped to those blue jeans. Or rather to her ass in the blue jeans.

“They’re not you.”

“They’re very much me,” she said. “They’re just not the me who you know.”

He looked up again. “Yeah.”

“And it, what? Upsets you?”

“Not really the right word.”

“Then why do you seem so upset by it?”

“Because I guess I was thinking that you would be the person who would stay the same.”

She twisted more on the ladder to look down at him. “What do you mean?”

“Aiden is all into expanding Zoe’s business, Dax is running a *nursing home*, Grant is now living in a tiny town where they’ve named an ice cream sundae after him, and Cam is basically a stay-at-home husband who takes care of Whitney’s grandmother and bakes cookies all day.”

Piper thought about all of that. Then she nodded. “Okay. I see what you mean. Your four best friends—”

“My only friends.”

She frowned, but okay, he had a point there too. “Your friends,” she started again, “all have lives and interests that are pretty different now than they were a year ago. But they’re the same people.”

“Kind of.”

But their relationship with Ollie wasn’t the same. They didn’t spend as much time all together. He and Dax hadn’t traveled anywhere together since they’d all come to Appleby. They hung out, of course, but the other guys cut the time short now because they were all eager to get home to their girls.

“Well nothing I’m doing is that different,” she said. “Just because you’ve never seen me in blue jeans before doesn’t mean it’s new.” She turned back to the painting.

“This whole camp thing is new,” he said, his tone frustrated. “You painting cabins and making s’mores and wearing short robes—”

She turned quickly to snap at him over mentioning her clothes *again*. But the move made her wobble on the ladder and she gasped, dropping the paintbrush and gripping the ladder rung.

The next thing she felt was Ollie’s hands steadying her. By grabbing *her*, not the ladder. More specifically grabbing her ass.

She sucked in a breath at the contact and froze.

The wobble had been relatively small. The ladder was still again and she was completely safe.

But his hands stayed on her butt.

She counted to ten. Then counted to ten again.

“Oliver?” she finally asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m good.”

“You really are.”

She huffed out a laugh. She wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but it had sounded complimentary. She looked over her shoulder. “I think you can move your hands.”

It took him a second, but he looked up and met her gaze. “Do I have to?”

She wet her lips. “I mean, I’m not *upset* with your hands there.”

He took a breath and then slowly lifted his hands and stepped back. He tucked his hands into his back pockets, his gaze moving over her from her face to her ass and back up.

“So you *do* like the jeans?”

“I hate the jeans,” he said with a frown.

“That’s not how it seems.”

He sighed. “In five years of knowing you, I’ve never touched your ass. Now, within a few hours of you being in those jeans, I have.”

“Well, don’t forget that you touched my ass in my robe the other night too,” she said, feeling annoyed by how annoyed he seemed by the ass touching that she’d rather enjoyed.

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten about that,” he said. “Holy shit, Piper, I’ve been thinking about that, and everything else, every day since.”

Okay, that was enough of this. She climbed down from the ladder—she didn’t have her paintbrush anymore anyway—and faced him squarely, her hands on her hips.

“And was it so terrible?”

“It was fucking amazing,” he said, seeming frustrated.

“Then why do you act pissed off and *scared* that I might make a move?”

“Because...” He narrowed his eyes. “Because I don’t think you will make a move.” He took a step toward her. “I would be *fine* with you making a move. *Please* make a move. But do it now. Before I—”

She was barely breathing suddenly. “Before you what?” she pressed.

The muscle along his jaw tensed and he was clearly gritting his teeth.

“Before you *what*, Oliver?” Piper asked. Dammit, he wasn’t chatty. He didn’t share a lot. He wasn’t open and didn’t say everything that came to mind the way Dax did. But she *was* going to hear this.

“Before I *do* actually fall for you.”

She searched his face. There were emotions swirling in his eyes but she couldn’t name a single one.

“I know you think that’s what you want,” he said. “But I think it’s going to ruin everything.”

Her heart did a back flip in her chest.

“I don’t want to just sleep with you, Ollie,” she said. “I do want that,” she added, so he was *clear*. “But I want more than that. I want to date you.”

“I don’t date.”

“You do too.” But she frowned as she said it because he didn’t really. In the beginning, when she’d first taken the job, he had, but it had been a long time. She knew he had hookups at the conventions he and Dax went to because the guys gave him shit about it. But she didn’t hear about women in Chicago. Of course, she’d just assumed that he didn’t talk about them with his friends. She certainly didn’t *want* to know, so she didn’t dig either.

“I don’t. I never have,” he said.

“I sent flowers to at least two women when I first started working for you,” she pointed out. “And I know I picked out a birthday gift for one.”

He nodded. “You did do those things. And it made things very complicated for me when I tried to explain to them that we were not dating and my assistant had sent those mistakenly.”

“But...” She trailed off. Okay, she remembered the one she’d sent the birthday gift to calling the office the Monday after and sobbing in her ear, trying to get a hold of Ollie. Ollie had refused to take her calls. He’d also refused to tell Piper why. And that had been early in her career with Fluke Inc., before she would have made him tell her. Or gone to Dax to find out what had happened.

“Oh,” she finally said.

“Yeah. Oh.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Did you stop dating women in Chicago because you were afraid I would send them stuff?”

He sighed. “Do you really want to talk about my dating life and habits?”

“Yes, actually.”

She wanted to know everything about him. And it wasn’t as if she thought he’d been living like a monk. Lord, she kind of hoped he hadn’t. No, she didn’t need details or names and photos of the women—though she knew from conversations she’d overheard that some of those photos would be of women dressed up as fairies and princesses and such from *Warriors*—but she wanted him to have some experience. Because when she finally got him naked, she wanted him to know what he was doing.

“I did, for a while,” he said. “The women who could track me down at the office and go through my assistant to make dinner plans and could mention things like their birthdays and our two-week anniversary of meeting.” He gave her a look.

Yeah, one of the women she'd sent flowers had done exactly that. She'd called and said she wanted to know what time Ollie would be done with meetings on that Thursday because it was their two-week anniversary and she wanted to do something special. Piper had, stupidly, found that kind of sweet and since Ollie had been out of town, she'd sent the woman flowers. From him, of course.

Apparently, that had been the wrong move.

"You could have told me to not do that," Piper pointed out.

"I didn't realize that I needed to go through a whole list of things you *shouldn't* do," he said. "I kind of thought we could just stick to the list of things you *should* do and anything that wasn't on there was a shouldn't."

"But after I sent the flowers... you never yelled at me for that."

He shrugged. "You were trying to be nice."

"Still, that *was* pretty presumptuous of me."

"It was."

"But you didn't say anything because I was new and you were trying to be nice to me. You just broke the girl's heart... blamed it on me behind my back, of course... but let me go on thinking I was doing a great job."

He smiled. "Something like that."

She returned his grin. He would tell her to knock that shit off now. Probably loudly. Yelling it from inside his office out to her desk with a "dammit, Piper!" Because they knew each other now. He knew she could take that and she would have rolled her eyes and told him that he should be nicer to the women he dated.

She might have even sent a bigger bouquet the next day just to mess with him.

"I hate to break it to you, Ollie, but you already know me pretty well. And you like me."

His smile died. "Yeah. I do."

A horn honking broke into their moment.

They both pivoted to see two pickup trucks pulling up behind theirs.

Dallas Ryan got out of one, and three teenagers—Matt Porter, Tanner Sanders, and Landon Summers—got out of the second.

“Hey,” Piper greeted them. She was going to have to hope that she and Ollie would have more time to talk later. If he decided to stay. “You guys are early. I figured since it was the first day of spring break, you’d have other stuff going on.”

“We goofed around this morning,” Matt said with a grin. “But then we figured we could get more work done if we got out here early.”

“You mean, you realized if you came out early, you could get more hours in and earn more money,” she said. They were being paid by the hour.

Matt nodded. “Yeah. We were kind of hoping you’d let us work more hours all week.”

Piper nodded enthusiastically. “I will absolutely let you work more hours.”

“Awesome.”

She laughed. “Ollie, this is Matt, Tanner, and Landon.”

“Hey,” they all greeted one another in typical guy fashion.

“And I wanted to check on the showers since you’re staying out here for several days this time,” Dallas said. “Figured I could put some painting time in too.”

“He knows you’re staying out here?” Ollie asked low enough for only her to hear.

She nodded. “Figured someone should know where I was.”

“I should have known.”

She rolled her eyes even though he couldn’t see her from where he was standing just behind her. “When have I ever told you where I was?”

He didn't answer. Because they both knew the answer. Never.

"Well, great. Definitely hoping for hot water in there," she told Dallas.

"Can do," he answered.

"We'll go prime building four," Matt said.

"Great," Piper told them. "That's perfect." It didn't really matter where they started. There was plenty to do. She loved that they didn't need a lot of direction though.

The younger guys grabbed supplies out of the back of the truck and started for the cabin furthest away.

"So I'll check the plumbing. Then do you want me to start painting building three or do you need help here?" Dallas asked.

Ollie moved in closer behind her. "We've got this one."

Dallas didn't smile but Piper could tell he was amused. Dallas was a great guy, just like his brother. He hadn't flirted with her or asked her out the way Drew had, but she knew he genuinely liked her. He also didn't seem all that surprised to see Oliver here.

Which was interesting, because when she really thought about it, *she* was surprised that Ollie was here.

"Okay, great," Dallas said. "Then, I'll just be over there." He inclined his head toward the next building. "Let me know if you need anything."

"We won't," Ollie said firmly.

Dallas looked at Piper. She just shrugged.

As he turned and started toward the bathroom and shower building, she faced Ollie. "We won't?"

"It's just painting and putting in grass and bushes, right? It'll give me a chance to go over some plot points in my head."

"Oh, you did hear me say all of that?"

He nodded. "I'll admit I was distracted by your breasts in that t-shirt, but yeah, I heard you."

She was startled by his admission that he'd been checking her out.

She looked down. "You know, this t-shirt doesn't show anything off that my dresses don't show off. Those are fitting across the bust and show cleavage."

He nodded. "I guess."

But he thought she should wear *those* when they were together. He'd said as much back at the bakery. She didn't know exactly what that was about, but she did know that he'd been thinking of her as his assistant, and maybe friend, for five years while she'd been wearing those dresses and he'd almost choked to death when she put this t-shirt on.

"So seriously, what's the deal with the jeans and t-shirts?"

His gaze dropped to her breasts. Which, of course, responded by getting tingly and hard-tipped. "The sparkly words, I suppose."

She didn't think that was it at all. She believed him when he said he didn't date and she knew that most of his hookups, at least over the last couple of years, had been mostly at conventions.

"I don't think it's the sparkly words, Ollie."

His eyes came back to hers. He saw something in her face that made him sigh. "You're going to tell me what you think it is?"

She smiled. "Sure."

"What if I don't want you to?"

"What do I do when you don't want me to schedule Zoom calls with Dan and Doug?" Dan and Doug were the execs who now owned *Warriors of Easton*. The guys Ollie more or less worked for now. He hated Zoom calls with them. He hated all calls with them actually.

"You do it anyway."

“Exactly.”

“Okay.” He crossed his arms. “Why do you think that I am completely distracted by your breasts in t-shirts and your ass in blue jeans but not in the hot, knock-out dresses you wear every day?”

“Wait, you think my dresses are hot and knock-out?”

“You’re a gorgeous woman, Piper. You wear the hell out of those dresses. You look like a freaking pin-up model from the forties. Every man who sees you nearly trips over his tongue. Of course I think they’re hot.”

She stared at him. “But you don’t have any trouble with staring and not putting your hands on my ass when I wear those.”

He shrugged. “I know. And you were about to tell me why that is.”

Right. She did have a theory about that. Maybe even more so now that he’d admitted to having noticed them. And liking them. But being able to resist her in those.

“I think those dresses are like costumes,” she said. “They put me into a role. I’m playing a part you know how to react to when I dress like that. You can just say, *oh she’s my assistant and I’m not supposed to be attracted to her*. When I dress like that, you can put me in that compartment. But when I’m in t-shirts and jeans, I’m real. I’m just a woman and there’s no specific compartment and so you can’t ignore your reactions to me then.”

He just stood looking at her. Piper let him process all of that.

Finally, he nodded. “I think that’s exactly it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Makes sense.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Well, she had to admit that helping him with these insights was a lot easier than she’d expected. He was easily accepting

these observations.

“And don’t forget the short bathrobe. Definitely a real woman in that. Didn’t have time to compartmentalize my reaction to that.”

She would never be able to forget his reaction to her short bathrobe. She wet her lips and nodded. “Being caught by surprise was part of that too, I would imagine.”

“Probably.”

“If you’d been expecting the robe, would you have kissed me?”

Because as much as that kiss had been torturing her, she would have really hated *not* getting it.

“*You* kissed me.”

“You totally kissed me back. And then some, Ollie.”

He cleared his throat and Piper enjoyed thinking that he was replaying all of that in his mind.

“Yeah. I’m thinking that the short robe and you starting it would have led right where it did whether I’d been expecting it or not.”

She grinned. “Noted.”

He arched a brow. “Did you bring your short robe along for camping?”

“I did.”

He sighed as if that was a terrible answer.

She laughed. She really liked that Oliver was attracted to her and was being open about it. Even if he found it inconvenient.

Chapter Eight



“Okay, you are *not* dressed for painting and even though I appreciate your willingness to help, I can’t have you ruining your pants or shoes,” Piper said, after she’d confirmed his worst fear as if she’d just told him that the sky was blue.

She had that robe in her bag.

Her wearing that short bathrobe in that secluded cabin where the two of them would be spending the next several days...

Who was he kidding? It wouldn’t matter if she were wearing footie pajamas around that cabin. He wanted her. And camping out with her was the best worst idea ever.

“Ollie?”

He met her gaze. “Yeah?” He hadn’t been studying her breasts. Or her ass. He’d been looking at her shoes. Which were not sexy. They were tennis shoes. Very basic gray-with-white-laces tennis shoes. As different from the heels that she normally wore as she could possibly get.

And he was completely turned on.

“I said, you should go write,” she told him, obviously repeating herself.

He really should.

At least he could get work done on his script. If he was going to lose his heart and then lose this woman, he could at least leave this campground with his damned script finished.

“Yeah.” He scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck.
“Okay.”

She stood watching him as his gaze dropped back to her shoes.

She had that short bathrobe in her bag.

Big deal. He was turned on by canvas tennis shoes.

“You all right?” she asked.

Nope. Not at all. He was about to sleep with and fall in love with a woman who was a sticky-note loving, multiple-calendar-having perfectionist.

That was a terrible idea.

He appreciated that she thought she knew all his quirks and could love him anyway, but he knew better. They put in long hours at the office sometimes, but it wasn't twenty-four-seven. His forgetfulness and messiness and disorganization made her work life more difficult, but that wasn't the same as making her home life chaotic. As his assistant, she could clock out from the frustrations. As his girlfriend, or more, there was no out.

Except breaking up with him and leaving, of course.

Kind of like his mom had. His mother had traveled more and more over the years as he'd grown up, needing to escape from the way he made her crazy.

But he wasn't sure he had a choice here. He wasn't going to be able to resist Piper so he just had to show her what being with him would really be like and brace for her change of mind.

Of course, the kissing in the meantime would be nice.

He realized that this situation was a lot like realizing you were plummeting to the earth *after* you'd already jumped out of the airplane. At this point, the only true choice was to pull the ripcord on the parachute. He was going to hit the ground eventually. Might as well try to enjoy the fall. And make the landing as soft as possible.

“Okay, I’m going to go write,” he finally said.

“Great idea.”

He gave her a little smile. “There’s coffee in the kitchen?”

“Keurig,” she said with a nod. “You use the little pod things in that.”

“Got it.”

“And the creamer is in the fridge.”

He lifted a brow. “You have the vanilla and caramel creamer?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t know I’d be here.” He frowned. “Did you?”

She looked like she was trying to decide how to answer that. It honestly wouldn’t surprise him if she told him that yes, she’d known he’d end up out here.

But she said, “That’s how I drink my coffee too.”

“Medium blend, three vanilla creamers, and one caramel?” he asked.

“Yep.”

Realization slowly dawned. “That’s how I started drinking it. You made it that way for me one time because that’s how you like it.”

“You actually took *my* coffee one day and drank half of it before I realized,” she returned with a grin.

He felt his mouth curving in response. “Huh.”

“Yeah. Huh.”

“So I guess I’m good with the coffee situation.”

“Guess so.”

Suddenly he felt that maybe he was good with a lot of situations here.

He made his way to the bright blue cabin, suddenly inspired to get to work on the script again. He really did think that just being in the general vicinity of Piper was going to help.

Along with the good coffee.

The three guys that had arrived with Dallas were working on the cabin next to the blue one. They'd gotten about half of the one side painted, but they were doing a lot more talking and laughing and messing around it seemed. At the moment

He stepped into the cabin and immediately took a deep breath.

It smelled like her. Sweet and spicy and, dammit, comforting. That scent made him feel like everything was going to be okay.

He was in trouble.

But your script will be done. At least there's that.

Yep, at least there was that.

He was going to have to deal with being heartbroken while his four best friends were madly in love, but whatever. Actually his *five* best friends. Whitney was in love too. But she and Cam were in love with each other. Did that still count as five friends in love? Yeah, probably. He'd have to see five people all the time who were sickeningly happy and planning their futures with their soul mates.

Ollie rolled his neck and got his thoughts reined in. This was what happened. He'd need to focus on a task and something else would come to mind and he'd spend ten minutes pondering details that had nothing to do with what he needed to get done.

He looked around Piper's cabin. It was not just fully furnished. It was downright cozy. It looked like a place someone spent a lot of time. There were even throw pillows. He frowned. How much time did she spend out here? She was at the office every day, of course. She put in long hours. But it was possible she spent weekends here. Or even some weeknights, he supposed. There were at least a couple of

nights a week she was at the hotel. He knew only because she brought him dinner. But they didn't see each other every night. It was very possible she spent some nights out here. In Drew Ryan's backyard.

She doesn't want Drew, he reminded himself.

But Drew had kissed her.

She didn't want Drew because she thought she was in love with Ollie. She was going to get over that. And maybe once she was over him she'd change her mind about Drew.

Ollie felt himself scowling at that thought.

He crossed to the coffeepot. Caffeine was always a good answer.

He found the coffee pods and got his cup brewed and the creamer mixed in the way she'd instructed. Taking a sip, he had to admit that swiping her coffee that morning over two years ago had been a really fortunate accident.

He went to the little kitchen table and pulled out a chair. He looked around again. The place was downright homey. It wasn't fancy like the hotel rooms he and Piper had been living in. But this was very Piper. Which was an odd realization.

Polished and stylish had always been his impression of her. But he was realizing that was on the surface. Which was, of course, as far as he'd let himself look. She knew how to use every piece of technology there was. She knew everything about every social media platform, old and new. She could multitask like a champ. She could sweet talk anyone into anything. She could also tell someone to fuck off—essentially, not literally—all the while smiling and making that person feel like she was being completely respectful and professional.

But within five minutes inside her cabin, Ollie knew that had been a part of her costume. She'd said that's what her dresses and heels had been to him and she was right. Those outfits had given him an image of her that allowed him to put her into a specific box in his mind. A do-not-touch box.

This place was more *her*. Like the blue jeans and tennis shoes and damned sparkly t-shirt.

The cabin was full of bright colors. The walls were a soft yellow, the hardwood floors were covered with multicolored braided rugs, and the furniture—a sofa, love seat, and overstuffed chair—were a basic light blue but covered in pillows and throw blankets in a variety of shapes and colors. The coffee table held books and two coffee cups, also in different colors. Even the kitchen was a riot of colors. There was a simple white wooden table with four chairs, but the chairs each had a different color cushion. The dish towels were a rainbow of colors as were the dishes. Everything was simple, but colorful. Practical, but fun.

Ollie was so caught up in thinking about all of that, he was startled when Piper came through the door.

“You don’t have your computer.”

He was sitting at the table, one ankle propped on his opposite knee, his cup halfway to his mouth. He blinked at her.

“Ollie?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have your computer. Do you?”

He did not. It was in his car. Back at the bakery. He’d planned to plot in his notebook at the bakery to see if being near Piper again helped his creativity and productivity. If it had worked he would have gone to his car to get his bag. But she’d whisked him off to the woods and he hadn’t thought of the computer.

Of course he hadn’t.

“I don’t.”

She looked around. It probably seemed that he’d been sitting here daydreaming.

Because he had been.

“Are you going to just write longhand?” she asked.

He did that from time to time when he was stuck. “Sure.”

“Where’s your notebook?”

In the inside pocket of his jacket. Which was outside in the truck.

He took a drink of his coffee.

She put a hand on her hip. “You don’t have your notebook?”

“I haven’t started yet. I was mentally preparing,” he told her.

She shook her head, clearly not buying it, and crossed to the coffee table.

Hey, he would have eventually realized he needed to go get his notebook.

She moved a couple of books and then turned with a laptop. “You can use my computer. All your stuff is in the cloud. I can get you to it from here.”

Oh yeah. Maybe they weren’t *clear out* in the woods. “That’ll work too, I guess.”

It would be great actually. He hated retyping his longhand notes. But sometimes when he got stuck, his brain would start working again if he changed up how he was writing.

She grinned at him as she set the computer on the table and leaned in to type her password in. He caught a whiff of her scent and his body tightened.

“You know, I might need to work in sprints today,” he said.

“Good idea.” She turned the computer toward him, then leaned on to her forearms on the table. “You can set a timer on your phone.”

“And I might need some incentive to look forward to.”

“You can come out and help me paint for your breaks.”

“I was thinking of something *fun*.”

She laughed. “Like what?”

“Like...” He wrapped his hand around the back of her knee and ran his palm up the back of her leg. “Maybe you could reward me for working hard.”

Her breath caught and, dammit, there was going to be heartbreak, but he couldn't help but love the effect he had on her.

“Reward you, huh?”

Their mouths were only a few inches apart with her leaning in like this. “Yeah.”

“What kind of reward would most motivate you?”

Her voice was definitely breathless.

He grinned. “How about fifteen minutes of making out for every twenty minutes of work?”

She swallowed and her gaze dropped to his mouth. “A kiss for every half hour of work.”

And she was still pushing him. He gave her a slow grin and dragged his hand up to the curve of her butt. “How about ten minutes of making out for every twenty-five minutes of work?”

“Five minutes of making out for every half hour,” she countered.

“Five minutes of making out for every twenty minutes.”

“Deal.”

He squeezed her ass. Then he slid his hand up her back to cup her head and brought her in, relishing her little intake of air. He leaned to brush his mouth over hers on his way to her ear. “You know I'll be a terrible boyfriend, Piper.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Are you going to prove me wrong?” she asked softly.

He kissed her neck, breathing in her scent, then sat back and looked at her. With regret that surprised him, he said, “Probably not.”

She blew out a breath that seemed frustrated. But she didn't argue.

“I need to go paint,” she said.

He nodded. “And I need to get to work.”

“Okay.” She straightened away from the table. “See you in thirty minutes.”

He grinned and gave her butt a little swat. “Twenty minutes.”

She was smiling as she went out the door.

He took a second to watch her go. In those jeans. With that ass he’d had his hands on three times now.

Playful, sexy Piper was definitely new.

And he liked her way too much.

On top of already liking her way too much.

Dammit.

* * *

He tried to work.

He really did.

He made more coffee. He turned on Norah.

Still, he only got three paragraphs written. Which was, admittedly, more than he’d written in the past week. It still wasn’t enough.

But holy shit, the kids working on the cabin next door were distracting as hell.

“You’re dead, man!” someone yelled.

Laughter erupted right outside the window in the living room area of Piper’s cabin.

“You’ll have to catch me, asshole!”

“I’ll catch you and make you regret that!”

Ollie rubbed his forehead. The boys had been shouting and laughing, playing their music loud, banging the ladders against the cabin, and just generally being loud and annoying for the past twenty minutes solid.

He was going to make someone regret something.

He was out here in the woods with a woman who was messing with his head and who was, in exchange for him offering up his heart and ego, supposed to be helping him *write his fucking script*.

But these guys were making it impossible.

Something hit the window, making him jump—and that was it.

He shoved his chair back and stomped to the door, jerking it open. He stalked out onto the porch—Piper’s cabin was the only one with a porch—and looked around.

One of the kids had just ducked around the side of the cabin they were supposed to be painting. He heard shouting and laughter behind his cabin and then one of them came skidding around the corner.

“Hey!” Ollie shouted.

The kid jerked and stopped, turning to face him.

“What the *hell* are you doing?” Ollie demanded.

The kid—Ollie thought this one was Landon—looked around. “We’re just... messing around.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?” He looked toward the cabin. It was still only about half painted on the side he could see.

But the brushes were now strewn across the stubby grass and dirt. The pan of paint had been overturned, the ladder lay on its side, and now as he studied Landon, he noticed streaks of paint down the kid’s shirt and jeans.

“Do *not* tell me you were throwing paintbrushes at each other,” Ollie told him, scowling.

“We... uh...” Landon looked around again. Clearly hoping for allies.

There weren’t any.

“So not only are you not working, but you’re wasting the paint and ruining the brushes. *And*?”—Ollie added when Landon’s mouth opened—“almost breaking my window.”

He didn't know a lot about guys this age. He'd been one, of course. But in high school Ollie had not been the type to hang out and goof around with buddies like this. It was probably why he and Dax did a lot of goofing around now. He had lots of fans this age though. Still, he interacted with them online or at conventions. Where Dax was the one who did most of the talking.

Yelling at them was on the don't-do-that list though, he was pretty sure.

"We're just taking a break," Landon said with a shrug. But his face was a little red. "No big deal."

Ollie sucked in a breath, trying to be cool. "I'm trying to work in here," he said, tipping his head toward the cabin. "Your break's been going on for a while. You should get some work done. Since that's what Piper's paying you for."

The kid nodded. "Yeah. I know." He straightened slightly and glanced at the cabin behind Ollie. "You're working out here?"

"Trying to."

"Like on *Warriors* stuff?"

Ollie lifted a brow. "You know *Warriors*?"

The kid laughed. "Uh, yeah."

Okay, so a lot of people, especially people this kid's age, knew *Warriors*. Ollie just wasn't used to running into those people on a typical day in the midst of his usual activities.

He gave an internal eye roll at that thought. Nothing was typical or usual about this day or these activities. He was at a *camp* and in the midst of developing a crush on his ex-assistant.

Then again, that didn't feel new. It was. It had to be. Didn't it? But it didn't feel new. It just felt... dangerous.

"What kind of work on *Warriors*?" Landon asked.

That pulled Ollie back to the fact he was having a conversation. It wasn't as if his thoughts didn't wander—all

the time—but man, they got off track even more easily when it came to Piper it seemed. And that was saying something.

“A new script,” he told the kid.

Landon’s eyes went wide. “No way.”

“Yep.”

“Like—” Landon glanced at the cabin again. “You’re just sitting in there writing a new episode?”

“That’s how it works.” He’d love if there was some other magical way that happened. But no, he had to sit his ass in front of a computer and *make it* happen.

“That’s... cool.”

“It really might be.” No guarantees. First drafts often sucked. “If I could concentrate.”

Landon nodded. “Right. Sorry, man.”

The kid actually seemed sheepish now and that made Ollie feel like a dick. It wasn’t as if he and Dax hadn’t done exactly what these guys were doing. Many times. Just abandoned the work they were supposed to be doing to jack around. For no reason other than they wanted to. He was certain they’d “distracted,” i.e., annoyed the hell out of, a number of people over the years. People who had been unfortunate enough to be given the room next to theirs at a hotel. People who had had the bad luck of being seated in front or behind them on an airplane before they’d had a private jet. People who had been trying to enjoy those fountains in Rome that they’d decided to go wading in.

And he and Dax were grown-ups.

Okay, they were adults. By age. They weren’t exactly grown-up.

But these were kids. Teenagers out of school early, outside in the nicest weather they’d had in months.

He sighed. “It’s okay. No problem.”

“No, seriously. I’m sorry. We love *Warriors*. We can be quiet.” Landon looked toward the cabin they were supposed to

be painting. “I mean, we can be *quieter*.”

“Yeah. I...” Ollie blew out a breath. “Tell you what. Give me twenty-five minutes. We’ll all just focus, and get some work done. Then I’ll need a break, and I’ll give you the signal, and you guys can blow off some steam then for a bit. How’s that sound?”

“Yeah.” Landon nodded. “We could do that. I think.”

“Twenty-five minutes,” Ollie said. “We can all focus for that long.” If he could, these guys could.

“Sure. Yeah.”

“Okay.” Ollie turned to head back into the cabin, but he pivoted back. “I’m setting a timer. The rules are, work solid for the twenty-five minutes. No breaks, no distractions. See how much you can get done. If you get distracted before the timer goes off, we have to start the twenty-five minutes over. Deal?”

“Sure. Deal.” Landon nodded. He looked sincere.

“Okay.”

Ollie stepped into the cabin. And sighed. Holy shit. He’d just talked a bunch of kids into work sprints. He’d laid down *rules*. For someone else. What was happening to him?

Chapter Nine



It had been an hour and nine minutes.

Not that she was counting.

Okay, she was totally counting.

Piper had given Ollie more than the twenty minutes he'd said he was going to work because she'd thought maybe he'd gotten on a roll and didn't want to interrupt him. But an hour and nine minutes? Ollie had never done anything straight for that long. Honestly. Not even Ping-Pong.

As she approached the cabin, she realized that it was quiet. Not Ollie-must-be-hard-at-work quiet. But this-isn't-right quiet. There was no Norah playing, for one thing. But she realized that she should have heard noise from Matt, Landon, and Tanner over here too.

How had she not realized that the boys weren't making any noise several yards back?

She was distracted. By Ollie.

Who was *not* watching the clock and counting down the seconds when he could come claim his "reward" from her—and stop working. Apparently.

This was an interesting-but-kind-of-annoying role reversal.

She poked her head into her cabin, but Ollie wasn't there. Somehow she'd known he wouldn't be.

She looked around from the front porch.

The ladder and painting supplies were beside the next cabin where the boys had been working. There were streaks of paint on the scraggly grass—mostly weeds—and dirt between the two cabins, oddly, but the entire side of the cabin facing hers was painted, and it looked like they'd gotten a good start on the front as well.

So where were they now? They would have had to come past her to get back to their car if they were going to leave, and she knew they would have said goodbye.

Just then she heard a faint shout. She crossed to the end of the porch and peered around the edge of the cabin but didn't see anything. She heard another shout though. It sounded like it was coming from the trees behind the cabins. They were about a football field away, down by the stream. Had the kids gone down there for some reason?

They were seventeen and eighteen. She hardly needed to babysit them. She didn't know if they knew how to swim, but she could assume the guys, having grown up in Appleby, had been around the streams and the river all their lives and were being safe.

No, the reason she headed in that direction was because she was suddenly sure that they were with Ollie.

And *that* she felt the need to check up on.

As she got closer to the trees, their voices got louder, and the sounds of the nearby stream grew.

“Yes! Finally! Awesome!” someone—she thought it was Tanner—cheered.

“Come on, you've got two more.”

That was Ollie.

Piper picked up her pace now that she knew for sure he was there with the kids.

“You've got this, Landon! Jump!” a voice, she was pretty sure was Matt, called.

She found a narrow trail into the trees and followed it down a slight incline. A few yards later, she came out at the

edge of the stream. On the other side were two of the teens and Ollie.

Matt, Tanner, and Ollie were standing on the ground looking up. She followed their gaze. And her mouth dropped open.

Landon was balanced on a large branch that was about ten feet off the ground. He was clearly getting ready to jump to a branch that was across a space of about three feet.

Piper frowned. It was a long jump, but if he missed that was a decent fall. It wouldn't do any major damage, probably. But he'd be bruised.

“What is going on?” she demanded.

Everyone swung to look at her as she approached, including Landon, who wobbled on the branch. He grabbed ahold of the branch above him, keeping his balance.

“Hey,” Ollie greeted. “Landon's almost done.”

She looked around. “What are you guys doing?”

Matt gave her a huge grin. “Ollie's got us doing an obstacle course during every break. He adds on to it each time. This time we're doing the branch jumps,” he said, indicating Landon and his position overhead.

“Obstacle course?” she repeated. Of course it wasn't a simple walk down to the stream. Not with Ollie involved.

“It's been awesome,” Tanner told her. “We work for a while, then we get a break. We just took a hike down here the first time, but then Ollie had the idea to make it into an obstacle course.” He pointed to her side of the stream. “We take a running jump onto that rock,” he said, indicating the huge rock in the middle of the running water. “Then we jump to the bank. We crawl through the grass, duck under those branches”—he pointed to some shorter trees with branches that hung to the ground in a canopy—“roll to a stand, climb that tree.” He then pointed to a tree two trees behind where Landon stood. “We walk across those branches, and now he needs to jump to that tree and swing down.”

Piper followed Matt's finger. There was a long rope hanging from a high branch in the tree in front of the one Landon was balancing on.

She looked at Ollie. "You climbed up there and tied that rope?"

"Yeah." He seemed confused by her question.

Of course he had.

She put a hand on her hip. "You're spending your breaks with these guys instead of with me?"

He looked up at Landon. "Yeah, we've been..." Ollie trailed off as he looked back to her, and realization dawned. "Oh. Right. Well, they..." He stopped and cleared his throat.

He'd forgotten. Piper shook her head. Wow. He'd forgotten that she'd agreed to make out with him during his breaks if he focused during his writing sprints.

She'd been upstaged by an obstacle course in the woods with three teenage boys.

She probably should have been hurt or annoyed by that, but honestly... that was exactly in character for Oliver.

Ollie started for her. He jumped to the rock in the middle of the stream, then to the bank on her side of the water. When he was standing right in front of her, he met her eyes and said, "I'm really sorry, Piper."

She sighed. "It's okay. If I'd known there was even a possibility of an obstacle course out here, I would have known I wouldn't see you for a couple of hours."

He gave her a sheepish grimace. "The guys were messing around and distracting me, so I made a deal that if they worked while I wrote, then we'd take breaks together. I thought getting them out here and active and having fun would be good so they would really concentrate on the work when they were at the cabin."

"You had them doing sprints with you?" she summarized.

"Basically."

“Probably a good idea.”

That seemed to surprise him. “Yeah?”

“Obviously. They got a lot done,” she said.

“They did,” he agreed. “Landon especially works better in sprints. He can focus for about twenty minutes on one thing, then he needs to do something else. He can get a lot done, but he needs variety and some structure.”

She smiled up at him. Did he realize how much Landon sounded exactly like Oliver himself? “Did you get any writing done?”

He nodded but slowly. “I worked through some things. I’ve got the scene sketched out. Mostly.”

So no, he hadn’t really gotten any writing done. “But it’s progress?” She actually really did want him to be able to write better out here with her than he did at the office without her.

“It is,” he said. “I’m definitely ahead of where I was when I started today.”

“Okay. Good.”

“You’re not going to tell me this is dangerous for them?”

She frowned. “Do you think it’s dangerous?”

“I... no. Not really. They’re eighteen. Athletes. Relatively bright. And I did everything before I had them try it.”

“I think it’s okay,” she said.

He narrowed his eyes. “Really? I mean, the rock’s slippery. Or they could roll in poison ivy. Or they could fall out of the tree.”

“So they might need to dry off or get some calamine lotion or an ice pack,” she said. “I mean, we *might* need to get some X-rays or a splint, but I don’t think any of this will hurt any more than them getting hit in football practice or even some of the stupid shit I’m sure they do on their own.”

He still didn’t seem convinced.

“What?” she asked.

“You just seem like the type to be concerned about something like this.”

“Do I?” she asked. “Or am I the one who forwards your insurance information to the ER in Miami because you lost your wallet and then calls all your credit cards to cancel them... because you lost your wallet? And am I the one that buys you the best heating pad on the market and leaves it on your bed so you see it first thing when you get home from urgent care? And am I the one that reminds you to take your pain meds on time so you can keep the pain under control?”

“You... are,” he finally said.

“Exactly. I don’t get worked up about bruises and stitches, Ollie. Those are called consequences. I learned a long time ago with my brothers that I could *tell* them not to do something stupid a second time, or I could let the broken rib or torn meniscus remind them.”

“Wow.” He lifted both brows. “That’s harsh.”

She laughed. “You clearly know there are risks here. You just spelled three out to me. If you don’t want to have to put calamine on for a few days, then don’t roll in the grass. I don’t need to tell you that.”

He moved in a little closer. “Would you help me put the calamine lotion on?”

Now she lifted her brows. “Gladly. Though it’s very possible you’d get”—she glanced behind him—“caught up in something else and not even remember that you’re... itchy.”

“You’re mad that I forgot I was going to spend my breaks with you.”

“Not mad,” she corrected. “Just... horny.”

His eyes widened at her answer. She was pretty sure it was the “horny,” not the not being mad. “Really?”

“Are you asking if I’ve been working and thinking about the chance to make out with you during your breaks and getting excited about it?”

He nodded. “I am.”

“Yes, Ollie. I definitely want to make out with you.”

“I can take a break now,” he said, reaching out.

But she stepped back and shook her head, fighting a smile. This was also a *consequence*. “I need to get things cleaned up and dinner started.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes, Ollie. It’s almost five, and the chili and everything will take an hour and a half.”

“It’s almost five?”

She smiled, her heart squeezing. She had no idea why his inability to keep track of anything was so endearing, but it was.

Okay, she had an idea. It spoke to the caregiver in her. She wanted to take care of him. She didn’t care that he didn’t keep track of the time, because she did. She was always aware of what time it was. It was second nature to her.

It also just *worked*. *They* worked. They fit. They balanced each other out. And she loved that.

Keeping track of time and meetings and details was something she could do for him, and for the company, that was important, something she was good at, something she could contribute. Because the stuff Ollie did? She definitely couldn’t do that.

When he lost track of time it was because he was doing things like creating and brainstorming and entertaining. All things she wasn’t good at. She’d sat in on brainstorming sessions with the guys before and ended up mostly just taking notes. She could absolutely weigh in on *their* ideas. She knew an amazing idea—and a horrible idea—when she heard it. She could make any of their ideas happen. She knew how to research, reach out, network, and negotiate to make things happen. But just starting with a blank page or a “so what should we do?” just left her sitting there with nothing.

She sometimes got the impression that Ollie and the guys were in awe of her ability to juggle multiple tasks and keep

everything running. Yeah, well, she was in awe of *their* ability to just make stuff up, create things out of thin air, sit down with a blank screen and twenty minutes later walk out with a whole new world that hadn't been there before.

Maybe that was romanticizing it—and making it sound simpler than it was, of course—but it seemed pretty magical to her. And she didn't even play the game. She just knew of it.

She didn't have a total lack of imagination. This camp was, hopefully, proving that to her. She could come up with fun things too. But even as a kid, when she'd "played pretend," she'd pretended to be things like a teacher or a mom or a doctor or a scientist. Real things. Things she knew existed. She'd never pretended to have magical powers. She'd never pretended to be a cursed princess.

Of course, she'd also spent a lot of time babysitting and playing with four little boys. There had been a lot of dirt and tree climbing and poison ivy—*real* dirt and poison ivy and yes, broken bones and stitches—in her life as a kid.

Which was fine. Definitely.

But she sometimes wondered if her imagination switch had been turned off at some point.

Whereas Ollie's seemed turned on and the dial pushed all the way to HIGH.

She marveled at that. Even when it made him absentminded and messy.

"It's almost five," she confirmed. "Dinner's at six thirty." She started to turn to walk back to her cabin.

"So I should..." Ollie said.

She smiled, but then hid it when she turned back. "You should get the boys back up to the cabin to clean up and get them to head home."

