



**K** *is for*  
**KIERAN**

A SURPRISE BABY ROMANCE

NATASHA L. BLACK

K IS FOR KIERAN

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# INTRODUCTION

**The sexy new firefighter with a body made for sin,  
Is about to turn up the heat in this sleepy little mountain  
town!**

My dream's on hold and I'm stuck waiting tables  
When Kieran, the town's new firefighter strolls in like a heat  
wave,

Tall, blonde, and ripped enough to sell all the calendars  
himself.

I've got a plan.

Winning the chili cook off will prove to Dad I'm good enough  
to cook at Sergio's.

My competition? The sexy fireman.

He invites me over, and soon the heat in his kitchen has  
nothing to do with cooking.

**Our good-natured rivalry becomes a sizzling fling,  
The nights together are too hot to handle.  
And soon, I find out I'm cooking way more than just chili,  
The bun in my oven might just change everything!**





## SOFIA

“Four top, all lasagna,” I called as I walked through the door into the kitchen of the bustling restaurant. The smell of oregano and marinara would be enough to overwhelm the senses of most people, but I’d grown up around it. For me, it was just another Friday night.

With another lasagna order.

“Four lasagna, all day,” my father called from behind the stove, where he was shaking a cast-iron pan so the shrimp inside it slid to the edge, flew in the air, and landed back in the center again.

“How many have you made today, Papa?” I asked.

“Twenty-three, I believe,” he said in his thick accent that confounded people when they heard it. Equal parts eastern Italian, Brooklyn, and Tennessean, it didn’t make sense to the ear. He would alternate between “you’s,” “y’all” and “tu.” He seemed to have no concept that certain words were regional, mixing and matching them according to whatever language arithmetic was going on in his head at that moment.

“That’s why they call it a special, Bella,” Leo said, coming in from the freezer with a crate of milk. “People order it because it’s popular.”

“That’s not why they call it a special, you moron,” I said. “It’s a special because it’s what we want to push today.” I shook my head in disbelief. “How did you make it out of high school?”

Leo smiled.

“I smile and good things come to me, Bella,” he said, and I rolled my eyes.

Leo was one of those guys who thought he was a ladies’ man, despite all evidence to the contrary. I had never seen him with a girl that didn’t look put-upon by being in his presence, and his constant attempts to hit on the waitresses were met with enough disdain that we had all casually mentioned to Dad that the place would be better without him. Unfortunately, he was also Papa’s best friend’s son, and since those two served in the war together, Leo was going nowhere anytime soon.

“My name is Sofia. Stop calling me Bella,” I said, “or I will rip your arms off and feed them to the pigs.”

“My apologies,” Leo said, dripping with sarcasm as he bent at the waist in an overly dramatic bow. “Sofia.”

“There, he apologized,” Papa said. “Now run table two and table four’s food out, then come back here and taste this sauce.”

“Fine,” I said, muttering various curses under my breath in what little Italian I knew.

I felt terrible that I didn’t speak the language, but Papa was adamant that we spoke English at home. After immigrating at fifteen, he’d settled in Brooklyn and learned English working at a pizzeria. It was there that he met my mother, a little Irish girl from Tennessee. When she got pregnant, they moved back to her hometown near Nashville and had me.

A few years later, we all moved to Ashford, and Papa opened his own pizzeria, slowly evolving into a full restaurant and then adding a bar a few years back. As my sisters and I grew up, we did so mostly in those walls and the apartment on top. When Mama died a decade ago, Papa threw himself so completely into the restaurant that I wasn’t sure he ever did anything other than sleep upstairs.

Still, he was shockingly spry for a man of sixty-three and bounded around the kitchen at a hundred miles an hour. Unlike a lot of Italian cooks, Papa didn’t have the big belly or giant

mustache, preferring to stay clean-shaven and in shape from his constant running around. He liked everything fast. Which explained the Ferrari he always had parked prominently in front of the store, even though he hardly ever drove anywhere.

I ran the two dishes out to the tables that were waiting on them and put on my waitress smile as I dropped them off. I disliked being on the floor, preferring to be in the kitchen whenever Leo wasn't there. Occasionally, if Papa was feeling ill or had to go out of town for something, I would be the one left in charge of the kitchen. Those were the best days.

Once I was back in the kitchen, thankfully, Leo was back in the freezer or outside somewhere, leaving my father and me alone.

"Taste," he said, pointing to the pot that was simmering on the stove.

I picked up a spoon and dipped it inside, taking a taste of it and tossing the spoon in the dirty dishes. It had a complex note of the guanciale and tomato with pecorino cheese and a dash of chili pepper and salt, but it felt like it was missing something. As usual, I knew what it was, and he wasn't going to like it.

"I think..." I began.

"Let me guess," he said, "it needs more heat."

He said the last three words in an overly shrill imitation of my voice as a child, as it was often a phrase that came out of my mouth, even then.

"Yes," I said. "It needs more heat, Papa. Lots more. Maybe some crushed pepper."

"No," he said. "No pepper. If they want it at the table, fine, but it will not go out of this kitchen like that. What about the cheese?"

"Cheese is fine, Papa. So is the pork. It just needs heat to marry it all."

He shook his head as he emptied the pan of shrimp onto a plate and pushed it along the line for me to garnish and add

pasta to.

“It’s always the heat with you. You like everything spicy. Your mama used to say to me, she say, ‘Sergio, that girl is a dragon. She breathes fire.’”

“Mama liked the heat too,” I pointed out.

“She got all the heat she needed marrying me, *mio tesorina*,” he said.

“Eeeeewwwwww.”

He laughed in that big way that his whole chest rose and fell like he was a broken washing machine on a spin cycle and shook his head again. I loved that laugh. For a long time after Mama died, it seemed to have gone away, and now I treasured it every time I got to hear it again.

“You need a *fidanzato*,” he said. “Someone to be your guinea pig for your spicy food.”

“Yes, Papa, I’ve heard this before,” I said, sighing. “I don’t like the men here. You know that.”

“So, what will you do?” he asked, nudging me aside so he could reluctantly grab the chili powder and add a pinch more in. “Stay with me forever? What’s wrong with the boys here? Your sisters don’t seem to have any problems with them?”

I bit my lip to refrain from speaking my opinion of my sisters’ choices of boys over the years. Suffice it to say that if one could label me as picky, whatever the opposite of that would be what Luna and Amara were. Camilla seemed disinterested so far in dating, but at seventeen, I had a feeling she just wasn’t being very vocal about it and had a whole life of her own with boys that we didn’t know about. Luna, being four years younger than me at twenty-two, had gone off to school for a bit and dated around, and Amara at nineteen seemed to be following in her footsteps.

Being young, pretty, and skinny seemed to go a long way for them, but they still chose the absolute worst boys to hook up with. It was a talent, in a way.

It wasn't that I didn't have men interested, though. Very specifically, I had an ex that I had thought was going to be my husband for years before I found out he was seeing other women on the side the entire time. It destroyed me, and because of it, I swore men off for a while.

A while turned into a year. Then two. Now I was twenty-six, staring headlong at the back half of my twenties and alone, living in an apartment behind the building where Sergio's stood, and Papa's apartment sat on top. He joked that I basically lived at home again, since I was so close, but I was glad to have a little bit of space to myself.

Papa tasted the sauce again after a few moments of stirring and grimaced.

"Well?" I asked.

"It's better," he said, sounding somewhat defeated. "Look, you might have been right here, and I agree you are a good cook, but your ideas on heat come from another planet."

"Maybe I like things hotter than you, Papa, but there is a market for that. Why don't you just let me do a few dishes and put them on the menu? We can label them for people, so they know they are spicy."

He shook his head and went back to the pan, adding a few new pieces of shrimp before checking the lasagnas in the oven.

"You know how stupid people are," he said. "They order things all the time and send them back for things that were on the menu when they ordered it. And the girls, they would have to remember to tell them..."

He didn't have to say much more. If conveying information to customers relied on my sisters telling them, then we would just have to accept that no one would ever know. They got tips because they were pretty, not because they were particularly good at their jobs.

"Well, one day when I take over the kitchen, I'm going to replace the whole menu with spicy stuff," I joked.

"Have fun with that at sixty-six years old," he quipped.

“Sixty-six? You plan on working in the kitchen until you’re over a hundred?”

“Nonna lived until a hundred and ten,” he said, smiling wide. “She cooked dinner every night until the night before she died. For the first time I can ever remember, we brought her food. For the longest time, I thought I killed her with my pesto.”

I laughed, kissing my father on the cheek.

“I promise I won’t kill you with pesto, Papa,” I said.

“You might. Especially if you use so much heat.”

I laughed again and grabbed the now finished plate of shrimp carbonara to run out to a table.

“Promise me, before you put me in the grave with a spicy pesto, I will have grandbabies to hold?” he asked as I reached the door. I turned to back out of it and smiled.

“No promises. But I am positive between the other girls, you will have plenty of grandbabies.”

“They won’t be yours, Sofia,” he called as I went through the door and out onto the floor.

Papa wanted me to run the kitchen. He had said as much before, but he also was more interested in me getting married and popping out babies while I could. I didn’t have anything against babies, per se; they just weren’t in the picture with the ex. Which I was glad for, because when he cheated on me and I found out, I just went back home to Ashford, went back to work with Papa and resumed life as I wanted it to be without him.

By the end of the day, I was starving but had something specific in mind to eat. Something Papa couldn’t, or at least wouldn’t, make. I walked home, pulled my work clothes off, put on a T-shirt and shorts, and went into the kitchen. Tying my hair up in a bun, I started making my homemade buffalo sauce and preparing a plate of drumsticks. Maybe I might not ever be tiny like my sisters, I thought to myself, but at least I didn’t have to subsist on kale.





## KIERAN

“Well,” I said to myself, “welcome home.”

My truck, and the trailer behind it, was now parked in front of the house I had just rented at the foot of Alphabet Mountain in Ashford, Tennessee. I sat in the driver’s seat, stared up at my new residence, and shut off the engine. It was, by far, the nicest place I had ever lived.

It was a far cry from my tiny apartment in Nashville, that was for sure. Yet, somehow, the rent was almost the same. I was paying an extra five bucks to live in Ashford. In Nashville, I had a one-bedroom, one-bathroom, eight-hundred-square-foot hole where I could brush my teeth from my couch by leaning over a bit to reach the kitchen sink. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration, but the point was it was small as hell.

Five minutes after being offered the promotion to assistant fire chief in Ashford, I was already looking online for rental properties. There were only two. A trailer, way up in the mountain and about twenty-five minutes from the station, or this house, at the foot of the mountain and ten minutes away. The trailer came with a ton of land. The house came with... well, the house. And the view.

Being surrounded by the mountains had a feeling of safety that I greatly enjoyed, even if seeing the tons of trees kind of set my teeth on edge as a fire specialist. As with any heavily wooded area, the potential for disaster was high, but that was what I was being brought in for. I had experience with big-city

fire departments, and Ashford's was in serious need of revamping after some dicey calls with lightning strikes in recent years.

At first, it felt like the promotion was just the next logical step in my career, and I was barely surprised by it. However, when I got to thinking about it, a small town like Ashford seeking outside help was a big deal. One that could lead to some awkward moments while they got used to an outsider coming in and shaking things up. I might even have to make a few enemies to get things done.

That was part of the job, though. I had no family to speak of, just a father I didn't have a relationship with and a mother who'd passed away when I was young. I had a few cousins, but that didn't count when factoring in who would be willing to move across the state and take over a job that no one wanted for a chief who had a reputation for being a curmudgeon. I was thirty-one, single, professional, and most of all, available.

Chief Arn McDaniel told me in our phone conversation a few days ago what my start day would be and that he looked forward to meeting me. I was positive one of those things was true. It gave me a window to find a place, though, and between this place and the trailer, this was the clear winner. For the first time in my life, I was going to have an office. And a dining room. Like, a room specifically for eating in.

That meant I might have to buy some furniture. The ancient stuff I had from the Goodwill in Nashville was probably not going to cut it anymore. The only thing I had really invested in had been my bed, but now that I had a place worth the work, and a job with a pay rate that could afford it, it was time to actually get some real furniture that didn't come in a million pieces with instructions in Swedish.

Getting out of the truck, I walked around the property, half expecting something to be falling over or breaking off the house. Renting it sight unseen, unless you counted the pictures that were online and sent to me by the landlord, was terrifying. But it looked like it was in great condition and was previously owned by a guy who worked for a lumber company nearby. A

couple of additions had been put on, and the house was immaculate.

I slid the key inside the front door and unlocked it for the first time, sending up a tiny prayer about how the inside looked. It turned out that I was concerned for nothing. Stepping inside, I let out a deep breath, and a smile spread across my face.

“Hey, neighbor,” a voice behind me said.

I turned around to see a friendly-looking guy, roughly around my age, shooting off a small wave and a smile. He was shorter than me, athletic-looking, and covered in tattoos down his arms.

“Hey, nice to meet you. I’m Kieran.”

“Nice to meet you, Kieran,” he said, offering a hand for a shake. “I’m Tony. I live next door. Or what counts for next door, I guess. I’m over that way.”

He pointed down the long driveway to where the road was that went up the mountain. A second mailbox was across the street, and a small house was right up on it, a short little driveway beside it with a compact car and sunflowers growing in the yard in a manner that would annoy the hell out of an HOA back in Nashville.

“Oh, cool,” I said. “I was worried I wouldn’t get to meet any of my neighbors since everyone’s so spread out.”

“We’re spread out, but friendly around here, Tony said. “I didn’t mean to come bug you, but I wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood and offer my help if you need anything. I got a strong back and a night off. If you need anything moved around or carried in, I don’t mind helping.”

“That’s very nice of you, Tony,” I said, making sure to refer to him by name so I remembered it. “Actually, I do have a couple of things that would be a hell of a lot easier to get inside if I had some help.”

“By all means, let’s do it,” he said.

“Well, I should be ready to empty that trailer out here in about twenty minutes,” I said. “Just need to do the move-in inspection first.”

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll be back then. You need anything when I come back?”

“I don’t think so but thank you.”

“Alright, I’ll be back in thirty,” he said.

He waved as he walked back down the driveway toward his place, and I went into the house.

I made the tour around the place, notepad in hand, ready to mark down anything I thought might come back up when and if I moved out, but there was barely anything to write. The only trouble I was having with the place was what I was going to do with the extra square footage. Even as a kid, I had always lived in apartments, usually tiny, cramped ones on the rough side of town. This was something completely different, and it felt kind of like a dream.

I had already brought a few boxes inside when Tony appeared at the end of the trailer, a pair of mechanic’s gloves on his hands and a bandana tied around his head. He motioned to the inside of the massive trailer.

“What do you want to grab first?” he asked.

I pointed to the bed, pushed up against the side wall.

“I’d like to get the bed first, just so if nothing else, I’ve got somewhere to crash tonight.”

“Rock and roll,” he said.

Over the next hour or so, we hauled what furniture I did have in, finishing with the massive TV cabinet, which usually had books, DVDs, and video game stuff in it. Once it was in place, I propped the TV on top of it, hooked it up to the cable box that was already in the house, and flipped it on. To my delight, the signal was still on, and a TV show popped right up.

“Oh, wow, already running cable,” Tony said.

“Yeah, the landlord said he had satellite running here already. Said he’d have it cut off when I got mine set up so I could have something to watch and internet while I waited. Apparently, they’re a bit slow out here?”

“Takes them at least two weeks,” Tony said. “They did you a solid, for sure.”

I laughed as we went back to pulling everything else out of the trailer, and when we were finally done, we crashed onto the couch and the easy chair to take a much-deserved break.

“So, you were telling me you’re a cook,” I said. “Where do you work?”

“Dina’s Diner,” he replied. “Not too far from here. Just go down the mountain road into town, and it’s right there. Straight shot, about seven minutes away. Just down the street from the Italian place, Sergio’s.”

“Italian, huh? They serve pizza?”

“The best pizza I’ve ever had, and that’s the truth. Ol’ Sergio is straight-up Italian. Dude was born in Italy and moved to New York when he was a teenager. Made pizza in Brooklyn until he moved to Tennessee. Best stuff I’ve ever tasted.”

“Damn. I might have to have some of that. You want some? I know it’s not much, but I’d like to pay you back a bit for helping me out.”

“I’d love to,” Tony said, “but I have a slow cooker going with my chili. I have to make it myself since they stopped doing the chili cook-off at the fair. This time of year, I always want chili.”

“Really? I used to do competitions for my chili,” I said. “Firemen, you know. We like hot stuff.”

Tony laughed.

“Oh, man, yeah, there used to be a hell of a cook-off every year. But then it kind of tapered off, and Sergio opened up a pizza stand, and that was it. He does those five-minute, fire-blasted pizzas at the fair.”

“Maybe I should make some chili and put up a stand or something. See if I can get the competition going again,” I joked.

Tony’s face went stone serious, and it almost made me laugh.

“No lie, you absolutely should,” he said. “Ah, shit.”

“What’s up?” I asked as he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Just got called in,” he said. “It’s all good. Chili’s always better the next day. For real, though, get on that. It’d be a blast.”

“I might. And I owe you beer at least.”

Tony stood up and shook my hand, grinning.

“I’ll take you up on that next time,” he said. “Adios.”

I bid him goodbye and opened up my own phone, looking for the number for Sergio’s. I had beer in the fridge, but I didn’t feel like going through the effort of making dinner. I did, however, feel like getting some fresh air and seeing a little bit of the city as the sun went down. I called into the restaurant, ordered a large pepperoni pizza, and grabbed my keys.



## SOFIA

**A**nother long day, another series of pizzas and lasagnas. It's like the people of Ashford never heard of other food options at an Italian place. Just an endless series of lasagna and pizza. And the occasional order of chicken nuggets from the little kids. At least Papa refused to use the frozen ones and made them from scratch, meaning I got the job of breading chicken on a regular basis.

This time, I even refrained from adding a dash of chili powder to the breading to liven them up, meaning no angry parents. That had been a colossal mistake. Most children, it turned out, were not as adventurous an eater as I had been. My sisters certainly weren't, which might explain why I was curvy and busty, and they all looked like stick figures with balloons attached to their chests.

The exhaustion from the busy day had snuck up on me and eventually had me making mistakes. I had brought orders to the wrong table three times, burned my palm on the stove, and slipped twice, once landing flat on my ass and breaking a plate fresh from the kitchen that was hot and landed directly on the already burned palm.

It was a crap day.

After the second fall, Papa moved me to the register and had Amara take over expediting and hostess duties. Leo ended up doing sous chef work, a step up from prep work, but it slowed the kitchen to a crawl, meaning I had to deal with



angry patrons who waited forever for their food. But Papa was adamant that I wasn't to move from that spot for any reason.

I almost just packed up and went home, and I probably would have if it wouldn't have left everyone else in a terrible position. It had been such a bad day that for the first time in a long time, I wondered if there was just something else in town I could do that didn't involve serving pizzas to half-drunk people in the bar partition or the same three dishes in the restaurant. Maybe I could be a receptionist? Or a cashier at the Walmart in the next county? Anything.

Then the door opened, and a man walked in that literally stopped my brain from functioning.

He was tall, muscular, and blonde, and his arms were covered in tattoos. His bright blue eyes seemed to find me from across the entire building, and when he smiled in my direction, I felt like my knees might just give out right then and there. He was *gorgeous*. And new. At least, I had never seen him before.

Passing by the empty hostess station, he made his way toward me at the register. He walked with a smooth swagger that was like a lion parading through his pride. He was so confident, so smooth, that I froze in my tracks.

His eyebrow cocked up as he approached me and said something. I was sure there were words in the sound he made, but my brain was so completely frazzled that I couldn't decipher them. It was just low, sexy vibrations that rumbled from his chest and seemed like they surrounded me, flowing like chocolate and sweeping me into a river of deliciousness that I would happily drown in.

"Hi," he said, shaking me out of my daze.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't hear you," I said.

Time froze as my cheeks flushed, and I suddenly wished I could be anywhere except in his penetrating gaze. I felt about six inches tall and like I had completely ruined any chance of being seen as anything other than the dorky girl in one stupid sentence.

“I must have mumbled,” he said, his grin growing wider. “My name is Kieran Duggan. I ordered a pizza?”

“You did?”

“Um. Yes? This is Sergio’s, right?”

“Oh! Right. Hang on.” I turned around completely so he couldn’t see the sweat forming in beads on my forehead. I started to go right, then realized that it would be walking into the wall and pivoted to go left, disappearing behind the dividing wall toward the kitchen. I poked my head back around once, flashing what I hoped was a friendly smile. “Just got to get it.”

“Okay,” he said as I ducked back behind the divider and shoved my back against it.

I took several deep breaths, feeling like I was going to pass out, when I saw my sister Amara on her way over in a low-cut shirt, her perfect hair piled effortlessly on top of her head.

“Hey, can you get me the pizza from the rack for Duggan?” I said, hopping up to cut her off.

“I was just going to the counter to—” she began.

“I need the pizza. Very angry customer. Waited and waited and waited. Can you get it, please?”

“I took that call. It was like fifteen minutes ago,” she said. “He couldn’t have been waiting all that long...”

“Just get the damn pizza!” I said, probably much louder than necessary and making Amara stumble backward a step.

“Alright, damn, I’ll get the pizza, sis,” she said, turning around with wide eyes and shaking her head. She returned a few seconds later with the pie and handed it to me. “Maybe you want to lay off the caffeine tonight.”

“Maybe,” I said, sweeping back to the counter.

Amara, much to my dismay, followed me out to the register, and I could hear her make a sound not unlike being punched in the stomach when she got a look at the customer.

“Ahh,” he said.

“Here you go,” I said, my voice rising far too high. I felt like I sounded like a chipmunk all of a sudden. “Pepperoni?”

“Yup,” he said, grinning.

“Nice and simple,” I commented.

“Simple is good. Though sometimes I like a little heat too,” he replied. “Me too,” I said. “I like spice. Heat. I like heat. Hot stuff.”

My eyes widened with each word as I frantically tried to stop my mouth from moving. It refused. It was just going and going and going, regardless of what I wanted it to do.

“I love spicy stuff,” he said. “Big fan of heat. Probably why I work for the fire department.”

He pointed to an emblem on his shirt. It was a logo for a fire department alright, but it said, “Nashville.”

“Nashville?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “just moved here. I’ll be working for Ashford in about two days.”

“Oh. How interesting.”

The Ashford fire department was two streets down from the restaurant. Within walking distance. This giant, gorgeous hunk of a human being was going to be two streets down from where I worked on a daily basis. In a fireman’s uniform.

My brain was already clouding up with visions that I really should not be having while out in public.

“I’ll probably be here a lot,” he said. “Firemen love their pizzas.”

“Firemen get discounts too,” I said.

“They do?” both Kieran and Amara asked in unison.

I turned to look at Amara with wide, threatening eyes as I spoke again.

“They sure do,” I said. “Ten percent. So you come on by anytime you like. Just make sure to ask for Sofia.”

“Sure thing,” he said, grinning. “How much do I owe you?”

“Hmm?”

He lifted the pizza a couple of inches and motioned with it.

“For the pizza. With the discount, it’s...?”

“Oh! Right. Umm.” I pushed a couple of buttons on the register and then looked back up into his dreamy blue eyes. “Fifteen.”

“Fifteen?” he asked. “That’s not ten percent. That’s like twent—”

“Fifteen, even,” I said, cutting him off. “Discount for first-timers too.”

“Sofia,” Amara began.

“Thank you for helping me, Amara,” I countered.

A few blinks later, she got the hint, shrugged, and went back into the kitchen, muttering to herself. Meanwhile, Kieran produced fifteen dollars, and I took it from him, putting it in the till and shutting it.

“Thanks again,” he said.

“Anytime,” I said and absolutely meant it.

As he walked away, I let my eyes roam over his body until he was through the door and then crumbled into the counter. Amara appeared beside me and poked me in the back a few times, but I refused to move. I had my eyes shut tightly and was letting the little movie reel of a memory of his face play in my mind.

“Sof,” she said, “what the hell was that?”

“Did you see him?” I groaned while keeping my head on the counter.

“I did. He was gorgeous. But what was all that about discounts?”

“I just... panicked, okay?”

“I got that,” she said. “You sounded like me when Barry Wiseman came in that time.”

“Oh Jesus, not the Barry Wiseman story again. He’s not that cute.”

“Yes, he is!” she said.

“Not like that guy!”

“Well, no,” she admitted. “But he’s older. Barry is twenty and has a motorcycle.”

“And that guy was a *fireman*, Amara. He’s the walking, talking subject of entire genres of fantasies.”

“Well, he was very attractive. Did you give him your Snap?”

“What?” I asked. “I don’t have a Snapchat.”

“You don’t have a...” she began and then sighed. “Your number? Anything?”

“No...” I said and then stood in the withering gaze of my little sister. “Look, it’s been a while since I’ve found anyone remotely attractive. Especially since I moved back here.”

“Go home,” Amara said. “Papa said to send you home. It’s what I was coming to tell you. That and to get my phone because Barry might have snapped me.”

“Fine. I’m out. If he comes back to complain about something, though, I want you to call me. I will come back over to handle it.”

“Yes, Sofia,” she said. “Now go.”

Not waiting around for Papa to change his mind, I grabbed my stuff and left out of the front door, trying to look around casually to see if Kieran was still around for some reason. When he wasn’t, I walked back to my place and threw a pan on the stove. Before my body completely crashed on me, I wanted to get something cooking.

As the cast iron heated and I gathered my ingredients, my mind went to Kieran Duggan, and I began to daydream about what he might look like underneath the fireman’s polo. It was

a lovely vision. One that was only marred when I absentmindedly grabbed the handle of the cast iron, subsequently burning the same hand I burned earlier.

A few expletives later, I was back to cooking and back to wondering if he had a girlfriend.



## KIERAN

Sofia.

That was her name.

I was actually pretty proud of myself that I remembered her name. She was so stunning that my brain had short-circuited, and I was lucky to recall anything about the conversation besides her beauty. And her voice. Smokey, deep alto, and mysterious, she sounded like she had secrets that I wanted to learn.

I couldn't stop thinking about her the entire way home. It was the quickest ten or so minutes I had ever driven, since I essentially put my mind on autopilot, and it was a straight shot down the road. Thankfully, I had already plugged my address into the GPS on my phone, or else I very likely would have passed right by my new place and up the mountain.

That'd be fun. Coming out of my haze with a cold pizza somewhere in the Carolinas. Would have made a hell of a story to tell Tony the next time I saw him.

Sofia. Something was different about her. Something fun, mysterious, sexy. She had a personality that intrigued me, and her stumbling over herself only made her adorable. But those eyes. They drew me in such a way that I had never experienced before. No one could bat their eyes at me and get me to do something, but I had a feeling she could ask me to build a stairway to the moon and I would give it a try.



I could see myself being enamored with that girl for a long time if I ever got the chance to take her out. Maybe next time I ordered a pizza, I'd remember to get her number. I didn't want to be the guy who creeped on her on social media, especially since my own social media was as bare bones as it got. It just wasn't my scene, and if I showed up on hers with a nearly blank page, I was pretty sure she'd make me for a weirdo.

I pulled up to the house and shut off the engine, noticing that Tony's place was dark since he had taken off for work earlier. I felt bad not sharing the pizza with him since he'd helped so much, but maybe I could also use him as an excuse to get the next one. Either way, I had to make it up to him somehow. As I got inside, I eagerly went into the kitchen to grab a plate and put the box down on the coffee table in the living room.

Grabbing the remote, I turned on the TV and flipped through a couple of channels, looking for something satisfying to watch while I ate. Thankfully, I stumbled onto a pro wrestling program and stopped. I used to be a big fan back in the day, and I figured I would give the new stuff a shot while I ate.

Twenty minutes later, I had a full stomach and a new destination show to watch on Wednesday nights. The pizza was incredible. Every bit as glorious as Tony had intimated that it was, and I ended up eating most of it in one sitting. I'd probably feel it in the morning, but I couldn't help it. Each bite was somehow better than the last.

With dinner over, I put the leftovers in the refrigerator, put my plate in the dishwasher, and went rummaging through the boxes in the bedroom. Tony had helped me put the bed together, but it still didn't have any sheets or anything on it. When I finally found them, I made the bed and piled the pillows on, then headed for the shower.

Once I was out, feeling fresh and clean, I brushed my teeth and went into the kitchen. I yawned as I filled a glass with water from the fridge, another luxury that was new to me.

I brought the glass into the bedroom, taking one big sip before setting it down on the nightstand and flipping off the light. I crawled into bed, setting my alarm to wake me up at nine, knowing full well my internal clock was going to wake me up at seven thirty anyway, and tried to settle into sleep, with little luck.

I couldn't stop thinking about Sofia as my mind relaxed. The curve of her smile, the dancing light in her eyes, it was all so enticing. If I was honest with myself, the curve of her body was incredible and not a small part of what attracted me to her.

I had glanced down to see the name tag and let my eyes stay there for just a moment. It was all I had needed to be able to close my eyes now and bring the memory back. A full, heavy breast was under that name tag, adding to the curvy shape of her body. She had mentioned she liked heat, and the only thing I could think about was how much fire we could spark between the two of us.

Relaxing into the pillow, I let the images of her float over my mind and found myself rock hard thinking about her. Imagining the way her skin would feel under my fingertips. The weight of her breasts and the way her nipples would feel in my palms. How warm she would be if I could press her against me. How soft her lips would be if I could press them against mine.

I was surprised by how intense the images were, and the fire they ignited within me provided the perfect backdrop for a dream. .



## SOFIA

“It’s feeling much better, thank you,” I said for the second time already that morning.

I should probably feel flattered that both Amara and Leo asked about my hand two days in a row, but now on the fifth day, it was starting to feel like they were poking fun at me. Granted, the first two days, it really did hurt a fair amount, and it earned me some light duty for the day. Now, however, I was right back to being in the trenches, and that meant being sous chef for lunch later.

Being the first of the cooks to enter the kitchen meant it was on me to start the pasta and make sure the mise en place was done. Usually, that would be Leo’s job, but I hated how slow and inaccurate his knife skills were and planned on going about it myself if I could beat him into the kitchen. Currently, he was busy fiddling on his phone outside, waiting for a delivery.

I passed him and went into the kitchen, diving headlong into work and getting things set up for lunch service. It was still my belief that we could do really good business if we opened for breakfast, but Papa was against it from the jump. He said people should have breakfast at home and eat pasta for lunch. Mama used to make him enormous breakfasts when I was little, and now that she was gone, he did them himself. Us girls tried to help, but as usual with Papa and a kitchen, he was the one in charge.

I checked the board for any notes he might have left me and saw that he was planning ahead for personal lunch pizzas today. It was listed as the special and added to the already monumental number of orders we got for his pizzas. It meant I would likely not be making much of anything else today.

Once Papa made it down into the restaurant, I decided to take a break until more tickets were in for lunch. The doors usually opened the second Papa was in, and today was no different, a line of people waiting to get in. I probably had about five minutes before more tickets would start coming in, and no matter how much prep I had done, I would be in the weeds immediately.

