

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**KELLY JAMIESON**



**LONG**  
*SHOT*

# LONG SHOT

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A LAST SHOT NOVEL

KELLY JAMIESON

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Second Edition 2022

Third Edition 2023

Cover by Dar Albert, Wicked Smart Designs

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## REESE

My boss is definitely a grade A manskank.

I walk toward the table at Conquistadors Tequila Bar, carrying a tray of champagne flutes and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, trying to ignore the woman standing next to the table who is pouting at my boss, Cade Hardy.

Everyone at the table has swiveled their heads to stare at the woman, the happy chatter falling silent.

“Why won’t you answer my calls?” The gorgeous, tall brunette blinks wet, thickly mascaraed eyelashes. “My texts? I don’t understand.”

Cade shifts in his chair, then rises. “I told you, Amelia.” He gently takes the woman’s arm and tries to steer her away from the table.

I do my best to ignore the developing drama as I set glasses at each place, studiously focusing on the table, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. This isn’t the first time one of Cade’s “dates” has shown up at the bar, either pissed off and chucking glasses at him or crying her mascara off. It makes life interesting.

Amelia stands firm in her platform heels. “You didn’t really mean that. What we had was special. You said that yourself!” She isn’t keeping her voice low, and everyone can hear.

I exchange a tight smile with Carrie, the girlfriend of one of my other bosses.



“Amelia, I told you I don’t do relationships.” Cade’s voice is lower as he edges Amelia away from the table. “You said you were fine with that. It was just one date.”

No shit, he doesn’t do relationships. In the few months I’ve been working at Conquistadors, Cade has probably slept with twenty-eight women. Not that I’m counting.

“But you brought me to a wedding! I met your friends! That has to mean something.”

I focus on my task to avoid the awkward encounter, easing the cork out of the bottle of champagne with a small pop, diverting attention away from the unhappy couple. I expertly pour the wine into Carrie’s glass, my thumb in the punt of the bottle, holding the flute in my other hand and tilting it so the wine slides down the side. I wait as bubbles subside to fill the glass, then set the glass on the table and step to the side to pick up Marco’s.

“This is so nice,” Carrie says in a bright tone, reaching for the flute.

Marco inclines his head. “Congratulations again, belleza.”

They’re celebrating the opening of G Gallery, where disadvantaged kids can hang out and make art, in the hopes that it will keep them off the street and out of trouble. Marco’s girlfriend Carrie has been working on setting up the gallery pretty much since I started working at Conquistadors, along with her mother and of course Marco.

Amelia’s sobs grow fainter as Cade leads her out of the bar. I continue to fill glasses until everyone at the table has champagne. Then Marco lifts his in a toast. “To G Gallery. And to Cheryl and Carrie. Congratulations on all your hard work.”

They all clink their glasses together and sip the sparkling wine.

Cade rejoins them and picks up his glass. “Sorry about that,” he mutters.

I move away from the table with the empty wine bottle, unable this time to stop my eyes from rolling and my lip from

curling. What a hound.

Before I can get far, my third boss waves me back to the table. Conquistadors Tequila Bar is owned by three men—Cade Hardy, Marco Solis, and Beck Whitcomb, all of them former Navy SEALs; all of them hot as hell. (Manwhore tendencies notwithstanding.) I just overheard Marco telling Carrie’s mom why they named the bar Conquistadors .... “We thought it was fitting. All three of us had some ... challenges growing up. Then we all decided to become SEALs, which is another huge challenge. We all made it—we were three of the fifteen who made it out of a class of a hundred forty-five when we started. We decided that naming the bar would remind us that we can overcome anything if we put our minds to it.”

For some reason, I truly admire that, even if I privately think they were a little crazy to think they could just open a bar and be successful.

“Hey, Reese,” Beck says. “Can you bring us some nachos, some chips and dip, and, uh, jalapeño poppers? And hey, Sid’s got something new we can try: Tater Tot nachos.”

I wince at the mention of the new menu item. “Um, yeah, about that ...”

Beck frowns. “What?”

“They’re ... well, you’re the boss. You should try them, if you haven’t. I’ll get those right out for you.”

I head to the kitchen to put the order in.

Tater Tot nachos. Ugh. It’s not a bad idea, but the execution leaves much to be desired.

I get that the guys are trying to improve their food menu. I know Sid, the cook, is trying. He just isn’t up to the job.

Oh, the things I could do ...

But no. I’m a waitress here. Happily waiting on people, serving drinks and food, living in sunny San Diego ... I sigh. Okay, not so happily, but still, this is my choice and I’m making the best of it.

The food menu here sucks, and even though the bar serves some excellent drinks, which is what attracts most of their customers, the drinks menu could also be improved. The bar is attractive—elegant and stylish with white walls, dark wood, black leather furniture, and funky chrome light fixtures suspended above tables. The big stone fireplace against one wall nearly always has a fire flickering in it. Wood Venetian blinds on the windows shade the bar from bright California sun.

I check on my other tables, picking up a few dishes and transporting them to the kitchen, taking more drink orders, which I relay to Alex working the bar tonight. Often Beck tends bar himself, or sometimes Marco. Beck's a charming flirt, though happily married, but that doesn't stop female patrons from hanging around to talk to him, admiring his sexy tats, beard, and long locks. Actually, even the male customers like hanging around talking to Beck.

Marco is more serious than Beck, but has definitely lightened up since I first started working here, which seems to be largely due to his girlfriend Carrie. All three guys are knowledgeable about fine tequilas, but Marco is the connoisseur. But when it comes to serious, Cade is the winner. He rarely tends bar, spending most of his time back in the office with his spreadsheets and graphs and sales charts. When he's not out screwing half the female population of Southern California.

I carry the food my bosses ordered to the table and they all begin passing the platters around, serving themselves nachos and poppers and chips. I wait expectantly, holding my tray in both hands.

"This is the new item." Marco picks up a cheesy Tater Tot and pops it into his mouth. He chews. And swallows. "Well."

"I know what he's trying to do," I speak up. "Using some fresh ingredients would be so much better." My lip curls again reflexively and I quickly try to tame that. "Those are made with frozen Tater Tots."

One of Marco's eyebrows shoots up.

Cade rises to his feet. “Hey, Reese, can I talk to you for a minute in the office?”

My stomach clenches at the grim look on his face and my skin turns cold. “Of course.”

I follow my boss back behind the bar, down the short hall, and into the office the three men share. It’s a cluttered space including two desks, one of which is covered with papers, folders, and binders as well as half-drunk bottles of tequila and inexplicably a bike helmet and a basketball. Cade’s desk, however, is neat and tidy, with nothing but a couple of file folders and his computer.

He turns and leans a hip against his desk. I stop just inside the door, my insides tightening.

Damn, why does he have to be so good-looking? The first time I met him when he interviewed me for the waitress job here, I took him to be a laid-back beach bum based on his appearance—shaggy, sun-bleached hair hanging over his forehead nearly into his stunning ice-blue eyes, dark gold scruff on his tanned cheeks and chin, and big, broad shoulders wearing a loose tropical-patterned shirt. His mouth is distracting in itself—a full bottom lip and sharply carved top lip I had to drag my attention away from.

It was hard to take him seriously at first, but I quickly learned he’s not laid-back and he’s not a beach bum. He’s the guy in charge—organized, efficient, decisive, and controlling. Waaaay too controlling.

Now I swallow, once more trying not to look at his sexy mouth.

“You can’t criticize our menu in front of guests,” Cade says, his eyebrows pulled together.

I bite back the words I want to say—the menu sucks. I’ve only been here a couple of months, and I don’t want to lose this job. But annoyance rises in me because he’s right, dammit. I would never have tolerated anyone who worked for me criticizing my menu. “I’m sorry,” I say stiffly. “It won’t happen again.”

One of his dark gold eyebrows lifts. “You sure? This isn’t the first time you’ve done it.”

I try to keep my face neutral. “I’m sorry.”

He fixes me with a steady gaze that makes my insides twist up. No wonder he has women all over him, all the time. Whorehound.

“What’s your problem with our menu?”

I press my lips together. “I don’t have a problem with the menu.”

“Funny, you seemed to have a problem with it a few minutes ago. And last week when you told a customer not to order the seven-layer dip.”

I make a tight, repentant smile. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

He regards me thoughtfully for another moment, then lifts his chin. “Okay. Glad we set things straight.”

Taking that as a dismissal, I nod and hurry out.

Inside, I burn. I hate being told what to do. Hate making mistakes. And I especially hate serving people food that sucks.

I have to get over that. This isn’t my restaurant. I don’t have to care. I don’t want the worries and responsibilities. All I want to do is smile and serve people, collect my tips, and go home to the crappy little duplex I’m renting.

It’s so damn hard though, when I know I could make things so much better.

Tight-lipped, I go back to take orders for another round of drinks from the table my bosses are at. They’re all laughing and happy, Beck and his wife, Hayden, Marco and Carrie, and Carrie’s family. A brief pang of self-pity strikes me, a moment of intense loneliness.

Then Marco smiles at me with a quizzical look, no doubt wondering if Cade thoroughly spanked me back in the office.

As if I’d want his hands on my ass.

I don't need pity. I lift my chin and give Marco a determined smile in return. "Another Mayahuel?"

"Yes, please." He circles a finger in the air. "Another round."

The one thing I approve of at Conquistadors is the selection of tequilas. These guys definitely know their tequila.



## CADE

I watch Reese disappear out the office door. She tried to hide it, but she's pissed. Her moss-green eyes flashed and those lush lips tightened, though it was barely perceptible. Her long red-gold ponytail bounces as she stalks out, and my eyes follow that trail of bright hair down her back to her ass.

She's kind of on the skinny side, but that ass ...

I blow out a breath. I've been told more than once to keep my hands—and my eyes—off our staff. Okay, specifically that one waitress. I would never go there. We're trying to make this bar a success, and a reputation for sexual harassment won't help.

Reese is an enigma. A gorgeous, anxious enigma.

She doesn't hang out with any of the other staff. Possibly because she's a little older than the college-age people we usually hire. She's a hard worker, efficient and competent, and customers seem to like her. She doesn't talk about herself, although she's friendly and interested in others. Maybe that's what makes me so curious about her.

I know nothing about her, except that she worked at a few high-end restaurants in New York City. She wears no ring, so apparently isn't married or engaged, and there's never any mention of a boyfriend. Or family. When asked why she moved to San Diego, she smiled and answered with a breezy, "I needed a change."

What do I know about her? Besides the fact that she's gorgeous, she's jumpy. Sometimes I pick up on a faint tremor



in her hands. A rapid blinking of her eyes. A habit of twisting her clothing—her shirtsleeve or hem—between her fingers.

Fuck, she fascinates me, and I have to shut that down. She works for me.

I push away from the desk and follow her back out to the bar where my buddy and business partner Marco is celebrating with his girlfriend Carrie.

Amelia's little drama was embarrassing, but I managed to calm her down, and convince her that she doesn't really want anything to do with me because I'm an asshole who has no intention of committing to one woman. The guys are on my ass about my active sex life, but screw them. Now that they're both in relationships, they're all uptight about my "degenerate" ways. As if *they* didn't sleep around. Okay, Marco not so much. He was actually engaged to be married once, until she cheated on him and married someone else while he was away in Afghanistan. It took Marco a while to get over that.

With a smile, I take my seat at the table. I pick up one of the Tater Tot nachos on my plate, now cold, and shove it in my mouth. Potatoes, cheese, jalapenos ... how can you go wrong? It's decent bar snack food.

I catch Marco's eye and give him a nod to let him know I've taken care of the issue. Our serving staff dissing our food isn't going to help our business. Hopefully Reese keeps her word and doesn't do that again or I'll have to fire her ass.

Her ass ...

No, no, I have to stop thinking about her ass.

I don't want to fire her. None of us like firing anyone, although it's happened. Finding good staff—not to mention retaining them—is surprisingly hard. Although I'm starting to think we might have to fire Sid, our cook. We're doing okay, and Sid is doing his best to try new things and improve our food menu, but his skill set isn't really up to the job.

The party starts wrapping up, Carrie's family getting up to leave first, then Beck and Hayden, then Carrie and Marco are

left standing, smooching, and gazing into each other's eyes. Bleh.

“Go home,” I tell them. “I’ll lock up.”

The bar is empty now, only floor staff left putting away dishes and glasses, kitchen staff cleaning up. I’ll make sure the garbage is taken out, the grease traps cleaned.

“Thanks, man,” Marco says. “See you tomorrow.”

I turn to head to the kitchen. Reese stands at the bar folding towels neatly.

“Go home, Reese.”

“I’ll just finish these.”

I have to admire her work ethic. I move over to help her.

She glances up at me, then stares at the white bar towels as she continues folding. “That was a nice celebration,” she comments. “Everyone seemed to be having fun.”

Is that a wistful note I hear in her voice? “Yeah. It was.”

“I’m surprised you and Beck and Marco actually took a night off and let someone else look after things.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

She lifts one narrow shoulder. “You guys spend a lot of time working here.”

“We own the place.”

“I know, but ... you have a restaurant manager. You have capable staff. Well, mostly,” she adds under her breath.

My frown deepens. “Ultimately, we’re responsible for everything and everyone. For making sure the bartenders aren’t giving away free booze, or cash isn’t disappearing.”

“You have to trust the people who work for you.”

“We do.”

“Okay.”

“What’s your point? You think we should be off golfing?”

She snorts. “I can’t picture the three of you golfing. Aren’t you guys into skydiving and rock-climbing?”

I grin. “Sometimes.”

“I guess my point is, you’re either working *in* your business, or you’re working *on* your business. Owners should be working *on* their business—marketing, bigger-picture things.”

“We do that.”

“Okay,” she says again, clearly humoring me.

My molars grind together and my body tenses. “So you’re telling me how to run my business.”

“No.” She sets down the last towel on the pile and picks them all up. “If I were telling you how to run your business, I’d have a lot more to say.” She moves to set the towels on a shelf.

What the hell does she know, anyway? Heat flares inside me. “Say it, then. Tell us what we’re doing wrong.”

She gives me a long look and a pleasant but fake smile. “I’m just a waitress. What do I know? Good night, Cade.”

She heads back to the staff room, presumably to get her things.

I grip the edge of the bar tightly enough to splinter the wood. Jesus Christ. I’ve just about had enough of her snotty superiority. Who the hell does she think is, implying we aren’t running our business well? It’s *our* business, and *we’re* in charge, for fuck’s sake.

I start toward the break room, but hear the back door closing. She’s left.

I suck in a long breath, standing at the end of the bar, hands clenched into fists. *Okay, calm the fuck down.* This isn’t the time to be firing someone, at midnight on a Sunday night. Also, we can’t afford to lose a good waitress. Staff turnover is surprisingly high, given that we think we’re pretty damn good bosses and have a great place to work.

I'm a master of self-control, keeping my emotions firmly in check. Actually, I try not to *have* any emotions. That makes life a lot easier.

Fuck. Why does *she* get to me like that?

I turn out lights, check the kitchen and then I, too, head out the back door where my SUV is parked. The motion-sensor light we installed a while back, when we were having trouble with vandalism, comes on. Reese is nowhere in sight.

I know her address from our personnel records, know it's not that far from the bar, and I know that she often walks to and from work. Tonight for some reason it bugs me that she's alone in the dark, even though she annoys the hell out of me.

I'm tempted to follow her and offer her a ride. Just to make sure she gets home safely.

I grip the steering wheel and knock my forehead against it. *Don't be an idiot. She's an adult and she's been walking home alone for months now.*

I just need to stop thinking about her.



## REESE

“No, no, it’s only seven-thirty. Go back to sleep,” I beg, burying my face in my pillow.

Jack nudges me again. A warm tongue slides over my ear.

“Shit.” Heaving a sigh, I throw back the covers and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I peer at Jack, who leaps down and runs to the bedroom door, tail wagging. “Good thing you’re cute.”

I pad out of my bedroom and through the living room to the door to let Jack out into the small, fenced front yard. It’s scrubby grass and dirt that the owner of the duplex said was going to be turned into a patio at some point, but I’ve seen no signs of it yet. I watch Jack trot out and do a circle around the yard, then lift his leg at a shrub. “Good boy.”

I yawn, leaning against the door in my panties and tank top. The sun is still low in the sky, casting long, early-morning shadows.

I had another nightmare last night. Shit.

They’ve been happening less often but I’m starting to realize they’ll probably never go away. They’re all a variation on a theme—I’m in grave danger but I’m frozen in place, can’t move, and though I try to scream the only noises that come out are painful squawks. I wake up sweating, my heart pounding. Then I lay in the dark wide awake.

And now I’m so tired.

Jack waddles back to the door, a smile on his face. Yes, it's a smile. I open the door and let him in.

Maybe calling Jack cute wasn't quite accurate. Some kind of mutt, he sort of looks like a small golden retriever with very short legs, but he's adorable to me. I'm fostering Jack until he finds his forever home. Because I was a little lonely when I move to San Diego, I decided to explore fostering. I don't want to commit to adopting a dog because I'm not sure how long I'm going to stay here. I still have my apartment back in New York. I still have friends and family there. I might go back there one day. Maybe.

I have no idea what the hell I'm doing here.

"Breakfast, little buddy?"

Jack follows me to the kitchen, where I pull the bag of dry dog food out of a cupboard and dump some into his bowl. I refill his water dish with fresh water, then start coffee for myself.

I think my sleep has improved since being here in San Diego because I've been busy, physically tired from waiting tables for eight-hour shifts, enjoying the sunshine and mild weather on my days off. Jack is the perfect companion for my runs on the beach—his short legs can't go very fast.

I've become addicted to the ocean, to sitting in front of it in various spots I've discovered, watching the endless ebb and flow, the soothing whoosh of waves on the beach, sometimes easy and calm, other times more agitated and violent, but unfailingly constant.

I pick up my phone and do a quick scroll through Instagram, Facebook, and emails. I've carefully pruned my friends and follows so that all I see is close friends and family. I want to know what's happening with them—my friend Josie just started a new job. My dad's not on the socials, but Mom is and posts occasional Facebook updates about what they're doing, and my older sister Kendall does, as well. They're all busy, Dad the CEO of Ellis Leitch Financial, Mom doing volunteer work with a bunch of high-profile charities, Kendall a lawyer at a high-powered law firm.

I love them and I miss them, even though when I lived in New York I didn't see much of them. I was busy, too, then, working weird hours that didn't line up well with family dinners or parties. But even though I regret that, I've up and moved across the country.

I check the time on my phone before setting it down. Today I'm working an early shift at Conquistadors, starting at eleven, but there's still plenty of time to take Jack for a walk on the beach then shower and change.

I dress in jeans and a hoodie, the morning still cool. Travel mug filled with coffee, Jack and I set out down Thomas Avenue toward the beach.

As we arrive at Ocean Boulevard, I glance over at Conquistadors, closed at this hour.

I shouldn't have bugged Cade last night about how they manage the place. He works long hours, which is definitely part of owning a bar or restaurant, but his obvious need for control means he works more hours than he needs to. The word "delegate" probably isn't in his vocabulary. Not only is he a manwhore, he's a stubborn and inflexible workaholic.

That's kind of pot and kettle-ish. I'm pretty sure people probably thought *I* was a stubborn and inflexible workaholic. I totally get dedication and hard work. But lately I've been thinking a lot about what the priorities in life should really be.

Jack and I cross Ocean Boulevard, then the sidewalk beneath a few palm trees before hitting the sand. Early in the day in November, there aren't many people on the beach, a few people running and a couple strolling near the water. Feathery white clouds streak the blue sky, the ocean a bit choppy with creamy whitecaps.

I turn and head toward Pacific Beach Pier, Jack bounding happily along. The breeze whips my hair around my face and I turn into it with a smile. Getting into a wide-open space with the ocean and the sky all huge and blue around me has a way of clearing my head.



Near the pier, we head back to the sidewalk. I love the old-time beachy atmosphere of this area with cute little shops, restaurants, and hotels, so different from New York. I lead Jack out onto the pier, inhaling the scent of sun-warmed wet wood and salt. Jack catches the scent of fish, his nose lifting into the air as he trots beside me. A couple of men at the end of the pier have fishing lines they're patiently waiting on. I lean on the railing. Below me, a guy in a wetsuit paddles on a surfboard, waiting to catch a wave.

I squint at the man. No ... really? It looks like Cade ... it's hard to tell, though.

I watch as a wave picks him up and he gets to his feet, balancing and riding the wave toward shore. It's not a huge wave, but he seems pretty comfortable on that board. The wetsuit outlines his perfect shape—wide shoulders, narrow waist and hips, and a perfect, round ass.

Maybe he *is* a laid-back surfer dude at times.

I smile at the thought. If that's him, it probably pisses him off that he can't control the waves.

Shaking my head, I move away from the railing and Jack and I stroll toward the beach.

Back trudging through sand, I survey the area for the surfer in the wetsuit, curious if it really is Cade, not seeing him ... until we're face-to-face.

Yep, it's him.

He stops and meets my eyes, his hair dark gold and wet, his surfboard held under one arm. Sunlight glints off drops of water on his shoulders. "Hey."

"Hi." Goddammit, I actually lose my breath. I reel in Jack's leash as he attempts to chase a seagull.

Cade's gaze drops to Jack. "Who's this?"

"This is Jack. He's not really mine. I'm just fostering him."

His eyebrows rise. "Huh. That's cool."

I shrug. “I guess. I like dogs, but I don’t know how long I’ll be here, so ...”

Now those thick eyebrows tug together. “Really. I didn’t realize this was temporary for you.”

“Oh, I haven’t decided for sure.” I wave a hand and smile. “Don’t worry, I’m not leaving anytime soon. I am absolutely committed to Conquistadors.”