"Oh." For just a second, he looked disappointed.

Of course he was. She was sending his playmates home for the day. "They'll be back tomorrow. All day," she told him.

He definitely brightened at that. She laughed and shook her head.

“You could head to Dubuque and get the stuff you’re going to need to stay out here for the week,” she suggested. She really wanted him to stay. And, dammit, if having this obstacle course to look forward to during his work breaks would make it more fun out here, then she was fine with that.

He didn’t even glance at the boys before he nodded though.

“Yeah, I think I’ll do that. Maybe even get enough stuff for more than a week.”

* * *

“Hey, Ollie,” Dax answered on the third ring.

Ollie had him on speaker in the car as he drove back to Dubuque. “Hey. You at McCaffery’s?”

He could never keep track of which night his friends all got together at Cam’s parents’ place for dinner. He knew it was once a week. Or more. It seemed like they were always getting together. And yes, as Piper had pointed out, he knew he was always welcome. He just didn’t like the big family thing.

“I am,” Dax said. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I just thought I’d call and let you all know that I’m with Piper.”

Dax paused. “With Piper? You mean like physically at the moment or emotionally and spiritually or what?”

Ollie frowned. “Physically.”

“So physically as in sexually or just you’re in the same physical location at the moment?” Dax asked.

Ollie sighed. Everyone thought *he* was difficult, but seriously, Dax Marshall could be such a pain in the ass.

“Actually, neither. At the moment,” Ollie said, “I’m on my way back to Dubuque by myself right now, but I’ve been with her all day, and I’m going back out there tonight.”

“Okay. Good,” Dax said.

“I didn’t actually answer your question, you know,” Ollie said.

“Which question?”

“Any of them. About if I’m with Piper physically, sexually, emotionally, or spiritually.” Whatever the hell being with someone spiritually meant.

“I just assumed you were going to be with her in all the ways,” Dax said.

Ollie started to reply. Then he frowned. “We’re camping.”

“Oh.” That seemed to give Dax some pause. “Well, that’s... interesting.”

“She’s starting a camp for kids. She’s painting the buildings and stuff.”

“Yeah, Jane told me.”

Ollie scowled. “You knew?”

“I knew she was working on a project with Drew Ryan on his farm that was going to be some kind of weekend camp for kids,” Dax said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Drew Ryan,” Dax said simply.

Okay, that was a decent point. It was no secret that Ollie was not a fan of Drew Ryan.

“And because we don’t talk about Piper.”

“We talk about Piper,” Ollie protested.

“We don’t talk about how you feel about Piper.”

“You know that I feel... good... about Piper.” Ollie frowned. That seemed like a very inadequate description of how he felt about Piper. Even before the blue jeans. “And we

talk about her all the time. She's our executive assistant. Hell, our last two morning meetings have been almost entirely about her."

"Because she quit, and we can't function without her."

"We've been functioning without her for a week," Ollie said.

"Sure," Dax said, and Ollie could hear the grin in his friend's voice. "That's why you stomped into Buttered Up this morning and sat sulking at her table until she agreed to take you to camp with her."

"That's not exactly how that happened," Ollie said. But it was kind of how it had happened.

Dax chuckled in his ear.

"How did you hear about that?" Ollie asked. "Never mind." Of course he'd heard it from Josie. Or Zoe. Or from Jane, who had heard it from Josie or Zoe. Or he'd heard it from Grant or Aiden, who had heard it from Josie or Zoe.

Living in a small town was also turning out to be a pain in the ass. At least if he wanted to have any secrets.

"Grant," Dax said, in answer to his question.

As if it mattered.

"I need to write," Ollie said simply. "I can't write at the office without her. So I'm going to be wherever she is until I hit this deadline."

"Well, I have to say that your turning into a reclusive writer living in a cabin in the woods really doesn't require much of a stretch of my imagination," Dax said agreeably.

His tone absolutely indicated that he didn't believe for one second that writing was the reason Ollie had gone looking for Piper.

"Is it really reclusive-writer-in-the-woods stuff if Piper and four teenage boys and fucking Drew and Dallas Ryan are here too?" Ollie asked.

Dax chuckled. "Probably not."

“And you agree that Piper will make sure I’m working.”

“Of course she will.”

“So this makes sense.”

But him being with Piper made sense for other reasons. She made him feel good. She made him feel like he was brilliant and worthy and... safe. Which wasn't very manly, but didn't everyone need to feel safe sometimes? Like they could screw up and it wouldn't be the end of the world? And she thought he was brilliant and worthy without even being a fan of *Warriors of Easton* and with knowing all of his faults and flaws.

The women who thought he was brilliant and adored him at conventions, adored him from afar. That was completely different.

His friends thought he was brilliant and loved him, but some of their perceived “brilliance” came from the fact he'd created something that had been wildly successful for all of them. Sometimes he thought they forgot that Aiden could sell anything to anyone or that Dax was the one who took the stuff Ollie put on paper and made it “real”. Dax could turn anything from a rough draft into something even better.

But Piper didn't have a true affinity for *Warriors*, and she definitely wasn't observing him from afar.

Her adoration was real.

That made his heart kick.

Could she *actually* be in love with him?

“Your camping for two weeks with Piper makes sense if you're going to start dating her,” Dax said.

Ollie focused on his friend and their conversation again.

Dammit, they were dating. Kind of.

“Yeah, well, it won't surprise you to know that I already screwed that up.”

“Oh?” Dax asked.

He did not sound surprised.

“I blew off a... meeting with her earlier.” He was such a dumbass. How had he forgotten about the promise of a make-out session for getting his work done?

But something niggled in the back of his mind. Had he forgotten it? Really?

“On purpose?” Dax asked.

“No.” Not exactly. He hadn’t thought *Oh, I’m supposed to go make out with Piper, but I’m going to mess around with these guys instead.* “Not consciously anyway.”

Dax didn’t comment on that.

Ollie wished he would.

“Was she mad?” Dax asked.

“No.” She really hadn’t been.

She’d been horny about it.

Ollie felt his body respond to that. Just as it had when she’d told him. Horny. He made her horny. He liked that. A lot. Except that it, like everything else when it came to Piper, intimidated him.

That was definitely not manly or alpha or whatever the fuck it was that women wanted in the men who took them to bed.

He didn’t worry about that with his convention hookups. They didn’t know the real him. Talking didn’t matter with them. At least not about things other than *Warriors*. And *Warriors* was the one thing, the one place—fictional though it was—that Ollie felt completely in control and on top of things.

Because he could make shit up there. If something didn’t make sense, or he didn’t remember something about how things were *supposed* to work, he just changed it. He needed it to rain to make something in the story work? Then he made it rain. He needed someone to be able to fly because that was a lot easier than figuring out how to get them to the top of the mountain any other way? Then he put a flying spell on them.

Well, *he* didn't. He had a goddess do it. Of course.

His convention hookups totally went along with all of that. Goddesses and out-of-the-blue rainstorms even in a desert? No problem.

He really liked people who just went along. It made his life a lot easier.

A lot easier than the people who thought 10:00 a.m. meant 10:00 a.m. on the dot. Or who thought that 9:57 a.m. was even better. People who would put sticky note after sticky note on his desk reminding him about his ten o'clock meeting every thirty minutes starting at seven o'clock. People who would come into his office at 9:59 a.m., see that he wasn't ready, and would turn the computer on for him, log-in, set a cup of coffee by his mouse, and point to the screen with one eyebrow up. While her breasts and ass were looking amazing in a fitted little sweetheart sweater, wide shiny leather belt, and skirt that clung and made her hips wiggle when she walked.

Ollie scrubbed his free hand—the one not on the steering wheel—over the back of his neck.

Obviously, he'd noticed Piper at work before. *Everyone* noticed Piper everywhere she went. But in those skirts with everything perfectly ironed and coordinated and not a piece of lint or a stray thread to be found, she'd seemed untouchable. And he'd abided by that message. He hadn't touched. He put it out of his mind completely as a matter of fact.

Which was why his friends' hints and insinuations that she had feelings for him had annoyed the shit out of him. He *needed* to ignore all of that.

Because her reminders and sticky notes and turning his computer on and getting him coffee *had* made his life easier.

Well, it had made it easier to not miss video conference calls anyway.

He really hated those conference calls.

He'd much rather be making it rain in the desert.

Still, he had to be on those calls, so Piper had made his life easier in that he hadn't had to deal with the consequences of missing those calls.

Yeah, he'd been intimidated by Piper, and now, even in blue jeans, even wanting her with an intensity that completely shocked him, he was intimidated by the idea of making out with her, of having a relationship with her, of getting closer to her and being her boyfriend.

Because he was going to be really terrible at this.

"So you didn't blow anything off on purpose, and she wasn't mad, so no problem," Dax said.

Ollie sighed. "But she should be mad, right? I mean, she shouldn't have to put up with that from the guy she's dating."

"Oliver," Dax said, his tone more serious. And really, just his use of Ollie's full name indicated that he was about to say something important. "Piper Barry knows herself and she knows you. I don't know that you could surprise her at this point."

Ollie shook his head. "I really have no idea why she wants to be with me."

"None of us deserve our girls," Dax said. "I don't know why Jane wants to be with me. But I'm fucking grateful she does. And I do know that being with someone doesn't mean never messing up. It just means that when you realize it, you try to make up for it."

Ollie thought about that. "So instead of avoiding her, I need to try to be worth the aggravation when I *am* there."

Dax chuckled. "Something like that." Then he said more seriously. "I can tell you that, while it's sometimes annoying not knowing if you're going to show up for dinner on time, or at all, when you are *there*... when we're wading in Roman fountains and jumping out of airplanes and up onstage at Comic Con, there's no one else I'd want to do those things with."

Ollie was surprised by the jab of emotion in his chest. "Yeah?" he asked.

“Of course.”

“Not even Jane?”

“I’m madly in love with Jane,” Dax said. “But some people are in our lives to eat strawberry pie with, and some are in our lives to jump out of planes with. I need you both, man.”

Ollie knew it was absolutely not alpha-manly—yes, he spent too much time on fan forums where they discussed things like that about fictional characters—to be touched by another man telling him that. But he was.

“Thanks,” he told Dax.

“Definitely. But you’ve got your skydiving partner,” Dax said. “You really need to have a strawberry-pie partner.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Dax had been more of a convention-hookup, women-loving playboy before he’d met Jane than Ollie ever had been. Probably in part because Dax did like to actually *talk* to people.

“I don’t know about strawberry pie,” Ollie said after a moment. “But can I substitute s’mores?”

Chapter Ten



Piper realized she was humming while she cooked.

But, dammit, the guy she was in love with was on his way back to camp out with her for the next week—or more—and give this thing a chance.

Kind of.

He was coming back because she refused to return to the office, and he'd made progress on his script, and he now had a playground and new friends to goof around with.

Still, he was coming back to camp. With her.

She just couldn't help feeling pretty damned optimistic. He was so going to fall in love with her.

She'd gotten all of her painting supplies put away when the guys got back from the stream. Landon was walking upright, with no assistance, so she assumed he'd made the jump from tree to tree without mishap. She'd come inside to start cooking as they cleaned up from their day's work and the kids had headed out. Then Ollie had asked Dallas if he'd take him back up to the house. He'd asked her for her car keys, said he'd fill her car up when he got back from grabbing a bunch of clothes and toiletries from Dubuque, and had kissed her on the top of the head.

He'd kissed her on the top of the head.

That was the stupidest thing to be thrilled about but... that was a dating thing.

It certainly wasn't something you did to your assistant. Well, not your professional assistant that you didn't think of as anything more anyway. And it wasn't something you did to someone you were just hooking up with at a weekend convention.

Top-of-the-head kissing was something you did to someone you were dating.

At least in her mind.

She frowned as she stirred the chili.

Then she reached for her phone.

She dialed Paige's number without even hesitating.

Paige was a self-proclaimed commitment-phobe.

Who was now living in Louisiana because of a guy she was crazy about.

Of course she claimed she was just there temporarily, having some fun, taking a break from Appleby and her nosy, determined-to-marry-her-off family, having hot sex, for sure, but nothing more. But Piper had seen the way Paige looked when she talked about Mitch.

There was something more there. Piper would bet her favorite t-strap sandals with the cherries on the toes on it.

She wondered if Paige had figured that out yet though.

She also wondered if Paige had kissed Mitch on the head yet.

Or, at least, how she'd feel if he kissed her on the head.

"Hey!" Paige greeted after the third ring.

There was a lot of noise on her end of the line.

"Hey, is this a bad time?"

"No, why?"

Piper heard a door slam and the background noise dropped significantly.

"Sounds like you're at a party."

Paige laughed. “Oh, that’s just dinnertime. It always sounds like that here.”

“Wow.”

“I know, right?”

“So not really a break from the big-family thing you had here?”

“Well...” Paige paused, “it should seem the same, I know,” she said. “It’s a big family, and everyone is always around and in each other’s business, but it feels different here.”

“You’re *not* engaged to Mitch yet, then?” Piper teased.

Paige laughed again, and honestly, Piper wasn’t sure she’d heard her friend this happy. She hadn’t known Paige long, but the other woman had always come across as more snarky and sassy than carefree or... well, happy. Not that Paige had been bitchy, but she’d had a lot of expectations put on her in Appleby, and it had seemed that she had been in a constant state of rebellion.

“I’m not,” Paige confirmed. “But I am having fun here.”

“I’m so glad.”

“So what’s up with you?” Paige asked. “I’m glad to hear your voice. I miss you.”

Piper smiled at that. They hadn’t spent years together, but when Piper had started taking classes at Paige’s yoga studio, they’d bonded pretty quickly.

“I miss you too,” she said. “I actually have a question for the only other anti-relationship person I know.”

Things were even quieter on Paige’s end of the phone now as if she’d gone into another room or walked away from the group of people she’d been with. Piper heard a birdcall and she could have sworn water lapping.

“Where are you?”

“I walked down to the dock,” Paige said. “It’s so different here, Piper.” She sighed. “They’re all loud and bossy, and it’s hot here already and it’s only March. There are real live

alligators roaming around, and holy shit, these people eat spicy-as-hell food. But it's really... nice."

"Maybe you're not as anti-relationship as you once were?" Piper asked.

That gave her some hope. If Paige could come around, maybe Ollie could too.

"I don't know about that."

"Oh." Well, so much for that theory.

"I have a lot to work out there," Paige said. "But tell me what *you're* talking about. I know you're not talking about *you*. So I assume you mean Ollie?"

Piper sighed, stirring her spoon through the chili. "Yeah." Paige knew how she felt about Ollie. Well, everyone did, more or less, but Piper had actually confided in Paige. Paige knew she was in love with him and wanted more.

"What did he do? Or not do?"

"He kissed me back when I kissed him."

There was a long beat of silence on Paige's end. Then she said, "Well, holy shit, that's awesome, Piper!"

Piper nodded even though her friend couldn't see her. "Yeah. It was. It was hot and he was all in on the kiss. I mean, I was the one who pulled back and said no to it going further."

"But..."

Piper pictured Paige's confused expression.

"*Why?*"

Piper actually chuckled. "Because I want *more*. I want it all. And he wasn't going *there*."

"Oh well..." Paige was clearly thinking about that. "I mean, that can lead to more."

"Is that what happened with you and Mitch?" Again, Piper felt the bubble of hope rise up. She probably needed to talk to *Mitch* and see what he was doing to convince her beautiful, stubborn, skittish-about-love friend to give him a chance. But

hearing Paige's perspective—which was more like Ollie's perspective—was probably also helpful.

Paige sighed into the phone. The sound was a bit wistful and a bit *oh yeah*. “It sure didn't hurt,” she finally said. “I mean, making me want more of that certainly played in his favor when he wanted me to come to Louisiana.”

Piper stirred her spoon through the thick soup without seeing it. “Hmm,” she said out loud.

Paige laughed softly. “Yeah, I'm not telling you *not* to sleep with him. But Mitch also refused to let me make it only about that.”

“How did he do that?”

“By not letting me push him away. By being around. By not letting me forget about him. By being... him.”

She stopped, but Piper had the sense that she was thinking through her answer, and Piper stayed quiet, letting her gather all her thoughts.

“The thing is, he's being so patient,” Paige finally said. “He lets me know all the time that he wants me, but there is something undeniably sexy about someone who is content to just be with you and who likes you, wherever you're at in figuring it all out, who will just take whatever you can give.”

Piper repeated that in her mind. Then she groaned. “I just have to be patient?”

Paige laughed. “While also letting him know that you want him.”

Piper chewed on her bottom lip. “Is Mitch going to win you over eventually?”

Paige sighed. “I guess all I can say right now is that he's going to make it incredibly hard to leave in the end. Harder than it's ever been.”

Piper felt her stomach twist. “Ugh, why did I call you? I should have called head-over-heels-crazy-in-love Whitney.”

Paige snorted. “You called me because you wanted someone who would tell you that you need to respect there could be a very good reason Ollie doesn’t want to or can’t commit.”

She knew that. Dammit. “Maybe I called because I knew I’d need Mitch’s number, so I’d have a friend to call when we were both sitting at home with broken hearts.”

“Maybe.”

Paige didn’t laugh that off and that made Piper frown. “You really might break that guy’s heart?”

“I don’t want to,” Paige said. “But I guess? Maybe? But I was honest with him going in.”

Piper knew that too. Paige was very up front and Mitch had still wanted her to come to Louisiana. “Ollie has been too.”

“Then you’re going in at your own risk.”

“Yeah.”

“Is that why you haven’t slept with him?” Paige asked. “Because you know he could still walk away, and if you sleep together, you’ll be even more devastated?”

Piper thought about that. If she had, it had been subconsciously. But finally, she said, “No. When I kicked him out of my room it was because I fully intended that to be it and I was going to work on getting over him.”

“And now?” Paige asked. “Why aren’t you sleeping with him now?”

“Because he’s not here at the moment.”

Paige laughed. “Is he coming back?”

“He is.” That she knew for sure. Now. Because of the kiss on the head.

“And what about then?”

“Well, does sleeping with Mitch make it harder to walk away?”

Paige was quiet for a couple of seconds. “I was going to say that you can’t sleep with him hoping that will make him want to stay. You can’t use sex that way. But—”

“But?” Piper asked when Paige stopped.

“I guess the sex with Mitch does make it harder to think about leaving. And...” She blew out a breath. “That’s never happened before. The sex hasn’t made a difference before.”

“So it’s not just about orgasms.”

“Nope,” Paige said, not even pretending to laugh that off. “I’d want to hang out with him even if he wasn’t the best I’d ever had. And I guess, in this case, that makes the sex important. If we *hadn’t* slept together, I wouldn’t realize that. I wouldn’t realize that this is not just a friendship, but it’s also not just a fling.”

Piper was surprised. “He’s the best you’ve ever had?”

“For sure. And I think it’s because of the liking him thing.” Paige actually sounded a little confused. “I mean, it’s absolutely all of his, ahem, attributes and skills.”

She said it lightly, and Piper could perfectly picture the mischievous grin she was wearing. It was a Paige Asher staple.

“But I think what makes him better than all the rest is that I really, truly *like* him too.”

“Man, I hope he’s way out of earshot,” Piper teased. “You’d hate for him to overhear all of this.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

“Thanks for the insight, babe,” Piper said. “I know why I called you. You always give it to me straight.”

“Always,” Paige said sincerely. “And I’ll be here if all of my advice ends up sucking and you get your heart broken.”

Piper appreciated that her friend was acknowledging that could still happen. She wasn’t sugarcoating things. Or saying she had all the answers. She was just being honest about what she knew and felt.

“Can I come to Louisiana if I need to get away?” Piper asked.

“Oh, honey, yes,” Paige said, taking on a bit of a Southern accent, making Piper laugh. “They have moonshine down here that will take away all your bad memories—hell, some of the good ones too probably—not to mention stripping the paint off your walls.” She laughed. “And there are definitely some hot Louisiana boys who would be happy to be your rebound.”

Piper smiled but her heart was already rejecting the idea of being with anyone else. Ever. Ugh, she was in so much trouble.

“I can’t imagine ever wanting anyone else,” she confessed.

Paige sounded sympathetic when she said, “Well, then, you can just play with the otters. You can’t be unhappy when you’re playing with otters.”

“Otters?” Piper asked.

“Oh yeah, they have this swamp boat tour company, Boys of the Bayou,” Paige said. “But they’re starting this otter encounter on the side, too. People can pet and play with and feed otters. They are so cute. In fact, they’re starting this whole petting zoo on the side. It’s hilarious, because they’re calling it Boys of the Bayou Gone Wild, but it’s otters and alpacas and goats and rabbits and stuff. Nothing very wild at all.”

Piper smiled at the affection she heard in her friend’s voice. “It sounds like you like it there.”

“I’m doing otter yoga,” she said. “We do yoga while otters run around. It’s super distracting and nothing like cat yoga, but yeah...” Her voice softened. “I do like it here.”

“I’m really glad. Even though I miss you and could *really* use some girl time.”

“Well, I’m just a phone call away,” Paige said. “And I’m only here temporarily.”

Uh-huh. Piper wasn’t so sure about that.

She heard the sound of a car outside and looked out the window over the sink in the mini-kitchen. Her heart flipped. Ollie was back.

“I’m gonna let you go,” Piper said.

“Oh, did your man finally get back?” Paige asked.

Her man. Yeah. Well, he was for now. He was willing to have campfire dates. Paige had said that there was something really sexy about someone who was willing to just be with you where you were. She could do that.

“Yeah. I think I need to show him what this can be.”

“You do,” Paige agreed. “Make it damned hard for him to leave next time.”

“Wow, from the commitment-phobe queen?”

“Who would know better how to do this?”

“Exactly,” Piper said with a grin.

They said goodbye and disconnected just as Ollie came through the door.

“Piper? I—” He saw her and stopped. Both walking and talking.

“Hey.”

“Holy shit.”

Piper snorted. She looked at the stove, then down at herself. “What?”

She was wearing the flannel from that afternoon, but it was on top of a white tank top and a pair of cut-off gray sweatpants.

Ollie tossed his duffle to the side and swung the door shut. He shoved a hand through his hair and shook his head.

“The normal-girl thing is still catching me off guard,” he said.

Piper laughed. “Well, get used to it. I’m not cooking in any of my work dresses, no matter what you say.”

He seemed to have gotten over his initial surprise. His gaze went over her again. From the high ponytail she wore to her bare feet. Slowly. Twice.

“I’m not sayin’ I don’t like this look. I’m just still adjusting to what it does to me.”

Piper let her gaze travel over him as well. She didn’t see any super-obvious effect, but she liked the idea that he was a little rattled.

Just having him in the cabin with her was making her heart beat faster.

“I’ve always really liked you in suits,” she said. “But you do very nice things to jeans and Henleys too.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “I’m also getting used to us saying things like that to one another.”

She shrugged. “Yeah. It might take some practice. But I think this is good. Normal, *real* stuff.” She gestured toward the table. “Like dinner. It’s ready.”

She dished up the chili and cornbread muffins and lettuce salads she’d made and set them on the table as he washed his hands at the sink and took a seat.

This definitely felt intimate to her. Different.

She’d cooked for him several times. And she loved when he told her how much he liked it. They’d eaten together. Lunches over their desks. Even a few lunches and a couple of dinners at restaurants. One had been pizza at nearly midnight after they’d put in a sixteen-hour day. One had been a nice dinner at an upscale Chicago seafood restaurant celebrating the sale of *Warriors of Easton* to Plus Gaming Ltd., the company that had bought the guys out just over a year ago.

That dinner had been with all the other guys too. She’d been surprised, though touched, they’d included her, in fact. And she’d spent the evening feeling a little sad about the whole situation. She’d suspected Ollie had been less than ecstatic as well.

The sale had resulted in a lot of money for them all, of course, but she wasn't so sure that Ollie had been ready to give *Warriors* over to someone else. She also had the impression that he was a little hurt the other guys had been so enthusiastic about the sale.

She tried to shake that off as she took her seat at the table with him.

This was a first. A meal she'd prepared that they were going to eat together. Just them. In an isolated cabin in the woods. Alone. After having admitted their attraction, and shared a scorching kiss.

She already wanted more of this.

And he hadn't even taken the first bite.

"Did you want to sell *Warriors*?"

"This is amazing."

They both spoke at the same time.

Ollie looked up at her. "What?"

Piper tucked a foot under her butt. "When Plus Gaming came to you guys, what was your first reaction? Did you want to sell?"

"Why do you ask?" He took another bite.

She should let him eat. But now, for some reason, she really wanted to know this. Maybe because she really wanted to know *him*. Or she wanted proof that she already did know him.

"I got the impression when we went to dinner that night, all of us, to celebrate, that you weren't as happy as everyone else."

He swallowed his bite and wiped his mouth with his napkin. Then he met her eyes. "I wasn't."

She nodded. "Then—"

"I got the impression you weren't either."

She lifted a brow. "I wasn't."

“Why not?”

She tore off a piece of her muffin and ate it, thinking about how she should answer that. It was none of her business what the guys did with their company. She shouldn't have had an opinion one way or another. But after she swallowed, she answered honestly. Because that's what she wanted from him.

“I was afraid I wouldn't have a job anymore. For one thing.”

He smiled slightly. “I was a little worried about that too. For me.”

“You thought *you* wouldn't have a job?”

“It's not like I'm really qualified to do anything else,” he told her.

“What was your degree in?” She should know this and was surprised to realize she didn't.

“I have a basic business degree.”

“You do?” She leaned in. “You *hate* business. Everything about that side of things. Getting you to fill out forms or look at a spreadsheet is like pulling teeth.”

“I didn't say I liked it or was good at it. You asked what my degree was in.”

She grinned. “How'd you even pass enough classes to get that degree?”

But she answered with him when he said, “Grant.”

He nodded. “He pulled me through.”

“He made you do it.”

“Yeah. I was going to drop out. When the game took off, I figured what did I need a degree for?”

“You were going to drop out? Seriously?”

“Lots of very creative and successful people don't have college degrees.”

“Okay. But... you really didn't want one?”

“I didn’t like school.” He was stirring his chili and took a bite after he said that.

She didn’t have trouble believing that, actually. Sitting still, studying, showing up to things at specified times, doing things the way other people thought he should... none of that was really Ollie.

“Why didn’t you do graphic design or computer science like Dax?” she asked. “At least you would have liked that.”

He actually laughed at that. “I wasn’t good at the business stuff, but I *really* sucked at the computer stuff.”

“Really?”

“Yep. They thought about having me take the classes Aiden had so he could help me, but he was doing more management stuff, and it was a lot of public speaking and group projects. Definitely not my thing,” he said. “They thought maybe I should follow Cam, but he just got a basic English degree once he decided on law school, and there was no way I was going to do all that reading.”

She was staring, she knew. “They all got together and decided which degree you should get?”

“I was going to drop out,” he repeated. “They all said no way, that they’d get me through somehow. So we sat around and decided what would make the most sense.”

“You mean, what would be the easiest.”

He leveled her with a look. “Yeah.”

She had not known any of this. But now that she thought about it, she really could see how Ollie would have hated school.

“But you really thought you wouldn’t have a job if you sold?”

“We made it a condition of the sale,” he said. “Well, Cam did. That was him and Grant. I had to continue on as creative director and head writer or no deal.”

Damn, she really liked those guys. “They were looking out for you.”

“Always,” he agreed. “So, like I said, I’m not qualified to do anything else.”

She studied him as he ate. She took a few bites too.

“So what was the other reason you didn’t want us to sell?” he asked after a bit.

“What?”

“You said you were worried about your job *for one thing*. What was the other?”

She lifted a shoulder. “It just felt sad. Like what brought you guys together was ending. And...” She bit her lip.

“What?” He was watching her now.

“It bothered me that you seemed bothered,” she told him.

He put a piece of cornbread in his mouth and chewed, looking at her. Then he asked, “You weren’t happy because the other guys were happy?”

She shook her head. “I like the other guys. I’m glad when they’re happy about things. But—” She leaned in. “I’m in love with *you*. So your feelings matter more to me than theirs do.”

Something flickered in his eyes. She’d told him she was in love with him before, but it seemed like each time she said it, he was less surprised. Maybe it was sinking in. Maybe eventually he would start liking to hear it.

Maybe he’d eventually say it back...

She straightened. She couldn’t get ahead of herself here. Paige had warned her that she had to respect that he might have very good reasons for how he felt and that he might still walk away.

She wasn’t going to hold back her feelings from him, but she had to not expect to get all those same feelings in return. That wasn’t fair to either of them.

“Do you regret it?” she asked. “Selling?”

He set his spoon down and rested an elbow on the table, leaning in. “We’re going to do this intimate, share our feelings, get-to-know-each-other thing, huh?”

Her heart tripped. She wanted this. “Yes.”

“Okay, then... no. Not regret. Exactly. I miss it. I wish we could have stayed the way we were forever. But Dax, Aiden, Cam, and Grant are like brothers to me. I would do anything for them. They wanted to sell so I said yes. And I would do it again.”

She saw his sincerity. And heard it. And she wanted to hug him so badly she almost came out of her chair.

“Do you feel like they didn’t respect *you* or your friendship?” she asked. “It was your creation. If you didn’t want to sell, then—”

“No.” He cut her off firmly.

“No?”

“Those guys have given me more friendship than I’ve ever given them back, Piper,” he said, his voice a little rough.

She looked into his eyes, studying them, thinking about the five men she knew and had observed, together and individually, over the past five years. “You didn’t tell them you didn’t want to sell.”

“No.”

She reached out. She couldn’t help it. She laid her hand on his arm. “You are a good friend, Ollie. You love them. They know that.”

He snorted. “I blow off birthdays. I forget to check my texts. No one would dream of asking me to pick them up from the airport or water plants while they’re out of town or anything like that.”

Well, all of that was true. Still, she squeezed his arm. “They love just being around you. You make them happy. They like *you*. Not the things you do... or don’t do... for them. They’re grown men, who happen to be millionaires.

They can all get rides from the airport and hire people to water their plants.”

“You’re missing the point on purpose,” he said.

“I know.” She took a breath. “I’m just saying that it’s not just about that kind of stuff.”

“Well, good, because I can guarantee that I will forget to send you flowers on Valentine’s Day.”

She worked to focus. He was making a point. But, of course, her mind went off on a Valentine’s Day—*that’s months and months away. He thinks we’ll still be dating by then? Woo-hoo—tangent.*

“I can get my own flowers when I want them, Ollie,” she said, with total composure. That was also true. She didn’t need him to send her flowers. But would it be nice? Of course.

“Again, you’re missing the point. On purpose.”

“Okay,” she acknowledged. “Well, I do think that if it’s a day like that, one that stays the same all the time, is clearly marked on every calendar, and is widely advertised in every medium, that perhaps, you could *try* to remember it.”

He nodded. “What I *should* do, is hire a really competent assistant who could take care of things like sending flowers on appropriate holidays for me.”

“Getting flowers that were actually sent from someone else because you couldn’t, or didn’t, remember doesn’t mean anything.”

“It does if the other person doesn’t know that they’re from someone else.”

“But I would.”

“Another reason this will probably not work out between us.”

She blew out a breath. “Another reason that we should probably just stay away from flower deliveries.”

“Another reason you should come back and just be my assistant.”

“You mean be someone who coddles you.”

“Yes.”

“No.” She squeezed his arm. “Come on, Ollie. You can do better. You know you can.”

He didn't say anything to that. She had the sense that he wanted to argue, but he just dug back into his chili instead.

Sometimes Dax drove her crazy with his talking. But she doubted Jane ever had to wonder what was on her fiancé's mind.

They finished eating, and Piper had a rock in her stomach the entire time.

Was forcing, or even cajoling, Ollie to try this relationship thing with her what she really wanted? Of course not. She wanted him to want this.

But there was something about the story he'd told about selling *Warriors* just because the guys had wanted to sell that was niggling at her.

He would do anything for the people he cared about.

Even the stuff he didn't want to do. Stuff he didn't like. Stuff that made him uncomfortable. He wasn't the manipulative type. He didn't do things to get people to do things for him in return. So she didn't believe he was just here to get his script finished. She also didn't believe that he hoped this made her realize she was *not* in love with him so that she'd come back to work. He had agreed to stay at the camp because she wanted him to. Even if he didn't like it.

She thought about that as they cleaned up from dinner.

They didn't really talk. Nothing more than, “Where should I put this?”

“Second cupboard,” type of stuff.

But they cleared the table, stored the leftovers, and did the dishes together.

And the entire time, Piper's mind spun.

Oliver was the brains of *Warriors of Easton*. Well, he was the imagination. Grant and Aiden were the brains, she supposed. At least when it came to the business. Cam was the muscle. Metaphorically, anyway. He protected the brand and the trademark, took care of the contracts, covered the legal aspects. Dax was the artist, the one who brought it all to life, but he was really the heart. He was the one who interacted with the fans and brought the enthusiasm and color—literally—when it came to the game graphics to *Warriors*.

Oliver was the imagination. The creator. The... god. Really. It all came from him first. Without him, there would be no characters or magical lands for Dax to draw and color. There would be no franchise to protect and expand. Or sell.

Warriors of Easton was Ollie's.

But the guys had taken it over, grown it, and then sold it.

Oliver had gone along with that.

She surreptitiously watched as he dried the bowls. He'd just gone along with that. Why?

Because he would do anything for the people who mattered to him.

He put friendship and relationships and love ahead of everything else. Ahead of business and money.

And now he was out here with her. At a campground. Agreeing to help paint buildings and finding a way to get her other hired hands to be more productive and even willing to sit around a campfire with her and make s'mores.

She didn't need flowers from this man. She didn't need him to remember that it was Valentine's Day. She didn't need him to remember details. She was a master at details. She was almost *too* good at details.

She wanted to be a part of Oliver's big picture. And if he needed to be with her to write, maybe she already was.

"You ready for our date?" she asked, holding up the bag of marshmallows she'd laid on the counter.

He looked from them to her. "Our date?"

She laughed. “Campfire and s’mores time.”

“That’s a date?”

“Well, it’s not a business meeting.”

“We could talk business.”

Piper remembered what Paige had said. “Okay. We can talk business. But I’m having *s’more* than that.” She grinned at her own pun, gathering up the s’mores ingredients and grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch.

“Our previous business meetings were just missing s’mores?” he asked, following her out of the cabin nevertheless.

“Every get-together of any kind can be improved with s’mores,” she said sincerely. “Wait until you try the bourbon-infused marshmallows I have on order.”

“Damn, you’re serious about s’mores,” Ollie said.

She turned and pinned him with a gaze. “When I want s’more, I want *s’more*.”

He gave her a little smile. “Noted.”

She tossed the blanket over one of the benches and set the marshmallows, chocolate bars, and graham crackers on the stump that acted as a little table between two benches.

Drew and Dallas had built the wooden benches a couple of months ago, but because they’d been in the midst of the coldest part of the winter in Iowa, they had yet to be used. They’d been made out of tree trunks carved out with chainsaws, sanded just to where they weren’t too rough to sit on, then finished to withstand most of the elements.

The benches circled the stone firepit. Each bench was about as long as a love seat, which meant three or four kids could sit together, depending on the size of the kids, but only a couple of adults.

Piper chose the middle bench, and Ollie sank down beside her. She was pleased he hadn’t taken a separate bench. She’d brought a cookie sheet along and set it on top of the stone edge

of the firepit. She spread the s'mores ingredients out on it so they could be easily assembled as the marshmallows toasted.

She'd also purchased special marshmallow roasting sticks. They were extra long, metal, with multiple prongs at the end, and colored plastic ends. She could, of course, have the kids—and Ollie—toasting marshmallows on actual wooden sticks they picked up from the campsite, the way God had intended it, but these seemed safer, and more sanitary. They even came in a little rack that they could keep out here by the firepit.

She handed one with a green handle to Ollie.

He put three marshmallows on the end of his and then looked at her.

She just looked back. She loved just looking at him. She loved being here with no desk between them. Toasting marshmallows was the only task on either of their to-do lists for the evening.

They'd been alone together at the office a number of times, but while she'd been tempted to kiss him several times, there had always been the he's-your-boss thing hovering between them.

That was gone now.

Her gaze dropped to his mouth.

“Piper?”

“Yeah?”

“Don't we need a fire?”

She could just lean in and put her lips against his. She really thought there would be plenty of fire, then. But she nodded. “Yeah.”

She turned toward the firepit and dug into the pocket of her shorts for the little box of wooden matches.

“I bought easy-starter logs at the store, but I can teach you to build a fire from regular wood and sticks if you want.”

She leaned over the edge of the pit, rearranging the logs a bit, then struck a match, lighting the bottom log.

“Ollie?” she asked. He didn’t answer, and she looked over her shoulder.

His gaze was fully on her ass.

She smirked. “Hey, Ollie?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to learn to build a fire?”

“I really prefer watching you do it.”

She straightened and turned to face him. “See? This date is going well so far.”

His gaze climbed to her face. Slowly. Taking his time as he went from her hips over her stomach, breasts, and mouth on his way to meeting her eyes. “It’s the clothes.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “Not just the jeans and the bathrobe, then?”

“The real-girl clothes. *Any* real-girl clothes.”

She propped a hand on her hip, feeling the warmth of the flames building behind her. Paige had also said the sex made it harder to think about walking away from Mitch.

“You don’t think you would want to kiss me right now if I was wearing one of my regular dresses?”

“I want to fill my hands with your ass. I didn’t say I wanted to kiss you.”

“Ah.” She stepped closer to him. “That’s true.”

He straightened but spread his knees. She stepped between them. “Well, Oliver,” she said. “I’m very happy to have any part of you on any part of me.”

“Oh yeah?” He lifted his hands without hesitation and cupped her ass in his big palms.

The warmth licking down her legs and through her stomach had nothing to do with the fire behind her.

“Yeah,” she told him.

He squeezed. “I like these shorts.”

“They don’t make you want to kiss me at all?”

“Well…”

Then he shocked the hell out of her by leaning in and pressing his lips to her stomach.

Her tank top was between her skin and his mouth but damn, it didn’t seem to matter. Her nipples tightened, her inner muscles tightened, and she sucked in a little breath.

He looked up, and his gaze zeroed in on her hard nipples. The tank was fitted and thin enough that there was no way to miss them. They grew even tighter with his attention on them.

“Pull your shirt up, Piper,” he murmured as he squeezed her ass.

Oh Lord yes. They didn’t need to talk. They’d talked at dinner. That was enough. She didn’t even think about *not* complying. She raised the hem of the shirt, preparing to shrug out of her flannel and strip the tank off entirely. But she’d only lifted it past her belly button when Ollie put his mouth against her again.

The feel of his hot mouth on bare skin, *any* bare skin, sent shock waves of lust through her body. She lifted a hand to the back of his head, his name coming out as a husky whisper, “*Ollie.*”

Then he made her knees nearly buckle by dragging his mouth back and forth, abrading her skin with the stubble around his mouth and along his jaw. Goose bumps broke out and spread like fireworks bursting from that point of contact.

She gasped.

Could she orgasm from the simple touch of his mouth on her *stomach*?

With this guy? It was possible. It might be a little embarrassing, but she wasn’t sure she cared at the moment.

He lifted his head and looked up at her. “How about some s’mores?”

She blinked down at him.

She wasn't sure she'd ever wanted to kiss someone more. His lips were right there. His eyes were on hers. She had his complete and total attention. She'd experienced his full focus a few times in the past. It was always short lived, but when it happened it was potent.

"Piper?" he asked.

"Yeah?" She was vaguely aware that she sounded distracted.

"S'mores?"

Oh, she wanted some more all right.

She would really love to make *him* into a giant, real-life s'more. She could wipe melted chocolate and marshmallow on his lips and lick it off. She could smear melted chocolate and marshmallow on his—

"Piper?" He added a pinch to her ass this time as his mouth tipped up into an incredibly sexy smile.