I stepped out of the back door and rolled my eyes at the trash Leo left behind. Empty soda bottles, a cigarette butt, and a candy wrapper were all piled up on a milk crate. I was about to grab them and toss them so I could sit when I saw a familiar face walking down the street toward the restaurant. I smiled and waved and met her halfway.

“Afternoon, Helen,” I said, offering a hug as a greeting. She gratefully accepted and smiled wide.

“Afternoon,” she said. “How are things with you? I heard you burned yourself pretty badly.”

“You heard about that, huh?”

“Well, that Leo boy comes in for lunch a lot. He mentioned it when I asked about the family. Everything okay now, though?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m good,” I said. “How’s the diner?”

“Same as always. Busy, busy, busy. I figured I’d take a break and come pick up a pizza for lunch. What better way to improve a Monday, right?”

“I suppose,” I said, shrugging. “I get enough pizza as it is.”

“I’m sure,” she laughed.

“Hey, do you know anything about the fair coming up?” I asked, taking a shot and hoping I didn’t rope myself into too

long of a conversation considering the tickets should be coming back any minute now.

“Not much,” she said. “Is your dad doing the pizzas this year?”

“No. That’s actually why I asked. He decided to take the year off because of the bar expansion. He’s too busy, and he said doing the fair takes up so much time and resources he can’t justify it.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m probably too busy to do something like that myself,” she said. “I’ve done a few booths for other things and running one of those is very time-consuming and stressful. Can have big rewards, though, so if you can manage it, it’s worth it. I might see if Tony would want to do something, though.”

“Tony?”

“One of my cooks,” she said. “You know him. Funny kid, always with the desserts. He does most of my Sunday menus now. Anyway, he might be up for doing a booth at the fair if your dad isn’t going to have something. Seems like a shame if they have to bring in an out-of-town vendor.”

“It does,” I said, trying to work up the courage to ask what I really wanted to ask. Finally, I figured I needed to just give it a shot. The worst she could do would be ridicule me for an idea that I was fairly certain wasn’t stupid. Fairly certain. Not completely. “Well, I had an idea.”

“Oh?” she asked, one eyebrow raised.

“I was thinking you and I might want to collaborate and do a chili cook-off. They used to do them all the time when I was a kid, but then they just kind of stopped. Then Papa took over and started serving pizza, and we never went back.”

“A chili cook-off?” Helen asked, her eyes growing wide and round. “I love that idea. I bet I could get Tony in on that too. If we play it right, we could use it to advertise for both our businesses.”

“See, that’s what I thought,” I said, feeling relieved and excited. “We could open it up to anyone, though. See who else

would like to throw their hat in the ring and give it a shot. It's been years, but I'm sure the last reigning champion has to be out there, champing at the bit to defend their title."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Helen laughed. "The average age in Ashford is like sixty-five. It's likely the cook-off stopped because no one could remember to take their heartburn meds beforehand."

I laughed.

"Fair enough," I said. "I was wondering if you knew anyone up at the fair, though. I don't want to mention it to Papa until it's a definite thing."

"I do, actually. A friend of the family, Brett, is on the committee for it. I'll give him a shout this afternoon and see what he says."

"That sounds great. Give me a call when you know something."

"Will do," she said. "Now, I'm going to go get my pizza before my break time is over and they kick me out of my own office to work the floor."

We exchanged another friendly hug, and she went to the front door while I went in the back. Papa didn't seem to notice me sneaking back in, and when I appeared on the line beside him, he didn't react then either. He just pointed to a ticket and made a sound that I understood to mean "do that, please."

After a long lunch shift, I went into prepping for dinner before clocking out to go home. Tonight was one of the nights Papa had another old Italian guy come in to work with him in the kitchen. His name was Sal, and he'd apparently moved to Ashford to keep an eye on one of his nieces after she had some rather scary stuff happen a couple years back. He met up with Papa one night in the restaurant, and they spoke to each other for hours in Italian, seemingly delighted to find someone in town to hang out with.

Sal was terrible in the kitchen, but it didn't matter. He was more there to occasionally chop up an onion and put toppings on pizzas before they went into the oven. It was easy work,

while Papa did all the other stuff. But if you dropped by, you would probably be able to hear Sal and Sergio in the back, laughing, singing, and joking together every Monday and Thursday nights.

I headed home, hope filling my mind as I started thinking about the possibility of a chili cook-off. A chance to not only show my own skills as a cook, but also to really experiment with heat and flavor in a way I wasn't allowed to at the restaurant. It was all so enticing, so much fun to think about, that I was deep in a vision while cooking and listening to music that I almost didn't hear the phone ringing in the living room.

I shut off the music and went to grab the phone, swiping it open and sitting heavily on the couch. Helen's chipper voice greeted me on the other end.

"Hi, Sofia," she said in a sing-songy way. "I just got off the phone with some of the other fair people. They *love* the idea of doing a chili cook-off again. Especially since Sergio isn't doing pizzas. They were apparently really contemplating asking me to cater it before they went to find vendors. I am so glad I don't have to do that all on my own."

I tried to contain the squeal building up in me and remain calm. I brought the phone with me into the kitchen and stirred the chili. It smelled delicious.

And spicy.

"I am so glad," I said. "I cannot wait to try my hand at it."

"Good," Helen said. "I just got a text from Brett. Apparently, they already have a couple other people throwing their hats into the ring too."

"Really? Like who? The reigning champion?"

She laughed.

"No, I asked. That was Mrs. Bigelowe, but she passed away last year. No, this was a couple of the ladies at the church, a guy from the other side of the mountain named Winston, and the new assistant fire chief. Apparently, he won a



bunch of awards for his chili up in Nashville and is super excited to compete.”

I felt like my heart was going to pound out of my chest when she mentioned the fireman. But I had to know. Was it the same guy? Maybe there was another new fireman with a taste for heat. Crossing my fingers, I asked.

“What was the fireman’s name?” I asked.

“I think it was Kieran?” she said in a questioning way. “Something like that. Duggan. Duggan was his last name.”

The man could cook too? Suddenly, the room felt very hot, and it had nothing to do with the spice in my chili.



## KIERAN

“You’re kidding,” I said into the phone as I pulled off my rubber boots and sat them beside me.

“Nope,” Tony replied on the other end. “I thought for sure you would be interested. I’m going to do something for it, I just don’t know what. I might enter it on my own, I might see if I can collaborate. I don’t know. But you said you won some awards for yours, right?”

“I did. I placed three years running and won first place one year in Nashville. Did a bunch of other small ones that I either won or placed in the top three.”

“See, you should do it! It’ll be a blast.”

“Yeah, you’ve got me. I’m in,” I said.

“Alright,” Tony exclaimed. “Then I’ll make sure your name gets put on the list. This is going to be great, man. Are you entering as you or as a representative of the fire department?”

“I’ll have to talk to the chief about it first,” I said. “I can’t even commit as just being me until I get a go-ahead from him to work on my recipe here.”

“Word. You just let me know.”

“Will do. Thanks again, Tony.”

“Hell yeah, brother,” he said.

“Later,” I said and hit the End button.

The call had been a happy surprise, and I felt like things were moving in a pretty good direction for me settling into town. Something as silly and fun as a chili cook-off could really help me to find my way in Ashford and maybe meet some people other than Tony and fellow firemen. Not that I was making any friends within the department.

My first day of real work, I instituted a new workout policy for the boys. It was really simple stuff, but I wanted to see how much pushback I got from them about keeping in shape. Normally, I wouldn't dream of doing something like that, but these guys needed it. Fat and out of shape was the beginning of the problems in this small town, lazy coming in right behind.

Back in Nashville, the guys were easy to manage. They got along with their own business, and when the calls came, they were on top of it. Some of them spent the downtime reading, working out, playing video games, whatever they needed to do. But when a call came, you knew for a fact they could be on a truck or a bus in less than two minutes without any hesitation. And even that was slow for them.

Here, though, all I saw were guys sitting around on their phones or video games, eating and taking naps. It was like a volunteer crew gone wrong. It was no wonder I was sent there to get guys in shape, but the grumbling from the peanut gallery when I instituted the minimum workout rules with a log sheet was not exactly comforting.

“Hey, Chief,” I said as I knocked on the door of the ancient curmudgeon who had given me a green light. “Can we talk for a second?”

“Son, one thing about this department is that we have all the damn seconds in the world to talk. It's why our boys are so damn lazy. What do you need?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about that, but first, I wanted to get your opinion on something.”

“Sure,” he said, leaning back in his chair. Chief McDaniel was a large man but not fat. He was built like a brick outhouse but certainly not what someone would describe as out of

shape. He was tougher than a two-dollar steak, and it was easy to see just by looking at him, even in uniform.

He stretched back in his chair with his hands behind his head with what passed for a smile on his perpetually grimacing face. I took a deep breath and went for it.

“There’s going to be a chili cook-off at the fairgrounds this year, and I won some competitions for mine back in Nashville. I’d like to enter on behalf of the department, but I’d need your blessing, of course. If not, I’d like to enter on my own.”

Chief McDaniel sat there, stone-faced, his slightly alarming amiable smile fixed. It was like he was waiting for more, but I had nothing else. Desperately, I tried to think of another way to sell it.

“I think,” I began, “that it would boost the morale of the boys. Get them something to be proud of. Plus, if I’m working on it during the down hours, them being involved in taste tests and me putting them to work chopping onions and peppers and stuff could keep them off their asses playing video games.” I cleared my throat. “Like you complained about, sir.”

Another long pause was followed by him slowly letting his fingers go and his arms falling down to the armrests of his chair. It creaked with the shift of his weight. The smile stayed somewhat fixed, but it was accompanied now with an almost imperceptible shrug.

“I don’t see the harm in it,” he said. “So long as it doesn’t interfere with you shaping these boys up.”

“Alright,” I said, pumping my fist a little.

“As a matter of fact, we used to enter the cook-off every year. Hell, we won it a bunch of times, back when Old Man Trafford was still here. He was a hell of a guy. Used to call me ‘kid’ if that gives you any indication of how old that man was. I’ve looked like I was forty-five since I was seventeen.”

I laughed, then covered my mouth. I knew it was a joke, but at the same time, acknowledging that Chief McDaniel looked like he was a pile of leather in a uniform seemed insulting.

“Are those his awards in the kitchen?” I asked, hoping to take the heat off me and redirect it to food.

“Yep. Trafford had an exceptional grasp of spice. Could make a chili so damn hot it made you sweat while you ate it, but you kept coming back for more because it tasted so damn good. Hard to do that.”

“Indeed,” I said. “Well, I look forward to continuing his legacy.”

“Good,” Chief said. “Now, can you do something about the average weight of an Ashford fireman? I’m getting tired of being able to outrun these boys, and I’m in my sixties.”

“Yes, sir.”

I got up, feeling pretty good about myself. Being able to represent the department and not be the subject of jokes or scorn would be nice. No one had been outright rude to me personally, but even I had heard people make a joke or two at the department’s expense. It had been a running gag in Ashford for a long time that if you had a fire to pray for rain, because the fire department wasn’t going to do much to help.

That was something I was hell-bent on changing. And if that meant losing a few of the guys in the house now and being short-staffed for a bit, I didn’t see that as a problem. Some of those guys were simply warm bodies, taking up space and payroll without doing much good. A couple of them that I had identified already were even worse.

I walked out of the office and saw one of those bad influences sitting on a couch, the remote to the television in his hand and his T-shirt untucked over sweatpants. I walked up directly to him, and when he didn’t acknowledge me, I stepped in front of him and the television. At first, he just leaned to one side to see around me, but I stepped again to block that way too until he looked up. His mustache twitched as he flickered a mean-spirited smile, one that always lay behind the words “it’s just a joke” after something extremely offensive was said.

I hated that phrase, that smile, and people who said those words.

“What’s your name again?” I asked.

“Beam. Jim Beam.”

A growling laugh came from another end of the room, where an older, portly man sat doing a sudoku puzzle. He was absolutely on my cut list, but at least he wasn’t actively a problem. He could stay for a day or two more.

“Your real name,” I said.

“Aren’t you a boss? Shouldn’t you know my name? Or have some nerdy clipboard with all our names on it? Like the one on the gym door?”

“Keith,” I said, suddenly remembering his name. “Keith Walker. Right?”

“You got me,” he said, pushing his hands out like I’d chased him down in a police procedural.

“Why are you out of uniform, Walker? I know you’re on call until four.”

“It’s just my pants, *sir*,” he said with as much derision as possible. “I can pop my suit on over them just the same as jeans.”

“It’s not the uniform, Walker. We have a code for a reason.”

“Yeah, so nerds like you can pick on guys like me. I’m on call. Not on duty. I don’t need to be in uniform.”

“Yes, you do. It’s policy. If it ever becomes policy that you don’t need to be in uniform inside this building other than the barracks, I’ll give you a pass. Until then, go get in uniform.”

“No,” he said, huffing out a short laugh.

“Fine,” I said. “You’re fired. Get out.”

“Excuse me?” He popped up out of his seat on the couch. “You can’t just fire me like that!”

“Can and did. Get out.”

“Fuck you,” he said, pushing past me and stomping to the chief’s office.

It was now or never for the chief. Either he was going to try to subvert my power or stand behind me and show these boys that things were going to work differently. I stood patiently, waiting for the door to open. When it did, Walker stomped out, shoving the door to the barracks open and disappearing behind the door. Chief followed him out but then turned to me. As he approached, he had his hands in his pockets, and when he spoke, it was barely above a whisper.

“You canned him for not being in uniform?”

“I canned him for that and being insubordinate,” I said.

“Good,” Chief said. “I hated that prick.”

With that, he sauntered back to his office and quietly shut the door. Walker slammed the door of the barracks, looked at me for a long second like he wanted to say something, then slung his bag over his shoulder and stomped out.

Slowly, I turned around to the shocked and expectant faces of the rest of the crew. The old man in the corner had even put down his sudoku.

“I will be entering the chili cook-off this year at the fair to represent the department,” I said. “I will need taste testers. The only thing I need them to do is chop vegetables for me and occasionally stir if I have something else I need to do. Do I have any volunteers?”

There was a pause of just a moment before the first hand went up. It was a guy standing in the archway leading to the kitchen, probably no more than twenty. It was followed by several more. Eventually, every hand in the room was raised.

“Good,” I said. “Who’s first?”





## SOFIA

I tended to enjoy Tuesday mornings.

I opened, and as the first person in the restaurant, it was up to me to get things going for the day. Often, I found myself getting up early and getting into the kitchen before I even needed to, just because I enjoyed the peace and solace of the empty restaurant. The relaxing monotony of chopping vegetables and starting the soup and sauces that we would build on throughout the day. That was the secret that only a few knew—the sauce was always better near closing time. It had cooked all day and had been spiced to perfection.

Tuesdays were also slow lunches, meaning I never got in the weeds, and I never had to worry about frantic service. Unless a business meeting was happening in the private dining room or some birthday party was coming in, for the most part, I could daydream the entire time I was there and just let my hands do the cooking while my mind went elsewhere.

Tuesday was my favorite day at Sergio's, for all those reasons, which was why it was a surprise and a disappointment to see the door already open when I got there. Propped wide with the ancient wooden milk carton that held it open during the warm days, the darkness beyond the door was ominous. It meant Papa had to be in there. Waiting.

There was no reason for him to be there on Tuesday morning. Tuesday mornings used to be time off for him; he would even close the restaurant until dinner service, just so he could spend the day with the family.

So, why was he here?

I walked into the gloom of the dark kitchen, the only lights on were the ones above the cutting board island and the one in the office. Since Papa wasn't in the kitchen, that only left the office, and it gave me a minor bit of hope. Maybe he forgot something last night or wanted to check over an order or sales? Maybe it was something other than waiting to talk to me.

My hopes were dashed almost as soon as they had sprung up when the door opened to his little office and his face appeared inside it.

“Sofia, will you come here, please.”

“I have to get started, Papa. Lots to do to prep, since I'm alone.”

“Just for a minute, *figlia piccola*,” he said.

“Shit,” I muttered. I hated when he called me that. It meant I was about to get scolded. It was like calling me by using my entire name, including both middle ones. Anytime I heard “Sofia Maria Giovanna Falco, come here,” I knew I was in deep shit.

I crossed the kitchen, looking longingly at my knife bag as I sat it down on the counter, and went to the office door. Papa's office was cramped and small, but clean and neat. Much like everything else in Papa's life, things seemed to organize themselves around him, like the papers put themselves away perfectly. In reality, it was mostly Luna, who was great with organization, going in and cleaning up after him.

He was sitting in his chair, a pen pressed against his bottom lip and a piece of paper on the otherwise bare desk. Considering he didn't have his laptop with him, it cut down on the possibilities of what he would be there for. Mostly it left things he wanted to fuss at me about.

“Yes, Papa?” I asked as sweetly as I could muster.

“This cook-off,” he said. “It's foolish.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Sofia. The cook-off. It’s foolish for you to enter. A waste of your time and effort.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked, getting hot already.

“Calm down,” he said. “You are just like your mother. I mean it is silly for you to waste your time with it, child. You are not a chili maker. You are Italian. You make breads and pasta and fish and sauce. It is insulting for a daughter of mine to be doing it. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t *allow* it?” I asked, gritting my teeth. I could feel the explosion coming on and out of respect for my father was tempering it.

Barely.

“Besides,” he said, “this Kieran fellow has a bunch of awards for his chili. He is entered as well. You should not get your hopes up, competing against someone who has done this before. If this were a pasta-making competition, I would say, please, my beautiful, go win it. Destroy them and bring your papa home the award. But this man, he knows what he is doing. It is not your forte.”

“How would you know?” I thundered. “You never let me do anything to show my forte! Every time I try to do something other than lasagna, you tell me it’s too spicy!”

“Because it’s too damn spicy!” he thundered back. “You have the tongue of a dragon, Sofia.”

“And I’m not the only one,” I argued. “There is a market for spice, Papa. You’re just too stuck in your ways to try it. I’m going to do this.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt. When people reject you, it is brutal. Do you think I like making the same pepperoni pizza all day? Do you? I had dreams of serving my food. Agnello cac’ e ove in the spring, tripe dumplings, shrimp pilau, all the things that are delicious and adventurous and speak of my parents’ home. Our home!

“But we make pizza, dear. We make pizza and lasagna and spaghetti Bolognese. Because that is what the people want, and they love it. And they love us for it. And I love making

people happy, Sofia. So I make them their lasagna, and I make it like Americans make it because that's what they want. You will learn this, the secret of cooking is to make what the stomach wants, not what the mind wants. You are a cook. You will cook what you are told."

"You've always held me back, Papa," I said. "You're too afraid to try something new. People love us here. They won't stop coming because a new item is on the menu. Because one time they got something a little too hot for them. Something another person loved so much they will come back again and again to order it. I promise you! You are overprotective, Papa. I love to cook. I want to cook. But I can't always cook the same things."

Papa let out a sound that was somewhere between a groan and a shout and then muttered something I didn't quite catch in Italian.

"You have always had problems with judgment, Sofia," he muttered. "Like with that boy you were with. You thought he was the greatest thing, but no, he strung you along like a little puppy while he had other women to satisfy him."

A tightness gripped my throat that felt like a vise, and Papa froze where he was. I could see him, wide-eyed, wishing to take those words back. But it was too late. He said them. And I heard them. At least I knew how much he pitied me now.

"Sofia, I—" he began.

"I need to get to work."

With that, I brushed out of the office, shutting the door behind me, and into the kitchen, where I kept my back to the door, even when he came out and stood there. I could feel his presence as he waited for me to turn around and face him, but I never did. Eventually, the door that led upstairs from the kitchen opened and shut, and when I turned around, he was gone.

\* \* \*

Service was a bit busier than usual, but I was absolutely not going to call for help. I was going to have to deal with it on my own. Just me, a server named Jessica, Amara when she could be bothered to pay attention, and Leo, who came in at one and went immediately to the bar to tend it until Sam got there at three.

I was looking forward to Sam getting there. She was a good bartender and a half-decent friend. She seemed not to want to get too close to me, probably because of the awkwardness of my father being her boss, but we could chat and make the time pass easier together. Better than hanging out with Leo, at least.

“Sofia,” a voice said from the door leading to the bar.

“Speak of the devil,” I muttered to myself.

“What?”

“Nothing, Leo. What do you need?”

“Can you cover the bar for like five minutes? I need to run up to the gas station for a minute.”

I sighed. The kitchen was caught up, and no new tables had been seated for a couple of minutes, so I did have the time.

“Fine,” I said. “Just hurry.”

“Thanks. Oh, and I need some mozzarella sticks for the girl at the end of the bar.”

“Leo!” I shouted as he chuckled and ran out of the door, flinging his apron onto the hook as he did so.

Angrily tossing some sticks into the deep fryer, I wiped my hands on the apron and then took it off, switching to a new one more presentable for the bar. I was tying it around my stomach as I walked through the door and slid behind the bar.

I had barely tied the knot in the apron and acknowledged the girl at the end of the bar, who was raising her finger in the air as an indication that her Long Island iced tea was too close to being empty, when the door opened, and I froze.

Kieran was walking into the bar.

For a moment, all the anger seeped out of me. Like all the energy in my body vanished and was replaced by a warming sensation that started in my chest and rose up my neck until my cheeks burned and my temples tingled.

Kieran was there with a guy I recognized from the diner, Tony, who often came in for lunch. Which meant I had an in. A reason to talk to him. I wasn't going to miss it.

Putting the sticks down in front of the girl at the end of the bar, I grabbed her nearly empty glass and poured her a new drink. I wasn't exactly a bartender and was pretty sure I overloaded the alcohol, but I wasn't going to worry about it. Instead, I whipped around the bar, cutting Jessica off as she made her way over to wait on them as they sat in a booth, and smiled wide.

"Oh, hey, Sofia," Tony said. "They got you waiting tables today too?"

"I do everything some days," I said. "Hello, Kieran the Fireman."

"Hello, Sofia, the Everything Some Days," he said, grinning.

I felt like my cheeks were going to split the sides of my face open if I smiled any harder.

"I heard you were entering the chili cook-off," I said.

"I am," he said.

"Good. I look forward to beating you."

He laughed, and I felt light-headed. What was I saying? I came over to flirt, not pick a fight.

"I look forward to the challenge," he replied.

He held out his hand, and I took it, the touch of his skin on mine like electric fire. Jessica appeared beside me and glanced between us as what felt like an endless handshake went on and on and on.

I was positive there was more conversation, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember anything until Jessica interrupted.

I knew words came out. I was sure they were somewhat normal words and that the connection between Kieran and I was intense enough that the words themselves probably didn't matter much.

“Thanks for covering,” Jessica said. “Now, can I get you boys something to drink?”

“See you around,” Kieran said, his eyes still burning into mine.

“See you around,” I echoed, turning quickly and heading back into the kitchen, hoping like hell Leo got there soon so I could take a break and stand in the freezer for a while to cool myself off.





## KIERAN

After a long day of grumbling firemen, all of whom were reluctantly logging their time in the gym and otherwise not sitting around all day doing nothing, I needed to go blow off some steam. Firing Walker had been one of the easier decisions I had made, but it took a lot out of me to deal with the stress of how everyone else would react to it, and I felt like getting a good late lunch somewhere other than cooking for myself at home would be good for me. It would keep me out and engaged with the world and hopefully a good note to end the day on rather than the argument I'd had over whether or not playing Switch games counted as "improving eye-hand coordination."

I texted Tony to ask where the best lunch was, and he mentioned that Sergio's was the place he would go at this time of day. When I told him I was off work already, having gone in at five, he suggested he meet me at Sergio's, and we could have a pizza and a beer and maybe catch the baseball game. Sergio's was pretty much the only place in town to go and watch sports and eat other than your own home.

Baseball was pretty much the only sport I followed, so I was down for it. Being in Tennessee, we had a handful of teams that aired locally, but following the Cubs was my thing. A game against the Pirates was on at one, meaning if we got there by two, we could catch most of it. Besides, maybe I could run into Sofia again.

I met Tony in the parking lot of the restaurant, and he guided me over to the bar entrance. As we opened the door,

the smell of fried mozzarella sticks, fresh dough pizza, and an almost overwhelming level of oregano and garlic hit me, and I loved it. My stomach grumbled, and a smile crossed my face.

“Man, this place smells good,” I said.

“Wait until you get a bite of their cheese sticks,” he said. “I come here on Tuesdays because the girl that works in the kitchen makes this dip for them that’s not marinara, but it’s like it, except it’s got this edge to it. I’m not sure what she’s doing to it, but it’s fucking awesome.”

“You talked me into it,” I said. “Also, this is all on me. As a thank-you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Tony said, but I was already waving him off as we sat down in a booth directly across from a TV.

“I insist. You came over and helped me out and didn’t know me from Adam. I owe you beer and pizza. Hopefully we can do this often.”

“Damn right,” he said. “Next time, it’s on me.”

We were mid-conversation when a presence arrived at the table, and expecting a waitress, I looked up and saw Sofia standing there.

Tony interjected and said hello, and I cracked a joke about her saying she was doing everything today, hoping to get a smile. When it did, it emboldened me, and when she openly challenged me in the chili cook-off, I took it a step further, shaking her hand and telling her I looked forward to it before moving on to more conversation. I wanted to keep her there as long as I could.

“Do you cook often?” I asked.

She nodded.

“I work in the kitchen most of the time, actually,” she said. “You’ve happened to catch me when I’m not back there, but I usually am.”

“She’s the one who makes the sauce I was talking about. Speaking of, can we get that with our sticks?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” she said, not taking her eyes off mine. “I love to cook.”

“She really loves spicy stuff, apparently,” Tony said. “She has stuff on the menu from time to time, and like I said, this dip has a subtle...”

“I love heat,” she said.

Tony laughed.

“Well, you’ll love Kieran then. He’s a fireman.”

There was a look that flashed across her eyes, and I felt myself grinning like an idiot. Her eyes were gorgeous. I felt like I could lose myself in them forever. The way her hair curled in her ponytail tied tight behind her head was enticing, and I felt myself wanting to run my hand through it.

“Can you take a break?” I asked. “Would you want to sit with us?”

“I would love to,” she said, raising my heart rate and my hopes all at once before crushing them, “but I’m working. I can’t sit on the clock, and there’s no one to cover me at the moment.”

“Ahh,” I said.

At that moment, another person showed up and introduced herself as Jessica, our waitress. As Sofia walked away, I couldn’t tear my eyes off her, specifically the way her hips waggled from left to right and her ass shook in a manner that made my pants tighter. Jessica cleared her throat, and I forced my attention to go to the middle-aged woman with blonde tips and brown roots and a smoker’s grumble.

“Sorry,” I said. “What was that?”

“Your drink, hon,” she said. “What would you like?”

“Oh. Umm, I’ll take a Sam—if you have the Summer Ale, that one. If not, whatever is on tap.”

“Sure,” she said. “Sofia will probably bring the drinks over, and I’ll be back to take your order. Sticks will be out in just a few minutes.”

With that, Jessica disappeared, called by someone at another table. She disappeared through the door separating the restaurant and the bar, and I found myself impressed by her ability to wait on both.

“Jessica is alright, but keep an eye on your order,” Tony said. “She sometimes forgets modifications if you make any. But she’s attentive and always keeps your drink topped off.”

“Good to know,” I said distractedly. My eyes had already floated behind the bar, where Sofia was back, pouring a couple of beers.

“I like heat too,” Tony said. “It’s not my favorite thing in the world, but I like some spice once in a while.”

I looked back toward the bar but didn’t see Sofia and was about to give in to the idea that maybe I shouldn’t be eyeballing her all night when she showed up in my periphery. She had two beers in her hands and looked for all the world like an Italian version of the St. Pauli Girl.

“Gentlemen,” she said, “here are your beers.”

“Thank you, Sofia,” I said, making sure to make eye contact. She smiled again, and I felt my chest tighten.

“You are very welcome,” she said. “I have something special in the back for you two. Give me about ten minutes for it, alright?”

“Sure,” Tony said excitedly, apparently unaware that his sudden good fortune of special food might have something to do with the way Sofia and I were looking at each other.

“Be back in a bit,” she said.

While she was gone, Jessica arrived with the mozzarella sticks, complete with two dips, one a traditional marinara and the other the “special” dipping sauce. One bite of it and I thought I had it figured out, but a second bite made me doubt my initial thoughts.

“Is that sriracha?” I asked.

“I asked,” he said. “No. She won’t tell me what it is, but she said she would tell me what isn’t in it, if I guessed.”

“And what’s to stop her from lying to you?”

Tony looked crestfallen, as if the idea had never even crossed his mind.

“No,” he said in a half-whisper. “She wouldn’t. We’re both Italian.”

“That alone would stop her?”

“I mean, Italian in Tennessee. In a small town. There has to be some kinship there,” he said. “Plus, we both cook.”

“I’m sure she was telling the truth,” I said. “No worries.”

We ate our sticks and watched some of the game, all while Tony seemed to be having a mild existential crisis over the truth of what was in the special dip. By the time the sticks were about done, Sofia returned to the table, another round of beers in one hand and a basket in the other.

“As promised,” she said. “I know you have a pizza order coming up, but I took the liberty of making you boys something. Enjoy.”

“Buffalo wings?” Tony asked excitedly, apparently getting over the possible deception in favor of delicious bar food.

“With my own hot sauce,” she said. “One of many. This one is just my favorite with wings. Fair warning, it’s pretty hot.”

“I can’t wait,” I said, and again we smiled at each other. As she walked away, she nearly tripped over a chair leg and had to turn away from me to make sure she didn’t hit the ground. Apparently, I distracted her as much as she distracted me.

“Holy shit, these are hot,” Tony said, sauce already on his cheeks and fingers as one wing was half-eaten. “Like, really hot.”

“Let me try,” I said, pulling the basket to me.

He wasn’t wrong—they were hot. But they were delicious. Something about the breading, I decided. She had added a spice to the breading to marry with the sauce, something that carried the heat all the way into the meat itself. It was

impressive as hell. There was so much flavor on top of being stupidly hot.

Like her.

Stupidly hot.

“Dude, I can’t,” Tony said. “I’m tapping out. Call me a pansy.”

“Pansy,” I said, taking him up on it and getting an eye roll for it.

“Seriously, that’s more than I was expecting today. I have to work up to eating something that hot.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “I’ll take care of them.”

And I did, and a good quarter of the pizza that came out afterward. By the time the game was over, we were full, happy, and our thirsts had been quenched.

As Tony headed out, presumably back to the diner for the evening shift, I paid the tab and hung back, waiting until we had said our goodbyes and he had headed out before I approached Sofia, standing at the bar.

“What time are you out of here?” I asked.

“I was supposed to be gone about now, actually,” she said. “But Leo never came back to the bar, and when I went back there, he was actually working, so I let him stay. Besides, I didn’t mind bar work today.”

She flashed that grin again that made my heart thump in my chest.

“So, I’m about to head out, but I was wondering if I could get your number,” I said. “So we can talk about the competition.”

The grin turned into a smile, and her cheeks grew red and flushed.

“The competition,” she said. “Of course. Here.”

She pulled a napkin out and wrote down her number on it, handing it to me to put in my pocket.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You should text me tonight. So I have your number too.”