“You’re the only one, then,” Cade mutters, shoving his wet hair back off his face.

“What? That’s not true. Danny’s very loyal.”

“Yeah, he is. It’s just that we have more staff turnover than we expected.”

“That’s common in the restaurant business.”

“Yeah, we’re learning that.” He eyes me, his arctic-blue eyes alight with curiosity.

I need to shut up about the damn restaurant. “So you surf.”

“Yeah.” He glances down at the board. “Good way to start the day. You?”

“Never.”

He grins. “You should try it.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I love looking at the ocean. Swimming in it, not so much.”

“City girl?”

“Hell, yeah.” I try a smile. “I mean, I can swim. But the ocean is ... big.”

“That it is. And powerful.”

“You must be a good swimmer.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Navy SEAL, remember?”

“Right, right.” How could I forget? All three of my bosses have that commanding presence and strength that struck me on meeting each of them. “I guess you’ve probably had to swim in some pretty hellish situations.”

“Oh, yeah.” He jerks his head toward the slightly rough Pacific. “This is nothin’.”

His bravery is impressive, I have to admit. Although he’s probably done even braver things than swimming in the ocean. For some reason, a knot of dread forms in my gut.

God, I’m such a wuss lately.

My cellphone rings in the back pocket of my jeans. I frown and reach for it, juggling my now-empty mug, phone, and Jack’s leash. Cade reaches for the leash and I let him take it so I can answer the call. It’s the pet shelter.

“Hi, Reese?”

“Yes.” I watch Cade crouch and hold out a hand to Jack for him to sniff.

“It’s Barb at the Ventura Animal Shelter. Just checking to see how Jack is doing.”

“He’s doing great, thanks.”

“We may have someone interested in taking him permanently.”

“Oh.” My heart bumps. “Really?”

“Yes. Just giving you a heads-up. There are a few dogs they’re interested in, and we’re arranging meetings. Would you be available later this week?”

I try to recall my schedule. “Um ... I’m off Wednesday. And I’d be available during the day Thursday or Friday.”

“Okay, good.” Sounds like Barb is making notes. “I’ll get back to you, then! Thanks, Reese.”

“Sure, no problem.” I end the call and purse my lips as I slide my phone back into my pocket. “That was the shelter where I got Jack. They have someone who might be interested,” I explain to Cade.

“You don’t look happy about that.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” I paste on a smile and straighten my shoulders, despite the heaviness in my chest. “I knew it was

just temporary, like I said.”

He eyes me, then turns back to Jack to pat him, running a hand down his back. Jack pants, gazing at Cade with what appears to be an adoring smile. “He’s a good dog.”

“He had some issues when he first came to me. I think just anxiety.” I can relate to that. “But we sorted things out.”

Cade straightens and hands the leash back to me.

“Thanks. We’d better get home so I can shower and get ready for work.”

“Don’t be late!”

I catch the smirk on his face as I turn away and shake my head.

I look down at Jack, obediently at my side. Damn. I’m getting attached to the little dude. I shouldn’t do that. I can’t keep him. But that too-familiar feeling of tightness in my chest and accelerated breathing is already gathering.

Shit. I take long, slow breaths in and out as we walk back toward Thomas Street. I have to be better than this. If I can’t handle giving Jack back, I never should have taken him in the first place.

Being angry at myself doesn’t help things. I have to change my self-talk. I know that, but sometimes it’s not easy.

I stop and pick up Jack. He’s not a pocket dog, but I can lift him and hug him and let him lick my chin. Hugs and affection make me feel better. “Thank you. I love you, too.” Then I set him back on all four paws to cross Ocean Boulevard and walk the last blocks home. By the time we get there, the anxiety is easing, thank God.

I rub a hand over my stomach walking to the bathroom as Jack slurps water from the bowl in the kitchen.

Cade beats me getting to Conquistadors, even though I get there early for my shift. When I walk in, now dressed in a short black dress, my hair pulled into a neat ponytail, all three of my bosses are standing at the bar, smiling, slapping each

other on the back and doing bro hugs. My eyes widen as I move toward them.

“Something good happen?” I ask.

They all turn to me, and even though three decidedly masculine pairs of eyes are focused on me, I’m really only aware of one—Cade’s.

“Marco and Carrie got engaged last night,” he says, grinning.

“Oh!” I turn to Marco. “Congratulations!” I like Marco’s girlfriend, er, fiancée. Carrie earned my respect the day she stepped in to help when things were extra busy in the bar. I also admire Carrie for the work she’s doing for disadvantaged kids.

“Thanks.” Marco beams.

“So when’s the wedding?” Beck asks.

Marco shrugs. “We didn’t talk about that at all yet.”

“We just went through this.” Cade shakes his head, still smiling. “Now another wedding.”

Marco grimaces. “Yeah. Maybe I can convince her to elope.”

Beck shakes his head. “Somehow I doubt that. Carrie had too much fun helping Hayden plan our wedding.”

I know that Beck and Hayden had just gotten married when I started working here.

“True.” Marco shrugs. “Well, there’s no rush. Not like for you two.”

“Fuck, we rushed the wedding because Carrie was moving to Spain,” Beck says. “And then she didn’t.”

“Uh, yeah.” Marco rubs his jaw. “Oops.”

“Ha-ha.” Beck claps his friend on the back. “No worries. It’s probably better than dragging everything out for a year.”

“Carrie’s having lunch with Hayden right now, showing off the ring,” Marco says.

“She liked it?”

“Yeah, thank Christ. Spent a fucking fortune on it.”

“She’s worth it, though, right?” Cade leans against the bar.

“Absolutely.”

I smile. Seeing all three men happy and relaxed is nice. Especially Cade. He never shows much emotion, so watching him smile and laugh with his friends, who he obviously cares about, always takes me aback.

I head back to put my stuff away before starting my shift, then pause at the kitchen where everyone is busy preparing for the lunch crowd. I frown at the bags of tortilla chips and jars of purchased salsa.

“Let’s make some chips today,” I suggest to Sid.

He frowns at me. “Why?”

“Because freshly made chips are so much better than bought. We should try a new salsa recipe, too.”

“We have salsa.”

I swallow a sigh. “I know, but as with the chips, something fresh and made here might be something people really enjoy.”

“You don’t work in the kitchen.” He’s not pushing back too hard, so I keep going.

“I know.” I shrug. “But it’s fun.”

He frowns at me as I get out a bunch of tortillas and start cutting them up.

“I’ll help.” Jenn, the prep cook, moves to one of the fryers to check the oil.

“Don’t use all the tortillas,” Sid protests. “We won’t have enough for tacos.”

“Someone can make a run to the wholesaler after lunch and get more.” I cut more tortillas into wedges. Soon Jenn and I are frying them into crispy golden triangles. While Jenn attends to that, I arrange tomatoes, jalapenos, onions, limes, and cilantro at a station.

“You can’t do this,” Sid keeps saying, but I keep ignoring him. It’s too hard to resist.

I chop and slice and arrange tomatoes, peppers, and onions onto a big baking sheet, drizzle them with oil, then pop them into a hot oven.

“What are you doing?” Sid’s practically wringing his hands.

“Roasting the vegetables. It makes the salsa roja taste better.” I salt the tortilla chips then pop one into my mouth. “Awesome. Here. Try.”

Sid reluctantly takes a chip and eats it. He rolls his eyes. “It’s good.”

I grin. Inspired, I grab some avocados and tomatillos, marveling that Sid actually has tomatillos. “How about avocado tomatillo salsa?” There aren’t any serrano peppers, so I use jalapeños again, tossing tomatillos, peppers, avocado, and fresh lime juice into the food processor, then adding salt. I taste it, closing my eyes to hunt out all the nuances, add more salt, then scoop it out into a container.

“What are we going to do with this stuff?” Sid asks, completely at a loss. “It’s not on the menu.”

“People always order chips and salsa,” I say. “This time they’ll get something special.”

“This is amazing,” Jenn says.

“Thanks.”

Although the salsa roja is often pureed, I prefer more texture, so I set about chopping the roasted vegetables along with garlic, then a handful of cilantro and of course salt.

Now Paul, the line cook, joins in to taste-test. “Needs to be chilled,” I say. “But it’s pretty good.”

“It’s fucking fantastic,” Paul says.

Sid sighs.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

I lift my head to see Cade. “We’re conducting the San Diego Symphony. What does it look like?”

Jenn and Paul choke on a laugh, but Sid speaks up. “She came in here and took over! I couldn’t stop her.”

I tip my head and give Sid a long look. “Jeez. I didn’t take over. I’m just trying a few things.”

“And they’re really good,” Jenn puts in.

“You’re not a cook!” A vein in Cade’s temple pulses as he gapes at me. “You can’t just walk into the kitchen and start making shit.”

My heart picks up speed and I grab a towel to wipe my hands. “You’re right. I’m not a cook.”

“Get back out to the front of the house.” Cade points at me. “We have customers waiting to be looked after.”

Shit. I hesitate, clutching the towel, then toss it down. Biting my lip, I hurry out.





# CADE

Once again I find myself with hands clenched into fists, muscles tense, my breathing rapid. For Chrissakes, even when the helicopter I was in crashed as we were landing for a nighttime raid on an al Qaeda cell, I didn't have this much adrenaline flooding my veins and making me lose my shit.

What the hell is she doing?

I close my eyes briefly, thinking about how red her cheeks were as she stalked out. I broke a rule I learned early when I became a team leader—praise in public, criticize in private. I've tried to apply that to the people we hire at Conquistadors, along with other rules, like take the heat when things go wrong and occasionally buy the beers. Goddammit, Reese riled me up so much I forgot it and embarrassed her in front of her coworkers. I'm an asshole.

“Try a chip, boss.” Jenn holds out a basket in one hand and a bowl of salsa in the other.

I stare at her, then give my head a shake and reach for a chip. I scoop up some salsa and pop it into my mouth. Flavors explode on my tongue, bright acid of tomato and lime, creamy avocado, peppery cilantro. “Damn.” I take another one. “That's really good.”

She nods, eyes bright. “I can't wait for customers to try it.”

“Well, they won't get to, if our waitress is in here cooking.” Shit, here I go again. I sigh. “I'll go talk to her.”

In the bar area I spot Reese at a table for four. The guys aren't regulars, and judging from how they're casually dressed

are probably tourists. They're giving Reese flirtatious smiles and hanging on her every word. This happens all the time. I rub my forehead.

When Reese approaches the bar, I wave her over.

Her face blank, she approaches me. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

She blinks.

"Sorry I spoke to you like that." I let out a breath. "I shouldn't have done that in front of everyone else."

She freezes. For a moment, I'm afraid she's going to bolt out the door. My insides cramp up at the expression on her face—pure panic. Her posture stiff, she swallows, and then lifts her chin a fraction of an inch. "Okay, thank you." She draws in a breath that lifts her breasts. Not that I'm looking. "I once had a boss throw a beer bottle at me, so what you said wasn't so bad."

My jaw drops. "He threw a beer bottle at you?"

"Yeah. When I told him I was quitting."

"Wow. We get frustrated with staff turnover, but you can rest assured that none of us will ever throw a beer bottle at you. Or anything, for that matter."

Her posture relaxes minutely, but her eyes stay shadowed and serious. "I know."

"Why did you do that?"

"Do what? Go in the kitchen?"

"Yeah."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

My mouth twitches.

"I just ..." Clearly she's conflicted about what to say, her eyes shifting around, her teeth sinking briefly into her plump bottom lip. "The food here could be so much better." She pulls in a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. "And I know I shouldn't be saying that to customers, just to you in private."

“Touché.” I drum my fingers on the wooden top of the bar. “I can’t disagree with you. We’ve been trying to get Sid to try new things for a while now. And he has been.”

“I see that. But ...” Again she hesitates. “Never mind. It’s not my place. Beck, I need four shots of Patron Reposado,” she calls.

He gives her a thumbs-up and moves to get the special tequila glasses.

“You obviously have strong opinions about it,” I say, eyeing her.

She lifts one shoulder, not looking at me, waiting for the drinks.

When she doesn’t respond, I ask, “What other ideas do you have?”

She slowly turns her head to eye me. “It doesn’t matter. You’re very correct. I’m not a cook.” She says the word with something that almost sounds like disdain.

I frown and shove a hand through my hair, pushing it back off my face. Something isn’t adding up here. But she’s placing the drinks onto her tray and then with a clearly fake smile she heads back to the table with the four dudes who are all apparently hitting on her.

“What’s going on?” Beck leans on the bar. “She looked pissed.” He eyes me. “So do you, actually.” He tilts his head, eyes narrowing. “No ... I thought we told you. Stay away from the staff.”

I glare at Beck. “I am.”

“Then what was the heavy tension all about?”

“I don’t know. Christ.” I look around to see what other servers were working today. Tony and Raul. I approach them each and ask them to let me know how customers like the chips and salsa when they serve it.

Then I march to my office.

I like it in my office. It's quiet and controlled. I sit at my desk a moment before opening the spreadsheet I'm working on. I like numbers and formulae. Okay, sometimes I don't like the actual numbers. As in, the law that requires us to sell at least fifty percent food and fifty percent alcohol, which means if we don't sell enough food we could potentially be shut down. Because our drinks aren't cheap, it makes the ratio of food to alcohol difficult for us. These are more numbers I don't like.

Our manager, Danny, doesn't seriously think we'd be shut down for that, but still ... for three former SEALs, failure is not an option, and we've been trying to increase our food sales, without much success. I remember the conversation we had with Danny about it, and Beck's mention that he and Hayden had recently eaten at a local restaurant called The Sandbar. Beck told us how Hayden raved about the fresh chips and salsas they served.

Fuck. I set my elbows on the desk and rest my head in my hands.

Sid has been trying new things. But the numbers don't lie. We still aren't selling enough food.

Fuck this. We wanted to open a tequila bar, not a fucking restaurant. When the three of us made the decision to leave the Navy around the same time and had to figure out what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives, Marco cracked a joke about opening a tequila bar because we drank so much of the stuff. We all laughed, but then somehow it became serious. With the help of Beck's trust fund (which we didn't know about until then, damn him) we started our own business.

Running the bar is a challenge for us, dealing with the county and the city on liquor licenses, health inspectors, finding the right people to work for us, firing the ones who aren't right. But we all overcame bigger problems in our lives, overcame the challenge of making it as SEALs, and we'll figure this out, too.

We were together for most of the years we were SEALs. The intense, fast-paced training along with practical jokes,

trash talk, and horsing around during off time bands platoons together like brothers, but Marco, Beck, and I had a special bond. None of us ever had much support from our real families, so we became one another's family. We'd do anything for each other, and that includes whatever it takes to make this business work.

We all have our own reasons for wanting to make a success of this. Beck doesn't need the money, but money is validation that we're doing a good job. For Marco, success is a way of proving himself worthy. The business is also a constant in his life, like the Navy was, like family wasn't.

I, too, am driven to succeed, but for different reasons. I grew up in a world that was chaotic and unpredictable. The Navy gave me security and stability and a chance for redemption. And now this business is the power and security I never had as a kid. Control is important to me.

Which is why Reese going into the kitchen and cooking shit pisses me off so much. I can't control her.

But she works for me, well, for the three of us, and that means I get to tell her what to do.

Am I being a stubborn ass about this? Because, damn, that salsa was really good.

No. This is our business and we don't need a skinny, gunnerjumped waitress telling us what to do.

I love a challenge and I'm always confident in my ability to find solutions, overcome obstacles, and conquer enemies. We can do this.

## Reese

I'm mentally kicking myself for my screwup as I work the afternoon shift. It's surprisingly busy, probably because it's such a gorgeous day. It'd not the height of tourist season but even so, the endless beach party vibe of this area keeps visitors coming, renting bikes or in-line skates, fishing off the pier, checking out the shops and bars and restaurants.

The table of four guys who came for lunch are still here at three o'clock, working their way through the tequila menu. They started out pleasant and friendly, but as they got drunker, their flirting has become cruder and louder.

“Hey, Reese,” one of them now says to me, reaching for my hand.

I deftly avoid his touch but give him a polite smile. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you like whales?”

I narrow my eyes at him, not sure where this is going. Then I get it. “No, I don't want to humpback at your place.”

Unfortunately, that just makes them all guffaw with appreciation.

“Are you single, Reese?” another guy asks.

“No, I'm plural.”

“Ha-ha. What I meant was, are you free tonight?”

“No. I'm very expensive.”

This time they groan.

“Come on, Reese.” The first guy winks at me. “I have really big feet.”

It takes me a beat to get what he's hinting at. I smile and say, “Sorry, I don't date clowns.”

Not only do his friends laugh, but I hear muffled laughter from the bar behind me. Glad I'm entertaining everyone in the place.

“Guys.” Cade walks up behind me. “Time for you to settle up your bill and get out of here. No more harassing my servers.”

“In fairness to us, we were only harassing Reese,” one of the guys says. “Not the dude over there.”

“You're an idiot,” Cade says pleasantly. “Now get the hell out.”

The guys don't even hesitate to listen to Cade, with his big physical presence and imposing demeanor despite looking like a tanned blond surfer dude.

He's actually kicking out customers. Because they were bugging me.

I don't know what to do with that.

"I'll get your check," I tell the group.

As Cade and I walk away, I say, "I was handling them."

"I saw that. And you were doing a great job." His lips twitch. "Sick burn with that clown line."

I bite back my own smile. "Thanks."

"But that guy was right on the edge of being a dick and you shouldn't have to handle shit like that. It's our job to take care of our staff."

I pause, clutching my tray, staring at him. Oh, man.

The apology earlier almost undid me. Yes, he was an asshole by publicly calling me out, but I know I deserved it, and I'm used to working for assholes who did way worse things than that—like throwing beer bottles. Hurling knives. Sexual harassment. Kicking a garbage can across the room when pissed. But then Cade apologized and I almost broke into tears.

I've learned a lot from the people I've worked for; most of all I've learned the kind of boss *not* to be, after working for a chef who had a reputation as "the country's worst boss," and I swore I would never be like that—I would also come to the defense of my team. And still I fucked up so epically that here I am, living across the country working as a goddamn waitress, trying to escape that fuck up.

And now my boss is looking out for me.

Again, it's enough to make me break down in tears. Except I'm tough. I don't cry. Ever. "Thank you," I finally say. "I appreciate that."



I hurry over to the computer to print out the check for the guys Cade just kicked out. Hopefully that doesn't mean I'm not getting a tip. Working for peanuts means tips are important. Luckily my last job paid decently and since I didn't have much of a life, I managed to save a fair bit, so I'm okay, but still ... that won't last forever.

That word "forever" makes my stomach clench. Thinking about the future gives me a sick feeling. I like knowing what's happening, having a plan, having a goal. And my only goal right now is to forget the past, not think about the future, and live in the moment.

I wait as the computer spits out the bill, then tuck it into the leather folder and head back to the table. These guys have run up quite a tab, drinking flights of expensive tequila. Which makes Cade's willingness to kick them out on principle even more impressive.

"Sorry if we made you uncomfortable," one of the dudes says as he pulls out his credit card, slurring his words only a little. "We were just havin' some fun with you."

"I know." I smile. "No worries." They were actually pretty harmless in the big scheme of things, young but well dressed and doing well enough to have a platinum credit card.

Carrie, Marco's fiancée, is sitting at the bar, smiling. She waved me over. "I overheard you with those guys." She jerks her head toward the men now leaving the bar. "That humpback whale comment was brilliant." She grins

I smile back. "Thanks."

"Did they tip you?"

I check the credit card slip. "Yeah." I lift wide eyes to Carrie. "A hundred bucks!"

"Good. You deserve it for putting up with them."

"Eh. They were harmless. Could've been worse."

"I guess. Luckily, Marco, Beck, and Cade don't usually let things get too out of hand here."

"That's true. And I appreciate it."

“Are you working Wednesday night at the tequila-tasting event?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m off Wednesday.”

“Ah. You should come for it, then. It’s usually fun.”

“Are you going to be here?”

“Yeah, and Hayden.” Beck’s wife. Carrie and Hayden are best friends. “We can all taste tequila and have some fun.”

“Oh.” I blink. Is Carrie actually inviting me to ... socialize with her and Hayden? I don’t know what to make of that.

“You probably don’t feel like hanging around here on your day off,” Carrie adds slowly. “I get that.”

I find myself wanting to accept the invitation. I didn’t know anyone in San Diego when I moved here—which was part of the appeal. I wanted to be somewhere nobody knows me, where nobody knows my history. And I’ve been fine with that. I’ve met people, and I now have acquaintances—the single mom and her five-year-old daughter who live next door to me; some of the regulars at the bar I now know by name; and my coworkers at Conquistadors. But I deliberately keep my distance from people so questions won’t be asked.

Lately, though, I’ve found myself feeling a little ... lonely. Keeping people at a distance is great for protecting yourself, but it also isolates you. Watching my three bosses interact, with their clearly close bonds despite the good-natured competition and trash-talking, also watching them interact with Carrie and Hayden and the friendship between those two women, has only made that loneliness more palpable.

“No, that actually sounds like fun,” I say, smiling back at Carrie. “But I haven’t bought a ticket.”

The tasting events are held once a month. Guests pay for a ticket that includes samplings of different kinds of tequila, along with some bar snacks, and the three owners of Conquistadors give “lessons” about tequila and how to taste it. The events have become popular, and have even garnered mentions on some popular food and travel blogs that has resulted in even more customers coming in.

“I have some pull.” Carrie winks. “Don’t worry about it.”