Her eyes went to his. "What?"

"S'mores." It wasn't a question this time.

She blinked. "Yes." She wanted s'mores. *On him.*

"Good grief, is this what it's like to talk to me all the time?" He actually nudged her back as he grinned.

She blinked again and tried to focus. Was this what it was like to... She shook her head. Then thought about his question. "Yes," she said truthfully. "It's very much like that."

He chuckled. "That's gotta be annoying."

She stepped back, took a breath, and took her seat next to him. "Well, if you were zoning out because you were thinking about the things I was just thinking about, I would be *very* forgiving about your distraction."

"Oh?"

She nodded. "If you wanted to cover me in melted chocolate and marshmallow and lick it all off, you could daydream all day long."

His eyes heated, and Piper felt her lower stomach tighten. Wow.

“That’s what you’re thinking about?” he asked.

“Yep.”

He didn’t say anything to that, so she stuck two marshmallows on the end of her stick and extended it toward the fire. She acted completely nonchalant, but the truth was, her heart was pounding so hard in her chest, she was certain Ollie would be able to hear it.

“But we’re getting to know each other too,” he said, also reaching to get his marshmallows into the edge of the fire.

“Right.”

“You realize *that* could be counterintuitive.”

“As in, getting to know you could turn me *off*?” she asked. Did he really think that? But it would make sense why he didn’t really date. He didn’t let women know him beyond what they already did—he was handsome, rich, and the talented, successful creator of *Warriors*.

“Exactly.”

“But I already know you.” She turned her marshmallow to toast the other side. “This is more about you getting to know me. And that’s only going to make you want me more. No matter what I’m wearing.”

She understood the theory that her clothes were making him look at her differently and getting her out of the mental box he’d put her in, but it annoyed her a bit too. She definitely wanted to get to the point where what she wore didn’t matter.

It hasn’t even been a day. You’ve been in love with him for two years. You have to give him time to catch up.

“I have ADHD.”

It took her a second to pull herself out of her thoughts and to realize what he’d said. She looked over at him.

He met her eyes. “I have ADHD,” he said again.

She paused. How should she respond? It was clear he thought he was laying a big reveal on her.

Finally she said the only thing she really could. "I know."

Chapter Eleven



Now it was Ollie's turn to blink at Piper. Then frown.

He shook his head. "I don't mean *I'm a little ADHD* as in I have a hard time sitting still and paying attention. I've actually been diagnosed. I was diagnosed as a kid, but I didn't grow out of it the way some do."

Piper realized she needed to tread carefully here. He was sharing with her and she *loved* that. This was not something he likely talked about often. Or ever. But she nodded again. "There are a lot of adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Sometimes they get diagnosed as adults, actually."

His frown deepened. "Right. I've always known I had it though."

She nodded and waited for him to go on.

The smell of burning sugar hit her then, and she glanced at the fire. Her marshmallows were charred, black balls on the end of her stick.

"Crap!" She pulled her stick back and knocked it against the side of the firepit. The burned balls of sugar fell into the pit. She sighed.

Ollie pulled his stick back.

His marshmallows were perfectly toasted. Dark brown but not burnt. They'd be crisp on the outside and gooey on the inside. He slid one off the tip of his stick with his fingers and held it out to her.

She leaned in and took it from his fingers with her mouth. Her lips closed around his fingertips, and she added a drag of her tongue to be sure she got it all off.

His eyes were locked on her as she sat back, licking her lips.

He lifted his fingers to his mouth and licked them as well.

Heat curled through her stomach at the sight.

She didn't miss the detail that Ollie had paid enough attention to toast the perfect marshmallows while she'd gotten distracted and burned hers to a crisp.

"Thanks," she said, her voice husky.

"My pleasure." His voice was low, and the spot on her stomach he'd kissed tingled.

She wet her lips again. She didn't want to skip over the conversation about his ADHD. That was important. It was important that he was sharing it.

But, *damn*, she wanted to kiss him so badly.

"I looked up ADHD in adults about three years ago, Ollie," she told him. "I've known for a long time that's what was going on."

"You never said anything."

"Why would I say anything?"

"Did you wonder if I knew?"

She thought about that. "I assumed you knew," she said. "I'm not sure why, but..." Little bits of memories came back to her. "Actually, I do. I think it was the way that you always knew that you could just throw ideas out and everyone else would mold them into doable plans or would reel you back in if you got too over the top. I think it was your self-awareness about that. And how self-deprecating you always are about your distractibility and how you don't know *how* to organize things but that you know you need them organized. When I would find something that really worked, you always seemed relieved. Like when I started using the red folders for the

really important stuff. You seemed happy to have that little extra bit of help.”

He nodded slowly. “I was. I was just really happy to have *you*.”

“No,” she said, holding up a finger. “You can’t guilt me. You don’t *need* me, Ollie.”

“I do.”

“You don’t need *me*,” she said, emphasizing a different word. “I’m not saying that you’re not a little better off with some help, but it doesn’t have to be me. I don’t do anything that someone else couldn’t do. And I think you could do more if you tried.”

His shoulders tensed, and he looked into the fire instead of at her.

She frowned. “Come on, Ollie. You became really dependent on me. You could do more.”

“I told you that I’ve been dealing with this all my life. I definitely know what I can and can’t handle, Piper.”

“You don’t even use the calendar app on your phone.”

“Do you know how much shit gets loaded in there?” he said. “Every fucking little thing. Then when I pull it up, there’s so much to look at, I can’t make sense of any of it.”

“Every fucking little thing? Like the meetings you need to be at and dinners with your best friends and the release dates for the new *Warriors* packs? Those are all important.” She smiled even as she shook her head.

He nodded. “But the releases will happen whether I know about them or not. And my friends are used to me missing dinners. So I focus on what I can. Like the meetings I always have to be at.”

“You don’t even put those on your calendar,” she muttered.

“Because I have *you* to remind me, and you’re a lot nicer to look at than my calendar.”

She snorted. “That was a very half-assed compliment.”

He lifted a shoulder.

“Okay, so I get that you have a lot of stuff that *could* go on your calendar and that gets overwhelming. But someone else could definitely keep track of your meetings for you.”

“Probably.”

“So hiring someone else was a good idea,” she prompted.

“Probably.”

“What’s the problem?”

“She’s not you.”

“That’s... nice. But it doesn’t have to be me. You can see me every day,” she said. “I *want* to see you every day.”

He sighed. Heavily. “I’m like this outside of work too, Piper.” He finally looked at her again. “At work, your job is a little easier. Believe it or not. Organizing my schedule. Getting me where I need to go when I need to be there. Keeping my paperwork in order. And you’re getting paid to deal with my nonsense. Outside of work, it’s a lot more... chaotic. It’s stuff like where I put stuff in the house and getting to social engagements on time and remembering the details about something we discussed last week. And you won’t be getting paid for that.”

Ah, so he didn’t think she would find dealing with all of this worth it when it was personal.

“Is that why you don’t have many personal relationships with women? You don’t think they’ll put up with all of that?”

“And it’s a lot of work for me,” he said. He shrugged. “It’s easier to just worry about myself.”

“There are ways to cope. Strategies.”

“I know.”

“You’re not willing to do that?”

“I’ve tried some things. Like medications. I took those as a kid. I stopped in college. Then went back to them. Then stopped again.”

“Did they work?”

“Yeah. They helped me focus so I could get through classes. But...” He shrugged. “I felt dull. It made me less creative. Everyone noticed. And I hated it. I know that I can be a lot and over the top, but I wasn’t myself on the meds, and I’ve chosen to deal with the ADHD other ways. Like by hiring you.”

She laughed softly. “Grant hired me.”

“Well, I became friends with a guy who would hire an assistant for me,” he said with a small smile.

“Good strategy.”

“Exactly.” He was quiet for a long moment. Then he sighed and focused on the fire. “I’m telling you this because you are the most stubborn, persistent woman I know, and you know me well enough to probably wear me down over time anyway.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“And I really wish it could be different with you,” he said. “I do. For the first time. So I’m going to tell you what’s up because I actually don’t want you to think I’m just a selfish dick. Other women, I don’t care so much, but with you, I... want you to know that I’ve actually given this some thought.”

Piper felt her heart squeeze as she studied his profile. He looked so serious. And she heard every word. He really wanted her to understand whatever he was about to explain. That mattered. She knew he didn’t spend a lot of time explaining himself and that she was important enough to him for him to go into this, whatever it was, meant a lot to her.

“Okay.” She wanted to hold his hand. But she resisted. She linked her fingers together and tucked them into her lap.

So she was startled when he reached over and took her hand, lacing their fingers together and resting them on his thigh.

Her eyes wide, she stared at their hands, waiting for him to go on.

“I was an only child,” he said. “My mom really didn’t like being a mom.” He took a deep breath. “She has OCD. It wasn’t diagnosed officially until I was about ten, but she had problems with it before that, obviously.” He looked over at Piper. “I drove her crazy.”

Piper frowned. “But—”

“I mean literally. I made her symptoms, including her anxiety, way worse. I was hyperactive. I couldn’t sit still. I couldn’t keep track of my stuff. I didn’t follow through on things.” He sighed. “I was her worst nightmare.”

Piper arched a brow. “She was your *mother*. I’m sure she didn’t feel that way.”

“Oh, she did.” He gave a little laugh that was devoid of humor. “She told me every day that I drove her crazy. At one point when I was a teenager, she said she would be so much better off if she hadn’t had me. It was hard enough dealing with her OCD tendencies, but when she had a messy, loud kid, who couldn’t follow directions or pick up his shit, it made it ten times worse.”

Piper frowned. “You have to be kidding. What a bitch.” She quickly slapped her other hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry.” She dropped her hand. “Ollie, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“She couldn’t help it.”

“*You* couldn’t help your stuff either.”

“But like you said, I didn’t really try.”

Piper almost groaned out loud. Dammit. She had kind of said that. Or she’d maybe said pretty much that.

“You’re very organized, very put together,” he said, looking at their hands instead of into her eyes. “I imagine that someone like me could drive someone like you crazy. Like really crazy. I mean, I know I do. But Dax does too, just not to the extent I do.”

“I don’t have OCD, Ollie,” Piper said, squeezing his hand. “When I say crazy, I don’t mean *crazy*.” She cringed. “Should

we be calling it that? I mean, it's a true disorder. I shouldn't make light of it."

He shook his head. "We both know what we mean. We're not being disrespectful. It's not as if we don't take mental illness seriously."

She took a breath. That was true, she supposed.

"I already drive you crazy. At work."

"Just the run-of-the-mill crazy," she said gently. "I get exasperated at times, it's true. But I knew going in that you needed extra help for organization and scheduling. That was my job."

"Exactly," he said with a nod. "It was your job. You knew going in what it was going to be and you were paid for it. That's not the same as dealing with it on a personal basis at home."

Piper thought about that. That was actually a fair point. She could understand why he thought that. Why he was convinced that if she wasn't being compensated for putting up with him, that she might not want to stick around when he was difficult.

She ran her thumb over the back of his hand. "Maybe, back in the beginning, the job description and money made it all... better. But, Ollie—" She looked over at him and waited for him to meet her eyes. "I'm in love with you. That gives me infinitely more patience."

He sucked in a breath. He did seem to be getting used to her saying she loved him. At least he didn't stare at her as if she had three heads and had announced that she ate puppies for breakfast. But hearing the words still appeared to affect him each time. She hoped so. She hoped his heart *felt* it every time.

"My brothers are *a lot*," she said. "They are loud and fight and make huge messes. I'm not trying to trivialize your stuff, but, yes, they make me batty, but I also love them and would do anything to help them navigate the world and be happier and safer and successful."

“My *mom* loves me,” he said.

Piper swallowed hard at that. Yeah, his mom loved him. Surely. She *should have* anyway. But Piper did know, or at least she suspected, that they weren't close.

He didn't go home for holidays. If he called home, it was from his apartment or hotel room late at night, because she'd *never* heard him on the phone with a family member. She never put calls through from his mother, like she did from Maggie for Cam and Aiden, or Grant's mom, or Dax's mom. She'd arranged for Dax's mom to join him at a convention in Chicago two years ago. She was a Master Warrior Enchantress in *Warriors of Easton*. She'd met Grant's mother a few times in their offices since she lived in Chicago, and she'd stopped by to go to lunch with her son. She'd met Grant's sister as well. All of the other men had relationships with their families, at least on some level, that were involved enough so eventually their executive assistant had at least spoken to them.

She'd never met or spoken to or even sent a gift to Oliver's mother.

“How is she now?” Piper asked.

He shrugged. “The same. Dad said she did get better when I moved out.”

Piper swallowed the little growl that threatened to crawl up the back of her throat.

“Do you not go visit?”

Ollie was from Chicago. When their offices had been there, she'd assumed he'd gone home to see his parents from time to time.

“As little as possible.”

“Why?”

“It's easier on her.”

“Even for short visits?”

He sighed. “We will occasionally get together for dinner. Out. At a restaurant. But I often show up late. And once I missed the meal altogether.”

“They should know to tell you to be there an hour before you should actually be there,” she said.

He nodded. “Like you do.”

“Yeah, like I do.” How would *parents* not learn how, and try to, compensate with their child?

“That bugs my mom. She’s very... exact. If we say dinner at eight, then we should all be there at eight.”

“Then your *dad* should tell *you* seven and her eight,” Piper said, her exasperation clear in her tone.

He gave her half smile. “Well, we both drove my dad nuts.”

Piper shook her head. It really wasn’t *that* hard to make adjustments. “Look, Ollie, the thing is, kids aren’t supposed to make adjustments and make things easier on their parents. It’s supposed to be the other way around.”

He just shrugged. “It wasn’t at my house.”

She didn’t like Oliver’s mother. That might be a problem at their wedding, but Piper would deal with that then. She was *not* going to get over disliking the woman who’d made Ollie feel like there was something wrong and, worse, unlovable, about him.

“How did you know I have ADHD?” he asked.

“I read about it,” she said.

“But why did you think to read about it?”

“I was just observing some of your... behaviors. Initially, I thought you were just kind of a spoiled prince who liked having someone do everything for him.” She nudged him with her shoulder. “Which you are and do.”

“It’s pretty awesome.”

She smiled. “But over time I started realizing there were times that you did things on purpose and there were things you didn’t. I don’t know, I guess I just started noticing that you honestly seemed completely incapable of remembering meetings. There were some that I knew you really did want to attend. But you even forgot about those.”

He nodded.

“So I started reading. I thought maybe you’d had a concussion, or you had some neurological disease. I came to ADHD, and other symptoms fit. I started observing you with that in mind and it completely fit.” She lifted a shoulder. “It also helped me with ideas for how to help you.”

“Like what?”

“Giving you one thing to do at a time. Prioritizing what I needed from you. Cutting down on the distractions. Keeping your office clean and organized.”

“I thought that was because *you* are a neat freak.”

“I do like things neat, but I read that it would help you to keep things decluttered. It would help you focus and not feel overwhelmed.”

“I do like when you clean my desk.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I know.” She paused. “I also really tried to just be honest with you. About when you were pushing my buttons. When you were pushing other people’s buttons. When you were being impulsive. When you let something go or missed something.”

“I like that too.” He ran his thumb up and down her index finger.

Piper was certain he had no idea that the simple touch caused a riot of hot butterflies to swoop through her belly. She didn’t mind it. But she was amazed by the strength of the sensation.

“But I wasn’t honest about knowing about the ADHD,” she said. “I guess I didn’t know who knew, if you were open to

talking about it, if that was something I should mention to my boss.”

He looked over.

They were sitting shoulder to shoulder, holding hands. But she felt as if they were now leaning in closer.

“I was your boss, kind of, in the beginning. But it’s been a long time.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re friends, Piper. Don’t you think?”

She smiled softly at that. “Yes. But you’ve kept the boss thing pretty firmly in the way of getting too close. I mean, we spend time together and I know you very well. But you don’t know me. We’ve never held hands before.” She squeezed his hand.

“Because I didn’t want to lose you.”

Her heart tripped. “You thought you’d lose me?”

He gave a short laugh. “I *have* lost you. Exactly the way I was afraid I would.” He looked at her. “You quit.”

She had. She wet her lips and nodded.

“At least it took five years. I honestly figured you’d be out way before this.”

“But you don’t have to lose me,” she said. “I just want *more*.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t sound thrilled, that was for sure.

“Now that you know that I know about the ADHD, that doesn’t make you feel better? That doesn’t give you more confidence that I could really stick around and not get scared off?”

He shrugged. “I realized, quickly, that I needed you. The guys did too. You really do make everything better. Organizing me, for sure, but the business had grown out of our control by the time Grant hired you. You came in and made everything better immediately. Again, getting paid to put up with all my

crap was really different than dealing with it personally. I didn't want to get too close because I didn't want to mess up the work relationship and I—" He dragged in a long breath. "I didn't want to have my heart broken."

"You thought I would break your heart?"

"It would definitely hurt to get close to someone and have them decide you're too much work."

She frowned. She needed to reassure him that wasn't going to happen with her, but she had to dig a little here first. "Is that how you think your mom feels about you?" That was an appalling thought.

"She's happier and healthier when I'm not around," he said.

Oh yeah, she hated his mom. A lot.

"Ollie."

He didn't look at her.

Piper sighed. "Oliver."

He sighed too. And still didn't look at her.

She wasn't going to argue with him about how his mom felt or treated him or what she said. Piper didn't know. Maybe his mom was misunderstood. Maybe she was awful. Likely she was somewhere in between all of that.

But Piper could absolutely argue with him about how *she* felt.

Piper rose and moved to stand in front of him, their hands still clasped. "Oliver."

He looked up reluctantly.

"I'm very sorry that you feel that your mom is better off without you. But I can *promise* you that I am not. And will not be. I want you. I know that I'm going to have to help you keep things decluttered. I know that I'm going to tell you to meet me an hour before I want you somewhere. I know that my life will be ruled by sticky notes and alarms and that if I want

flowers, I'll have to send them to myself. But I *know* that. I'm going in eyes wide open."

His fingers tightened around hers, and she wondered if he was even aware of it.

"In spite of the fact that you thought we should have alpacas at a baking competition and that you thought you should name a soda Unicorn Snot, I still want to cover you in melted chocolate and marshmallows."

Even in the dim light, she could see his eyes flicker with emotion at that. She knew some of it was desire. But she also suspected at least some of it was affection. Knowing that she liked him in spite of his quirks, mattered. That mattered to most people. Being loved in spite of the things that people most disliked about themselves meant a lot.

It was important that she really knew all of his quirks.

"*You* were the one that arranged for the alpacas at the baking contest."

"Only after you said no because they were Drew's, and he was flirting with me that day."

"You're wearing me down," he finally said.

"Thank God."

"In less than twenty-four hours."

"I'm very good."

"Do you see why I've been afraid of you?"

She laughed. "You haven't been afraid of me."

"Oh, yes, I have." But he tugged her forward.

She went. Very willingly. She stepped forward. Then with another tug and his other big hand on her hip, she slid into his lap, straddling him.

Her breath caught in her throat. "You have nothing to be afraid of, Ollie. I'll take very good care of you."

He gave her a crooked grin at that. "You're good at *everything* you do, Piper. I have no doubt that I'm in very

good hands.”

She definitely wanted him in her hands.

She took his face between her palms and leaned in. “You okay so far?” she asked with her lips just above his.

His hands went to her ass and brought her up against him more fully.

He was hard.

She was surprised. And very pleased. And immediately turned on.

“I’m okay,” he told her.

“Then here I come.”

She pressed her lips to his.

His fingers curled into her ass, and he gave a little groan as she licked her tongue along his bottom lip. He opened under her kiss and their lips melded fully. He met her strokes with his own.

Her body melted into his. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing close, her breasts against his chest, his body heat warming her. His hands ran from her butt up her back, bringing her against him even more firmly as they tasted each other. She ran her hands into his hair. He stroked up and down her spine.

When his hands dropped to her butt again, he dragged his palms down the outsides of her thighs. His hands on her bare skin sent hot prickles of sensation down her legs to her toes.

She ran her hands down his sides to the bottom of his shirt and then under the edge and onto the bare skin just above his waistband.

He groaned, and she wiggled in his lap in response.

She pulled back to look down at him. They were both breathing hard. He was watching her, his gaze intense, his full focus on her. She shivered. His full focus was heady. In part because it was unusual. She could get used to getting it this way, that was for certain.

He wet his lips. “I’m never going to be the one that stops this,” he told her, his voice gruff.

“Good.”

“I thought you didn’t want this.”

“I most definitely want this.” She certainly hoped they were talking about sex.

“Your hotel room—”

“That was when sex was all you were offering.”

He swallowed. “You think I’m offering more now?”

He was here. She’d realized this was out of his comfort zone, that this was different. But before he’d told her the full story about how he avoided spending a lot of time with his mom so he didn’t bug her, and before he’d admitted that he’d kept from getting closer to *her* so that he wouldn’t make her “deal” with him when she wasn’t being paid to do so, she hadn’t realized how big this really was.

Yeah, he was offering more.

“Ollie,” she said, looking right into his eyes. “I want it all. Can you give me that? For two weeks?”

He didn’t answer immediately. But finally he said, “I’m not sure I can help it.”

And she fell just a little more in love with him.

“But—” he added.

And she almost groaned.

“You’ve agreed to keep me around for the full two weeks.”

Dammit, she wanted to hug him so tightly. And cover him in gooey, warm chocolate and lick it all off. Slowly. And thoroughly.

Yeah, naked hugging. With chocolate. That’s what they needed to do.

“Promise,” she said, never meaning anything more.

“So are you going to toast the marshmallows, or am I?” He ran his hand up and down her thigh.

She was feeling pretty soft and melty herself at the moment. “I’d really like for you to keep your hands where they are, doing what they’re doing,” she said, shifting on his lap to reach for the stick he’d been using.

He groaned as the shifting brought her against the hard ridge behind his fly and she gave a little lusty sigh.

“I was thinking about doing more with my hands,” he said. He slipped one under the bottom edge of her shorts, the pads of his fingers skimming the band of her panties where they crossed her hip.

“I’m all for that,” she told him. *Yes, please.* She’d been thinking about Ollie’s hands on her for so long, this felt surreal. *Really,* really good. But surreal.

She tossed the marshmallows he’d toasted previously into the fire and grabbed two new ones. She stuck them onto the stick as he slid his palm up her, under her shorts and panties, to cup her bare butt.

Somehow she managed to get the marshmallows into the edge of the fire while his fingers stroked back and forth over her skin.

“Now you have to *focus*,” he told her huskily. “Don’t want those to burn.”

“I’m *really* good at concentrating.” Her voice was a little breathless.

“Yeah, yeah. But you’re cocky about it.” He ran the pads of his fingers back and forth over the curve where her butt met her thigh. “And I’m feeling kind of cocky about the idea of making you lose your train of thought.”

“Hmmm,” she said, letting her eyes slide shut, soaking in the feel of his touch. “You can try.”

Screw burned marshmallows. She didn’t care about the marshmallows. But if he wanted to play, she’d play.

“I want those marshmallows gooey enough to cling to your nipples.”

Her eyes flew open. He was watching her with a hot gaze and her nipples *loved* the idea.

She did care about the marshmallows after all. Very, very much.

She glanced over her shoulder and rotated the stick.

He chuckled.

God, she really did love teasing with him like this. She had never experienced a naughty Ollie. Not sexy naughty anyway. He'd been *naughty* a few times. Like ending up in jail in Rome. And Vegas. But Grant had mostly dealt with those.

Impulsiveness was part of the ADHD. She hadn't known that initially, of course. She'd thought Ollie truly was a spoiled, rich guy who thought he could get away with anything. But it had all fallen into place when she'd realized that his brain processed things differently. Like the inability to think through to consequences.

Of course it didn't help that he had a best friend who always said, “Hell yes!” to Ollie's impulsive ideas. Like jumping on a plane to Madrid because he wanted to see how much of his high school Spanish he'd retained.

“They look good.”

She looked at him. “What?”

He arched a brow. “The marshmallows, Piper. They look good.”

She jumped and pulled the stick from the fire.

He chuckled. “I don't know why you get so exasperated with my trouble concentrating. It's pretty cute when you do it.”

“Because your trouble concentrating isn't because you're thinking of me sucking on your nipples.”

His smile died, his expression growing intense. And hot. He squeezed her butt. “If I *was* distracted because of that, it

would have been okay?”

She gave him a little smile. “It would have been better.” It had never been not okay. Not entirely. She’d understood. Did she sigh when she’d reminded him of a conference call, and then he still dialed in late? Yes. Did she roll her eyes when he asked her where his character biography folder was on his computer for the third time? Yes.

But she was never so frustrated that she’d thought about quitting.

Falling in love with him had been the cause of that.

And now she was starting to think that she might need to go back to work.

Would someone else take care of him as well as she did? No way.

But she wanted more from him than their work relationship. Could they have more? Could they be involved personally *and* work together?

“The marshmallows are going to get too cold,” he said, lifting one hand and plucking one melty white mass from the end of the stick.

He lifted it to her mouth. She parted her lips, but he simply rubbed it over her bottom lip. Then brought her down for a kiss, running his tongue over her lip to lick the marshmallow off.

They kissed deep for several long moments. In one part of her mind it seemed dreamlike to be kissing Ollie and to have him kissing her with such hunger. But in another it felt so right and so natural, and so *good*, that it seemed as if they’d done it before. Maybe in another lifetime.

“Lift your shirt,” he said against her mouth.

Yeah, she could definitely think about work and where they went next *after* this.

“The marshmallow will be too cool now,” she said, dragging her mouth from his far enough to speak.

“Not this one.”

He pulled his arm back to reveal a toasted marshmallow on the end of a stick.

Her mouth dropped open, and she looked from the stick to the fire to him.

“You *toasted a marshmallow while we were kissing?*”

He gave her a cocky smirk. “Guess I *can* multitask if the tasks are both really fun.”

Chapter Twelve



Piper narrowed her eyes even as she smiled. She shrugged out of her flannel and stripped her tank top over her head. She was wearing a bra so she wasn't entirely naked, but the way his eyes heated and his smug grin dropped away, she felt as if she was.

“Let's see that multitasking,” she told him.

“Take it off.” His gaze was on her bra. He took the marshmallow from the stick and bit into the very end to reveal the melty inside.

She shivered with desire and anticipation. She'd imagined kissing Ollie. She'd imagined him naked—yes, she'd ogled him in the office and no, she wasn't apologetic about it. But she had never, not once, imagined them making out with marshmallows.

She liked it.

A lot.

Piper reached behind her for the hooks on her bra. She let the plain white garment fall down her arms, then tossed it on the grass beside them.

She had big breasts. It was a fact. They made for amazing cleavage in her dresses. They gave her great curves. They didn't, however, give her tiny scraps of lace and silk for bras and lingerie.

She didn't care.

Oliver didn't care either, it seemed.

He lifted a hand, almost reverently, to cup one.

She let out a long sigh as he palmed it. He had big hands, so he was definitely able to “handle” her. And he did. So well. He kneaded, running his thumb over her nipple. Piper let her head fall back, arching closer.

“Yes, Ollie.”

“You’re so beautiful, Piper.” He said it softly, huskily, almost as if he was awed.

She wondered if he was feeling the same combination of this-is-so-surreal and this-is-so-so-good.

“Thank—” She felt the warmth on her nipple, and her head came up.

Ollie was rubbing the melty marshmallow over the hard tip of her right breast. He spread the sticky white sugar in bigger and bigger circles, watching as if he were painting a masterpiece.

Then he lifted his eyes to hers as he popped the marshmallow into his mouth. He gave her a sexy half smile before lowering his head and licking her nipple.

She gasped as heat flooded through her, turning her insides to a melty marshmallow consistency. Her hand went to the back of his head as he licked and sucked. She loved having her nipples played with and appreciated a lot of pressure.

“Harder, Ollie.”

He didn’t ask questions. He sucked hard, sending an arrow of lust straight to her clit. “Yes.”

She wiggled in his lap, pressing closer to his cock. He seemed to like that idea because he shifted on the bench, pressing up against her as well.

She wanted more of that.

Reaching between them she ran her hand down the length behind the denim fly.

He hissed out a breath against her breast.

Yeah, she liked affecting him. She also *really* liked touching his cock. The guy was big all over. She'd known he would be. Proportionately it just made sense. He was tall and had big hands and feet. But she was happy to know she'd been right and *very* happy to be proving it by touch.

Sight was next. And some more feeling. With other parts of her body.

She ran her hand up and down, pressing and squeezing.

But it seemed that Ollie's multitasking had gotten disrupted because he was resting his forehead against her chest, breathing on her breast, but the licking and sucking had stopped.

"Ollie?"

"Yeah?" His voice was tight.

She grinned. "You okay?"

"Never been better."

Well, that was very nice.

"I was a little better when your mouth was busier," she teased.

She felt him smile against her chest.

"I got distracted."

She rubbed him. "Let's practice the multitasking."

He gave a little groan. "Maybe it would be easier to focus if we talk through it."

"You can't suck and talk," she pointed out, squeezing him.

His voice was thick when he said, "I can stroke though."

Stroking nipples was okay too, she supposed. "If you also pinch and squeeze—"

But she was the only one who got completely distracted when he ran his big hand down underneath her butt and then forward to cup her through her shorts.

"Ohhh," she said on a long exhale. "Got you."

He grinned up at her. “Yeah.”

She squeezed him. “Yeah.”

His eyes narrowed, and he shifted her on his lap, moving his hand so his fingers could slip under the loose edge of her shorts. His fingers stroked over the hot silk of her panties between her legs, and her eyes nearly crossed.

She squirmed, wanting to press closer to his fingers but not able to get a lot of leverage perched on his lap the way she was.

“I need to move.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I need to...” She frowned. “Get closer. Get naked.”

“Be in charge?” He lifted a brow.

She bit her bottom lip. Then nodded.

He gave her a slow smile and stroked his fingers over her again. “I don’t think so.”

“But—”

He pressed against her clit and she sucked in a quick breath.

“While I agree that most things go better when you’re in charge...” He slipped his finger under the elastic edge of her panties suddenly bringing the knuckle of his middle finger against her clit and rubbing gently.

Piper gasped, and she completely forgot about anything but that part of his body and that part of her body being against each other.

He nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got *this*.”

“You’re pretty cocky,” she said. But the breathlessness took any sass right out of her tone.

He rubbed again. “Yeah. I am.”

He should be. He’d found her clit, through clothing, no less, without an ounce of coaching. Now he was applying the

perfect amount of friction and pressure to have her hovering on the edge of orgasm already.

She did *not* want to know how he was this good with clits.

“The idea of making you come apart, of making your in-control, in-charge attitude shatter, is the most addictive fucking thing I’ve thought about in a very long time,” he told her gruffly.

That sounded so damned good. “I’m in.”

She wasn’t the type of woman who needed control *all* of the time. She was type A, for sure. She knew what she was good at. She prided herself on being organized and getting shit done. But she was fine with other people doing their things too. If someone else could do something better than she could, she was happy to let them. Hell, she’d *recruit* them for the task.

It was *very* possible that Ollie would be better at giving her orgasms than she was. And she was *super* okay with that. That couldn’t be said for every guy she’d been with.

Ollie’s hand went to the back of her head, bringing her down for a deep kiss as he turned his other hand so that he could slide a thick finger into her.

“Oh, *damn*,” she said against his mouth.

“You’re tight,” he said gruffly.

She nodded. “Been a while.”

He slid that finger out and back in, deep. “How long?”

She couldn’t have lied even if she’d wanted to. Her brain was all about *this* moment. What was going on here with this man. Screw multitasking. “Two years.”

He paused. Yeah, she’d figured that’d get his attention.

“Two years?” he repeated.

She kissed him, running her hand over his face, loving the feel of the scruffiness of the start of his beard against her palm. “Two years,” she confirmed.

“Because of me?”

She was so glad he'd put that together. He was starting to believe it. Or at least understand that she believed it.

“Yeah.”

He started to pull back to look at her, but she clasped him closer. “Keep going,” she said softly. “Please, Ollie.”

He gave a groan. Of surrender. And moved his finger. In and out, slow and deep at first, but as she moaned and gasped and pressed closer, he picked up the pace. He also kept up the magical friction against her clit with the pad of his thumb.

It had been a *long* time. At least a long time since someone besides her had done this. And this was *Oliver*. The one man she wanted doing this to her.

It didn't take long for her to start climbing toward that delicious orgasm crest.

Then he returned his mouth to her nipple. Maybe because she'd taken her hand from his cock, or maybe because he just knew she needed that too, or maybe because *he* couldn't help it. He sucked hard.

And she went over the moon.

She came hard, gasping his name.

He brought her head down again, kissing her as the pleasure coursed through her. He kept holding her and kissing her as the waves became ripples and then quieted entirely.

He withdrew his hand from her shorts and wrapped his arms around her.

Piper buried her face in his neck, hugging him close.

“I really like s'mores,” he said.

She giggled into his neck. She loved this part of his body. His skin was hot, and he smelled so good. He was solid and strong, and she could feel the rumble of his voice as she heard it.

“We only got to one third of the s'mores so far,” she said.

“Still, best campfire I’ve ever been to.”

She lifted her head to look down at him. “How many campfires have you been to?”

“This is my first,” he admitted.

“They don’t all go this way.”

He chuckled. “Maybe a good thing at a kids’ camp.”

She grinned at him. “I like having this camp to ourselves.”

“So far anyway.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Assume I’m going to end up *not* liking it.”

He was quiet for a moment, but he did smile. “Orgasms have to help increase your tolerance level for crazy.”

She leaned in and kissed him. “For sure,” she said when she lifted her head.

“And I was thinking,” he said, his hands going to her hips and bringing her against his cock again. “Maybe I should get as far ahead as I can before I do anything annoying.”

“Hmm.” She wiggled happily against him. “Not a bad idea.”

“How do you feel about campfire s’mores sex?”

“Never had it, but it sounds like something right up my alley. How about you?”

“You know I’m the adventurous type.”

Adventurous. Sure, they could call his impulsiveness and inability to think through to major consequences “adventurous.”

“Okay, then.” She reached for his shirt and started unbuttoning.

He shrugged out of it as soon as the last button let go.

Oh, she'd been waiting for this. She kind of regretted that they were in the dimming light now that she had Ollie's chest and abs on display now, but what she couldn't take in with her eyes, she could certainly work on memorizing with her hands.

She ran her palms from his neck down his shoulders to his chest, then down either side of his abdomen, to the waistband of his pants. "These have to go too."

"I'm not going to get mosquito bites in bad places, am I?" But he was already nudging her back so he could stand.

She got to her feet, eager to watch him strip. "Too early for mosquitos." That was very fortunate. "At most, you might get a little chilly." It was still March after all. Typically, she needed a jacket or a blanket over her lap if she sat on her balcony after sunset.

"Don't think that's gonna be a problem," he told her as he bent to untie his shoes and toed them off, kicking them to the side and then tossing his socks in the same general direction.

Tonight, she'd brought a blanket out but hadn't even thought of using it. The fire, combined with Ollie's body heat and the way he jacked hers up, had been more than enough. Now, though, as his hands went to the button and zipper of his jeans, she reached to spread the blanket out where he'd be sitting again. The bench had been sanded and finished, but she didn't want to risk any splinters in sensitive areas either.

She quickly straightened, though, not wanting to miss a moment of him getting naked.

He watched her watching him as he pushed his jeans over his hips. He shoved them to his ankles and kicked them to the side. Then his thumbs went to the waistband of his boxers.

"Let me," she said, stepping forward.

"You've got some to get rid of yourself," he said, looking at her shorts.

She stripped the shorts and her panties down, stepping out of them.

Ollie froze, staring at her.

She propped a hand on her hip, letting him look. She was curvy, but she'd never been worried about her body, even with sex. The men she was with were into curves and having places to put their hands and plenty of surface area to kiss and suck and lick and stroke. Guys who weren't simply weren't her type.

Ollie seemed to snap out of his stupor a moment later. He dropped his boxers and sat back on the bench. "Come here."

She couldn't though. She was busy staring herself.

Yep, big. She'd been right.

And gorgeous.

Her whole body responded to just the sight of him. She knew, and agreed, that women weren't typically turned on by sight as much as they were by thoughts and ideas and words. But, damn, the sight of Oliver Caprinelli sitting in front of her, totally naked, by a campfire, wanting her... she was one big toasted marshmallow.

"Piper." His tone was low and firm.

She swallowed. He didn't use that tone with her much. But he had a few times. Usually when he was out of patience with her nagging him about something. Or when she was going on about something that he'd long ago lost interest in.

Now it seemed he was out of patience. But this was definitely not a frustrated "Piper". His voice was husky and needy.

"Come here," he repeated.

She took a step forward, but she swiped a piece of chocolate before coming to stand between his knees. She put it to her lips, licking the end and then sucking it into her mouth, letting it melt on her tongue.

"You sure you want to do this like this? Out here? Sitting by a fire?"

"I've imagined it sitting up," she said, sliding into his lap. "Straddling you."

He was clearly surprised. “Yeah?”

“I’ll admit it was in your office chair in my daydreams though.”

She leaned in and kissed him, tangling her tongue with his, letting him taste the chocolate. His tongue stroked hers, his hands squeezing her hips. Her breasts pressed into his chest, her nipples beading at the contact.

“Just daydreams?” he rasped against her lips, running his hand over the curve of her butt and between her legs where she was still hot and wet from before.

She moved against his hand, wanting his fingers deep again.

“Oh, the night dreams were either me spread out on your desk, bent over your desk, or straddling you in the bean bag you sit on in Dax’s office,” she told him.

He gave a mixed groan-laugh as he stroked over her clit and then dipped a finger into her pussy. “Damn, I want to do all of that.”

“Good. But I’m really loving the campfire thing,” she said.

“Yeah?” His finger pressed deeper.

She nodded even as sparks of pleasure danced along her nerves. “I’ll admit I’m not very spontaneous. Office sex seems very in my wheelhouse, you know? Bean bag chairs notwithstanding.”

He added a second finger, stroking her a little faster. She reached between them again, now circling his bare cock with her hand.

Again his breath hissed out and a “holy fuck” rumbled up from his chest as she stroked up and down his length. He was hot and hard, and just touching him like this made her ache deep inside in a spot she wasn’t sure she’d ever been touched.

“Office sex does seem like you. In your office dresses. With the heels still on. Skirt hiked up.”

She nodded. “Even though a lot of those skirts wouldn’t go very high.”

“But I like you being spontaneous.” He pressed his fingers deep and circled her clit with his thumb.

Her inner muscles contracted around his fingers. “Oh God, me too.”

He gave a dark chuckle and lowered his mouth to her nipple. His mouth sucking on her while stroking her while she had his cock in her hand was enough to start her climbing again. But this time she wanted it all.

“Condom?” she asked.

He froze.

She sighed.

Dammit.

Why would Ollie think of a condom? Coming out to a campfire? He hadn’t known what to expect out here. *She* hadn’t known what to expect. She’d hoped they’d kiss. She had *not* expected to need a condom.

But if she was going to date this man, she was probably going to have to be in charge of condoms. He wasn’t the plan-ahead guy.

Which made her pull back to look at him. “Oh my God, you use condoms with the women you hookup with at cons, right? Please tell me you do.”

He frowned. “Of course.”

She lifted both brows. “Of course? Oliver, I love you, but you are not the most prepared person I know.”

He sighed. “Are we really going to talk about other women right now?”

“I think now is a really good time for this, yes. Actually, we might be a few moves past when we should have done that.” She even took her hand off of his cock. The cock that may or may not have been covered in condoms with all the

fairies and princesses who had wanted to get up close with his magical staff.