“Will do,” I said. “Have a good night, Sofia Everything Some Days.”

“Good night, Kieran the Fireman,” she said.

I walked out of the door patting the napkin in my pocket and feeling on top of the world.





## SOFIA

That was one hell of a Tuesday.

Walking into Papa bitching at me and saying something he knew he shouldn't have said was enough to make any day the worst of the week. But after he took off and Leo unexpectedly needed to run to the store, everything got much better.

I was shameless in how much I'd flirted with Kieran, but he seemed to be responding in kind, so I didn't feel bad about it. Besides, how long had it been since a guy even made me look twice, much less made me stumble over myself, grinning and doing everything I could to shake my hips while I walked away from them?

A long damn time.

Kieran absolutely had that effect on me. He was tall and handsome and seemed to have muscles that were hiding other muscles. He was hot. Like all of him was hot.

He had my number. He *asked* for my number.

I couldn't wait for him to call me. I had no idea what I would say or talk about besides food, but I was damn sure going to give it a try.

I was also really glad Tony came in with him, giving me a reason to go say hi. Tony was a good guy, and he and I had talked about food and life before. I didn't think there was any interest there on either side, so it made it easier to use him as a go-to to get to Kieran. From what I was picking up, if Tony

had his eye on anyone, it was my sister Luna, but she was as blind to him as could be.

As the clock neared four, I ducked my head into the kitchen and caught sight of Leo working on chopping onions for Papa, who had taken up his spot behind the stove. I had zero intention of addressing him before I left, so it meant I had to wait on Sam to get in and get behind the bar before I could head out. I was going to walk right out of the front door.

As soon as I stepped out of the restaurant, my thoughts went right to Kieran and his hands. Something about those hands turned me on more than I could handle. They were large and strong but looked soft and gentle. When he held out his hand for a shake and I took it, I thought I was going to dissolve into a puddle right there.

All I could do was think about those hands riding up my legs in a dress. How they would slide under the fabric of the cotton and cup my ass, pulling me tight into his body. That was the image playing in my mind over and over as I walked faster than usual to get back to my place.

My fingers were shaking as I put the key in the door, and I cursed a little when the knob stuck. It did that from time to time and only when I was in a hurry to get in from the cold or heat. Or now. When it finally opened, I tossed my knife bag on the easy chair, pulled the blinds completely shut in the living room, and yanked off my shirt, tossing it in the general direction of the washer in the kitchen.

My pants were off one leg halfway down the hall, and I hopped until I got them off the other and was standing in the doorway of the bathroom. In only my bra and panties, the vision was getting stronger, and I fumbled for the shower handle to turn the water onto a level that I lovingly referred to inside my head as Hell's Front Porch.

It took far too long for the water to heat up, but as soon as the steam was starting to fill the room, my hair had been brushed out, my socks were off, and my bra was unhooked. I let it fall off me as I looked in the mirror. I could imagine him

behind me, his hands sliding under my arms and up my stomach until they cradled my heavy breasts.

My own fingers ran up my body to hold them, and my nipples hardened. I was so sensitive to the touch because of how worked up I was that I knew it probably wouldn't take much until I was crumpled in the bottom of the tub, shaking.

Hooking the cotton panties with my thumbs, I slid them down my legs and kicked them off, letting them join the bra in the corner of the bathroom. I climbed into the shower, and the hot water greeted me with the soothing burn I enjoyed so much.

Denying myself on purpose for a few moments, I grabbed the soap and lathered myself up, then used the soap to make my breasts slick as I squeezed them, letting my eyes shut and imagining his hands around me. His hard, strong body pulling me tight into him. I could turn my head just to the side, and our lips would touch.

One hand slid down my stomach and between my thighs. Using my middle finger, I swirled over my clit and moaned into the pounding water coming from the showerhead above me.

I let the fantasy take over.

His hands would guide me until I was wet inside and out. I would be able to feel his cock, thick and warm, pressed against my back. He would spin me around and press his lips against mine, and then I would move down his chest, letting my hand wrap around his staff and stroke him. The power of his mighty erection would be in my grasp, and I could make him groan with my touch.

I would drop to my knees and take him into my mouth, as much as I could fit, and taste him. One of his hands would ball up my hair and guide me to the motion he liked, taking control and letting me pleasure him the way he wanted.

Then he would pull me back up, unsatisfied with just my mouth, and lift one leg up and over his bent arm. I would wrap

my hands around his neck for balance, but it wasn't necessary. He would have me. He could hold me forever.

His cock would slide through my folds and make me cry out. The pressure of his massive head at my opening, stretching me, would be almost too much to bear. I would bite down on his shoulder as he entered me, filling me in a way nothing ever had before and driving deep inside my pussy. He would slide back and forth, wet with water and the juices running down my leg.

His eyes would burn into mine as I leaned back to let the water run through my hair. His stomach muscles would contract and relax as his hips snapped into mine, his cock going up and into me relentlessly. His groans would be my music and his thrusts my drumbeat.

I would give in, letting him handle me how he liked. Letting him take control. He would spin me around and press me against the tile of my shower, pulling my hips back toward him.

He would fuck me hard from behind, one hand sliding up my body to grasp my breast while the other dipped between my thighs, rubbing my clit as he plunged into me. I would try to look back over my shoulder, but he would increase the speed and power of his thrusts, and my eyes would shut and my head would loll.

"Come for me," he would growl, and I wouldn't be able to deny his command.

The tension of the oncoming wave would take over my senses. The crashing of an intense, incredible orgasm would roll over me, and I would be powerless to stop it. I would cry out in one long sound as he relentlessly pounded me, his cock throbbing as my pussy clenched and milked him. He would be ready too, and I would welcome him.

"Come," I moaned into the shower, both real and imagined. "Come inside me!"

His hands would slide to my hips as he pounded into me, pulling me over him with each thrust forward. I would feel

like he was going to split me in two as my climax rolled over and over, refusing to end. Then, with a roar that could be heard in the mountains, he would explode deep inside me, pulling me tight to him so I took it all. My aching, hungry body milking him as my legs shook and my breath hitched.

He would empty inside me, and we would slide down into the bottom of the tub, curled together as the water fell onto us like rain. I would doze in his arms, warm and happy, until the water ran cold and we needed to get out, only to do it all again in bed.

My eyes fluttered open a few moments later. I slid all the way to the floor of the tub, just like the fantasy. Also just like the fantasy, the water was getting cold. Thankfully, I had already gotten myself clean and just needed to shampoo and condition my hair before I got out.

With my body freezing from the cold water, but feeling clean and much more relaxed, I climbed out and toweled off.

Now that I had gotten that particular fantasy out, my brain was moving on to more innocent, but no less intense, fantasies involving Kieran. Now I was imagining what I would do at the cook-off, how we would interact and how we would go out on a date. How we would have our first kiss.

All these thoughts played in my mind as I made myself dinner and ate at the table rather than in front of the TV. There was nothing on that could beat the show in my head. When I was done eating, I ran the dishwasher, brushed my teeth, and went into my room to get into pajamas. It was only nine, but I was ready for bed. I had a lot of dreaming to do.

Flipping on the TV, I put on a cooking reality show and let my mind wander into the fantasies again. I could see us not just competing but working together. Mixing spices and sauces together to make something as hot as he was. How we could be together, happy and in love. In lust.

As my eyes drifted closed, and I fumbled for the remote to hit the power button without opening them, I thought about his hands again. How they could hold me in the middle of the night. How they could keep me safe and warm and protected. I

let myself fall asleep thinking about those hands and how they would feel holding my own as we walked through the fair together, each with a medal.

It didn't matter which one of us won.

That's how I knew it was a dream.





## KIERAN

**A**nother long day down, but things were starting to look up. The boys were getting into the swing of things with logging in to get their workout time in, and I noticed a few less bags of chips and a few more salads in the fridge. That said, our first real fire since I arrived happened, and we took almost two and a half minutes to get out of the door. The trailer that we were called out for had been abandoned for years, and apparently the detectives thought it was arson. All I knew was that there were definitely accelerants used because even with our delayed time getting there, it went up in a hurry.

Getting out of the clothes I'd worked in and into a shower was first on the priority list, and as I finally got home, I went right into the bathroom to start the shower. I pulled out my phone and checked my text messages, noting that the last one still was the one I sent to Sofia this morning, giving her my number.

The truth was, I had been thinking about her all day. From the second I walked out of the bar until right that moment, she had not been far from my mind. I wanted to talk to her, to feel that energy I felt when we were in the same space together. It was intoxicating.

Just before hopping in the shower, I decided to shoot off another text and take a risk. It was worth it if I got the right response.

*Are you busy tomorrow?* I texted.

I pulled the curtain closed on the shower and had a hair full of shampoo and my hands covered in it when I heard my phone bling with a new notification. Quickly, I rinsed off my hands, reaching out for the hand towel that hung just outside the shower, and wiped them off as best I could before picking the phone back up.

*No*, she had responded.

*Would you like to have dinner together? Talk about chili secrets?*

It was silly, but it was the right kind of silly, I thought. Something lighthearted that could get us together under a pretense that wouldn't have as much pressure as me just asking her out. I thought maybe I was being a bit of a coward about it, but she sent back a laughing emoji and a response that made me feel like my instincts were still on point.

*I won't give anything away, but I would love to do dinner.*

*Seven sound good?* I said, shampoo dripping down my back and into my eyebrows. I tried to brush them away with my hand, but it only made it worse. Groaning, I put the phone down and rinsed my hair.

“Damn, damn, damn,” I said as the burning sensation of the shampoo made me close one eye and barely open the other.

*Seven sounds great*, she'd responded, following that with her address.

I put the phone down, feeling elated, and went back to running my face under the water until I felt like I was no longer Spring Misting my eyeballs.

Getting out of the shower, I wrapped a towel around me and went into the bedroom, opting to only get sweatpants and a T-shirt. There was no one to impress, and I planned on enjoying my evening with a slight celebration since she'd agreed to go out with me.

Going to the fridge, I pulled out all the ingredients for pork and pineapple tacos and started going to work making a half dozen of them. Strictly speaking, I probably should stop at three, maybe four, but this was a celebration. And I was carb

loading. At least that's what I was going to tell myself as the sixth tortilla went down my gullet.

A couple of hours later, I was bushed and headed to the bedroom. I checked the messages again, making sure she hadn't texted back to call it all off like it was some bad April Fool's joke. When I saw she hadn't, I put the phone on the charger, crawled into bed, and hit the light. But as soon as my head hit the pillow, my eyes opened, and I started trying to think of what I could do.

I had been so wrapped up in getting the date that I hadn't thought about what we would do on it.

Eventually, I fell asleep, but it took a long while and more than one moment where I sat up in the bed, unable to sleep, and went through various ideas in my head as to what to do on our date. I had nothing. I was just going to show up at her place, ask her what she'd like to eat, and freaking wing it. I had no other plans that sounded decent.

As I drifted off into a stressful and not terribly revitalizing sleep, I worried I was going to screw this up before it even got started.

\* \* \*

As the day wound down, I cut out early. Technically, I was on call, not on duty, but I wanted to lead by example and came in anyway. In uniform.

But by four in the afternoon, my on-call shift was ending soon, and I wanted to get home to get ready. I checked with the chief and headed out for the day, going right home to change and prepare myself.

Tony texted while I was deciding between jeans and khakis and went on about his recipe ideas, regardless of how often I told him that as his competitor, he shouldn't be giving me secrets, and at six thirty, I got off the phone and into my car to head over to Sofia's place.

She answered me at the door, looking absolutely stunning in a cute yellow sundress.

“So, where are we going?” she asked.

“Well, I wanted to give you an option. We could go to a restaurant, or—and this is an option I won’t feel bad if you turn down—we can go back to my place, and I can cook for you.”

“You want to cook for me?”

I nodded.

It was an idea that had popped into my head on the way over, and while it might be a little creepy for someone who barely knew the other person to go to their place, I figured it was worth a try.

“Sure,” she said. “Let’s do that.”

“Alright,” I said, grinning. “After you.”

I held the door open to the truck for her, and she climbed in. I couldn’t help noticing how gorgeous her legs were in that dress and how much I just wanted to feel them wrapped around me.

We drove over to my place chatting casually about the heat of the day and how it was only going to get hotter. When we arrived at my place, I let her out of the truck and walked her inside, where, much to my surprise, she turned around and pulled something out of her purse. It was long and white and made of fabric.

“Is that an apron?” I asked.

She nodded, grinning. “I hereby challenge you to a mini-cook-off.”

“You want to do a cook-off, now?” I asked.

“Yep,” she said.

“You’re on,” I said, a combination of flirty feelings mixed with my immediate desire for competition.

What happened next was a whirlwind of frantic prep work. Mixing bowls and spatulas and cutting boards were everywhere. Sofia lamented not bringing her knife bag, to which I wondered aloud if that was a common problem on dates for her. She laughed, but there was a hollowness to it that I decided to pass by for now.

As she rolled out a piece of dough, I made a motion like I saw something outside through the window. It worked, and she snapped up to look out the window. As she did, I stole the butter she was using and hid it. When she realized what I had done, she very casually reached over, took my wooden spatula from my hand, and tossed it into the sink full of soapy water.

Then the sabotage was on.

We kept taking things from each other's stations, pushing each other off burners so the other could use it, intentionally taking up space in the refrigerator so the other one couldn't get an ingredient. It was like one of those cutthroat cooking competitions come to life. She was doing her best to slow me down, and I was doing my best to make her make do without half her ingredients.

Eventually, we got to a point where each of us needed a taste test. I was first, offering her a spoon of the risotto I had been lovingly working on. She didn't take the spoon from my hand. She simply put her lips over it and kept eye contact with me while she did it.

My cock twitched in my jeans, and I felt like I might lose control right then and there, but I pulled myself together. Going back to the meal, I was paying attention to what I was doing when a rubber spatula entered my vision, and I opened my mouth to taste the red goo on the end of it.

It was sweet but not overly so. A little tang was accompanied by an almost smoky flavor. It was delicious.

"What is that?" I asked as I licked my lips.

"Dessert," she said. "My cherry pie."

The groan that came out of my chest wasn't because of hunger. Not for food, anyway.

Eventually, she pulled another spoon up to my mouth, but before I could take it in, she leaned in close and blew on it to cool it. Our lips were merely inches from each other as she tipped it inside my mouth. It was a delicious sauce, but it was still hot, and a little of it dripped onto my chin. I reached for a washcloth beside me to wipe it off when she reached up on her tiptoes and licked it off.

We stood there, staring at each other, fairly sure each one of us was as surprised as the other.

Our eyes were locked.

But the door had been opened.



## SOFIA

It was impulsive. It was daring. It was potentially a huge gamble.

But it worked.

Our lips crashed into each other, and my back was pushed against the wall of the kitchen almost immediately as Kieran crushed his body into mine. I could feel how hard his cock was through his jeans as it pressed into my stomach, and it only brought my arousal higher. Doubts, hesitations, rational thought, all of it went out of the window as I raised one leg to wrap around his body and one of his hands slid down to cup my ass.

“Bedroom?” he grumbled.

Breathlessly, I nodded, and he picked me up effortlessly. I wrapped my other leg around him too as a laugh bubbled up in my chest and came out with a squeal as he carried me through his house. He kicked the door of his bedroom open while I kissed his neck and nibbled on his ear, desperate to get my own clothes off, much less his.

I wanted him. I needed him. More than I had ever felt those desires before.

Sitting me on the bed, Kieran let me go, and I stood on my knees as I reached for his jeans button. I yanked it open eagerly as he pulled his shirt up and over his head, tossing it away. I groaned at the sight of his chiseled body. Deep lines around the molded muscles of his chest and abdomen led to a



V shape, diving into his jeans. My imagination ran wild at what I would see when I yanked them down.

It was even better than I thought.

A long, thick cock sprung out at me as the jeans fell to his knees, and I immediately wrapped my hand around the base. He groaned deeply as he pulled my shirt up over my free arm and over my head, and I only released him long enough to get it completely off me. I knelt forward and took him into my mouth as he yanked on the clasp of my bra, opening it and letting my breasts fall out as it fell to the bed.

I took him as deeply as I could into my mouth, the head brushing the back of my throat and my tongue sliding underneath him. The sounds coming from his chest only urged me to continue, and I stroked him to my lips as I bobbed back and forth over him. I loved how he felt in my mouth, how one hand slid through my hair and grasped it, guiding me in my motions while the other slid under to cup my breast.

Reaching down, I pulled down on my pants until I got them down to my knees and then wiggled them off. I wanted to be naked as fast as possible, and it seemed like Kieran was on the same page. He pulled me off him and pressed me down onto the bed, pulling at my panties until they slid off me and then pushing my legs open wide.

I expected him to mount me, to cover me with his weight and slide his delicious cock inside me. But instead, he crawled between my legs, a devious grin on his face, and licked his lips. A shudder went through me as he knelt down and slid his tongue through my folds. I cried out at the touch of his tongue on my clit and knew I was near a climax already. Gripping with his hair, I curled my body to watch his gorgeous face as he closed his eyes and licked me until I squirmed.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” I cried as he increased his speed, and my toes curled. One finger slid inside me and brushed the top wall of my pussy, and I exploded into an orgasm that shook me to my core.

I writhed in his grip as he sucked on my clit, my body bucking and vibrating with a powerful climax. I felt light-

headed and sensitive all over, like every nerve in my body was on fire. As I cried out in one long song, he kissed the inside of my thigh and began working his way up my body with his lips. Taking one nipple into his mouth, he sucked as he settled his hips between my thighs.

Breathing deeply, I tried to gain some measure of control of myself so I could prepare for him. His cock was so big, so thick, I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to take all of him. But I was so wet, so ready to try, that I settled under him, and as his cock slid through my lips, I closed my eyes and sank into the pleasure.

He stretched me, opening me further than I had ever been, and I dug my nails into his shoulders as he pressed his cock deeper into my pussy. My eyes opened wide as he settled so deep inside me, and burned into his. He grinned as he began to rock into me, his hips moving slowly and confidently, one hand on my hip, looped under my leg to hold it up.

“Fuck me Kieran,” I cried out.

The mood shifted.

His eyes darkened, and his jaw set as he began to rock harder, faster into me. I could barely contain myself, the sensation of him filling me overwhelming. I clutched him tighter to my body, loving the way my breasts felt pushed against his hard chest, the way his skin tasted as I bit down on the crook of his neck and shoulder, the way his grunts of effort seemed to block out all other sound.

We rolled around the bed, laughter bubbling up as we playfully changed positions and relished in our bodies pressed together so tightly. As he bent me over the bed, standing on the floor as he pounded into me from behind, I looked back over my shoulder in the haze of our passion and ran my hand down his sweat-stained chest.

“Come for me,” I moaned.

His hands gripped my hips tighter, and the concentration that set on his face was intense as his eyes bored into mine. I kept myself turned halfway to watch him as his body tensed

and his eyes closed. Another final wave of climax was building, and as he let out a roar and slammed into me, it crashed over me, sending me into a fitful, wild orgasm.

He came, hard, with me, and we collapsed into the bed together. As our heartbeats slowed in the darkness of the night, I let myself doze to sleep, wet, exhausted, and satisfied.

\* \* \*

I could not believe I'd done that.

Waking up in bed with a man that I barely knew was not something I was used to. In fact, it was something that had never happened before. It was so far out of my comfort zone that when I first came to, I froze in the bed, unsure of what to do next.

I had only slept with one man in my entire life. My infuriating, asshole ex-boyfriend, who I refused to think of as much as humanly possible. He was my first and my only, having been my boyfriend for the prime years when most other girls were dating.

It just wasn't me. I was extraordinarily monogamous. I could barely comprehend the idea of fitting one extra person into my life; I certainly couldn't handle two or more. This was besides the fact that everything I'd gone through with my ex was caused by his inability to keep it to one girl at a time. Namely me.

Technically, there was nothing wrong with doing what I did. I wasn't in a relationship, and as far as I knew, Kieran wasn't either. That was just the problem right there. I didn't know. I assumed, but we barely knew each other. One thing had just led to the other, and I bore enough of the blame for pushing it all to this point that I absolutely had no right to be upset about it.

This was just so beyond anything I had ever even thought I was capable of.

Battling my internal monologue, I rolled over and felt Kieran's strong arms tighten around me. Suddenly, everything I had been thinking, all the potential negative feelings and guilt, melted away in the warmth and safety of his embrace. He was still asleep, and his breathing stayed slow and calm.

Maybe I could just let myself enjoy something for once?

Kieran groaned in his sleep, and I sighed. I was so comfortable. My eyes fluttered shut for a moment, and then before I knew it, I was dozing off again.

An alarm woke me up a little while later, the sun peeking through the blinds and the birds outside doing their daily symphony. I opened my eyes and looked up, watching as Kieran moved in his sleep but didn't seem to wake. It was his phone, and I didn't feel comfortable grabbing it to turn off the alarm, but I certainly couldn't go back to sleep with it on either.

"Morning," I said, placing a kiss on the center of his chest.

"Hrnh?" he said as he opened his eyes and looked down at me. He seemed to notice the alarm and reached over to grab it, shutting it off before laying his head back down for a second. When he lifted it again, he looked down at me and smiled.

"Morning," he said.

"Sleep well?" I asked.

"Like a rock. Unfortunately, I have to get up. I have to get to work."

"Oh. Too bad."

"You could stay here," he said hopefully. "I don't mind. You can sleep in a bit and go home when you want or stay here until I get off work."

"I'd love to," I said and realized I totally meant it, "but I have to work in a little bit too. I should go home and change clothes first."

"Ahh, okay," he said, a note of disappointment in his voice.

I watched as he slid out of bed and started getting dressed, relishing in watching his naked body as long as I could. When he finally put a shirt over his rippled, hardened abs, I sighed and slipped on my own clothes. We walked out together and hopped into his truck. He dropped me off at my place and drove away after another lingering kiss, and I opened my front door, then shut it behind me, feeling like I was going to collapse into a puddle.

I had a few hours before work, and though I needed a shower before then, I didn't really want to wash the smell of his skin off me yet. I wanted to carry it with me for just a little while longer. Plus, our night didn't include a ton of sleep, and I could use a nap first.

I wasn't completely against calling in and telling Papa I needed a day off. It wasn't like he was going to complain, not when all the dishes today were his specialties, and I knew for a fact he would have been in the kitchen starting around four this morning. It was pies day. He loved making pies.

Crawling into my bed, I tore off my clothes and settled under the sheets as naked as I had been in Kieran's. It was colder in my room than in his, though, and I had to pull the heavier blanket over me to stay comfortable. As I drifted off to sleep, I let the smell of his skin on mine lead me to drifting into wonderful dreams about our time together and where it could lead.



## KIERAN

Waking up next to Sofia was incredible. Not just because she had an insane body that drove me wild or because she was one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen, much less been with, but because there was something extra about the way we had been together. It was different. It was special.

It was real.

This wasn't like the girls in Nashville, who I would pick up at a bar or meet through friends, go on a few dates with, end up in bed, and then fizzle out immediately. This was something entirely different. It felt *normal*. As exciting and intense as our night together was, I felt completely fine with the idea of her staying at my place by herself if she wanted. I would have left her a key.

I really liked her, and she really seemed to like me, and even though she'd declined my probably wildly weird offer, it felt like there might be something there. Something much deeper than two people who shared a love of cooking spicy things and had incredible sexual chemistry. I hoped after dropping her off and sharing one last intense kiss that the next time I saw her wouldn't be too far away.

Heading into work, I barely had time to drop off my gear before a call came in. Someone had called to report an old church having gone up, and I was dressed and on the truck in less than a minute. Somehow, even though I was the least ready of anyone in the station, I still beat half the guys to the truck. Something else for me to mention at the next meeting.

By the time we got to the church, it was already destroyed. The flames were whipping out of the top of the old, wooden building, licking the sky and burning a dark grey smoke that was filling the area nearby. People were gathered on the street, watching the fire, and I saw plenty of them with tears in their eyes.

“Stevens,” I said, grabbing an older fireman who only worked part-time now as he was semi-retired. “Is this place historic?”

Stevens glanced at the people gathered on the sidewalk and nodded.

“Ashford First Baptist,” he said. “Hasn’t been used as a church in twenty years or so, but it was the first one in town. Back then, in order to be a real town, you had to have a church, a post office, and a pub. This building acted as two of the three.”

“The post office?”

“The pub,” he said, huffing out a laugh. “Weird, I know, but the pub was built in the basement. Had its own entrance. Pubs back then weren’t just about selling beer, but it was the place people would meet for official business. Made sense to have it in the same physical building as the church. People thought it would keep you honest.”

“At least no one was inside,” I said with a sigh.

“Yeah,” Stevens said, “but the lumber company is going to have a field day with this.”

“Lumber company? What does a lumber company have to do with anything?”

“Tennessee Lumber. They’re here in Ashford. Great group of guys down there and a major source of revenue for the town. They’ve been bugging the mayor for months about some of the spots in the mountains and how there’s a major risk for a massive wildfire to break out. It’s one of the reasons Chief McDaniel ended up poaching you.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “You think they’re going to use this church going up as a reason to cause trouble?”



“Not trouble, no,” Stevens said. “But I wouldn’t be shocked if Chief has you meet with them to keep them from bugging the mayor again. Kind of give them some assurance that we’re working on the problem.”

“Good to know. Thanks, Stevens.”

“Anytime,” he said. “By the way, you still need help with the chili cook-off?”

“Always,” I said. “You’re only in the firehouse three days a week, right?”

“Monday, Wednesday, Friday. But if you need me to come in just for chili, I can be there. My knees just can’t handle five days of carrying equipment anymore.”

“Got it,” I said. “I’ll make sure to call you if I need you on off days, but otherwise, consider yourself on my list on your days in.”

“Fantastic,” he said. “I’m glad you’re doing it. It’s been a long damn while since we had someone cooking in our kitchen and doing good things. I miss like hell how we used to do the cook-off. We had so much pride in the department back then.”

“Mark my words, we will again,” I said.

With that, I marched off to check on the guys who were now hosing down the burning embers inside and assessing the structural integrity of going further into the building to see if more could be put down or if we needed to let it burn out. That was one of the things I knew some of the people on the corner wouldn’t understand.

I wasn’t going to risk anyone’s life today.

As the fire was slowly put out, I sent two of the trucks on, a volunteer one and a backup that had come from a neighboring town. It left just our two trucks at the scene, and as we finished up, I let our media relations person know the details so they could handle the news trucks with reporters that were waiting for some kind of word from us.

I checked my phone for the first time in a while and saw that I had a text message. Excited and hoping it was from

Sofia, I opened it up only to see Chief McDaniel's name.

*I need you to go to the Tennessee Lumber Company office and speak with their ownership. They've been bugging us for a while and this fire won't help. It's right down the road from where you are at the church. If you can get someone to drop you off, I'll send someone to pick you up afterward.*

I mapped the location he sent me and saw it was a couple of miles away. Still a bit far in all my gear. I would have to have the truck drop me off.

Relaying the request to the driver of one of the trucks, we got half the guys on and rolled out, heading over to the lumber company before they went on back. I changed out of most of my gear, leaving it on the truck with Stevens, and hopped off at the lumberyard. The door of the building opened, and two men stepped out, watching as the truck drove away and I walked up.

"Afternoon," I said. "Name's Kieran Duggan. I'm here to meet with the owners on behalf of the fire department."

"Sure you aren't here from the Shriner's?" one of them joked. The other one just looked at him stone-faced, and when there was no laughter, he shook his head and looked back to me. "Come on in, Kieran."

"Thanks," I said, stepping onto the porch of the building.

I shook their hands and followed them through the door. Inside, the place was cool and modern-looking. A receptionist sat at a desk and briefly looked up, seeing I was with the two men and smiling.

"Deacon," one of them said, offering his hand. "This here is Everett. We're two of the owners here. The other one is off on a jobsite. Follow us to our office, if you don't mind."

"Sure," I said.

"Can we get you anything? Coffee? Water?" the one named Everett asked.

"Water would be great."

He nodded and disappeared as I followed Deacon into a room with glass doors and windows and sat down on a chair inside. Deacon took up a spot at a table across from me, and I noticed another table nearby with a nameplate for Everett. Interesting that both of them would share an office in a place like this. It looked plenty big enough for an owner to have his own space.

Everett returned with two bottles of water and sat them next to me on a small coffee table before going to his own desk to retrieve a coffee mug. A few chairs sat scattered around the large office, and Everett took up residence in one and peered at me with his intense but friendly stare.

“So, Kieran,” he said, “what brings you here today?”

“Well, I’m sure you heard about the church,” I said.

“We did,” Deacon replied, exchanging a glance with Everett. “We warned the old assistant fire chief that the place was a fire hazard and a tinderbox a couple dozen times. He never listened. Somebody could have gotten really hurt.”

“We do a lot of work out in the mountains,” Everett said. “We have our own fire containment system we have to use all the time because we’re out in the woods and can’t depend on the department to help out. So, we’ve become kind of de facto firemen on the side. All of us have. I think everyone here except the receptionist has been called out to help put out a fire at a site at one time or another.

“But that’s not the worst of it all. I’ve had people with fires on their land that call us rather than the department. Because your boys are—and I’m trying to think of a better way of saying that to you, and I can’t—not good.”

“Not good is an understatement,” Deacon said. “They’re terrible. Have been since we moved out here and started the company. Something has to change, or else this town might face a real disaster.”

“I understand your concerns,” I said. “And I’m working my best to address them already. I’ve been working on an overhaul of staff and instituted a number of staff readiness

responsibilities. I think if you're willing to give us a couple of weeks, you will see a dramatic improvement."

"I'm sure," Everett said. "But our bigger issue is the jobs we go on. Our business can only grow so much because we're hamstrung by an inability to ensure safety. We need help from the town. We're willing to donate a lot of our time and maybe even to buy equipment and vehicles if we can get some help on a regular basis."

"I promise, I will make sure I help you guys out," I said. "If you help me lobby the mayor for some more funding, I will do everything I can to make sure you guys are taken care of with whatever expansions and improvements you need for safety."

The two of them shared a glance and shrugged.

"Whatever you need, you can have it."



## SOFIA

Waking up laughing wasn't something I was expecting, but damn if it didn't feel good.

The dream faded almost as soon as consciousness came, but I knew it was sexy, silly, and fun, and it starred Kieran. I didn't need to remember much more than that. The fact that I was giggling to myself when my eyes opened told me everything else I needed to know.

I had at the very least, a massive crush on a guy who apparently had one back.

Feeling like a teenager again was exhilarating and adding in the ability to have my own private space with my superhot fireman where we could get naked and do whatever we wanted added an extra layer to it all. I had never felt that way with my ex, not after we first started dating. It was always more of a matter of expectation. We followed each step of a relationship like a playbook, all the way until engagement, where everything stalled out.

Good thing it did. The divorce would have been messy, and I might not have been here, now, available to meet Kieran and impulsive enough to make a move on him. Which I still couldn't believe I'd done.

I got up and hopped in a quick shower, relenting to getting clean and losing his scent as I used exfoliating soaps and special shampoo that might as well have had emblazoned on its side, "for stupidly thick Italian curls." It felt good to stand under the hot water, though, and it woke me up a bit, getting

me focused for the day ahead. Dinner service was likely to be a bear.