Reese laughs. “Sounds good.” I notice one of our regular customers at the bar needs another drink. “Excuse me.” I move over to him. “Hey, Dussen. Another beer?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I get him his usual draft without even asking and slide it over the polished bar to him. “Here you go.”

“You’re my favorite waitress here, you know,” he says.

“So you’ve said.”

“And it’s not just ’cause you’re pretty.”

I grin. “Thanks.”

“Don’t tell the others I said that.”

“I won’t.”

“But you know ...” He pushes a small pottery bowl that holds some of the avocado and tomatillo salsa over to me. “I don’t care for this shit.”

My mouth drops open. “Oh. Why not?”

He shrugs. “I like the other stuff. This is ... weird.”

Well, you can’t win them all. I know that. Everyone has different tastes. I learned that early in my career when a food critic trashed one of my creations.

“I can get you some of the regular salsa.”

“That’d be great, sunshine.” He smiles.

Marco approaches then. “Okay, I can get out of here for a while.” He bends and kisses Carrie’s forehead. “Let’s go to Home Depot.”

Carrie slides off the stool. “Yay!” She looks back at me. “We’re renovating Marco’s house.”

“Sound like fun.”

“Fun for her.” Marco rolls his eyes. “Work for me.”

“Hey, I help!”

“Yeah, you come up with all the brilliant ideas, like, let’s move that wall! Let’s put in French doors! Let’s turn that closet into a bathroom!”

“Those are brilliant ideas.” Carrie smirks.

“Brilliant but not always practical.” He smiles, though, affection warming his dark eyes. He pats her butt. “Let’s bounce, babe.”

I watch them go, smiling.

I tip my head to the side, my stomach fluttering with excitement and nerves. Maybe socializing with my bosses’ wife and girlfriend isn’t a great idea ... and I’ll even be socializing with my bosses, sort of. But they’ll be busy with all the other customers, so it’s not like we’re all going out for an intimate dinner. It’ll be a big group of people I can get lost in, and maybe have a little fun with Carrie and Hayden.

I press a hand to my stomach, hoping this isn’t the start of another panic attack. They’ve been fewer and farther between lately and I want to keep it that way.



## CADE

I watch Reese laughing with Hayden and Carrie at the end of the bar Wednesday evening. Reese apparently purchased a ticket and is part of the big group gathered here. Usually she has her hair pulled back, but tonight it's loose, long, wavy and bright, and she's dressed in a pair of jeans and a loose camisole top that shows off smooth, lightly tanned shoulders.

“Tonight we have something new to try,” Marco says. I'm always impressed that he manages to convey similar information in new ways, and has something new to tell the crowd every time.

“This is a cristalino tequila. These are becoming quite popular. It's basically añejo tequila that's been filtered to remove the color it picks up when it's in the barrel. So it has the complexity and character of an añejo, but with the bright notes of a blanco. Definitely a sipping tequila.”

I'm always present for these events to help, and sometimes I even try the tequila, but my area of expertise is the business side of things. Not that I don't like tequila, but my one experience getting shit-faced on the stuff made me vow to never do that again. Drinking too much is a sure way to lose control, and I fucking hate not being in control. No way in hell am I letting my life go down that shit path.

Reese seems to actually know what she's doing with a glass of tequila—she holds it up to observe the color, tilts the glass on its side to sniff the spirit at the bottom then the middle of the glass, then tastes it. She nods approvingly, eyes

downcast, clearly savoring it. “Nice,” she says. “Mellow but turns citrusy and spicy with fruit and cedar. Long finish.”

Marco nods approvingly.

I cock my head to one side. She intrigues me. That episode in the kitchen earlier ... her comments about our food ... the way she handled those drunken idiots ... and now, her face more relaxed and happier than I’ve ever seen her since she started working for us, and demonstrating an impressive palate.

She’s beautiful.

Okay, I noticed that before, but right now ... her eyes sparkle, her smile lights up her face, and it bemuses me to see her laugh so much and lean in closer to Hayden to listen to something she’s saying, then nod and touch Hayden’s arm.

Tony and Raul told me that the fresh chips and salsa were a big hit with customers. We ran out quickly and reverted back to chips from a bag and bottled salsa. Danny heard about it, and we’re going to have a quick meeting tomorrow about it, to see what we have to do to keep that happening. We’ll need to buy more tortillas, and the stuff Sid used in the salsas.

I find myself moving down the bar toward Hayden, Carrie, and Reese ... Reese’s smile pulling me in. What would it be like to have that smile aimed at me ...?

“Cade! Hi!”

I turn to see a woman approaching, flashing me a high-wattage white smile and waving. Carlotta. Ugh.

Carlotta and I met at a club one night and hooked up after at her place. “Hey, Carlotta.”

“I haven’t seen you in so long!”

If I weren’t behind the bar, she would probably throw herself at me in a big hug. “Yeah, it’s been a while.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Reese look over at us, along with a few other people. I catch the expression on her face—lips twisted, the barest of eye rolls. Awareness of her prickles my skin.

I swallow a sigh. “Are you here for the tequila-tasting?”

“No.” Carlotta looks around. The woman beside her also smiles at me, and I vaguely remember her being at the bar the night Carlotta and I hooked up, a friend of hers presumably. “I didn’t even know about this.”

“No worries. The bar is still open if you want to order drinks.” I gesture at a few empty tables. “I’ll send Raul over to take your order.”

Carlotta’s bottom lip pushes out, disappointment evident on her face. “Okay, thanks.”

I snag Raul’s eye and gesture. Raul bobs his head, drops the towel he’s using to dry a glass, and heads to their table.

I turn back and immediately meet Reese’s eyes. She watches me as she sips tequila, her face expressionless. And yet I sense her scorn.

What the fuck? It’s none of her business. She has no right to judge me. It’s not my fault women keep showing up here. I’m nothing but honest with them.

It’s getting a bit old, actually, even for me.

“That’s it,” Marco says, observing the group. “Inhale before you take your first sip. When you have the tequila in your mouth, breathe in through your nose, swallow the tequila over your tongue, and then exhale hard over your tongue to really get your taste buds excited.” He grins and the group laughs.

“That’s what we want to do here, get our taste buds all excited,” Beck adds with a wink.

Somehow they make tasting tequila sound sexual. But, hey, sex sells.

“Then have a couple more sips to see if you can taste anything else, or if it’s the same,” Marco adds.

“This is amazing,” one of the female guests says.

“We do our tasting from light to dark, as with a wine-tasting,” Beck tells the group. “And in order of age. This next one is an añejo, a little older. You should taste a difference.” Beck, Marco, and I pour small amounts of the golden liquid



into tasting glasses. We always pour enough for a few sips, in the hopes that if guests really like it, they'll stay and order more.

I'm certain these tasting events had increased our business.

"Cade." Carrie beckons me over.

He moved around Beck, lifting his eyebrows.

"I have another idea for getting people into the bar," Carrie says.

"Oh, yeah?" I pour some of the añejo into her glass, then Hayden's and Reese's, trying to be casual.

"Yes! Paint night."

I go still and lower the bottle. "What?"

"Paint night. Lots of bars are doing it. People come in and eat and drink and paint pictures."

I narrow my eyes. "Uh ..."

"I'm serious! I told Marco about it and he thought it was great. I know an artist through G Gallery who'd be willing to do it. You can go online and see what it's all about. I think this would be a great place for it."

"Sounds like a chick thing."

Carrie scrunches up her face. "It's not just for women, although I think a lot of women enjoy it. They do girls' night out at a paint party. But couples come, as well. Hey, I'll tell you what ... Hayden, Reese, and I will organize it. How about that?"

I frown. "Negative."

Carrie pouts. "What?"

Reese speaks up. "Cade likes to be in charge. Of everything."

I meet her eyes in a sizzling clash. *Oh, hell, no. She has no idea.* Heat builds, as if she knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Funny," I drawl. "I get the feeling you also like to be in charge."

Her lips purse.

A weird feeling of excitement builds in me as I await her response. And she doesn't disappoint.

"Sometimes it takes balls to be a woman."

After a shocked beat, Hayden and Carrie burst out laughing and I drop my head forward, shaking it, unable to stop the smile that tugs at my lips. Something warm fizzes inside my chest.

This. This is what I've been missing with all the women I've been hooking up with. Excitement that's more than physical.

"Oh, my God, I love you," Carrie says, slinging an arm around Reese's shoulders. "Please say you'll help us organize a paint night."

Reese smiles. "I'd love to help."

"Don't worry, Cade," Hayden says. "You can trust us."

Still smiling, I lift my head. "Yeah. Fine. Go for it. Just keep me in the loop."

"Of course!" Carrie beams at me. "Let's get together this weekend and start planning. Um, do you work this weekend, Reese?"

"Just Saturday."

"Perfect! We can go out for brunch or lunch on Sunday."

I watch Reese's face and the pleased yet anxious look she wears. She's always so reserved, I almost expected her to decline to be involved, but she seems happy to be included ... yet there's still that distance.

Beck digs an elbow into my ribs to regain my attention. I jump and flash a scowl at my buddy. "Jesus, man, what the ...?"

Beck's eyebrows hoist, his gaze moving from me to Reese and back again. "We're moving on to another tequila," he says mildly.

Next, we taste an extra añejo, this one smooth and rich.

“I swore I’d never drink tequila again,” one of the woman guests says. “Literally every time I do tequila shots I wake up naked. There are naked photos of me at parties.”

“They say tequila makes your clothes fall off,” Reese comments with a smile.

The woman nods emphatically. “It’s true! For me, anyway.”

“Pour her another one,” a male customer says, and everyone laughs.

“Everyone has a tequila story,” Beck says. “Moderation is the key.”

“This tequila is from the Highlands of Jalisco.” Marco holds up the bottle. “It’s aged for three years in virgin American oak barrels. It’s called Ciervo, which means ‘deer’ because the founder’s grandfather used to love to watch the deer running through their agave fields. It has a sweet, rich flavor profile.”

Everyone follows the steps, checking the color, sniffing, tasting. I’m eager to hear Reese’s assessment. This is one of my favorite tequilas. I eye her expectantly, but she says nothing as others in the group give their opinions.

I move closer to her. “Well?”

She tilts her head. “What?”

“What do you think?” I dip my head toward her glass.

Her forehead creases but she lifts one shoulder. “Green apple and cinnamon, and salted caramel. Rich roasted agave—both sweet and spicy. Nice heat and balance.”

I nod slowly, my pulse quickening. A need to know more about her burnd inside me.

What the hell am I going to do about that? She works for me, for Chrissakes.

Later, when the event is over, I retreat to my office. I sit in front of my computer, staring at the monitor. There’s always

work to do, but nothing urgent enough that I have to do it tonight.

Beck pushes into the office holding a bottle of Ciervo. I sit back in my chair. “What’s this?”

He shrugs and sets the bottle on the desk. He grabs three glasses, which I note just as Marco arrives. “Workday is done. Time for some fun. We haven’t had one of our adventure outings for a while.”

“That’s because you two are all married off and busy being whipped.”

Beck shakes his head, pouring shots into the glasses, making chiding noises. “That sounds sadly like sour grapes, dude.”

“It does,” Marco agrees, reaching for a glass.

“Fuck off.” I pick up a glass, too, and sniff then sip the tequila. “Ah.”

“So where should we go?” Beck asks. “Go-kart racing? We haven’t been for a while.”

“Sure.” I shrug. “I like racing. As long as it’s not a trampoline park, I’m good with pretty much anything.”

Beck and Marco exchange a glance. “The trampoline park was fun. You were only interested in picking up chicks, though.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, it was fun, but kinda tame.”

“Rock-climbing?”

“Hey, I know ... base-jumping!”

I grimace. “Yeah, maybe not. I like an adrenaline rush as much as you guys, but that’s a bit much.”

Beck sits back and lifts his feet to the desk, crossing them at the ankles. “How about mountain-biking?”

The air in the room goes flat. I narrow my eyes at my two buddies. “Assholes.”

“Come on, man. You have to get back in the saddle. So to speak.”

I hate thinking about the bike accident I had months ago.

“Do we need to lecture you about facing your fears?” Marco asks. “Didn’t you just tell each of us off about that recently?”

“That was about women.” I lift a shoulder. “You were both being pussies.”

“And you’re not?”

I want to deny it, but it’s probably true.

“Speaking of pussy, who was that woman who came in?” Marco asks.

“Carlotta.” I wave a hand. “One night, I told her.”

“You gotta stop this,” Beck says. “It’s getting out of hand.” He gives Cade a long, stern look. “No more women. And you’re getting back on a bike.”

I examine my fingernails. “Can’t. I have PTSD.”

Beck snorts.

“Fuck that.” Marco leans forward with an ominous expression on his face. “You can make a joke about that after the things we’ve seen? The teammates we’ve seen affected by that? Jesus Christ.”

Shame rolls through me. It’s true. We’ve all been impacted by our experiences, and we all have different ways of handling it. Some of us got through it okay, and some of us ... didn’t. I can name more than a handful of men whose lives were changed by PTSD, and a couple whose lives were tragically ended because of it.

I bend my head and rub the back of my neck. “You’re right. I’m an asshole. Sorry.”

Marco sighs. “Look, I’m not making light of what happened. But you know as well as I do what PTSD is like. Not that you have that.” Then his gaze sharpens. “Or do you?”

I stare at him.

“A lot of guys have a hard time adjusting to life outside the military. It’s not uncommon.”

I blink.

“No, really. Are you feeling on edge? Emotionally numb and disconnected? Isolated and emotionally cut off from others?”

“Uh ... no—”

“If that’s how you feel, you need to know you’re not alone.” Marco leans forward. “You can get help.”

Okay, there *was* an adjustment period after leaving the Navy, but I’m pretty sure I’m doing okay. Having my two buddies—who I consider my family—around all the time definitely helped. We’ve all had to adapt, but at least we’ve been there for each other.

“You’re not feeling suicidal, are you?” Beck demands.

“Christ, no!” I sigh. “Okay, it’s not exactly PTSD, but I may have had the odd nightmare about biking.” I clear my throat, heat washing over me.

“Flashbacks?” Beck asks.

“You *are* avoiding it,” Marco observes.

Yes. Yes, I am.

“Hmm.” Marco rubs his chin. “Having exaggerated negative beliefs about yourself. Persistent feelings of shame.” He arches an eyebrow.

“Fuck. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“That’s more avoidance.” Marco’s chin lifts.

“You know how they treat PTSD,” Beck says.

I shrug. “Cognitive behavioral therapy. Desensitization.”

“Exactly,” Beck says. “And that means getting back on a bike. So we’ll go for an easy ride along the boardwalk. Just to Mission Beach and back.”

“What is this, an intervention?” My shoulders tighten up.

Beck shrugs. “Guess you could call it that.”

“What the hell?”

Marco sighs. “Just trying to help, buddy. Come on. You can’t keep up this lifestyle.”

I want to be pissed. I want to argue. I want to deflect by blaming this on the fact that Beck and Marco are all settled down with women now and possibly just jealous of my single life.

But the truth is ... I’m tired of it, too. “I haven’t hooked up with anyone in a couple of weeks,” I finally say, not meeting their eyes.

“Really?” Beck looks at Marco. “What about Carlotta?”

“That was weeks ago. Months, maybe.”

“Huh.” Marco makes a face. “Okay, then.”

“Hold up,” Beck says. “I’m curious. What’s up with you and Reese?”

I still. “Nothing. Why?”

“We’ve mentioned this before. You keep looking at her.”

“She works for us. I *have* to look at her.”

“You know what we mean. Don’t be an idiot.”

“Well, isn’t this a fun evening,” I say. “I’ve been called a control freak, a pussy, and now an idiot.”

Beck barks out a laugh. “Don’t forget you called yourself an asshole.”

The tension in the room instantly lightens with Beck’s smartass remark. Some. I look at my friends and sigh. “Okay, yeah, I know what you mean. There’s something about her ... I don’t know what it is. She makes me ... curious.”

“Curious. Huh. Is that a new euphemism for horny?”

“Ha. Very funny.”

“What are you curious about?” Marco sits back again, forehead furrowed.

“I don’t know. Everything. And I don’t just mean what she’s like in bed.” *Or how she tastes. Or how she uses that very lickable mouth. Or whether she likes to be on top or bottom, or on her hands and knees ...* “She knows a lot more about food and drinks and running a restaurant than she lets on. I feel like she’s hiding something.”

“Jesus. Did you do a criminal record check before you hired her?”

“No! That’s not what I mean. At least, I don’t think it is.” Hell, what if she *is* a convicted felon? I shake my head. “No. That’s ridiculous. It’s just that she’s very ... private, I guess. And it makes me wonder why. Also she’s kind of jumpy.”

“That’s true.” Beck drums his forefinger on his lip. “So you’re saying you *don’t* want to tap that?”

“Ugh. Okay, not gonna lie, she’s also hot.”

Marco smirks. “Speaking purely objectively, yes, she is.”

“Never noticed,” Beck says.

“Bullshit,” Marco and I say at the same time.

Beck grins. “I’m not attracted to her, but yeah, I can see she’s a babe. The fact remains, though, she works for us and is therefore off-limits.”

One corner of my mouth lifts. “I know.” Not that I want to return to talking about my little issue with bike-riding, but that’s probably safer than talking about Reese. “Okay, if you want me to get back on a fucking bike, I will.”

“Great. Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sure. Fine.”





## REESE

When I haven't heard back from Barb at the shelter by Thursday afternoon, I call her.

“Oh, I was just going to call you, Reese! The family who was interested in possibly adopting Jack decided on another dog.”

“Oh.” I lean against my kitchen counter, a happy relief fizzing through my veins. “Okay, then.”

“You're fine keeping him longer?”

“Of course! Not a problem at all.”

“Great. Hopefully Jack will find a forever home soon.”

I end the call. Am I a selfish bitch, not hoping the same thing? Jack's a good dog and he deserves a loving forever family.

“But you're okay here with me, aren't you, buddy?” I crouch and rub his head and back, and his tail sweeps the floor in a happy back-and-forth. “I'm a good foster mom.”

He smiles at me, pink tongue hanging out of his mouth. He clearly agrees with me.

“And you're a good boy.” I press a kiss between his eyes, my favorite spot to smooch him. Sometimes there are lipstick marks there, but Jack doesn't care. “I have to go to work now. I'll be home later.”

I drop my phone into my purse and slip my feet into black ballet flats. I step outside into the cool overcast day, the air

holding a hint of rain. Hmm. I dart back into the duplex to grab my umbrella, just in case, then briskly walk the ten blocks or so to Conquistadors.

I think more about last night and how much fun I had at the tequila-tasting, surrounded by people my own age, especially Carrie and Hayden. I like them both. Hayden is harder to get to know, quieter and more reserved, but I respect that, and I also respect that Hayden is apparently a brilliant scientist. And if Beck cares about her, then that's enough for me, because Beck is a good guy.

I also had fun sparring a little with Cade.

Of course, one of his many female conquests showed up. Ugh.

As usual he placated the woman. I have to admit that even though these women keep showing up with "broken hearts" because he hasn't called them, he's never a jerk to them.

He didn't look at Carlotta the way he looked at me, watching me, waiting for me to give my assessments of the tequila. And he seemed impressed when I did so.

I don't really know that much about tequila, but I've done sommelier training courses in the past and I've been told I have a finely tuned palate. I enjoyed practicing those skills ... visualizing and isolating the flavors, identifying them, paying attention to texture and body. It's a challenge and something I've missed.

I duck my head briefly, smiling at the memory of interest flaring in Cade's eyes, and his comment about how he thought I like to be in charge.

He was right about that.

But *not* being in charge is what I want right now.

As usual, I'm early for my shift and inside the bar I find Cade, Marco, and Beck engaged in some kind of tense standoff.

"I have too much work to do." Cade crosses his arms.

“No you fucking don’t,” Beck snarls. “Get your ass home and get your bike.”

Taken aback, I try to inconspicuously move around them and down the hall to the staff room. Cade starts down the hall, presumably toward the back door, the same time as I do. I halt to let him go first, eyeing him.

He’s pissed.

He slashes his hand out to me in an impatient gesture for me to precede him. I raise my eyebrows. “What’s wrong? Are they making you take time off?”

His jaw tightens.

This is unusual for him. Cade doesn’t usually get angry. He doesn’t usually get ... anything. He’s usually calm and impassive.

I step in front of him and stroll down the hall, sensing his big presence behind me. “You know an hour away from here isn’t going to destroy your business. We got things.”

“I know,” he grits out.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Nothing.” He shoves out the back door and I cock my head, watching the door slam shut behind him

Ookay.

I stow my purse in my locker and head out front. As I walk past the kitchen, Sid calls out to me. “Hey, Reese.”

I pause, back up, and entered the kitchen. “Hey, Sid. What’s up?”

He glances around, then grabs a towel to wipe his hands and walks toward me. “Got a minute?”

“Sure.” I’m always early for my shift.

Sid walks me out of the kitchen and into the hall where we’re alone. “You know everyone wants me to change up the menu, try new things.”

“Yeah.” I cross my arms.

“Danny just talked to me about the chips and salsa you made the other day.” He glances around uneasily. “They were really popular.”

I smile with satisfaction. “Yeah.” Then I wrinkle my nose. Except with Dussen.

“The guys want me to keep making them.”

By “the guys” I know he means Cade, Beck, and Marco. “Oh.”

“I, uh, might need some help.”

I gaze at him impassively.

“I was thinking ...” He trails off, twisting a towel in his hands.

“What?”

“I’ve tried some new things and they haven’t worked out that great. So I was thinking, maybe you could help me with some other ideas, too.”

I frown. “That’s not my job.”

“I know.” He glances around. “But if you could maybe just give me some ideas ... tell me what do to ... nobody would have to know.”