He also withdrew his hand. Which was probably good. Probably. It was hard to feel that way about it, honestly.

“When I... meet women at cons,” he said. “Which,” he added, “is not as often as you apparently think it is.”

She rolled her eyes at his choice of the word “meet” and decided not to press on the issue of how often “not as often” was.

“I always take them back to my room,” Ollie said. “Then I don’t have to worry about not having what I need.”

She felt her mouth drop open. “You take them back to your room? Oliver!”

“What?”

“These are total strangers! It’s bad enough you’re hooking up without knowing them at all, but you’re letting them know where you’re sleeping? What if they’re crazy stalkers?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Well...”

She pushed back and got to her feet, grabbing her flannel and pulling it on. “Well, what?” she asked, planting her hands on her hips.

“Grant gets us private security when we go to cons. So if anything gets weird, the security guys take care of it.”

Piper pictured big, muscled guys positioned on either side of Oliver’s hotel room door, in dark suits with earpieces in, standing guard while he had his latest “meeting” with a magical elf from *Warriors of Easton*.

She stared at him. “You make it sound as if that’s happened.”

“Only once.”

She tipped her head.

“Okay, twice. Unless you count the twice with Dax. Then it’s four times. But only twice to me.”

She knew what she was getting into, she reminded herself. Mostly anyway. She'd known about the other women. In theory. She'd *chosen* not to find out details. So she couldn't really be shocked. Or angry, of course.

She and Ollie hadn't been dating. He was a grown man—regardless of how he acted sometimes. He got to choose when and how often he had sex and who he had it with. It wasn't as if he'd been cheating on her. And she didn't *actually* know how many convention hookups he'd had. He and Dax were both big talkers. All the guys were. They loved to give each other shit and joke and tease. For all she knew, the stories she'd overheard about princesses and magical staffs had all actually been *one* princess and one weekend.

So she was going to let all of that go. She'd dated other men. Some of them very temporarily and superficially. In other words, she'd had a couple of hookups herself.

That was all in the past.

“Do you have condoms in the cabin?” he asked.

She blinked at him. “No.”

Why would she have condoms in the cabin?

“Are you on the pill or anything?”

“No.” She hadn't been involved with anyone in two years. If she had been, she would have started the shots again that she'd used before. And she would have been using condoms. But why would she be buying and packing condoms now? “And,” she said, as she really thought about his question, “I wouldn't be having sex with you without a condom even if I was. You've been having sex with strangers at Comic Con!”

“People at Comic Con don't automatically have STDs, Piper,” he said, reaching for his boxers and pulling them on.

“Of course not,” she conceded. “But—”

“And I *always* use a condom.”

She swallowed. Okay. Good to know. “But with me you wouldn't? If I was on the pill or something?”

“Of course. If you said it was okay.”

“Ollie?”

He looked up from pulling his jeans on.

“What are you talking about?”

“I completely trust you,” he said. “There’s no way you would do anything that wasn’t safe for both of us.”

That was nice. And annoying. “Well, that’s true,” she said. “But it would be nice if we could say the same about *you*.”

He frowned. “I would never hurt you. On purpose.”

“I know. But—” She sighed. “You need to think about the fact that you’ve probably had more partners than I have, and you’ve probably known them less well than I’ve known mine, and you and I have never had this conversation before, so it’s appropriate that I be wondering about how you’ve handled things with the other women you’ve been with. Especially when I’ve just found out that you’ve brought them back to your hotel room without thinking about how unsafe it might be for them to know where you’re staying.”

“I was totally safe,” he said, clearly irked. “I had security. And condoms.” He yanked his shirt over his head.

“Okay.” She believed him. “Well, we don’t have condoms now, so I guess... we can’t do anything more right now.”

He just stared at her.

“What?”

“You’re serious?”

“Well... yes.”

“So now what?” He seemed confused.

“Bedtime.”

“I don’t have a bed.”

“You’ll have to sleep in mine.”

“With you?”

“I’m not sleeping on the floor or the couch, and you’re too big for the couch,” she told him.

“But no sex.”

“No. Sex,” she said firmly. Good Lord.

“I’ve never slept with a woman I haven’t had sex with.”

“You *sleep* with these total strangers you take up to the hotel? You actually fall asleep? You’re actually *unconscious* with them in your room?” She shook her head and started for the cabin. “For God’s sake, Oliver. They could rob you. Kill you. Take a million naked pictures of you and post them all over the internet.” She swung back. “Have you checked for naked photos of yourself on the internet?”

But her gaze darted past him to the firepit behind him.

That was still on fire.

She’d left the fire burning.

And her clothes over there. And food, which could attract animals.

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. He’d completely distracted her.

Dammit.

They couldn’t *both* be distracted and letting things go.

“I. Had. Security,” Ollie said as she sighed and started for the firepit.

“Did they keep the women’s phones when they went into your room?” She doused the flames.

“Well...”

“Exactly.” She gathered the s’mores supplies and her clothes. “You or Dax need to scan the web for naked photos, Oliver.”

“Fine. You’re probably right.”

She went back into the cabin. He was right behind her.

“In my defense, it’s kind of gentlemanly that I didn’t just assume we’d need condoms tonight,” he said. “Right?”

Piper snorted. If she wasn’t concerned about him being naked on the internet where all of those *Warriors* hussies could ogle him and drool over him, and she wasn’t completely feeling hussy-ish herself, she might find that gentlemanly.

“You were in Dubuque tonight,” she pointed out. “*In* your hotel room. You could have easily grabbed condoms when you were grabbing your toothbrush.”

“Are you under the impression that I have condoms in my hotel room?”

She set the s’mores ingredients on the counter and turned to face him, holding her clothes in front of her. “Yes.”

“Why would I have condoms in my hotel room in Dubuque?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you *not* using condoms in Dubuque? Oliver, I swear to God—”

“I haven’t had sex since we got to Iowa!”

She stopped and stared at him. She shook her head. “*What?*”

“I haven’t needed a condom since we got to Iowa,” he said. He shoved a hand through his hair. “I don’t have condoms in my hotel room, Piper.”

Okay, he still could have stopped and gotten some at about a hundred stores between there and here, but that was not the point right now. It wasn’t at all what she wanted to focus on. “You...”

“I haven’t been fucking other women just down the hall from you,” he said, meeting her eyes. “Jesus, Piper.”

“Because there aren’t any gaming cons in Dubuque?” she asked.

“Because you were just down the hall,” he said.

“Why does that matter?” Her heart was in her throat now. She wasn’t sure why she *needed* the answer to that question so

badly. She did not think it was because Ollie had been harboring secret feelings for her all this time. She knew that wasn't what he was going to say. But she still wanted to hear his answer. So much.

He didn't want to answer. It was clear on his face. He swallowed hard.

"Oliver? Why does it matter that I would have been just down the hall?"

"Because you might have run into them when we came back to the room or the next morning."

That would have killed her. But he hadn't known that. "So?" she prompted.

He tucked his hands into his back pockets and tipped his head to look up at the ceiling.

"Ollie?"

"Because you might not have liked them." He looked at her again. "And you wouldn't have liked that I didn't remember their names, or that I wasn't on my way out to breakfast with them."

"I would have known all of that from running into them in the hallway?" she asked, bemused.

"Well, after you ran into them and invited them into *your* apartment for coffee, probably with *my* caramel creamer, you would have known more about them than I did. Then at work later that day, you would have asked me about them, and I wouldn't have known anything, and you would have been disappointed in me. Or if you didn't see me right away and didn't realize all of that, you would have sent them flowers from me and screwed the whole one-night stand up for me." He lifted a shoulder. "So I didn't want to take them back to the hotel."

Piper felt her heart pounding. Not in a good way. "You could have gone back to their places."

"This from the woman who is appalled that I took strangers up to my room at conventions?" he asked. "Going

back to their places would have been even stupider. They could have a whole backyard full of dead bodies.”

She almost said *what about another hotel?* but stopped herself just in time. She was thrilled he hadn't been with any other women in a long time. Why was she suggesting ways he could have been banging the women of Dubuque, Iowa?

She wet her lips and asked the question she didn't want the answer to.

“You haven't brought any women back to the hotel in Dubuque because I'm hypercritical, and you didn't want me to judge your dates?”

He frowned. “No. I didn't want you to judge *me*.”

“You?” she asked.

“The fact that I wouldn't know her name or where she worked or”—he blew out a breath—“how many brothers she had.”

Piper's heart squeezed. “I'm not upset that you didn't know that about me, Ollie.”

“I am.” He shrugged. “I told you, I don't attach. It's on purpose. I don't like disappointing people. I wouldn't have *wanted* to know how many brothers any of the women I've slept with had. I honestly didn't really care where they worked.” He gave a little wince. “I probably should have known all of their names. But,” he went on, “with you it feels really weird that I didn't know that very important big fact about your life.”

She had to admit there was something nice about him wanting to know more about her than he did about all of the other women.

“I'm sorry I've given you the impression that you disappoint me sometimes,” she said. “That's not...” But she didn't finish the thought.

She supposed she did sometimes get disappointed. And that was completely *her* fault, not his. He'd never made promises to her. He'd never tried to be anything other than

who he was. He'd never confessed about his ADHD before, but he'd acknowledged his weaknesses and accepted her help for them. He'd never promised to try to fix them. He'd paid her to put up with his "quirks" and had been less than enthusiastic about the idea of her taking them on without that incentive.

"That's not how a friend should make another friend feel," she finally filled in. "I really am sorry."

"But you totally would have given a woman coffee if you found her by our elevator some morning," he said, the corner of his mouth tilting.

"I would have," she agreed. "Walk of shame solidarity."

"You've done a walk of shame?" He looked very interested in that.

"Maybe once. Or three times," she said.

"Did the assholes give you coffee?" he asked, clearly amused.

"Nope."

"Fuckers."

"Right?"

They were both smiling now.

She moved to stand right in front of him. "You've never made a promise to me that you haven't kept," she said.

He lifted a hand, brushing her hair back over her shoulder. "I've been late to more meetings this year than some people will be in their entire careers."

"But you never promise to be on time."

He nodded. "I know myself."

"And you never promised those women breakfast the next morning. Or even coffee. You can't feel bad about that. And I can't judge it."

He studied her eyes. Finally, he said, "Okay."

"Okay."

Then she took his hand and led him toward the bed.

“This is going to be very hard,” he said, watching as she shrugged out of the flannel and pulled her shorts and tank on, without a bra or panties.

Yeah, hard, she thought as he stripped out of his t-shirt and jeans. Hard abs, shoulders, chest, back... cock. He was definitely still hard there as well. Definitely. Obviously. He slipped under the covers with her in only his boxers.

She turned on her side, switched off the bedside lamp, then snuggled her ass right into his groin—his *hard* groin—and pulled his arm over her.

“Well, maybe next time you won’t forget the condoms,” she finally said.

He nuzzled her neck and took a deep breath.

“I promi—”

“Nope,” she said loudly and firmly over him. “Don’t you dare use the P word in regard to condoms, Ollie. That’s serious. You *can* disappoint me by forgetting the condoms after you promised not to.”

She felt him smile against her hair. “Fair enough.”

Chapter Thirteen



Ollie took a deep breath. Then another.

Slowly he opened his eyes.

Was this heaven?

The air was cool and smelled like bacon. And pancakes. He was lying on something soft. He could even hear the sizzle of the bacon.

It had to be heaven.

He had never woken up like this before. And he wanted to. Forever. Even if it meant he was dead.

But then he heard a soft, “Dammit, son of a bitch.”

And he smiled.

He was somewhere possibly even better than heaven.

He was in Piper’s bed.

And she was in the kitchen making breakfast.

The only way that could be better would be if she were still in bed.

And they had condoms.

As he stretched and turned toward the sounds and then opened his eyes, he decided that there was one more good thing about this cabin—it wasn’t very big. She was about thirty feet away, cooking, in only a pair of panties and another fitted tank top with spaghetti straps.

He grinned.

This was real life. But this *had* to be what heaven would be like too.

He watched her as she cooked, feeling his whole body stirring.

But not just his cock. His freaking chest felt tighter and warmer too.

His attraction to her had surprised him in the beginning. Not because he didn't think she was gorgeous and funny and brilliant. But because he'd, apparently, locked any thoughts of a relationship or even sex down tight.

But once she'd been in his lap and he'd touched, tasted, seen, and heard her, he'd been addicted.

He could really be screwed here.

But as she turned, saw he was awake, and gave him a huge, bright smile, he decided that he didn't care.

This wouldn't be the first time a big idea had occurred to him and he'd just rolled with it, consequences be damned. And Piper was one of the people who helped him with those consequences when things went sideways. If she was right here beside him, then everything would be fine.

"Morning," she said as she approached the bed.

Fuck yes. Breakfast in bed. With Piper. How could this be a bad idea?

"Morning."

"Morn—"

There was a knock on the door.

Piper sighed.

"Who is that?"

"Probably Drew."

Of course it was.

She handed him his plate and then started for the door.

"Piper."

She glanced back. “Yeah.”

“Get dressed first.”

She glanced down. “Oh. Pants. Right.”

Did he hate the idea that she might have just gone to the door like that if she’d been here alone? Yes, he definitely did.

She pulled on yoga pants that were draped over the arm of a chair and started for the door again.

Ollie sighed. “Piper.”

“What?”

“Get. Dressed.”

Her breasts looked amazing in that tank top. Without a bra. And there was no fucking way he was going to let Drew see that.

She rolled her eyes and reached for the flannel shirt she’d been wearing last night. On second thought...

Ollie set the pancakes and bacon to the side—with a definite twinge of regret and a longing look—and flipped the covers back. He got out of bed and headed for the door.

“You’re not going to get dressed?” Piper asked.

He looked over at her and her expression that was half amused and half I-want-to-see-how-this-goes.

“If Drew wants to get a good look at *this*,” he said, waving a hand down his body. “He’s free to gawk all he wants. But *that*”—he pointed at her—“is mine.”

Her eyebrows shot up even as he felt a flip in his own gut. What? That was *his*? That was pretty damned possessive for a guy who didn’t want attachments or anyone having expectations of him being able to meet any kind of decent-partner standard.

But she didn’t comment on it.

Neither did he. Because he had no idea what to say.

He was not sharing her with Drew Fucking Ryan. That was really all he knew.

He pulled the door open. “What the hell do you want?” he asked.

Drew did, in fact, take in the sight of Ollie in his boxers only. From head to toe.

“My eyes are up here, Ryan,” Ollie told him.

He met Ollie’s gaze. “Good morning.”

Damn, the guy’s grin was annoying. “Was about to be. Then you showed up.” Drew didn’t know that all Ollie had been on the verge of getting in bed was bacon and pancakes. Because he didn’t have any condoms.

But it wasn’t as if he couldn’t have had some fun with Piper and the maple syrup without the condoms...

“Well, we can come back later,” Drew said. He leaned to the side so Ollie could look past him.

Matt and seven other teenagers, five boys and two girls—including Jane Kemper’s little sister Kelsey—were standing out by two trucks and a car.

“There’s more of them today,” Ollie said unnecessarily.

“Word about the *Warriors* being written out here—and something about a kick-ass obstacle course—spread,” Drew told him.

“You think the obstacle course is kick ass?” Ollie asked.

“I’m just repeating what I’ve been told.” But Drew was grinning.

“Hi, guys!” Piper ducked under the arm Ollie had braced on the doorframe. “Hey, Kelsey!”

She’d gotten dressed. At least she’d put on a bra. And blue jeans.

Ollie sighed even as his body decided she looked just as hot in those as she had in just her tank top and panties. He shifted, so he was standing behind her and his sudden hard-on was hidden from their audience.

Of course, that put her front and center. Her smile was big and genuine, and Ollie had to admit he'd been *really* good at compartmentalizing Piper into the *assistant-only-don't-fuck-this-up* box in his head. Because that smile? That made him want to press her up against the side of the cabin and kiss the hell out of her.

"Hi, Piper. Matt said you all needed some extra help out here," Kelsey said with a grin.

Piper laughed. "Did he say that, or did he say there was a kick-ass obstacle course and free food?"

Kelsey nodded. "He mentioned both of those things too."

"Where do you want them?" Drew asked Piper.

Ollie gave in to the stupid urge to put his hand on her shoulder as the other man talked to her. Obviously, he'd spent the night with her. Did he really have to stake his claim? It seemed that she'd shared with Drew how she felt about Ollie when she'd turned Drew down for the date he'd asked her on.

After he'd kissed her.

Out here at this campground.

Ollie moved his hand to cup the back of her neck. Yeah, he needed to stake his claim.

He couldn't see Piper's expression, but he saw Drew's. The other man definitely got the message. Though he didn't look upset so much as he looked entertained.

"You guys can finish up cabin four," Piper said to Matt. "And another group can start on cabin six." She looked at Drew. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm going to start on the interior of cabin two, but can't stay long. Justin's gonna come out later and finish up."

Piper nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

"You've got it. See ya later." Drew gave her a wink.

Ollie knew that was for *his* benefit, but he still frowned at the other man.

Drew headed for his truck with a chuckle.

Fucking guy.

“They’re going to be here all day?” Ollie asked as he watched the kids getting supplies out of the truck bed and start for the cabins.

“Guess so.”

“Do they come every Saturday?”

She looked up at him. “It’s not Saturday. They’re on spring break, remember?”

Ollie sighed. Right. It just seemed like Saturday. Or something. Honestly, it didn’t much matter to him what day it was. He worked every day. And his friends worked every day. And his editor worked whenever Ollie sent him stuff. So his schedule wasn’t really dictated by the day of the week. But he was aware that one of his issues with doing things on time and the way other people wanted him to do things was that very inattention to details like what day it was.

“Is it still March?” he asked dryly.

She nodded with a grin. “Yep. Got it in one try.” She looked over to where the boys were spreading drop cloths over the ground beside the cabins. “Thanks for motivating them to get out here early and to bring friends.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t.”

“I think you did. They weren’t all here before yesterday.”

Huh. “I didn’t really do anything.”

“You focused them on the work but made it fun,” she said. She turned slightly so she was facing him more fully. “And I’ll bet they’re hoping for some insider info about *Warriors*.”

He glanced at the kids. Based on what they’d gotten done yesterday, with the extra hands and hours, they could get a lot done today.

With more people, they could add on to the obstacle course. They could do it in teams. Maybe every time they completed a side of a cabin, he could tell them something

about the new adventure he was writing. Maybe they could even help him past the part he was stuck on. Normally, he batted ideas around with Dax. Aiden if he was really stuck or Dax wasn't around. But these kids played the game. At least Matt and Tanner and Landon did. He'd bet they could brainstorm the shit out of a new adventure.

He felt his heart kick. New people involved could mean some fresh ideas. This could be great.

Piper laughed, and he looked down at her.

"I lost you there for a second, didn't I?" she asked.

"No, I was just thinking about..." He sighed. "I was thinking about asking them for some brainstorming help."

She looked surprised but nodded. "That could be great. Are you stuck?"

He'd been stuck for months. "A little."

"Dax hasn't helped?"

"Dax has been really busy."

Something flickered in her eyes. "Aiden? Cam? Grant?"

"Busy, busy, and busy," he told her. But he smiled. "And Cam and Grant kind of suck at the mystical, fantasy stuff."

She smiled too. "I can see that."

"It'll be okay."

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, clearly thinking.

"What?" he asked after a second.

"I was going to offer to help, but I'm not good at that stuff either."

He frowned. "You are. You're incredibly creative." He wondered why he'd never asked her to brainstorm *Warriors* before.

She shook her head with a laugh. "I'm not. I can tell when an idea is good or bad. I can tell when something in a plotline makes sense or where you need to make some magical spell or

exception to gravity or something, but I couldn't come up with the stuff in the first place.”

Now that she mentioned it, Ollie realized that she'd always been very quiet during group brainstorming sessions. Piper being quiet was unusual. Those didn't happen all that often, of course. Usually only at the beginning of a new adventure script because everyone liked to have an idea where *Warriors*, as a world and product, was headed next.

For Dax, it helped him start planning graphics. For Aiden, it helped when he'd talk to their marketing team and contacts. He'd know just enough to get them all excited about what was coming. He and Grant could also get started on possible additions to their line of merch, and Cam could get ready for any new trademarks they might need.

Of course, none of them did any of that work anymore, so Ollie had been on his own with a lot of it. Well, he'd been teamed up with the people in those positions for Plus Gaming. But it hadn't been the same. At all.

Their knowledge of the game was limited, and their passion for it was driven by the bottom line rather than a true love for the world they'd created.

“I'd love to talk to you about it,” he said. If they were doing this dating, share-everything thing, maybe that was something they could do. He'd love to have someone to bounce ideas off of.

“I...” She was biting her bottom lip again.

Ollie lifted a hand to her face and freed her lip with the pad of his thumb. He stroked back and forth across it. “You what?” he asked.

She winced and looked at his left earlobe instead of into his eyes. “I probably wouldn't be much help. I don't play *Warriors*.”

He looked at her, dropping his hand. He was a little surprised, he wouldn't deny. It wasn't as if being a gamer was at all required in her job description. Her job had a lot do with the game in a general sense. She kept them all going so that

they could keep *Warriors* going. But she didn't contribute directly to the game.

"You don't play regularly? You're not really into it? Or you've never played?"

She winced again. "I've never played."

"Really?" He couldn't decide if he was just surprised or if he was a little hurt or if it didn't really matter at all.

"Really." She finally met his eyes. "Do you hate me?"

"No." Of course he didn't hate her. "I'm surprised though."

"Because I'm in love with you and am thrilled that you're taking an interest in the camp and getting involved but find out that I'm not similarly interested or involved in your big professional passion?"

He thought about all of that. "Yeah." That pretty much summed it up. "I mean, I guess, working with us all this time and everything, I guess I would have thought you'd be at least curious."

She nodded. "That makes sense. But"—she blew out a breath—"I've been horribly jealous of that game."

"What?"

"When I first came to Fluke, I was a little curious, so I read about it, but gaming isn't really my thing, so I just never tried it. Then after my crush on you started, I hated how hard it was to get your attention when you were caught up in the game and... the women." She sighed. "I hated the women that got your attention because they were into the game, and so I just got stubborn and decided I was going to get your attention anyway." She gave him a little grin. "That turned out to be a lot harder than I'd expected."

His chest tightened at that. He lifted a hand and brushed her hair back. "I'm a dumbass."

She nodded. "Sometimes."

He gave her a little grin. “Why do I love that you can tell me that without hesitation?”

“I don’t know. You’re a little weird.”

But she said it with such affection in her expression that Ollie felt warmth spread through his chest, and he bent to kiss her. It was a soft kiss, nothing like the heated kisses from last night, but it twisted his gut and heart up just like those had. Maybe more.

He lifted his head. “How do you feel about maple syrup being poured all over your body?”

Her eyes widened. “I feel like I would be *very* disappointed about the no-condom thing we have going on.”

Right, no condoms. “I could make you *very* happy in spite of that.”

“You have maple syrup experience?”

“I don’t. But this is something I feel very good about ad-libbing.”

She grinned but shook her head. “I believe you about making me happy, but we’ve got nine people milling about this campground now, and I get loud.”

He didn’t know why that surprised him. Actually, it didn’t. Piper was loud in bed? That not only fit but totally fired his blood. It also didn’t surprise him that she told him that so easily.

“Noted,” he said, his voice gruff. “And I can’t wait.”

She gave him a sexy smile. “You go write and entertain the boys and brainstorm and all of that, and I’ll paint and plant some bushes, and we’ll have s’mores later.”

That sounded absolutely perfect.

He thought about that as he dressed and settled in at the table in the kitchen area, coffee in hand, the smell of bacon still lingering in the air. Who would have thought his perfect day would include the woods behind Drew Fucking Ryan’s house and eight teenagers who wanted to climb trees and army

crawl through the dirt and leaves and... okay, the obstacle course made sense. And was cool. But the cabin in the woods where he'd slept with, but not *slept with*, his assistant was weird.

Good thing he was very good at weird.

* * *

The day had been amazing.

He'd finished not just the scene that had been bugging him for almost three weeks, but he'd gotten through most of the next one.

Brainstorming with Matt, Tanner, and Landon had been awesome.

The obstacle course with two teams of four to do relays had been awesome.

The amount of work they'd gotten done on the cabins had been awesome.

And being able to walk up behind Piper, turn her, put his hands on her ass, and back her up against the side of the cabin before kissing the hell out of her was awesome.

When he let her go after long, delicious seconds, she grinned up at him. "What was that for?"

"Because I can. Because Drew Ryan might be watching. And because of how you look in those jeans."

She laughed. "Drew headed out for alpaca duty a few hours ago."

"The kids are gone too," he told her, bending to place kisses along her neck.

She tipped her head so he could get to more skin. "I have a little more work to do, but I'm almost done."

"Great, I'll help."

He was in a fantastic mood.

She simply bent over and grabbed a brush. She handed it over. “Great.”

She was about two-thirds done with this side of the cabin. He let her take the ladder—he liked the view a lot—and he started work on the lower slats.

“So tell me about your brothers.”

Her paintbrush paused.

Yeah, he was surprised too.

“It’s really bugging you that you didn’t know about them, isn’t it?” she asked.

It really was. “Yep.”

“Why is that, do you suppose?” she asked, resuming the back and forth strokes with her brush.

“Because I’m interested in you,” he said.

Her brush paused again.

He rolled his eyes. “That shocks you?”

“It surprises me that you realize that’s why you want to know more about me.”

“You think I’m an idiot?” he asked.

She looked down at him. “Definitely not.”

“Then why wouldn’t I realize that I like you and am interested in you and that would make me want to know more about you?”

“I guess I expected you to ignore that and not admit it.”

“Why would you expect that?”

“Because I think you’ve been doing that for at least a year. Definitely since we all moved to Appleby.”

He shifted to face her more fully and propped an elbow on the rung beside her knee. “You think I’ve been interested in you for a year?”

She nodded.

“And that I’ve been fighting it?”

“Yes. But not consciously,” she said. She seemed thoughtful. “Now that you’ve told me about your mom and how you’ve seen me as so organized and put together and you thought your ADHD would bug me, I think that you just put me in this space in your head that said, *don’t get close*. I don’t think you really let yourself think about *wanting* to get close.”

He couldn’t help the small grin that stretched his lips. She was confident, he’d give her that. “What makes you think my interest shifted a year ago?”

“It might have been longer ago than that.”

His smile grew. “What makes you think it was ever more than just ‘Hey, she’s a great assistant’?”

“You came to Appleby for about two weeks before I did.”

“Yeah.”

“And you called me three times a day and texted at least twice during those two weeks.”

“Well, I probably needed stuff.” He hadn’t. Not really. Well, not more than a couple of times.

“Yes. Apparently you needed to tell me about how your office smells like cake. And how they think it’s weird here that a man would get a pedicure. And that actually the whole side of town where the factory is smells like cake—a separate phone call from the first one about your office. And to let me know that you had decided that you *do* like pineapple on your pizza.”

“Granny Smith’s has great pizza.”

“You’ve always liked pineapple on your pizza, Ollie.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is.”

“No. I thought pineapple on pizza was *fine*. But I wouldn’t say I *liked it*. Until I had it at Granny Smith’s on the Hawaiian Delight.”

He watched her roll her eyes and grinned. All of that was true, of course. But going from fine to liking pineapple on pizza was not truly of phone-call-in-the-middle-of-a-workday importance. Which he'd known at the time. But, yes, he'd missed her.

"You missed me," she said.

"I did."

"And not just for assistant stuff."

"Yes."

"Even though you probably weren't admitting that to yourself."

"Right."

"But now you *definitely* like me," she said, giving him a smug look. "For more than assistant stuff."

"After the things you let me do to you last night, I think it's safe to say you're one of my very favorite people in the world," he said sincerely. He definitely wanted to see her react to the reminder of last night.

In true Piper fashion, she didn't blush or avert her eyes. She lifted an eyebrow, gave him a cocky smile, and said, "I would certainly hope so."

He really wanted to kiss her. He loved her confidence. He loved just how *capable* she was. She could do anything, he swore. She had this caring, nurturing side that was edged with I'm-doing-this-for-you-but-I-know-you-know-you're-better-than-this.

This was definitely one way she was different from his mother. Vivian Caprinelli had never been all that *capable*. She'd been, well, frail frankly. So many things bothered her and made her anxious. Not the least of which had been her only child. But she'd always needed Oliver's father there to reassure her and help her and support her. Which was nice, on one hand. Marco had always been there for her. He'd been her rock.

When Marco was around, Ollie had always felt better. Marco would deal with Vivian. Ollie didn't have to. He didn't have to worry about bothering her because Marco would run interference.

Maybe that was why Ollie was so drawn to Piper. She was definitely a rock. She was steady, dependable. Told you exactly what she thought. He knew where he stood with her. He didn't have to walk on eggshells around her. He could be himself because she could handle it. She could handle *him*.

"I think I should warn you," Piper said. "If you get to know me better, you're going to definitely like me more and be even *more* interested."

See? She was handling him. Not dancing around any issues. Not letting him think this was anything other than what it was... her wanting him and pursuing him and drawing him in.

And knowing that she was going to get him.

Chapter Fourteen



He took a moment, then nodded. “So... your brothers,” he said. He knew it was an admission of everything she’d just said.

“Really?”

“Yep.”

The only people he knew well enough to know about their siblings were the guys. And Whitney, though that was partly because her oldest brother had been a big part of Hot Cakes when the guys were buying the company, and Ollie had met the man once. He hadn’t liked Wes Lancaster much.

But he wanted to know about Piper’s family the way he did Cam’s and Grant’s and Dax’s and Aiden’s.

“Okay.” She went back to her painting, but she had a soft smile on her lips. “The twins are Nathan and Lucas. They’re eleven. Nathan is the sweetest kid. All into firemen. Lucas is really quiet and shy. Loves books. And they both love video games.” She slid Ollie a glance.

“That’s totally my fault?”

“It really is.”

“And yours. You’re the one that introduced them.”

She nodded and sighed. “Yeah.”

“Jacob is sixteen,” she went on. “He’s a pretty typical teenager in a lot of ways. He plays basketball and is way more into girls than into studying.”

“Understandable.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, you two need to not spend a lot of time alone together.”

Ollie grinned, but he liked the idea of meeting her family. Which he knew was a sign he was getting attached. And he probably should *not* do that. If nothing else because if Piper was like her mom or dad at all, then that would be two more people for Ollie to drive nuts.

Still, he couldn't help but think that he'd love to see Piper with her brothers. It had to be a lot like watching her interacting with, and taking care of, Dax, Aiden, Grant, and Cam over the years. She did it without any of them even truly realizing how much she did for them. He knew she'd probably say it was because it had been her job, but he knew it was more than that.

He swiped paint onto the side of the building as he thought about Piper interacting with the four men he loved like brothers.

She loved those guys too. Regardless of how she felt about *Warriors of Easton* specifically, she'd been a huge part of their success in the years she'd been a part of the company. The guys couldn't have done all the things they'd done without her help. She did more than organize meetings and make reservations. When they checked into hotel rooms, there were always things there to make them more comfortable. And they were specific to each man.

She made sure Aiden had feather pillows. She made sure Grant had smoked almonds. She made sure Dax had gummy bears. She made sure Cam had his favorite brand of highlighters.

As he thought about all of that, Ollie realized she could have just reminded the guys to each bring those things themselves. Or she could have packed them into their carry-ons. Well, except for the pillows.

But she didn't. She'd make sure the hotel staff could provide the items and that they were waiting in their rooms.

He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd shipped everything ahead to the front desk to be sure it was all exactly right.

And those were just a few examples.

She did that stuff all the time.

For Ollie there was always a pack of his favorite iced tea, along with multivitamins and a pad of sticky notes.

He realized now that he'd always felt very cared for when he saw those things sitting on the top of the dresser even in a strange hotel room.

She was so good at making them all feel loved even while she wasn't afraid to roll her eyes and tell them that an idea was stupid. Of course, she was always happy to offer suggestions for making the idea *not* stupid.

Even though she didn't love *Warriors*, it had been important to the guys, and they were important to her, so she'd done her part to make *Warriors* successful.

He really appreciated that now that he thought about it.

Piper was a lot like Grant in his life. She was a rock. Someone who kept him steady. He was able to be a dreamer because she kept his feet on the ground. He didn't have to worry about "floating away" or getting lost, because Piper was there for him.

Just like Grant was.

But she smelled a lot better. And he did *not* want to see Grant naked.

"Do you send care packages to your brothers?" he asked. He knew the answer was yes.

"I do. Why do you ask?"

"It's what you do for the people you care about. It's how you show your love," he said. "You do it with all of us. Your kind-of brothers. I figured you for sure do it for your real brothers."

"You've noticed."

“I have. I hadn’t really thought about it because it’s just what you’ve always done. Full water bottles just appear on our desks. The mayo is always on the side of Aiden’s burgers. You make sure there are always replacement Ping-Pong balls for Dax. You make sure the antacid and ibuprofen bottles in Grant’s desk drawer are full.” He grinned at that. Grant wrote DAX on the side of the antacids and OLLIE on the side of the painkillers.

He glanced up to find her looking at him with a strange expression.

“What?” he asked.

“I guess...” She shook her head. “I guess I do do those things.”

He chuckled. “You don’t do them on purpose?”

“Well, I mean, I don’t *accidentally* buy Grant antacids, but I never thought of that as a way of showing love.”

“I don’t think most professional assistants specifically buy cola-flavored Chapstick for their bosses.” It was Aiden’s favorite.

“I’m sure they do.”

“Not without being asked to,” he said. He paused, watching her think that over. “Has Aiden ever specifically asked you to get cola-flavored?”

She shook her head. Then said, “I don’t think he’s ever specifically asked me to buy Chapstick at all.”

“So why did you?” He knew why, but he wanted her to realize why.

“I noticed he was almost out one day and it seemed like something I could help him with.”

Ollie nodded. “Exactly. You do it without us asking but even without *thinking* about it. You do things like spraying Cam’s office with that citrus room spray his mom makes. You had her send it to you, didn’t you?”

She nodded, her bottom lip between her teeth.

“And you dust Grant’s office every morning before he gets in.”

Not because Grant was a neat freak, though he was a little, but because he was allergic to dust.

“Not *every* morning,” she said weakly.

Ollie grinned. “Liar.”

“I don’t go in on the weekends to do it.” She paused. “But if I’m in on the weekend anyway, I do.”

“I know.”

She gave him a smile. “And you noticed all of this?”

“I guess so.” He shrugged. “I’ll be honest. I didn’t give it a ton of thought until now. But it definitely makes us all feel cared for and makes us happier. And healthier. Which makes the business do better and... just all of us do better.”

That made Piper do something he’d never seen her do before. She ducked her head with a little smile that almost made her look... shy.

He reached out and tipped her chin up, looking into her eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate all of that more before now.”

“But see,” she said. “I don’t mind that you didn’t notice. If I made your lives a little easier, then I was happy.”

She was so sweet. And out of all the adjectives that he would have applied to Piper before now, that was probably not one of them. She was sassy and confident and capable and sharp and bold. But not sweet. She told them all when they were being idiots. She told them when their ideas were terrible. She told them when they pissed her off.

But that made the way she loved them and took care of them even better.

The realization hit him right in the heart.

She could have walked out and landed another job somewhere else easily. Hell, the guys would have given her a glowing recommendation even as they begged her to stay.

She could have just done the basics and still made a great paycheck. She could have kept herself from getting involved and saved herself a lot of headaches, 3:00 a.m. phone calls, and having to dust Grant's shelves.

But she didn't. She told them the truth and kept them in line even while making sure Cam had pineapple juice instead of orange juice at any breakfast, formal or informal, and any number of other little details that really did make their lives better. They seemed like small things, but they all added up. They were all better for the little Piper touches.

He wanted to kiss her but was a little glad she was too far up the ladder to be able to reach her lips. If he started now, he wasn't sure he'd stop, and there were more things to talk about.

"You make our lives so much better, Piper. And it's not just the things you do. It's how you do them. It's that it's so natural to you. You're a caregiver through and through. Even when you're telling us we're wrong, it's because you care."

She nodded.

"You even care about *Warriors*," he teased.

"Well..." She gave him a little smile. "I care because you all care. But I'm not upset that everyone has other stuff now." She frowned. "I'm sorry. I know it means more to you than the others."

"It's just... the thing that brought us all together. That's mostly it," he said. "I love it, but I love what it does for people." He looked at her as his heart kicked. "Kind of like what you do."

She lifted a brow. "*Warriors* is like what I do? What do you mean?"

"You take care of people. Little subtle things that blend into this bigger picture of them being happy and more successful."

"And *Warriors* does the same?"

“It does.” He laughed at her look of skepticism. “The game teaches things like teamwork and self-sacrifice and the importance of loyalty over riches. Things like that. But it’s subtle. It’s built into the stories and the things players encounter as they go through the stories. The choices they have to make, the way they have to work together, the obstacles they have to confront.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t sound convinced. But she didn’t argue. She might have looked a tiny bit interested, in fact.

“So what about your oldest brother?” he asked. He still wanted to know everything about her, and they’d only gotten through three-fourths of the other guys she took care of.

Of course, that wasn’t true either. He’d watched her today with the kids and Drew. She was constantly making sure everyone had everything they needed and that they were all happy. She’d praised them all for their work, thanked them for doing such a great job, made sure they had plenty of sandwiches and water. She’d even come down to the obstacle course during one of their breaks to check it out—and insisted that Matt pound some nails into the one end of the wooden plank they’d added between two trees to secure it. But she never told them to be more careful or questioned if they should be doing things like putting monkey bars between two trees twenty feet off the ground.

“My oldest brother is Ethan,” she said, her voice softening with affection. “He just turned twenty. I’m hoping that he’ll come and help run the camp once it’s up and going.”

“Really? He’d want to come to Appleby?”

She nodded. “I think so. He tried college but it wasn’t really for him. So he’s been working and living with my parents instead. I think he’d like to get away from home and be on his own a little. Plus, Appleby is really different from Chicago. I think a new place and lifestyle could be good. Teach him a few things.”

“Definitely different,” Ollie agreed. “Lots of cute girls here though. At least according to my *four* best friends. You know, if he’s into that kind of thing.”

Piper laughed. “Oh, he is.” Then after a moment said, “Ethan is the one who loves *Warriors* the most.”

“Yeah?”

“They all do,” she said. “Too much,” she added quickly.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“But Ethan was the one who really got into it first. He broke his leg badly about six years ago. It required two surgeries and a lot of pins and stuff, so he couldn’t play any sports and got around at school in a wheelchair for a while. He’d always liked video games but got into it more then. And *Warriors* was his thing. Said it made him a lot less depressed because he could find people to ‘hang out with’ any time while his friends from school were out being active and he was stuck at home.”

Okay, that was awesome. That gave Ollie a definite sense of pride.

“He still has some limitations from that injury,” she went on. “Nothing super serious, but he can’t run like he used to and jumping and pivoting for competitive basketball was out even after he’d healed and done rehab. He became a lot less active.” She was still painting, watching her brush go back and forth, but she seemed lost in thought. “He’d wanted to try to play basketball in college, and I’ve wondered if that wasn’t why college didn’t really work out. Because he’d always envisioned himself as an athlete but hadn’t really thought about what *else* he wanted to do. When that dream ended, he had a hard time finding a new one.”

“You think coming to Appleby can help him figure out his dream?” Ollie asked.

She looked down at him. “I don’t know. But I know that when everything you thought you knew ends, and you have to figure out a new plan, you realize the things that you want to hang on to and the things you’re willing to let go of.”

He stared at her. He felt like she’d just punched him in the chest. It was hard to take a deep breath for a second.

“Is that how you feel about Appleby?” he asked, his voice a little rough.