Still on a completely different planet than everyone else, I sauntered over to the restaurant and walked in the front door rather than the back. I didn't want to see Leo first. That was my only requirement. Leo could bring my mood down if it wasn't tempered first, and I'd much rather see my sisters than him.

Sure enough, Camilla was working as hostess and cheerfully waved when I came in. I responded with a jaunty one of my own and watched as her tiny, adorable face scrunched up with confusion. It was like I could read her thoughts. *Since when was Sofia so happy to come in mid-service?*

It was fair. Normally, I hated coming in mid-service. I'd much rather come in before everything got going so I could be in the kitchen alone and do prep work. But today, I was good with anything, and it showed. Not even an evening of working the bar would get me down.

I breezed through the restaurant and entered the kitchen, placing my knife bag on the prep table and moving to the back where the private restroom was for staff. I left the door open while I tied my hair in a tight bun on top of my head. I didn't even realize I was humming until Papa's throat clearing seemed to cut me off.

"Oh," I said, happy enough to forget my anger with him over the cook-off. "Sorry, was I making too much noise?"

Papa reached up and turned the dial down on the ancient speaker that played his opera CDs while he worked and continued staring at me with an expression I usually only ever saw when the meat deliveries showed up and he was trying to decide if he was getting screwed or not.

"Alright," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and a slow smile beginning to stretch under his rapidly whitening mustache. "Who is he?"

“Who is who?” I asked, feigning innocence. How did he know?

“The boy. Whichever one has you a’ humming like a little songbird.”

“What, I can’t hum a song?” I asked, mocking offense but struggling to gain any believable insolence due to the overwhelming happiness coursing through my veins.

“Sofia does not hum,” he said, enunciating every syllable with extreme prejudice.

“I do too. I hum while I cook.”

“To music,” he retorted. “Not to the nothingness and the air and the angels. Who is he?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I said, sweeping out of the kitchen and heading to the bar. “I’m going to go relieve Leo from the bar since we can’t trust him not to give out free shots to women with big boobs.”

I backed out of the swinging door without looking, and as soon as I turned around, the rubber on the door making that weird *fwump* sound as it closed, I was confronted by three very excited sisters.

“Oh, shit,” I said, knowing there was no way out. What Papa couldn’t get out of me, they would by sheer will alone. They could pester with the best of them. I knew it for a fact. I’d taught them everything they knew.

“Who is he?” Amara asked, nearly buzzing with excitement. “Is he that guy? The one?”

“Which one?” Camilla asked.

“The hot one,” Luna said. “The one from the fire department.”

“Fire department?”

“Tall, blonde hair, big arms,” Amara said, and when that didn’t work, “Probably a size thirteen.”

“Oh,” Camilla said. “The hot one. Right.”



“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath, trying to brush by them, but the passage was too narrow, and they moved in unison to block me. When I repositioned and tried the other direction, they blocked that too.

“Tell us,” Luna pleaded, letting the *s* sound hang forever like a demented Italian snake.

“Yeah, sis,” Camilla said, using the dreaded *s*-word that she only used when she wanted something.

I made a frustrated groaning sound and looked behind the bar, where Leo was casually chatting to a blonde woman, and noted that the bar was, at least for the moment, not in desperate need of my presence.

“Fine,” I said, “come with me.”

Falling in line behind me, my sisters squealed enough that Leo tore his attention away from the girl for a split second to look over. Not enough to come investigate, thank goodness, but we were now on his radar. I brought them to a six-top that was positioned so we could see through the door leading to the restaurant proper, in case customers came in and needed Camilla.

“So,” Amara said, “is it the fireman? Did you see his hose?”

“Oh God,” I said.

“Did you slide down his pole?” Luna asked.

“Did you fuck?” Camilla said, stopping all three of us. She looked around innocently and blinked her big, jealousy-inducing doe eyes. “What? That’s what we’re talking about, right?”

“Be glad you’re beautiful,” Luna said. “Because God gave you tits and an ass and not much in the noggin.”

“Shut up. I want to hear what *Sofia* has to say,” Amara said. “Go on.”

“Well, that’s a first,” I said, then sighed. “Alright. So. We hung out at his place yesterday and cooked for a bit. Then I kind of made a move, and he responded.”

“He responded?” Luna asked eagerly. “Like, *responded*?” She made a complicated humping motion in her chair that I was pretty sure would have gotten her banned from television up until recently.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Holy shit!” Luna exclaimed.

“Tell me *everything*,” Amara said.

“Did he have a big dick?” Camilla asked.

Again, the three of us stopped and stared at our formerly innocent sister. The one we all thought was the angel. The one with all the gifts that each of us got one of but she got all of and seemed so completely unaware of. The one we all knew was going to end up marrying a millionaire somewhere.

The silence settled over the table for a few seconds before Luna slowly turned back to me, cleared her throat, and splayed her fingers on the table.

“Well,” she said, “did he?”

The next five minutes felt like hours. I fielded questions that were simultaneously wildly out of line and yet perfectly normal sister banter because they were questions I would have peppered them with too. I tried to hold back, to keep some vague mystery to it all, but I couldn't. I was too excited, too proud, too damn happy to not tell them. By the time the door in the bar swung open again, I was catching myself going into far, far too much detail about last night. I shushed them as I saw who it was coming out of the kitchen, though, his eyes focused on me.

“It's Papa,” I said. “Everyone pretend I was giving you instructions for tonight.”

“Oh,” Camilla said, then in a voice that could be heard across the bar, “seat *everyone*, got it.”

“Jesus, help me,” Amara said.

“Sofia,” Papa interrupted, “can I speak to you?”

“Yes, Papa,” I said, scooting back from the table and shooting a look at Camilla that I was sure went right over her head.

I followed him into the office, assuming I was about to get yelled at, either because of the sisters ditching work to chat away in the bar or something else, and I was surprised when he offered me to sit down across from him with a softness in his voice he rarely used at work.

“Sofia,” he said, seeming like he was searching for words, “I have been thinking a lot today. Your mama has been on my mind very much, as she is this time of year.” I nodded solemnly. No one needed to remind me that the anniversary of the day she died was coming up. It was a brutal day at best for all of us, and in her honor, we only served breakfast food all day. It was her favorite. “She would have been very upset at me with the way I spoke to you.”

“Papa,” I said, trying to cut off the conversation at the pass. It was heartbreaking to see him so sad and trying to apologize when that was clearly not in the wheelhouse of things he often did.

“No, no, let your Papa finish,” he said. “I was wrong. About all of it. I should not have said what I did, and I was wrong about why I said it. I should be encouraging you, *bella*. You are an adult now. You have been for a while. I forget this because I am an old man, Sofia. An old man who still sees his babies as his babies. But I need to realize you are grown. You want to do something, and I should be helping you, not telling you not to do it. So, if you want to do this cook-off, I will help you. Whatever I can. Okay?”

I could barely believe what I was hearing. Papa admitting he was wrong? Offering to encourage me in making something that was expressly *supposed* to be spicy? And doing it in a way that made me cry about it? What was going on?

“Thank you, Papa,” I managed.

“One other thing,” he said. “When the cook-off is over, I want you to take over the bar menu. I am too old to be in touch

with what people want in food at a bar. You aren't. I want it to be yours."

If I was on another planet when I came into work, I was in an entirely different universe by the time I closed up. I pulled out my phone almost the instant I got onto the floor behind the bar and texted Kieran that I had something I wanted to talk to him about and then shoved it into my back pocket, a smile that a hundred million annoying Karens with complicated drink orders couldn't wipe off.

I checked the phone periodically over the next half hour before things picked up, but he didn't answer immediately. By the time he did, things were winding down.

*That sounds amazing,* he said, referring to the brief description of what had happened that I gave him. *Want to meet up and celebrate?*

*Sure,* I responded. *But this time, my place.*



## KIERAN

“**Y**ou’re still here?” Chief asked as he walked into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He had fallen asleep a couple of hours ago in his chair, the victim of an extraordinarily long meeting with the mayor and his staff before taking calls from media folks all over the state.

“Just finishing up, boss,” I said, putting the last of the plastic Chinese food containers in the refrigerator. “Stayed late with Stevens to pick his brain a little and do some cooking since I have an afternoon shift tomorrow.”

“Do I detect a note of frustration there, Duggan?”

“No, sir,” I said, grinning. “I don’t mind swing shifts.”

“Good,” he said, passing me on his way to the back door.

The thing was, I didn’t really like swing shifts normally. I preferred the routine of the same waking hour and working time. It was one of the things I enjoyed about becoming an assistant chief: I was going to get out of the changing shift schedule that saw me working mornings, afternoons, and overnights all in the same weeks.

But my mind went directly to Sofia and the fact that if I played my cards right—and since I was in control of making the schedule, I was pretty sure I could—I could make my schedule mirror hers rather easily. It was super early to be thinking about it, but I was so optimistic about our night together and what it could mean that I was already looking forward to many more.

With the last of the leftovers put away, I went into the locker room and was halfway out of my boots when the alarm went off.

“Shit,” I muttered, shoving the boot that was just barely off of my toes back on and tying it.

“Chief!” a voice from the doorway called out. I looked up and saw Dwayne Austin running into the room, looking around wildly. He saw me and then kept looking as he ran to his locker. “Have you seen the chief? He was just here!”

“He left. What’s the call?”

As I spoke, a notification came in on my phone, and I glanced down at it. It was an alarm I had set to get out of the building and head to Sofia’s. I had to silence it as Dwayne started speaking.

“Came in from one of the lumber guys up on North Mountain. They said they came across a fire and have been trying to put it out but need backup. Like, a ton of it,” he said, slamming his feet into his giant rubber boots and standing to grab his jacket.

“Shit. How many people are left in the building?”

“Six,” he said. “Including you. I thought Chief was here. He could have called in backup.”

“I’ll call him,” I said. “Meet you on the truck.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, and I bounded up to head back into the kitchen. While I ran, I swiped open my phone and hit the number for the chief.

“Duggan?” he asked. “Did I leave something there?”

“Negative,” I said. “Fire on North Mountain. Lumber guys are already there, but they need major backup. I’m heading out with the crew, but we think we will need more than our six.”

“Got it. I’ll call you in ten with who I can get.”

Chief McDaniel abruptly hung up, but I didn’t take it personally. He didn’t have time for niceties at the moment. I slammed the alarm button, and the sudden motion of half-

sleeping guys jumping into movement seemed to liven the place up. Four men stormed past me in moments as I pulled open my texts. I wanted to message Sofia, but halfway through composing one, I heard the engine of the truck roar to life.

Shoving the phone down into my pocket of the uniform pants, I ran back into the locker and grabbed the rest of my gear, sprinting to the truck. Hopping onto the back, I looked at my watch. It had been just over a minute and a half, and the last of the boys were hopping on behind me. We were getting quicker.

“I thought the lumber guys had their own fire stuff,” Doug King said from the seat in front of me. He was one of the newer additions to the roster and only worked the night shifts. Being in his mid-twenties, he was the youngest guy on crew.

“They do,” I said. “But it’s not professionals; it’s lumber guys. They’re trained at containment but not putting out fires. That’s our job.”

“Just seems weird that they call and we go running when they have people,” he said, yawning. He must still be bitter about his nap being interrupted.

“Anyone calls and we go running,” I said. “That’s what we do. But these lumber guys have been pulling more than their own weight for a while. I made a promise to them that we would fix that.”

“Ahh,” he said. “So, this is a you thing.”

“No, this is an Ashford thing. This is a fire department thing. If they called us, it means they know it could get bad. They aren’t out there crying wolf.”

“Maybe,” he said.

I pursed my lips. I really didn’t like his attitude, and as the truck screamed down the street, headed for the access road up the mountain specifically for emergency vehicles, I was contemplating how to approach this in the next few days. Clearly, he was going to need to be spoken to, if not let go. I couldn’t have people on crew who thought that only certain parts of the town were our responsibility.



All that changed when we got to the access road and could smell the acrid, nutty smell of the fire in the distance.

“That’s a forest fire,” muttered one of the older guys on the staff. His name was Ronald, but everyone called him Red on account of his orange hair. “I know that smell. We’re in for a long night, boys.”

“Great,” Doug said sarcastically.

The rest of the ride was in silence as the truck climbed the mountain, and when we crested a hill overlooking where the call came from, we could see why it was made. Dozens of trees were on fire, and they were leading into a heavily wooded area that spread out over the mountain through a valley. This part of the valley was in direct sunlight during the day, meaning that the trees were dry and warm, perfect conditions to go up quickly at the faintest suggestion of a spark.

As the truck pulled in beside the lumber guys’ containment unit, our boys hopped out and got to work, coordinating with their people on setting up a pump and a line to the nearest body of water.

“Duggan?” a voice from their truck came. I looked up and saw a gentleman that I hadn’t met yet but had seen pictures of at the lumber office. He had an accent I couldn’t exactly place and a worried brow that spoke of a man who had been unprepared for the current situation.

“Yes,” I said, holding out a hand for a shake. “And you are?”

“Gerry,” he said. “I’m a surveyor for Tennessee Lumber. I happened to be out this way coming home from a site this evening and noticed the fire.”

“You guys don’t have a site near here?” I asked. “I thought y’all were working this way.”

He shook his head, still staring ahead at the fire that was raging and threatening to spread quickly. “Nope. This is county land, and we can’t really touch it. But I was coming up over the pass up there connecting 204 and 12 and saw the

smoke. I decided to take the access road down, and damn if there wasn't a fire."

"And you called your men first rather than us?" I asked, a note of accusation in my voice.

"Well," he said, shrugging and looking at me, "you guys don't exactly have the best track record. Our guys were only ten miles out, and I knew they were activated and ready. I called you as soon as our guys were dispatched."

"Oh, so how long have your guys been here?"

"Just a few minutes. We honestly didn't expect you to arrive for another half hour."

I wanted to defend our unit, to say something back to combat his accusation, but the fact was he was right. Our guys didn't have the best reputation in town. In fact, they had a terrible reputation. That was the whole reason I was here. I bit down on the words that wanted to fly out and nodded instead.

"We're here now and appreciate your assistance," I said diplomatically.

"Look, I didn't mean to insult you," Gerry said, but I held up a hand to cut him off.

"I'm aware of how people think about my department. I am working on fixing that."

"Well, good," Gerry said.

Stepping away, I pulled open my phone and scrolled through some of the numbers. There was one that I had in my back pocket, a number that I hadn't used yet but knew I could. A friend of mine who had gone on to work for the state named Jimmy Williams. I pressed the contact for his name and put the phone to my ear. After two rings, he picked up.

"Kieran?" he asked. "What's happening, man? It's almost midnight."

"Jimmy, I have a situation," I said. "I'm on a call out here in Ashford on North Mountain where 204 and 12 meet up, and we have what looks like a forest fire starting. Ashford is not

equipped to handle the size of this thing if it gets going. I need backup from the state.”

“On it,” he said. “Keep this line open. I’ll call you right back.”

\* \* \*

I t was five in the morning, and sweat was pouring down my body both from physical labor and from the intense heat. I had been coordinating the team along with the state folks who were coming in and looking for direction from the ground. It was a lot of responsibility, more than I had ever shouldered before, but I effectively led the entire operation through the containment of the fire.

Choppers came in from surrounding counties, along with extra trucks from as far out as the counties outside of Knoxville. Even a Virginia truck came in through the mountains, giving us coverage around the entirety of the fire, and by the time daybreak was threatening to turn the sky from a dull, dark grey into a lighter, smoke-filled beige, we had it under control.

Still, there was major damage to the area, and I kept pushing my body to the absolute physical limit. I didn’t stop until I felt myself crumbling and the fire was well under control, with half the trucks that came in already leaving.

“Chief,” I said as I noticed the old man arriving for the second time. He had come in early once but went back home when the fire looked contained to finish getting some sleep. Now, two hours later, he was back, coffee in hand.

“Duggan,” he said, nodding. “You look like hell.”

“Sorry, Chief. I think I’m going to go lay down in our truck. Everything should be under control, and we’ll be down to smoke in about twenty minutes or so.”

“Very well,” he said. “Here, go over to the EMS truck over there. There’s a gurney in the back. Take a nap. I’ll make sure they don’t bring you into the emergency room.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, nodding.

I trundled off and hopped into the back of the ambulance that stayed in our bay at the fire station and was asleep before my head even hit the pillow, barely having set an alarm for three hours, just in case no one woke me up beforehand.



## SOFIA

**T**hankfully, the bottle of wine that fell on the floor didn't explode into a million tiny pieces on impact.

It did, however, wake me up.

I sat up suddenly, immediately regretting the decision, and pushed my hands down deep in the cushion of the couch, hoping, praying, for the room to stop spinning. At least to stop spinning so violently. Just a light, casual turn would be fine.

I clenched my eyes shut for a moment, and the events of the evening started coming back to me in a sickening wave of nausea and regret.

I had gotten made up and ready, irked a bit by Kieran not answering the text I sent him but not overly concerned. He was a fireman, and maybe he'd had a late call. Deciding to keep myself calm and in a jovial mood, I'd grabbed a bottle of wine and sat down on the couch, pouring a small glass and turning on a show I was binge-watching about sorcerers and witches.

After an hour, the small glass turned into a larger glass, and episode three of the evening stopped being terribly interesting while I, instead, focused on being sad and disappointed.

Another hour after that, and the larger glass turned into a very large glass and a box of chocolates that Papa had ordered from Sicily.

Then, when the chocolates were done, I ditched the glass and drank straight from the bottle, drowning my sorrows and ruining my lipstick as I waited on any form of communication from him. I got none and ended up passing out in the living room, curled up on my couch, the ancient, crocheted blanket my nana made before she passed over my shoulders and face to block out the light I was too drunk to stand up and turn off.

Now, I had a massive hangover. Was it a hangover if you were still drunk, though?

Sighing and blinking my eyes open experimentally, I was glad at least that my automatic timer had shut off most of the lights in the room. Only two lamps weren't connected to smart plugs, and they were on the glass tables on either side of the couch. I reached over and shut one off, nearly knocking it onto the floor in the process, and decided the other could just stay on.

I waved the phone in front of my face, wincing at the bright bluish light that came from the screen, and saw it was six in the morning. I had to be in the kitchen at ten, and I needed to sober up before then. Grumbling, I forced myself to my feet, wavering and prepared to sit back on the couch if need be, and waited for the room to stop spinning again.

When I finally felt like I could maybe move a little without crashing into furniture, I took a few tentative steps toward the bathroom. It had been a long, long time since I had been drunk, so I wasn't used to navigating my space in an inebriated state. As a matter of fact, I had never been drunk at home before.

I shuffled to the shower and sat on the closed lid of the toilet for a moment when I felt like my legs were going to give out on me.

Slowly, I reached up and turned the handle for the shower. It burst into life with one of the very satisfying aspects of this dwelling. The hot water heater was immediate, and the pressure was high, meaning the shower beat the tension out of your shoulders by force, and it didn't take but a few seconds to

heat to the temperature you wanted, even if it were River Styx hot.

Fumbling out of my clothes, I stepped into the shower before I realized I was still wearing my socks. It was almost enough to make me cry, and I peeled them off and tossed them away. Standing under the water brought a little bit of clarity to my mind but coupled it with an intense thirst. The pounding in my skull had gone from the still-drunk dull throb to the hangover-thump before I got the makeup off my face.

I could do this. I had to keep telling myself I could do this. I could get showered, get dressed, and head into the kitchen early so I could get my stuff done and then feign some form of sickness and go home at lunch. It might make Leo pissed, since it would mean he had dinner all to himself back there until Papa returned at seven, but he would live. Papa might ask some questions, but after what he said yesterday, I thought I might have a little leeway.

I finished getting clean and shut off the faucet. The sudden lack of hot water made me shiver, which also seemed to wake me up a little more. Wrapping a towel around me tightly, I cursed myself for not turning on the little space heater in the bathroom and tried to put on my clothes without taking the towel off. I got one leg halfway into my slacks before I gave up, sat on the toilet seat, and cried.

It was no use. Everything hurt, especially inside my skull. There was no way I was going to be able to work today. Cop-out or not, I was going to have to call my sister and figure out a way to call off.

Ditching the work clothes, I stumbled into the bedroom and yanked my pajama drawer open. A pair of fuzzy pants was on top, and I grabbed them before stumbling over to my closet and pulling an old hoodie out to slip on as well. The sun was beginning to peek through the curtains already, and I had no idea where my blackout curtains were and probably wasn't going to be able to hang them even if I found them.

Finally in something comfortable, I went back into the living room one last time. My phone was still on the couch,



and I grabbed it while picking up the wine bottle on the floor and setting it upright on the coffee table. I'd throw it away later. I wanted it to stay there as a testament to my stupidity for when I wasn't feeling like I had been hit by a train.

A half of a pack of water bottles, still in the plastic wrap that kept them all together, sat in the kitchen on a shelf. I grabbed the whole thing and headed back into the bedroom. Once there, I put the bottles on the floor, grabbed one and opened it, and downed almost the entire thing in one go. I cracked open a second one and sat it on the nightstand before shutting the blinds completely and pulling the curtains as tight as I could.

Collapsing into the bed, I wriggled down until I had the blankets up to my chin and pulled the hoodie down over my eyes. I pulled open the contacts on my phone and found Luna, hitting the call button and yawning. Lying down was triggering the need for more sleep already.

"Sofia?" Luna asked on the other end of the line as the ringing stopped abruptly. "What are you doing up this early?"

"I'm sick," I said. It wasn't entirely the truth, but sickness and hungover were cousins on the same branch of the get-out-of-work family tree. "I can't make it in today. I need you to tell Leo and Papa."

"Oh. Do you need me to bring you anything? Soup?"

"No," I said, trying to resist the urge to wretch at the idea of eating anything at the moment. "Maybe some soup later. Much later. I'm going back to bed."

"Okay," Luna said. "Get some rest. I'll take care of Papa and Leo."

"Thank you." I hung up, shoving the phone under the pillow. I wanted to go to Kieran's messages and see if maybe he'd sent one that hadn't popped up as a notification. But I knew better. He hadn't responded because he was ghosting me. He'd got what he wanted and realized that he didn't want to get into a relationship before he explored what else Ashford had for him.

Joke was on him. Ashford wasn't exactly teeming with possibilities. I should know.

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep but found it hard to do. Part of it was the headache that I now realized I should have taken something for, but that wasn't the worst thing keeping me up. That was Kieran. I finally pulled the phone out from under the pillow and checked the messages again, pulling down so it refreshed.

Nothing changed. The message didn't even say it had been read.

Sighing, I shoved the phone back under the pillow and pulled the covers tight. I tried to think of anything other than Kieran. Food wouldn't work since it brought me back to the competition and how I was excited to compete against him, but food was my go-to.

It took a long time, but eventually, I drifted off to a restless, dreamless sleep.



## KIERAN

**S** *moke.*

*Clutching chest. Can't breathe. Where is everyone? I can hear people crying out for my help, but I can't find them in the darkness and flame.*

*A foreboding sense of doom. What have I forgotten? Where am I? How do I get out?*

*Flames shoot in front of my face, and my yell of surprise is drowned out by the roar of the fire. I hunker down and try to find a way through the flames. A path reveals itself, flames licking the narrow area where I might just fit sideways if I skip through it. I have to try.*

*I leap to my feet and dive into the place where the fire hasn't engulfed everything in its path yet. I can see it converging behind me as I half skip, half run. When will it end? When will I get somewhere safe?*

*When will I wake up?*

**I** snapped awake, taking a huge, guttural breath of air, my eyes wide and searching for the flames again.

Where was the fire? Was I still running? Was I still in danger? What about the cries of those people who needed my help?

Nothing made sense, and my heart was thumping in my chest, making me feel like it was going to burst out. I was in

an ambulance. I recognized that much. But I still had my gear on, and I was alone. The bus was parked somewhere dark, but there were dim lights outside. I was lying on the ground beside a gurney, seemingly having fallen off it at some point, as it was turned sideways and caught against the bottom of the shelves on the side.

I fell asleep here. I remembered that now. I fell asleep in the ambulance. I pulled my sleeve up to check my watch, the one my father and my grandfather wore. I had been asleep for two hours. I realized I couldn't hear anything outside of the ambulance, which meant we weren't out in the open field anymore. They had driven the bus somewhere with me in it, and I never woke up.

I lay back down and clenched my eyes shut, trying desperately to calm my heart down enough to not feel like I needed to vomit. Taking deep breaths and staring at the ceiling, trying to count down from five to one with each breath, I felt things starting to settle. My heart slowed down and didn't feel like it was being clenched by someone reaching into my chest with a vise.

I opened my eyes, and the blurry, dark, spinning world I had woken up to was much clearer, much calmer. Sitting up, I felt like the terror and fog that had been filling my mind was dissipating, to the point that I couldn't even remember the dream. All I knew was that there was fear and fire. I unbuckled my coat, pulling it off my shoulders and relishing in the cool air hitting the sweat-soaked white T-shirt underneath.

Scooting to the edge of the bus, I pushed on the door and found it only partially shut. It swung open easily, and light flooded my vision, making me squint and groan. The sun was up and peeking over the mountains, filling the garage with yellow beams. I stepped out gingerly and grabbed my coat, stumbling toward the door to the firehouse.

The small garage just for the EMS crew was attached to the back of the house, allowing me to go in and, using a short hallway, end up right at the lockers. At this time of the morning, it should be fairly empty, with one shift having just started. Most likely, all the other guys from my shift would

have gone home by now. God knew I sent enough of them back to the station before I zonked out.

Locker rooms almost always have the same smell, but when I walked into ours, all my nose could pick up was the remnant burning smell that came from inhaling so much smoke. I had spent all evening and all night battling that fire, and now my entire body was emanating the aftermath. I needed a shower and a bed, and when I plopped heavily onto the bench in front of my locker, I was already envisioning how sweet it would be to crawl under clean white sheets.

I changed out of my uniform, not bothering to get out of the shirt or boxers I was wearing. I'd toss those into the washer when I got home. Slipping on jeans and my sneakers, I grabbed my wallet and keys and shut the locker door. It was after six, which meant the chief was probably in the office. I should at least stop by and give him a rundown on how the night went.

Gripping the handle of the door to the main hallway, I heard voices outside and paused. One of them sounded like the chief, and the other distant and tinny, like it was coming from a speakerphone. I opened the door and saw Chief McDaniel walking toward me in the hallway, surprise and something almost approaching happiness in his face. The slight, almost imperceptible rise of the corners of his lips and his eyes opening ever so slightly more than usual was the closest thing I think I had ever seen to joy coming from him.

“Duggan!” he barked, marching over to me. In my still half-awake and fumbling state, I thought he was coming to fight for a second. But that was just Chief McDaniel—he always looked like he was barreling at you with a football, and you were the last defensive back between him and the endzone.

“Chief?” I said, not necessarily intending it to sound like a question but kind of worried he was just going to run over me.

He stopped a couple of feet from me and swung out his arm. I was far too late to duck or do anything about it and

simply winced in anticipation, unsure of why he would want to hit me but accepting that it was happening.

Instead, he clapped my shoulder, hard enough to make me stumble. Though, admittedly, that probably didn't take much right at that moment.

“Duggan! I just got off the phone with the mayor!”

“Oh,” I said.

He searched my eyes for any sense of recognition, and when I gave him nothing because I had no idea what the mayor would want, he seemed to sigh and return to the surliness again.

“He called about you,” he said. “Come into my office.”

“Sure.”

My heart sank to my stomach. If the mayor wanted to call the chief about me and he wanted to talk to me in the office, it was possible my nap had cost me my job. I didn't think it should, but things didn't always happen the way they should, especially if politics were involved. If someone had needed something and witnessed me sleeping in the back of an ambulance, my ass was toast.

Chief sat behind his desk and motioned to the door until I shut it quietly behind me. I stood with my head held as high as I could manage given the circumstances. If I was going to get fired, at least I knew I had done a hell of a job coordinating the night before.

“Well,” he said, “I want you to know that I don't often do this. As a matter of fact, I can only think of doing one other time, and it was extremely well deserved this time around.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to accept my fate.

“I just wanted to say I was impressed and proud of you for how you handled that fire,” he said. “An incredible showing, and one that other firemen could learn from. Your poise in such an incredibly hectic environment kept cool heads and effective work for multiple departments. I have heard nothing

but rave praise about you from everyone that was there last night.”

“Oh?” I said, completely confused. I was positive I was getting the axe, so for him to be giving me praise was doubly weird.

“Enough so that the mayor *and* the governor heard about it. Your name is getting splashed on the news this evening as a hero. The mayor and governor want to meet with you later today.”

I was speechless and too tired to even begin the mental gymnastics necessary to figure out how I had gone from positive I was getting canned to being asked to do a photo op with the movers and shakers of south-eastern Tennessee. Instead, I simply nodded.

“Don’t bowl me over with excitement there, boy,” Chief said, a laughless smirk crossing his face.

“Sorry, Chief. Just exhausted.”

“I figured,” he said. “The boys found you in the bus and brought you back to the firehouse. You did a damn fine job out there last night. I’ll tell you what. I want you to go on home, get some sleep and a shower, and shave that stubble off your face. Grab something good to eat. Then get back here at the station at five to meet them all. Sound good?”

Chief always seemed to make any question about things he was planning with you sound more like an order than a request. His “sounds good” was not a question about if I thought it sounded good. It was a warning that whatever he just said was how things were going to be, and I had a choice to either fight it and lose or accept it and just go along.

I decided on accepting and going along. Most people did.

“Five,” I repeated, trying and failing to do the math in my head. It meant a few hours of sleep. That’s all that mattered.

“Alright,” he said. “Git.”

It was informal for Chief McDaniel, but that’s what made it special. Him telling me to “git” was better than being



dismissed or telling me to go. It was familiar and almost playful. Almost. A sense of pride filled my chest as I walked out of his office. Funny that. The mayor and governor wanted to meet me to congratulate me, at least in theory. And yet, the chief saying “git” was far more impactful for me at the moment.

I walked out of the office, and the first thing I thought was that I should tell Sofia about it. She would be thrilled for me to hear how well the chief had... taken... to...

*Oh shit.*

Sofia.

Sofia, who I was supposed to have a date with last night. Sofia, who I had slept with and then stood up immediately the next day. Sofia, the girl who was so beautiful and perfect and now was most likely so mad at me she wouldn't speak to me again.

Dammit, dammit, dammit!

I scrambled through my bag to find my phone and pulled it out. The battery was dead, and I cursed as I ran into the locker to throw it onto the charger I always kept inside. It took a moment to boot up, and when it did, I cursed again into the empty room.

She had called me at least once and texted me a half-dozen times. The last one made me shake my head. I had to fix this.

*I guess one night was enough, the text read. Have a great life, Kieran.*

A series of angry emojis followed that, and then there was nothing.

I couldn't believe I'd missed so much from her and yanked my phone off the charger. I could charge it in the car. I had to go.