My forehead tightens even more. “I don’t know ... that’s kind of weird.”

“Look, I’m gonna lose my job if things don’t get better. I know that’s what’s coming.”

I tilt my head, sympathy for the man softening me. The poor guy ... he has good intentions and he tries, but yeah, his skills are limited. It’s also tempting ... oh, so tempting ... to get involved with the menu and cooking and food ... lovely, delicious food ... “Oh, man,” I say. “I don’t know.”

“The guys are all out. They won’t know.”

“Everyone else will know.”

“They won’t say anything. We’re all a team.”

I purse my lips. Then I sigh. “What are you thinking about doing?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I’m not super-creative. Tell me how to make something, I can do it, but coming up with ideas is hard.”

I nibble my bottom lip. “Let’s go look in the walk-in and see what we have.” I’m not optimistic that there’ll be a lot of good ingredients to choose from. “We can do the chips and salsa again.”

“Yeah, we have to do that.”

“And maybe a dip ... with queso.” I inspect the cheeses we have on hand. Not much. “It would be nice to get some great cheeses ... cotija and Oaxaca ... parmesan.”

“I don’t even know what those are. I mean, I know what parmesan is. We have that. And Monterey Jack.”

I grimace. “Yeah. And some peppers ... chorizo ... let’s put that together.” I wish I could go to the wholesaler and pick out ingredients. “I’ll try to make a list so when you and Danny go to the wholesaler tomorrow you can pick up the things we’ll need.”

“Yeah.” He bobs his head eagerly. “That would be great.”

Sparks flow through my veins at the opportunity to create in the kitchen. Sid and I get busy; me giving him directions on the salsa while I create the new dip. “I can’t stay here that long,” I say. “Things are getting busy out front. But I’ll come check on you.”

I have my own job to do, which is what I was hired for. I hurry out front and check in with Danny about sections.

While I work, my mind races with ideas. The things I could do! I’m still not sure how this is going to work. I can get the ingredients, I can give Sid instructions, but whether he can carry it all out is questionable. But if I’m in the kitchen all the time, Danny and the three Conquistadors are going to wonder what the hell is going on.

Guacamole is a must. Not the kind we usually buy in giant tubs, but fresh, with beautiful avocados, lime, serranos, red onions ... God, I want to go buy the food, too. I'm off in the morning ... how would Danny react if I suggest I tag along with them?

Maybe Danny would be okay with it. They want to improve the food. If I help out a little, he won't mind ... will he?

Seeing what's available will inspire me. Oh, dear Lord ... I long to be surrounded by food ... produce, meats, dairy ... I close my eyes as the yearning sweeps over me. Getting my hands on the food, a beautiful, balanced, sharp chef's knife in my hand, the scents rising around me, garlic, lime, cilantro ...

I pause at the bar, waiting for drinks, gripping the edge of the wood in both hands.

I miss it.

I bow my head. I've been away from it for months now and I have to admit I miss it.

This is a chance to maybe get my hands back onto the food, to let my creativity explore things, and to help Sid and, yes, the owners of Conquistadors. I don't care if I get credit for it. And I don't want the burden of being responsible for the kitchen. I just want to cook.

Danny's behind the bar with a clipboard checking the booze inventory.

"Hey, Danny."

He looks up. "Yeah?"

"Can I come with you to Food Depot tomorrow?"

He frowns. "What?"

"I'm off in the morning. I'm just curious what it's like."

"I guess." He shrugs.

"What time are you going?"

"We usually go around ten."

“I’ll be here.”

I pick up the drinks and carry my tray to the table, wanting to dance my way over. Cool! Excitement skips in my belly.

Beck appears from behind the bar. Did they go for a bike ride? I can’t stop myself from looking for Cade. I’m always aware of him when he ‘s around. Beck starts helping Alex behind the bar, pouring and mixing, filling beer glasses, laughing with customers. Marco appears, too. As it ‘s dinnertime, things str busy and he helps out, too, moving racks of glasses and dishes. But no Cade.

Not unusual. He often stays in the office working.

I’m super-curious, though, about why he was so pissed off that his buddies were making him take some time off.

When I get a break, I casually stroll past the office. Yep, there he is, behind his desk, focused on his computer as he often is. “Have a nice bike ride?” I ask.

His head jerks up. He frowns at me. “I didn’t go.”

“Oh.” I tilt my head. “Everything okay? You still look angry. Are we being inspected by the health department tomorrow or something?”

He shakes his head, one corner of his mouth kicking up. “No. Not that I know of, anyway.”

“Yeah, they usually don’t give notice.”

“There wouldn’t be a problem if they did.”

“Other than that first-aid kit that needs restocking.”

He frowns. “What?”

I shrug. “Easy fix, though. You should get on that.”

His mouth drops open.

I start down the hall to the staff room, smiling. Damn, I like pushing his buttons.

“Reese!”

I halt and back up a few steps. “What?”



“What happened with Jack?”

I stare at him slack-jawed for a moment. “Um ... oh. Well, the people who were interested decided on another dog. So they never came to see him.”

“Ah. Poor Jack.”

I lift a shoulder. “Yeah. I guess.”

“You don’t want him to be adopted?”

“Sure. Yeah. Finding his forever home would be great.” I try out a smile.

He squints at me skeptically. “Okay.”

I flash a hopefully bright smile and continue down the hall. In the staff room, I stand for a moment. He asked about Jack. I don’t quite know what to make of that.

I sigh, pull my phone out of my purse, and sit for a few minutes to look at it. My mom has messaged me. *Please call. I need to hear your voice.*

She’s worried about me, as always. Shaking my head, I call my mom’s cellphone number. “Hey, Mom, it’s me.”

“Reese! Sweetheart, it’s so good to hear from you. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing well, Mom.”

“You’re still waitressing?”

“Yes.”

After a beat of silence, Mom says, “That just seems so ...” Her voice trails off.

“It’s good, really. It’s a nice place. The owners are great. I’m enjoying the sun and the ocean here. I’m even making some new friends.”

“Oh. Does that mean ... you’re going to stay there?”

“I don’t know. You know I’m just taking one day at a time right now.”

“Yes, right.”

We chat for a few more minutes, Mom updating me about family news.

“I have to get back to work, Mom,” I say before ending the call. “I’m just on a break. We’ll talk again soon.”

“Okay. I’m glad you’re happy there. Maybe you’ll come home for Christmas?”

“Um ... maybe. We’ll see.” I end the call and tuck my phone away to get back to work. It was good to talk to Mom. I do miss my family, and I don’t want them to worry about me.

I gaze around the enormous wholesale store. I’m in heaven—surrounded by food. I wander past the cooler full of all kinds of sausages, salami, and free-range chickens ... amazing seafood—*look at those scallops!* I literally salivate, imagining them crusted with pumpkin seeds, dressed with a chipotle peppercorn sauce. Discreetly, I make notes of ideas.

I meander into the produce section, eyeing tomatoes, onions, and yes, avocados. Oh, God, all kinds of chiles! I finger their smooth skins and admire the glossy colors. I imagine the fresh corn served with caramelized onions, pequin peppers, and butter.

It’s enough to make me weep.

I gave Sid a list of things I thought of last night, but today I sidle up to him and pass him the paper I just wrote on. I can’t get carried away. We can only try a few new things, but even just having beautiful fresh produce to make existing menu items like salsas will help.

I continue to wander around casually while Danny and Sid make their purchases and load up Danny’s SUV. They buy staples, too, rice and beans, the kosher salt I requested. We get regular deliveries of other stuff, prepared foods like frozen chicken fingers and jugs of salsa, bleh. This is much better.

I’m all but rubbing my hands together, contemplating the amazing things we can turn out.

Secretly.

I sit in the back of the vehicle on the way back to Conquistadors, wrinkling my nose, staring out the window as we cruise along Interstate 805. I shouldn't get excited about this. I'm just helping out Sid, giving him a few ideas, maybe teaching him a few things. It's not my restaurant; it's not even my job. In fact, I probably shouldn't be doing this, going behind my bosses' backs. I'm putting this job at risk, and I kind of like this job.

For now.

Sure, I don't want to spend the rest of my life waitressing. But thinking about the future scares the crap out of me, so I don't think about it. I just think about right now. I think about the people I work with, who are all good people. I think about the regulars at the bar, even Helena and Joe who argue all the time. I think about Carrie and Hayden inviting me to help plan paint night. And I think about Cade ...

No. I can't think about Cade.

Other than he's a decent boss. Compared to others I've had. Yeah, that's all.

Back at the bar, first up is a discreet lesson on making fresh guacamole. "We can jazz it up, too," I tell Sid. "With some spicy pepitas. And salsa." Sid watches me with wide eyes as I expertly and rapidly chop cilantro.

Watching me next stir together some cayenne pepper, black pepper, cumin, ancho chiles, salt, and lime juice, Sid asks, "How'd you know how many avocados to buy?"

I shrug. "Lucky guess." And years of experience. "And here's another idea that I think is pretty easy." I grab a loaf of ciabatta. "Calabacitas toast. We have to make the calabacitas ... with these zucchini ... slice them up thinly."

Sid gets to work on that while I slice up the bell peppers and onions, and cut kernels off cobs of corn. I show him how to make the dish, adding oaxaca cheese to get all melty. Yum. "Then we'll layer the refried beans onto the ciabatta and top with the calabacitas."

Okay, I've spent as much time as I can in the kitchen. It's time for me to start my shift and I need to change out of the jeans and T-shirt I wore to Food Depot and into one of the black dresses required for serving staff at Conquistadors. I packed a stretchy dress in my purse earlier along with a change of footwear, so I hurry to the staff room to get them.

## Cade

"This is unbelievable." I look up from the appetizer. "Sid made this?"

"Yeah." Beck shrugs. "It's fucking fantastic, right?"

"Amazing." I take another bite of the chewy bread topped with spicy veggies and cheese. "Definitely a keeper."

"People are raving about the guacamole, too," Marco adds. "He made it fresh today instead of using the stuff we usually buy."

"That's great."

"Yeah. He needs to keep this up. We want word to get out that our food is good."

I shake my head. "Definitely. Make sure to tell him, so he knows."

"Positive feedback," Beck says. "Already did, but he's hearing it from the serving staff, too." He pauses. "You okay?"

I don't pretend to not know what Beck is talking about. I still sense Beck's frustration and displeasure with me. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Beck gives me a long, hard look, then a chin lift, and leaves the office.

I sigh. I suspect I'm being more stubborn than traumatized. I do have that damn obstinate streak in me that sometimes makes me a tad inflexible. But it also gives me the determination to succeed, to never give up. I just need to be aware of when something is worth fighting on for, or when it's time to let go.

I also possibly kept fucking around with all different women for too long, trying to prove I'm still a man. Goddamn, sometimes I'm an idiot.

That realization also might have something to do with the fact that right now there's only one woman who interests me, and it's not just to get into her panties. She's also the one woman I can't be with.

The look on her face when I asked about Jack ... she didn't want to lose that ugly mutt. But she won't adopt him because she doesn't know how long she'll be staying in San Diego. When she told me that the other day I felt like punching something. What the fuck is up with that? Why'd she move here if she doesn't like it? If she doesn't plan to stay?

She raises all these questions in my head, and I want to know more. I want to know her.

I rise out of my chair and stride out of the office. Christ, just thinking about her makes me want to see her.

It's happy hour on Friday and Conquistadors is packed. Tequila specials are being poured like crazy, Alex is shaking up margaritas and mixing Palomas, and tables are full. I search out Reese.

She sets a basket of chips and a bowl of guacamole on a table, smiling at the four guests there. "Enjoy!"

As if she senses my presence and my gaze, she turns and looks right at me. Our gazes lock for a few sizzling seconds. Then she smiles and heads to the kitchen.

I follow her.

"I need to try the new guac," I say to Sid. "I hear it's great."

Sid keeps his head down. "It is. I mean, thanks."

I grab a chip—another freshly made one—and scoop up some of the green dip. I crunch, swallow, and my eyes widen. "Damn, that's good." I slap a hand on Sid's shoulder. "Great job, Sid."

I try not to watch Reese as she picks up an order. The dress she's wearing today is entirely modest, long-sleeved with a round neckline, but it hugs every curve on her body, ending a few inches above her knees. Christ, she has amazing legs. My gaze roams down her toned thighs, slender calves and ankles, then back up, landing on her ass when she turns to carry the tray out.

A hand cuffs the back of my head, startling me. I jump and glare at Beck. "What the fuck, man?"

Beck gives me a warning look, head tilted, eyes narrowed.

Busted.



## REESE

“Don’t take this the wrong way.” Carrie eyes me from across the table at The Good Egg Sunday morning, holding a cup of coffee in both hands. “But you don’t really seem like a waitress.”

I blink at her, then force a scant laugh. “What does that mean? I *am* a waitress.”

“I know you are, and you’re a good one. I just mean ... you seem ... I don’t know.” Carrie grimaces. “You seem as though you like to be in charge of things. You’re obviously good at what you do, and you work hard ... not that the other servers don’t, but for them it’s just a job. You know?”

I actually do know.

“You’re organized and on top of things, and you have great ideas for how to make things better,” Hayden adds.

“That’s my years of experience,” I say lightly.

“And you totally just took over planning the paint night,” Carrie says.

My mouth drops open. “Oh, God ... I am so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize! We needed someone to take charge. Hayden’s smart and all but she’s a little scatterbrained when it comes to anything but her research.”

“Hey! Scatterbrained?” Hayden pouts. “Okay, maybe I am.”



“And I am, too, sometimes,” Carrie continues. “I’ve learned a lot from starting up G Gallery, but I am *not* a business person.”

“Really, I don’t want to take over ... ” I hate the thought that I might have offended Carrie and Hayden.

“No, it’s all good,” Hayden assures me. “You kept us focused and now we have a plan and we all know what we’re responsible for. It’s like you’re a project manager or something.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound quite so bad.” I make a face. “Please tell me if I overstep. This was your idea.”

Carrie leans in. “It feels good to have things all laid out.”

“I can do up a spreadsheet,” I offer.

Carrie points at me. “See, that’s what I’m talking about. So you can’t tell me waitressing is your career goal.”

“Okay, it’s not what I want to do for the rest of my life,” I admit, knowing there’s no point in dissembling with these women. “I’m just not sure what my future holds right now.”

“You’re coming off a bad breakup, aren’t you?” Carrie nods wisely, leaning forward. “That’s why you moved here from New York.” She leans closer. “Did he cheat on you? Was he abusive?”

My eyes fly open wide. “Um ...” Wow, they’ve given me a story to go with. I hate lying to Carrie and Hayden, because they’ve been so open and friendly with me. “Something like that.”

Their faces wear a look of sympathy. “It takes time,” Hayden says. “That’s understandable.”

I nod slowly. “Yeah. So right now I’m just trying to live in the moment.” Which is totally true.

“Well, this is a great place for that,” Carrie says. “The ocean, the beach, sunshine ... and tequila! What more could you want?” She tosses back her hair.

“True.” I smile back. “And I do really like it here.”

“Well, good.” Hayden tilts her head. “Sometime you should come out with us. The guys are talking about taking us go-karting.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Go-karting?”

“Yeah.” Carrie shrugs. “One of their fun ways to bust each others’ balls.”

I laugh. “I don’t know. Hanging out with my bosses might not be a good idea.”

Carrie snorts. “Come on. Conquistadors isn’t that formal of a place. It’s not like there are fraternization rules.”

I don’t see any of the other employees at Conquistadors socializing with the bosses. Well, not that I know about, anyway. “Well. Maybe. I have no idea how to drive a go-kart, though.”

“Neither do we. Of course the guys are all good at it,” Carrie says with an affectionate eye roll. “They’re so damn good at everything.”

Yeah, I can see that. They’re all very fit, very perfect male specimens.

“How’s the house reno coming?” Reese asks Carrie.

The topic changes to that, and Carrie is happy to describe some of their plans. “The house is small but it’s really cute and it’s a nice neighborhood. Close to the beach. Plus, it has the big garage that Marco uses for his welding, so we figured it made sense to stay there and renovate it.”

Hayden asks about the trip to Home Depot to pick out new bathroom fixtures and Carrie pulls out her phone to show us pictures of what she chose as well as some images she’s saved on Pinterest.

“I love your Instagram feed,” I confess to her. “You’re a great photographer.”

“Thank you!” Carrie beams. “I have another shoot coming up next week—a family portrait for Ashlie and Van Stephanos.” She names a popular Hollywood couple. “And Marco wants me to do some pictures at Conquistadors.”

“Of what?” Hayden asks, nodding at the server to refill her coffee cup.

When we’re all topped up, Carrie replies, “Some of the new things on the menu. The new salsas and guacamoles. They want to change up the website with some pictures of the food, and Marco even suggested I put some on Instagram to try to get the word out.”

My stomach tightens at the mention of the new menu items. “That’s a great idea.”

“Yes! Finally, Sid is coming around.”

I wrinkle my nose, peering down into my coffee. Sid is getting the credit for my great ideas.

I knew this would happen and I thought I could deal with, but ... it kind of bugs me.

I’m enough of a diva that I want the credit. On the other hand, I don’t want the attention and the questions that would follow, so I keep my mouth shut. But ... “If you need any help with the styling, let me know,” I offer, hoping this isn’t another mistake. “I had some experience with that at my old job.”

“Oh, that would be great! Food photography isn’t my specialty, even though I like doing it. I know there are some tricks to it, for professional photographs. And I want the Conquistadors website to look professional.”

“You *are* a professional.” Hayden nudges her friend.

Carrie smiles. “I know about lighting and composition. But the actual food—the presentation on the plate, garnishes, that kind of thing—I could use help with that.”

“Sure.” I shrug casually.

“Even though Sid seems to be doing better with his new creations, I don’t have a ton of faith in him when it comes to that stuff,” Carrie says. “No offense to Sid. He’s a nice guy.”

I smile and tighten my grip on my coffee mug, still cringing on the inside, maybe a little guilt twisting there.

What do I have to feel guilty about? Okay, it's a bit deceptive, but it doesn't matter to Conquistadors who's actually coming up with the ideas. The important thing is that the food is getting better, and hopefully that will help their business. As long as I don't let this interfere with my actual waitressing duties, it's no big deal. I just prefer keeping a low profile right now.

Cade

"Okay, let's move out!" I call into the kitchen, searching out Sid Monday morning.

Reese appears, dressed in pair of cropped, faded jeans and a black T-shirt that says DEATH BEFORE DECAF. She holds a paper cup with a plastic lid that I guess holds full-test coffee. She frowns at me. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm taking Sid to Food Depot."

"Why?" Her lips thin. "Where's Danny?"

"He had to go for a colonoscopy today."

"Ugh. Jesus. Thanks for sharing that."

I shrug. "Where's Sid?"

"He's running late. Just texted me."

"Why'd he text you?"

"I, uh, I'm tagging along today."

I gape at her. "Why?"

She lifts one shoulder. "For fun. I like food."

I narrow my eyes at her. I don't doubt this ... I've seen that she likes food. But going to the wholesaler ... that seems odd.

Her phone buzzes and she pulls it out of her pocket to peer at it. "Oy." She bites her lip. "Um, looks like Sid's going to be really late. He can't get his car started."

"How late?"

She sets down her mug and sends off a message, then waits for his response. "He's waiting for a tow truck. Says he's not sure how long it will be—they told him an hour."

“I can’t wait around an hour. Besides, we need to get back in time for him to be ready for lunch.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes dart around the bar. “Well, you and I could go. I think I know what he needs.”

I stare at her. “How?”

“I see what he buys. Plus, I’ll text him.”

This is weird, but I don’t know what else to do because I don’t know what to buy. Sure, I see the invoices, and I’ve hung out in the kitchen enough to make some guesses, but I don’t know if we’re out of coffee or ketchup or peanut oil, for Chrissakes. Danny said he gave the inventory lists to Sid. “Okay, fine.”

She gives a quick nod and we headed out to my SUV behind the bar. I turn onto Grand Avenue toward I-5. It’ll probably be about a half-hour drive. Just me and Reese.

She has her head bent, intent on her phone, presumably communicating with Sid about what’s needed. Along with the coffee she brought, I breathe in the scent of spiced vanilla and fruit. Her scent. Jesus. My dick reacts to the enticing smell.

I clear my throat. “You getting all the deets about what we need?”

She jumps and bobs her head. “Yes. It’s all good.”

She continues to stare at her phone, scrolling through whatever the hell she’s looking at.

“Sid’s been upping his game lately,” I say.

She starts again. “Um. Yeah. Seems so.”

“We don’t want to push him too hard, but it would be great if we could improve the whole menu.”

She bites her lip and bends her head.

“You must hear feedback from our guests.”

“Yeah. Sure.” She smiles briefly without looking up. “People seem pleasantly surprised by the changes.”

“Good.”

“Most people,” she adds.

I lift an eyebrow.

“Dussen didn’t care for the fresh salsa.” She appears to be amused by this.

I keep glancing sideways at her as I drive. Now she’s twisting the hem of her shirt between her fingers. “What’s wrong, Reese?”

“Wr-rong?”

“Yeah. Jesus, you’re as jumpy as a virgin at a prison rodeo.”

She chokes. “Oh, my God!”

“You are.”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. Not at all.” She lifts her head. “Maybe I had too much caffeine.”

“That *was* a large coffee.” I jerk my chin at the now-empty cup in the cup holder. “I gather you don’t do decaf.”

“Ha. What’s the point? It’s like de-alcoholized beer.”

“Maybe it tastes good?”

Her lips twitch. “I’ve yet to taste a de-alcoholized beer that tastes as good as regular stuff.”

“And decaf coffee tastes different than regular?”