She nodded. “Yeah. Everything about the company and business and the interactions with you guys changed when Hot Cakes came into our lives and we all moved here. But from that I realized the things that are unchanging. Your friendships and how I feel about all of you and what I’m good at. And that I want to keep doing the things I’m good at. Organizing and planning and pulling big things off and taking care of people.”

He swallowed with some difficulty. “You think that’s happened to the rest of us?”

“For sure,” she said without hesitation. “The guys have all realized that they were ready to bring other people into their lives and add love in. They were ready to look at new endeavors. They were ready to just look at life differently. And that they all had new directions to go in, but that they wanted to stay together, seeing each other, involved in each other’s lives.”

“I didn’t want things to change,” Ollie said.

“I know.”

“So that makes me, what? Less enlightened than the other guys?”

She smiled. “It just means that you need more stability.”

“Like being with a woman I know really well.”

She nodded. “And who knows you really well.”

He couldn’t help his smile. He wondered if Piper had ever doubted that she’d get him wrapped around her little finger. It didn’t seem so.

“Well, writing in the woods is new.”

“And building obstacle courses for teenagers is new.”

“And painting cabins is new.”

“And being friends with Drew Ryan is new.”

“I’m not going to be friends with Drew Ryan,” he said firmly.

She laughed. “Okay. Well the rest of it is good.”

He studied her. Her face, her voice, her scent, her laugh... it was all so familiar and comforting, and maybe he hadn’t let himself think of her as someone he wanted to fuck against the wall, and on the table, and bent over a sofa, and by a campfire—okay, he definitely hadn’t thought about fucking her by a campfire—but in less than forty-eight hours he was already realizing that it was ridiculous that he *hadn’t* thought about that every day for the past five years.

“I really have been a dumbass,” he told her.

She nodded. “I know. But you’re cute, and you’re here now, so I forgive you.”

He felt that warm-in-his-chest feeling again. “I think I should be the activities director here at the camp.”

She shifted gears with him without even blinking. “Um, no.”

“Come on.” He grinned at her. “You know that one recommendation to help with ADHD is physical activity and having lots of different things to focus on rather than having to attend to one thing for long periods. In fact, sitting still and staring at a computer screen or a blank piece of paper for long periods is hell. It’s been really working for me, and for the kids. So let me do some camp stuff with you. Besides painting.”

“No.”

“You said yourself that you’re not good at the creative, making-things-up stuff. I’m *awesome* at it. Then you can help me mold it into things that are workable.”

She didn’t say no as quickly this time.

So he kept going. One thing he’d learned from Dax Marshall was *always* push your advantage. “I’ve gotten a ton done out here.” That would make her happy. “And I think it’s because during my breaks I had the obstacle course and the

kids to focus on. As much as I like the writing and creating, the parts of my day that I like most are the ones that involve other people.”

Piper snorted. “No kidding.”

He grinned. He loved the morning meetings with the guys. He loved when Piper was in his office. He even liked the editing process. He liked talking about the stories and plots and characters.

The stuff he did alone was the hardest for him.

“I’m a creator but I’m a teamwork guy. When I put pen to paper, it’s a long time until I see the final product. The graphics Dax did always brought it to life for me, and he’d let me see early sketches and stuff as we went along. I loved that stage of the process. But now Dax is doing less of the graphics and design work.” Dax was more of a consultant to the other designers now. “The guys with Plus Gaming never show me stuff until it’s done.”

Piper was listening, her attention fully on him now.

“This is different,” he went on. “I can see the paint going onto the sides of the buildings. I see something new for the obstacle course in my head, and then we make it and start using it right away.” He could already mentally picture all of the things he wanted to add to the campground. “I’m having fun. And I want to keep doing this. I feel like I’ve been able to focus and accomplish something here in a way I haven’t in a long time.”

He could tell that made her soften toward the idea.

Piper really did want what was best for him and wanted him to be happy.

How had he resisted her this long?

“I just worry that you might... go overboard,” she said.

They both knew that he *would* go overboard. That was part of the fun.

“I’m so good at going overboard,” he said. “I didn’t know what to expect being out here, but this is fun. I like that we’re

doing this together. And I think it's going to be good for me to have something new to do. Like the other guys have."

She narrowed her eyes. "I said that first," she reminded him. "I *know* you need something else."

"Then we're on the same page." He grinned. "And I'll pay for everything."

That definitely gave her pause. Yeah, being a millionaire had its perks.

"I'll pay for all materials and labor costs *and* you don't have to pay me. And I promise it will be kick ass."

She sighed.

"Plus—" He reached up and curled a finger through one of her belt loops and tugged.

She came down the ladder, and he leaned in, bracing his hands on the siderails. "If I go too overboard or screw things up, you can make me make it up to you however you want." He felt her lean closer and he smiled.

"*However* I want?" she asked.

He ran a hand up her back and into her hair. "*However* you want." He kissed his way down her neck, along her collarbone and up to her jaw.

"You know exactly how to get to me, Mr. Caprinelli," she said, her voice a little breathless.

He definitely did. And while he knew she loved the kissing and the promise of being able to get whatever she wanted in the bedroom—which of course she could have without anything more than a simple request—he realized she really mostly loved the idea of him getting involved in the camp and doing something *he* would love.

That was a humbling thought. Even as it made him want her with an intensity that was actually shocking.

"So," he said against her mouth, "can I be the activities director? And can you get your brothers here in a few days?"

"The younger ones are in school," she said.

“Can they miss a couple of days? They could get here Thursday and stay until Sunday.”

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. “Next Thursday?”

“Yeah.”

“You really have plans to get things together that fast?”

“Of course. Why wait?”

“I...” She shook her head.

It was so unusual for Piper Barry to be at a loss for words that Ollie actually felt kind of proud of himself.

Then she surprised him even further by saying, “Yes, they could miss a couple of days.”

“Really?” Piper did not strike him as the type to condone skipping school.

“Sure. They could get their work done ahead of time. And this could be important for Ethan. If you’re here and he could meet you, it would make him even more enthusiastic about coming.”

“I would have gladly met him any time.”

“I know. But having you involved with the camp I want him involved with...”

She trailed off with a little frown.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I just...” She swallowed. “You’ve made this even more important. I didn’t expect that. I thought I was into this and was hoping that once you were here you’d help out, but now you’re taking this to a new level. You’ve been awesome with the guys working here, and now you want my brothers here too, and you’re just being you, but you’ve made this into something even bigger.”

She gave him a wobbly smile so full of affection that he felt a strange tightness in his chest.

He knew what it was.

Expectation.

Someone was expecting something from him. And now he had to deliver.

Dammit.

People expecting things always made him nervous. Delivering on expectations was not a strong suit of his.

But... this was Piper.

He knew that thought kept going through his mind, but it was so damned comforting. This was Piper. He wanted to deliver on expectations for her more than he'd ever wanted to for anyone else. At the same time, he didn't feel as nervous as usual thinking about that. Because she was patient and forgiving and loving and would understand that him even trying mattered.

"I'm just talking about some camp games and activities," he said.

"But you're excited about this?"

He nodded. "I am."

"That's so great." Her voice softened. "Thank you."

Ollie felt a weird squeeze in his heart at that. She was thanking him for caring about this? But he realized almost instantly that it made sense. He hadn't done that a lot. Or at all. The other guys hadn't really either.

Piper hadn't had stuff that she'd shared with them or needed them to care about.

Except Drew. She and Drew had worked together on some of the farm programming for Dax and the nursing home. Because Drew had alpacas, and Piper had a natural ability to organize absolutely anything and make it work perfectly.

And now this camp.

Drew had been a friend to her that the guys—that *he*—hadn't been.

And rather than jealous, that made him feel a surge of *no more*. Not because he wanted to keep Drew away from her, but because *he* wanted to be someone that helped her get what she needed and wanted.

Everything Piper did was with a pureness of heart that he had to admit was pretty damned sexy.

She dusted shelves and replaced Ping-Pong balls and bought Chapstick. She kept them on their toes and made them laugh but also took care of them and was incredibly loyal, and she cared about things just because they did.

Hell, *he* still cared about *Warriors* in part because of her. He maybe would have quit once Dax and Cam and Aiden and Grant were done. But Piper was still there.

He'd kept doing his *Warriors* work, in part, because he didn't know what else he'd do. But Piper had still been there, making it okay. Yes, she literally *made* him do it some days, but it was also what kept her there.

If he hadn't been writing *Warriors*, he wouldn't have been having conference calls about *Warriors*. So he wouldn't have needed someone to keep track of his conference calls about it.

He'd initially kept writing *Warriors* because of the guys. It had been fun to write stuff for Dax to play with. That Aiden had been able to sell it had just been a perk. He could now live off the royalties and what Plus Games paid to use his name, for years.

But *Warriors* kept Piper in his life.

Until a week ago.

And for a week he hadn't been able to write a word. Until he came here. To her. Was she his muse? Maybe. Or maybe she was just his *reason*.

Now he wanted to be part of the reason she was excited about this camp and what it could do. He wanted to be here with her when she needed help and when she had successes, the way she'd been there for him.

"I'm in because of you."

She watched him for a few seconds after he spoke. Then she asked, “Are you falling for me?”

To the point, no bullshit. That was Piper.

He took a breath. “No.”

“Oh.”

“I think I’ve already fallen.”

Her eyes widened at that. And a smile slowly tipped her mouth. “Yeah?”

“I mean, I’m probably not going to be *good* at being in love,” he said. “So I wouldn’t get your hopes too high. But yeah. You’re completely amazing, and I want to be here every day with you, building this thing. I want to meet your family. I want to be friends with your friends. I want to make this even bigger and better than what you have planned. And I want to amaze you even half as much as you amaze me.”

Now she really did look dumbstruck and that was absolutely a first. Ollie grinned. He wished he had a photo of that expression right now.

“Oliver.” That was all she said. But she looked like she might cry.

And *that* was definitely new and weird.

“Are you feeling totally swoony and lovestruck?” he asked.

“Did you just use the word swoony?”

“I did.”

“How do you know that word?”

“I go to conventions that are attended by women of all ages and where actors, who play superheroes, show up,” he told her. He gave her an eye roll. “I’ve heard the word.”

She laughed, the threat of tears seeming to vanish. “Well, yes, I am feeling swoony,” she said with a nod.

“Then I think you need to come here, and show me some of those mushy feelings.”

She leaned forward, running her hands up his chest and linking her hands behind his neck. “Like this?”

His hands dropped to her ass and he squeezed. “Yep.”

“Okay, I will,” she said. “But... we don’t have any condoms. And we’re going to need them.”

Chapter Fifteen



There was a long pause.

Then Ollie pulled away. “I’ve got this.” He started toward the truck.

“What are you doing?”

He jerked the truck door open and looked back at her. “Going to get condoms.”

“Now? Just like that?”

He gave a short laugh. “Yeah, just like that, Piper. This is the best sex I’ve ever had, and we haven’t even had it yet.”

Then he got in the truck, slammed the door, and started the engine.

Piper watched him pull away from the cabin and go rumbling down the dirt path.

This is the best sex I’ve ever had, and we haven’t even had it yet.

She couldn’t stop repeating that line over and over in her mind.

And grinning.

She did wonder, of course, how long it would take him to realize that he didn’t have his wallet so he’d be unable to buy any condoms anywhere in Appleby. Maybe he was thinking he was going to go all the way to Dubuque to his hotel room. Without his keycard, of course. The front desk staff would let him into his room without his key or ID. He’d been a

permanent guest for the past nine months. In the penthouse suite. They knew who he was.

But surely he'd realize it was ridiculous to drive all the way to Dubuque for condoms.

Right?

He'd turn around and come back for his wallet.

Wouldn't he?

Well, if he didn't, then he'd come back eventually and get his wallet, and then she'd tell him he could get condoms in Appleby. Or maybe she wouldn't.

Ollie was taking this into his own hands. He was solving the problem. He might not do it in the most efficient manner, but he was doing it. That was really, really good.

He just needed the right motivation it seemed.

She couldn't help but feel damned satisfied as she turned and started for the cabin. She really liked being his motivation.

And, hey, he had a fifteen-mile drive into Appleby before hitting the highway to Dubuque. Maybe he'd realize that Aiden, Dax, Cam, and Grant all lived in Appleby and would have condoms. Or might have condoms. Okay, she had no idea if those couples used condoms. Nor was it any of her business.

But they did all have money. They could loan him money to use to go buy condoms in Appleby.

Yeah, he'd figure that out.

Probably.

She had just finishing putting everything away and was in the cabin straightening up when she heard a vehicle pull up in front.

Ollie came through the door a moment later.

He stalked toward her.

“You realized you forgot your—”

He tossed a box of condoms onto the table and backed her up against the countertop behind her. He took her face in his hands and bent to kiss her.

The kiss was hot and hungry, and she immediately melted into it. Gripping his biceps, she arched closer, opening her mouth.

His tongue swept into her mouth, stroking, as his hands ran from her face, down her neck, down her sides, to her hips. He brought her up against his rock-hard cock and she moaned.

“Get naked,” he ordered against her mouth.

Then he stepped back and stripped his shirt over his head.

Heart pounding, she pulled her t-shirt off and unhooked her bra, tossing it to the side.

He groaned and lifted a hand to cup one breast, thumbing the nipple, then rolling it between his thumb and finger.

She gasped and let her eyes slide shut.

He pinched harder, and her breath hissed out as pleasure spread from her belly between her legs.

“Fuck. Less clothes, Piper. Now.”

She pushed her jeans and panties to the floor.

His eyes were dark and hot as he shed his jeans and boxers, then reached for her.

He scooped his hands under her ass and lifted her onto the counter as if she weighed nothing. Without breaking eye contact with her, he stepped back to reach the box of condoms.

She pressed her knees together, her core aching.

“Oh no, wide open,” he said, noticing.

He ripped the box open and withdrew a condom.

“Piper.”

Her gaze was on his cock, anticipating watching him roll the condom on. “Huh?”

“Open your legs.”

Her eyes flew to his. Dang, this bossy side of him was so sexy. She parted her knees.

“That’s it,” he praised, his eyes roaming over her body.

She was never particularly self-conscious, but the way Ollie was looking at her right now made her want to stretch and pose, making sure he could see every inch. He was regarding her the way some people looked at beautiful art.

And like he wanted to ravage her.

He tore the condom open and rolled it down the length of his erection.

She wiggled on the counter as she watched, the sight making her hot and needy.

He noticed. “Oh, you like that?”

“Yes.”

He stroked himself again.

She licked her lips.

He gave her a slow grin. “Oh yeah. Later.”

She gave *him* a slow grin. “Promise?”

“To let you wrap that bossy mouth around my cock? I would love only one thing more.”

Her breath caught in her chest she managed to ask, “What’s that?”

“To make you come on that counter right now.” He stepped forward.

She spread her legs wider.

He cupped her ass and brought her to the edge. “You’re fucking fantastic, Piper Barry.”

In spite of what they were about to do, his tone was definitely affectionate as was the look in his eyes as he leaned over to kiss her.

She curled her hand into the back of his neck at the base of his hair and let him stroke her and taste her for nearly a

minute.

Finally he lifted his head. “You ready?”

“I’ve been ready for two years, Ollie.”

For a second, she wondered if that was the wrong thing to say. Was it too much? Too intense? Overkill?

But his eyes flickered with an emotion that was definitely lust combined with a softer emotion, almost like wonder.

Then he lined himself up and pressed forward, thrusting deep.

And yes, it was absolutely fucking fantastic.

He drew back and thrust again. He was big and he was so damned good.

Piper moaned and wrapped her legs around him, pressing her heels into his ass. He gripped her hips, his jaw tight, thrusting steady and deep, his eyes locked on hers.

Every stroke was perfect, hitting *that spot*. The one she hadn’t even known she needed to have hit. But she did. She so did. Again and again and—

“Ollie!” she cried out, feeling her orgasm tightening low and deep, coiling, ready to let go.

“Yes,” he said through gritted teeth. “Fuck. Yes.”

“I... don’t stop...”

“No fucking way.”

He gripped her hips tighter and picked up the pace, pumping into her deep and hard.

She dug her heels in and gripped his shoulders. “Ollie!”

And then she shot over the pinnacle.

“Oh damn. Yes, Piper,” Ollie groaned. He thrust faster, and the waves of her orgasm went on and on.

She felt his body tighten and his breath catch and then heard her name on a low, sexy groan.

She wrapped her arms around him, and he hugged her close as they caught their breaths and their bodies cooled.

Wow. That had been very worth waiting two years.

“I take back everything I said about calling it a ‘magical staff,’” she said against his neck. “It really is.”

He gave a chuckle. “You heard about that?”

“You guys are *not* quiet when giving each other shit.”

“Fair enough.” He paused. “Sorry you heard about that. All of it. Any of it.”

She pulled back and looked up at him. “You don’t have to be. We weren’t together. You didn’t say it *to* me or to be mean or anything.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Still. Feel like an ass now.”

“Don’t.” She rubbed his shoulder. “Nothing to feel bad about. It was fun. Good, consensual sex between adults. And,” she added, grinning up at him, “magical.”

He gave a little eye roll. “That was Dax’s thing. Not mine.”

“Hmm.”

He stepped back and dealt with the condom. She hopped to the floor and grabbed her t-shirt again. But she’d just pulled it over her head when he moved in behind her, wrapping his arms around her. “I got a whole box of condoms.”

“I noticed.”

“So don’t feel like you have to get too dressed.”

She shivered in his arms. Naked all night with Ollie? Yes, please. “Noted. Where’d you get those so fast?”

“Drew.”

Piper froze. Then turned in his arms. “You went to Drew’s?”

“Yeah. He was the closest.”

“You just went up to his house and said, ‘Hey do you have some condoms?’”

“Yeah.”

“And what did he say?”

“He laughed and said, ‘As a matter of fact I do’ and went and got them. Asked how many I needed, and I just grabbed the box and left.”

Piper put a hand over her mouth as she grinned. She could picture Drew’s face. He knew that Ollie was the reason she’d said no to dating him. He was a good friend. He’d wanted to date her, but when she’d explained that she was in love with someone else, he’d respectfully backed off and remained her friend.

And now, he’d be happy for her. That was just the kind of guy Drew was.

But he’d tease her about it the next time he saw her.

She wouldn’t mind.

She wrapped her arms around Ollie’s neck and stretched up to kiss him. “I’m glad you thought of that.”

His hands went to her hips, pulling her close, and he kissed her deeply. “Me too,” he finally said when he let her up.

“Very resourceful of you, Mr. Caprinelli.”

“Turns out I *can* be a problem solver.” He gave her a crooked grin.

Yeah. Naked all night. That was definitely a plan.

* * *

“Need any help over here?” a male voice called.

Ollie wanted to punch Drew Ryan in the face.

Despite the other man coming through with condoms last night.

Ollie had written two new scenes that morning with three obstacle course breaks with the guys. They'd nearly finished painting the outside of cabin three. Now Ollie was helping Piper plant bushes along one side of cabin two. Things were great over here. Without Drew.

He looked over his shoulder at Drew. "Yeah, I could use someone to run to town for me. For more condoms."

Drew smirked. "You lost the box on your way back over here?"

"On second thought, you'd better get me two boxes."

"Okay," Piper cut in. She pushed up from where she'd been kneeling on the ground and wiped her hands together to brush the dirt off. "As entertaining as it is to listen to two men discuss my sex life right in front of me as if I'm not here, I think we could find another topic."

"We're bonding," Drew said. "You're the one who wanted us to be friends."

"You did?" Ollie asked. Why would she want that? He had friends. Four of them. Maybe even five if he counted Whitney, which he probably did now that he thought about it.

"Friendly," Piper said. "I think that's probably the most I could hope for."

"Probably not gonna happen," Ollie told her honestly. Drew Ryan wanted to date Piper. He knew that the other man had asked her out. And kissed her. Sure, Piper had turned him down, but that didn't make *Drew* more likable. It just made Ollie like *Piper* more.

"That's too bad," Drew said. "Because I could use a hand with something that requires a blowtorch, and, for some reason, that seemed like your kind of thing." He was looking at Ollie.

"A blowtorch seemed like my kind of thing?" Ollie asked. "What does that even mean?"

"It means you seem like the type of guy who might like to use fire to melt things."

Ollie thought about that. Dammit. He *was* that type of guy. Presumably. He'd never used a blowtorch. And the only fire he'd ever set outside of the gas fireplace in his apartment in Chicago had been purely accidental, had been put out quickly by the Miami Fire Department, and had cost him nearly a hundred grand. Porsches were not cheap.

"What are you *melting*?" Piper asked Drew.

"Metal," Drew said with a grin. "I'm welding. Need to mend a couple of gates, and then I thought I'd try making a couple of things for the mini golf."

"You think you can make some stuff?"

He shrugged. "I think so."

Piper looked at Ollie. "I swear, Drew can make anything."

Yeah, yeah. But it sounded like the guy had blowtorches. Ollie couldn't deny that was cool.

"You're going to have miniature golf?" he asked Piper.

"I think that seems like a good outdoor activity to include, don't you?"

Not really. He shrugged. "Are you going to make it exciting?"

"Exciting?" Piper asked.

"Yeah."

"Miniature golf isn't exciting as is?"

"No. Not at all," Ollie told her. Hey, she told him when he had bad ideas, right? He could return the favor.

She propped a hand on her hip. "Not at *all*?"

"No. Now, disc golf could *possibly* be fun," Ollie said.

"Frisbee golf?" Piper clarified. "How is that more fun?"

"Well... it's not putting balls through fake castles and shit."

"But frisbee golf is just throwing a frisbee around," Piper said.

“Right. You’d have to make it more exciting than that,” Ollie said. That was obvious, wasn’t it?

“How would we make it exciting?” Drew asked. He actually seemed interested. If amused.

“Hazards,” Ollie said simply.

Piper sighed.

“Like water hazards in real golf?” Drew asked.

Ollie frowned. “No. First of all, real golf blows.” Golf was way too slow paced and tranquil for Ollie. He’d hated it all three times he’d played. And he’d sucked at it. “And water hazards in golf are hazards only because your ball might go in and cost you strokes.”

“So you mean hazards like...” Drew prompted.

“Like hazards to the players,” Ollie said. Obviously.

“I’m not sure we should purposefully add *hazards* to an activity for kids at a camp where we are responsible for their health and safety,” Piper said. Though she definitely didn’t seem surprised by Ollie’s suggestion.

“Well, I’m not talking about having people shoot poisoned darts at them while they’re golfing,” he said. Though that would be pretty great. Not poisoned, of course, but the darts. Maybe rubber tipped. Still...

Piper moved to stand in front of him. “You’re thinking about how to shoot darts at them, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Ollie.”

He grinned. “Well, we could have teams. One team golfing and the other team making it hazardous. Darts—rubber tipped, of course—paintballs, dodgeballs.”

“No.”

“But the team with the darts and balls could climb trees and hide out and wait for the golfers. The golfers could have shields and stuff if that would make you feel better.”

Piper put a hand on her hip. “No.”

It was always fun to brainstorm with Piper around. More fun when Whitney and Dax and Grant and Aiden were there though. That ended up being like a Team A vs Team B setup as well. The Idea Team against the Practical Team.

He loved making Piper sigh and roll her eyes. Grant too.

“I’m guessing having them walk across a narrow balance beam with hungry alligators underneath on the seventh hole is also a no?”

She shook her head but was clearly fighting a smile. “That’s definitely a no.”

“Rings of fire?” he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. “To throw the discs through or for them to climb through?”

“Which would you say yes to?”

“Neither.”

He laughed. “Then both.”

She snorted. “No.”

He sighed. “So boring old disc golf, huh?”

“Boring old disc golf.”

“You can at least melt metal to make baskets for it,” Drew offered.

That was true. Ollie regarded the man who Piper wanted him to be friends with. Drew having alpacas and working with Dax to have a farming program for some of the nursing-home residents who missed getting outside to garden and care for animals was pretty cool. And him letting Piper set this whole thing up on his land was cool.

And he had blowtorches.

Piper finally said, “Go ahead.”

Ollie realized he’d been thinking about Drew’s offer.

“But we have a lot of planting to do.”

“It will be okay.” She smiled at him. “I’m just glad you’re here, no matter what you’re doing.”

Because she’d been tempting him all morning by bending over and being on all-fours and just *being* near him in general, and... because Drew was right there watching... Ollie moved in until he was nearly on top of her. “Of course, some of the things I’ve been doing you’ve liked more than others.”

Her eyes heated and her breath caught.

He loved that. So damned much.

She wet her bottom lip. “Yeah.”

Ha, take that, Drew Ryan. Ollie cupped the back of her head and bent to kiss her. He kissed her deep, stroking her tongue with his, wishing he could take a breast in hand, tease her nipple, and make her whimper in that sweet, sexy way that he was already hooked on.

But he let her up after fully tasting her, pleased to see her eyes slightly dazed.

“See you later, then,” he said.

She nodded.

He stepped around her to follow Drew to his truck.

“Um, Drew?” Piper called.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t let him... hurt himself. You know, burn any vital parts off or anything.”

Drew laughed.

Ollie slapped a hand over his heart. “You don’t trust me?”

“I remember a call from Miami and a Porsche being on fire —”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Ollie cut her off. “We’ll be fine.”

“Well, at least I know he knows how to use protection if you two already blew through a box of condoms,” Drew quipped.

Piper didn't respond to that.

Ollie just gave her a wink.

As he was getting in the truck, Drew said, low enough that Piper couldn't hear, "You know, if we *did* want to include some hazards on the golf course—"

"No!" Piper yelled.

Ollie and Drew exchanged a look. Then a grin.

Well, hell, maybe he and Drew Ryan *would* end up being friends.

* * *

Ollie and Drew should definitely *not* become friends.

That had been a miscalculation on her part Piper realized as she continued working.

Drew was a reasonable, laid-back, responsible guy.

Presumably.

But she knew all too well how persuasive Oliver Caprinelli could be.

He was charming and fun and... fun. Ollie was fun. He could even get Grant Lorre to have fun, and Grant was *way* more serious and gruff than Drew.

Drew had tools. And land. And everyone in Appleby loved him. He could do no wrong in this community.

Ollie had ideas and extraordinarily little inhibition and lots of money.

Together they could turn this town upside down.

Yeah, she'd definitely miscalculated this, Piper decided.

She'd finished planting the bushes along the side of cabin two and was moving to the front when she heard the teens shouting and laughing. She looked over to find them chasing each other around the cabin. Two of the boys had the water hoses out and were spraying the others.

She sighed. Yeah, they'd been working without a break for a while now since Ollie had gone to "work" with Drew. She stretched to her feet and headed in the direction of the water fight.

"Okay!" she called over the noise of the laughter and shouting. They all turned to her, and she barely jumped out of the way of the stream of water from one of the hoses before it doused her.

"Oops! Sorry, Piper!" Tanner called, pointing the hose in the other direction.

"Looks like it's time for an obstacle course break," she said.

They all looked surprised. "You'd let us take a break?" Tanner asked.

"You're already taking a break," she pointed out.

Matt and a couple of the others at least looked slightly sheepish.

"I know you've all been working hard, and you've gotten a ton done when you've been doing it Ollie's way," she said. "So, yeah, you can take a break. But I think it should be at the obstacle course."

"Okay, awesome," Matt said.

Tanner went to shut the water off, and a few of the boys took off running toward the stream.

"Hey," Piper called to Matt and Tanner.

Matt pivoted back. "Yeah?"

"I want to come."

Matt was clearly surprised. "You want to come to the obstacle course?"

She nodded.

"To watch?"

"I want to *do* the course," she said.

"Really?"

“You don’t think I can?”

“No. I just...” He grinned. “You’re going to get dirty.”

She looked down at her jeans, the pale-pink t-shirt with the sparkly *Classy, Sassy, and A Little Bad-Assy* across the front, and the pink-and-blue-checked flannel she wore over it. She grinned at Matt. “I’ll survive.”

She liked sparkles. But sparkles were washable.

They started across the grassy field toward the line of trees where the obstacle course was nestled.

Not only had the course and whatever challenges and games Ollie had come up with been working to keep the kids focused in between the breaks, she was curious. She knew they’d added a lot to the course, and she wanted to see it.

Because it made Ollie happy. And these kids. But mostly Ollie.

It was really that simple.

The obstacle course had made him happy, and she wanted to see it and try it out.

And the kids really needed to get back to work, so she could give them an obstacle course break.

Thirty minutes later, she could officially declare that the obstacle course was The Best Obstacle Course Ever.

She was laughing and a little breathless as she and the kids headed back across the field to the cabins. Her pink t-shirt was definitely dirty—you didn’t crawl on your stomach through a tunnel made of tree branches and leaves without getting dirty. She’d lost a couple of sequins that she was never going to see again; her flannel had a tear in the left shoulder, and she had a scrape on her right wrist.

And she’d had a great time.

Sure, she’d told Matt he needed to stabilize another plank and instructed Tanner and Kelsey to come back out with gloves and pull out the poison ivy along the one side of the tunnel they had to army crawl through. But she’d also

suggested that they wet down one area of dirt to make it actual mud instead and that they should raise one of the platforms a few feet higher to make it harder to jump to.

The kids got back to work, and she happily knelt in the dirt by cabin three to plant more bushes.

She had the front and side of cabin two and three finished by the time Drew drove Ollie back over.

Ollie was laughing as he got out of the cab of the truck.

“No way!” Drew said as he rounded the front bumper.

“Swear to God. But if you want to hear great weird stories, customs agents have some of the best,” Ollie told him.

Drew laughed. “I haven’t even been outside the US, so not much chance to run into customs agents.”

Ollie stopped, clearly shocked. “You’ve never been out of the US?”

“Nope.” Drew shrugged. “Hard to leave a farm for long periods.”

“That’s it,” Ollie said. “We’re hiring you some temp help—like those guys,” he said, casting a glance at the teens. “Then you and I are getting on a plane to... Ireland,” he decided after a second. “Ireland is awesome.”

Drew’s eyes were wide, but Piper was sure hers were wider.

They’d been gone for just over two hours.

They’d gone from “probably not gonna happen” as an answer to simply being *friendly* to one another to Oliver inviting Drew on an international trip?

She put a hand on her hip. “You are so easy,” she told Ollie.

“You had to work for two years, sweetheart.” He turned to her with a grin.

She snorted. “I started *working* on you two *days* ago, big shot.”

His gaze went over her from head to toe. “What have you been doing?” he asked, taking in the dirt and general rumpledness of her appearance.

“Working. Planting. Oh, and I did the obstacle course with the kids during a break.”

His eyes widened as he took that in. “That right?”

“Yep. My time wasn’t bad either. But I know I can break it next time.”

He crossed the gravel to her. He cupped the back of her head and brought her up on tiptoes and into a deep kiss.

When he let her go, she had to take a deep breath.

“That’s really fucking hot,” he told her.

She laughed lightly. “See? So easy.”

“I’m easy for you,” he agreed.

“And Drew,” she said, nudging him back. “All he had to do was pull out a blowtorch, and now he’s got a ticket on your private plane.”

Ollie looked over at Drew. “Well, it’s not just anyone who will let me mess with a blowtorch.”

“Yeah, Drew doesn’t know you very well.”

Drew chuckled and came forward. “Be honest with her.”

Ollie sighed. “We only used the blowtorches for about twenty minutes.”

“What happened?” She really hoped the barn Drew used as a workshop was still standing.

“It’s just easier to buy the disc golf baskets,” Ollie said.

“Oh.”

“It really is,” Drew said. “We *could* do it, but the time it would take probably isn’t worth the cost savings.”

“Especially when we’ve got other stuff we need to build that we can’t just buy,” Ollie added.

Drew was clearly fighting a smile as he nodded. “Right.”

“What other stuff?” Piper asked suspiciously.

“Other activities.”

“We’ve got activities planned,” she said.

Ollie rolled his eyes. “I know. Drew filled me in.”

“And you don’t approve?”

“They’re going to go fishing, right?” he asked. “And swimming. And hiking to look at plants and animals. And they’re going to do disc golf and volleyball and cooking classes and arts and crafts.”

He said “arts and crafts” the way she said “kale salad.”

She crossed her arms. “What’s wrong with hiking and volleyball and cooking classes?”

“Piper,” he said, squaring up to face her directly. “You’ve always been totally honest with me when my ideas suck.”

“I have never told you an idea *sucked*,” she said.

“Semantics,” he told her.

“Okay, lay it on me.”

“This camp sounds like the most boring thing ever.”

“Have you ever been to camp?” she asked.

“No. And I think I’m really grateful for that.”

She rolled her eyes.

He gave her a little smile. “The thing is, *all* of this has potential. We just need to... turn it up a little.”

Oh boy. When Oliver “turned it up”, people ended up wearing parachutes or with arrest records. Sometimes in the same night.

“Ollie—”

“Come on,” he coaxed with a grin. “We talked about me being activities director last night. I’m into this.”

“I was high on s’mores and sex.”

His grin grew. “I can keep you supplied with both.”

She couldn't help but laugh.

"We can definitely make all of this a ton of fun," he said.

"You sometimes go a little overboard," she reminded him.

"Yes. And you rein me in. But you never shut it all down." He moved in a little closer. "And *you* were the one who talked *me* into having the petting zoo at the baking competition."

Whitney had *not* been impressed with that. But the town had loved it. "Because the alpacas were Drew's, and I knew you were saying no just because of him."

Ollie nodded. "And you said yes just because of him."

"I said yes because I wanted to make you jealous of him."

"It worked."

Her heart did a little flip. She'd suspected it had worked. No, she'd *known* it had worked, but she hadn't been sure that Ollie realized he was jealous. Or that it meant he cared about her as more than his assistant.

"I'm right here and can hear you, you know," Drew said.

Piper gave him a little grin. "Sorry."

"No, you're not," Drew returned with a smile. "But, anyway, Ollie has some interesting ideas."

"Oh, I have no doubt they're interesting." Oliver was a lot of things but *uninteresting* was not one of them.

"Maybe you should hear him out."

Ollie immediately started shaking his head. "No, I want to *show* you."

"You think I'm going to say no," she guessed.

"Before you see it, maybe," he agreed. "But once you see it all, you'll love it." He paused. "Probably."

She huffed out a laugh. "When you say *it all*, how much are we talking here?"

"I have... a few ideas," Ollie said.

Uh huh. “Okay, how about this. You can add *one* thing to the camp plans besides what I have,” she said. “*Then*,” she went on as he tried to interject. “If it’s awesome and not over the top, or not *too* over the top—” Because, of course, it would be over the top. “—then we can talk about more.”

He was studying her, and he slowly nodded as he thought about what she’d offered. “Okay.”

Oh boy, that was an easy consent. That definitely made her suspicious too. “But you can’t—”

“Nope,” he said. “You already said one thing. I know just the thing I’m going to do to show you. This is going to be awesome.”

She was not so sure about that. She looked at Drew. “You’re going to help him?”

“Definitely.”

Definitely? That was also a really fast agreement. “I can help too,” she said.

“No, you’ve got too much going on with the buildings and getting everything organized. Paperwork and stuff,” Ollie said.

She laughed. He had no idea what she needed to organize or what kind of paperwork she had to do. But he was excited, clearly. He was into this. He was doing something for the camp. He was getting to know Drew. He was a part of this project of hers.

She stepped forward and pulled him down by the front of his shirt. With her lips against his, she said, “You better not burn these cabins down. If I did all this painting for nothing, I’m going to be pissed.”

Then she kissed him.

Man, she *really* loved being able to do that.

He definitely kissed her back. She loved that too.

He cupped her head and tasted her completely before they parted.

“Oh, and Drew’s making a campfire dinner for us and the kids,” Ollie said.

“He is?” She looked at Drew.

“Yep. Potatoes and sausages and grilled veggies.”

That sounded great.

“*On* the campfire,” Ollie added.

“That will be great,” she agreed with a grin. He was just a big kid.

“And we can do s’mores after,” Drew said, turning to head toward his truck.

“Fuck off, Ryan,” Ollie said. “You and all those kids better be long gone by s’more time.”

“You *told him* about s’more time?” Piper asked.

“I just mentioned that I *really* liked s’mores.”

“You called them naked s’mores,” Drew said, pulling a cooler from the truck bed.

“Oh yeah, I guess I might have said it that way.”

“You guess?” Piper asked.

He didn’t look apologetic. “I definitely said it that way. Now that I know he’s cool, I definitely need him to know that you’re taken. If you figure out that he knows way more about the physics behind catapults than I do, you might change your mind. I gotta keep you... sweet and sticky.”

The words and the way he dropped his voice and looked at her distracted her for a moment.

But just *one*.

“*Catapults?*”

He glanced at Drew and then back at her with a grin. “That’s a metaphor.”

“A metaphor for what?”

He paused. Then said, “For contraptions that launch things into the air.”

She closed her eyes. “Drew?”

“Yeah?” She could hear the laughter in his voice even without seeing his face.

“You’re the grown-up in the room when you’re alone with Ollie. Please remember that.”

They both laughed. And neither said anything. Like, “You got it, Piper” or “Of course, Piper” or “Nothing to worry about, Piper.”

Yeah, she’d definitely miscalculated this.

But as she opened her eyes and watched Ollie help Drew set up for their campfire dinner, she had to admit that the guy was so damned attractive when he was excited and happy. As he clearly was right now.

She felt her heart squeeze.

He was here. With her. Getting involved in her project.

Yeah, he could definitely put in a catapult. Well, probably. As long as they weren’t catapulting *people*.

She frowned. She was going to have to clarify that, she knew.

And she was going to have to be careful not to let on that she’d let him do just about anything as long as he looked that happy doing it.

She was really glad he hadn’t been *that* happy about the unicorn-snot soda.

Chapter Sixteen



“I have a confession,” Whitney told her a week later.

Piper paused with her coffee cup halfway to her mouth. “Oh boy.”

She and Whitney were at Buttered Up. Whitney had asked her to a late breakfast and since everything was going well at the camp and Ollie and Drew were busy from about nine a.m. to four p.m. over in Drew’s big workshop inside one of his barns, Piper had agreed. She needed to get back to the campground to make sure the kids got their break—and to work on her time on the obstacle course—but she’d figured she could spare an hour.

“As your friend, I feel obligated to tell you that Oliver is building a volcano,” Whitney said. “And I might have been part of the brainstorming for it.”

Whitney looked apologetic. But not as if she was joking. At all.

Piper blinked at her. “A *volcano*?”

Whitney nodded. “And before you ask, yes, it will actually erupt. Elliot’s been out there for the last few days helping them.”

Piper set her coffee cup down without drinking.

Elliot was an engineer for Fluke. He worked as a designer as well, second in talent only to Dax. He was also recently engaged to Max, one of the Hot Cakes employees, and so was working from Appleby a majority of the time.

But the important part was Elliot was an *engineer*. Someone who would know how to make a volcano. Or at least a pretty-damned-realistic fake volcano.

“Does *no one* but me say no to Ollie?” Piper asked.

Whitney laughed. “Grant. Sometimes. Aiden once in a while.”

Piper sighed. “I told him he could add *one* thing to the campground, and he decided on a *volcano*? What is *that* for?”

Whitney grinned. “Well, I don’t know if this will make you feel better but the volcano is only *part* of whatever they’re building.”

“Of course that doesn’t make it better!” Piper let her eyes slide shut. But even as she took a deep breath, she had to admit that made sense. Of course Oliver would take the “one thing” she’d agreed to and make that one thing multifaceted and huge.

She opened her eyes again. “And you’re partly to blame?”

Whitney nodded, cupping her coffee mug in both hands. “I am. You know how Ollie and I get when we start talking about a new plan for something.”

They were trouble. That’s what they were. The two were wildly creative and they built on one another’s crazy ideas until someone—usually Grant—reeled them back in.