## SOFIA

**I** 'm lying in my bed, and the smell of something on the stove catches my attention. It's got a sweetness to it, but heat. Lots of heat. I can pick out onions and pepper, tomatoes and bacon. It has to be a chili. I don't know how I know, but I do. I sit up and throw the covers off me. It's my bed, but not my room. Not my covers. Not my sheets. Yet, for some reason, I am fine with it.

*It's the way it's supposed to be.*

*Following the smell, I stumble to a nightstand and open a drawer. There are spatulas and stirring spoons inside, and I choose the one that I use the most. He will like that.*

*I'm wearing a bathrobe now, even though I don't remember putting it on, and I slip into my combat boots. I hadn't worn these since I was an early teenager. They made me feel sexy at a time when I was awkward and tall for my age. I didn't know I was going to stop right there and stay that height the rest of my life, watching people who called me tall suddenly sprout up over me.*

*Lacing the boots tight, almost to the point where they hurt, I stand and look at myself in the mirror. A mirror I don't have, yet there it is in the bedroom I think of as my own. I'm wearing fishnets now. And an apron. It's a look, that's for sure, but one that will certainly capture his attention.*

*A soft humming is coming from the kitchen, and I realize I am now in a mirror image of my old apartment. I laugh at how*

*silly it is that everything is reversed. The bathroom is in the wrong place, I think. It should be on this side of me.*

*Walking toward the kitchen, still feeling like I should be heading in the direction of the bedrooms, I listen for that humming voice. His voice. It beckons me.*

*Rounding the corner into the kitchen, I see him, in the blue T-shirt and khakis I met him in, stirring a pot with his massive, toned arms. He's singing to himself an old Italian tune, one my father used to sing when he cooked when Mama was alive. I'm shocked at how good his accent is.*

*He reaches for a jar of sugar, and I reach out to stop him. No one puts sugar in chili. That's insane. I go to speak, but my voice is missing. My mouth flaps open and shut, but no noise comes out. Panic starts to wrap its way around me as I reach for him, but the room gets longer. The space between us deepens. He is so far away now. And still singing.*

*I try to cry out but am silenced by the sound of a loud drumming.*

*Thump, thump, thump.*

*A pause.*

*Thump, thump, thump.*

*A sound, something that is almost like singing, breaks the silence between.*

*Thump, thump, thump.*

*I'm trying to find it, but it seems to be everywhere and nowhere at once. I turn away from Kieran and his faraway voice and search the cushions of the couch, thinking it might be my phone.*

*Thump, thump, thump.*

*It's driving me insane. I have to find what it was.*

*Suddenly, Kieran is in front of me. He is handing me a coffee, one of my breakfast brews. He's shirtless now, looking like he just came out of bed. He smiles softly at me and*

*brushes an errant hair from my face. I feel it escape my lips where it had settled.*

*“Don’t worry,” he says. “It’s just me.”*

**T** hump, thump, thump.

I woke up to the sound of the drumbeat, crossing between the lands of dream and awake. It was real, and it was loud, and it was coming from somewhere in the house. I sat up and looked around my room. My real room. No mirror, no drawer full of kitchen utensils. Just my same old boring bedroom with the furniture I had since I lived with my ex.

Thump, thump, thump.

It was the door. I realized that now.

My eyes were letting in too much light, and I squinted them almost shut. It still wasn’t enough. I shut one eye fully and then switched them when I had finally mustered up the strength to push the covers off me.

There were no boots at the foot of the bed. Just slippers, old and worn from years of use, but still fuzzy and comfortable. The boots I had dreamed of hadn’t fit me in a long time and had long since been donated to Goodwill. I wondered if some other teenager had found them and tried to create a new identity like I had when I owned them. It probably involved listening to a lot of whatever stood in the place of Nine Inch Nails now.

I slid my feet into the slippers and reached for the bathrobe draped over the post at the foot of the bed. Standing, I slipped it over my pajamas and shuffled out of my bedroom door.

Thump, thump, thump.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I shouted at whoever it was being so damn persistent. It was only six forty in the morning. Normally, the religious wingnuts and kids looking for donations for their school marching band weren’t out just yet. And none of them were as persistent as this knock.

Suddenly, a thought went through me that struck my heart. What if it was about Papa? What if it was someone alerting me something terrible happened at the restaurant?

Picking up my speed a little, I made it into the living room and to the door. I gave myself a second of silent prayer and yanked it open.

The sun was so bright that initially, I couldn't see anything. It was right above the restaurant now, shining directly into my field of vision. Whoever was on the porch was invisible in the blinding light. I shoved my hand over my eyebrow like a salute in an attempt to block it.

Then a body stepped into the sunlight and shadowed me. A rather large body wearing a dirty white T-shirt and an apologetic smile.

Kieran was standing on my doorstep, and suddenly everything from the night before rushed back into my mind. Getting dressed up in a way I hadn't done in years. Waiting with my phone in my hand, texting him, calling him as I got drunker and drunker. Waking up on the couch and forcing myself into a shower. Calling out of work.

It was like a jolt of electricity went through my body, and I was as awake as I could be. And I slammed the door in his face.

There was silence for a moment as I breathed in sharp, shallow breaths and stared at the door that was now shut. How dare he? Of all things, showing up at my house before seven in the morning was extremely rude. And to do it after standing me up? What, had he gone on another date that didn't work out and now wanted to see if we could repeat the night before? No, thank you.

"Sofia." His voice came through the door in a muffled plea. "Sofia, please, let me explain."

I stood there, silent, watching the door and listening to his voice on the other side. I didn't know what to do, frankly. All of this was still new to me. But I knew I was still angry.

“Sofia, please. I know you’re standing right there. Please, just hear me out.”

“No,” I said, not sure if the word actually came out of my mouth.

“What?” came the voice. “I heard you say something, but I can’t hear you.”

I rolled my eyes.

Who did this guy think he was? He stood me up. He was lucky I didn’t call my Papa and tell him to round up some of the boys. Sure, those “boys” were in their fifties now, but they would do anything for Papa. One phone call and I could have him the subject of a million different stereotypes about my heritage.

“I don’t know if you’re still there,” Kieran said, “but I’m going to try to tell you what happened anyway. I got called to a forest fire as I was leaving. It was crazy huge. I spent all night fighting the damn thing and then passed out in the back of an ambulance to get some sleep. They took me back to the station. I am so sorry I missed our date. But listen. If you don’t believe me, go look it up. It’s all over the news right now.”

His explanation stopped me from walking away from the door. He couldn’t be stupid enough to tell me a lie that was so easily verified, could he?

I pulled out my phone, humoring him by looking it up. I typed in the local newspaper’s website, one out of Nashville, and stopped mid-thought.

There was Kieran, in full uniform, looking incredibly, stupidly attractive. He was barking an order to other firemen while the flames burned trees in the background. The photography was excellent and gave a sense of urgency and control of chaos in great detail. Kieran was clearly in charge.

The headline made my stomach do a flip.

“Hero Firefighter Leads Effort to Stop Massive Fire”

*Shit.*

He wasn't lying. He was not only at a fire last night, but also, he was in charge of the response. And he was getting lauded for it. All while I sat on my couch, drank wine, and casually cursed his name. I owed Kieran a huge apology if I'd brought half the karma down on him that I had attempted to.

Kieran was a hero, and he was standing on my front porch, banging on my door and apologizing for missing a date. With me.

Swallowing my pride and with an incredible sense of admiration and guilt for thinking anything less, I reached for the doorknob.





## KIERAN

I stood there in the silence and stared at the door, hoping that she would open it and at least give me a chance to explain, or maybe even speak to me through it. I'd take that. I knew that I hadn't really done anything wrong, but she was hurt, and I understood it. I was sure if she just let me explain it, she would find that I didn't mean to hurt her.

"Mornin'," a voice behind me said, making me turn toward it. It was a newspaper delivery man, dropping off papers. Sometimes I forgot how small a town Ashford was. In Nashville, papers were delivered by a strong-armed guy tossing them out of the window of some ancient four-door as they blasted talk radio and cruised down the street.

"Morning," I croaked.

There was a pause as the man scanned my face.

"Don't I know you?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I replied.

"Wait a second," he said. Ruffling in the bag on his hip, he pulled out today's paper and showed it to me. "Ain't this you?"

I sighed, looking back at the still-closed door.

"Yep," I said.

"I'll be damned," the man said, tossing the paper on the porch. "Good work out there, man."

“Thanks.” There was still no movement at the door. It was time to give up. As the man walked away, heading across the lot to the next apartment, I stepped off the porch. At least I could go home and sleep, even though I didn’t even really feel all that sleepy anymore. Just tired and disappointed.

My foot hit the pavement when a sound behind me stopped me in my tracks. I turned to see the door flinging open. Sofia was there, wearing a bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. Her eyes were filled with tears, and she stood there, staring at me for a long moment. I took the two steps back up the porch to the door, trying desperately to find something to say. All the words just whooshed out of me the second I saw her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t respond to your calls or texts,” I said. “I didn’t check my phone the entire time because I was so busy, and I just didn’t know...”

She shook her head, tears streaming down her face, and reached for me. Her hands gripped my dirty T-shirt and pulled me to her. Our lips met, and a hunger that I had never known revealed itself inside me. She seemed to feel it too and threw her arms around my neck and jumped into my arms.

I carried her inside, slamming the door shut behind us, our lips searching for all the available skin on each other’s body. I held her under her ass with both hands, relishing the way her cheeks fit in my palms, and walked her over to the couch. We tumbled down onto the oversized cushions with her on top of me, and she let out a giggle that filled my soul.

“You smell like smoke,” she muttered between breathless kisses to my neck and chest, hands reaching down to tear my shirt off from the waist.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No,” she groaned. “It’s hot.”

A rumble in my chest met her voice, and my cock felt like it was going to burst out of my jeans.

My shirt was flung to the ground as I yanked her robe off. She was wearing a hoodie underneath, and I pulled that off too, revealing her bare chest and smothering my face in it

immediately. She smelled like citrus and soap. I licked her skin between her breasts and grasped them as she fumbled with my jeans.

Once the button was undone, she slid off me, pulling them down as I arched up to help her. My cock sprung out, hard and straight as my jeans went past my knees and I kicked them away. She moaned as she took it in both hands and began to stroke me toward her. She took me in her mouth with a sound that rolled up my spine, and I slid one hand behind her head to guide her.

Bobbing up and down on me, she kept eye contact, only breaking it to close her eyes briefly. Diving down deep on my cock, she choked as it reached the back of her throat, and I groaned. Her tongue slid underneath and flicked at the sensitive place under the head, and she smiled. Still stroking me, she kissed my thighs and squeezed my balls gently.

The pleasure was immense, and I couldn't take it. I was going to come. I clenched my stomach, trying to stop it, and reached for her hands, but she was undeterred. Taking me back into her mouth, she sucked me again, and I exploded down her throat. She groaned in gratification at my pleasure as I climaxed inside her soft lips, and she continued to stroke me.

I jolted in the seat for a moment as I emptied into her and then reached down to pull her up to me. She was still wearing pajama pants, and as she stood, I yanked them down off her. My cock was still standing tall, and I knew I only needed a moment before I was ready to go again.

I guided her to stand on the cushions above me and settled one knee on the back of the couch. I reveled in the scent of her wet, ready pussy and slid my tongue through her folds, stopping to swirl around her pearl. She cried out and reached down to clench my hair as I languidly let my tongue dance over her clit and one hand slid between her thighs and up to her entrance.

My middle finger slid inside her, and the cry from her throat turned into a hoarse moan. The pad of my finger brushed the upper wall of her pussy while my tongue nudged

her clit. I looked up, between her mountainous breasts, nipples serving as a delicious peak that I would gladly climb and settled on the way her face screwed up in ecstasy. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes were clenched shut.

I reached up with my free hand to cup her breast, and she opened her eyes to look down at me. Her hips moved a little as she brushed her pussy against me, and I knew she was close. There was a desperation in that rocking, a need for release. I could feel it like it was my own desires. I knew her needs and how to fulfill them as an instinct, and I squeezed her breast as I sucked on her clit.

“Kieran!” she cried out as she suddenly went still, her body arching back. Then her legs shook as she lost strength and the toes beside my head, resting on the back cushion while her knee pushed down on it, curled tight. Her hands clenched my hair and pulled me into her as she tumbled down, bending over me while I slid my finger in deep and pressed my tongue into her clit.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her down into my lap. She went willingly, as if in a daze, and I pulled her into position.

“Fuck me,” she whispered in my ear, pulling me over so that she lay down on the couch and I was now on top of her. “Please, fuck me.”

I groaned in appreciation of her body as ours smashed together and the way she begged for me to take her. I had no intention of disappointing her either.

I sat up, one knee pressed deep into the couch and the other leg down on the floor as I spread her legs wide and settled my cock at her entrance. The head was throbbing in anticipation, and I was rock hard again. I needed to be inside her, to feel her, to fill her.

To claim her.

She was wet and waiting for me, and I didn't bother with being gentle. I plunged my cock deep inside her, and she let out a howl as I filled her tight little pussy with my throbbing cock. I held it there as her eyes rolled back in her head, and

she shook, vibrating, and her breath coming out in short bursts. I curled over her, dominating her and pressing her into the couch with my weight, and she wrapped her thighs around my hips, squeezing me tighter.

I rocked once, and she cried out. My cock was deep inside her, and she was molding herself around me, making room for me as I throbbed and ached to pound into her with an animalistic lust.

She raced her fingers down my chest, and I grabbed her hips, holding her in place as I rocked into her again. And again. Each thrust brought me deeper into her until our hips met.

Her nipples were taut and peaked as her breasts bounced with each movement. I was mesmerized by them as I fucked her, willing to watch them dance for the rest of my life if I could. But there was another release building, an even more intense one than before. I was racing to it but not wanting it to be over yet and yearning for the euphoria of the orgasm to come.

She pulled one leg up and slid it between us and then positioned herself on her side. The new position granted me even deeper access, and I rocked into her, sweat beginning to slide down the small of my back. Sofia's eyes were glazed as they rolled back, and she clenched my waist with her hand, pulling me tighter and deeper into her with each thrust.

Her body was reacting with an intense, long climax, and I could feel the cream covering my cock as I increased my speed. Suddenly, her eyes opened and focused on me, determination and pleading in them. Her lips opened, and moans came out in short, staccato bursts.

“Come inside me,” she cried.

A roar from deep in my chest built as I slammed into her harder, our bodies smashing into one another as I penetrated her as deeply as I could. The sensitive sensation of an oncoming climax combined with the intense need to pound her as deeply as possible, and I let my head fall back and my eyes clench.

My fingers dug into the soft skin of her ass and her hips as I thrust one final time into her, coming with a ferocity that I had never experienced before. I felt like my soul ascended for a moment as I emptied into her in huge, gratifying pulses, her pussy squeezing me as she came with me. When my eyes opened, they locked on hers, and we experienced that moment together, the last of my essence spilling out with short, desperate thrusts, until I collapsed onto her in a sweaty and satisfied mess.

What adrenaline had gotten me this far was gone, and I fell to the cushion behind her, pulling her into me as I breathed hard and tried to gain control of myself as I felt her curl into me, molding around my body. My mind was still empty from the incredible, life-altering climax, and I rested there with her for a few moments, enjoying the glow of our mutual climaxes and wondering if it would be like that every time.

I had a good idea that it would be.





## SOFIA

O rgasms were better than Tylenol for getting rid of headaches, that was for sure.

We had been curled up on the couch together, naked and comfortable under a blanket when I decided I needed to get up and get something to drink. Kieran was dozing and woke up to my movement. As I sat up, I leaned down to kiss him before standing.

“I just need a glass of water,” I said. “I’ll be right back. Do you need anything?”

“Water would be good,” he said.

I was tempted to put on something to cover myself, but the room was warm enough, and frankly, I liked the idea that Kieran was watching me walk around naked and enjoying it. I certainly enjoyed seeing him naked on my couch. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

There were a couple of water bottles in the refrigerator, and I grabbed one out and cracked it open, guzzling it down in just a few gulps. The satisfaction of drinking cold water when I was so thirsty simply added to the overall physical satisfaction I was feeling at the moment, and instantly, I felt like I could lie back down and sleep for a week. I grabbed two more bottles and brought them with me into the living room, opening them and handing one to Kieran. He emptied his quickly as well, and I took a few sips before lying back down with him.

As I settled into his body, he curled his arms around me, pulling me tight. I sank into it, enjoying the sensation of being held so close and the rhythm of his heartbeat against my back. Turning my head a little, I pressed a kiss to his lips.

“Do you want to go get in bed?” I asked.

“I have to be at the fire station at five,” he said. “The mayor and the governor want to meet with me and the chief over the fire.”

“Oh, wow. That’s exciting.”

“I guess. I’d rather be here with you.”

I felt my cheeks flush, and I kissed him again.

“I would too, but you should go,” I said. “But there’s a lot of time between now and five. We could get in bed and curl up for a few hours. I took today off work.”

“As long as you don’t mind,” he said, “I would love that. I just need a shower so I don’t make your bed smell like smoke.”

Wiggling out of his arms, I went to the bathroom, gathered some towels and washcloths, and turned on the water. The pounding heat was intense right off the bat, and I turned it back a little so it didn’t burn him when he got inside. I wondered if he would like the space heater on.

Stepping out of the bathroom with a lot on my mind, I went back into the living room, where Kieran had started dozing on the couch again. I kissed his cheek, and his eyes popped back open. They were a little foggy and dazed but awake enough that he smiled when he saw me.

“Shower’s on,” I said. “I’ll get the bed ready.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Of course. Go shower.”

I watched him, subconsciously biting my bottom lip as he made his way down my hall to the bathroom. His chiseled body was incredible to watch, and when he turned to head into the bathroom, the sight of his thick, swinging cock made me

want to climb into the shower with him and see if he wanted to go for round three.

*Get ahold of yourself, Sofia.*

It was exciting to feel this way about someone. It was like I was a teenager again, but even better because there was someone to share that excited, intense desire with. I was positively giddy, even with the drained feeling in my bones from the hangover and the headache that was still there but just barely threatening to become more of a problem at the top of my skull.

I gathered our clothes, threw them into the washer, and went into the bedroom to prepare the bed. The sheets had been thrown to the side when I got up to pounding on the door, and I remade it so it was nice and tight like a hotel bed. By the time I had finished with that, the water shut off in the bathroom, and I had just enough time to spray the bed with the eucalyptus mint spray that I always used when I needed a good night's sleep.

"That's a wonderful smell," he said as he made his way into the bedroom, mostly dry and with a towel wrapped around his waist. Somehow, a towel slung low under his abdomen on one side, giving just the faintest peek at the dark curly hair down there, was just as sexy as seeing him fully naked.

"It's my nighttime spray," I said. "I use it when I've had a rough day and need a good night's rest."

"Well, I certainly had a rough day. It's gotten much better, though."

He winked at me, and I felt the butterflies in my stomach acting up again.

"Come on," I said, taking his hand. "Let's go to bed."

I led him to the bed, and he crawled in with me. He lay on his back, and I settled my head over his chest, wrapping one leg around one of his and sighing happily. I was barely awake long enough to remember to reach back and grab my phone to set an alarm. As soon as I set it back down on the nightstand and returned to his chest, we were both fast asleep.

\* \* \*

I woke up just before the alarm and shut it off. Just a couple of minutes before three, it was already late in the afternoon, but there was enough time for us to get up, have a little something to eat, and for him to get back to the station. Regrettably, I put on clothes, giving up on the idea that we had enough time for one more romp before he had to leave but placating myself by saying it certainly didn't seem like this was a goodbye.

Moving into the laundry room, I switched his clothes to the dryer and then headed for the kitchen. A solid lunch sounded amazing. Sandwiches would be fast and delicious, so I put on a pan and fried up bacon while collecting various deli meats and opening the package of brioche bread I always kept around.

The coffee machine had just poured out a pot when I heard shuffling in the bedroom. Footsteps down the hall preceded the arrival of what I expected to be Kieran wrapped in a towel again. Instead, he confidently strode into the kitchen, buck naked and grinning.

“Coffee smells amazing,” he said.

“Uhh. Mm-hmm,” I managed. It was about all I could say.

“Ooh, sandwiches. Thank you for making lunch.”

“You're very welcome. I thought you might like something delicious before you have to go.”

“I very much would,” he said. “And I hate to ask you to do something, considering all this, but I have a favor to ask.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I have a bag in my truck,” he said. “It's got clothes in it for me to put on. Would you mind grabbing it?”

I laughed.

“I am rather enjoying this whole situation,” I said. “But yes.”

He pulled me tight into him and pressed a kiss to my lips.

“I’ll stay this way as long as you want me to,” he said. “I just can’t go into the station like this.”

I giggled in spite of myself. I sounded like a teenager. I wasn’t a giggler. Ever. What was going on with me?

“I’ll get your bag for you. Where are your keys?”

“In my pants,” he said, looking around. “Which... I threw off somewhere.”

“Oh, I put them in the washer for you. They’re drying now. I think your keys must have fallen out.”

A quick look into the living room produced his keys under the coffee table. He handed me the one for his truck, and I pranced out of the house in my pajamas happily to go get it. It dawned on me that my front door could be seen by the back door of the restaurant, and I froze, wondering if it was standing open the way Papa usually did. If it was, he would see Kieran’s truck. And me. In pajamas. At three in the afternoon.

Oh well. That was a problem for Later Sofia.

I grabbed his bag from his truck, noticing the way the smell of smoke was still thick inside it, and brought it inside for him. He rummaged through until he found a pair of boxers, some socks, a T-shirt, and a pair of shorts.

“Well, I can’t meet the governor like this, but I can at least drive home.”

“It’s casual, but casual in a ‘hero who saved Ashford from a raging forest fire’ kind of way,” I teased.

“Yeah, I think it’s the shorts that sell it,” he said.

We gathered our plates and sat down at my tiny kitchen table to eat. We were a few bites in, marked by general moans of happiness that again got me warm between the thighs, when he sat his second sandwich down and looked over at me with a bit more seriousness in his eyes.

“I’ll be honest,” he said, and a note of fear went through my body, “I’m historically not very good at relationships.”

*Ahh, there it is.* That’s the polite way of saying, “I have a lot of girls I bang.” At least it explained why he was so good in bed. He probably had a lot of practice.

“Neither am I,” I said truthfully. “I’ve only ever had one, but it lasted for years and ended horribly.”

He nodded, tossing a pickle in his mouth and crunching on it.

“I never could seem to get the hang of them, only because I was never really all that interested in being around the same person all the time,” he said. “But that’s... different with you.”

“Oh?” I said, trying to keep the hope out of my voice.

“Very different. I really, really like you. And I know we barely know each other, but I would like to change that.”

“Me too,” I said, feeling like my head was a balloon, barely tied by a thin string to the rest of my body. My face tingled, and I didn’t know what to do with my hands. Trying to remain calm was extraordinarily difficult, but I did my best. “I didn’t think I was going to meet anyone who I wanted to pursue anything with after my ex. At least not now. But I would like to see where this goes.”

“Good,” he said. “It’s settled, then. We both want to see what develops here.”

I smiled, and he returned it, and for a moment, we just sat there, staring at each other, smiling like lunatics.

“Good,” I said finally. “Now, let’s get these sandwiches in and get you off to meet the mayor.”



## KIERAN

I didn't know exactly what to think about things when I left Sofia's, but I knew one thing for sure: I liked her a lot. More than just someone I could shack up with on lonely nights, but as someone that I really, truly felt comfortable with. Someone I wanted to get to know. I was absolutely mesmerized by her. The incredible sex was a bonus.

A hell of a bonus.

She seemed to feel the same way and making me lunch and washing my clothes seemed like a token of that kind of feeling. I wanted to do something to thank her for that and put it in the back of my mind to keep rolling over while I went about my day.

After a passionate kiss on the porch, I tore myself away from her, hopped in the truck, and booked it back to my place. After I had already laid down the law to the boys about dress code, there was no way a T-shirt and jeans were going to cut it if I was to stroll in there and meet the mayor and the governor.

Racing inside, I tore open my closet that was still only half unpacked and found a pair of dress khakis and a button-up shirt that had been freshly dry-cleaned before I left Nashville.

Changing as quickly as I could, I checked my texts after a sound alerted me. A new one from Sofia was in my inbox, and when I clicked it, it was simply a kissing emoji. I laughed. I forgot there was a bit of an age difference there. She was in her mid-twenties. Emojis were an entire, accepted language



for that age group, and even though I was barely out of it, it still seemed silly in the best possible way.

I sent one back, unsure if that was the proper etiquette or not, and shoved the phone down in my pocket. Sprucing up quickly, I headed to the truck and revved it up, burning rubber back into town. I got there five minutes until five and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Until I saw all the other cars.

Vans and trucks with tiny satellite dishes were attached to the tops. Camera crews roamed the lawn outside of the station, some setting up to get a clear shot with a reporter standing between them. There was a large selection of spectators gathering from the nearby area, all stretching their necks to see and whispering to each other.

I pulled into the parking lot that was reserved in the back for EMS and saw several people excitedly pointing at me as I got out. Voices, all jumbled up together in the distance, all seemed to be pointing me out and talking. I tried to smile a bit and waved.

Inside was a million times more insane.

The station was crowded, full of people and cameras and security personnel. Young people in smart suits with tablets arguing with each other in that way where they never stop smiling seemed to indicate that they were political staffers. The firemen themselves stood in the background, watching everything with a combination of mild amusement and frustration at their normal evening routine being interrupted.

The chief greeted me near the door and pulled me into his office. He was smiling.

It looked really weird.

“Kieran, good evening. There are quite a lot of cameras here. I wanted to warn you.”

“Yeah, they were outside, too,” I said.

“Oh. Right,” Chief said. “Well, the governor will be here any minute now, and they would like you to say a few words

to the media when they're done meeting with you. Just general stuff, you know."

"Ok," I said.

"Duggan, this looks really good for the department. Your job was to come here and whip these boys into shape, and not only have you done a marvelous job of that so far, but you found yourself the center of a heroic story."

"I—" I began, trying to object to the whole H-word stuff.

"Heroic," he said again. "That's the word the media are using, and frankly, it's true. Now, when the governor gets here and the mayor is here, we'll do a little thing for the cameras, and then the mayor and I would like to talk for a little bit. Alright? Don't go anywhere."

"Yes, sir."

With that, he clapped me on the back hard enough to make me take a half step forward from the impact and walked out of his office. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I wasn't the kind of guy who liked a whole bunch of attention. It was more my speed to do my job and lead others to do the same. This whole thing with cameras was not exactly my favorite thing in the world.

I walked out of the office and directly into an impossibly young-looking staffer with a cell phone in one hand and a tablet in the other. He dodged me without looking up and kept going. Another was right behind him, this time a girl who looked like she might even still be in high school but also sporting the technology uniform of political staffers. She looked up briefly, looked back down at her phone, and then stopped in her tracks.

"Wait," she said, almost tripping over her feet. "Are you Kyle Duncan?"

"Kieran Duggan," I said.

"Right. Kieran Duncan."

"Duggan."

“Duggan,” she repeated, seeming frustrated at the correction rather than the fact that she kept getting it wrong.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Why aren’t you outside with the governor?”

“No one told me to be?” I ventured.

She rolled her eyes, sighing heavily, and then put on the bright fake smile that people of every political stripe used.

“If you could just come with me!”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement by someone who ran events like this a hundred times a week and could barely perceive a life where things weren’t done for the sake of PR. I followed her as closely as I could, but she managed to zip through the crowds of reporters much easier than I could being smaller and faster.

Every reporter I passed did the same slow turn of recognition, but by the time they knew who I was, I was past them and on to someone else. My name, both correctly and incorrectly shouted out, could be heard behind me as I made my way out of a side door we rarely used and onto the back lawn, where a makeshift stage had been set up with a microphone.

Sure enough, the governor, who I vaguely recognized from his ads on TV, and a person that I assumed was the mayor were standing next to the chief. I walked onto the stage, and the governor greeted me warmly, holding out a hand for a shake and smiling broadly. Then he just paused, frozen in place as he turned his head toward the reporters. I realized he was stopping for a photo op, and I awkwardly turned my head as well.

The snap of cameras taking pictures filled the air for a few seconds, silencing everything else. Then the governor turned to me and motioned to a place beside him at the podium. Nodding, I took my place on the other side of the mayor and the chief.

The next few minutes were kind of a blur. There was a little speech by both politicians and then a recognition of Chief

McDaniel. Then I was ushered in front of the cluster of microphones, and reporters started shouting questions. The only one I remembered later was the one asking me how it felt to be a hero.

“I’m not,” I responded. “The heroes are the people who noticed what was going on and called for help. The folks at Tennessee Lumber, the other firemen who spent all night fighting it, the other counties that sent help, those folks are heroes. I’m just the guy who told people what to do.”

For about ten minutes, the questions came at me, and then I was ushered away, back into the station and into the chief’s office. I was there alone for a little bit before the chief returned, the mayor laughing jovially as he told the chief a story the mayor clearly found hilarious. Chief McDaniel looked like he had just smelled an egg fart.

Of course, that wasn’t terribly different from his normal facial expression.

“Kieran,” the mayor said, coming over to me and shaking my hand vigorously. “You were great out there for the cameras. Very photogenic. Modest. All the things we need to help revitalize the image of the Ashford Fire Department. Great job.” He stopped suddenly and took an exaggerated breath. “Perhaps you might be suited for politics one day, eh? You have a look that people respond to, Kieran. And what a name! Kieran Duggan! I can see it on yard signs now. Of course, you’ll have to wait until I move on from being mayor, though, ha, ha, ha. Perhaps I’ll be governor by then?”

“Only if I’m president,” the governor said as he came into the room and shut the door behind him, blocking out several staffers who were clearly upset by the situation.

“Good to see you, Harvey. You too, Arn. Kieran, nice to meet you in person. Well done out there, son.”

“Thank you, Governor,” I said.

“If we could all take a seat for a moment,” Chief McDaniel said.

I sat down after the other three, wanting to keep the comfortable chair available for the other two should they want it, but they each sat down on folding chairs along the back of the room.

“Kieran,” the governor said, “I feel as though this might be beyond my normal prevue, but considering the state of things here in Ashford, I thought it my duty to see to it myself. The mayor here has asked me for help before, but this most recent situation was a damned disaster, and you handled it fantastically. We need a leader like you in southeast Tennessee. I want you to know that what you are about to be asked is not just from the mayor and the chief but from me as well.”

Confused, I turned my attention to the mayor, who seemed overjoyed at being able to say whatever it was he was about to say.

“Kieran, Chief McDaniel is retiring next year,” the mayor said. “We have all spoken, and we would like to offer you the position when he steps down.”

I blinked a few times, looking between the mayor and Chief McDaniel. The chief was beginning to have what looked like an actual genuine smile forming at the corners of his lips.

“Wow,” I said. “I am extraordinarily honored that you asked me. I promise, I will not let you down.”

“So that’s a yes, then?” the governor asked.

“Absolutely,” I said.

“I know you won’t let us down, son,” the governor said. “Now, as I understand it, there is some training that you will need to do beforehand while you learn the position. Chief?”