“Totally.” She lifts her chin, but she’s trying not to smile. “It’s also like ... like light cheese. Or fat-free ice cream. Those are an abomination.”

“So you’re a food snob.”

“No, I’m not!” She pauses. “Well, maybe. I just think if you’re going to put it in your body, it should be good stuff.”

“So you never eat junk food?”

She catches her top lip briefly in her teeth. “Well, I wouldn’t say that.”

“Ha. What’s your favorite guilty pleasure?”

“I have a few,” she admits. “Burgers from Shake Shack. Fries from McDonalds. And I love egg salad sandwiches with potato chips in the sandwich.”

“Ugh. Really?”

“Don’t knock it till you try it. There must be some strange food combinations you like.”

I think. “Okay, yeah. I like peanut butter on toast with bacon.”

“Hmmm. Interesting.” She taps her fingers on the console between us.

I glance down at her hand. Long, slender fingers with short, unpainted nails. She wears a simple silver ring on her index finger that’s oddly ... sexy. “That doesn’t gross you out? Everyone else thinks it’s disgusting.”

“Hey, I’m not judgy. I bet the salty bacon and peanut butter tastes pretty good together.”

“It’s fantastic. I also like to put ranch dressing on my pizza.”

She nods thoughtfully.

“When I was a kid, I was the one who did the cooking,” I find myself telling her. “Sometimes there wasn’t a lot to choose from so I had to get creative.”

She turns now, looking at me for the first time since we got in the vehicle. “Why did you do the cooking?”

“My mom took off when I was fourteen.”

“Oh, no.” A sideways glance catches the downward slope of her eyebrows. “That’s awful.”

“It sucked. But honestly, I couldn’t blame her. My old man was a drunk. She got tired of putting up with his bullshit and looking after two boys.”

“Oh, no. No.” She shakes her head. “A mom can’t do that. Not to her sons.”

“She did,” I say matter-of-factly. “Yeah, I was pissed off at her for a long time. But you gotta do what you gotta do. I had a little brother and we had to eat, so ...”

“And probably not just eat.” She eyes me. “You probably did everything.”

“Pretty much.” I don’t want to sound like a martyr. “My dad was useless. If he wasn’t falling down and breaking things, or trying to whale on me or my brother, he was passed out on the hall floor. Or on the street. There were a lot of nights the cops dragged his drunken ass home.”

“Oh, God.” She touches her fingertips to her mouth. “That’s awful.”

I’m not sure why I’m telling her this. I confessed this shit and more to Beck and Marco during one of our first drunken nights on leave, but I don’t usually tell people all the crappy details about my past. I grew up with people feeling sorry for me and I fucking hated that. It’s what made me so loyal to Beck and Marco—even when they knew the truth about me, they never pitied me.

“Hmmm.”

I glance at her at the sound. “What?”

“Nothing. So do you have any contact with your parents?”

“My dad’s dead.”

“Oh.” Again her fingertips go to her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was pretty much a foregone conclusion that he was going to drink himself into the grave.” Again, I don’t bother mentioning the guilt that ate away at me after I left home to join the Navy. Even though I hated my dad and at times wanted him dead, deep down inside I was just a kid who wanted a father who would be there for us. For years I tried to save the guy in the hopes that would happen, but ... well. I know exactly when I finally gave up.

“Well, I’d say your brother was lucky to have an older brother like you.”



Nope. Not even close. I failed my little brother in the worst way possible. Not going there, though. “How about you?”

“What about me?”

“What kind of family did you grow up with? Nice, normal, middle-class family with two kids and a dog?”

“Well. Yeah.”

I grin.

“I have a sister. And we did have a dog. I don’t know if we were really normal.”

“What is normal, anyway?”

“Right? My parents and my sister are all overachievers. They kind of looked down on me because ...”

“Because you’re a waitress?”

Her lips thin. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“And yet ...” I hesitate, not sure how to say this. “You don’t strike me as an under-achiever.”

She shoots me a startled glance, but says nothing, biting her lip again.

I don’t know why I think that about her ... she *does* work as a waitress, when she’s nearly thirty years old. Not that waitressing isn’t an honorable profession. I have tons of respect for the people who work for me in that capacity. But there’s something about her that seems to not quite fit with that.

We arrive at the Food Depot. I’ve been there a number of times with Danny and Sid, so it’s somewhat familiar to me, but I hope like hell Reese knows what she’s doing.

And apparently she does. She checks her phone frequently; I presume she’s looking at the texts Sid sent her, as she loads us up with cheeses and tortillas and produce.

I pause next to cases of cooking wine. “We need any of this?”

She eyes it, wrinkles her nose, and tilts it into the air. “God, no.”

“Isn’t there wine in the shrimp scampi?”

“Yes. But not that. You should never cook with a wine you wouldn’t drink.” Then she goes very still and her eyes go distant. “Oh.”

“What?”

“I just ... nothing.” She continues down the aisle and grabs a sack of dried chick peas.

She doesn’t shy away from helping me load up the back of the SUV with our purchases, her slender arms revealing surprisingly strong biceps. Another turn-on.

Fuck, I’m weird. Why am I getting all horned up over a woman’s fingers and arms and scent? Apparently, not hooking up with anyone the past few weeks is making testosterone build up in my body or something. I need to jerk off more.

Christ, I shouldn’t have thought that. Now I’m getting hard and I’m stuck in the vehicle with Reese for another half an hour at least.

“Still no word on a home for Jack?” I ask, for something to talk about.

“Nope.” Her bottom lip pushes out. “And he’s such a good dog.”

“His looks might have something to do with it.”

“What?” She turns outraged eyes on me. “He’s adorable!”

“Uh ... come on ... have you looked at him?”

“I realize he’s not conventionally cute, but he has personality.”

“If you say so.”

“You don’t even know him!”

“We’re talking about a dog,” I say. “You don’t get to know a dog.”

“Yes, you do! You never had a dog?”

“Hell, no. As if my mom would’ve wanted something else to take care of.”

She slumps a little in her seat. “Yeah. I’m sorry. Okay, so not being a dog person you wouldn’t know, but dogs do have a personality. Jack is different than Peggy.”

“Peggy?”

“The poodle we had when I was a kid. She was a great dog, too. Super-loving and affectionate, almost to the point of annoying. She had to be on someone’s lap all the time. Jack is more ... independent.”

“Jesus.”

“I’m serious!”

I grin. “What else is Jack?”

“He likes to have his space. Unfortunately, that means if you treat him too aggressively, he won’t trust or respect you. Which is what apparently happened with his last owner. He’s had some bad experiences.” She turns and gazes out the side window, falling silent.

*He likes to have his space.* She could be talking about herself. Which makes me wonder—what bad experiences has she had? Jesus. My imagination makes my gut cramp up.

I cough. “I feel I should get to know Jack better.”

“Why?”

“To see if what you’re telling me is accurate.”

She doesn’t respond right away. “Well, I guess you’ll have to take my word for it, since I won’t be bringing Jack to work.”

“Yeah, probably not a good idea. But maybe I could walk with you one day.” Fuck, why am I saying this shit? “Hey, do you think he knows how to surf?”

She bursts out laughing. “Surf? Geez, I have no idea.”

“There are dogs who surf.”

“Shut up.”

“No, really. I’ve seen them at the beach. Let’s try it. He might like it.”

“I don’t even know if he can swim.”

“All dogs can swim.”

She squints. “I’m not sure of that. He has awfully short legs.”

“Well, we could check that out first.”

“He might need a life jacket.”

I grin. “They do make life jackets for dogs.”

“This is a crazy conversation.”

Yes. Yes, it is. But she’s more at ease and smiling now and ... I like that.



## REESE

“We’re going to cook with tequila.”

Sid gapes at me. “What?”

He’s at Conquistadors when Cade and I arrive back with our provisions. As soon as Cade disappeared to his office after helping them unload and put things away, I turned to Sid and hold up the bottle of añejo I liberated from the bar. “It’s going to be amazing! I have so many ideas. But first is a salsa. I bought these dried pasilla chiles. Oh, we need a dark beer, too. Can you grab one?”

“Like what?”

“Like ... a Dos Equis Dark Lager.”

“Okay.” He disappears and I set about preparing the dried peppers by slicing them open, flattening them, and scraping out the seeds and ribs. Together Sid and I toast the chiles, then reconstitute them with boiling water while we roast garlic cloves. Then we whiz up the garlic, chiles, some freshly squeezed orange juice, beer, and tequila. I add a little of the soaking liquid and a generous toss of kosher salt.

“Taste.” I dip a chip and gesture to Sid to try.

“Fuck.” He shakes his head. “Unbelievable.”

“I know, right?” I grin.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Sid says. “Fess up. You’re not just a waitress, are you?”

“I am now.” I toss him a cheeky smile. “I have other ideas, but we can’t do everything at once. Chicken marinated in tequila and lime is easy, though. Serve it with guacamole. I’m also thinking a cheese dip with tequila in it.”

Beck walks into the kitchen.

I quickly set down the container of salsa. “Great job, Sid! This tastes awesome!” With a wave I head out.

The others in the kitchen saw some of what was going on, but Sid and I convinced them not to say anything. But Beck gave me a couple of questioning looks. I hate the deception. Maybe it would be better if we just come clean about it. What’s the worst thing that could happen?

They could fire me.

Ack. I don’t want that. I’m actually having fun with this.

It’s harmless.

I keep battling this out in my head as I cruise down the hall toward the staff room. Just then, Beck enters through the back door, followed by Marco and Carrie. Carrie smiles and gives me a happy wave. Beck carries an unusual bottle in two hands.

“Hola, amigo!” Marco calls. “Cade, where are you?”

“In here,” Cade answers from the office.

Curious, I pause to watch.

Beck holds up the oddly shaped black and gold bottle, standing in the door of the office. “You’re not going to believe what we have our hands on.”

“What?” Cade’s voice carries from the office.

Carrie grabs my upper arm and squeezes. I slant her a curious smile.

“This is a bottle of Jiminez Ultra.”

“Uh-huh. What the fuck is that?”

Beck moves into the office. Marco follows and Carrie, still holding my arm, pulls me along, too.

“Sweet baby Jesus in the manger.” Marco shakes his head. “You’ve never heard of Jiminez?”

“Nope.”

Marco sighs, bending his head with a mournful shake. “This, my friend, is the best tequila in the world.”

I haven’t heard of it, either, but the bottle is impressive.

“This bottle cost fifteen hundred dollars,” Beck announces.

“Fuck me running.” Cade falls back in his chair, jaw slack. “You did not spend fifteen hundred dollars on a bottle of tequila.”

“I spent my own money,” Beck says dismissively. “And don’t bust my balls about it.”

Cade blinks. “Seriously? Fifteen hundred dollars?”

Carrie bounces. “I want to try it!”

“We have to do this right.” Beck strokes the bottle reverently. “At the right time. With the right people.”

I watch this unfold. Damn. I would die to taste a tequila that fine.

“How the hell did you get that?” Cade demands.

“At an auction.” Beck sets the bottle gently on the desk and passes a hand down the side. “Okay, when are we going to do this?”

“Later tonight,” Marco says. “Hayden has to be here, too.”

“Yes,” Carrie agrees.

“Maybe we should wait for a special occasion,” Beck says. “Like your wedding.” He looks at Marco.

“We don’t even have a date yet,” Marco objects. “I can’t wait that long. I can’t even wait until tonight.”

“Delayed gratification” Beck waves both hands. “Oh, hell, who am I to talk. I want to crack that baby open right now, too. I’ll call Hayden and see when she can get here.”



I back out of the office. I'm not a part of this. But as I do so, I meet Cade's eyes across the room. Something passes between us. He knows I enjoyed tasting those tequilas. He knows I want to try this expensive tequila.

Damn.

I hurry to change out of jeans and flip-flops into my black dress and ballet flats.

As I start my shift, I'm pleased that people are ordering the new salsa that's been added to the daily specials. And they're loving it.

Of course Sid is getting all the compliments for it. I pretend not to listen as Marco tells Sid what a great job he's doing lately and to keep it up. "We want to sit down with you and talk about revamping the entire menu," Marco tells him.

Sid glances at me and I read the panic in his eyes.

Shit.

Welp, there's no way I can sneak into that meeting. We'll just have to hope Sid can handle it somehow. With a small knot in my stomach, I pick up my order and head back to the bar.

When things get quieter later in the afternoon, I start refilling salt and pepper shakers on tables. Marco, Beck, and Cade are at the bar in a heated discussion about something. I can't help but overhear.

"We need to make money off this bottle," Marco says.

I presume he's referring to the tequila Beck bought.

"We don't need to make money off it," Beck says. "I paid for it. I say we just enjoy it ourselves."

"I have another idea," Cade says. "Why don't we share it with our staff? Sid's doing great with the menu. We've managed to not have anyone quit for a couple of months now. It would be a nice gesture of appreciation for them."

"We pay them to be here," Beck says drily.

Marco and Cade both make noises of disapproval and Beck laughs. "I'm kidding."

"There really is potential for some great marketing with it," Marco says.

"True." Cade sighs. "It would bring in some real aficionados to be able to offer this. But our staff is more important."

I blink at this. Cade the numbers guy is concerned about the people who work for him?

I don't know why that surprises me. It's not like he's an asshole boss, someone who doesn't give a shit about the people who work for him. But I would have expected this more from Beck, who's the fun guy.

"Reese."

I look up as Marco calls to me. "Yes?"

"Settle this for us. What should we do with the tequila? Drink it ourselves? Share it with the staff? Or sell it and make some money off it?"

I bite my lip, my gaze roving from Beck to Marco to Cade. His eyes blaze as I meet them, the intensity of his gaze making goosebumps rise up on my skin. "Why are you asking me?"

Marco shrugs. "You have a good head on your shoulders. What do you think? Would everyone appreciate it?"

"I think they'd love it," I say quietly. "But maybe I'm biased because I really want to try it."

They all chuckle. "At least you're honest."

I try not to wince. "Um, yeah. But seriously, recognizing your staff for their hard work is always a good thing to do."

Cade rubs his chin. "Okay, that's what we'll do. We'll have a staff party. Close the restaurant early one night and get everyone together."

Well, that's more than I anticipated, but it's a nice idea.

"Tonight," Beck says.

“That’s too short notice,” Cade protests.

“But Mondays are our slowest night,” Beck says. “That way it won’t interfere with business that much.”

“Sundays are slower,” I say. “And we close at ten on Sundays, anyway. It would give everyone more time to plan around it.”

“Fuck.” Beck scrunches up his face. “Okay, okay, I can wait that long. I’m going to put this in the safe, though.”

“Good idea.” Cade gives him a thumbs-up.

Marco and Beck pick up the bottle and head back to the office. I look at Cade and again meet his eyes. “That was a nice suggestion.”

“Thanks.” One corner of his mouth lifts. “You sound surprised.”

“I am a little, to be honest.” I smile.

“Well, thanks.”

“I expected you to be the one to push for making money off it.”

“Nothing wrong with making money.”

“If you’re in the world of business, you’re in the business of making money.”

He cocks an eyebrow.

I shrug. “One of my bosses told me that. But ... I think you don’t make money without the people who work for you.”

“That is absolutely correct.”

We eye each other for a few seconds, and heat flickers over my skin. “I can’t wait to try it,” I confess.

“I sort of got that feeling earlier.”

I cock my head. He didn’t get the idea of sharing it with the staff so I could have some, did he?

No, I’m not that important. That’s crazy.

“It better be amazing,” Cade says. “So are you taking Jack for a walk on the beach Wednesday morning?”

“Uh ...” That was a change in subject. “Probably. Wednesday’s my day off.”

“Does he have a favorite toy that would float?”

I stare at him. “I guess so. He has some squeak toys that would likely float.”

“Bring one of them.”

“But ...” I twist my fingers together. “I don’t want to scare him.”

Cade smiles slowly and I feel that smile all the way down inside my panties. “I’ll be there to help him. We won’t let him be scared.”

“I guess I shouldn’t let my own fears hold my dog back from an adventure.”

“You’re afraid of the water?”

“Not water. But the ocean makes me a little nervous.”

“Huh.” He studies her. “That’s pretty brave of you, then, to let Jack learn to swim.”

A smile tugs my mouth. “This is so crazy.”

“Ten o’clock. At the pier.”

I sigh. “Bossy.”

“I *am* the boss.”

“You’re the boss *here*.” I hold his gaze and damn it if sparks don’t snap between us.

“I like to be the boss everywhere.” His arrogance is tempered by the sexy wink he gives me. My girl parts fluttered.

Oh, geez. This is so bad. I’m flirting with my boss. This can’t happen.

“I better get these dishes into the kitchen.” I try not to sprint away from him.

## Cade

I walk into the kitchen later and stop short seeing Reese standing at one of the stations. “Yes, that’s right,” she tells Sid. “Open the peppers like a book and scrape out the ribs and seeds.”

I frown.

Reese looks up and sees me. I catch the flicker on her face as she straightens. “Hi, Cade!”

Sid’s head jerks around, also with an air of guilt.

What the hell is going on here?

I would’ve thought Reese might feel guilty for being in the kitchen when she should be waiting on tables. But Sid ...?

My mind puts a few puzzle pieces together. I watch Reese hurry out of the kitchen, then I amble closer to Sid. “What are you making?”

“Drunken salsa.”

“Sounds good.”

“I hope so.” Sid snickers nervously.

I return to my office and sit down at my desk, continuing to contemplate. We’re all meeting in the morning to talk about the new menu. I’m looking forward to that.

“So that drunken salsa was a hit last night,” I say when we’re all seated at a table in the empty bar the next morning. “Another winner, Sid.”

“Thanks.” Sid doesn’t meet my eyes.

Yeah, something is going on here.

“We’d love to hear more ideas from you,” I continue. “We want to redo the entire menu. That’s why Carrie’s here. We’re going to update the website, as well. I’m thinking we should try to get some of the top food critics in the city to come and try things. That would really get the word out and bring in more customers.”

“Jesus,” Sid mutters, running a finger beneath his collar.

“Like Betsy Harrington from the *San Diego Press*,” Beck suggests.

“And that big food blogger,” Carrie says. “Joy Dizon. She has tons of followers.”

“So do you,” Marco points out, and he and Carrie share a smile.

“Yeah, you do,” I say. “We already talked about you posting some stuff on Instagram.”

“I’d be happy to.”

I set down our existing menu on the table. “This is what we have now. I’m not saying we have to scrap everything, but guests do seem to like things more when they’re freshly made.”

“You know, we’re gonna need more staff,” Sid says. “If we’re gonna make the chips fresh every day ... plus the salsas ... I don’t have time to do all that. And if we’re going to be making more stuff from scratch, that takes time.” He swallows.

“Hmmm. Good point. It does take more time. Frozen burgers and chicken fingers are pretty quick.” I look at Danny. “What do you think?”

Danny gives a grim smile. “I think we need to know if this is actually going to increase our revenues before we start hiring more cooks.”

I tilt my head. “Okay, like I said, we don’t have to start over completely. Everyone likes nachos. We have to have nachos on the menu. We just need to kick them up a notch. What do you think, Sid?” I eye the man expectantly.

Sid blinks rapidly. “Yeah, sure. I can do that.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.” He swallows again. “Let me think about it.”

“Okay, sure. What about tacos? Another staple, but let’s figure out how to make them special.”

“The fresh salsa and guacamole helps,” Sid says quickly.

“Sure, yeah. But what if we made our own tortillas for the tacos? That would be special.”

“Jesus, I don’t have time for that!”

I cock my head.

“Also I’d have to learn how to make them,” Sid mutters.

“I think Paul and Jenn could help. And leave you to do the more creative stuff.”

Sid wipes a hand across his brow. “Yeah. Right.”

“What else could we do with tacos?” I persist. “Beef, chicken, pork ... oh, fish. We don’t have a fish taco.”

Sid nods. “Sure. Fish tacos. That’s easy.”

“I like shrimp tacos,” Marco says.

“And something vegetarian,” Beck suggests.

“Chickpeas!” Sid bursts out. “Chickpea taco bowls.”

“Oh, yeah ... is that why we bought that big bag of chickpeas yesterday?” I stroke my fingertips over my chin.

“Yeah. That’s another idea ... I ... we can try.”

“Interesting.” Marco taps his fingers on the table.

“I like it,” Carrie says. “So what else would be in it?”

“You know ... the usual taco seasonings ... and toppings. Lettuce. Sour cream.”

“I’m not convinced,” I say. “But we can try it and see how it goes. How long do you think you need to come up with enough new menu items? A week?”

Sid makes a strangled sound. “Maybe?”

I regard my employee with an unyielding expression. “You okay, Sid? You seem stressed.”

“I’m okay.”

“You’ve really come up with some great stuff lately. What turned things around for you?”

Sid drops his gaze to the table. “Fuck.”

“Pardon?”

I look around the table, taking in Beck and Marco’s curious expressions and Carrie’s frown.

“I can’t do this.” Sid pushes back from the table but doesn’t stand.

“Too much pressure?” Carrie asks gently, reaching out to pat his forearm. “These guys are being pretty demanding.” Me. She means I’m being demanding. “We can take it slower ...” She catches my eye. “Probably. Or not.”

“It’s too much pressure because I can’t do it.” Sid lifts his head and looks across the room, then meets my gaze. “I haven’t been the one coming up with these great new ideas.”

The air in the room goes flat and heavy.

“Then who has?” Carrie cocks her head.

“I think I know,” I mutter, rubbing the back of my neck. I tip my head back and say to the ceiling, “Jesus Christ.”

“What? Who?”

“It’s Reese,” Sid blurts.