“How did I not expect this?” Piper asked.

Whitney laughed. “He’s softened you up with sex.”

Piper nodded. “Seriously. I’ve always enabled him in a lot of ways, but man, it’s really hard to say no to him now.”

But she wasn’t *sure* she would have said no.

That was a startling revelation.

It was because of the obstacle course, she knew. And the alpacas at the cake tasting. And any number of other things over the years. Sure, Ollie got a little wild in his initial ideas, but he could be reasoned with and the actual implementation

of his ideas ended up being pretty great in actuality. They *sounded* crazy, but he had a way of pulling them off.

There was a part of her that wanted to see this volcano.

Surely it didn't have *real* molten liquid of any kind inside. What were they planning with that thing? How did that fit into camp activities?

And that was a sure sign she was in love with him.

She was a little worried about the idea of a volcano at camp. But she was more intrigued.

Whitney shook her head with a sly grin. "I should have been ready for you to admit that."

"Doesn't it work that way with Cam?" Piper teased.

"Oh, for sure," Whitney said. "But," she added. "*He* is softened up because of me, and the sex, too."

Piper smiled at her friend. They were calling it sex, but they both knew that it was more than that. It was love. Plain and simple. She would have never let another man she'd slept with put a volcano in the middle of her campground.

Of course, she couldn't imagine any of them even considering that.

But that was one of the reasons she was in love with Ollie and hadn't been with the others. His big, crazy, fun thinking was as much a part of him as his sense of humor and his aversion to sauteed onions and his ADHD. He wouldn't be him without it.

"So tell me everything," Piper said.

"No way." Whitney shook her head. "First, I don't know what all from our brainstorming session actually made it into the plan. And second, he wants to surprise you."

"I've been wondering what they've been up to in Drew's workshop all day every day," Piper said. "You have to give me *something*. Is there a catapult?"

Whitney's pause was enough to confirm that yes, there was a catapult. And to remind Piper that she'd never clarified with

Ollie or Drew that they couldn't catapult *people*. Or alpacas.

"You *have* to tell me, Whit," Piper insisted.

"Nope. I want to see your face when you see it all," Whitney said.

"How will you see my face?"

"Oh, we're all invited."

Piper frowned. "Invited to what?"

"To the campfire cookout and reveal of the new campground activities tonight."

Piper leaned in. "Who all is invited?"

"Me and Cam. And Henry and Maggie and Steve," she said, naming Cam's little brother and his parents. "Didi too," she said of her grandmother. "Zoe and Aiden. Dax and Jane. Grant and Josie. Max. Though I think that Elliot has told Max more about it than the rest of us even know."

Piper was staring at her. "Who invited everyone? Ollie?"

"And Drew," Whitney said. "Oh, and all the kids who've been helping you paint and landscape." Whitney grinned.

Piper shook her head. It was going to be a damned party. At her campground. Without her knowing a thing about it.

But... it sounded like fun.

Piper sighed. Dammit, the sex really was getting to her. Okay, the being in love with Oliver Caprinelli was really getting to her. She was more excited about this whole thing than she was nervous.

It had been over a week since they'd first gone "camping" together. They'd been living together in that cabin, laughing, having sex, cooking, acting like live-in boyfriend and girlfriend for all intents and purposes. She'd even gotten used to showering at the next building over, rather than being able to just walk down the hall to the bathroom in the hotel room. She didn't even miss the marble countertops or the shower with the six shower heads. Much.

The cabins were all nearly finished. They were fully painted on the outside and inside. The landscaping was done. Furniture had arrived yesterday. That had been because of her and Matt and the other kids though, with a hand from Dallas and Justin every now and then. Drew and Ollie had been otherwise engaged. Every morning after breakfast Drew came and picked Ollie up and they headed for Drew's big barn-slash-workshop.

And she'd been denied access to the building.

All three times she'd asked and the one time she'd just showed up there.

Ollie had actually picked her up over his shoulder and carried her back to her truck.

That had been kind of hot. And funny. And it had worked to get her driving back to the campground without getting even a peek at what they were working on.

Then, each day Ollie came back to the cabin around four and helped finish up the projects she was working on. They'd talk and laugh and tease and flirt. They'd make dinner, which had included the kids and Drew a few times too. Then everyone else headed out and she and Ollie had their campfire date. They had s'mores most nights. And every night they had fun, dirty, sweet sex. Sometimes by the fire. Sometimes in the cabin. Sometimes both.

"So if you're not going to spill anything else, why did you tell me about the volcano?" Piper said. "And the party?"

"Not going to tell you much," Whitney said, shaking her head. "But I thought you needed a little heads-up. Cam told me Ollie is really into this and I just wanted you to be prepared so..." She seemed unsure how to finish that thought.

"So I don't yell at him?" Piper asked.

Whitney smiled. "I don't think you would yell."

Piper shrugged. "I've been known to raise my voice."

"I guess I didn't want you to be completely surprised and react and... I don't know. Hurt his feelings, maybe?" Whitney

grimaced slightly. “Sorry. That sounds bad.”

Piper shook her head. “No, I get it. I would *not* have been expecting a volcano. My reaction might not have been perfect.”

Whitney smiled. “Cam and the other guys have been amazed at how Ollie’s been over the past week.”

“Yeah?” Piper had been too, but that was possibly because she was seeing him in an entirely new environment, including his burgeoning friendship with Drew—which was about more than blowtorches, no matter what Ollie said—and because she had been doing dirty things to him with toasted marshmallows. And vice versa. That was *completely* different for them. The guys weren’t seeing all of that.

“Definitely,” Whitney confirmed. “He’s been so focused on the conference calls. He’s been enthusiastic and energetic. I think we all expected him to be more distracted than usual because he’s doing this camp stuff most of the time, but he’s been engaged and on top of the stuff we’ve needed from him.”

Okay, Piper was a little surprised by that. “Really? I didn’t even know he was working on anything but the script and now this stuff with Drew while he’s been out here.”

“He hasn’t had a lot to do,” Whitney said. “But we wanted some ideas from him about the new commercials we’re doing and he gave great input. And I know they needed him to send some stuff in and he did it by the next morning.”

Maybe he’d been doing some of it up at Drew’s house. She supposed Drew had to take some breaks from volcano building to tend to his livestock and other farm chores. Playing with blowtorches with Ollie wasn’t his full-time gig.

Though if she found out Ollie was paying Drew to make that his full-time job, she wouldn’t have been shocked.

“What do you think of these?”

Piper and Whitney looked up to find Josie beside their table with a plate of what looked like cupcakes. Kind of. They were brown, but they were triangular in shape and slightly bigger than cupcakes.

Then she realized... they looked like little volcanoes.

Piper knew she had a huge grin on her face as she took them in.

“Ollie told me the party has a volcano theme,” Josie said, setting the plate down between Piper and Whitney. “So first I made a big cake and messed around with red Jell-O and different things to look like lava, but it was so messy and didn’t really taste that good. Then he called back and said if I could also make it taste like s’mores that would be great.” Josie sighed. “Seriously? A volcano that tastes like s’mores too?”

Piper wanted to laugh out loud. That was Ollie. The idea guy. He didn’t really think through *how* they’d make things happen, just that he wanted them a certain way.

Josie put a hand on her hip, frowning at the mini volcanoes. “So then I started messing with cakes that would taste like graham crackers, then chocolate cake and trying to get the marshmallow to be runny and come out like lava and...” She blew out a breath. “Here’s where I’m at now.”

Piper studied the little volcanoes. “So what is this?”

“The volcanoes are made with graham cracker crumbs stuck together like Rice Krispy bars so I could mold them. Then—” She leaned in and pulled one apart. Chocolate oozed out. Like lava. “—the lava is chocolate and you can dip marshmallows in it.” She did just that with a marshmallow she pulled out of her apron pocket. “Or tear of pieces of the volcano to dip. Or both. I think having them be individual works best, though, or there will be chocolate lava going everywhere.”

She held the chunk of the volcano out to Piper who took it and tasted it.

Delicious. Of course. It definitely reminded Piper of a s’more.

“Yum.”

“Yeah?” Josie asked. “It’s really simple. But I guess it checks all the boxes?”

“Absolutely.” Piper shrugged. “I mean, I guess. He hasn’t told me anything about this.”

Josie’s eyes widened. “What?” She glanced at Whitney. “Crap, was this a secret?”

“Kind of,” Whitney said.

“Oh *no*,” Josie groaned. “I’m so sorry,” she told Piper. “I’ve been having Zoe and Jane taste the other stuff because they’re here, but when I saw you two in here today I thought I should get your input.”

“This is great,” Piper assured her. “I’m absolutely sure that whatever Ollie has planned will still surprise me.”

Whitney laughed at that and Josie nodded.

They both knew Ollie well.

“I won’t tell you anything more about the plans,” Whitney said. “But he definitely has a theme going.”

“And no one’s telling him no on anything?” Piper asked. She felt a little flutter of excitement. She wondered what all Ollie would come up with if just left to his own devices.

“Well, I mean, that’s *your* job a lot of the time,” Whitney reminded her.

That made the flutter in her chest feel more like a jab. Yeah, it was. She frowned but nodded. “What about Grant?”

“This isn’t about Hot Cakes,” Whitney said. “I think Grant feels like he doesn’t have much to say.”

“Well, good.” Piper realized that response was a little more forceful than it probably needed to be.

Whitney’s raised eyebrow confirmed that it had come off a little strong.

“I just mean, maybe we should just let Ollie have some fun.”

“With something that could spew molten lava into the air to then rain down on some of your closest friends and their families?” Whitney asked.

Piper hesitated. “Is the volcano actually going to *erupt*?” That could be pretty cool. Except for the molten lava raining down on people. And the buildings she’d just painted.

Whitney laughed. “I don’t know much about the volcano other than it’s being built. Elliot and Dax have been going out there to help. And I did hear the word *erupt*. At least twice.”

“Dax has been coming out to Drew’s too?” Piper asked. “You didn’t say that before.”

“That doesn’t make it *less* worrisome does it?” Whitney asked with a smile.

No, it didn’t. But it made it sound like an even bigger deal. A bigger, more *fun* deal.

When had Piper started thinking that Ollie and Dax’s crazy plans could be fun?

Well, always. Their plans *were* always fun. No one could argue that. But they could be crazy, a little dangerous, and potentially expensive.

But she knew that she’d started thinking about Ollie’s ideas differently at the campground. With the obstacle course, in part. That had been totally his doing. She would have never come up with that and while it seemed a little strange, seeing him and the kids using it and then doing it herself, she had to admit that it had been fun and not as off the wall as she might have imagined if he’d just said the words “obstacle course” to her.

Like her reaction to hearing “hazards” and “catapults.” She’d immediately jumped to *oh, that’s gotta be crazy and dangerous and not well thought out*. But where did that come from?

The label that Ollie had been given before she’d even met him.

“I’m not worried about the volcano,” she told Whitney.

“Oh *good*.” Josie picked up the plate. “So I can go ahead with making fifty of these?”

“Fifty?” Piper repeated. “He’s invited *fifty* people to this?”

Whitney nodded with a grin. “Yep.”

“Then... yeah, I guess make fifty,” Piper said.

“You’ve got it.” Josie started to turn away.

“But—” Piper said.

Josie turned back.

Piper realized she and Whitney were both expecting her to put some condition on the treats or the party or both.

“Can I have the rest of that one? Since we already broke a piece off?” she asked instead. It really was good. And she was always a sucker for anything s’more.

Josie grinned and picked the little volcano up, setting it on Piper’s empty muffin plate. Then she pulled a handful of marshmallows from her apron pocket and put them beside the volcano.

She went back to the kitchen and Piper took another piece of graham cracker volcano and dipped it in chocolate lava.

“You’re not worried about the party?” Whitney asked.

Piper met Whitney’s eyes. “I was just thinking that maybe we should have let him have acrobats at the cake tasting.”

Whitney sat up. “Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I get that it sounds over the top and crazy, but there are *professional* acrobats, right? They clearly know how to walk on tightropes. And there’s liability insurance for a reason. That would have covered us if anything would have happened.”

Whitney nodded slowly. “Okay, fair enough. Though I’m not sure acrobats really matched up with a cake tasting theme.”

“But it must have when you and Ollie were talking about it,” Piper said. “He convinced you of it at one point because you were into it.”

Whitney couldn’t argue with that. “You’re right. He made it make sense somehow.”

Piper grinned. “So no, I’m not worried about the volcano party. In fact, I’d love to see what he would do if he’d really just let go. If he was allowed to let his imagination really run.”

“Isn’t that how he and Dax end up in jail in other countries?” Whitney asked with a grin.

Piper laughed. “Yes. But...” A thought occurred to her just then for the first time. Something that she’d never really realized before but now seemed clear. “The only times he’s actually gotten into *trouble*—like jail or the time there was a Porsche set on fire—”

Whitney’s eyes got round.

Piper laughed and nodded. “Have them tell you that story at the party.”

“Oh, I will.”

“Anyway, the only times there was actual *trouble* was when it was just him and Dax.”

“Because Dax never says no to him or holds him back, right?” Whitney asked.

Piper thought about that. “Maybe. At least, that’s how it seems, I know. That’s probably part of it. But maybe it’s also because Ollie knows that Dax loves that stuff. Dax loves the high-risk, over-the-top stuff that gives them awesome stories to tell for years after. And he knows they have the resources to fix whatever problems come up. They can buy someone a new Porsche, stuff like that.”

“Okay,” Whitney said. “I’m following so far.”

Piper nodded. “But I think all of that is more about Dax than about Ollie.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think Ollie would ever put anyone else in a situation like that. I think he picks and chooses how he lets his imagination go depending on who he’s with. He’s not out of control or some delicate genius who’s so in his head he can’t be trusted to understand the situations and risks and consequences.”

Whitney was thinking about that, it seemed. She nodded. “I know that when he and I brainstorm, we go in some crazy directions sometimes, but, like you said, it all actually makes sense. And yeah, we both have fun with it, but I think he trusts that I’ll help hone the ideas.”

Piper nodded. “I’m certain he has tons of ideas that he never brings up to Grant and Aiden at all because he *knows* they’re too out there.”

“Do any of you ever completely shut him down?” Whitney asked.

Piper chewed on her bottom lip, studying the mini volcano. Finally, she confessed, “Yeah. Like the acrobats. We heard the word, along with circus tents, and immediately thought *no way*.”

“And now you think you should have let it go?”

“I think it would have turned out better than we were imagining.”

“Interesting.”

Piper tipped her head. “Is it interesting?”

“It is.” Whitney leaned in. “I think you’re right. But I also think it’s interesting that you’re realizing this. As the person who is the most in charge of keeping his feet on the ground.”

Piper felt her chest tighten. “I’ve always thought of myself that way. That’s how I was hired. That was one of the things Grant essentially said to me when I interviewed. I’ve always felt really good about being a part of Fluke that way. Taking care of the guys, but especially Ollie because he really is the imagination behind it all. We need him most in a lot of ways.”

Whitney didn’t say anything but she was clearly listening intently.

“Maybe it’s because it’s just been the two of us and we’ve been spending a ton of time together and I’m seeing him out of his usual environment and the stuff we’ve been doing hasn’t been about *Warriors* much at all, but I’m looking at it differently now.”

“How so?”

Piper hadn't given this a lot of deep thought. She'd just been so happy this past week. It had felt so *good* to have Ollie there with her, him clearly happy and feeling productive, him interacting with the kids, and working with Drew—becoming *friends* with Drew—and then all of the domestic things about basically living together. They ate and slept together, talked, did dishes, cleaned the cabin, all very normal activities. And then there was the hot sex. She had to admit that it had distracted her from a lot of thoughts beyond *this is even better than I'd imagined*.

But now that she was pondering everything, her thoughts were rolling—one realization after another—through her mind.

“Like the obstacle course I told you about,” she said to Whitney. “He started it. Then when he realized how much the kids liked it, he made it grow. Then when he realized that I wasn't going to flip out and make him tear it down, he *really* made it grow. The thing is huge now and super fun. It's like one of those play structures at the park for little kids, but this can also be for teens and adults.”

She thought about how the obstacles had even grown. It had started with jumping and climbing and swinging from one tree to another, but now it included monkey bars and what was essentially a rock wall they had to climb and a mud pit they had to walk across on stilts. Stilts.

There was also a section where they had to avoid bean bags swinging down from tree branches overhead trying to knock them off the narrow wooden beam they were crossing. Yes, the other team was swinging those bean bags at them.

The obstacle course was now done in teams as a relay. Each section of the obstacle course had to be completed before they could move on to the next section. Points were given or subtracted for various things and the whole thing was also timed.

So the “hazards” he'd talked about with the disc golf had become a part of the obstacle course. And there were others. In

one section, the other team threw dodge balls—they were *very* soft balls, without Piper even having to insist on that, and weren't designed to knock anyone over—but if you got hit, you lost a point.

There was also a ring of fire.

It wasn't real fire. It was a ring that glowed bright orange and to complete that section, the “warrior”—yes, they'd decided to call themselves warriors—had to throw three spears through the ring.

It was no surprise to Piper that the number of teens coming to the campground every day to “help” had grown and she now had so much help they were way ahead of schedule with getting everything ready for camp the first weekend of June.

“But even though the obstacles and the course have grown and seem a little over the top, it's not. It's fun and safe, at least for kids the age these are at, and he's just done it and then I come in behind and do a few things like tie things down tighter or have them nail things more securely or add a net under the highest tree. Just little things. So instead of saying no to it completely, he just did it and then I “fix” whatever needs a little extra fixing.”

Whitney took all of that in. “That's all really nice, actually. Ollie's got to feel good about all of that, right?”

“I hope so.”

Piper hadn't really thought about what she was doing. She never mentioned that something needed “fixed.” She knew he was aware. He'd never commented on it either. He'd never protested. And it hadn't kept him from continuing to add to the course.

“I have held him back before though,” Piper said. “Like with the acrobats. For instance.”

Like the unicorn-snot soda. Dammit.

“Can I be honest with you about something?” Whitney asked.

“Of course.”

The women hadn't known each other for long. At least not compared to the other women in the Fluke circle. Zoe, Jane, and Josie had been friends for years. Zoe and Josie since childhood. Piper and Whitney weren't as close as the guys. The five men they both knew and cared about were closer than some brothers.

But Piper knew that Whitney wanted to be friends as much as Piper did, and they both felt their friendship growing.

Spilling their guts and honest opinions was the way to get closer.

"Your tendencies to be perfect and to always have the right answer are amazing and very appreciated in the office," Whitney said with a smile. "But on a personal level they can be very intimidating."

"I don't always have the right answer," Piper protested.

"Yes, you do. Or at least, it really seems that way. I think it is fine, good even, for you to mess up once in a while."

Wow, she really hated the term "messed up" in regard to her own stuff.

"So you *do* think I messed up pulling him back on the acrobats," Piper said.

Whitney laughed. "I think it's okay for you to learn something new about Ollie and about yourself, Piper."

Piper sat back in her chair, probably looking a lot like Ollie had that day he'd come to find her, sulking about muffins. And missing her.

Her annoyance softened thinking about that.

Yeah, it was okay to learn something new about him and herself. In fact, it was great.

"You're right," she told Whitney. "And I'm definitely looking forward to this volcano party."

Whitney looked proud of her. "Great. And just so you know, you not only have to act surprised when you get there, but you have to spend the day at Hot Cakes with me

pretending that I came up with a brilliant way to keep you busy so you didn't go back to the campground before they got all set up."

Piper laughed. "I can do that. Do I need to train the new girl?"

"Actually, she's doing pretty well. I mean, she's only working for me and Aiden and Grant, really, so she's fine. I was thinking we could do mani-pedis actually."

Piper laughed and nodded. "Nothing weird about taking care of you all."

"Guess not. But, don't worry, Dax comes in often enough to keep things a little weird."

Piper laughed. She missed being around all of the guys, she had to admit.

She'd always wanted to get Ollie to herself, and the camp really was a passion project, but now that it was coming together and she and Ollie were on a new, awesome path, she had to admit she was feeling a little Ollie-ish... like she was going to soon need a new challenge and would want something *more*.

Oh no.

She groaned internally. Dammit. She and Ollie were clearly an opposites-attract couple. Right? *Right?*

Or did they have that constant need for *more*?

Chapter Seventeen



Ollie was nervous.

He never got nervous.

Annoyed, pissed, happy, excited, jealous—apparently—yes. But never nervous. He didn't love getting on stage at Comic Con, but that was more because it took a lot of energy and he didn't want to let people down. The people who came to see the guy who created their beloved *Warriors of Easton* and who built him up to be a particular way in their minds, for instance.

But he never got nervous.

Tonight he was.

Because Piper was pulling up in front of the cabins at the campground and was about to see what he'd created.

He never got nervous about the things he created.

Of course, he mostly created things—story lines, characters, settings—in a fictional world he'd entirely made up and could manipulate in any way he wanted to, and that other people had found far more intriguing and “brilliant” than he ever had. First Dax, then Aiden and Cam and Grant, had declared his creation special long before he'd ever thought so. Which meant he'd never been in a position where he'd created something with the hopes that others would like it.

Wow, that sounded really dumb when he thought about it.

“Hey,” he greeted Piper as she approached from her car.

She was the last to arrive, as planned. He wasn't sure how Whitney had been able to leave Hot Cakes and get out here before Piper did when Whit had been the one stalling her in Appleby all day, but Whitney had pulled it off. All of their friends, Cam's family, the kids who'd been helping at the campground for the past several days, even Drew, Dallas, and Justin were all here already, gathered around the volcano, waiting for the unveiling.

Ollie felt a surge of excitement.

The volcano. It was done and he couldn't wait to show Piper.

It was symbolic as much as it was just damned cool in general.

It stood about twelve feet tall and had a twenty-foot radius. It just *looked* cool. But it was also functional. In more than one way.

It was also something he'd imagined and created without worrying about Piper thinking it was too much. Three weeks ago, he might have hesitated. He would have thought she'd be skeptical about putting a *volcano* behind her campground. But she'd showed him over the past week or so that she could roll with things and she trusted him more than he'd realized.

She'd not only been fine with the obstacle course, but she'd been *doing* the obstacle course herself at least once a day. She'd told him it was fun and actually a decent workout.

He'd put her up on the kitchen table and kissed and licked every inch of her after she'd said that.

When she'd bragged, clearly pleased, about breaking her own time record on the course two days ago, he'd carried her to the bed and made her come twice.

Having Piper on board and excited about his creations was a surprising aphrodisiac and he was addicted. She'd always been supportive and, of course, an important behind-the-scenes part of Fluke, but she'd never been *enthusiastic* about *Warriors* or specific things he made. This was different. And he loved it.

This party was going to be great, but he couldn't wait to have her alone and make her call him her volcano god before he let her come tonight.

Maybe he'd fuck her against the volcano.

A jab of heat and happiness rolled together hit him in the gut.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked as she stopped in front of him.

"Glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you too." She gave him a little smile that he couldn't quite decipher. "Sorry I was gone all day. Whitney needed help at the office."

Whitney had been stalling her so that he and Drew, Dallas, Matt and the other teens could get tonight set up. He shrugged. "No problem."

"Since we didn't get to have dinner together and our usual campfire time, I was thinking we could maybe head inside and have a little fun with this." She held up a bag from Buttered Up.

"And what's that?"

"Cream-filled cupcakes with *lots* of frosting. Zoe assures me they can be very... *sweet*."

Ollie had definitely heard Aiden's very smug innuendos about those cupcakes, so Ollie knew exactly what she was talking about. And his body responded.

But they had a campground full of people.

And a volcano.

Damn, he was definitely torn here.

And that was an absolute certain sign that he'd fallen for this woman. There wasn't another person on the planet who could make him want to skip out on a party with a huge, glowing, heated, looks-pretty-fucking-real volcano that could even erupt.

“I would love that,” he said sincerely. “I would *really* love that. But I... had another plan.”

“Ooooh, well, if you want to do more with the melted marshmallows, you know I’m in,” she said with a playful smile.

He definitely did. How did he get rid of fifty guests? And hide a volcano?

It was actually amazing that they’d kept this a secret so far anyway. Everyone had parked up at Drew’s and he’d driven them in groups out to the campground.

They’d all been extremely impressed with how the camp was turning out and he couldn’t wait for Piper to hear all of their praise. She didn’t think she was creative? Well, maybe not in the way he was, exactly—making shit up when there were no actual rules anyway—but he hoped this camp and everyone’s response to it would show her that she wasn’t just the woman behind the scenes dotting I’s and making coffee for the creatives. She helped make things happen.

And *that* was what made him say, “Frosting and cream filling and marshmallows are going to have to wait.”

“Oh?” She tipped her head to one side. “Why?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

He took the bakery bag from her and set it on the porch step. He hoped the frosting and cream would still be good later, but they always had marshmallows and chocolate if not. Lots of both actually. Josie had done an amazing job on the dessert volcanoes.

Ollie took Piper’s hand. “Close your eyes.”

She did without hesitation or question.

Which made him narrow his eyes.

That was *way* too compliant. She wasn’t usually so trusting when he had something up his sleeve and she had no details.

“Open your mouth.”

She did it.

Oh yeah, something was up.

“Stick your tongue out,” he told her.

There was just a tiny pause then, but she still did it without question.

He reached up and took her tongue between his thumb and finger. “What’s going on?”

Her eyes flew open and she instinctively tried to pull her tongue back in.

“You know something, don’t you?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“You do too. Who spilled?”

She shook her head again. Then sighed.

He let go of her tongue. “You know about the party.”

She swallowed and nodded.

“Who told?”

“I’m not telling on anyone.”

He sighed. It didn’t matter. The party was happening. And there was a volcano. “Okay, come on.” He took her hand and they started around the side of the cabin.

Everyone in the field behind the cabins had stayed quiet all this time. But as soon as they saw Piper, a chorus of “Surprise!” rang out as if they’d been hiding behind furniture in a living room at a surprise party.

She laughed and looked up at Ollie.

He grinned down at her. “Welcome to the kick-off party for the most fun camp ever.”

“You’ve never been to camp,” she pointed out. “How would you know if this was the most fun?”

“Your brothers assured me that it is.”

“My bro—”

The entire crowd of friends had moved toward them but Piper's four younger brothers were at the front and reached her first, circling her and giving her a big group hug.

"Oh my God!" She embraced them all at once, lifting her face to Ollie's.

The look of surprise and joy in her expression made Ollie's chest tighten and he could feel his own grin stretching. That look right there was one he wanted to be responsible for over and over again for this woman.

The realization hit but it didn't feel as stunning as he would have expected.

Piper had been making his life easier and happier for five years. It might have seemed like little things inside of her overall job, but her working to find ways to make the tasks that were difficult or annoying for him easier or more pleasant meant a lot. Mixed with things like making sure he had coffee exactly the way he liked it really did make his life happier. And the way she took care of his friends, people he felt closer to than he did his own family, made him understand what it was to be loved.

Watching Piper take care of people, being one of those people, had taught him more about love than anything he'd learned from his own parents.

And he wanted to love her and make her happy in return.

Damn, he really hoped she liked his volcano.

"I can't believe you guys are here!" she told her brothers, still clearly a little stunned. She was laughing and had already hugged them each individually as well.

"Ollie called us and asked if we could miss school," one of the twins—Ollie thought it was Nathan—said. "Mom said yes, so here we are."

"He sent a private plane for us," Jacob, the sixteen-year-old, added. It was clear that had impressed them all.

Ollie wasn't going to lie. He wanted Piper's brothers to like him. And he wasn't above using *Warriors* and private

planes to do that. At least at first.

“I’m so glad you’re all here,” Piper said, suddenly sounding choked up. She looked at Ethan. “I really wanted you to see the camp in person.”

“It’s really great,” her oldest brother told her. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

A little crease appeared between her eyebrows. “Really?” She looked up at Ollie. “The activities, you mean?”

Ethan nodded. “Well, the whole theme really. I mean, the cabins are great,” he added quickly.

Ollie had been sure to give them all a tour of the camp, not just describing the activities he, Drew, Dallas, Elliot, and Dax had been working on, but the buildings and grounds as well.

Piper laughed. “They’re just typical camp cabins.” She met Ollie’s eyes. “But I’m guessing there’s nothing typical about the activities.”

“It’s really awesome,” Ethan agreed.

Ollie felt a surge of pride. But he wanted—no, he *needed*—Piper to feel the same way about what she was about to see.

And yeah, he was nervous about it.

“Piper, this is *sooooo* awesome!” Henry McCaffery had pushed to the front of the crowd, along with his two best friends, Hunter and Jack, who had tagged along tonight.

They were the same age as Piper’s twin brothers and they’d been friends within about two minutes of meeting.

“Hey, Henry,” Piper greeted. “What’s *soooo* awesome?” But she shot Ollie a grin.

“All of this!” He looked over his shoulder. “I can’t wait to come to this camp!”

Yes. Ollie was shocked by how much he loved hearing Henry say that.

But yes, he wanted Appleby kids here. He wanted this whole thing to be great for the town. Piper had envisioned it as

a place for city kids to come and appreciate nature. But this little town, and his best friends' affection for it, had gotten to him. He loved the idea of Appleby kids wanting to be here and having the time of their lives here too.

"Well, then I need to give Ollie a raise," Piper told Henry.

"You do! Have you *seen the obstacle course*?" Henry asked.

"Oh, I have. I've *done* the obstacle course," she said. "My best time is ten minutes and eighteen seconds."

Henry grinned at her. "I challenged Zoe. I'm so gonna beat her."

Piper laughed. Henry's older siblings, Zoe and Cam, were great with him. As were all of their friends. "I can't wait to see that contest," Piper said. "We should get prizes."

"*More prizes?*" Lucas asked.

Piper looked up at Ollie. "Oh, there are prizes?"

He gave her a "please" look. "Of course there are prizes. How could there not be prizes?"

She nodded with a laugh. "What was I thinking?"

"Come on, guys!" Henry said. "We need to practice."

Nathan and Lucas started across the field with Henry, Jack, and Hunter.

"What are they practicing for exactly?" Piper asked.

"Their team is going up against ours," Jacob said with a grin.

Piper lifted a brow. "Oh?"

"Teams of five," Jacob said. "Of course."

Ollie wasn't sure Piper would understand why *of course* there would be five people to a team.

"So, Ethan and I've been put with some of the other guys who've been working out here on everything." He nodded toward the cluster of kids, including Matt, Tanner, and

Landon. “Lucky for me, the cute blond wants to be on my team.”

The cute blond was Aspen, Jane Kemper’s stepsister. She was... a handful... for Jane and Jane’s sister Kelsey, but over the past few months she’d become a lot nicer and she and Kelsey had been spending more time together. She’d, apparently, been jealous of the time Kelsey was spending out here working at the camp, and with the cute boys, and had joined them the last couple of days. She’d been thrilled to be invited along to the party tonight.

Piper shook her head. “Well, don’t get distracted when you’re up there in the tree branches and jumping over mud pits, okay? The closest ER is about thirty minutes away and I don’t want you bleeding all over my car interior.”

“Got it,” Jacob said with a grin.

Ollie was again pleased by how go-with-the-flow Piper actually was. He truly believed that if one of her brothers ended up hurt and bleeding, she’d simply wrap him up, give him an ice pack, and drive him to the ER. She wouldn’t freak out. She wouldn’t lecture or yell. But she might make him scrub her car the next day if he dripped blood on her seat.

Piper was waving and grinning and saying hi to the rest of the crowd.

“Hey, before you all get busy on the obstacle course again, we’re going to light the volcano,” Ollie told the kids.

Jacob stopped mid-stride and turned back. “Oh awesome.”

Piper heard him and pivoted to face him. “*Light* the volcano?” she repeated.

He narrowed his eyes. “You emphasized ‘light’ and not ‘volcano’.”

She pressed her lips together.

“You knew about the volcano too?”

Whitney was beside Piper and she coughed. Josie turned to Grant and pretended to be in the middle of conversation with her husband.

“Wow, you guys,” Oliver told them.

“You should take it as a very positive sign about the way she feels about you that she knew about the volcano and still showed up tonight,” Whitney, ever the saleswoman, said.

Ollie looked down at Piper. She grinned up at him and nodded. Okay, that was a good point.

“Josie’s s’mores volcanoes are very cool,” Piper said.

“There’s also a bread volcano full of marinara that you can dip pepperoni-cheese sticks into,” he told her.

Her eyes widened. “I’m definitely going to need to see *that*.”

He laughed. “Big volcano first.” He was excited about this damned thing.

Piper looked out over the party. The crowd was milling around three fire pits that Drew and Dallas had assembled earlier that day. There were long tables set up with the food and drink—bright red “lava punch” included—and lawn chairs and benches made of hay bales with wooden planks laid over them.

She frowned. “I don’t see a volcano.”

“Come on.”

He took her hand and started across the party site, telling everyone to follow them as he passed them. The little crowd headed out into the darkened expanse between the party site and the stream where the obstacle course started. They’d put up tall lights out there that would soon be replaced with lights like those found on baseball fields for permanent use, but they’d turned them off before Piper arrived to maintain the surprise-party feel.

But the obstacle course would absolutely be able to be used at night as well. In fact, there were some really fun things they could do with glow sticks and glowing paintballs and “night walkers” to change the course up from day to night use.

“Okay, everyone, gather around!” Ollie called to the group as they got to the site.

If they squinted and peered about fifty feet ahead they would be able to make out the outline of the volcano. Everyone but Piper had already seen it though. But it hadn't been dark enough to light it up until now so no one had gotten the full effect.

“Ready?”

Everyone cheered, lifting their glasses, and whistling and clapping.

He grinned and turned toward Drew, who was carrying a lighted torch toward him. Piper's eyes were wide as he took the torch.

“Any last words? Warnings?” he teased.

She shook her head. But just as he started to turn away, she grabbed the front of his shirt. She pulled him down and kissed him. In front of everyone. While he was holding a torch and about to light a volcano. That he'd built on her campground. Without permission.

Yeah, he was in love with her.

He cupped the back of her head and deepened the kiss for just a moment.

Until the “ewwww!” and “Oh, come on!” and “Let's go already!” started up from the kids.

He lifted his head and looked down at her.

“Go light something on fire,” she told him.

So he did.

He touched the torch to the bottom of the volcano where they'd laid the coals. It was a lot like lighting a grill. Except that Elliot had taken it a step—or ten—further. The heat from the coals started a chemical reaction that not only heated the entire structure but also made it start smoking and made the other stuff—Ollie had no idea what it was—start to bubble and expand and would eventually boil over the top and spill down the sides like lava.

Ollie didn't know anything more about what happened inside the volcano than that, and he didn't need to. Elliot was in charge. He'd assured Ollie the whole thing was nontoxic to the humans, plants, and animals around and that a good hosing down or rainstorm would clean it up, and that's all Ollie needed to know.

Everyone *oohed* as the structure began to glow from the bottom up. The lights inside turned the dark, almost-black cone to a warm brown with an orange glow emanating from the top.

The smoke began to billow from the top and one of the kids declared it, "Super *cool!*"

Ollie looked over at Piper and saw her watching with a bemused expression. She looked a little confused frankly. It definitely wasn't the awed expression he'd been expecting.

She was standing with her brothers and Henry, Hunter, and Jack. Henry was, as usual, talking. She was nodding absently. It seemed that her brothers were also adding to the conversation here and there.

Then the lava began to spill over the top and ooze down the sides.

Again people *oohed* about it and another kid just shouted, "Yes!" in reaction.

That was exactly how he felt about it.

He figured they could light it every night after dinner and the kids could gather around. He envisioned them sitting on benches, watching the volcano and discussing times that they'd done something they didn't think they could do or something tough that had happened to them and what they'd learned from that situation.

The volcano in *Warriors of Easton* was a major challenge moment and when the characters managed to get to the top as a team, they were greatly rewarded.

He knew that this couldn't be about *Warriors*, but when Piper had shared what her brothers had learned and loved about camp, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about how

similar it was to what people told him about playing *Warriors* and how the fandom worked.

People from around the world connected in the game and found a place to belong. They learned about people with backgrounds different from their own. They sometimes met and played with someone from a country on the other side of the globe which would inspire them to look that country up and learn more.

There were tons of message boards and forums where fans got together and talked and those conversations often went in directions outside of *Warriors*.

Inside the game, they learned about teamwork and loyalty and sacrifice and people commented often about how, while it was an online game, the stories pulled them in and made them think about real life differently.

He knew, of course, after nine years of the game existing and being both praised and critiqued, that there were plenty of people who felt it was ridiculous to think a simple video game could actually make a difference in people's lives. But he'd gotten the email and letters and talked to hundreds of people at conventions telling him it was true.

It was what kept him writing the stories even when he didn't want to.

But right now, looking at Piper's face taking it all in, he wanted *her* to know and understand it. It was one of the reasons he'd made sure her brothers could be here.

Piper said something to the boys and they all grinned and ran off in the direction of the obstacle course. She watched them go. Then she turned and headed... for Dax.

Ollie watched her as Cam came up beside him.

"Pretty great, man," Cam said.

"You think?" Ollie asked absently.

"Definitely. Looks just like Mount Frenzy."

Ollie looked over. "Don't most volcanoes look alike?"

“I mean—” Cam lifted a shoulder. “So this isn’t supposed to be Mount Frenzy? Henry told me that you made it so a kid could climb it and then throw black diamonds from the top to their teammates to carry to the stream for safe passage from the water nymphs.” He looked in the direction of the stream. “I know that’s part of the obstacle course. Though Henry’s really hoping you put some kind of challenge between here and the stream.”

Ollie chuckled. “Okay, maybe it slightly resembles Mount Frenzy.”

In *Warriors of Easton*, Mount Frenzy required all five of the teammates to climb together to collect the black diamonds and they had to carry them back down while volcano wolves—wolves made of lava—and fire spirits tried to stop them. If the warriors were able to keep possession of the diamonds, the gems made their passage to the next level easier by illuminating dark paths, healing any wounds, and shrinking obstacles.

But yeah, this part of the course *might* have been inspired by that.

“It’s cool. I’m glad you’ve been able to help Piper with all of this,” Cam said.

Ollie had barely taken his eyes from his girlfriend. Yeah, she was his girlfriend. For sure. But he was wondering about her idea of how much help this really was now. She was talking to Dax and Grant both. Dax was giving her a look that said whatever she was asking him about was a surprise and Grant now held his hands up in the universal sign for “it wasn’t me.”

“Yeah, I think maybe I need to go help Dax and Grant right now actually.” He nodded in the direction of the threesome.

Cam looked intrigued. “I’ll come with you.”

“You *swear*?” Piper was asking Grant as they came up behind her.

“I didn’t know about it,” Grant told her. “Dax was the only one of us who was involved.”

“You know I didn’t talk him out of anything,” Dax said with a snort. “That’s not my thing.”

“But then... it was me.” Piper’s voice was softer and she sounded upset.

“Talked who out of what?” Ollie asked.

She gasped and swung to face him. “Ollie!”

“Hey.” He moved in closer. “Who talked who out of what?”

She pressed her lips together.

“She’s worried that—*oomph*,” Grant started and stopped when Piper swung a hand and whacked him in the stomach.

“I just...” She blew out a breath, looked around, then reached for Ollie’s hand. “Come here.”

Chapter Eighteen



She started pulling him away from the party and toward their cabin.

He let her lead him away. What was going on?

As soon as they hit the porch to the cabin he tugged on her hand, swinging her around. “Piper, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Concern knotted his gut and he frowned, stepping in close. “What’s wrong?”

The lamp beside the sofa inside the cabin was on and the soft light came through the window and gave them a little illumination out here.

“Why isn’t the volcano bigger?”

He blinked at her. That was definitely not what he’d been expecting her to say. “Um, it’s just... a good size.”