“That’s right,” Chief McDaniel said. “Right back to your old stomping grounds, actually. You’ll have to do a few weeks in Nashville and Memphis, working under their chiefs and shadowing them for a bit. We want you to know the job both from a high-capacity and our low-capacity situations so when you take over, you’re fully prepared. When I first got the job, they put me on for six months in Nashville, but since you were

just there in your current position, and how you handled our fire last night, we thought we could do with maybe six weeks.”

“Of course,” I said. “When is that?”

“It would start on the second. Right after the cook-off on the first.”

“Oh, good. I didn’t want to miss that.”

“We’re depending on you to help the department go two for two on the local news, Kieran,” the mayor said.

“I’ll do my best,” I said. “Thank you.”

As I walked out of the department and toward my truck, my first thought wasn’t excitement about the new position and pride over how much they thought of me. It was worry. Worry because what had begun this morning between Sofia and me was something I didn’t want to jeopardize. I wondered how she would take the news of me being gone so long.

I was going to have to make every single second with her as enjoyable as possible before training. Because when I left, who knew how things would go?



## SOFIA

For the last couple of weeks, Kieran and I had been together pretty much all of the time that we weren't at work. Even then, that didn't completely stop us as I had dropped off a few of Papa's famous pizzas at the fire station one evening, and he had come by to meet my sisters and Papa himself during one of my shifts. The whole night had been a blur, but Papa seemed pleased with him, and my sisters would not stop gushing about how I had somehow wound up with the hottest man in Ashford.

Yet, while we were spending almost all of our available time together, there was one thing we weren't sharing.

Our chili recipes.

There was a competitiveness between us that was unique for me, something I had never had before with anyone I had been interested in and certainly never with a boyfriend. He was positive he was going to beat me, to the level of cockiness not only infuriating me but somehow turning me on. I *liked* the idea that we were in competition, and I wanted to beat him.

We didn't tease each other so much as brag about how our own personal taste testers thought our chili was the best they ever had. It wasn't a lie on either of our parts. He was testing the boys in the firehouse, and I was testing patrons of the bar that I knew enjoyed hot stuff and had decent palates.

As I leaned against the bar the day before the cook-off, eyeing the three people who had been allowed to taste test my latest—and last—tweak to the recipe, I was on pins and



needles. The three people had been carefully chosen from regulars, and all had their own opinions on what kind of spice level was deemed “hot.”

First there was Rebecca Rowe, a tattoo artist who was married to one of the founders of the logging company and was known for enjoying a mild level of heat since her kid was born. Then there was Hawk Blackthorne, a tall Native who lived on the top of one of the mountains and often ended up being the one to clear the roads for everyone when snow came. He liked a good dose of heat but tended not to order the really hot stuff. Then there was Malia, a young YouTube star who got famous for her series on life as an amputee. She was what I called a fire addict. The only person I knew of personally who could handle heat as well as I could was Malia.

All three of them were good people, honest and fun to be around. And all of them had their partners sitting nearby, and all of them were sworn to secrecy about the recipe.

“I think,” Malia began, “that the heat level is perfect.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes and sat her spoon down by the line of saltine crackers and tortilla chips I had laid out as alternate utensils.

“Maybe when I was a teenager,” Rebecca said. “But I can barely handle it. It’s a lot of heat. Really tasty, I just have to take my time with it.”

I nodded, moving my eyes over to Hawk, who was sitting on his stool, staring into the bowl like it was talking to him.

“And you?” I asked.

“I’m thinking,” he said.

I waited for the rest of the sentence and, when it didn’t come, decided to prod him a little.

“Thinking...” I said.

“I am thinking that you’ll win this thing,” he said, cracking a grin. “This is delicious. A little hot, like Rebecca said, but I would absolutely order it again. The tortilla chips are the perfect vessel for it, too.”

I pumped my fist and reached down to grab them more chips.

“By all means, eat up. You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Rebecca.”

“Sorry,” she said, shrugging.

“No, seriously, it’s okay. It’s the one thing I need to keep an eye on. Not all the judges will be excited by the spiciness.”

“It’s got a lot of flavor,” Malia said. “Don’t sell yourself short. The complexity of the spices and veggies and meat is really outstanding.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Alright, so, this is the final draft. Loose lips sink ships, right?”

“Mine are sealed,” Malia said.

“Silence,” Hawk agreed, taking a swig of his beer.

“Won’t hear a peep from me,” Rebecca said. “My only question is if this is going on the menu?”

I beamed. “Yep. The bar menu is mine now, so I’m adding it right after I win first place with it.”

A general laugh rose up from my friends slash guinea pigs.

“That Korean-inspired pork belly was just to die for,” Malia said. “I love how the bar has spicy stuff now.”

“And that you have a one-to-ten scale for the heat,” Rebecca said. “So I don’t kill myself trying to eat these things.”

“Just keep doing what you’re doing to the pizzas,” Hawk said. “I love that they have a kick now.”

I received the compliments as humbly as I could while still secretly rejoicing. I was on my way to a good showing tomorrow at the cook-off, and Kieran was going to have to eat a little bit of crow.

“Do you mind if I take my bowl with me?” Hawk asked. “Looks like you guys are picking up.”

I looked around the bar that was slowly getting packed and nodded.

“Good thing I’m getting off now,” I said. “I need to rest up.”

“Good luck,” Malia said. “You’re going to beat the pants off of Kieran.”

There was a beat where I looked at Rebecca, and we both burst out laughing as Malia’s face went red.

“Damn right she will,” Rebecca said, “one way or the other.”

As my friends went back to their significant others, I turned over the duties of the bar to Sam and Leo and went to tell my papa I was leaving. He was in the midst of a rush of orders himself but stopped to kiss my cheek and tell me to get some sleep before jumping back onto the line.

I was going to spend the night alone for the first time in a while, and it was kind of weird but exciting in a way. Not that I was happy to be apart from Kieran, but the distance only made the intensity of our rivalry even stronger. He was going to spend the night at his place and I at mine, and neither of us was going to see each other until we were at the fairground in the morning.

The idea had been mine, but apparently, Kieran had been thinking the same thing. I had my suspicions it was because he wanted to go home and tweak his recipe at the last minute because he was afraid of losing to me.

Tonight, the plan was to go home at five, get a shower and comfortable clothes on, and not even look at my stove for the night. I had Papa prepare me a dish to take home for dinner, and I was going to enjoy it on my couch while I watched murderer profile shows and avoided wine at all costs.

Walking into my place and not seeing Kieran was still kind of weird. He should be there. It was how things had been now for a little bit, and I had already gotten used to it. Putting away my knives and starting the shower, I wondered what he was doing and decided not to bother him. He would send me a

message if he got the chance. I was going to concentrate on getting myself calm and relaxed so I could sleep.

I had gotten rather accustomed to falling asleep completely exhausted from the intensity of another incredible orgasm and using his chest as a pillow. This was going to suck a little bit.

After my shower, I put on a comfortable robe and fuzzy slippers and made my way into the living room with my dish from Papa. When I opened it, I had to laugh. A lasagna, the thing I'd hated hearing called into the kitchen for so long and yet loved to actually eat when I got the chance, was sitting in my to-go box.

I stuck my fork in and got a big wedge of it into my mouth, closing my eyes and sinking into the memories it brought with it. No one could make a lasagna like my father. No one, perhaps, except Mama when she was alive. When she passed, Papa became the best by default.

With the last bite in and settling into the couch, my phone rang, and I swiped it open, surprised to see Helen's name on the Caller ID.

"Hey, you," I said. "What's going on?"

"Not much. Just got off my shift for the evening. I sent Tony home a few hours ago. That boy is a bit much right now."

I laughed. "I bet. Kieran mentioned that he's taking the chili cook-off really seriously."

"That's an understatement," Helen said. "He is obsessed. I came in today, and the pie that he normally makes was replaced with a chili pot. I had old people complaining."

"I would think so. His pies are a staple. Did any of them try it?"

"I was told not to tell you or Kieran anything about his chili," she said, almost robotically. "That said, he seems to be under the impression that he is going to win."

"Well, it wouldn't be any fun if he wasn't," I said. "Has he been warding off customers with his chili escapades?"

“The opposite, actually. People know he’s going for it and have been dropping in to eat some of his tester samples. It’s brought a lot of people back into the diner that usually don’t come in all that often.”

“Same for the bar,” I said. “Lots of folks who kind of lapsed for a bit have come in to try my new stuff. The rivalry between Dina’s and Sergio’s just added a new chapter.”

Helen laughed. “Good. Anything that drives both our businesses back up some is good.”

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t increase Kieran’s business too.”

She laughed again. “Let’s hope not. Alright, girlie, I just wanted to call and touch base and tell you Tony said that he will see you tomorrow when you have to acknowledge him as your chili master.”

“You’ll be there tomorrow, right?”

“Damn straight,” she said. “I wouldn’t miss it. Good luck, Sofia!”

“Thanks, Helen,” I said, hanging up a few seconds later and checking the clock. Just after nine. It was early, but that was the point. I shot off a text to Kieran to say good night and crawled into my bed, ready for a fun day.



## KIERAN

The alarm went off at four, but I was already up.

Years of training had me able to lay down my head and wake up seven hours later without an alarm if necessary. It was a gift and a curse. Very rarely was I able to sleep more than that. Only if I was very sick or, as I discovered recently, wrapped up like a pretzel with Sofia's head on my chest, was I able to sleep any longer than that. Especially if I was looking forward to something.

This morning, when the alarm went off, I was sitting on the edge of my bed, having done my crunches and push-ups already and waiting for my heart rate to slow before I got up and got coffee. It was a habit of mine to do exercises first thing in the morning when I had nerves about something, even before breakfast or coffee. And I was, indeed, nervous.

It wasn't that I was nervous to lose. That was irrelevant to me. Winning would be nice and would do a lot for the department and my own stature in the community, but it wasn't the end all be all anymore. Not after everything that had happened with the big forest fire. Now it was all about having fun and enjoying my time with Sofia before I got called off to train.

And that's where the nerves came in.

I was nervous about how she was going to handle the news when I told her. Spending the last couple of weeks wrapped up in each other had been some of the best times of my life. I didn't want to ruin it by telling her I would have to be away

for so long. It would likely be an entire six weeks, doing intense training courses of both physical and mental types. It was a unique approach to promotions but something the governor thought was especially helpful.

I had to go. There was no way out of it. But at least I had today.

I could make the best out of today.

Driving over to the fairgrounds, I found myself among the very first people there. The light was still just barely beginning to make the sky less black when I was guided to my spot to set up, and I emptied my materials out of the back of my truck. Each station had the same general setup with a grill, some pots and other cooking materials, a canopy, and a few other things. I set up the canopy first, then put up some of the brochures and other materials for joining the volunteer staff at the department before getting on with everything else.

Minutes after that was all set up and before I could get food cooking, I noticed Sofia arriving, pulling a wagon with cooking materials of her own she was bringing to the table. She stopped as she passed me, on her way to her own station right across, and leaned in for a kiss. I pressed my lips into hers, and for a moment, our rivalry disappeared, and I started wondering if anyone would notice if we left for a while.

“Good luck,” she said. “You’re going to need it today.”

“You talk a big game,” I said, grinning. “Let’s see how well you handle the heat of competition.”

“Oh, I can handle the heat. I think you know that by now.”

I shook my head and laughed. She was getting into my head and making it hard to think with the correct head.

“Have fun in second place,” I said. “Silver medals are very nice.”

“Good,” she said. “You’ll look good in silver. As for myself, I prefer gold.”

She walked away, putting a little extra shake in her hips. I watched her in spite of myself, until she was in her station. I



could watch her walk all day.

I went back to putting my things together, getting the fire going and the pot on, while I pulled out what little I was allowed to prepare beforehand.

The rules allowed us to prep our vegetables but not cook them. It also allowed for us to pre-season our meat, which I had done as well. Sealed in a bag with a little water and a hot sauce I'd brought from Nashville, the meat had spent all night in the fridge, gaining flavor. Now, as it sat in the cooler, I added some bacon to the skillet to get it cooked and to add bacon fat to cook the meat and veggies with.

I was an old pro at this sort of thing and went directly into my rhythm, hardly noticing as the sun rose and other people arrived to take their places in the competition. About an hour after Sofia arrived, Tony showed up and set up shop one place over from me. He seemed in high spirits and was playing music on his phone in earbuds as he danced around under his canopy.

*Remember to find out what kind of coffee he drinks,* I said to myself. *Whatever it is, I need some.*

The rest of the stations were taken up by out-of-town restaurants and some everyday citizens. A food truck from just outside of Memphis showed up to compete, as did a guy I recognized from other competitions who had done a few shows on food channels. I wasn't too worried about them. They were here to be seen, not necessarily to win.

A couple of news crews dropped by, taking footage for B-roll and having a reporter come and ask generic questions of contestants. When they came to me, every single one of them mentioned the fire from a few weeks back and the "heroics" of the day. Again, I tried to limit that kind of talk, but they were undeterred, finding their narrative for the competition and running with it.

Eventually, they left us alone, and it was us versus the clock. The judges would sit down to taste at five, meaning the chili would have been cooking for twelve hours at that point. It

was long enough to develop a strong flavor, but not enough because I would rather have a twenty-four-hour cook.

I kept stealing glances at Sofia, both flirting with her for fun and also because I wanted to enjoy every possible interaction before I had to give her the news. The last thing I wanted was to have her be upset with me.

Finally, as the time neared for the judges to come around and grab their samples, I wiped the sweat from my brow and looked up at Sofia at her stall. She was standing next to a table filled with samples, hands behind her back and a fresh apron on. A big, wide smile on her face gave away that she was feeling extremely good about her chili and was ready for the judges. At that moment, I almost stopped what I was doing just to admire her but forced myself to keep going.

She wouldn't want to beat me because I wasn't ready.

The judges, a news personality who had been raised in Ashford, a renowned doctor from the local hospital, and the pastor from one of the largest churches in southern Tennessee all came by. I gave them the spiel about the chili as the sounds of the fair quieted, and I watched their faces. All three did a remarkable job of not giving much away, and when they moved on to the next table, I didn't know for sure how they liked it.

After the judges, other fairgoers were allowed to stop by, and I started slinging samples to them. They came in a rush, and though Ashford's fair was small, I was moving fast to keep up with the demand all the way until I was completely out of chili.

The comments from people had been good, and I felt like I had a pretty good chance, but I kept hearing people walking by talking about Sofia's as well. It sounded like the rivalry between Sergio's and the fire department had just begun, and from the way people seemed to enjoy the competition, I had a feeling it might not be the last time we had a showdown.

Eventually, the clock struck seven, and the contestants all gathered in front of the judges' table to hear the results. It seemed like the entire fair had stopped to watch, and the

crowd of people around the table was the largest I had seen since coming to Ashford by several orders of magnitude. I could see friends and their families, folks from the logging company, the diner, the restaurant—everyone in town, it felt like.

Sofia had positioned herself beside me, and all the contestants were lined up shoulder to shoulder. I reached my hand behind her and took hers, and she squeezed it. It was nice to feel her touch, even just that little bit, and I moved my hand back behind me to await the announcement. The news personality was the one behind the microphone and tiny speaker set up, and the other two were holding a silver and bronze ribbon.

“First up, the final three. The judges debated and chose the top three chilis here today, and they were, in no order, Kieran Duggan from the Ashford Fire Department, Tony Russo from Dina’s Diner, and Sofia Falco from Sergio’s Italian Restaurant!”

A cheer went up as the three of us waved to the crowd, and Sofia was nearly vibrating with anticipation.

“Here we go,” I said, nudging her.

“Now,” the newscaster said, “we are going to award the second-place position for this year’s Ashford County Fair Chili Cook-off,” the newscaster said. “It was an incredibly close race between the top three, and I will say that initially, we all three had the same three chilis in our top lists in different orders. But after much deliberation, we settled on the following.

“In second place and awarded the silver medal by our select judges... Sofia Falco from Sergio’s Italian Restaurant!”

I guess I expected her to be upset with placing second, but Sofia let out a squeal of happiness and walked up to the judge to receive her medal and ribbon. When she returned, her eyes caught mine, and I saw her face was red, and she had tears in the corners. I hoped they were ones of pride.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said, taking her spot beside me and standing tall and proud.

“And the winner of this year’s Ashford County Chili Cook-off... Tony Russo of Dina’s Diner!”

I stood there blinking, half-shocked and half-thrilled for my friend. As he walked up to accept his ribbon and medal, I heard my name called for third place, and I walked up to get my awards as well. Tony looked like he was in shock as they gave him his medal and presented him as the winner, and both Sofia and I went over to shake his hand and congratulate him.

As people swarmed Tony, Sofia leapt into my arms, and we held each other for a long minute, both laughing and reveling in the job well done of a successful competition.

“You beat me!” I said when we broke our hug.

Sofia reached up on her toes and pressed a kiss to my lips.

“Told you,” she said, a devilish grin on her face. “Now, let’s get out of here and go back to your place.”

“You don’t want to stay and enjoy the fair?” I asked teasingly.

“I want to enjoy my own personal fair, where the two of us are in your bed, wearing nothing but these medals.”

“I think that can be arranged,” I said, taking her by the hand. “Race you to the truck?”

“Last one there is a loser.” She took off before I could get started.

Laughing, I ran off after her.



## SOFIA

**M**y car could stay at the fairgrounds. It wasn't like they would tow it.

Happily, I jumped into Kieran's truck, both of us laughing and full of adrenaline and joy and desire that the smiles on our faces seemed painted there, never to come off. At least not until they turned into the slack-jawed expressions of carnal release. Which might be sooner rather than later.

The sun was still up but setting and bright orange over the distance of the mountains as we drove down the highway at speed toward my place. The fairgrounds were on the western edge of town, and my place was closer. It was the only reason we were going there. Whichever place was closest, whichever place we could shed our clothes, wrap our bodies around each other, and sing the praises of physical passion, that was where we were going to go.

As he barreled down the road, unworried about traffic cops in the small town, nor curves on the fairly straight highway as it cut straight through the northern part of the county and exited just streets away from my place, I placed my hand on his thigh. He shot a look over at me, and I grinned devilishly. I wanted him, and I didn't want to wait.

Sliding my hand up his thigh, I found the stiffness in his jeans where his already hardened cock was stretching the fabric. I gently squeezed, and he groaned. I could barely contain the giggle that rose up from my chest. I loved the

control over him I had when I touched him. I loved the way he fought to maintain it.

Unsatisfied with just touching him over his jeans, I slid my hand up to his belt buckle and began to undo it. I unhooked my seat belt and leaned over as I yanked the zipper open and reached inside. Sliding his cock out of his jeans, I groaned in anticipation.

“What are you doing?” he moaned.

“This,” I said, rolling my tongue out and sliding it underneath the head. It twitched in my grip, and I swept up the sweet precum and took him into my lips.

I could feel the engine rev momentarily as he punched down on the gas and then let off. One hand went down to my backside as I bobbed on him, taking him deeply in my throat. His hand squeezed my ass, and I moaned as I sucked him, stroking him into my lips.

I felt the car jerk as he turned off the highway, and I sat up, brushing my bottom lip with my thumb and adjusting my hair. Seeing his glistening wet cock, still hard and throbbing as he drove, made me even wetter than I already was, and I squirmed in my seat as he pulled onto the street where my place was. I let one hand slide down my stomach and over my pussy, stroking it lightly while my other hand squeezed the side of my breast, a finger running over my sensitive nipple. He watched me with a note of hunger in his eyes that was undeniable, and when he parked, he launched himself into me with a kiss.

I opened the door and escaped, laughing as he scrambled to get his cock back in his pants long enough to chase me inside. I was already in the door by the time he was getting out of the truck, and I shut it behind me, leaving it unlocked. I ran to the bedroom, tossing off my shirt and unhooking my bra. Jumping onto the bed, I could hear him slamming the door behind him and thundering down the hall.

My pants were off, and I was pulling on my panties when he came through the door, his pants already removed and a gleam in his eye. He yanked his boxers off as I froze to watch

him and then pounced on me. I gasped as he reached down and yanked my panties to the side before driving his cock deep inside me.

For a moment, we froze in place, our bodies stiff and curled as my back arched and his body tensed over me. I relished the feeling of fullness, teetering on pain, as he stretched me out and settled before gently rocking backward. Then another deep thrust brought a cry that was more like a yelp from my throat, which was cut off with his lips settling over mine.

“You’re so deep,” I moaned.

His lips moved down my cheeks to my neck and then further down. They settled over my breast and took my nipple inside, his warm, strong tongue flicking it until it was hard and wet as he moved to the other. Hips moving, he drove deep inside me with each movement, and slowly, I relaxed into the motion, letting the ecstasy of the moment fill all the available space in my reality.

Nothing else mattered or even existed besides us, his body and mine intertwined. One of my legs wrapped over his hip, sliding between his cheeks as he kissed me softly on my chest and up my neck, I felt the wave of a growing climax building.

“Harder,” I whispered.

The grunt of effort as he plowed into me, growling with desire, burnt the edges of my nerves with a fiery passion. Every pore was covered in the sweat of our bodies, and I cried out in rising sounds of pleasure. My eyes clenched shut, and my fingers dug into the skin of his shoulders as I clenched my thighs around him.

He held himself deep inside me as I shook, vibrating and bucking underneath him. He held me down and in place, and the weight of him over me only added to the sensation. When my body finally settled and I sank into the mattress, he sat up on his knees, and I felt his eyes run over me. I loved the way he exalted me in that look. He worshiped my body, my essence, and I felt more alive, sexier than I had ever felt, all with just the way he gazed at my naked body.



“Roll over,” he grumbled, and my body moved to the command without a thought.

His hands settled over my hips and guided me into position. He pulled me to my knees, and I waited for him, presenting myself for his pleasure. One hand gripped my hair, and the other slid over my ribs until it cupped my breast. The head of his cock slid through my folds, and I reached down to stroke it and guide it to my opening. As he slid inside, I let my fingers splay out and stroke his shaft and graze over his balls as he began to rock into me. The way they slapped over my clit with each thrust only brought the sensation of another climax higher, and I felt myself sinking into it.

His hips began to move faster, and he stood up again. His thumbs dug into the soft skin of my ass and pulled up while his fingers wrapped around my waist. I looked back over my shoulder and watched him watching his cock go in and out of me. The concentration on his strong jaw and angled eyebrows made me fall even deeper toward the climax. He was so concerned with bringing me pleasure, so turned on by how our bodies looked as we fucked, that it brought a new level of intensity to the moment.

“Come for me,” I begged. “Please, come for me.”

His fingers tightened over my hips, and his thrusts grew harder, faster. He groaned deeply as he rocked into me with a ferocity of purpose. The dizzying, intense sensation of another earth-shattering orgasm rolled over me, and I tried to hold it off. I wanted to come with him. Together.

“Sofia,” he moaned. “Sofia...”

“Kieran!” I cried.

Suddenly, his body slammed into me, and I felt him explode. He came in throbs and bursts, emptying into me with additional thrusts that only drove him deeper into me. The hot, wet explosion of his essence brought me over the edge of my own climax, and I crumbled into the mattress as I came with him.

We collapsed together, his spent cock sliding out of me as I pulled the sheets up and over our shoulders but didn't move from being curled beside him. With his arm draped over my chest and settled over my breast, I fell almost instantly into a deep, peaceful sleep.

\* \* \*

The shift of the bed as Kieran sat down on my side woke me up, and I rubbed my eyes blearily as I tried to focus on him. It was barely dawn, and he looked like he hadn't really slept, bags under his eyes and a pensive look on his face. I sat up, fear creeping through my heart. Something was wrong.

"What is it?" I asked, eschewing all pretense. "What's going on?"

"I didn't want to tell you until now because I wanted to enjoy our time without the scepter of this hanging over us," he said.

"Oh God, what is it?" I asked, the fog of sleep having completely disappeared and replaced with a creeping horror. My mind was coming up with all kinds of things that could be wrong and flashing at a rapid pace, even when some of them didn't make any sense.

"I got a promotion," he said.

"What?" I asked. Of all the confusing things my brain jumped to, that was certainly not among them. "A promotion is great! Why wouldn't you tell me that? Why would you scare me that way?"

"It means I have to go to training. For six weeks," he said, his eyes slowly traveling to meet mine.

A deep sadness settled over me as the reality of what he was saying solidified in my mind. He was going to go away. And he didn't know if we would survive it.

"Oh," I said. "I mean, I hate that you will be gone, but we'll be okay. We have phones. We can video call."

“It won’t be the same,” he said, hanging his head again. “You’ll be here alone. For weeks.”

“So, I’ll go back to how I was before I met you,” I said, trying to grin through the pain. “We’ll be fine. You’ll be back.”

I didn’t know if I was trying to convince him or myself.

He nodded, the corner of his lips curling up ever so slightly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before,” he said. “I know it’s shitty to just drop this on you.”

I waved him off. “No, don’t apologize. I get it. We’re new. This is new. You didn’t want to rock the boat, I get it. I wish I had known, but I understand.” I paused, taking a breath. “But what we have is special. At least to me.”

“Me too,” he said.

“Good,” I said. “Good. Then you agree, it’s worth getting through a few weeks of video calls. Right?”

“It is for me.”

“Me too.”

“I have to go today,” he said. “I have to be at the station at noon, and then I head up to Nashville. Then the retreat is intense. I won’t have much time to talk until I’m in bed, and then I’ll get an average of only a couple hours a night. I might not be able to call until like three in the morning sometimes.”

“I’ll wake up,” I said. “Call me anyway. It’ll be okay. We can make this work.”

“You won’t move on without me?”

He had to be joking, but his eyes were pleading. Serious.

“No, I’ll be right here, waiting for you.”

I meant that. I just wondered if he would be coming back at all.

Or if when he did, he was going to still want me.



## KIERAN

It was early, and though I wanted to spend every moment I could with Sofia, the fact was that I hadn't packed anything. I was going to have to get everything I could together and try to get a little sleep before I headed into the station at noon. God knew I didn't get any sleep the night before, and it wasn't for one of the fun reasons I usually didn't get sleep when I spent the night with Sofia.

Tossing and turning all night, I felt like I just couldn't relax. The tension was unbearable as I watched the clock tick away and knew that I had to tell her. I had waited too long, and now it was going to be awkward and sudden and dramatic. But she took it well, or at least better than I had handled it and assumed she would, and I went back to my place feeling like things might just be okay.

It was only six thirty when I walked through my door, and I tossed the suitcase on the bed.

By eight, I was fully packed and had my bags by the door. I debated making something to eat but decided on sleeping instead. I could always grab fast food on the way out of town.

I lay down in the bed and immediately realized it just wasn't comfortable anymore without Sofia there. We had spent so much time sleeping together in each other's beds that it just felt massive and lonely without her. Still, I had to try. I pulled a pillow to my chest and clenched it as I shoved my head between two others to block out the light coming in from the window. Eventually, I fell asleep.

My alarm woke me at eleven, and I struggled to force myself awake. I had been having the best dream, and it was slowly slipping away with the dawning realization of what I had to do.

Once I was up and dressed, I threw my bags in the car and made the short drive to the station. As I pulled in, I saw Sofia's car in the visitor parking area and that it was empty. It meant she was inside waiting for me. I tried to prepare myself as I got out of the car and headed inside.

Chief McDaniel met me in front of his office, holding his hand out for a shake. Guiding me inside, I was surprised to see Sofia sitting in one of the chairs. She stood and crossed over to me, and I pulled her in for a deep hug. When our embrace broke, I saw something that appeared to be reaching toward empathy in Chief's eyes.

"Kieran, I wanted to say again how much I appreciate you taking the time to go through this training retreat. I feel like the department will be in good hands with a well-prepared man to take the reins when you come back. I know it comes as a sacrifice to your personal life, but I appreciate it, and so do the mayor and the governor."

"Thanks, Chief," I said, noting how he had looked at Sofia when he said, "sacrifice to your personal life." "I hope I do you proud."

"You better," he said, passing by me and slapping my shoulder. "After you lost the chili cook-off to that goof from the diner."

I laughed as he exited, a grin I came to know as the one he employed when he was pleased with himself for knocking someone down a peg crossing his face. He shut the door behind him, giving Sofia and me a private space for the moment.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"No," she said, shaking her head and laughing it off. "But I will be. We'll video call. And it's only six weeks. We can

make it six weeks. I made it my whole life until I met you; I can handle another six weeks.”

“Hey,” I said, feeling the words caught in my throat. I knew what I wanted to say. I just couldn’t make myself say it. Not because she didn’t deserve it, but because I didn’t want to hurt myself. I had never said those words to any woman, and if I left and she found someone else...

I didn’t want to waste them.

“Yeah?” she asked, hopeful eyes looking up at me. She wanted me to say those words. And yet, I couldn’t.

“I’ll be back,” I said. “If you’re willing to wait, I will be back.”

“I know. I will.”

I pulled her tight and kissed her lips softly. She sank into my arms, and when I pulled away, she stumbled a little. I caught her and righted her before smiling awkwardly.

“I’ll call you tonight when I get there.”

“Okay,” she said. “Bye, Kieran.”

“Goodbye, Sofia,” I said, opening the door. “Tonight. Probably about eight.”

She nodded.

“Eight,” she repeated, and I could see the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. I had to go. If those tears fell and I saw them, I might never make chief.

I nodded and opened the door, swiftly exiting and heading to the locker room, where I had a few things I needed to get out. Once I grabbed them, I slipped out of the door to the parking lot, hopped in my truck, and took off.

As I drove, I flipped on the regular radio for the first time in forever. I didn’t care to listen to the music I always listened to, because now it would only remind me of Sofia. I searched for a classic rock station, and when I found one, I settled back in the seat, hit the cruise control, and rolled down the window a bit.

The fresh breeze was nice, and the sun was shining. It was as gorgeous a day as a person could hope for as they drove over the mountainous area of southeastern Tennessee. Yet, all I could think about was Sofia and how we could make this work, even with me gone for so long, so early in our relationship.

I had looked up the itinerary for the retreat while I was at home. There had been the faintest notion of driving back to Ashford in the middle of everything just to surprise her and then driving back the next day. But attendance was mandatory every single day, and the only day we had off was in the middle, and it would come after a twenty-four-hour shift and before another one.

It was a program designed to wear you out, to take you to the limit of your stress level and push you a bit further, all in a safe environment. We wouldn't even be staying in the same place the entire time. There would be travel during the course to locations around Tennessee where scenario fires would be set to allow us to strategize and test our knowledge. All while studying for and taking exams in a traditional classroom on the property of the retreat.

It was an intense course, and the chance to get away for any length of time was impossible. I was just going to have to settle for video calls. But I was going to make it work. I had to. For Sofia, it was worth it.

\* \* \*

As days turned into weeks and weeks stretched into a month, I had adjusted to life on the campus quite well. Gaining tons of experience on the job was one thing but being able to run scenarios that were quite intense, but without the fear of loss of life, was incredibly helpful. Combined with courses on how to handle internal politics, paperwork, red tape, media, and the like, I was finding myself in awe of Chief McDaniel.