They all stare at him. But not me, whose suspicions have just been confirmed. “Apparently, I need to have a little talk with our waitress.”





# CADE

“How about that twenty-four-hour rule?”

I glare at Beck. “What?”

“Wait twenty-four hours before you talk to Reese.”

“Fuck, no!” I try to unclench my fists.

Beck, Marco, and I moved to the office after our interesting meeting. After confessing all the details about how Reese stepped in and took over, Sid gave us a terrified look and asked, “Am I canned?”

“Not right now,” I gritted out.

Then Sid slunk off to the kitchen. Danny is now doing inventory and Carrie left to go to G Gallery.

I check my watch. “Reese should be here soon.”

“Just don’t freak out on her.” Beck crosses his arms.

“I’m not going to freak out on her. I’m going to fire her.”

“What? No!” Beck gapes at me.

“Hold up.” Marco waves his hands. “Why do you want to fire her?”

“She’s been lying to us!”

Marco and Beck exchange looks. “Well ... she’s been a little deceptive ... but I don’t know about lying,” Marco says. “Why don’t you just talk to her and find out what’s going on?”

“She actually came up with some pretty fantastic stuff,” Beck says. “I don’t think we should fire her. I think we should

promote her.”

“What?” Now I stare openmouthed. “What the actual fuck?”

“I’m serious. Hey, do you want me to talk to her? Or Marco?”

I narrow my eyes. “No.”

“Maybe we should be here, though,” Marco says.

Jesus, what do they think I’m going to do? “I can do it. I hired her. I’ll deal with it.”

“Okay. But let me be clear on this.” Marco leans forward, shoving his face right in Cade’s. “Do not fire her.”

My muscles tense all over again. I’m so fucking pissed I could spit bullets.

Why? I never get angry like this. I’m in control of my emotions at all times. It’s Reese who does this to me. I take a deep breath. “Fine,” I say through clenched teeth. “I won’t fire her ... right now.”

Beck and Marco wear identical looks of frustrated annoyance. The three of us stand glaring at each other for a long moment in a tense standoff. “Okay,” Beck says finally.

Beck and Marco leave and I throw myself down into my chair.

Jesus. I didn’t even have to ask Sid how long this has been going on. It’s pretty obvious. I knew there was something weird happening, when Sid suddenly came up with those great ideas, but I was too lazy to put it all together. Lazy. Stupid. Blind. Or maybe in denial that the cook we were on the verge of firing hasn’t really come through after all.

A soft knock on the open door has me lifting my head.

Reese.

She stands in the doorway, smiling faintly. She’s dressed for work in another black dress, this one sleeveless with a bunch of pleats that wrap around her slender body. It, too, shows off her amazing legs, and today she wears a pair of

pointy-toed shoes with a low but spiky heel. Her bright hair has been pulled up into a bunch of loops on the back of her head with wispy pieces hanging out.

“Come in,” I say gruffly, now distracted from my anger. I gesture at another chair.

She advances into the room and perches on the edge of the chair. Her fingers go to the hem of her dress and rub it. Fingers that are shaking. Just a bit.

“What the everloving fuck have you been playing around at?” I shout. Then I close my eyes. That’s not how you talk to an employee.

On some level, I recognize that my anger is way out of proportion to the incident.

“What are you talking about?”

I slash a hand through the air. “No more lies. You’re busted. Sid confessed everything.”

“Oh.” She says the word on a soft exhalation. “Damn.”

“Yeah. Damn.”

She meets my eyes. “It was my doing. Don’t be angry at Sid. He’s trying his best.”

Her defense of Sid and acceptance of responsibility take me aback. For a few seconds. “How the hell ... what were you thinking ... why?”

Her eyes flash and she presses her lips together. “I could see how he was struggling. And the food ... well, you know how I felt about the food.”

Oh, yeah. I do. Even now she doesn’t bother to hide her distaste.

“Look, it’s not like I was taking cash out of the register or skimming credit card numbers from the customers, for the love of Godfrey. We weren’t hurting anything by doing what we did. In fact ...” She juts her chin at me. “Even *you* have to admit guests liked the food.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what the hell *is* the point?” She sits forward, her cheeks now flushed peach, eyes sparkling. “You wanted to make your food better. I was trying to help. It didn’t interfere with my waitressing, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I frown. “I never thought that.”

“Then what are you so pissed off about? Oh wait, I know. Because this wasn’t your idea. Because you weren’t in control.”

My head jerks back.

“Well, I’m sorry I went behind your back. I know it wasn’t honest. I didn’t mean to cause problems. Just don’t ... I don’t want Sid to be in trouble about this, because it was my doing.” She jumps to her feet. “I’ll get my things and leave.”

“No!” I push up, too, then lay my hands on the desk, leaning forward. “No. Sit down.”

She doesn’t move for a few seconds, holding my gaze with her own fierce stare.

Jesus. Hot need punches my lower belly. I’m turned on. She’s stunning with her passion and confidence and honesty. Then she turns and starts to walk away.

No fucking way.

I vault over the desk and grab her arm, spinning her around.

She gasps, eyes big. My gaze drops to her mouth ... her full lips shiny and parted ... fuck, I want to taste her and feel those lips. Tension shimmers around us, the temperature in the office rising several lustful degrees. Her breasts lift and fall with her quick respirations and I try not to look there but damn, it’s hard not to, and I want to pull her closer so I can feel those sweet, soft tits pressed against me.

“Let me go.” Her voice comes out low and husky.

I’m losing my goddamn mind. This is a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen. But for some reason I don’t fucking care. “You’re not leaving.”

Our eyes meet again and the air around us crackles. “Why?” she demands. “You’re obviously angry. I lied to you. That’s grounds for termination.” She glares. “You know you want to fire me.”

I nearly groan. “You have no idea what I want to do to you.”

Her eyes widen again. Tension arcs between us. My muscles bunch and jump, my heart thudding. When her lips part again, I know ... she *does* know what I want to do to her. And she wants it, too.

Drawn to her like a magnet, I bend my head. I breathe in that scent I now know, spiced vanilla and pear. Heat pulses through my veins.

I can’t screw this up.

“Shit.” I relax my grip, but then probably make things worse by reaching for her other arm. Holding her like that, my grip gentler, I stare down into her face. “You make me crazy, Reese.”

Her eyelashes flutter and her pulse flickers at her throat. Her face now wears a glowing flush of color and her eyelids drop to half-mast. “I know.”

I choke on a laugh, and lower my forehead to touch hers. “Sometimes I think you *try* to make me crazy.”

“It’s pretty easy. Control freak.”

“Shit,” I murmur. “You know what buttons to push.”

“I didn’t do this to make you crazy. I swear.”

I sigh. “I believe you.” I move back, still holding her arms, and give her a searching look. Then I ease her back toward the chair and down into it. “Sit.”

“Yes, sir.”

My lips twitch. “That’s much better.”

Her own mouth purses up as if trying not to smile.

I lean my ass against the edge of the desk. “I promised Beck and Marco I wouldn’t fire you.”

“I *knew* you wanted to.”

“It crossed my mind. Okay, tell me what’s going on. Why did you do that?”

“I told you ... Sid needed help—”

“No.” I cut her off and her mouth snaps shut. “I mean, what are you hiding, Reese?”

She eyes me balefully for a moment. Then her gaze slides away. “It’s not anything that would affect my employment here. I do have a lot of experience working in restaurants. Only, not as a waitress.” She meets my eyes again. “I’m a chef.”

I nod. Of course she is. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“I don’t want to work as a chef anymore. I needed a change. Less ... responsibility. I just wanted to be a waitress. For a while, at least,” she finishes, dropping her gaze and plucking at a speck of lint on her dress.

“You were a chef at those high-end New York restaurants you mentioned?”

“Yes.” She lifts her chin again. “I was the chef de cuisine at my last position.”

“Huh.” I rub my jaw. I feel like there’s more to this story, but she’s closed up tighter than a fish’s ass. She said she wanted a change. I’ll accept that ... for now. “Obviously you want to cook.”

She bows her head again. “I do kind of miss it.”

“You seem to be pretty good at it.”

Now her chin lifts again. “I won the Rising Star award in New York last year.”

“Okay.” That means nothing to me, but sounds impressive. And she seems proud of it. “So you’re a star chef.”

One corner of her mouth hitches up. “Rising star. But yes.”

I admire that. She's not bragging. But she's not downplaying her success, either, with false modesty. "We have an award-winning chef working at Conquistadors," I say musingly.

"Ha. As a waitress."

I stroke my jaw again, wheels turning in my head. "Okay. We'll make you a chef." I wince inwardly. Probably should have consulted with my business partners before throwing that out there. Although Beck did say to promote her.

Her jaw goes slack. "Um. No. Thanks." She jumps up again, almost close enough to touch him. Now her eyes flicker all over the place and she nearly vibrates.

"What? Why?"

She's halfway to the door, but pauses and turns. "I told you. I don't want to be a chef right now. I need ... a break from it. That's why I'm here." She cocks her head. "Do I still have a waitress job?"

"Fuck, yeah." He frowns.

She hesitates. "Okay, then. I'm sorry for all this trouble, but I'll stay out of the kitchen from now on." She walks out.

Well, shit.

I round the desk and throw myself down into the chair.

That didn't go exactly like I planned.

It's not long before Beck comes storming in. "What the hell did you say to her?"

I groan. "Why?"

"She came out of here looking like she'd just been held at gunpoint."

"I offered her a job as a chef."

Beck's mouth falls open. "What?"

"I know, I know, we didn't talk about it."

Beck lowers himself into a chair, gaze fixed on me. "A chef?"



“Yeah. Turns out she’s a chef. Worked in a bunch of fancy restaurants in New York. Won awards.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah.”

“But she turned it down.”

“I gather there’s a reason she didn’t tell us that.”

“Ha. I gather there is, too. She said she wanted a change. Less responsibility.”

“That woman owns responsibility.”

“Right? Anyway, first she said she kind of misses cooking, and I thought hey, this is a win-win situation, right? We’ve got an award-winning chef working for us. We need her. She wants to cook. But no, she basically told me to go fuck myself and stalked out.”

Beck grins. “I wish I’d seen her tell you that.”

“Not in those exact words,” I admit. I blow out a long breath. “She seemed upset.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

I stare across the room. “Maybe I can convince her.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just lay it out for her again. It makes sense, right?”

“Yeah ... I dunno.” Beck rubs his forehead. “Not that I’m an expert on women or anything but using logic might not be the best approach.”

“Reese seems very logical.”

“Sure. But there’s obviously some emotion involved is what I’m saying. That means you need to use caution. Trust me.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Hey, just giving some input.”

“Thanks.” I think about what Beck said. “Emotion. Ugh.”

“I know, I know.”

“You’re okay with offering her a job as a chef?”

“Hell, yeah. Did you taste the stuff she made? It was fantastic.”

“I know.” I sigh. “How’s Sid?”

“To be honest, I think he’s pissed. Not that she took over, actually the opposite. I know he was worried he was going to lose his job, then things were looking up and now ... he knows he can’t do it alone.”

“Maybe Reese would agree to just keep helping him? Not actually be the head chef or whatever we’d call it.”

“I don’t think it’s fair to expect her to be a server *and* help in the kitchen.”

“No, I agree. And we’d have to pay her more. Danny was hesitant about taking on more staff.”

“It’s our decision,” Beck points out. “I’m sure Marco would feel the same. If you can get her to agree, we’ll back you up on this.”

“Thanks, man.” I suck in air. “Guess I’ll need to talk to her again.”

“Good luck with that.”

Yeah, I’m going to need luck. I’m also going to need to know the reason she doesn’t want to be a chef.

## Reese

The banging on my door and subsequent ferocious barking by Jack make me pour coffee all over my kitchen counter the next morning. Damn, I thought I was so much less jumpy lately.

“Jesus!” I set down the coffeepot and grab a towel to stop the liquid from running onto the floor. “Jack, quiet!”

Who the hell is at my door? Still holding the towel, I march over and peered out.

Cade.

Frowning, I open the door to him. “Hi. What are you doing here?”

He scowls back at me. “I came to get you and Jack. We’re going to teach him to surf, remember?”

“I remember. I just didn’t think you’d want to do it after our, uh, discussion yesterday.”

“Why not?”

“You seemed angry.”

“That had nothing to do with Jack.”

I try not to smile. “I guess not.”

“So come on, let’s go.” He jerks his head. “We need to see if he can swim.”

I now notice he’s wearing a pair of black board shorts and long-sleeved gray T-shirt that hugs his broad chest and shoulders. “You’re going to go in the water?”

“Sure. To make sure he doesn’t drown.”

I bite my lip. I don’t want Jack to drown. I also don’t want to force him go in the water if he doesn’t want to. “I don’t know ...”

“Let’s just try it.”

Jack is happily pacing around Cade, who bends and rubs his head and strokes down his back.

“You confuse me.”

He looks up at me. “I know.”

I smile at having my words repeated back at me. “Okay, fine. I’ll get his leash.”

“And the toy.”

“Right.”

I clean up the spilled coffee, unplug my phone from where it’s charging and shove it in the back pocket of my jeans, then find a squeaky rubber chicken. I also stuff a couple of poop

bags into a pocket and grab Jack's leash. As soon as he sees the leash, he goes crazy, barking, whining, and jumping up and down.

"Yes, you like your walks, don't you, buddy." I bend down to clip the leash to his collar.

I straighten and meet Cade's amused eyes. Heat sparks.

Like in his office, I'm intensely aware of him and of the way my skin tingles and my veins heat. Yes, I'm attracted to my boss. Yes, it's not good. Tempting. But a terrible idea.

"Okay, let's go." He opens the door and gestures for me.

I pluck my keys from the rack on the wall near the door and lock the door behind us. The morning is fresh and cool and feels so good on my heated skin. A thin layer of pale clouds allows some of the brightness of the sun through, and the air holds briny hints of the ocean.

"How do you know where I live?" I ask. "Oh, never mind."

He grins.

That grin is remarkable.

I drag my gaze away from him and over my scrappy front yard, mostly dirt and weeds, and I cringe a little. He probably lives in some gorgeous beachside mansion.

"You rent here?" Cade asks as we hit the sidewalk.

"Yes. It's reasonably priced and a decent neighborhood. Close to work and the beach."

He nods.

"Where do you live?"

"Not far, actually. Over on Law Street."

I'm not familiar enough with the area to know exactly where that is, but it doesn't matter.

"Let me take Jack." He reaches for the leash.

I pull it away. "No, I've got him."

His head whips around to stare at me, then he bursts out laughing. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll carry the chicken, then.”

“Won’t you feel silly walking down the street carrying a rubber chicken?”

“I’ve done worse things.” He takes it from me.

“Hmmm.”

“I once had to walk around a Coronado bar carrying a big black dildo.”

I crack up. “Oh, my God.”

“Yeah. This is nothing.”

“Do you miss the Navy?”

“Sometimes, yeah. But life is good now. Mostly.”

“What’s not good about it?”

“We need an award-winning chef.”

“Doh.” I roll my eyes.

“We probably couldn’t afford you, though. I bet you made big bucks working in those swank places in the big city.”

“Eh, I did okay.”

“We’re probably not high class enough for you.”

I snort. “That’s ridiculous.” I turn a suspicious frown on him. “That’s not why you’re here, is it? To persuade me?”



## REESE

Stopped on the sidewalk, hands planted on my hips, I glare at Cade.

He sighs. “Of course not. We’d already planned this.”

I study his face for any sign of deception. He meets my eyes steadily.

“True.” I pause. “I still don’t know why, though.”

“You’re proving to me that dogs have personalities.”

“Right.” I eye Jack, trotting happily ahead of us, the leash in his mouth, ignoring us. “See? He thinks he’s taking us for a walk.”

Cade chuckles.

Jack halts at a bush to sniff intently and I slow my pace to let him have a few sniffs, then give a gentle tug on the leash to keep him going.

As we arrive at the beach, the sun breaks through the clouds. Crossing the sand toward the water, I turn my face to it, enjoying the warmth and brightness.

“You like living in California?” Cade asks.

“I do.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I suppose I am, a little. I grew up in New York. I did travel when I was younger, but I spent most of my life there. What about you? Where are you from originally?”

“Mesa, Arizona. Came here for BUD/S. Never wanted to leave.”

“BUD/S?”

“Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training.”

“Right. I hear that’s pretty intense.”

“That’s one word to describe it. Torturous hell would be another.”

“You made it, though.”

“I did. I worked my ass off preparing and also I was determined I was going to do it. My home life was another form of torturous hell.”

“Oh.” I touch my throat, remembering what he’d said about his family. His story had really affected me. Like, I’d wanted to hug him. So inappropriate. “Right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s in the past. Okay? Come here, Jack! Good boy. You wanna swim? I think you do.”

“I’m not so sure.” Why am I so worried about Jack? He’s a dog. He’s not even *my* dog.

“Come on, boy!” Cade kicks off his sandals and trudges to the water. “Come on!” He holds up the chicken then tosses it down the beach, not into the water. Jack bolts for it on his stubby legs, seizes it in his mouth, shakes it violently, then trots back to us. “Good boy.”

Cade takes the chicken again and this time he throws it into the water. Jack dashes after it, not even hesitating. It’s close enough that he doesn’t have to swim, so he again retrieves the toy and runs back to Cade.

“See, he doesn’t mind the water.” Cade pauses to pull his shirt over his head before bending to take the toy from Jack.

Ugh. I stare in fascination at Cade’s amazing torso. For a blond man, his skin is tanned a deep gold. His board shorts ride low on lean hips, and my gaze lingers on the two grooves of his lower back, then climbs the strong channel of his spine and roams over all the muscles of his upper back rippling



beneath sleek skin as he walks into the water and throws the toy out farther.

I feel like I'm watching a slow motion movie, nothing but Cade and his muscles and the sparkling ocean. Quivery sensation ripples through my belly.

Jack runs after it again but when the water gets deep he stops.

Distracted from Cade's hot body, I twist my fingers together, watching the indecision on Jack's face. He doesn't know how to get his beloved toy.

"You can do it, buddy." Cade wades out, lifts Jack under his belly and carries him deeper, where his feet can't touch. I press a hand to my chest, my heart swelling as I watch the care Cade takes with Jack.

Instinctively, Jack's paws begin to paddle and when Cade releases him, he keeps going, swimming to the chicken. His strokes are a bit wild but he closes his mouth around his toy, manages to turn and frantically paddle his way back.

I hold my breath, but Cade stands near him ready in case the little guy goes under. When Jack's feet touch ground he runs out, drops the toy at my feet and then shakes himself. Water sprays all over me, and I lift my arms to shield myself, shrieking.

Cade's laugh is joyous and booming.

Warmth spreads through me. I meet Cade's dancing eyes and I have to smile. "He did it."

"He did. And he'll get better. Come on, Jack!" Cade grabs the chicken and runs to the water.

Jack bounds after him, splashing into the waves and once more he fetches the toy from the ocean, happily paddling.

My heart squeezes as Jack emerges onto the sand and drops the toy again, his mouth stretched into a wide, panting smile.

Okay, I know dogs don't really smile, but clearly he's happy, his tail wagging so hard his butt shakes.

After a few more swims, Jack wades out and stands next to me. “Next time we can try him surfing.”

I close my eyes and tip my head back, sweet joy expanding inside me. “Okay. He does seem to like it.”

“He has some retriever in him,” Cade says. “So it makes sense.”

I open my eyes and give him a look. “You know dog breeds.”

“Well. Some.” He shrugs.

Damn. He annoys me and frustrates me, but shit, he’s making me like him.

I can’t like him. Not like that. I can like him, as a boss. Respect him. But like him, like him? No. I’m in no place to have feelings for someone. I’m fucked up, and I’m only here for a while. And if he knew the truth about me, he’d hate me. So yeah ... I can’t like him.

“Aren’t you proud of the little dude?” He cocks his head toward Jack.

“Yes.” My smile broadens. “Yes, I am.”

“Me, too. And you’re right. He does have a personality. He’s intrepid.”

“Intrepid.” I purse my lips. “Yeah. I like it.”

“Uh ... he might need a bath now.”

We both stare down at the wet, sandy pup. Pungent odor of wet dog emanates from him. I can’t be upset, though. “Oh, well.”

“I’ll help you.”

“You don’t need to do that.” I bend to clip the leash to Jack’s collar.

He doesn’t even bother responding to that, and I know I haven’t dissuaded him; he just isn’t bothering to argue with me. That makes me smile, too.

Cade snags his shirt from where he dropped it on dry sand, shakes it out and pulls it on. I watch from the corner of my eye, sad that he's covering up all those beautiful muscles. I swallow a sigh.

We set off back across the sand toward Ocean Boulevard, Jack's pace slower now.

"I think you exhausted him," I say. "He's not used to so much physical activity."

"How old is he?"

"They weren't sure, but they think about four years old."

"That's still young. He needs to be active."

"Are you saying I don't give him enough exercise?"

"No! Fuck, no." He flashes a scowl at me. "Clearly, you love him."

"No, I don't."

"What?" He gapes.

I sigh. It's a lie. I'm lying to myself. Jack is going to leave. He's going to a forever home someday. I have to protect my poor heart. "Okay, I kind of like him. A little."

"Uh-huh." We walk across Ocean. "You, Reese Kirkwell, are a big phony."

"What?"

"You act all tough and strong and bossy. But you have a soft heart."

"No, I don't." My entire body tightens. My response is automatic. He can't be right. I can't have a soft heart. I can't care.

I had to be tough to make it in a high-testosterone profession. That beer bottle thrown at me? Yeah, that was only one incident among many, including profanity-laced diatribes directed at me by a chef with anger management issues because I put too much chicken stock into a sauce or overcooked a piece of rainbow trout, screaming at me that I

might as well be sitting at home on my couch watching Nigella Fucking Lawson. Or another boss who liked to grab my ass any chance he got.