“It should be bigger.”

“It should?”

“Shouldn’t it?”

He looked at her carefully. The shadows still made it hard to read her expression clearly. “Why do you think it should be bigger?”

“It’s supposed to be Mount Frenzy, right?”

He hadn't been expecting that either. At all. "I thought you didn't play *Warriors*."

"I don't. But that's what Henry and Nathan said."

Ollie nodded. "I'll admit it does bear a little bit of a resemblance."

"Most volcanoes don't have black diamonds at the top, do they?" She crossed her arms.

He tucked his hands into his front pockets. "So the kids filled you in on Mount Frenzy." He wasn't sure what she was getting at here but she was upset, it seemed.

"They did. But even before that, I was expecting it to be bigger and just... more."

"You had expectations for my volcano?"

"Of course I did."

"And they were that it would be bigger and, what else?"

"Shouldn't it at least *really* erupt?" she asked. She dropped her arms, seemingly exasperated. "I mean, it's short, Ollie. And it just kind of... *oozes*. And it's not even that hot!"

He stared at her.

"And if it's supposed to be Mount Frenzy, shouldn't it be big enough that more than one kid can climb it? Isn't the point that the teams have to scale the mountain *together*? Henry said that all the major challenges in *Warriors* have to do with teamwork. That there's no way to get to the top of Mount Frenzy by yourself. Unless you have..." She frowned as if trying to recall what Henry had told her. "Some spell to make you fly. But those are really rare and only for..." She frowned again. "Searchers?"

"Seekers," Ollie supplied.

"Right, only Seekers can use those spells and they don't last very long and if you do use that to get to the top you might end up stranded there and you can't even really get *down* from Mount Frenzy alone. Plus you can't take as many diamonds as

you can with five people so getting across the..." Again she frowned.

"The Moaning Barrens," he filled in. He felt the corner of his mouth twitching, trying to curl into a smile. But he wasn't entirely amused. She was upset and he didn't completely understand why, but it made him curious and feel like hugging her and also a little upset himself. She didn't like his volcano.

"Moaning Barrens," she repeated with a nod.

"But I'm probably going to add the Infernal Prairie," he said. "The field seems more like a prairie than a barren wasteland."

Even in the faint light, he could see her eyes round. "You can't just change barren wastelands to a prairie."

"Why not?" He could, literally, do whatever he wanted in *Warriors*. That was really good for a guy who had a hard time making plans that were too long-term. If he needed six seasons, instead of four, he just added two more. If days needed more hours, he added them. There weren't a lot of rules in *Easton*.

"There could be a period of fertility," he said, thinking out loud. "Lots of rain. Some wind creature could bring seeds. Or a goddess could come along and reclaim the wasteland from the ghouls. Or someone could cast a spell over the lands. That would take a lot of points from someone and I'd have to come up with why they'd want those lands to be productive, but I can come up with something."

She was staring at him now.

"You would change *Warriors* to match up with the campground?"

Oh... well... He shrugged. "It would make it more fun for the kids here."

"Are you turning my camp into a *Warriors of Easton* theme park?"

Now he did let his lips curl. "Not really. I mean, theme park indicates rides and stuff. But this could be a training

camp. If we add archery and some fencing and things like that to the physical aspects of the obstacle course, it could fit.

“But we can also have them spend time in other team-building activities and time in groups learning and talking about courage and loyalty and empathy and leadership.

“In *Warriors* everything is done in teams of five where each person has a specific role and they master their talents and learn about how those gifts fit into the bigger picture and how everyone has a place and plays an important role. We could do something like that here.”

He took a breath. “Drew said that there are some teachers and counselors that might enjoy being a part of something like this in the summers. So the camp would include physical activity but it could also include mental and emotional aspects as well.”

Piper’s mouth was actually hanging open now.

Ollie took a step forward and cupped her face, pressing his thumb under her chin to close her mouth.

“We can’t call it *Warriors of Easton*, of course,” he told her. “We sold the trademark and everything. But we can still incorporate the important parts of *Warriors*. I’ve already bounced some things around with Cam. He said we can call it a warrior training camp and hint that it’s like *Warriors of Easton*. With my name attached to it—and Dax’s... he said he’d love to be involved—people will probably infer a lot. But Plus Gaming can’t come after us if we don’t use the exact name or logo or anything.”

She still didn’t say anything.

“You building a camp is amazing,” he told her. “I love what you want to do here and I wanted to add to it.”

Finally she wet her lips. “You made it *a lot* more.”

“I did.” It was kind of what he did. And for the first time he felt a niggles of *uh-oh*. “It still has everything you wanted it to have. All the physical activities—they’ll still swim and stuff.” He paused. “Okay, they might not fish. Fishing is *really* boring.”

“They don’t have to fish,” she said softly.

He grinned. He dropped his hand from her face but slid his hand down her arm to link their fingers. “Good. But everything else—the physical activity and the friendship building and learning about other people and teamwork and all of that is definitely still here. It’s just...”

“Turned up a bit,” she filled in.

He nodded. “Yeah. Turned up. It’s got some flair now.”

“Yeah.” She blew out a breath. “It sure does.”

“Is that a good thing?” He really couldn’t tell what was going through her head.

“I think so,” she said slowly. “But, Ollie. The volcano should be *bigger*.”

“Yeah, why did you think that before even hearing all these plans?”

“I completely expected you to have built a gigantic volcano that even you and Dax could climb. And that it would actually *erupt*.”

He laughed softly. “We can’t have actual hot liquid spilling out on kids.” He paused. “Can we?”

“Well, can’t it at least be *warm*?” she asked. “Not hot enough to cause burns of course, but does that stuff in yours now even get warm?”

“A little. But no, not really.”

“It should be warm. And it needs to look more like lava. And come out faster. It needs to be something that they have to actually climb around and avoid. Or it should be slippery or *something*. It has to be at least a *little* hazardous.”

He stared at her. He was freaking *marveling* at her right now. She *wanted* hazardous? That should not be a turn-on, he knew. And it wasn’t that she was now entertaining the idea of putting little kids in danger that was getting to him. It was that she was on board with his crazy idea to turn her camp into a warrior training camp. It was a little out there. He knew that.

But it was different and fun and dammit, he'd rediscovered his creativity and enthusiasm while working on it. His writing had never been better and getting his hands on things like an actual Mount Frenzy had focused him and excited him in a way he hadn't felt since the early days of writing *Warriors*.

"Let me get this straight... you are insisting on a bigger volcano with more hazardous lava," he finally said to her.

She nodded. "If you're going to put a volcano in the middle of a campground and call it a warrior training facility then the volcano better be *big* and at least slightly problematic."

Problematic. Piper was asking him to make something *more* problematic. He felt his grin growing.

"And I think that—"

He cut her off with his mouth on hers. He wanted to hear everything she thought. He really did. He wanted to brainstorm and talk all of this through.

But right at this very moment he *needed* to kiss her.

She'd said she wasn't good at the brainstorming part. She wasn't the creative that could come up with ideas out of the blue. She couldn't take the idea of summer camp and turn it into a crazy-fun warrior training camp. But once *he* did, she could absolutely add to it and embellish it and point out areas that needed to be different or better or changed. Like the volcano.

This was going to be perfect. This camp was going to kick ass. They were going to be an amazing team.

But first he needed to kiss her.

And as she gave a little moan against his lips and arched closer, he knew he had to do more than kiss her.

This was a celebration. The camp was the epitome of how their personalities and energies and talents fit together.

He needed to fit together with her in every way. Right now.

Their friends were all busy with the party. There was an obstacle course and tons of food to keep them occupied for a little bit. There were enough people out there that they might not even notice that he and Piper were gone.

He started backing her up toward the cabin door.

She didn't resist for even a moment.

She walked backward, kissing him, tugging his shirt up his torso. He reached behind her and pushed the door open. As she stepped across the threshold, he grabbed the bottom of his shirt and stripped it off. Their mouths momentarily separated, she took him in.

As always, she looked at him with a combination of lust and love that made his gut knot and his whole body tighten with want. He wanted her body, but he also wanted that look on her face and every bit of emotion behind it. Always.

“Take your clothes off.”

“There are a lot of people outside.”

He crossed to the lamp and switched it off. That way no one would be able to see in the windows. “I don't care.”

She didn't either, apparently, because she started stripping.

By the time he'd backed her up to the bed, they were both naked. They tumbled to the mattress together. He kissed her long and deep as his hand stroked from her shoulder to her hip.

“God, I love how you smell,” he told her gruffly, dragging his mouth along her jaw to her neck. He kissed his way to her ear. “I love how you feel. How you sound.”

She arched into him as he licked along the soft skin just behind her ear.

“I especially love how you sound when you're telling me that my crazy idea should be even bigger and crazier.”

He felt her stiffen against him for just a moment. He started to pull back, but she wrapped her arms around him and kept him close, hooking a leg around his thigh too.

“I love how you’ve been this past week, Ollie,” she said softly. “You’ve been so happy. So open and enthusiastic and... unleashed.”

He thought about that word. *Unleashed*. He had been. He’d been outside, no tie around his neck, the writing flowing, his creativity not just rolling but actually *seeing* things come to life.

It had been like how he felt when he saw Dax’s graphics on screen. When he saw a story make it from his head to actual colorful, moving scenes on screen. But this had been even better. He’d been *making* these things. The volcano of course, but also the slide that mimicked the Forgotten Falls waterfall and carried warriors from one side of the stream to the other after they survived the Hermithill Chasm—which, of course, he’d have to rename.

They’d also added a rope bridge to mimic a perilous invisible bridge in *Warriors*, a tunnel that was similar to the Precarious Pass in *Warriors*, and a spot where participants would have to fight off gigantic scorpions. The scorpions were fiberglass and Elliot was still working on the mechanics but it was basically a big dart board where warriors had to shoot arrows to get the scorpion head to retreat so they could pass.

The whole thing was just so cool. And they had even more plans.

He’d really enjoyed every minute over the past couple of weeks. And this woman was so much of it. Coming home to her each night had been heavenly. Keeping everything a secret from her had been hard because he knew that she’d help make it even better. She’d think of things he hadn’t considered. She’d help him figure out how to incorporate the leadership trainings. She’d figure out how to get the word out about the camp.

And, best of all, she’d look at him with that familiar what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you and you’re-amazing and I-want-to-tear-your-clothes-off-and-ride-you-in-your-office-chair.

Yeah, he hadn’t realized what that last look actually was until recently, and he didn’t have an office chair out here, but

they'd absolutely made do with... just about every other surface present in the cabin and just outside the cabin. And now that he knew what that look meant, he wasn't sure how he'd missed it for the past two years.

He was never going to get over it now.

"Unleashed, huh?" he asked, stroking his big palm down her thigh and then wrapping it around her knee and bringing her legs apart.

"Yeah."

Her breath caught as he started kissing his way down her neck to her collarbone and then to the upper curve of her breast.

"I like that word." He swirled his tongue around her nipple.

The tip drew tight, begging him for more attention. He licked and then sucked. She moaned and arched closer, her hand in his hair, pressing him closer.

"I do too," she said, her voice breathless. "I like you unleashed. I like you when you can do whatever you want, whatever you feel. No one should hold you back, Ollie."

He moved his attention to her other breast, licking and sucking that nipple as well as he teased the first with his fingers. He knew attention to her nipples made her hot and wet faster than almost anything and he needed her hot and wet. He needed her to *need* him the way he needed her right now.

"You're amazing." Her voice was ragged and her hips were lifting against his torso where he lay across her, as if seeking more pressure and friction.

He was going to deliver on both of those.

"You need to just let go," she went on.

He kissed his way down her stomach, one hand still teasing a nipple while the other stroked her thigh. He lifted her leg even higher and wider, making room for his shoulders between her thighs.

She gasped, knowing exactly where he was headed. She did nothing to stop him though.

“Tell me more,” he said against her belly button. “Tell me how you want me to let go, how I should be *unleashed*.”

“You need to be free to just run with all of your ideas and enthusiasm,” she said. “You don’t need people telling you to be careful or to rein it in or to take it down a notch.”

Her voice was thick but she was obviously able to form clear thoughts.

He didn’t want her forming clear thoughts. While he appreciated her sentiments, he wanted her thinking of nothing but his tongue and hands and cock. Able to only utter his name and maybe a couple of *mores* and a *harder* or two.

He moved lower, spreading her legs, and kissed his way up her inner thigh.

“Piper?” he murmured against the soft, sweet skin where her thigh curved into her pussy lips.

“Yeah?”

That answer was definitely more breathless.

“I’m going to unleash some enthusiasm on you right now, okay?”

“Oh God,” she choked out. “Yes.”

He very enthusiastically licked over her clit and then lower, tasting her fully. He licked and swirled as she writhed against him. He held her thighs open as she arched against him, gasping and chanting his name. Her hands fisted the sheets next to her. He teased, talking dirty to her as he took her closer and closer to the crest. Then he slipped two fingers into her wet heat as he sucked on her clit and she came, bucking against his mouth, calling his name louder.

If anyone was on the porch or just under the window on this side of the cabin, they’d hear.

And he hoped they did.

When she'd come down from the high a bit, he kissed back up her body, unable to stop stroking his hands over her soft skin and curves. "I am most definitely enthusiastic about that."

She rolled toward him, wrapping herself around him. "I appreciate your enthusiasm there very much."

He took her mouth in a deep kiss, sure that she could taste herself on his tongue. She kissed him back, her tongue meeting his, stroke for stroke. That was hot as hell.

Mouths still fused, he rolled to reach for the drawer in the table beside the bed. He found a condom without looking.

She plucked it from his fingers before he could open it. Pulling back, she gave him a sly, seductive look. She tore it open and tossed the package to the floor. Then she reached for him. She circled his cock with one hand, stroking up and down, nearly making his eyes cross. He instantly went from incredibly hard to painfully hard.

He'd been hard since she'd told him his volcano needed to be bigger. His need for her had only grown as she'd insisted that he should make it a true Mount Frenzy that could be climbed, and then listened with the awe he'd been wanting and needing as he'd described his ideas for the camp.

This was so much more than physical need. So much more than lust. He could have put a camp like this together with someone else, he supposed, but it wouldn't mean this much. Doing this with Piper, being able to surprise her and go beyond her expectations and give her something to be awed about, hearing her say he should go for it, big and bold, was so much more than he'd even known he needed.

Creating *Warriors* and then building it into an empire of sorts with his best friends had been the best thing in his life. Hands down.

Until now.

Doing this with Piper was even more than that. Because she would steady him. And she'd grow *with* him. The guys had outgrown him. They still loved him, he knew that. They wanted him to succeed. They'd help him however they could.

They'd always be there. But they had lives that had branched off from him.

Piper's life was intersecting with his. The branches from here would be *their* branches.

That thought made the strongest need he'd ever felt surge through him. He needed this woman on every level and she needed him too. Not for *Warriors*. She barely knew anything about the game. She needed *him*.

"Piper." He grasped her wrist. "Now."

She must have heard something in his voice or seen something in his expression, because her lips parted and her eyes rounded and she started rolling the condom down his length.

The second it was all the way on, he rolled her to her back and braced himself over her.

"You asked for unleashed," he reminded her.

She nodded.

"You ready?"

"So ready."

He lifted one of her legs, spreading her wide, then thrust, sliding deep.

They both groaned and Ollie felt the pleasure coursing through him from the soles of his feet to his scalp.

"God, girl."

"I know." Her fingers dug into his back. "This is so good."

"So. Fucking. Good."

He started to move, his thrusts as slow and deep as possible.

But soon she was lifting against him and encouraging him to go faster.

"More, Ollie. More."

He wanted to give her more. More of anything she wanted. Anything she needed. More of everything.

He picked up the pace, thrusting harder.

“Yes!” Piper wrapped one leg around him, her heel digging into his ass.

He loved that she liked it hard and he could go for it without worrying about hurting her or scaring her off.

He went for it, pumping into her hard, fast, deep. The knowledge that he could just *let go* was incredible and intensified everything and he was soon barreling toward climax.

“Piper, honey—”

“Yes! Ollie!”

She came a second later and as her pussy milked him, Ollie felt the waves washing over him and he surrendered, coming hard as well.

He relished every second, holding himself over her as the ripples of physical and emotional pleasure washed through him.

Finally, he sagged to the mattress beside her, pulling her up against his side, his arm over her stomach, their legs tangled.

Piper was breathing hard and they just lay together, their hearts thundering.

It was nearly five minutes before she spoke.

“I’m sorry.”

He gave a soft laugh and kissed her shoulder. “Nothing to be sorry about there.”

He heard her swallow.

“No. I mean... I’m sorry for... making you hold back on the volcano.”

She had her hand resting on his forearm where it was draped over her stomach. She rubbed back and forth.

“Holding me back on the volcano?” he repeated. “What are you talking about?”

“I know that you would have wanted to build a huge volcano that spewed... like red candy liquid all over every three hours or something and Grant told me that *he* didn’t talk you out of it and Dax, of course, didn’t and that... leaves me. I’m the other one who pulls you back from stuff and who talks you out of big ideas and... I’m just sorry. I’ve been thinking all night about how often I’ve done that over the years and it’s a lot.”

She paused and took a breath.

He started to respond but she went on.

“I know that’s what I was hired for. It’s how it was set up from the beginning. And it’s what I’m good at. I’ve been doing it for my brothers forever. I was praised growing up whenever I could manage the boys or control them. And then whenever I could keep you on track or rein you in, it was a source of satisfaction. I knew that Grant and Aiden, and even Cam to some extent, appreciated that. I made things easier on them. And I took pride in that. I felt like I was contributing to the business by keeping the ‘delicate genius’ focused and working and not causing headaches.”

Her voice sounded tight now.

Just like Ollie’s gut felt. He didn’t respond as she paused now. He didn’t know what to say.

She wasn’t wrong. She’d been hired to keep him on track and out of trouble. That had been the entire purpose for Grant putting the ad out to hire an assistant.

At first, Ollie had balked at it. He’d been slightly insulted actually, even as he acknowledged that he did need some help.

But it had taken only about a week—maybe more like three days—for him to realize that Piper gave him comfort and... relief. He could relax with her around because he didn’t have to try as hard to keep his shit together. She was there to help him. And she did. She helped him so much. With a smile that was, at first, friendly and, over time, turned affectionate.

And her sense of humor and the bright colors she wore and the way she smelled and just the way she made everything easier for them all. She made things *better*. Piper made everything better.

They all breathed easier when she was around. And when his friends were happy and more relaxed, that helped Ollie too.

“You *were* contributing by doing that,” he finally said, his voice gruff.

“Maybe. Kind of. But I shouldn’t have been so rigid about it. I should have realized that I was holding you back.”

“I never felt like you were holding me back.”

But something niggled in the back of his mind.

“Liar,” she said softly.

He tightened his arm around her, suddenly feeling like she was pulling away. She wasn’t. Not physically anyway, but the urge to hold her close was strong.

“I never resented it,” he said after a moment. “I never felt like you were doing anything but keeping me, and the company, safe.”

Her hand stopped moving on his arm. Ollie felt his gut tighten. Trepidation. That was definitely what he was feeling.

“But I was holding you back. I was listening but I wasn’t really paying attention. I watched you with the guys. I listened to what they worried about. *I* worried too. I wanted to make things comfortable for you and help you be more productive. I found red folders and set alarms and nagged.” She pulled in a long breath. “They weren’t the ones I should have been listening to. They sold Fluke. They sold off *Warriors*. *Warriors* was *yours*, Ollie. You created it. Without it, none of the rest would have happened. But they said, ‘let’s sell’ and you went along. Just like when I say, ‘yes you have to do this conference call’ or ‘you have to quit goofing around’ or ‘get back to work.’ We all talk at you a lot, and you listen—mostly—but *we* don’t listen much.”

He frowned. That all *sounded* true, he knew, but it didn't feel right. Exactly.

"It wasn't until we came out here and *I* let down a little that I realized all of this," she said. "It wasn't until the whole project was mine and not about Fluke and I didn't have to do a certain job for other people, that I relaxed and really *saw* you and heard you. And then I realized what you really need."

She paused. Ollie stayed quiet. He had no idea what to say. The sense of trepidation wouldn't leave him though.

She rolled toward him. "I used to imagine myself as the person who was holding onto the string and you were the big, bright balloon that was trying to float away. I thought of myself as the thing keeping you tethered."

He swallowed.

"But these past several days, out here, I started thinking of myself as more of a parachute. Your feet are up off the ground, nothing keeps you down, but when you take those big leaps, I'm there to make sure you get back to earth safely and softly."

He felt his chest tighten. He liked that metaphor. So why couldn't he shake the ball of dread in his stomach? "I like that. I've felt that out here too. You've let me go. You've trusted me. You've secured the wobbly things. You've tightened a few loose screws. Literally and metaphorically. But you've let me do my thing."

She gave him the tiniest of smiles.

"And you haven't said no about anything."

"I said no about the rings of fire. And the alligators."

"You haven't said no about anything I was serious about."

"But..." She wet her lips. "The thing is, in your head I did."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Even if I didn't say no out loud, I've gotten to you. Me holding you back has become a habit. You could have—would have—built an enormous volcano, but something held you

back. And it wasn't Grant. Which pretty much leaves me. And my voice of reason in the back of your mind."

"Your voice of reason is necessary, Piper. I love it. I need it. It makes me feel... relieved. Comforted."

She shook her head. "That volcano should be bigger, Ollie."

"So I'll build another one. A bigger one."

"But I hate that you didn't in the first place."

He started to speak again, but she lifted a hand and covered his mouth.

"I thought I was in love with you. I thought I was the perfect woman for you."

Ollie felt his heart squeeze. "Piper—"

"But how could I love you if I was holding you back? If I thought my role in your life was to keep you tethered?" She lifted her hand to his cheek, rubbing the palm over his beard.

He'd let his beard grow while he'd been out here at camp and he liked the new look. It felt less buttoned up and expected. He also knew she liked the feel of it on her skin. Like the skin of her neck. And breasts. And inner thighs.

He rubbed his cheek against her hand. "Your role in my life is exactly what it's always been. To be my partner in making sure the ideas are big, but realistic and safe and good."

"But that's not what I've done." She looked genuinely sad. "I don't think your ideas should be *realistic*. You specialize in amazing. That's what you do. You write an amazing, fantastical world that means so much to so many and it's definitely not *realistic*."

She was still cupping his face, but he could feel her pulling back emotionally.

"You took a simple campground and made it into a warrior training camp." A tiny smile curled her lips. "I would have never thought of any of this. You started from disc golf and got to a *volcano* in a week's time."

“We started on the volcano after just a few days,” he said. Though he wasn’t sure why.

She nodded. “Exactly. My ideas for this camp were very realistic. They were very straightforward. The usual camp-type stuff. And my brothers have been to camp before and *loved* it. But this? *This* made them light up. Even Ethan. This is exciting to everyone from the eleven-year-olds to the twenty-nine-year-olds.”

“Well, if you’re talking about Dax, it’s not like he’s a typical twenty-nine-year-old.”

She smiled again. “True. But I could tell even Grant thought this was all amazing. This is beyond anything my brothers have done at camp before. And you have plans to make it even *more*. And it’s not just the camp,” she added when he started to reply. “It’s everything you do. From wanting to add acrobats to a baking contest to the gag gifts you get the guys at Christmas to... how you kiss.” She sighed. “You do everything with this extra energy and this bigger-than-life feel and...”

He wanted to respond. He wanted to kiss her now that she mentioned that. But he needed her to finish her thought. Even though he knew he didn’t want to hear what she was going to say.

“You need someone who encourages that. Who appreciates that. Who doesn’t shake her head and roll her eyes and try to put your life and ideas into folders and onto schedules.”

He frowned. “You appreciate it all. That’s what you’re saying, right? That you think this is all good and amazing? That you’ve seen that over this past week?”

“Yes.”

He braced himself for the “but.”

She swallowed hard. “But how can I say I’m in love with you and we should be together when I’ve really *just* gotten to know you? The way we’ve been for the past nine days out here at camp has been new. It’s not how we’ve been for the

past five years. Or even the past two when I thought I was in love with you. This way of being together is new.”

She was right. He knew that. She’d told him she was in love with him eighteen days ago in his office. At the time, he’d rejected the idea, thinking that was crazy. Even as a part of him had grabbed onto it and been unable to let go of it.

Now, hearing her say that maybe it *wasn’t* true, that she couldn’t be in love with him, sent a bolt of panic racing through him.

He wanted her to be in love with him. He wanted her to want to be with him.

Of course, he did.

Because *he* was in love with *her*.

But that had happened over the past nine days. As he’d gotten to really know her. He’d learned about her family and her “real” side—yes, the one that wore blue jeans and tennis shoes—and that she could put together a plan for a kids’ camp as easily as she could pull together a big community baking contest.

And maybe most importantly, he’d truly realized that she didn’t take care of him because of *him*, because she thought he was a dumbass who couldn’t find his own way home (even though the first time he’d driven back to the hotel in Dubuque from Appleby, he’d ended up on the wrong highway going the wrong direction for nearly thirty minutes, before he stopped and called her and she’d given him the address for his GPS). She took care of him because that was *her*. She was a natural-born caregiver.

She was attracted to him. Obviously. Sex with Piper was the best he’d ever had. Turned out, really knowing and liking the person you were naked with made sex really, really good. Loving that person and trusting them and being able to be himself completely with her made it phenomenal.

But, still, she had a point.

He’d gotten to really know her over the past nine days out here together. She’d let him be himself and he’d found his

passion for *Warriors* again.

She was just figuring this all out. Who he *really* was, what it was like to be with him, how they fit.

“This is interesting,” he finally said.

“It’s *interesting*?”

“It is.”

“Which part?” she asked with a frown.

“The part where *I* actually fell in love with *you* first.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He nodded. “I’m in love with you. I’ve fallen in love with you over these past nine days. Our history over the past five years has been a part of it, sure. But I’ve definitely fallen for you, for real, since coming out here.”

Her eyes got shiny as if she was on the verge of tears. She blinked rapidly. “But I haven’t been who you need me to be.”

“You have though. I’ve been free to do everything I need to do, everything I want to do. I’ve dreamed and planned and created.” He reached up to cup her cheek now. “And then I come home at night and we talk and laugh and make love. It’s been perfect.”

“But it’s not real life out here.”

“There’s nothing out here that we can’t have for real all the time, Piper.”

“I still told you to be careful and told Drew to watch out for you and I made the kids redo parts of the obstacle course.” She shook her head. “I can’t just let you be you. You deserve that.”

“*I* deserve someone who doesn’t care if I set something on fire?” He narrowed his eyes when she started to reply. “And you *know* the chances of me setting something on fire are good.”

She pressed her lips together.

“And all you did on the obstacle course was make it better. You made them secure some unstable parts. *That* is exactly what I need. I need to be able to *do* big, fun, crazy things while having someone there to make it all stable.”

She was blinking fast again.

“You are my parachute,” he said, stroking his thumb over her cheek. “That’s exactly what you are. You are the reason I can even consider jumping in the first place.”

She just stared at him, her breathing a little ragged.

The sound of his phone ringing suddenly erupted in the quiet.

He frowned. Everyone he knew was here at the camp. Well, mostly.

He let it ring again.

“Get it,” she urged, nudging him back.

He sighed and rolled, getting up and going to grab his pants from the floor a few steps away. He pulled his phone out of the pocket and looked at it. It was Cam.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“We have a little problem. Where are you?”

“Close. What’s up?”

“The volcano... broke.”

“What do you mean it *broke*?”

“Well, you and Elliot really should have told us that there was a weight limit on it.”

“What did you guys do?” Ollie asked. He was torn between laughing and rubbing the middle of his forehead—the way Piper and Grant often did when *he* said things like “we have a problem.”

“Dax and Aiden were racing to the top and...”

“Never mind. I’ll be there in a minute.”

He disconnected and turned back to Piper.

She was still in bed, the sheet covering her curves but lots of bare skin and tousled dark hair highlighted against the white linens.

He knew what he had to do. He had to show her, in a big, Ollie-like way, that he was *fine*. That he was going to be able to do and be everything he wanted to do and be, with her right by his side. That she absolutely did not hold him back. That he knew she'd be there to cheer him on and support him and, yes, love him even as she made sure his landings were safe and soft.

Had he been held back the past few years? Yeah, he had been. Not just because of her. But he hadn't been *fully* go-for-it, dream-big Oliver. Not the way he wanted to be. Not the way she wanted him to be.

He'd wanted to make good decisions and choices for his friends' sake, for their businesses' sake. He'd wanted to do his part to make Fluke stable and solid. And that meant *Warriors* had to consistently be good so it would sell well. The safest way to be consistently good was to not take too many crazy risks.

He'd saved the risks for his personal life and free time. Wading in the Roman fountains, sky diving, rock climbing.

But now... he was free.

The guys weren't dependent on Fluke entirely anymore. *Warriors* wasn't central to their lives and their financial security anymore.

And for the first time, he realized that was awesome.

He'd been bemoaning that fact—to himself anyway—since they'd sold to Plus Gaming, but now he could see that it took all the pressure off. He didn't have to worry about his friends. They were all good.

Now he could take some real risks and dream big.

“The guys broke the volcano,” he told Piper, stepping into his jeans and then crossing to the bed. He put a knee on the mattress and leaned in. He took her face in his hands and

kissed her deeply. “I’m going to go check on what’s going on, but I’ll be back.”

She nodded. She almost looked relieved at the interruption.

Well, if she thought she could just call this a breakup and they’d be done, she was very wrong.

“I’ll come back out too,” she said as she slid to the other side of the bed to get up. “The party’s not over and we should be out there.”

“Piper.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Yeah?”

“I love you.”

She pulled in a quick breath.

Yeah, he could relate to the surprise, and pleasure, those three words could send through you when you weren’t used to them yet. “I…”

She didn’t have to say it right now. She’d said it a lot before he’d been able to say it back, when he was still figuring things out. And if she wasn’t sure right now, or had to work through some things, that was fine.

He knew how to prove to her it was all going to be great.

He needed to show her he wasn’t holding back, he was going to be unleashed, and he knew just where to start.

And he’d make her fall in love with him for real.

“It’s okay,” he told her gruffly. “We’ve been working on this for five years. You can take your time with that.”

She looked sad before she gave him a little smile. “So you’re going to be the grown-up now? The patient, reasonable one?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Should we try it?”

“I mean... I suddenly want a *bigger* volcano in the middle of my peaceful, basic kids’ campground so... stranger things have happened.”

Ollie had to admit, he was feeling good about things as they dressed and headed back to the party.

Even though the woman he was now for sure in love with was not in love with him after all.

Chapter Nineteen



He was gone.

Piper awakened alone the morning after the party and she was relieved to find that Ollie wasn't in the cabin.

They'd come to bed separately. Not completely on purpose, but she'd been happy to avoid further conversation about how she wasn't the right woman for him after all.

Their guests and the cleanup from the party had kept them up until late. Ollie had worked with the guys to get the volcano guts cleaned up and the outer shell dismantled and hauled up to Drew's workshop.

Piper had needed to get her brothers and their new friends—Henry, Hunter, and Jack as well as Matthew, Tanner, Landon, and a couple other guys who'd helped with the camp—settled into other cabins for the night. It was a great chance to have kids “trying out” the camp. They were going to sleep in the cabins, shower and use the bathroom building facilities, and she and Drew were going to see if the bigger kitchen in the cabin they'd decided would house the counselors could handle breakfast for everyone. Then Henry's mom and dad were going to come get the younger kids and the teens were going to head out. Tomorrow Piper was going to take her brothers to the airport for the private plane ride home.

Piper rolled over and stared at the ceiling. She didn't want to get up.

She finally had a camp full of kids and she should be eager to see what they thought of the cabins and if the showers were

working and she should get started on pancakes.

But she didn't want to get up and face the first day where she realized Ollie could do better than her.

She was still reeling from the fact that she couldn't actually be really in love with Ollie. And the confusion that came from that realization because, *dammit*, it really *felt* like she was in love with him. And the feeling of sadness that she couldn't be what he needed.

She was an organizer. She wasn't the creative type. She was a planner. She was careful. She tightened the loose screws, as he said, literally and figuratively.

And she was keeping him from building volcanoes.

The knock on her cabin door roused her.

She blew out a breath and threw the covers back. "Just a second!" She pulled on yoga pants and a hoodie over her tank and padded to the door.

Drew was on her porch.

"Hey." He didn't give her his usual big smile.

"Hey. I can be ready to make breakfast in ten minutes," she told him, pulling her fingers through her hair.

He frowned. "Oh, uh. We already did that."

"What? You already did what?"

"We already did breakfast."

She looked behind him, then behind her, then at the clock over the kitchen sink. She felt a jolt of surprise. "It's ten a.m.?"

"Yeah."

She looked back at Drew. "I slept through breakfast and everyone leaving?"

"Yeah."

She peered at him. "What's going on? Why didn't you wake me up?"

“Ollie said not to.”

Even the mention of his name made a pain stab her under her ribs on the left side. “He helped with breakfast?” she guessed.

“Yeah.”

She narrowed her eyes. Drew wasn’t really a one-syllable-answer kind of guy. “Why do you look like you need to tell me something that you don’t want to tell me? Was everything okay? Did the kids hate staying out here? Did someone get bitten by a snake or something?”

Drew’s shoulders relaxed and he actually smiled. “No snake bites.”

“Okay, then what’s going on?”

“Breakfast was great. Though Ollie thinks your pancakes are better.”

She nodded. “I’m sure they are.”

Drew’s smile grew. “The kids loved staying out here. The showers worked. Everything is great.”

“But?”

“Ollie left.”

Her heart kicked hard. “Left?”

“Yeah. He took my truck to Dubuque.”

She took a breath. “He went back to Dubuque.” That could mean a lot of things.

“To the airport.”

Okay, that was more specific. “Did he say why?”

“Said he had something he needed to do.”

She took another deep breath. Then nodded. Ollie did stuff like this. This wasn’t the first time he’d just left and told them all why later. “Okay.”

Drew didn’t look convinced. “Really?”

“This is... Ollie.” Yes, they all enabled him with that excuse to an extent. But the truth was, it just *was* Ollie. He didn’t plan ahead all the time or think through consequences, but he had good intentions and big dreams.

He also had the money, resources, and connections to not end up penniless on a dark street in a strange city alone in a storm. Or something.

Probably.

She thought about their conversation the night before and made herself breathe deep again. Twice.

She didn’t want to hold him back. She wanted him to be *him*. Fully. Unrestrained. Without any voices whispering in his ear about being careful or worrying.

She wanted to be his parachute. The thing that made it safe for him to jump.

She didn’t think she’d really been pulling that off the way she should, but that was what she wanted. And he seemed to think she was that.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” she nodded. She focused on Drew. “I’ll make sure it’s okay.”

“I got the impression he didn’t want you to know what he was up to.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s probably true,” she said.

He’d told her he loved her. He’d insisted she was what he wanted and needed.

He wasn’t upset. He was planning something.

Probably something really over the top.

The volcano had energized him. Everything she’d said about it not being big enough and crazy enough had been true.

She’d driven out to the campground excited, anticipating something huge and excessive. Something wildly imaginative.

She’d been disappointed. She wouldn’t deny it. That volcano had been kind of cool, but it had not been an Ollie

volcano. She'd had a knot in her stomach from the second she'd seen it until, well, right now.

Holding him back had never been her intention, but it's what had happened and she hated it. She might have hurt his feelings a little bit last night, but if it pushed him to go bigger and be confident, then it was okay.

She didn't need to know what he was doing exactly. She just needed to be sure he had a soft landing spot when he came back down to earth.

"I've got this," she assured Drew.

"Anything I can do to help?"

She really liked Drew. He was a good guy. She probably needed to set him up with someone.

"Maybe keep my brothers busy for just a little longer while I make some calls and take a shower?"

"They're down at the obstacle course," he said. "I'll go check on them."

They didn't really need checked on, she knew. But it would make Drew feel like he was helping her. "Thanks."

Piper swung the door shut and went straight for her phone. She dialed Dax's number. "Are you with Ollie?" she asked when he picked up.

"Uh, no."

"But you know where he is?"

"Yes."

Dax's short answers were as unusual as Drew's. She rolled her eyes. "You don't have to tell me what he's doing. But if he's going to Chicago, he's not going to have any food at his apartment and the heat's been turned way down all winter and the place will be freezing. He might not have linens on his bed either."

"Oh... right."

She shook her head. “I’ll have the building manager turn the thermostat up and have food delivered and see if his previous housekeeper will stop by before he gets there.”

“How did you know that’s where he was going?” Dax asked.

She thought about that. “I’m not sure.” She frowned. “I guess because that’s one place he’d go alone. And he only goes to New York or San Francisco when he needs inspiration, and he’s not stuck on anything right now.”

Dax gave a little laugh. “You really do know him.”

“I’ve been paying attention.”

Dax hesitated, then said, “I offered to go with him. He was adamant about doing this on his own.”

That was unusual. Ollie didn’t really go on adventures alone. Maybe this wasn’t an adventure.

But she didn’t think this *wasn’t* an adventure. He was happy. In love.

Her heart squeezed and her breath caught at that.

She’d been mostly ignoring that he’d said that. Because it was unfair to think that he’d fallen for her just when she’d realized she wasn’t good for him.

But he’d said it. He’d told her he’d fallen for her. And it hadn’t sounded crazy. They’d gotten to know each other. He’d spent real time with her, listening to her, getting to know more about her, being around her outside of the office, without her functioning as his assistant.

They’d essentially been dating for these past nine days. And he’d fallen for her.

That made sense.

Dammit.

But if he thought he was in love, he wouldn’t just run off on some spontaneous adventure in an attempt to entertain himself or blow off steam.

Ollie's previous adventures hadn't been about being bored or having too much time and money on his hands or because he was allergic to responsibility or consequences.

Those were the way he could take chances and let his imagination go without it negatively impacting *Warriors* or Fluke. And his friends.

She knew that. Now.

But he now had this camp. This was a place where he could let his imagination run free. And she was sure this mattered more.

Imagining Mount Frenzy and then *making* it happen in real life, not even on a computer screen but in real 3D-touchable-actuality and having other people ooh and aah over it had to be better than wading in the fountains in Rome.

"How long will he be gone?" she asked.

"He just said a couple of days. He wasn't specific."

Specifics weren't Ollie's thing. "He's going to stay in touch with you?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"Really?"

She shrugged though Dax couldn't see her. "Yeah. I mean, I quit my job and basically broke up with him last night. I guess I don't have a lot of say here."

"Uh, okay." Dax clearly wasn't sure how to respond to this.

Ollie had told him not to tell her what he was up to. Fine.

"I'll make those calls to Chicago but then... I guess he's all yours," she said.

"I've got him," Dax assured her.

They disconnected and Piper just stood in the middle of the cabin for nearly a minute. She looked around. Now what?

None of what Ollie did should be her problem now.

But Ollie had *never* felt like a problem.

Sure, she got headaches once in awhile and she would name them after him but... she hadn't really meant it. Or she had, but she hadn't wished it was different. Or...

Piper plopped down on the sofa and frowned at the wall.

She had wished it was different, she supposed.

But there were only two ways to make that different. Either change Ollie. Or change how she reacted to Ollie.

She thought about that.

She'd tried to change Ollie over the years. Not *really*, but she'd tried to hone his behaviors. She'd tried to help him be more, well... manageable, she supposed. The alarms and sticky notes and folders were supposed to help him get the things done she thought he needed to do on a timeline that she thought he should follow.

The breeze lifted the light curtains at the window and she glanced in that direction. The edge of the volcano was just visible from this window.

She blew out a breath.