How had he gone through all this? I was beginning to understand why he was a man of so few words and why most of them were grumbling, direct ones. He had found that cutting the bullshit and getting straight to the point was a hell of a lot easier than playing political footsie. His example was one that was even taught in the classes. Some people were good at smiling and thinking two steps ahead and trying to play “the game.” Others, like Chief McDaniel, were good at telling people things they didn’t want to hear in a matter-of-fact way that left no room for reinterpretation.

The problem the chief had was pretty clear. He had been understaffed and underfunded for so long that he’d learned to make do with almost nothing. The department suffered greatly, but while it had gained a terrible reputation, Chief McDaniel had at least kept it running and not replaced entirely by volunteers. Now that we had a new mayor and a new governor who had a history as an EMS worker, the funding was there, and the ability to bring in someone to clean up the crew had presented itself.

My understanding of how I’d ended up in Ashford was cleared up quite well from all that. It gave me a level of respect for the chief that was extremely high and also boosted my own confidence. When the funding and opportunity came, my name was the one brought up for the position. That meant I had been recommended for it by multiple people. It felt good to know I was respected in that way.

But while I was feeling good about things in my career, one thing nagged at me the entire time. Sofia was home alone and the distance was a burden to us both. We had been doing video calls every night, and I wanted nothing more than to be with her. But it was hard, and the longer it had gone, the more it felt like it would never end.

The final two weeks of the retreat were even more intense than the four before it. I was working tirelessly and only getting a chance to have a quick check-in with Sofia before passing out in my bunk. She hadn’t missed a call, though, no matter what time of day or night it was.

Until the last day.

I had passed out at nine in the evening the night before, having talked to her in the morning. Now it was eight in the morning, and I was calling her before my last class and exam. I felt like I could use the pep talk and knowing that afterward I was coming home would be exciting.

But the call rang and rang, and Sofia never picked up. Disappointed, I shrugged and shoved the phone back down in my pocket. I was sure she was either already at work, prepping food, or she was still in bed having worked late in the night. Either way, I could talk to her later. When I was on my way home.

To her.



## SOFIA

The phone showed Kieran's name, but I couldn't bring myself to swipe it open. How could I? What would I say? How would I just pretend everything was normal and have that conversation with him when I knew what was going on for real? How could I pretend that I was just as excited for him to get home as I was yesterday, that I wanted to maul him the second he came through the door, that I wanted to spend every minute naked in bed with him until he absolutely had to get up for work?

Not when I knew this secret. One that might make him want to stay in Nashville and never come back.

I didn't want to think that about him. He didn't seem like the sort of man who would do that. But the truth was, we were still new. We had barely started our relationship, and then he had to go away for six weeks. Six whole weeks of life without me, more than the time he had spent with me, and a lot of chances to reevaluate and cool his jets. And now, this.

He was going to come home, expecting a waiting and available girlfriend. Someone he could pick up where he left off with, to romp with and play with. Someone that would add to his happiness and take away the stress. And I was going to meet him at the door, carrying this secret, and do what? Pretend I didn't? Tell him immediately? Greet him at the door and tell him we had to have a talk?

Nothing seemed right.

The phone stopped ringing in my left hand. I watched as the little picture of Kieran disappeared on the screen, and then my eyes moved to the right. The stick was still in my grip. The result had shown up not three seconds after I peed on it. It was as definitive as a test could be.

As it had been with the four I'd taken before it.

I was absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, pregnant.

If Kieran had called again, right at that moment, I would have picked up. I would have picked up, sobbing, and told him everything. But he didn't. Instead, I sat there in silence, crying and rocking and not knowing exactly why.

I always wanted a child. Maybe only one, maybe not. I hadn't really given that part much thought. But I knew I wanted to be a mother. I had dreams of cooking for my child, teaching them the secrets of my parents and my grandparents and the ones I made up all by myself. Watching them bloom into whatever they wanted to be. And doing it beside a partner I could trust and love.

My ex had never been that. Kieran was.

I thought.

But what if it wasn't what he wanted? What if he came home, all buoyed by this experience away from me, only wanting something fun and silly for a while before wanting to have something serious. Or what if he never wanted something serious at all? I was going to have to find out, and now I had a ticking clock. Seven months. Come spring, our lives were either going to be different together, or his would be the same, separate.

Maybe I should try to hide it just a little bit longer? Give him a few days to get home and get settled. See if the relationship was still as hot and thick as it was when he walked out of the door. Maybe I should delay it even longer. Until I was showing. Considering I was a bit curvier than my sisters, it would take a little longer for that to happen. I could buy myself another month or more, most likely, if not longer.

I didn't know what to do or who to turn to. My sisters were no help. They were younger and had a much higher tendency to throw caution to the wind in the name of drama. I needed someone with a level head. Someone who had more experience with adult relationships and not boys they met at bars and online.

Suddenly, Helen's face popped into my mind, and I sat the stick on the sink counter, pulling open my phone and finding her name. Normally, Helen would be at home at this time, I knew. She didn't often go into the diner until the afternoon and stayed late. It might wake her up, but I needed a friend. Hitting the number, I hoped that she would pick up. Thankfully, she did.

"Hello?" she said, somewhat groggily.

"Hey, Helen, it's me, Sofia," I said.

"Hey, Sofia," she said, still sounding like she was half-asleep. "What's going on?"

"I really hate to ask you this, and I understand if you can't, but can you talk for a little bit? I really need someone to talk to."

There was a shuffling sound on the other end, like someone suddenly sitting up and putting on slippers.

"Sure," she said, sounding more awake. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm safe. I just need someone to talk to. Someone who might be able to give me some really important advice. If you're available and it's not too much trouble, I would like to meet up with you somewhere and talk."

"Sure." A voice in the background, low and grumbly, mumbled something. When she spoke again, it was muffled, like she'd put her hand over the bottom of the phone and pulled it away a little. "It's Sofia. She needs to chat with me about something private. I'll be back in a bit."

"Okay," the grumbly voice said.

“Sorry,” she said. “Everett was sleeping in this morning. He has a cold. Where do you want to meet?”

“Anywhere. Just somewhere we can talk privately, and I can get something to eat.”

“Come to the diner,” she said. “It’ll be my treat, and this time in the morning, it’s just the old men sitting at the counter. We can take up a booth in the back, and no one will hear us.”

“Okay,” I said.

Twenty minutes later, I was dressed and in my car, sitting in the parking lot of the diner. A car pulled in behind me, and I saw Helen in the driver’s seat, pulling up beside me and parking. I got out and met her, and she walked with me inside, commenting on how nice my hair looked, in spite of it clearly still being bedhead and her just being nice to get the conversation going.

She guided me to a booth, and I sat down as she disappeared into the kitchen. When she came back out, she had two mugs of coffee and sat them down on the table. My brain immediately jumped to everything I’d read about drinking coffee while pregnant, and I decided that at this moment, getting a little bit of it in me wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

“So,” she said, taking a sip of her own, “I have Tony back there working on a breakfast for us. I didn’t tell him it was you, so he won’t make it as spicy as all hell. Just in case.”

“Just in case?” I asked.

She sighed and smiled warmly.

“In case you’re pregnant?” she asked. “I assume that’s what all the hubbub is.”

My eyes went wide, and I stuttered for a second.

“H-how?”

She waved her hand and took another sip of her coffee.

“You aren’t the first person I know who got knocked up unexpectedly,” she said. “And your coffee is decaf. Also just

in case.”

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry, but the overwhelming desire for the dark, black coffee was more than either, and I guzzled some of it down quickly.

“You are amazing.”

“Don't mention it,” she said. “Now, tell me, what's happening?”

I took a deep breath and let the aroma of the coffee wash over me, warming me as I tried to put my thoughts in order.

“It's Kieran's,” I said. “I don't know exactly how far along I am, but I think it's about eight. My period has never been regular, but it was way later than it's ever been before. I took the test this morning.”

“How did you know?”

I laughed softly, quietly to myself.

“I didn't want anything spicy,” I said. “For a couple of days, every time I thought about hot, spicy stuff, I got sick to my stomach. Just even thinking about it was enough to make my insides do flips.”

“Yeah, I can see how that would do it for you,” she said.

“The thing is, Kieran's been on this retreat for six weeks. That's longer than the time we've been seeing each other before he left. We've been apart more than we've been together.”

“Ahh,” Helen said. “And when does he come back?”

“Tonight or tomorrow. He said he wasn't sure if he needed to stay after the last exam or not. But that's this morning. He's taking it right now.”

“I see. And you haven't told him, have you?”

“No,” I said. “I don't know how. Or if I should right now. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm torn on whether I should tell him immediately or if I should wait. Maybe a couple days, maybe a couple of weeks. It will be a little bit before I'm showing, I think. I just don't know.”



“Well, first off, are you going to keep it?” she asked. “No matter what?”

“Yes. I made that decision before I even took a test.”

“Good. Then everything else is easier that way.” She paused as a young lady I didn’t recognize came up to the table with two plates and a large serving tray. It seemed to have every kind of breakfast food imaginable on it, and our individual plates were stacked high with pancakes. For the first time in a few days, I suddenly felt ravenously hungry. “Thank you,” she said to the waitress as she walked away, then pointed at her with her fork and leaned in to me. “New girl.”

“Ahh,” I said.

“Anyway,” Helen said, stabbing her pancakes with her fork and taking a large chunk into her mouth, “you need to tell him immediately. Like, not the second he walks in the door, but soon after. You need to know where he stands as soon as possible, and it’s no damn good to let yourself think things will be okay and then have him freak out when he finds out.”

“So, how should I tell him?” I asked.

“I’d do it somewhere public. So that way he can’t get too weird.” She stuffed another bite of pancakes in her mouth and cut into the eggs with great fanfare and a look in her eyes like she was experiencing a bit of heaven. “You know what? We have a bonfire tomorrow. Why don’t you do it then?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how he’ll react.”

“Think of it this way,” she said. “If he reacts well, great! You have a party to celebrate the news. If he reacts like a dick, well, Everett can straighten him out real quick. I know your boy is a big, strapping fireman, but Everett has about twenty other dudes there that would throw down with him in a heartbeat. Twenty-to-one doesn’t sound like good odds for Kieran.”

“I don’t think it would get that bad,” I laughed.

“Maybe not. But I will be there. And if he doesn’t react well, you can always cry on my shoulder, and I’ll take care of you.”

“Thank you,” I said, grateful for her friendship and seriously contemplating her offer. “That means a lot.”

“No problem, kid,” she said. “Now eat some of these eggs. They are to die for.”



## KIERAN

There was something magic about the mountains at sunset.

Driving down the long highway toward Ashford, seeing them crop up in the distance, gave me a sense of wonder and peace. I felt like I had been holding my breath for six weeks. Seeing the purple mountains in the distance, I exhaled and felt my muscles relax. I was going home.

Home.

It was funny. I never really felt at home anywhere before. Mom always said home was where family was, but my uncles and aunts and cousins all scattered to the wind when I was young, and my parents being older meant they had well-established lives before I was even born. I was an addition, not the focus. I knew they loved me, but they didn't ever really seem to care much about what I was up to. It was a good thing I was generally a good kid.

Then they split up, and Dad married some waitress from Idaho and moved away, and Mom beat breast cancer and then disappeared into activism and old-lady card nights. I talked to her once a week, like clockwork, but the conversations were never deep. I never felt like I could just show up on her doorstep in southern Ohio and be home.

No, home was where I made it to be. And home, for me, was wherever Sofia was.

Six weeks of being away from her, longer than we had even been together before I left, had let me stew on how I felt

about her. There was no question anymore. I was in love with her. Deeply, truly in love with her. When I got home, I was going to tell her exactly that. Before the end of the night, she was going to know how much I couldn't live without her and how I never wanted to spend that much time away from her again.

Slowly, the signs pointing the way to Ashford began to crop up, and I made it a game for myself to count them down. With the music on and the warm late-summer sun tanning my arm with the window down, I cheerfully counted down the miles until I was back.

I wasn't going to go to my place when I got into town. I wasn't going to go to the station, either. I was going straight to Sofia's. There was no place in the world I wanted to be more than her bed. I realized that now. For a long time, I felt like we were torn between places, neither of us feeling completely comfortable in the other's space. But now I knew I would be comfortable wherever she was. And her bed was heaven. A destination to pursue.

My phone was attached to the dock on the windshield, and I glanced at it as I peeled off onto the route taking me into Ashford. Still no messages from Sofia. Oh well. It would be a fun surprise when she opened the door, and I would be standing on her porch. She knew I was probably coming home today, but the anticipation and surprise of showing up unannounced was something extra.

As I drove into the mountains and onto the back roads that snaked down the eastern portion of Tennessee, down through the mountains that separated the state from Virginia and North Carolina and into the valley where Ashford lay, the sun set. Darkness spread in a purple blanket over the sky, cooling the heat and making the wind coming in the car from the open window almost chilly.

Finally, I pulled into Ashford, just streets away from where Sofia's place was, and the excitement and anticipation of seeing her was like a hot rock in the center of my stomach. Suddenly, I was bombarded by worry that she wouldn't be there or that she wouldn't let me in. That something had

changed in the last twenty-four hours. That she wouldn't want me anymore.

When the truck was parked, I took a deep breath and rolled up the windows. I wondered how I would respond if she didn't answer the door. I didn't have an answer for myself. Yet, I pushed on and went to the porch, knocking lightly.

"Come in," a voice said in the distance. That was encouraging. The worry seemed to fade away and be replaced with that excitement once again. I grinned as I turned the knob and it opened easily.

I was greeted by mostly darkness, pockmarked by tiny yellow streams of light from candles burning in various places. Some were small votives, others long sticks, giving the room a dim, warm glow. Shutting the door behind me, I smiled into the near darkness.

"Babe?" I called out.

"In here," she replied from somewhere beyond the hallway. Likely the bedroom.

I took a few tentative steps and could smell something had recently been cooked. It was a warm, comforting smell, like bread. The realization that there was probably dinner waiting on me sent a streak of pride through me. She'd thought enough to make sure I had food waiting on me when I got back. It was a gesture that meant she cared for me in the same kind of traditional way I cared for her.

A measure of love.

I walked down the hallway, which was darker than everywhere else with only one candle burning on a sideboard. The door to the bedroom was cracked open, and as I touched it, it began to swing wide.

Candles burned in every corner of the bedroom, giving it plenty of light and a flowery, comforting scent. Sofia stood by the bed, her arms behind her back and a pensive smile on her lips. She was wearing a dark blue teddy, so sheer I could see her stomach through it like gauze. A blue, high-waisted thong

matched it, and I marveled at how spectacular she looked as she gently swung sideways back and forth.

I shut the door behind me and stared at her for a moment. She didn't move from where she was, returning the gaze, and I took a tentative step forward. Yanking the T-shirt out of where it was tucked in my pants, I pulled it over my head and tossed it away. I saw her eyes flicker down to my chest and stomach before returning to my own, and her legs gently squeezed together.

I grinned.

Crossing to her, we both gave way, and she ran into my arms with a thump of our bodies colliding. Her chin rose, and I pressed a deep kiss to her lips. We stayed there for a moment, relishing the touch of each other's skin, the passion of our embrace, before she broke off just a bit.

“Welcome home,” she whispered.

A shiver went down my spine at those words, and I suddenly felt like I had grown a million times stronger. I swept her up into my arms and carried her, giggling, to the bed. She peppered my face and neck with kisses as I gently laid her down and settled between her thighs. Kissing her softly on her neck, I began to move down to the space between her breasts and let my hands roam down her sides until they reached the thin fabric of her panties.

Her fingers gripped my hair as I moved down and down, pushing the teddy aside so I could get to her luscious skin. Her stomach trembled with my touch, and I gently pulled the panties down, peeling them off her already soaking wet core as my tongue flickered out and wet her belly. She was already hitching her breath as I scooted back on the bed, giving myself plenty of room to put my face between her thighs and taste her once again.

Sofia spread her legs and allowed me access as the panties slipped off one foot and then the other. I took my time, winding my way down to the soft mound, settling one hand on her stomach and the other near her opening. The initial touch was enough to make her shift on the bed, a moan of pleasure

and anticipation escaping her lips. I spread her lips open with my fingers and slowly let my tongue dip through her folds.

Her grip on my hair tightened as I swirled my tongue around her sensitive pearl. Her back arched, and her whole body tensed. One finger slid inside her, and her wet, waiting pussy welcomed me. My tongue flicked her clit and her hips began to buck instantly.

“Oh Kieran,” she moaned. “I missed you.”

Pressing my tongue harder onto her clit, my finger slid over the upper wall of her pussy, her words faded into a formless moan. I increased the speed of my tongue, sliding my finger in and out of her, and the vibration turned into a bucking, wild shaking. Her moan turned to a scream. Her thighs clenched over my ears, and her hips rose above the bed as she came.

I smiled as I held her in place, pleasuring her until she collapsed onto the bed again, clawing at me to pull me up to her. I rose up her body with kisses until I reached her lips while her hands went down my chest and to my pants, yanking desperately at the button until it was open. Her hands dove between the waistband of my boxers and my skin until she grabbed my shaft with both hands and pulled it out, stroking it with a moan of desire.

“I need you inside me,” she cried. “I’ve missed you so much. I need you.”

“I need you too,” I said, kicking the pants away.

I was naked on her bed with her curled around me. Our hearts were thumping hard as I pulled the teddy down over her breast and took it into my mouth. My cock was settled over her clit, and she moved her hips to soak it in her juices before positioning herself at the ready.

I was about to enter heaven on Earth.

Her hand guided me to her opening, and I slipped inside her easily. The hot, wet sensation of being inside her nearly made me come instantly, but I held myself there, waiting for my body to adjust. She shook as another climax rolled through



her just at the mere entrance of my body into hers, and I slid deep inside, until our hips touched, and her legs wrapped around my waist.

We made love in that bed, our bodies wet with desire and sweat. As I pressed her against the mattress, her naked body wrapped around mine and my hips pumping into her, our eyes locked on one another.

“Come inside me,” she pleaded.

I slammed into her, her feet bouncing off my ass as I held her under her backside, pulling her tight against me as the climax built.

Then, with an incredible explosion of pleasure, we came together. Our bodies shook as I emptied into her, and she groaned in pleasure. Huffing and panting, I collapsed over her and kissed her neck while her fingers traced my back.

Now was the time.

I rose to face her, holding my nose just above hers. I was still inside her, and our bodies were locked in an embrace.

“I love you,” I said.

It felt like her body softened underneath me, and a sad smile pulled at her lips.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Of course I am,” I responded instantly. “I have never been surer of anything in my entire life.”

The sadness of her smile seemed to disappear, and she kissed me.

“Good,” she said as her head lowered back down onto the bed again. “I love you too.” I kissed her again, and when we broke apart, she pulled me into place so our eyes met again. “I love you, Kieran.”

“I love you too, Sofia.”

“I have something I need to tell you.”



## SOFIA

The weight of him pressing down into me was comforting, and as I looked into his eyes, I could see the worry that was crossing his face. It probably wasn't the best way to start the conversation, now that I thought about it, but I just couldn't keep it in any longer.

"Okay," he said, sliding off me and settling beside me. The void of his body inside me and the weight of him off me made me feel a pang of sadness, but I fought it to continue. I turned on my side to face him, letting my head settle on the pillow as I traced his face with my eyes.

I hoped that wasn't the last time. That he wasn't going to freak out. But I had to tell him. I couldn't wait for the bonfire.

"I'm pregnant," I blurted out. It wasn't suave in any way. But it was out there now, and the rest of the world had to deal with it.

"You're..." he said, letting the words sink in.

*Here it comes.* Whatever reaction he was going to have was about to take place. I cringed internally as I waited for what seemed like minutes but were only milliseconds.

"You're pregnant?" he asked, a wide smile stretching from one side of his face to the other. His eyes opened so large that my whole world sank into them, and I felt my body break out in goosebumps.

I nodded.

“Yes,” I croaked out, now feeling the smile stretch across my face too. Laughter bubbled up in both our chests, and he clenched me tight to him.

My face burrowed into his chest, and emotion overwhelmed me. Tears and laughter mixed together as I cried. Kieran was laughing in surprise and happiness and holding me tight. He rained kisses down on the top of my head and pulled me back to look at my tear-filled eyes.

“We’re having a baby?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m going to be a father?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe it!” he said, but the smile on his face told me it was a good kind of disbelief. There was no hiding emotion there. No secret sadness. The joy in his eyes was pure and warm, and I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders by his massive arms and tossed directly into the sun.

“You’re happy?” I asked, needing the confirmation for the tiny part of my brain that refused to believe in anything good.

“Elated,” he said, pulling me up to him for a deep kiss. “I am beside myself happy. Sofia, I cannot wait to be a father. And to have a baby with you.”

There was no holding back the tears now. They came like a waterfall, and I pressed myself to him, breathing in his smell and tightening my body around his.

“When did you find out?” he asked. “How long have you known?”

“This morning,” I said. “It’s why I didn’t answer your call. I had just found out and didn’t know what to do.”

“I’m glad you didn’t tell me over the phone,” he said, grinning. “I would not have driven back home safely.”

I smiled and pressed a kiss to his chest, hugging him tight again.

“I’m so happy,” I said.

“So am I. This is the best day of my life.”

The goose bumps returned as I curled into him. Then the darker thoughts began to creep in. The logistics of having a child, what we would do, how we would handle it all started to seep into my mind. Part of me wanted to hide those thoughts, to not bother him with them and bring down his mood. But this was something I needed from him. The comfort and knowledge that we could do this together. I needed the reassurance from him.

“What are we going to do with our schedules?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I work at a restaurant. I have long days, mostly in the evenings. You work at a fire station and might get called in at any moment. How are we going to be able to take care of a child like that?”

“We’ll be okay,” he said, the smile never leaving his face. “As a fire chief, I’ll be able to make sure my schedule is much more regular. I’ll have most nights off. Besides, you’ll be able to make your own schedule anyway.”

“No, I won’t,” I said. “Papa writes the schedules. I know he’ll try to help me as best he can, but he’ll have to make sure things get covered. I’ll still end up running the bar at night a lot, and if someone calls out, I’m the first one to go in.”

“No, baby,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “Your father won’t be making the schedule at your own restaurant.”

There was a pause as I worked out what he’d just said. Lifting my head, I looked up into his eyes critically and saw that he was grinning now even wider than he had before. I sat up a bit, and he pulled the blankets up so the sheet still went over my shoulders even as I sat up to look at him.

“What are you talking about? I work for Papa. It’s called Sergio’s.”

“Yes, right now you do,” he said. “But soon enough, you’ll be working at your own place.”

Oh no. I'd cracked his brain. Finding out he was going to have a kid had driven him right over the edge, and now I had a boyfriend who had gone cuckoo.

"Kieran, I can't possibly have my own place. There's no way I could afford that, especially in this town. The only available building is the one by your place that used to be the steak house. It shut down in less than a year because no one went there after the first couple weeks."

"I might have a little secret too," he said, sitting up a bit. "Are you ready to hear it?"

I took a moment to let myself prepare for whatever he was about to say. If it involved space aliens or some other wacky thing, I was going to have to reevaluate everything. I would still love him, but if he had gone crazy in the last six weeks and then I'd broken his brain fully, I would have to figure everything out pretty fast.

"Okay," I said. "What's your secret?"

He beamed.

"While I was gone, I went to the bank and inquired about a small-business loan. It turns out that I could afford a pretty hefty one based on my savings and income now that I'm set to be chief. Enough that I could absolutely lease that building near me and turn it into a restaurant. One that focuses on a little bit of heat, maybe? At least, that's how I pitched it. A spice-forward restaurant for people who like a little punch with their food. I was thinking of calling it something catchy, like *Heatseekers*."

It was like a bomb went off in my brain. Instantly, I could see it. The logo, the décor. The menu. I could see the dozens and dozens of people who would come into the bar of Sergio's every day just to sample whatever spicy thing I had on the menu, filtering into my new place.

Our new place.

"Oh my God," I said.

"Do you hate it? I'm not completely tied to the name..."

“I love it,” I cried. “I love it!”

“Oh! Great!” he said, and I sank back into him again. Joy flooded my body, and I felt like I had never been happier for a single moment in my entire life.

“I love it. You got the loan?”

“I did. Sitting in a special bank account I made just for the business. I even called the owner of the building and set up a meeting to talk next week.”

“Kieran!” I cried. “We’re going to have a restaurant!”

We kissed once again, and when our lips broke apart, I could feel his cock growing again. It was beginning to press against my thigh, and a thrill went down my spine. It wasn’t going to be long before he was ready for round two.

“I was thinking,” he said. “I could supply some stuff I make all the time for the fire department. Whenever I’m not up there, I could come work in the kitchen. We could put a nursery in the building so our baby could be there with us all the time, and it’s just a mile or two from my place anyway. We might even be able to steal Tony away from Dina’s.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “Then we would all be able to cook spicy stuff together!”

“We’d never lose another chili cook-off, that’s for sure,” he laughed.

“But what about Papa?” I asked, more to myself than to him. “He’ll be devastated.”

“I think he’ll be okay. We won’t serve anything he serves, and if he still needs you once or twice a week at the bar or in the kitchen, I’m sure we can work it out.”

“Do you think so? You wouldn’t be upset?”

“Why would I be?” he asked. “He’s your father. He wants you to be happy. And of course you would help him when he needed you. We will figure it out. I promise.”

“Oh, Kieran,” I said, burying my face into his chest. “This is all so much. I feel like it’s too good to be true.”

“It’s not.” He stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head again. “This is reality. It’s real. It’s you and me. And it’s for good. We’re going to have a baby. And we’re going to have a restaurant. And we are going to be happy.”

“I love you. I am so, so happy.”

“I love you too,” he said. “Also, and I want you to think about this one, because it might change if you have to fill in for your father once in a while, but otherwise... you will never have to make another lasagna ever again.”

I closed my eyes and let out a long slow breath.

“Promise?” I asked.

“Promise.”

“You have no idea how good that sounds.”

“I think I do,” he said.

I glanced down from where my head was settled on his chest to the rising mound under the blanket. It had grown as I watched it, and my core began to tingle with desire. Slowly, I slid my hand down his chest and under the covers. My fingers wrapped around his staff, and I stroked him.

“As good as this feels?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he said, tipping my chin back so he could press a kiss against it.

“Good,” I said.

“Come here,” he said, “I don’t think I’m done celebrating yet.”





## KIERAN

This was only my second bonfire, and I was nervous. Part of it was being inducted to the inner circle of movers and shakers in Ashford, sure, but the other part was what this night meant. What we were going to do. That was the biggest and most daunting part of the upcoming night.

I had stayed in bed with Sofia all day, finally rousing myself off the bed long enough to shower and bring her back to my place to get ready for the bonfire. Sofia called out for the day, telling her father she needed a day off and would tell him why the next day. That was a conversation I didn't know if I should look forward to either. I knew her dad liked me, but he was a traditional man. The idea of his unmarried daughter being pregnant with a man she'd only know a few months was not the best optics.

Thankfully, he didn't ask any questions, and Sofia and I ended up in the shower at my place, unable to spend more than a little bit of time without our hands all over each other. We were giddy about each other, living in a fog of silliness and sex. It was like I was a teenager, constantly hungry for her and never feeling full. I wanted to be touching her always, even just our fingers interlocked, or the sides of our feet pressed together while standing. I needed her energy and her touch, just as she needed mine.

We had decided to tell everyone about the pregnancy at the bonfire. Sofia got dressed in a blue, soft cloth dress that accentuated her curves while still looking casual. It made me want to slip my hand up her thigh and feel the soft cloth above

my hand and her wet core underneath, but I would have to wait. She knew it was driving me wild too, and the coy smile on her face confirmed it.

This week, the bonfire was being held at Everett and Helen's, which was appropriate since Helen and Sofia had gotten so close recently. I was still getting to know Everett, but the two of us seemed to hit it off well enough, and along with the other guys from the logging company, I was excited to have a little pod of dudes to hang out with that weren't also firemen.

We drove over and parked in the large grassy area in front of their cabin and walked down the hill to the backyard. Most everyone was already there by the time we arrived, and the fire was burning hot, deep in the yard. Children played on one side of the large, empty space, clearly separated from where the adults were by a section of rubber flooring, swings, and slides.

I could imagine our own child among them. It would be a few years, sure, but one day our own little one would look forward to these nights when he or she could come down and frolic with the other kids of Ashford. The next generation of this town, growing as people like myself moved in and built it up from the place it was just a few years back to what it was becoming.

"Sofia," Helen said, coming out of the back door of the cabin and rushing over to give her a hug. Her eyes shifted to me for a split second and then back to her. "Everything good?"

"Everything's fantastic," she said.

"Good. So, can I get you something? Some orange juice?"

"I would love orange juice," Sofia said, looking back at me with a grin.

"Ahh," I said.

"I needed some advice," Sofia said. "I hope you're not mad."

"Mad? How could I be mad?" I asked. "I'm glad you had someone to talk to."

“Good,” Helen said. “Now, what about you?”

“I’ll have a beer,” I said. “Only one, though, since I’m driving.”

“You don’t have to drive,” Sofia said. “I can get us home.”

There was something so wonderful in hearing her refer to my place as home. I grinned.

“No, thank you,” I said. “I have other reasons for wanting to stay sober too.”

“Oh?” she asked, curling into my arms as Helen slipped away to get us drinks. “What would those be?”

“I want to be fully cognizant of my surroundings when I peel that dress off of you later.”

“Mr. Duggan,” she said playfully. “Are you insinuating that I will be sleeping with you tonight?”

I grinned. “I never said anything about sleeping.” I grinned.

Helen returned a few moments later with our drinks, and we went about milling around, Sofia introducing me to people I didn’t know and having a bit of fun talking with people in the town. It was good for me to get to know people, considering they would be putting a great deal of trust in me running the fire department.

But also, it was just nice to feel like I was making myself a part of the community. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere. I wanted to be here, in Ashford, raising my family and living the good life here. Briefly, I thought about what would happen if I was offered a promotion somewhere else. If the governor called and wanted me to take over in Nashville or Memphis. Or if I was called to run a federal program.

I simply wouldn’t do it. At least, not for a while. I had a home and a life here. I was happy, settled.

Ashford, Tennessee, was where I wanted to be, as long as I had Sofia and our baby. Any promotion or opportunity would have to compete with the level of personal happiness I was

experiencing right at that moment. I didn't think anything could beat it. Especially once Sofia's restaurant was open.

As we walked around, speaking to everyone and having a good time, I could hear the whispers about Sofia's drink. People were noticing that she wasn't drinking a cocktail or mixed drink. It was clearly just a glass of orange juice and not a screwdriver. The lips of the Ashford inner circle were flapping, and it was going to be a matter of time before someone asked us point-blank.

Which meant it was time to go ahead and make the announcement. But I had something in mind for the announcement. Something not even Sofia knew about. As a matter of fact, only three people in the world knew about it. One of them was me, obviously. Another was my mother, who I told through a text earlier in the day. The other was a little old man in Nashville, likely at home now, knowing that I was one of many who he had helped along the journey I was beginning tonight.

My fingers brushed over the box in my pocket. Sofia hadn't noticed it, and I had been doing a bit of creative dancing to keep her hand from touching that specific pocket. It wasn't easy, but I didn't have to do it long. And now I was almost done.