I learned to be strong. Resilient. Assertive. Working for drama kings in kitchens in high-end restaurants is not a place for the faint of heart. And then ... when I had to be tough, to be bossy and strong, just like he said ... *God*.

I close my eyes briefly at the wave of darkness that rolls over me. That darkness I hoped to leave behind in New York.

I pull in a long, slow breath and let it out even slower. Control. I'm fine.

"Yes, you do." As if he's unaware of my internal struggle, he nudges me with his shoulder as we walk along Thomas. "I've seen it. It's why you helped Sid."

I swallow. I have no answer.

"You still want to help him," Cade continues. "You want to help all of us. You want Conquistadors to serve good food."

I blink hard and fast at the stinging in the corners of my eyes. I stare straight ahead as we walk. I want to deny it. But how can I? I press my lips together.

"Why don't you want to work as a chef, Reese?" Cade's quiet, steady tone almost has me spilling my guts.

I don't want him to hate me. I don't want him to feel sorry for me. I just want to escape what happened.

"I told you." I manage to squeeze the words out through my constricted throat. "I needed a change."

He nods and doesn't press me.

Jack pauses to lift his leg on a fire hydrant and we wait for him silently, then continue our walk in more silence.

I do want Conquistadors to serve good food. Why do I even care, though? It's just the place I work. For now. And dammit, I had fun creating those new dishes. I was in heaven at Food Depot. Ideas flooded into my head, things I'm itching

to try. Dying to taste. And craving the appreciation I get when people eat and enjoy and praise my cooking.

I screwed up big time, getting too involved in things. I should never have done that.

Cade isn't saying anything. He isn't pressing me to talk. He isn't pushing me to agree to take over their kitchen. He's just a big, solid presence next to me as we walk.

"I'll carry him into your house," Cade says as we arrive at my place.

"You'll get all sandy."

"I was in the water. I have to shower, anyway."

"Okay." I unlock the door as Cade scoops up Jack. Inside, I lead the way to my bathroom. It's a tiny space and Cade's a big man who takes up a lot of room. I hover at the door as he sets Jack in the tub and reaches for the detachable shower head.

"I'll grab Jack's towel." I have a big old beach towel I use for him, and I pull it out of the linen closet in the hall. When I return, Cade is hosing off Jack.

"Good boy," Cade murmurs. "Does he have shampoo?"

"Yes. I'll get that, too."

Jack stands patiently as Cade shampoos and rinses him.

"You have to cover his ears," I offer. "To make sure no water gets in them."

"You do it."

He's seated on the toilet, leaning over the tub. I edge past his big knees and bend down to put my hands over Jack's ears. Cade shifts and my breasts are nearly in his face.

The air in the room goes electric, awareness making my skin tingle everywhere. The tension in Cade's body tells me he feels it, too.

Oh, God. My nipples tighten and my breasts ache. Imagining Cade burying his face there ... no, God, no, I can't

think of that. That's crazy.

"There." Cade cranks off the water. "I think he's good."

His husky tone makes me think of a dark bedroom and cool sheets and his mouth ...

Damn.

I straighten with a jerky movement and grab the towel from the vanity. I drape it over Jack and rub him, then Cade takes over to wrap it around him and lift him out.

"He's going to ... aaaaah!" We both get drenched as Jack shakes, the towel flying off him.

Our eyes meet with a near electric shock and then we both burst out laughing.

Taking advantage of our distraction, Jack bolts.

"No!" My eyes widen. "Jack! Get back here!" I sprint out of the bathroom and catch him just before he jumps up on my couch. Still wet, he soaks my T-shirt and I sigh. "Dammit, Jack."

Cade follows with the towel, his eyes dancing. "Here. Give him to me."

He enfolds Jack in the towel as I hand him over, then lowers him to the floor so he can rub him dry. He glances up at me and his gaze lingers on my chest.

I look down. Shit! My shirt is soaked and my hard nipples are on full display. Heat sweeps from my chest up into my face.

Cade lifts his head and we eye each other, something pulsing between us. My heart bangs against my ribs and I squeeze my thighs together at the ache building low inside me.

I open my mouth to say *I'm all wet*, but luckily realize how that will sound before the words come out. "I, uh, guess I need to change."

"Go on." Cade's voice comes out in a rasp. "I got him."

I rocket past him and down the short hall to my bedroom where I pull the wet T-shirt off over my head. I press a hand to my breasts. Yep, my bra is wet, too. I unfasten it and toss it onto my bed, then yank open my dresser drawer. My fingers don't cooperate as I try to get a clean bra on and fastened. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

Damn, I'm all flustered.

I snag a hoodie lying on the chair in the corner of the room, slide it over my head, and tug it down. There.

Jack and Cade are seated on my living room floor, Cade lifting Jack's paws to dry them, too.

"Okay, I'm back," I announce needlessly. "All dry."

Cade lifts his head. His lips twitch. "Damn."

More heat scalds my cheeks.

"Do you maybe need to blow-dry him?" Cade asks.

I shake my head. "He'll dry. I'll just get a blanket to put down on the couch. Hang on."

Once more I flee, returning with a blanket. Cade helps me lay it on the couch and Jack immediately jumps up, paws at it, turns in a few circles and then lays down, nose between his paws. His eyebrows twitch as he peers up at us, then he closes his eyes.

I laugh. "He's exhausted."

"So he should be, after all that swimming." Cade sets a gentle hand on Jack's head. "So Sunday?"

"Um, what?"

"Sunday. You're off, right?"

"Yes."

"This time we'll get him on my surfboard."

"That's crazy."

"Yeah, but it's fun. And you can see he enjoyed the water."

I have to admit he did. Why is Cade doing this, though? He's my boss. I work for him. "I don't know if it's a good idea."

"I'll get him a life jacket."

"No." I sigh. "Not that. I mean ... you and me." I wave a hand.

He blows out a breath. "Yeah. I know."

"I mean, I know you have this thing ... about women."

His eyebrows lower.

"That's your own business," I add quickly. "I don't want to judge—"

"But you do."

My mouth opens. Then shuts. I thought I hid that better. Ah, well. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I mean, I see the parade of beautiful women in and out of the bar, but obviously, it's not a good idea for one of your hookups to be someone at work."

"One of my hookups."

"Yes."

He rubs his forehead. "I'm not trying to hook up with you, Reese."

I blink. Well, that's humiliating. My skin tightens and my cheeks and eyes burn. "Right, of course not! I just ... don't know why you're doing this. But okay! We'll take Jack surfing on Sunday."

He nods, a faint furrow still between his eyebrows. "Okay."

My face still hot, I twist my fingers together.

What is wrong with me? I controlled a kitchen full of staff, most of them men, most of them sexist and foul-mouthed, and I gave back as good as I got. And now this one man has me blushing, for God's sake, blushing and stammering and making a fool of myself.



I'm off my game. I need to get back in the game.

"Okay, fine," I say. "I'll do it."

One of his eyebrows flies up behind his shaggy hair, that sexual tension still crackling between us. I know exactly where his mind went. "Uh ... do what?"

I close my eyes. For the love of ... "I'll do it ... I'll help in the kitchen."



## CADE

“We need to figure this out.” I look around the crowded office with Beck, Marco, Danny, and Reese all sitting or standing. “We need to know what Reese’s role is going to be.”

“I don’t want to be in charge,” she says, lifting her chin.

I grind my teeth. She totally wants to be in charge. I can tell she’s salivating at the chance to take control and direct things in the kitchen. Why is she denying that?

“I think you have to, Reese,” Danny offers. “You’re the one with the ideas. The knowledge. The experience.”

Her lips tighten, one corner twitching up into a grimace.

I let her off the hook. “Danny’s in charge. Everything you do, you run past him.” I meet Reese’s eyes. “You’re not responsible for other staff. Just the food.” I don’t want to come across as a tyrant, but I sense right now this is what she needs.

I see the way relief releases the tightness in her eyes and mouth. She nods.

I guessed right.

Some kind of weird emotion fills my chest. I shake my head to refocus. “Are you up for redoing the menu?”

Her eyes sparkle. “Yes.”

“What kind of time frame do you need?”

We talk more business.

“You’re set on Mexican food?” Reese asks.

We exchange glances and shrug.

“It seemed to go with tequila,” Marco says.

“I agree,” Reese says. “I suggest we go for a California-Mexican cuisine. There’s a lot of authentic Mexican food in San Diego, so let’s not try to do that. I’m not Mexican, but I love the idea of combining native Mexican ingredients with fresh California produce. And dairy. Reimagining other popular dishes.”

Once again, we all shrug.

“That sounds fantastic to me,” Beck says.

Reese’s confidence has us all listening. She has ideas about new menu items but also specials that would change daily or weekly, that would keep things interesting. We also talk about a plan for someone to take over her waitressing shifts so she can focus on the food.

She’s really something. Clearly, she’s in her element. I can’t wait to watch her in the kitchen.

Jesus. What the hell is wrong with me?

Yesterday after I went to the beach with her and Jack, I damn near jumped her back at her place. She’s fascinating—trying to be tough and indifferent on the outside, but so obviously in love with that mutt, worried about him in the ocean. And the way she looked at me when I took my shirt off ... yeah, I noticed the heated appreciation in her eyes at the beach. And then back at her house, when we were so close, those lush tits so near my face. And yeah, I also noticed her hard nipples and the way her breath caught in her throat. There’s a sensuality there, an appetite ... and not just for food.

It makes sense that if she loves food and cooking, she’s a sensual person—food has tastes and smells and textures. And that sends my mind straight into the gutter, thinking about her taste, her scent, the texture of her skin, the feel of her body against me, around me.

I’m not alone in it. I recognize the same reaction in her.

What the hell are we going to do about it, though? She's still an employee.

"I'm eager to get working on it," Reese says as we finish up the meeting, and she heads out front to start her shift.

Beck and Marco linger in the office after Reese and Danny leave, Danny to go talk to Sid and explain the plan to him. We'll keep Sid on as long as he's willing to work under Reese and take instructions from her. He'll probably be relieved.

"So." Beck leans back in a chair and steepled his fingers. "How'd you manage that?"

"What?" I lean back, too.

"Getting her to agree."

"Ah. I didn't do anything."

"Bullshit." Marco shakes his head.

"It's true. Much as I'd like to take the credit for it, I really didn't. Yesterday we hung out with her dog at the beach, and \_\_\_"

Beck straightens. "What? You hung out with her?"

"Yeah." I wave a hand. "Just casual." I'm lying, but whatever. "I just mentioned once that we still wanted her to take over the kitchen, but that was it. And then somehow ... she said she'd do it." I shrug. "I told you I had it covered."

They both give me a narrow-eyed look. "Okay. Sure."

I shoot them a shit-eating grin and then all three of us burst out laughing. Beck and Marco shake their heads. "Don't fuck this up," Marco says. "Somehow an award-winning chef walked into our restaurant and took over our kitchen. I don't know what we did to deserve that, but let's make the best of it."

"Yeah," Beck says. "We need her."

"I know. I plan to offer her foot rubs and feed her chocolate."

The smiles fade.

“Come on, dudes. I’m joking.”

Marco punches my arm. “Okay. Sure.”

“He’s doing it!”

I grin as Reese jumps up and down on the sand. I stand thigh deep in the ocean as Jack coasts along a tiny wave, all four paws planted on the surfboard. His bright yellow life jacket protects him in case he loses his balance, but I’m right here, anyway.

Reese claps and wades into the water to greet us, holding out her arms to Jack, who decides to jump off the board and swim to her. She scoops him up out of the water and hugs him, laughing. “What a good boy. You’re such a good boy. Did you like that?”

Jack swipes his tongue over Reese’s chin, looking like he’s smiling himself.

Christ, seeing Reese like this is killing me. I’ve seen her smile, I’ve seen her laugh, but shadows always lurk in those mysterious green eyes, and this pure, unbridled joy nearly takes my knees out. I have no idea why I’m reacting so strongly to this, but it suddenly makes the drenching in cold Pacific waters all worth it.

Jack wriggles out of her arms and she lowers him to the sand. He races to the water and barks at Cade.

“He wants to go again!” Reese’s smile is as bright as the Sunday sunshine.

“Sure. Come on, little dude. If he likes it, sometime I can try taking him with me on bigger waves.”

I catch Reese’s wrinkled nose. She’s still hesitant about this, but seeing how much Jack actually likes the water will probably assuage those fears. And I’m showing her that I can take care of Jack in the water.

I carry Jack back out into the surf and wait for a good wave, not too big. This time Jack stays on the board longer until Reese meets up with him at the edge of the water.

She's dressed in a pair of short shorts that are damp at the hem, and a long-sleeved T-shirt now wet from picking up the dog. Her hair is piled up on her head in a messy knot, a peachy flush colors her cheeks and nose, and she's gorgeous. "Attaboy!"

Jack and I do a few more runs, but the breeze is picking up and the surf getting rougher. Plus, my legs are numb.

I carry Jack under one arm and the surfboard under the other as I trudge through the water to Reese. "Enough for today, I guess."

"You did so good." She drops to a crouch and unfastens the life jacket. Jack proceeds to shake himself as usual, giving us both a shower.

She stands, holding the jacket. "Thank you. That was so cool."

"It really was." I grin. "I had no idea if he'd do it."

She mock-punches my arm. "Hey. I thought you had all the confidence in the world in him."

I grab her hand and twine my fingers into hers. "I knew you were nervous about it. But I wasn't going to let anything happen to him." Our eyes meet and hold, the breeze teasing loose strands of her hair around her face. "It was a hard lesson for me to learn, but there's nothing wrong with having a little fun."

She doesn't answer.

I squeeze her hand. "Right?"

"Why was it a hard lesson for you to learn?"

Ugh. Am I going to go there? "I told you about my life growing up," I say slowly. "There wasn't much fun. We were always on edge, waiting for my old man to come home drunk out of his mind and try to beat the shit out of us, or fall down and break something. It took Cade and Marco to teach me that it was okay to relax and have fun."

She regards me thoughtfully, her head moving up and down slowly.

“Maybe *you* need more fun in your life,” I add.

“I don’t think so.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“I don’t deserve fun.” She pulls her hand loose and turns to call Jack, who’s wandering. “Jack! Let’s go! Time to go home.” Jack runs back to her and she picks up his leash where she left it on the sand.

What? She doesn’t deserve to have fun? What the fuck is that about?

I stare at her slender back as she hikes across the sand away from me. I grab my board and towel and stride after her. “Hey. What the hell does that mean, Reese?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head and keeps walking.

“Nothing my ass. Reese, wait.” I inject a commanding tone into my voice and she slows and glances over her shoulder at me, but doesn’t stop. “Why would you say that?”

She sighs. “It’s just how I feel. Just forget it.”

Like hell I’ll forget it, but once again she’s closed off.

The weird thing is ... I know exactly what she meant. For a lot of my life, I, too, felt I didn’t deserve to have fun. Now I have to find out why she feels that way.

Reese

“Nobody’s cooking for the party.”

I tip my head. “Really? We need to have food.”

Later that evening at Conquistadors, we wait for the last customers to leave to close down the bar and start the staff appreciation party.

“Of course.” Cade smirks. “We’re going to order pizza.”

I lift an eyebrow. “You’re going to get pizza delivered to a restaurant?”

“Sure. Why not?”



I laugh. “It seems weird but yeah, why not.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to make you all work when it’s a party to show our appreciation.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you.”

I wasn’t scheduled to work today, and after our trip to the beach and my unfortunate confession, I was glad of that so I didn’t have to spend more time with Cade. I’m getting to know him and know I screwed up by saying I don’t deserve fun. He’s not going to just let it go until he knows why I said it.

Shit.

The restaurant is pretty much empty now, other than regulars Joe and Helena, who are sitting at the bar arguing heatedly about what movie to watch when they get home.

“We’re closing now,” Beck says to them. “I highly recommend the latest James Bond flick.”

Both Joe and Helena fall silent. They look at each other, shrug, and slide off their stools. “See you tomorrow,” they both call as they walk out.

“I don’t understand how they stay married,” I say. “They don’t agree on anything.”

“Right?” Cade shakes his head. “But then again, they agree on the most important things.”

“What?”

“They love each other and they’re honest with each other and they’re faithful to each other.”

My heart flutters in my chest. “Um. I guess those *are* the most important things.” Not that I’d know anything about a relationship. I’ve been so busy building my career, I’ve never really had one of those. I had a few boyfriends, but most of them weren’t willing to stick around when I worked such long and weird hours. Anyone with a nine-to-five job who wanted to go out for happy hour drinks or dinner and a movie was going to be disappointed.

But when my career came to a crashing halt, and I was all alone, it crossed my mind that maybe I sacrificed too much for my work. Or maybe I'm just too selfish to ever be in a relationship.

Now that customers are all gone and the restaurant staff not working today have all arrived, Marco cranks up the music and Beck starts pouring drinks. Hayden is also behind the bar, helping, which is cute. She has no idea what she's doing when it comes to cocktails, but she fetches ice and glasses, and pours wine.

"What would you like, Carrie?" Marco asks. "We have some new drinks on the menu."

Carrie leans on the bar, smiling at him. "Oh, yeah? Is that thanks to Reese also?"

"Nope. Thanks to Beck. How about Sex with the Bartender?"

"I'm always up for that." Carrie winks at him.

"It's a drink, baby."

"No. You cannot have a drink called that." She pauses. "What's in it?"

"Bailey's, Triple Sec, coconut rum."

"Erm ... no, thanks."

"Okay, how about a Dick Sucker?"

Carrie chokes. "A what?"

Marco grins. "Dick Sucker. Made with Blueberry Pucker, and pear vodka."

"Um ... it sounds good."

"Gotta love a good Dick Sucker," Marco says with a dirty grin.

I laugh along with everyone else.

"How about you, Reese?" Cade asks. "A Juicy Screw?"

I laugh, my body tingling with awareness of Cade standing near me. Speaking of a juicy screw ... "While that does sound

tempting, I think I'll have a glass of wine. The Sauvignon Blanc."

"Coming right up." He pours me a generous glass of wine.

"What other crazy drinks do you have?" Carrie asks, now sipping on her turquoise drink.

"Pop My Cherry," Beck answers. "Lick Her Right."

"Oh, my God."

"Hey, they're very popular."

Marco leaves briefly and returns with the bottle of tequila, which he sets on the bar and strokes reverently. "We'll crack this baby open in a while."

"I can't wait!" Hayden bounces a little.

"Me, too," Sid says. "I've heard of this but I never thought I'd ever get to try it."

Cade grabs himself a beer and moves around the bar to stand with the group now mingling there. Despite not having to cook, I've set out bowls of chips and salsa so we have something to nibble on while waiting for our pizza.

"So." Carrie turns to face me. "I was right. You're not just a waitress."

I grimace. "I am a waitress, right now. And I'm sorry that I misled you." I do feel bad about that. And I know there are going to be questions.

"Was there really a bad breakup?"

"Mmm, not really."

Carrie gives me a searching look, but rather than ask about my reasons for lying, she says, "Tell us how you got to be a chef. Did you go to chef school?"

I smile. "Sort of. I did go to community college after high school for a year. My first ever job was working in a kitchen as a dishwasher. Luckily that didn't last long and I got promoted to a prep cook, but the kitchen fascinated me. Then I

got a job at Piccolo.” I pause, not sure if anyone there will recognize the name.

“Oh, my God,” Carrie says. “You worked for Graham Sand?” Her mouth falls open.

“Yes.” Graham has become even more famous the past few years because of his reality cooking show.

“Wow. He’s ... an asshole.”

I laugh. “Yeah. But he’s very talented.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“It was a great experience,” I go on. “I quit school to work there full-time. I learned a lot and I wanted to move up, but I knew I had to learn from others, so I left there and traveled in France for a year.”

“Is he the jerkwad who threw a beer bottle at you?” Cade asks.

Others around us gasp.

I make a face. “Yes.”

“I knew he was an asshole!” Carrie says.

“I ducked,” I add. “He didn’t hit me with it.”

“Good to know,” Cade growls.

“The things I could tell you about him,” I murmur. “But I won’t. Anyway, I came back from France, and got another job as a sous-chef.”

“That’s when you won the award?”

“No. From there, I moved on to a position as chef du cuisine.”

“That’s the boss chef?” Cade asks.

I smile. “Yes. I created the specials, ordered the food, basically managed the kitchen. So that’s how I came to be a chef.”

“You must be very talented,” Hayden says.

“She is,” Sid says.

I turn my gaze on him with surprise. “Thank you, Sid.”

“You are. You blew me away with the stuff you did, and I’ve already learned a lot from you.”

That’s nice of him to say, since I kind of took his job away from him. But in the days I’ve been working more in the kitchen, he seems more relieved than resentful. Sure, a few times he questioned me, when I suggested a jalapeño pineapple salsa, or ahi tuna enchiladas. But mostly he seems happy to go along with what I want to do. And truthfully? He keeps me grounded. This is a popular, fun tequila bar, not a pretentious bullshit foodie place where dishes are embellished with truffles, caviar, or kombu.

I also need to keep in mind that we have to limit the number of items on the menu. We don’t have a huge space for prep and cooking, or storage, for that matter. And my bosses have made it clear they want the food to be good, but they aren’t trying to run a Michelin-starred restaurant here.

Beck has lined up tequila glasses along the bar, and Marco makes a big show of opening the bottle. Then he pours shots for everyone.

Beck holds up a hand. “Before we drink, we want to make a speech.”

“No, we don’t,” Cade mutters.

I hide a smile.