That volcano had turned into a crazy symbol of everything. Every way that Ollie was larger-than-life and bright and unexpected and seemingly chaotic, and yet underneath it, he was really passionate and powerful and impossible to actually contain.

Sure, sometimes he wreaked a little havoc, but it was just his nature and you could worry and keep a wide berth, or you could get close and appreciate the power and beauty and maybe, if you were really good, you could even find the diamonds that would make your journey easier.

She'd learned about the volcano and diamonds in *Warriors* from Henry and her brothers. She'd been intrigued that there was so much to it all.

Layers. Depths. To the volcano. To the game. To Ollie.

Wow, she really sucked at being in love with someone.

How could she be in love with him when she was just now realizing his layers?

She groaned and let her head fall back onto the cushion behind her.

What else didn't she know? What else could she discover about Oliver Caprinelli?

Suddenly she sat upright.

Warriors of Easton.

She'd never played the game. The game that the man she claimed to be in love with had *created*. Literally from the very first spark of an idea to the fully fleshed-out, elaborate, internationally beloved world it was now. The game that meant so much to him.

Yeah, she *really* sucked at being in love with him.

But she could fix that now.

Twenty minutes later, she had downloaded *Warriors* onto her computer and her brothers were gathered around teaching her and coaching her through it.

They talked over one another, corrected one another, argued about the details of everything from the Rabid Arctic Rabbits to the Prickly Burr Grass, but Piper just absorbed it all with a smile and an I-should-have-done-this-a-long-time-ago feeling.

Dang, she kind of sucked at being an awesome older sister too. Why hadn't she just played with them before when she knew how much they liked it? Or even just sat with them while they played and learned?

She thought she knew so much. She thought she was always right.

Turned out, she had a few things to learn too.

Four days later, Piper got off the elevator on the top floor at Hot Cakes where the executive offices were and stomped past the receptionist's desk. *Her* old desk.

“Excuse me?” the girl sitting there asked. “Can I help you?”

Piper glanced at her. Oh right, they had a new assistant. What was her name again? Did she even know? “No, I just need to talk to... all of them.”

The girl’s eyebrows went up. “All of them?”

“Yes, Aiden and Grant and Cam and Dax.”

The girl looked surprised. “They’re in a meeting.”

Her surprise was probably that Piper knew Dax was here. He didn’t work here anymore. No one came to see him at Hot Cakes.

“I know,” Piper told her.

It was the time of morning the guys all gathered for their daily meeting. Even though they didn’t really need to gather for a morning meeting. But it had been a tradition for as long as Fluke Inc. had existed—before there had been an official Fluke Inc. in fact—and it had continued even after it was no longer necessary for actual business.

It was exactly why Piper was here right now at this specific time.

“I’ll need to ask them if they can be interrupted,” the new girl said.

Piper really wanted to just sweep past her desk and go stomping into their meeting. But the girl was doing her job and didn’t know that Piper could walk into any meeting the guys would be having.

She nodded. “Let’s go ask them then.” She gestured toward the door to the conference room.

Piper wasn’t wearing an “office outfit.” She was in blue jeans, a t-shirt that said, *Speak your mind even if your voice shakes*, one of her favorite quotes from Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and her tennis shoes. But she was wearing her office attitude. She was here to get some business taken care of with the men of Hot Cakes.

Their new receptionist knocked on the door—something Piper would have never considered doing—and waited until Aiden called, “Come in!” She then opened it slightly and said, “There’s someone here to see you.”

“Who is it?” Aiden asked.

The girl looked back at her.

“It’s me, Aiden!” Piper called.

“Definitely let her in,” Aiden said.

The receptionist pushed the door open and Piper gave her a smile as she stepped past her and into the conference room.

Grant, Aiden, Dax, and even Cam, who often attended via Zoom since he worked from home where he could hang out with Whitney’s grandma, Didi, were seated around the far end of the table.

Aiden had his laptop open in front of him. They all had coffee cups, but no one had water. She would need to mention that to... what’s-her-name outside. They needed to drink more water and if she just put it in front of them they would.

“Piper,” Aiden said, clearly surprised to see her. “Hi.”

“Good morning.”

“Everything okay?” Grant asked.

“Nope.” She moved to stand at the opposite end from where Aiden was sitting in his usual place at the head of the table.

Grant frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“We need to talk about Oliver.”

They all shared a look. Aiden glanced down at his computer.

“He’s fine, Piper, I promise,” Grant told her.

“Oh, well, he’d better be.” She propped a hand on her hip. “I’m trusting him and you all that that’s true. Or that you’ve taken care of anything that’s come up. That’s not why I’m here.”

They all looked at each other again and Grant leaned in to rest his forearms on the table.

“Okay, why are you here?” he asked.

“To tell you all that, while I’ve been part of the problem and I’m certainly not perfect, *you* all are part of the problem too. And that from now on, Oliver is going to talk to *me* about ideas and plans for *Warriors of Easton*. Not you.”

That clearly surprised them. Even Cam, whose perpetual posture was leaned back with one ankle propped on his opposite knee, sat forward.

“What problem?” Aiden repeated.

“The Ollie problem.”

“There’s an Ollie problem?”

“Yes, there is. We’ve all messed up loving him.”

Aiden’s brows arched. “We have? How so?”

“I’ve been playing *Warriors* over the past four days,” she informed them.

She’d actually been playing nearly nonstop. Things at the camp were mostly done. She’d taken her brothers to the airport two days ago. Ollie was gone. She didn’t have a job anymore. So she’d had plenty of time to sit on her couch and get lost in the world of *Easton*. She hadn’t showered at all yesterday. She’d only stopped to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when her stomach refused to be ignored any longer.

The damned game was addicting.

It was amazing, actually. It was exciting and fun and unique, and success did, indeed, rely on teamwork and good communication and trust and loyalty and making tough decisions for the greater good rather than individual success.

Her brothers were the other four in her five-person team and who had been, she had to admit, pretty amazing too. Even though it had been more online than in person, she’d felt closer to them and as if they’d laughed and talked more while

playing together than they had in a very long time. Maybe ever as a group.

She'd been wrong. About *Warriors* and about Oliver and about... a lot of things.

Like her not being good for him.

She had more to learn and she needed to make some adjustments, but she could be good for him. She *wanted* to be good for him.

In fact, she was now convinced that she was the person who could be the *best* for him.

Forever.

“Well, that’s... great,” Dax said of her playing the game. “Right?”

“No.” She frowned at him.

She blamed him most. He'd been right there in the midst of it all. He'd seen the stories as Ollie created them. He'd turned them into the moving graphics. He'd *known* what was happening, practically in the moment.

“Well, yes,” she amended. “It’s good that I’ve been playing because I needed to know the game. I needed to see that side of Ollie for myself. I needed to understand it and appreciate it. And if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have seen what’s been happening. What you all”—she pointed a finger at each of them, one by one—“let happen.”

“What did we let happen?” Cam asked, frowning as if legitimately confused and concerned.

“The game has gotten progressively suckier over time,” she said. She pointed at Dax. “And you know it.”

Dax looked completely shocked. He held up his hands. “Hey. I just design what I’m asked to design.”

“Bullshit,” she said. “You’re his best friend.” She dropped her hand. “You should have told him that he could do better.”

This was another reason *she* was perfect for Ollie. He needed these men. He loved them. But he needed someone

who would stick up for him and protect him. Even if the people she needed to kick in the ass were these guys.

“What do you mean it’s gotten suckier?” Grant asked. He also looked legitimately concerned.

“The first two episodes were *amazing*,” she said.

Each year they released a new “episode.” It included new adventures. New lands. New obstacles and enemies and quests. Last year they’d celebrated their tenth.

The first two were the ones Oliver wrote before he’d even met the guys. Before they’d decided to turn it into a video game. Long before Fluke Inc. was a thing.

“The third was pretty great too,” she said. “But they’ve slowly been getting worse. Less exciting. Less bold. Less twisty and over the top. And the last two? Pretty freaking boring,” she said bluntly.

“And you’re blaming us,” Aiden said. It wasn’t stated as a question.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve—*we’ve*—been holding him back.”

“How so?”

“He wanted to make the game successful for *you* all. You were the ones that wanted to turn it into an online game in the first place. That was never *his* dream. Then it became huge and you were all in on it, so he knew he needed to keep delivering. To make you all money, but also because it was your company too. You were all proud of it and out there working hard for it. So he... pulled back. Made more safe choices.”

She’d seen it so clearly as she’d played straight through the episodes. It had been like reading a book where the main protagonist got more and more conservative and worried and careful.

“Then,” she said, when Grant opened his mouth to respond, “you sold. You sold the whole thing to Plus Gaming. You took his story, you built it up, you made him think that you were all in it together, made him make choices to keep it safe and productive for you *all*, and then you sold it. That’s when it *really* started to suck. When he had to make choices for a big corporation and a bunch of people he didn’t know and couldn’t trust to care about it as much as he—and you all—did. People he didn’t know would trust him to make wild choices and to push the envelope.”

She felt tightness in her throat as she looked at the four men she considered close friends. No, more than that. They were like brothers. She loved them. And she was damned disappointed in them right now.

“And as he was making those choices, none of you stopped him. None of you pointed it out. None of you said, ‘Ollie you don’t have to pull back and be careful. Do your thing. We’re here. We’ve got your back,’ and so he was on his own.”

They were all staring at her. But none of them said anything.

“So,” she said, pulling herself up straight, “you don’t get any more say in it. I know you’ve all moved on to your other stuff in your own lives. But *I’m* going to still be in Ollie’s life and I’m going to be sure he follows his heart and lets his imagination loose and isn’t held back at all from here on out.” She took a breath. “You’re all fired as consultants to *Warriors of Easton*.”

There was silence for nearly ten seconds.

Then Cam said, “I thought you quit as his assistant and broke up with him as his girlfriend.”

She nodded. “I did.”

“So how’s all of that going to work?”

“I’m going to be his *personal* consultant. Not for Fluke or Hot Cakes. Just him.”

“I assume I’ll be helping to draw up that contract?” Cam asked. He seemed mildly amused now.

“No, thanks,” she told him. “The contract is really easy. We’re just going to help each other out with whatever the other needs. And,” she added, “I wouldn’t want to put all the sexual favors in writing. In case we’d accidentally leave one out.”

Again, there was a long moment of silence. Then four big grins stretched around the table.

“Thank you for your time.” She pivoted and started for the door. She loved these men and she hoped their relationship would survive this, but if she had to pick between being their friend or Ollie’s... everything... she’d choose Ollie every time.

“Piper.” Aiden’s voice stopped her.

She turned back.

“We haven’t washed our hands of *Warriors* or of Ollie. But if you, or Ollie, think we’ve been holding him back, we’re really sorry and we’re going to stop doing that.”

She gave him a nod. “It wasn’t just you. I did it too. I tried to make him more careful and responsible. But that was actually the opposite of what he needs. He needs people who will tell him to go for it and help him make whatever he’s doing big and bold and badass.”

Dax gave her an affectionate grin. “I think you’re the perfect partner for him if bold and badass are the goals.”

She smiled. She really was. “Thanks.”

“And we’ll be there for him too,” Grant said. “Though feel free to let us know if you think we’re holding him back at any point in the future.” He gave her a smile that said he knew very well she *would* let them know, even if he hadn’t asked her to.

“It will be my pleasure,” she told him.

He gave her a wink.

An actual *wink*. From Grant Lorre.

Yeah, their relationship was going to be fine.

She smiled at him. “Tell Ollie that I can’t wait for him to get home.”

She was 99 percent sure Ollie was on Zoom on Aiden’s computer at that very moment.

Chapter Twenty



“See? I need her,” Ollie said from Aiden’s computer screen where he’d been on Zoom the entire time Piper was chewing his four best friends’ asses. On his behalf.

“Of course you do,” Aiden said.

“We’ve always known that,” Grant agreed.

“She’s amazing,” Dax added.

“Thank God you didn’t mess that up,” Cam also inputted.

Ollie couldn’t agree more. With all of it.

“So as I was saying—” He grinned widely as Aiden turned the computer back around so he could see all of his friends. “Plus Gaming is willing to sell it all back to me. But the bastards are gouging me on the price.”

“I’ll call Frank,” Aiden, their best negotiator said. “They won’t have anything at all if you walk.”

“I don’t want to walk,” Ollie said. “At all. I want it all back.”

He never should have agreed to the sale in the first place. He realized that now. But it was going to be okay. He wanted *Warriors of Easton* back. Every bit of it. The stories, the logos, the trademarks for the merch, every single file and sticky note associated with it from day one.

He was going to go forward with it. On his own.

Well, him and Piper.

He'd barely slept over the past few days. He knew he'd been gone longer than he'd expected, but this was all taking a lot more time than he'd planned on and he was getting frustrated and antsy with all the paperwork and the obstacles Plus Gaming was throwing up.

They didn't want to lose a cash cow. Of course. But they couldn't do this without him and he knew he had to at least *act* like he was willing to walk away.

The truth was, all of his plans hinged on getting *Warriors* back. He couldn't do any of it while they owned the name and trademarks and he'd be damned if he was going to share this with anyone else.

Except Piper.

This was the big, unleashed, over-the-top dream that she'd encouraged him to dream. He wanted to present this all to her as proof that with her in his life he felt the absolute opposite of held back.

But he had to get the business part of it all over with so he could get back to the fun parts.

He should have known better than to just pack a quick bag and jet off to Chicago by himself. The business and negotiations and paperwork were not his thing. But then, neither was thinking about how he shouldn't just pack a quick bag and jet off to Chicago by himself.

He needed his friends.

"You don't have to walk," Cam said. "The whole thing hinges on you."

Ollie made himself focus on this conversation instead of all the ways he'd screwed this up by just waking up, kissing Piper on the forehead, and getting on their private jet to Chicago and not taking time to plan it out.

"Well, that's very flattering, but they own forty-nine percent of *Warriors of Easton*," Ollie said. "I own the other forty-nine percent. And someone else, I don't know who, owns the remaining two percent. I can't just do anything I want."

Cam had worked it all out that Ollie remained an owner of *Warriors*. He'd convinced Ollie that he not only deserved that, but it was in his best interest for long-term stability in working with Plus Gaming. He'd tried to get Ollie 51 percent but Plus Gaming had balked.

"But you can," Cam said.

"Not with less than the majority."

"But you can if you have your forty-nine percent and my one percent."

This came from Dax.

Ollie frowned. "Wait... what?"

"Well, the one percent was actually my mother's," Dax said. "You know she's a huge fan. And when Cam came to me and said that we needed another investor, I asked her and she jumped at the chance."

"What are you talking about?" Grant asked.

"When we were negotiating the sale, Plus Gaming would only agree to equal shares with Oliver," Cam explained. "I knew that it was a bad idea to make it fifty-fifty and potentially lock up decisions because no one had majority say. I convinced them to have two percent of the company go to outside investors to keep it fair."

"So Dax's mom owns one percent of the *Warriors of Easton*?" Aiden asked.

"Yep," Cam confirmed.

"But who has the other one percent? If Plus Gaming gets to them—"

"Your mom," Cam told him.

Grant stared at him. "What?"

Cam shrugged. "Your mom owns the other one percent. Her son has convinced her over the years to invest and has taught her to manage her portfolio. I told her *Warriors* had one percent for sale and she grabbed it immediately."

Ollie took in Grant and Aiden's expressions. They were clearly surprised... and impressed.

"Wow." Grant shook his head. "She's never said a word."

"They've both made a lot of money from the investment," Cam said, looking smug. "And I get the impression they both love being part owners."

"So that means..." Ollie said, wanting Cam to fill in the blank.

"It means, you and Dax's mom and Grant's mom together own fifty-one percent of *Warriors of Easton*."

"So..."

"So we talk to the ladies and tell them what you want to do going forward. Then we go to Plus Gaming and explain to them that we're going to be making a bunch of changes and if they don't like it, they should just sell off their forty-nine percent to you."

"That's what I want," Ollie said.

"Then we make the changes crazy shit they'll never want to take on."

"We can do that," Ollie said.

"We can definitely do that," Cam agreed with a laugh.

Ollie felt a sense of relief seep through him. Yes. This was going to be okay.

"Then that just leaves two more tiny details," Ollie said.

"What do you need?" Grant asked.

God he loved these guys. They were there for him. They didn't own *Warriors* anymore and they didn't operate Fluke like they used to, but they were still there for him. Their friendships were solid. They always had been. They always would be. But things would change. He'd go on with *Warriors* more on his own. They'd be there to help, but he'd do things his way now.

With Piper.

Piper would be there. That wouldn't change.

As long as he could get back to Appleby and show her his big grand gesture before she wrote him off as too much trouble and decided a nice alpaca farmer might be just what she needed.

Good thing he and Drew were friends now too. He would absolutely remind Drew of the bro-code and not dating a friend's love interest.

In fact, he might text Drew right now. He pulled out his phone.

"Ollie?"

He looked up at the computer. Oh right.

"What two tiny details?" Grant asked.

He frowned. He could only remember one of them right now. But it was not-so-tiny. "I don't have enough money to buy out their forty-nine percent on my own."

The guys all grinned.

Aiden nodded. "I think we can help out with that."

"Yeah?" Ollie had expected the answer, but hearing it made his throat tighten.

"Fuck yeah," Dax said. "Let's own *Warriors* together again."

"Definitely," Grant agreed.

Ollie breathed out. "Okay. Awesome. So..."

"We'll be there in a couple of hours," Aiden said, rising from his chair.

"Oh. You're coming to Chicago?"

"Absolutely," Cam said, also pushing back from the table. "But you're buying the deep-dish pizza."

He sat back with a huge sigh of relief and a big grin. He would buy all the deep-dish pizza in the city.

Well, except that he was going to need all his money to buy back *Warriors of Easton*.

And maybe to buy a diamond ring.

* * *

“Happy birthday, Piper!” Whitney said.

Whitney, Piper, Zoe, Jane, and Josie all lifted their barrels full of hard cider and bumped them together over the tabletop at Granny Smith’s.

Piper grinned. “Thanks, girls.” She looked at Whitney. “I can’t believe you knew it was my birthday. Did you look in my personnel file?”

Whitney had called last night and said Piper *had to* shut off *Warriors* and come out with the girls tonight.

It was a regular practice for the four other women to get together but Piper was not usually one of the gang. Tonight though, she’d known it was a good idea. She’d been out at the cabin alone for six days now.

She’d been “hanging out” with her brothers and Drew had stopped by every day to check on her, but she knew that playing hermit wasn’t a good long-term plan. She did, however, take back all the things she’d said about how online relationships weren’t as good as in person. They were different in many ways, but she felt closer to her brothers after the last few days of playing *Warriors* with them than she had in a long time.

Whitney took a sip of her hard cider and shook her head. “Nope. Aiden told me.”

Piper was surprised. “Really?”

“Yep. In fact, this is all on the guys,” Whitney said, indicating the drinks and the food on the table that included some of the bar’s famous “apple-tizers” including quesadillas with apple, cheddar, and bacon filling; apple and butternut squash bruschetta; and an apple and gouda flatbread.

Piper smiled. Her ex-bosses were pretty great. Then she frowned. “They didn’t want to come along?”

“Oh, they’re in Chicago,” Josie said. Then she jumped slightly and frowned at Zoe. “Ow.”

Zoe smiled at Piper. “They were... busy tonight.”

Piper set her little wooden barrel full of cider down. “The guys are in Chicago?”

“I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to know that,” Josie said with a little grimace. “I didn’t want you to think they didn’t want to be here.”

“Why would them being in Chicago be a secret?” Piper directed that to Zoe, who had clearly kicked Josie for her slip.

“Because they’re helping Ollie with something,” Zoe said.

“I knew Ollie was in Chicago,” Piper pointed out.

“But you don’t know what he’s doing in Chicago.”

“True.” And she didn’t know why it was taking so long. It had been six days. What was he up to?

But the guys were there now. That meant...

She sighed. “He got into trouble with something?”

The other women all lifted their barrels to their mouths.

Uh-huh.

“You forget that I know him really well,” she told them. “He needed them to come because he got in over his head. Did he end up in jail?”

Jane was the first to set her mug down. She was grinning. “No to jail. Yes to over his head.”

Piper regarded the other woman. Her fiancé was the one who most often encouraged Ollie in his over-his-head endeavors. “Did *anyone* end up in jail?”

Jane laughed. She clearly knew exactly what Piper was getting at.

“Nope. No jail for anyone.”

“Did the fire department need called for any reason?” Piper asked.

“No,” Jane said. “No sirens of any kind have been used. No cop cars, no firetrucks, no ambulances.”

Well, that was something.

Piper studied the women around the table. Which of them would be the easiest to get something out of? Zoe was stubborn. Jane was fierce. Whitney was so used to dealing with the asshole misogynists she called Dad and Grandpa that she could out-cool anyone in any situation without blinking.

That left Josie. The sweet one. The optimist. The romantic.

Piper leaned in, her eyes on Josie. “I miss him,” she said. “I know I said that I didn’t think I was the right woman for him, but I was wrong. I need to make some changes, but I want to be there for him and help him with all of his dreams.”

Josie’s expression softened and she smiled brightly, her eyes growing large. “Oh,” she said, putting her hand over her heart.

“No.” Jane leaned over and covered Josie’s ears. “Close your eyes. Don’t fall for it. She knows you’re the weak link.”

Piper sat back with a huff as Whitney and Zoe laughed.

Josie groaned. “I *am* the weak link. I want *everyone* to be in love.”

Piper couldn’t help but smile. “Well, no worries there. I am definitely in love.”

“I am so glad to hear that.”

She gasped and swung around, nearly sliding off her stool at the sound of the voice behind her.

Ollie was there. Grinning at her. He was wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a *Warriors of Easton* t-shirt. He hadn’t shaved the beard either.

God, he looked so damned good.

Piper launched herself off the stool at him.

He caught her... mostly... stumbling back only a step, hugging her tightly.

Their height difference made the whole thing awkward and she ended up on tiptoe with her arms around his torso while he grabbed her hips.

But their mouths met easily.

The people and noise and tables and chairs and the smell of cider and pizza all faded as they kissed. One of them, or maybe both of them at the same time, deepened the kiss. Tongues tangled. Moans mingled. Hands began to wander.

Someone cleared their throat as her hands slipped under his t-shirt and his hands dropped to her ass.

They pulled apart. But stood grinning at each other.

“I can’t believe you’ve been gone for six days.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been gone for so long.”

They spoke at the same time.

Then grinned at each other some more.

“Happy birthday, Piper.”

She pulled her gaze from Ollie—God, she really loved that beard—to smile at Grant. “Thanks.”

“Happy birthday, Piper,” Aiden added.

Cam and Dax echoed it as they all grabbed stools and dragged them to the tall table to join their girls.

She gave a happy sigh and looked back to Ollie.

He looked like he was going to be sick.

She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s your birthday?”

“Well, yesterday was.”

The I-might-be-sick look intensified and she considered stepping back.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Fuck no, I’m not okay.” He let her go and shoved a hand through his hair. He looked miserable. “I missed your birthday.”

“Well...” She chewed on her bottom lip for a second then said, “You’ve *always* missed my birthday, Ollie.”

“Mine too,” Cam said, just before he bit into a quesadilla.

“Mine too,” Grant added, as the waitress set ciders and beers down in front of the guys.

“A large Squealer,” Dax requested of her. Then he looked at Ollie. “Mine too. Except that time we were in Madrid and I reminded you of it.”

Ollie sighed.

“You didn’t get me anything for my birthday either,” Jane told him. Grinning widely.

“Yeah, okay,” Ollie told them. “I get it.”

“But Piper sent me a dozen strawberry cookies from you,” Jane said.

“You knew they were from Piper though?” Ollie asked.

Jane laughed. “Of course.”

Ollie looked down at Piper. “Good try, I guess.”

She grinned. “Jane just knows better because of Dax. I’ve been making you look good for five years with everyone else.”

He gave her a small smile and stepped closer again. “Yeah. I know.” His smile faded. “I’m so damned sorry I didn’t know it was your birthday.”

“I’m not upset.”

“You should be.”

“Why? You gave me a surprise volcano party the other night.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a *surprise*,” he said, shooting a glance at Josie and Whitney.

“You brought me the *best* clam chowder I’ve ever had from Boston when you were last there for a convention. And that was no small thing. Getting seafood chowder from Boston to Chicago took some sweet-talking and some money.”

He shrugged. “It was amazing chowder.”

“It was.” She put a hand to his face. “I would rather have surprise volcano parties and amazing clam chowder for no reason other than you thinking I would like it than a planned birthday celebration anyway.”

“Hey,” Jane and Whitney both protested.

Piper sent them a grin. “From *him*. Planned girls’ nights for my birthday are awesome.”

“Well, you’re coming to girls’ patio nights at my mom’s from now on,” Zoe told her.

Piper felt her heart flip. That was a big deal. It meant she was truly part of the group. The other four couples got together at Zoe and Cam’s parents’ house for dinner once a week—sometimes more—and the girls gathered on the back patio with drinks for girl talk while the guys did the dishes.

She looked up at Ollie. “What do you say? Group dinners at Maggie’s?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Definitely.”

Her whole body felt like it flipped then.

He’d avoided those because he didn’t think he was good with attachments.

He was changing his mind.

“Why don’t you *surprise* her now with what we were doing in Chicago?” Dax asked, picking up a piece of bruschetta.

The apple-tizers were nearly gone now that the guys had joined them. It was a good thing Dax had ordered pizza.

Piper pulled Ollie closer to the table and climbed back onto her stool while he took the one next to her. “Yeah, what was going on?”

“I’m sorry I just took off.”

“I wasn’t shocked,” she told him dryly.

He looked a little abashed anyway. “I thought it would be a quick trip and I could get right back and tell you all about it.”

Her lips quirked. Of course, he’d thought it would be quick and easy and then it hadn’t been. “It’s okay. I knew Grant and Dax and the guys would be there for you.”

He reached for her hand and linked their fingers. “You would have been too.”

She nodded.

“I noticed the stocked fridge and the fresh sheets.”

She smiled. “I couldn’t let you starve.”

“I would die without you, Piper. And I know that sounds a little romantic, and I mean it that way too, but I seriously think it’s possible that I might literally die without you taking care of me.”

Everyone at the table laughed. And no one argued.

She leaned in and kissed him. “I will never let that happen.”

“Good. Because... I need you to help me keep *Easton* alive too.”

She sat back, confused. “*Easton?*”

“Yep.”

“Is it dying? I’ve played to the end. Oh my God, Ollie! Are you planning something in the next episode? The one you’ve been writing? If you do something to *Easton*, I will kill you. You can *not* have an earthquake or swarm of locusts or something come in. No. I won’t let you.” She looked at Dax. Then Grant. Then Aiden. Then Cam. “You guys! Say something!”

Grant shook his head and popped an apple slice into his mouth. “Nope, I’m on his side. Completely.”

That surprised her enough that she paused and just stared. Those words had never come out of Grant Lorre's mouth before.

"Completely?" she finally asked.

"Yep."

"Because you've talked him out of the really horrible idea he initially had that led you all to jump on the plane to Chicago and rush to stop him?" she asked.

"Nope."

She turned to face Grant more fully. "So Ollie had an idea, and you are fully on board without question, without any revisions?"

"Yep."

Piper looked at Josie. "I'm so sorry."

Josie frowned. "For what?"

"That your new husband is having a stroke."

Josie grinned and snuggled up closer to Grant. "He's fine."

Piper shook her head. What the hell was going on?

"Piper."

She looked back to Ollie. He seemed highly entertained.

"You've been playing *Warriors*?"

She nodded. "With my brothers. And I love it. Though we do have to talk about how things have been progressing lately."

"Oh?"

"You've been slacking."

Surprise flickered in his eyes briefly, but then he nodded. "I have. I've been too careful."

"Exactly."

"I've worried too much about not letting others down and I've let myself down instead."

“We’ve been holding you back though.”

He shook his head.

She nodded.

He sighed. “Okay. Yeah, maybe a little. But it’s my fault too. I *let* that happen. I didn’t push back.”

Okay, maybe there was a little fault on both sides. She nodded again, her throat feeling a little tight.

“And,” he went on. “I finally understand that I’m not letting down the important people—the guys... you—if I’m doing something I’m passionate about and that makes me proud and happy. Because you all love me.”

She felt her smile spreading and her heart swelling in her chest. God, she was so glad he realized all of that. Especially the part about her loving him. “I do,” she said sincerely. “I love you so much.”

He leaned in. “I love you too. But fair warning—I’m done with holding back and being careful. I’m going all in. Full on. Totally unleashed. On everything.”

Her heart gave a hard beat and she felt a rush of adrenaline. It was the words, but also the look in his eyes. He was excited. Enthusiastic. Motivated. He looked like the guy she’d met five years ago. Before she’d covered him in a pile of sticky notes.

“And I promise to stay out of your way,” she told him.

He shook his head. “That’s not what I want. I want you right there with me. My parachute.”

She pressed her lips together. She wanted that too. More than anything.

Suddenly a little ding rang out and Ollie looked down at the watch on his wrist.

Piper stared. Oliver Caprinelli had a *watch* on his wrist.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“A watch.” He looked at her, clearly amused. “But it also shows me my emails... one at a time. And texts. And a bunch of other stuff. Like the alarm feature that’s really easy to use.” He grabbed her hand. “Come here. I have something to show you.” He started for the door.

They stepped out of Granny’s and into the parking lot. Their friends were right behind them.

Ollie pulled her around the edge of the building and then looked up at the sky. He pointed. “There!”

Piper looked up. And gasped.

There was a small plane flying overhead, pulling a banner that said, “Piper, Will You Marry Me?”

She swung to face him, her mouth hanging open.

He grinned, clearly proud. “I wanted a sky-writer, but there isn’t one nearby. This guy does banners, though, and I figured that was pretty over the top too.”

“Ollie—”

But that was all she got out before he dropped to one knee and held up a ring box. “Piper, marry me. Please. I need you. I need you to help me dream, to push, to go for it all. And to help me land safely and softly.”

She felt the tears spilling over her lower lashes and she wiped them away as she grinned down at him.

Oliver Caprinelli. Genius. Pain in her butt. The love of her life.

“Yes, I will absolutely marry you, Ollie,” she said, her voice wobbly.

He rose and pulled her into a big hug. “Thank God. There’s so much ahead and I want you with me for all of it.”

She squeezed him tightly. “I knew I’d get you to fall in love with me,” she said against his chest.

He laughed. “Well, I was already partway there when you kidnapped me to the woods. Even if I didn’t realize it.”

She leaned back, grinning. “Kidnapped, huh?”

“Or something.” He bent and kissed her.

It was sweet and short, but it made her stomach flip and her toes curl.

He lifted his head. “And I’m definitely not destroying *Easton*,” he said. “I bought...” He looked at the other guys. “We bought *Warriors* back. It’s all ours. We can do whatever we want with it now.”

Piper’s heart beat hard again. Really hard. Her ribs almost hurt with how hard it was suddenly pounding. “What?” She looked at the other guys. They all nodded.

“Ollie is the majority owner,” Grant said. “But we’re all back in. It’s ours again.”

Piper felt tears stinging her eyes again. “Oh my God.”

Aiden smiled at her. “Why didn’t you tell us you thought selling was a bad idea when we did it?”

She sniffed and turned to face them, her arm still around Ollie. “That wasn’t my place to say.”

“It was,” Aiden said.

“It was,” Cam agreed. “You should have told us what you thought.”

“You would have listened?” she asked.

“We would have,” Grant said with a nod. “Especially if you had told us how Ollie was feeling about it.”

She looked up at the man she was in love with. She smiled, then met Grant’s gaze. “Well, no worries. I will be telling you exactly what I think and how you should all be treating Ollie from now on.”

Grant chuckled. “Yeah, we know.”

Ollie’s arm tightened around her. “What do you think about expanding the camps? Making them actual *Warriors of Easton* camps and putting them in multiple locations?”

Piper didn't know if she was going to survive her heart pounding like this, but she nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. I love that."

"And I have an idea for a book. An actual novel. Maybe more than one. Maybe a whole series. I could expand on the *Warriors* universe, take known characters and backstory and history, but delve more into their personal stories, maybe give them more in-depth relationships, explore more of their thoughts and feelings and reactions to the adventures and challenges."

Piper gripped him tighter. "Oh my God, Ollie. Yes!"

"And I want to expand the camp. Make it even bigger. And then do it again in other locations. Have *Warriors of Easton* training camps all over the country. They'll be places where kids can come together in real life and get a little dirty and actually be physical and meet new friends face-to-face instead of just behind the screen. *Warriors of Easton* can come to life in so many ways."

"Oh wow!" Whitney's eyes were wide with excitement. "Yes! Will you cosplay at the camp? Have them do costumes and stuff?"

"I don't know," Ollie said. "Maybe."

"Oh, you could make actual costumes *at* the camps," Whitney said. "I know there are a ton of people who are so creative about using very regular items and doing it on very low budgets. That would be such a cool thing to include so that the kids could take those ideas back home and continue with them. You could open up the whole world of cosplay to all these people."

"That's great," Dax agreed. "I know the head designer for *World of Leokin*, Kiera Connelly. She's big into cosplay. Her best friend, Sophie, does a lot of costuming. We could talk to them."

"How cool," Whitney said. "I'd love to know more about it. I could maybe get into some... costumes."

She glanced at Cam with a look that even made Piper feel a little warmer.

“I’m in. Let’s do it. Call her now,” Cam said, pointing at Dax.

They all laughed.

Piper blinked, making another tear roll down her cheek.

Ollie noticed immediately.

In spite of the fact that he was wrapped up in brainstorming and his two biggest enablers, Dax and Whitney, were right there, he noticed Piper.

He lifted a hand and brushed the tear away with his thumb. “What’s going on in that amazing head of yours? You know I can keep you fully supplied with all the folders and sticky notes you’ll need to keep this all on track right?”

She gave him a wobbly smile. “I’m trying to break my sticky-note habit.”

“Oh no, you can’t. I need it. I need you.”

Her heart *thunked*. “I need you too. Exactly the way you are.”

“Good.” His grin was huge and he pivoted to face her fully. He took both of her hands in his. “So here’s the proposal. We’d like you to be the new CEO of Fluke Inc.”

Those words just hung in the air between them for several seconds.

She heard them. She repeated them to herself.

But they made no sense.

“Piper?”

“You... I...” She frowned and shook her head. “Aiden is your CEO.”

“I’m the CEO of Hot Cakes,” Aiden said. “And I’m a consultant at Buttered Up and I’d like to stay on as a board member for Fluke, but I’ve got my hands full.” He smiled at her. “Fluke needs someone who’s completely focused on

what's next for *Warriors of Easton* and"—he glanced at Ollie —“taking care of our delicate genius in the manner to which he has become accustomed.”

“Do you mean the way she's ‘taken care of him’ recently?” Dax asked, a mischievous grin on his face. “Or always?”

“Both,” Aiden said with his own grin.

Piper shook her head, trying not to smile. That would only encourage them. She focused on Ollie. “I don't know.”

“Aiden will be on the board. Whitney too. Grant will still be CFO. Cam will still be our attorney. Dax will still consult. And I'll still be the creative heart and soul that keeps everything going.” He grinned. “But we need a leader who can keep us organized, get shit done, and who can take us to the next level. That's you, Piper. It's always been you.”

Her heart rate picked up. She'd been thinking she needed a new challenge. Something more. Her gifts were organizing and planning. She didn't come up with the big ideas, but she could lay foundations that Ollie could build on and she could add on layers to what he did. She felt excitement start to bubble in her veins. Could she run Fluke and more specifically help grow *Warriors* into something even bigger and better?

Oh, yeah she could.

“I would absolutely demand more money and benefits,” she said, just because she could.

“We are definitely going to talk about your *benefits*,” he said, his voice just husky enough to send delicious tingles down her spine.

She worked to look remorseful. “I'm very sorry, Mr. Caprinelli, but our personal relationship will have to end.”

He frowned. “Excuse me?”

She nodded. “We won't be able to sleep together anymore. It would be inappropriate.”

“How so?”

“Well, if I'm CEO, then I'll be your boss.”

There was a beat of silence. Then laughter erupted.

He gave her a slow grin. “And to think that I was going to have Knight Arnott fall for a beautiful, feisty warrior who turns out to be the princess of a neighboring land.”

“You were, huh?”

“It was going to be a really awesome love story.”

She tipped her head. “In the game or in the novel?”

“Novel.”

“So would there be on-the-page sex scenes?”

“These are kids’ books.”

“You should totally write two versions—one for the kids, one for the adults.”

“Now, see, that’s CEO thinking right there.” He grinned.

“You write me a romance novel complete with some really steamy scenes and we can renegotiate how we spend our outside-of-work time,” she told him with a grin.

“No way,” he said. “I’m going to need inspiration.”

“You do still have that big leather office chair...” she said thoughtfully.

“They don’t have leather office chairs in *Easton*,” Dax said.

She laughed. “True.”

“They will have,” Ollie declared.

“How will that work? They’ll just stumble upon random chairs left out in the woods?” Dax asked.

“I’ll make it work,” Ollie said.

And somehow, Piper believed that he would. She lifted a shoulder. “But I’ll be wearing my dresses and skirts again if we’re at the office together. You’ve never been *inspired* by those before.”

He lifted his hand and cupped the back of her head, pulling her in until their foreheads touched. “Well, I don’t know if you

were aware of this, but I can be kind of a dumbass sometimes.”

She laughed softly. “I’ve never thought you were a dumbass.”

“I have,” Cam said.

“Same,” Grant agreed.

Ollie just lifted a middle finger to them both, his eyes locked on Piper’s.

“Never leave me,” he said.

Her heart squeezed. “Okay. And *you* never leave me. At least, not for more than like four days at a time.”

He laughed. “I’ll take you with me from now on.”

“Awesome.” She squeezed his thigh.

“How do you feel about wading in Roman fountains?”

“You know, I might just be into that.”

“How about a few hours in a Roman jail?” Dax asked.

“Maybe even that,” she said.

“Oh God, he’s going to turn *her* into a dumbass,” Grant muttered.

She lifted her middle finger to Grant too.

The CFO of Fluke Inc. chuckled. “Does that mean you’re taking the CEO position?”

She lifted her head from Ollie’s, looked around at all of their friends, and then back to Ollie. And nodded. “Yes. On one condition.”

“Yes, we can get married next weekend at the camp,” Ollie said.

Her heart and stomach flipped, her nipples tingled, and her toes curled.

“Okay, two conditions,” she amended, her voice a little thick. She *really* wanted to marry him next weekend at the camp.

“What’s the second?” he asked, grinning, but clearly curious.

“That we also start a *Warriors of Easton* energy drink line and the first one is called Dragon Spit.”

It only took him a second to catch her up in a huge hug, lift her off her feet, and say in her ear, “That *Warriors of Easton* romance novel just got a lot dirtier.”

Chapter Twenty-One



ONE YEAR LATER...

That *Warriors of Easton* romance novel became a *New York Times* bestseller.

Coming in right behind the children's version on the list.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading *Gimme S'more!* I hope you loved Ollie and Piper's story!

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small town rom com

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(Paige and Mitch)

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* * *

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Otterly Irresistible (Griffin & Charlie)

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Flipping Love You (Zeke & Jill)

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(Zander & Caroline)

Head Over Hooves (Drew & Rory)

Kiss My Giraffe (Knox & Fiona)

About Erin

Erin Nicholas is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over thirty sexy contemporary romances. Her stories have been described as toe-curling, enchanting, steamy and fun. She loves to write about reluctant heroes, imperfect heroines and happily ever afters. She lives in the Midwest with her husband who only wants to read the sex scenes in her books, her kids who will never read the sex scenes in her books, and family and friends who say they're shocked by the sex scenes in her books (yeah, right!).

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