I caught Helen's attention, and she stood, tapping her glass with a spoon, and the rest of the crowd of adults calmed, the children now safely inside, playing video games and some already down for the night.

"Attention, everyone," Helen said. "Our good friends Sofia and Kieran have an announcement they would like to make."

"Thank you," Sofia said as a circle widened around us.

"I'm pretty sure I know what it is," Helen said. She had a few drinks in her by now and was probably trying to only say that to Everett, but I couldn't help but laugh at how loud it was.

"So," Sofia said, stepping in front of me. She had pulled on my hand to get me to step with her, but I hung back. When

she turned around to see why, I was already down on one knee, the box in my hand.

“Wh—oh,” she said, the words trapped in her throat. Her eyes went wide, and one hand rose to her lips as she gasped.

“Sofia, before you say another word, I needed to ask you something,” I said.

“Guess not,” Helen said, making me grin even harder and sending a small ripple of laughter around that part of the grouping.

“Kieran...” Sofia whispered.

“Sofia, I love you,” I said. “And before we take any more steps in this life, I need you to know just how much I love you. How committed I am to you. The six weeks I spent on retreat were the longest, loneliest weeks of my life. Without you, I was a zombie. I realized while I was there that I wasn’t a whole person unless I was with you. You are my other half. I need you like I need air.

“Sofia Adriana Falco, will you do me the honor and privilege of becoming my wife?”

“Yes!” she cried, and I slipped the ring onto her finger to a roar of applause from our friends.

I stood and wrapped her in my arms for a kiss, and the cheering only got louder. When our lips separated, we turned to everyone, and Sofia held up a lone finger.

“First off,” she said, choking back laughter and tears of happiness, “thank you all. Second, I have one more announcement.”

“Oh, I think I know this one,” Helen said, and Sofia laughed.

“Yes, this time, you’ve got it,” she said. “For everyone else, though... we wanted to say we are going to have a baby!”

Another wave of cheers filled the yard, and the faces of the children still awake peered in from the glass door. Suddenly, we were bombarded by hugs and claps on the back, people offering to shake my hand and offer congratulations. It was

overwhelming in the best way, and for the rest of the evening, the two of us walked around the bonfire, receiving hugs and offers of help from everyone there.

At one point, I let it slip that we were thinking about starting our own place together, one that would be ninety percent Sofia's place, and Tony's head popped up.

"Should I?" I asked Sofia, who nodded. I peeled away from her for the first time all night and went to my friend.

"So, you heard about the new place we're going to open up?" I asked.

"I did," he said. "Sounds great."

"Well, it will be, but it's missing something," I said. "Both of us agree it needs a head cook, someone who can be there full-time when Sofia and I can't. Someone we can trust and someone who has their own palate, one that can add to our own and be a star themselves."

"Wait, me?" Tony asked.

"Of course, you! Winner of the Ashford County Chili Cook-off!"

"Really? Head cook?"

"I mean, yeah," I said. "Sofia will be the chef in charge, but we need someone who can be there full-time. Neither one of us could possibly imagine a better person for that job than you. If you want it."

"If I want it?" he laughed. "Of course I do!"

"Good," I said as Sofia rejoined me, and I put my arm around her, offering my other hand for a shake. "It's a deal, then?"

"You name a time and place," Tony said. "I'll be there."





## SOFIA - SEVEN MONTHS LATER

“I can’t fit through the door,” I said, pressing my forehead against the doorframe sadly and fighting the urge to both laugh and cry.

“Why are you going through it sideways?” Wendy asked. “Honey, turn around and come through straight.”

“I know I can fit through it straight,” I said, wallowing in my own self-created crisis. “I’m just so big I can’t fit through it sideways.”

“Not for long,” Helen said, rushing over to guide me in turning and coming into the room. “A couple more weeks, tops.”

“Yeah, and then you will have a tiny little baby to hold,” Wendy said. “It’s going to be amazing. You just have to make it a few more weeks.”

“I know,” I said glumly.

I sat down heavily in the chair. We were in the special room of Sergio’s birthday parties and bachelorettes sometimes used, and where rumors had been for my entire life that the mafia met on a regular basis. To be fair, though, a bunch of “Family” did meet there once, back when Desiree had some issues with her ex. But even Desiree’s family, who came into town every once in a while, rarely ever sat in there. They preferred the patio outside.

“Where are the boys?” Wendy asked, sitting down across from me and filling my glass with the jug of ice water. I had

been chewing ice for three days, almost nonstop. It was cold as hell outside, a typical Tennessee early spring, but I was chewing ice almost constantly.

“Still at the new place,” I said. “Finn is helping install the kitchen equipment. Kieran bought some state-of-the-art fryers, and they’re over there geeking out over them.”

“Sounds like Finn,” Wendy said.

“Do you need anything?” Helen asked. “I can get you something from the kitchen.”

“No, that’s okay,” I said. “Papa said he has some special dinner planned. I’ve already eaten my weight in bread today, so I just need to wait for him to finish up whatever he’s doing in there. I just hope the boys make it in time.”

“How did he handle the news, by the way?” Wendy asked. “When you told him you were going to get married after the baby?”

Wendy and I had only recently hit it off but had become very close. The three of us—Wendy, myself, and Helen—were almost always together the last few weeks in some combination. They had taken the responsibility of doting on me and checking on me constantly, making sure I was prepared as I nested. Wendy especially had taken a keen interest in making sure I was properly pampered, which meant she was giving tips to Kieran on a regular basis. He loved it, though, taking every suggestion and turning it into luxurious baths and getaways for me.

“Honestly, he was so happy he was going to have a grandbaby that I didn’t get the marriage lecture at all,” I said. “He casually mentioned once or twice about how nice our wedding will be, and I’m sure he’d have rather it happened before the baby came, but he hasn’t said anything about it.”

“And he gets along with Kieran fine?” she asked. “I mean, I see them talking together, but you never know.”

“They get along great,” I said. “Papa likes him a lot. He respects firemen. Even before he came into town and the department was a joke, Papa still contributed to their

fundraisers and stuff. He said when he was a boy, there was a big fire in an apartment building he lived in, and a fireman rescued his neighbor by going into the flames to pull them out. He never forgot that.”

“Oh, wow,” Helen said. “I never knew that.”

“Papa says Kieran is a good man who does good work. Coming from Papa, that’s like giving him sainthood. Papa never likes any boy we date.”

“Wasn’t he critical of how you ended up single, though?” Helen asked.

“Only because he thought I should have chosen a better boy to begin with. He was afraid he was getting too old to have a grandbaby. Papa loves babies.”

“All grandfathers seem to,” Wendy said. “I think it’s because they share similar hairlines.”

I laughed.

“There they are,” Helen said, peering out of the blinds of the long windows on one wall of the room. They usually remained closed for privacy, but I casually mentioned that it was dark, and Wendy jumped into action, opening the blinds.

I grinned as Kieran, Finn, Tony, and Everett all came into the restaurant, making a beeline for us. I made to stand up, and Kieran put his hand out to stop me. Leaning down, he kissed my cheek and pulled me tight to his stomach in a hug. It was not lost on me how close to his groin I was, and even as miserable as I was, part of me desperately wanted to pull him into the bathroom and rip his clothes off.

“You don’t need to stand up,” Kieran said. “You are the queen of the day. You stay seated.”

“How will a baby be born if she doesn’t walk, eh?” Papa’s voice said, coming into the room from the kitchen with the flair for the dramatic that only tiny little Italian men with giant mustaches possess.

“We will let the baby decide when he wants to come out,” I said.

There was silence in the room. I looked up into the shocked faces of my father and Kieran.

“He?” they both said at the same time.

“Oh shit,” I said.

“Surprise!” Wendy exclaimed.

Kieran had decided he didn’t want to know what the baby was going to be until it was born, and Papa, ever the traditionalist, joined him. I had no such desire and had gotten the ultrasound months ago. Still, I had sworn Helen and then Wendy to secrecy about it. Still, neither Papa nor Kieran seemed upset. Instead, the smile beaming on their faces became so wide, so bright, I thought their heads might split in half.

“I’m going to have a little boy,” Kieran said.

“A little *ragazzino*,” Papa said. “Oh joy, I love, I love it!” He crossed over to me and pulled my face tight as he kissed my cheeks and then went to Kieran, taking him into a big bear hug. For such a tiny man, Papa was surprisingly strong, and Kieran laughed as he picked him up briefly and sat him back down. “Now, this is a cause for celebration! I will be right back.”

When he returned, he was carrying several bottles of champagne and glasses to hand around to the other guests. The restaurant was just beginning to open, but one of my sisters closed the door to the private room, leaving only its own special entrance to the kitchen open. We all had a glass of special drink, with mine being sparkling grape juice, and celebrated for a bit as food began to stream in.

Helen and Finn had offered to throw us a catered party themselves, but Papa had been insistent. He said Italian women needed Italian food and was pumping me full of everything he could to pamper me and stuff me like a Christmas pig. Eventually, he brought out a giant pizza, one that took up the entire table, and placed it in front of us all.

“This looks amazing,” Helen said.

“Try it first, my dearest,” Papa said. “Go on. I am’a very proud of it.”

Shrugging, I peeled off a slice and put it to my lips. As soon as I bit down, an explosion of flavor, and heat, hit my tongue. I was so surprised, I nearly spat it out. But I held strong, chewing and swallowing with wide eyes as Papa’s hands clasped together and he shook them in victory.

“You like?” he asked.

“It’s so hot!” I said. “Papa, you made a spicy pizza?”

“I did. Just for my little baby. I heard spice induces labor, you know. So, eat. Eat!”

“Papa, what is on this?”

Beaming, he put his hands on his hips, puffing his chest out.

“Ghost pepper.”

“You put ghost pepper on *pizza*?” Tony asked.

“I did,” he said. “I learned something from my little Sofia. You used this in a sauce one time, and one of our guests came back and said it was the best he ever had. I was so mad at you. But it worked. I have been asked about that sauce once a month for years. So, I decided to make it myself. As a pizza marinara.”

“It’s delicious,” I said. “But it’s so hot.”

“I can’t wait,” Kieran said. “May I?”

“Everyone, eat,” I said. “If you dare.”

It only took a few seconds before Tony and Kieran were chomping away, their foreheads glistening with sweat and smiles on their faces.

My sisters joined us a little while later, each in their own time while on break. They had been trying to pamper me as well and driving me around when Kieran couldn’t and I didn’t feel comfortable behind the wheel anymore. Luna was the last to join us and curled up on my arm for a while as we put our heads together. I had never felt closer to them than I had in the

last few months, not since we were tiny children. It was amazing what bringing a new life into the world could do.

Finally, when the pizza had been polished off and everyone else headed home, Kieran and I made our way to the truck and got on the road. We were almost there when I had the worst indigestion of my life. I was moaning and holding a gurgling stomach when something else happened that made my eyes open wide, and I grabbed Kieran's arm.

“What is it?” he asked.

“My water just broke!” I shouted. “It's time!”

Kieran yanked the truck out of the lane we were in and into the turning lane, heading for the highway. Five Corners hospital was twenty minutes away, and he planned on making it there faster than that. A quick call from him to the police department meant we were joined by a cop car moments later, its lights and sirens on as it led us through town at high speed.

I texted my family and told them what was happening, and by the time I was in the hospital room, I knew they were there.

Dr. Romina Davis was there, and it was nice to see a friendly face as I was rushed into delivery. She helped guide me as our beautiful baby boy wasted no time coming out, and after only three hours of hard labor, I was holding him to my chest, Kieran beside me, and feeling like the next phase of my life had just begun.

# EPILOGUE

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## KIERAN - THREE MONTHS LATER

“**Y**ou ready, boss?” Tony asked.

“I’ve been ready since about ten minutes after meeting her,” I laughed.

“Good, because this is your last chance if you want to back out,” he said. “Of course, as your best man, I have to inform you, you would be a massive moron if you did so.”

“I have zero intention of doing so,” I said.

“Good,” Finn said. “Now, before you walk out of this door, you need one last drink as a single man.”

Finn produced a bottle of what looked to be extraordinarily expensive scotch from his jacket and three shot glasses.

“Holy shit, is that Lagavulin?” Tony asked.

“It is,” Finn said. “Bought it special for today. The rest of this bottle will be in your house when you get back from your honeymoon. But first, a toast.”

“Hear, hear,” Tony said, taking one of the glasses. Finn poured them to the rim and raised his.

“To happiness, to love, to eternity. To Kieran and Sofia Duggan,” Finn said. “Salut.”

“Salut,” Tony echoed.

We each took a large sip of our whiskey, then downed the rest.

“That is not a shot whiskey,” Tony said, coughing.



“No, no it is not,” Finn said, eyes watering. “That is a sipping scotch. I suggest you do not take shots with it at home.”

“Noted,” I said, shaking my head. “Alright. I think I’m ready.”

“Good, because I just got the cue,” Finn said. “It’s go time, friend.”

“Hey,” I said, stopping him before he left through the door to the waiting wedding coordinator outside. “I just wanted to thank you and Wendy for watching the house and everything while we were gone.”

“No problem,” he said. “Sergio and Sofia’s sisters are taking care of the baby. All I have to do is make sure your house doesn’t burn down. Wouldn’t that be ironic.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Tony laughed.

“Seriously, thank you,” I said.

“Anytime, bud,” Finn said. “Have fun out there. Remember this day. It only gets better.”

As Finn walked away, I turned to Tony, who was examining the bottle.

“Want another?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “Just remembering what my dad once said about the difference between whiskey and scotch.”

“What was that?”

“He said they say whiskey comes from America and Scotch from Scotland, but the real truth is they all come from the devil’s own bar.”

“He didn’t like whiskey?”

“Oh, no, he loved whiskey. Whiskey just didn’t like him,” he said. “I, however, have no such problem.”

“Well, when it’s your turn at the altar, I’ll make sure you have some good whiskey too,” I said.

“Yeah, that’ll be the day. The day Xavier Anthony Russo gets hitched is a day that will live in infamy.”

“Your first name is Xavier?” I asked. “I never knew that.”

“No one does,” he said. “Well, Sofia does, since she signed my paperwork when I joined your restaurant, but other than her and Wendy, nobody.”

“And now me.”

“And now you,” he said. “Oh, looks like it’s my turn. See you out there, groom.”

“See you out there, best man,” I said.

And so, I was alone. I picked up the bottle of scotch and popped open the top. I took one last, long sip and put the top back on. It steeled me for the moment. Not that I was afraid of marriage or the commitment or anything like that. I was scared of myself. I was scared of the emotion that I knew was building up inside me.

I loved Sofia with my entire heart, and the moment she came down that aisle, I was going to see my bride and know she was choosing me for the rest of her life. It was overwhelming. I might need the extra liquid courage.

“Kieran?” a voice asked from what felt like a long way off. It was Amanda Lander, the girl who was running the wedding as a coordinator.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Are you?” she asked.

“I am,” I said. “I have been.”

“Come on, then,” she said. “Let’s get you out there.”

Going down the aisle myself felt like a blur. My mother was in the front row with my baby boy, and I was standing next to Finn and Tony, the pastor between us and the bridesmaids, Wendy and Helen. As the wedding march began, I gazed up the aisle of the restored church, the same one that had burned on one of my first days in town.

They had done so much to fix this place in such a short time. Sofia and I had donated our own time to help restore it, and now it was a historical landmark for Ashford, even rebuilt, and a wedding venue for couples like us. We were the first ones to be married there since it was fixed. In attendance, luminaries from the town stood in the wings, along with the governor, the mayor, and even former Chief Arn McDaniel, wearing a tuxedo and linking arms with his adorably tiny wife.

Suddenly, Sofia swept into view, and I felt the wind come out of me like I had been punched by God himself. She was as gorgeous as I had ever seen her. The white dress flowed behind her, and the veil over her face was lacy and traditional. Her father walked her gently down, tears streaming from his proud face. When they reached me, he let her go, and for one brief second, one hand was still in his while the other was in mine. Then, she let go of him and joined me on the altar.

“You look amazing,” she whispered.

“So do you,” I said.

The wedding continued, and our vows were said, all a delirious blur of motion and sound. All I could concentrate on was Sofia’s face. I tried to follow the minister, so I could say what I needed to say when I needed to say it, but it was fruitless. Twice, Tony had to poke me with his foot to prompt me. I was mesmerized.

“Then, by the power vested in me by the state of Tennessee, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride,” the minister said.

And thus, our lips pressed together for the first time as a married couple to the cheer of the church and the joy of my heart.

As we went down the aisle together, people clapping my back and our hands linked together tightly, I knew what I wanted to do more than anything in the world. As soon as our son was back in the waiting room with us, I snuck them both off, out of the building and to a small grassy area nearby. The sun was out, and the weather was finally warming up when I

pulled my wife to me, our son between us in her arms, and placed my head on hers.

“I love you, Sofia,” I said.

“I love you too, Kieran.”

“We’re *married*.”

She giggled.

“I know. You’re my husband.”

“You’re my wife.”

We smiled and pressed another kiss to each other’s lips. As we did, our little baby boy gurgled, and we laughed before pressing a kiss to his cheeks.

I couldn’t imagine a better way to celebrate that moment than with just them, and though we would have to return for the reception in a few minutes, I reveled in that private moment with them. As I looked back, I couldn’t believe how much my life had changed in just about one year’s time.

And I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

The End

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“J is for Jason”

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## BETH ANN



“Thank you. I’ll call you back. Goodbye.”

I ended the call and sank down onto my favorite chair in my living room. I stared at the wall for a few moments, contemplating the conversation I’d just had. Life suddenly felt completely different than it had when I woke up this morning.

I’d just been thinking about whether I wanted to go all the way to the grocery store to get something to make for dinner or if I would scrounge through the cabinets and get creative when the phone rang. In an instant, everything shifted. The biggest decision of my life one moment was how much effort I wanted to put into what to eat tonight, and in the next moment, I had to decide whether to change the entire direction of my future.

The phone call left me stunned, but in a way, it was just what I had wanted. For a while, I’d been very aware of the feeling that I was just drifting through life. From day to day, there wasn’t much difference, and I felt like I wasn’t doing anything that actually mattered. There wasn’t really anything to look forward to. It wasn’t as bleak as that sounded. I wasn’t doomsday about my life. There wasn’t anything to dread ahead of me either. It was just that I didn’t feel like I was moving forward.

I wanted a direction, some kind of purpose. Now, suddenly, I had one. Or, at least, I had the option of one.

When the lawyer who called introduced himself, I didn't recognize his name. He said he was calling about a family matter, but when I tried to think back through people I'd met or even just heard of in connection to my family, I came up blank. He told me he represented Maisie Turner, and the lightbulb clicked. Maisie was my great-aunt, the older sister of my mother's father, and my only living relative.

As it turned out, she wasn't even that anymore.

The lawyer, Matthew Warren, was the executor of my aunt's will. She'd died a week ago, and he was tasked with settling her estate for her. It wasn't much of a shock to hear she had died, considering the last I'd heard of her she was already very ill.

That was the first shift. The next one came right after that when Mr. Warren informed me I was the sole beneficiary of Maisie's estate, which consisted primarily of the Christmas tree farm she owned in Tennessee. I had some faint memories of my mother talking about her aunts owning a Christmas tree farm and her having many happy seasons there when she was younger, but that was all I knew about the place. I had never been to it or seen any pictures. I didn't even realize it was still in the family.

Now it was mine. Along with the tens of thousands of dollars of debt attached to it.

And there was the kicker. In that quick moment, I went from a twenty-four-year-old clutching an accounting degree and searching for my dream, to a landowner saddled with massive debt. I barely even knew about the family business I was apparently now at the helm of, and it was already deep in the hole.

The sudden rush of news was a bit overwhelming, and I'd asked Mr. Warren to give me a few minutes to process it all before we continued the conversation. Staring at the wall wasn't giving me nearly the reassurance and answers I'd hoped for, so I picked up the phone and called him back.

"I apologize," I said when he answered.



“No apology necessary,” he said. “I’m sure this is coming as a shock to you. Allow me to extend my deepest condolences for the loss of your aunt.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a little bit strange accepting the sentiment about someone I barely even knew.

“Were the two of you close?” Mr. Warren asked.

By the inflection, I could tell he’d heard the uncertainty in my voice and was curious about the details.

“Not exactly,” I said. I hesitated. “Not at all, actually. It’s been years since I’ve heard from any of my extended family. The occasional birthday card or Christmas card was really the only connection I had to them when I was growing up, anyway. I know my mother was close to her aunts when she was younger. Her mother died when she was really young, and her father worked so much he didn’t really have a lot of time to spend with her, so she was with his sisters most of the time.

When she got older, though, they didn’t always approve of the decisions she was making with her life. She just didn’t want the same kind of life they had. She didn’t want to join them on the farm and live her life out in the country the way they envisioned. She wanted to see more of the world, have experiences. So, they kind of drifted.”

I recognized I was now the one who had gone off the rails as I waxed poetic about my family history to a lawyer who likely didn’t care about a single word I was saying. But there was something cathartic about talking about them. My mother’s death had been very sudden and horrible. We were very close, and when she found out she had cancer, I was determined I was going to be right there by her side and help her fight it. I wasn’t going to give up.

And I didn’t. Neither did she. The cancer was just too aggressive, and within two months of her diagnosis, she was gone. It left me with only Maisie as the entirety of my family, but I didn’t think much of that. Not until I found out Maisie left the Christmas tree farm to my mother in her will, and since my mother was no longer living, it had trickled down to me by default.

I had to give it to Mr. Warren, though. He sat there and listened to my rambling until I finished.

“I’m sure this is a lot for you to take in right now,” he commiserated.

“It is,” I said. “I just don’t know what to do. I barely even knew this place existed. I’ve never seen it. I honestly didn’t even realize it was still a place. I figured it would have been sold off a long time ago because there wasn’t anyone left who could take care of it. And you said there was a lot of debt attached to it?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice a little heavier now. This obviously wasn’t the kind of phone call I imagined he enjoyed making. “Unfortunately, your aunt got fairly far behind on tax payments, and combined with late penalties and other fees, it added up quite a bit.”

“So, what am I supposed to do with it? I don’t know anything about running a Christmas tree farm.”

“And I’m sure you have your own career and your life established where you are, so it is challenging to think about something so far away.”

“Well,” I said under my breath, not committing to that sentiment.

“Fortunately, you have options,” he said. “You could just sell the land off. That could be a very straightforward transaction you wouldn’t even have to leave home to do. I could handle all the details, and you would just need to be available to sign paperwork. There is a logging company nearby that has been interested in the land for a while, and they are willing to buy it at cost.”

“They’ve been interested in it for a while?” I asked.

From what I understood, Maisie had been very ill for years, and it was highly unlikely she had been doing much with the farm. If someone was willing to purchase it from her, I imagined that would make her life much easier and more comfortable. And she wouldn’t be saddled with the debt,

though that was something she obviously didn't take care of anyway, so it might not have even been on her radar.

"Yes," Mr. Warren said. "They apparently contacted Maisie several times about it, but she adamantly refused to sell. It meant a lot to her to own that land, and she wasn't willing to see someone else own it, especially a company that was only going to use it for the lumber."

"Oh," I said.

"But the decision is yours now. There were no stipulations put in the will that the land had to remain in the family or that anyone who inherited it wasn't permitted to sell. You are fully within your rights to sell the land if you want to."

"It doesn't sound like you think that's what I should do," I said, picking up on a note in his voice.

"It's not up to me to tell you what I think you should or should not do in regard to your final decision about the property," he said. "I understand it is a major undertaking and could be quite overwhelming to suddenly have in front of you. The thought of being able to just sell it to a guaranteed buyer, fulfill the debts, and still have money leftover is likely very tempting."

"But?" I said, leading him into what he clearly wanted to say.

"But I wouldn't want to see you making a rash decision without all the information," he said. "You mentioned you've never seen the land. I suggest you at least come to see it. This farm has been in your family for more than one hundred years and would be worth far more if utilized properly than you would get if you just took the outright offer from the logging company."

I thought about his words for a few moments, going back and forth with myself about the idea of actually visiting the property. Selling to someone who was immediately willing to buy was, as the lawyer said, tempting. But there was also potential there. It was something more than just a paycheck,

and I had been looking for purpose. I couldn't guarantee this was that purpose, but it was something.

It had also been valuable to my mother and to the people she loved. That made it harder to imagine just letting someone else take over without even giving myself the chance to experience it.

“Did Maisie live on the property?” I asked.

“She did until she went into the hospital. There is a house on the land, but it isn't livable in its current condition. She was living in a trailer. All the utilities are connected, and the local police did a goodwill welfare check on her not too long ago and said the place was a bit cluttered and messy, but in good condition otherwise.”

I thought for another second, then nodded even though he couldn't see me.

“Alright,” I said. “I'll go. If the trailer is habitable, I'll stay there for a few weeks to decide what to do with the property and get everything handled. If there is internet access, I can work remotely.”

“I believe there is,” Mr. Warren said. “I can't promise it is as fast or reliable as you are accustomed to, but it should be manageable.”

That almost made me sigh, but I reminded myself I'd committed. I asked the lawyer to send directions and any other information he had to share, ended the call, and started my preparations. I needed to get out there before I could change my mind, so I immediately put my mail on hold and packed my bags with enough essentials to last me for at least a couple of weeks.

I imagined there would be laundry facilities available, and there had to be a store nearby. If I overstayed what I brought, I could always get what I needed. I put my packed bags at the door and went into the kitchen to make dinner. I needed to get to bed early so I could hit the road as soon as possible in the morning.



## JASON



When I was in school, my cousin Carter was my hero. Both literally and figuratively. He was a war hero with shrapnel in his leg and medals where Uncle Sam thanked him for his service and his sacrifice. I looked up to him more than any other person on the planet, celebrities and sports stars included. The fact that he was my cousin, just a few years older than me, gave me something to inspire me, to push me to be better.

When Carter came home from the desert, he moved to Ashford, Tennessee, and started a logging company with two of his buddies. It was extremely successful, due to their hard work and willingness to put in the extra effort to make it so. I kept in touch with him over the internet, and we exchanged Christmas cards and emails regularly.

Carter had been encouraging from afar and had cheered me on as I finished school, offering that if I wanted to take some time between high school and college, that I could always come out to Ashford and work for him for a while. It didn't take long before that was The Plan.

My girlfriend at the time, Charlotte, had been my high school sweetheart. We met in sophomore year and had been together ever since. I was ready to marry her, and when I told her the plan, I was totally fine with the idea that we might have a long-distance relationship if she chose to go to college. We would work it out. We always had.

Unfortunately, that wasn't how she reacted. I loved Charlotte and would have done anything for her, but her plans

were to go to school in Baltimore and live in an apartment with me in Maryland. So, I stayed. I thought we were happy, and she was going to be mine forever.

Then, the accident happened.

I had been working in a warehouse while I tried to figure out what I was going to do with my life. College was still an option, and I had taken some classes online to get the basic stuff out of the way. But the warehouse paid well.

One day, I was working in the office of the warehouse when one of the workers had taken the power jack out while he was drunk. He plowed right into the glass window in front of the office and destroyed the wall. Pieces of concrete slammed into me and broke my arm, but it was the gash across my face and neck that was the worst. I nearly died on the floor, bleeding out. I was trapped under rubble, and the glass had sliced me so deeply in the face and across my throat that I lay there in that puddle of blood and thought for sure that I was seeing my last moments on Earth.

I passed out, waking up in a hospital with bandages around my face and my arm in a sling.

Charlotte was there when I woke up. She was there often during the days after, leaving for class that she couldn't miss or tests she had to take. Then, when they took the bandages off, she was there for that too.

She wasn't around much afterward.

The scar had healed in the time since, mostly fading away everywhere but just under my eye and behind my jaw, then on the underside of my neck below my chin. But it was enough that it freaked Charlotte out. She admitted it one night when she again fell asleep in the recliner in our living room instead of coming to bed, and I confronted her about it. She couldn't see past it.

Then, a month later, I got home from work to find a note. Her best friend from childhood, a guy named Stephen, texted me an hour later. He said that she was with him. That she didn't want to speak to me anymore. That he was sorry that it

turned out that way because he felt pity for me and my scarred face.

It was infuriating, but worst of all, it was just sad. I had changed my entire world for Charlotte. All I had left of her was an empty apartment and I couldn't even stay there. I moved out and into a long-term hotel and sold off all our furniture. I kept almost nothing. When I heard that just six weeks later, Charlotte and Stephen had married, it was just another kick in the teeth.

Months went by where all I did was sit at the hotel, play video games, and try not to think about how lonely I was. I wallowed in it. Then, when I finally had a single day when I didn't think about Charlotte for twenty-four hours, I decided I needed to move on.

And I had an idea of how.

I was ready to start a new life. I'd emailed my cousin a week ago and now was staring at the screen of my budget laptop as it displayed the email I got back. Not only were there openings for his crew, but Carter wanted me to come down, and he would put me up for a while until I got some paychecks in and could find my own place. His wife, Lauren, was looking forward to meeting me, and Carter wanted to make up for lost time.

Excited, I immediately went about looking for a moving truck and figuring out what I would need to move the few things I had in the storage unit. The email said they had a finished basement at their place that had a bedroom, a living room, and a full bath, so it would be like my own apartment. It was supposed to be for Carter to turn into a man cave, but he just hadn't gotten around to it yet and was more than happy to share it with me for now.

I couldn't believe the generosity of my cousin, but at the same time, it tracked with everything I knew of him. Carter was the best man I knew. I couldn't wait to hang out with him.

Grabbing my keys, I headed to the storage unit where I'd put whatever I hadn't sold and surveyed what I had that I would take with me. I rented a trailer and called a couple



buddies who would help me load it up when I was ready to go. Then I checked my bank account and glanced over the settlement money that was just sitting there earning me interest. It could be a cushion. A little seed money for finding a place in Tennessee, assuming things did work out with Carter's company. I had to believe it would. This was the path I should have gone on before, and I'd let Charlotte stop me. Not this time. This time, I was going, and I was finally going to get a chance to do something for myself.

The next two days seemed like they took forever, but when they were done, the trailer was packed and ready to go with everything on it that I would need. I was in the hotel for one more night, happy to finally be done with living in a tiny little suite and excited to be in a place where I could cook again without having to rely on a propane gas stove.

I was ready to head out and see if a new environment would help heal the pain. Everywhere I looked now just reminded me of the betrayal.

But tomorrow would be a different day.

A better day.

\* \* \*

**\*\*End of Preview\*\***

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank for you taking the time to read my latest release.

I hope you loved reading my story, as much as I enjoyed writing it.

It would mean the world to me if you could take some time to leave a quick review for this book. Reviews allow me to understand how my readers truly feel, and they keep me improving to be better.

I appreciate you supporting me, thank you so much.

- Natasha L. Black

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Natasha L. Black is an Amazon Top 100 bestselling author. Dreaming and fantasizing ever since she was a young teenager, her love of writing flourished from a very early age. After working for 15 years as a veterinarian, she now follows her passion in writing for a living. She currently resides in a lovely country home in a rural area of Dallas, writing steamy novels to fulfill her readers' desires.

\* \* \*

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