Beck ignores him. “Thank you to everyone here for helping us make Conquistadors a success. We’ve had some ups and downs and of course some challenges along the way, but we’re doing well and becoming known as a destination in San Diego. Once we get the new menu up I’m sure we’ll do even better.” He winks at me. “We couldn’t do it without all of you, right, guys?” He looks to Marco and Cade.

“Right.” They both lift their glasses in a toast.

“Okay, let’s taste this sweet, sweet blue agave nectar,” Beck finishes. He holds up his glass to the light, and everyone does the same.

After sniffing and tasting, Carrie says, “Wow. Even I can tell it’s really good.” She surveys Marco. His eyes are closed as if he’s in a trance. “You okay there, honey?”

Marco opens one eye. “I’m in heaven.”

“Hmm. I might be jealous of a tequila,” Carrie says.

“You’re my first love,” Marco replies. “But this is a close second.”

I hold up my glass, admiring the dark amber color. I swirl the glass and regard the “string of pearls”—the liquid formed inside the glass. Then I carefully sniff, enjoying faint burnt sugar and cinnamon on the nose, and sip. I close my eyes and hold the tequila on my tongue for a few seconds before swallowing. “Wow.” I open my eyes to find Cade staring at me. The scorching, intense expression in his eyes makes my heart bump in an uneven rhythm.



## CADE

My gaze drops to Reese's mouth, her bottom lip wet with tequila. An intense desire to lick it, to drag my tongue along her mouth, suck that plush bottom lip and taste the tequila mingled with her own sweetness, swells up inside me, fast and hot. Her eyes smoky, her mouth full and lush ... sensual ... goddamn, what would it feel like to have her look at me like that? I swallow. "Well? What do you think?"

"Lovely." Her voice is low. "Crème brulée. Pineapple. Warm and rich, with a honey-toasted oak finish."

I purse my lips.

"What do you think?" She eyes me over her glass.

"Haven't tried it yet." I do the same as she did, sniffing then tasting it, holding the tequila in my mouth to search out all the notes, trying to focus on the fine tequila instead of her. I swallow and nod slowly. "Oh, yeah. Definitely warm and rich."

Our eyes meet in a moment of shared pleasure and understanding, as if we're standing alone in the bar, the music and voices fading around us. My jaw tightens and heat pulses around me, inside me. Damn, I want her.

"It's amazing," Reese says in a calm tone that belies the heat in her eyes. "I guess I shouldn't use this stuff in the salmon marinade."

I choke. "Fuck, no."



“There is that rule that you shouldn’t cook with something you wouldn’t drink.”

“I thought that meant wine.”

“It means anything.” Then she chuckles. “I’m kidding. There are plenty of other good tequilas I can cook with.”

“Have you cooked with tequila before?”

“I have not. Many other spirits, but I was inspired, because this is a tequila bar. What would be better?”

“Makes sense to me.” We’ve separated a bit from the crowd, who are drinking the tequila and comparing tasting notes. “I want to add my thanks to what Beck said. We really appreciate what you’re doing.”

She eyes me. “Maybe you should wait and see how it affects your bottom line. I know that’s what you’re focused on.”

My eyebrows snap together. “That’s not all I care about.”

“It’s not?”

“Come on.” My voice comes out low and rough. “That’s what you think of me?”

“I know it’s important for you to make a success of the business.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all. I’m not criticizing you. I respect that.”

“Huh.” I eye her doubtfully.

“Look, I’ve worked for some horrendous bosses. You’re not one of them.”

“Oh.” I like that. Drawn to her, I shift closer. “I guess that’s good.”

Her lips curve. “You may have some control issues, but you’re not a total dick to the people who work for you.”

“High praise indeed.”

Her eyes sparkle. “But it’s a business. You can treat your staff like royalty, but if you’re not making money, they won’t even have jobs.”

“Good point,” I murmur, watching her lips move as she talks. Amazingly, we’re on the same page when it comes to business. I fucking love that. “You seem to have a very sensitive palate when it comes to tasting ... tequila.”

“I took sommelier classes. To learn about wines. At one point, I almost thought about becoming a sommelier.”

“Interesting. Why didn’t you?”

“I love food.”

I nod at her simple but sincere response.

“There’s something I’m curious about.” She lifts an eyebrow.

“What?” I take another sip of the smooth spirit.

“You mentioned that your father was an alcoholic.”

“Yeah.”

“And yet here you are ... owner of a bar.”

“It does seem ironic, doesn’t it?” I shrug. “I don’t drink much ... but I do drink.” I meet her eyes. “I’m not an alcoholic.”

“Clearly you’re not.” She shakes her head. “But you could have an entirely different attitude toward alcohol.”

“I could. After seeing alcohol destroy my dad’s life, I could be a preachy teetotaler. Sometimes I am preachy. I don’t like seeing people get wasted. We’re careful about that here.”

“I’ve seen that. Another thing I admire.”

More heat shimmers between us. I get my fair share of feminine approval from women I meet, but her compliments strike something deeper inside me. Women admired me in my uniform—and out of it. But this feels like more. Like she sees inside me to the man I want to be.

I was successful in my Navy career. I proved to myself that I'm worth something. But I never quite got over being hard on myself. The scars of my father's emotional abuse go deep.

"When I see people with a beer or a drink, laughing and happy and relaxed, I like that. I want to be a normal guy, who can have a beer and a good time. I admit to overdoing it a few times in my life. Just ask Beck and Marco." I grimace, and a smile flits on her lips. "But I don't like losing control."

Her smile deepens. "Imagine that." She tilts her head. "But now I can better understand why that is."

Yeah. I'm sharing more about myself than I usually do. "And I like it when people come here and have a drink or even a few and they're having fun. I know alcohol can be evil. Alcoholism is a disease. Sometimes I struggle with the conflict of it myself." I shrug. "The one thing I learned from my dad, though, is that in the end I can't control anyone else but myself."

"That's very true." Her eyes fasten warmly on my face. "Your life could have turned out very differently."

"Yeah. I know it. But I was determined not to let it."

"I'm sorry you went through that."

I search her face for any signs of pity. Because I fucking hate that.

She holds my gaze with a steady, clear-eyed expression.

"Thanks," I say gruffly. "How's Jack? Did he recover from his surfing lessons?"

"He was sound asleep when I left. Poor guy."

I love how her expression softens and warms when talking about the dog. "I think he liked it."

"I think he did, too." She pauses. "Thank you. I'm not very ... adventurous lately."

"Lately?" That catches my interest. "I'd say moving across the country where you don't know anybody to start a new job is pretty adventurous."

“Adventurous? Or cowardly?” She shrugs. “Never mind.”

“Cowardly? That makes it sound like you were running away from something.” My gaze sharpens on her. “Or someone.”

“Hayden and Carrie think I’m getting over a bad relationship.”

“Are you?” I narrow my eyes even more, my chest clenching.

“Not a romantic relationship.”

“Ah.” Still, she’s not offering up much.

She smiles but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Don’t worry, I’m fine.”

“I’m not so sure of that. Why did you say that, about not being adventurous lately?”

She sighs. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Huh. You know, I’d never have taken you for passive-aggressive.”

“What?” Her eyes pop wide as dinner plates. “I’m not!”

“You drop these comments, and when I try to ask you about them you close up. But I get the feeling you really *do* want to talk about things.”

She gapes at me for a moment, then closes her eyes and shakes her head. “Well, you’re wrong. I don’t. And we should get back to the party.”

She turns and walks away from me, inserting herself into the group gathered at the bar, where everyone is still exclaiming over the Jiminez.

My gaze wanders down her narrow back, over the curves of her ass in tight jeans, down her legs. Her hair is loose now, shimmering in rose-gold waves as she tosses her head to laugh at something someone says.

What is it about her?

“Did you know that the word *avocado* comes from the Nahuatl word for testicle?”

I frown at Sid but Reese laughs from her station where she’s expertly cutting up avocados a couple of days later. “Yes, I’ve heard that.”

Sid grins. “And that *guacamole* translates to testicle sauce?”

My frown deepens. I glance between Sid and Reese, waiting for her to take offense.

She doesn’t. The corners of her lips tip up. “That’s a myth.” Her knife keeps moving.

“What?” Sid scowls. “No, it’s not.”

She shrugs. “It’s a myth. If pre-Columbian Nahua people ever said the phrase *testicle sauce*, they wouldn’t have called it *guacamole*, they would have used other words that mean testes. I forget the words, I’m not a Nahuatl expert, but there’s another word that’s almost like guacamole and all it means is *mashed up avocados*.”

“Oh.” Sid sounds disappointed.

I cross my arms and grin, catching Reese’s eye.

She winks at me, smiling. “Sorry,” she calls to Sid. “Facts are important.”

“Huh.”

“Okay, so for these ahi tacos, we’re going to season the tuna with a garlic peppercorn rub.”

Sid reaches for a knife.

“Drop it.” Her stern tone has his hand freezing in the air.

“Huh?”

I lift an eyebrow.

“That’s my knife. Nobody touches my knives.”

I purse my lips. Hmm. Reese can be a bit of a diva, apparently.

“Sorry,” Sid mutters, moving to get another one.

“You have your own knives?” I ask.

“Of course.” She beams at me.

“I’d get in trouble if I touched one?”

“Only if you value your fingers.”

“Got it.”

We’ve made progress with the new menu in the past few days. I took Reese back to Food Depot and then to a big farmers’ market where she went crazy for a bunch of fresh local produce. “It’s so much better if we can use local ingredients,” she said happily.

I was a little worried about the cost of the food.

“Look.” She planted her hands on her hips. “I’m not one to be wasteful. Chefs are taught to never waste anything. In past jobs I was judged on profit margins and sales numbers, not just good reviews from food critics. I know what I’m doing. But if you want a quality menu that will keep guests coming back, you’re going to have to spend some money to get that.”

So we sat down in the office to go over numbers, taking food costs, overhead, and payroll plus a nice profit margin into consideration in pricing menu items. When I expressed my concerns that customers wouldn’t want to pay more, she told me to check out other restaurants and what they’re charging for comparable items. So I did. And she was right.

Annoyance mingles with admiration. At one time, that might have pissed me off. But part of running a bar and restaurant has been admitting we don’t know everything we need to and hiring the best people who do. And clearly, Reese is a top-notch chef.

It’s actually hot.

Now watching her parry Sid’s comments about testicles with equanimity all the while slicing up avocados and chopping herbs with flying hands is actually turning me on, for Chrissake.

“Jenn, you can mix up the sriracha mayo.” She picks up two limes and tosses them to Jenn, who catches them with a grin.

She’s effortlessly taken control of the kitchen, and everyone seems happy to do her bidding. She gives clear direction and makes it apparent that she has high standards ... but she’s not overbearing about it. She has a fun and charming way about her that everyone responds to, and she’s getting results.

I want to fuck her so bad.

Hell. I close my eyes briefly. This is not good.

What’s worse? I’m pretty sure she feels the same. But she’s been avoiding being alone with me since the staff party on Sunday, when I tried to ask too many personal questions.

BANG!

An explosive crack from the alley behind the bar shakes the building, rattling dishes and pots and pans. Everyone in the kitchen flinches, including me.

“What the hell was that?” Paul asks.

I open my mouth to say I think it’s the refuse truck emptying the Dumpster out back, but nothing comes out as I watch Reese dive under a stainless-steel counter. She scrambles backward, whimpering, pushing herself into a corner.

Jesus.

I clock the stunned expressions on the faces of Paul, Sid, and Jenn, then turn my attention back to Reese.

Paul laughs. “Reese, what are you doing?”

The laughter dwindles as they all move to stare at her, cowering, shaking, her arms around her knees, head down.

I slash a hand at the others to tell them to back off and stride over to her. I crouch, then drop my ass to the floor of the kitchen and scoot nearer to her. I’m a lot bigger than she is and

have to duck my head. “Reese.” I keep my voice low and firm. “Reese, it’s okay.”

I slide an arm around her shoulders, which are trembling so hard I’m afraid she might break a bone. She starts at my touch, but I pull her closer, wrapping both arms around her, awkwardly given our position. “It’s okay,” I murmur again. “You’re okay.”

Her head jolts back and forth and she makes a noise in her throat, something low and distressed. But she doesn’t push me back or try to get away. If anything, she presses closer.

I rest my face on her hair. “You’re okay. Nothing happened.”

It scares the shit out of me that she’s not even talking, just vibrating.

“Come on, let’s get out from here.” I attempt to move, but she reaches for me then, clutching my arm and the front of my shirt in a panic-strong grip. “I’m here with you. It’s okay.”

I have no idea what’s going on in her head, but sadly, I’ve seen this before and know that whatever it is, it’s powerful and terrifying. Dread wraps cold, hard fingers around my insides.

I smooth a hand down her back in long strokes. “Breathe,” I whisper. “Breathe with me. In ... out. In ... out.” I keep my tone low and measured, my touch slow and gentle. “In ... out. That’s it.”

I press her hand to my chest and breathe in tandem with her, hoping she’ll pick up on it and emulate it. Long. Slow. Breaths.

“Okay, now we’re going to move. We’ll go to my office. It’s safe, Reese. We’re all safe.”

She lifts her head and gazes at me. Christ, she’s white as chalk, her eyes wide and unblinking, her chin and lips trembling.

“Yeah. We’re safe. Come on.” I manage to scoot out from under the table, then help her stand. She’s still shaking and I support her with an arm banded around her waist.



I glance at Sid. “You take over for now.”

Sid’s forehead furrows, clearly not understanding what’s happening.

I wish I didn’t understand what this is.

I guide her out of the kitchen and into the office. Nobody else is around to see us, and the office is empty and quiet. I settle her into my office chair and drop to a crouch in front of her.

Her breathing is still jagged, her hands icy cold as I clasp them in mine and rub. She closes her eyes and leans her head back. I wait, patiently, knowing that telling her again she’s okay isn’t going to make a damn bit of difference.

Her respiration slows a bit, although it’s still rapid. I slowly stroke and pat her hands, then her forearms. I settle my fingertips over the pulse in one wrist. Yeah, her heart is racing.

She opens her eyes and regards me with an unfocused look. “Oh, God,” she moans.

“I’m here. I’ve got you.”

She lifts her chin then drops it, blinking slowly. “I-I need to get back to work.”

I snort. “Yeah, no.”

She doesn’t argue and that tells me a lot. “I’m dizzy.”

“Yeah.” I release a hand and reach over to smooth her hair back from her clammy face. “You’re breathing too fast. Take it easy.”

She gives a short nod again, her breasts rising and falling with each inhalation and exhalation.

“Has this happened before?” I ask quietly.

“Yes.” She breathes again. “A few times.” Another small moan escapes her lips. “God, I feel awful.”

“It’s okay. It’ll pass. How long does it usually last?”

“Um ... sometimes a few hours. I haven’t had one of these for a while.”

“Since you’ve been in San Diego?” I would’ve noticed if she had a panic attack while working.

“No. A few times I almost felt like I was going to ... but it passed.”

“I’ll take you home.”

“No!” Her eyes fly wide again. “No, I have work to do.”

“We can manage without you for one night.” I glance at my watch. “It’s nearly seven. Things will quiet down now.”

She sighs. Apparently, she realizes she’s not going to be able to do it. “Shit.”

One corner of my mouth lifts. “I’ll be right back.”

I stride out to the bar and grab a glass of ice water, lifting it in a gesture of greeting at Beck as I leave to go back to the office.

There, I give Reese the water, which she drinks gratefully. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Feel well enough to get out to my vehicle?”

“You don’t have to drive me home.”

I snort yet again. “Yeah, I do. Let’s go.”

“My purse ... it’s in my locker.”

I help her to the staff room where she retrieves her purse, then lead her out the back door. I’m parked right there, and it’s only a few minutes before I pull up on the street in front of her duplex.

I help her inside, taking her keys from her to unlock the door and pushing it open. Jack bounds toward us.

“You’re surprised to see me this early, aren’t you,” Reese says in a thready voice. She reaches down to pat Jack’s head and misses.

I take her purse and toss it onto a chair. “Come on. Let’s get you into your bed.” I want to pick her up and carry her, but

she holds on to my arm as we make our way to her bedroom. Jack trails along after us.

With a sigh of relief, she crawls onto her bed and plants her face into a pillow. Jack jumps on the other side of her and sits, giving Reese what appears to be a puzzled look.

I sit on the edge of the bed, tugging her hair off her face and smoothing it. “Better?”

“A bit. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s not like it’s something you can control.”

“I feel like I should be able to. I should be able to just get over it. It shouldn’t happen.”

“Mmm. Doesn’t work that way.” I rub her back again. She’s not shaking now so that’s good.

“How do you know this? You’re awfully understanding.”

“I’ve seen people have panic attacks before.”

“Oh.” Her eyes closed, she falls silent. Her breathing is slowing, but she’s still sweaty.

“It was the Dumpster,” I say quietly. “That’s what the noise was.”

“Oh. Jeez.” She sighs. “I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. It’s fine. What can I get for you? More water? Do you have any medication you take?”

“No. No meds. Water would be good. There are bottles in the fridge.”

I head to the kitchen. When I come back with a bottle of water, Jack is licking Reese’s jaw, her arm around his neck.

“He’s worried about you.”

“I’m sorry, Jack.” She rolls over and pushes up to take the water.

I grab her pillows and arrange them behind her to prop her up. After she’s guzzled down half the water, I set the bottle on her nightstand and sit again.

Shocking the hell out of me, she reaches for my hand and curls her fingers around it. “Thank you.”

I turn my hand to clasp hers, too. I fix my gaze on it ... her long, slender fingers with short pink nails in my big, rough, hairy paw. Something turns over in my chest. “Go to sleep,” I say in a hushed tone. “I’ll stay for a while.”

“Okay.”



## REESE

*Jack's putting on weight.*

I let him sleep on my bed, and often he likes to sleep right against my legs. But tonight he's pressed against my back ... and he's really warm ... and he's breathing near my ear ...

That's not Jack.

I jolt awake.

Oh, my God. Memories flood back. It's Cade. He's in my bed. He's spooned up against my back, one big arm over my waist. He's muscular. Hot. Like, *literally* hot. I'm so warm and cozy and ... secure. But ... *Cade*.

"You awake?" His voice rasps near my ear.

After a brief hesitation where I consider pretending to be asleep, I say, "Yeah."

"How're you feeling?"

I draw in a long breath and assess my state of being. Blessedly, my heart rate is normal, my chest not constricted, and I don't feel dizzy. Just ... weary. "Good."

"Good." He gives me a squeeze.

I do another assessment. I'm still wearing my short, stretchy black dress. Cade's legs are bare against mine. Is he naked? Sweet baby Jesus. My pussy clenches hard at the thought and I have to resist pushing my ass back against him.

"What are you still doing here?" I whisper.

“Didn’t want to leave you when you weren’t feeling well.”

“I wasn’t sick,” I object halfheartedly.

“I know. But you weren’t feeling well. Were you?”

“No.” I wrinkle my nose. “It’s so embarrassing.”

“Don’t be embarrassed.”

“Easy to say.”

“I know.” He shifts and readjusts our position.

“What time is it?”

“Mmm ... a little after midnight.”

“Oh. I thought maybe it was morning.”

“You’ve only been asleep for a few hours.”

“Oh, God.” I spin under his arm so I’m facing him. With our heads on the pillow, face-to-face, I regard his shadowy features. The hall light is still on, the door partly open, so I can see his face. “I am so sorry.”

His mouth curves. “It’s fine, Reese. Stop apologizing.” His hand squeezes my hip. “Want to tell me what was going on with you?”

“Not really.” I drop my gaze to his strong throat. Then lower ... to his bare chest. Jeez, maybe he *is* naked. Holy crap.

He caresses my hip in a leisurely, mesmerizing motion. That clench deep inside me tightens even more, spreading through my pelvis. I’m in bed next to a big, gorgeous, possibly naked man. My body is responding. Who wouldn’t? Cade is strong and beautiful and ... and good. He’s a good man. Despite his manwhore ways.

Well, I can’t blame all those women for wanting to be with him.

“Talk to me, Reese.”

“Uuuh ...”

“What happened looked a lot like PTSD.”

I close my eyes, my body tensing. Shit. He probably knows something about PTSD. But fuck, I hate admitting it. It feels like a weakness. Yeah, yeah, I've been for the therapy; I understand what it's all about. I didn't have all the symptoms of PTSD to officially diagnose me with it, but enough that I struggled. My blood heats and my heart beats faster.

"What happened, Reese?" His voice is calm, his touch sure.

I gulp in a breath and even though I know it's a bad idea, I burrow into him. "It's ... hard."

"I know." He shifts again, more onto his back, pulling me with him and wrapping both arms around me. I press my face into his neck. "I know. Have you talked to anyone?"

"Yes." I take a fast breath in and then out. "I saw a psychologist for a while."

"Good." He slides his hand down my back and this time goes low, resting his palm on my ass.

"I worked at Nova."

"Yeah. Know that, babe."

The endearment melts me. He's my boss. But we're in my bed, his arms around me, hands touching me, making my skin heat and my pussy squeeze. And he's being sweet to me ... bossy, controlling, unemotional Cade.

And that disarms me.

The words spill out. "One of the prep cooks who worked for me was a problem. He didn't take direction. He wanted to do his own thing. He thought he was another Graham Sand. He was going to be a celebrity chef and every time I told him he needed to be more careful with his sauces or not overcook the lamb, or not ream out a line cook for making a mistake, he got pissed. His attitude was a major problem in the kitchen. It was affecting everyone." I pause to take a breath.

"Asshole."

"Yeah. I had to deal with it. I talked to him a couple of times, trying to give him feedback on his work, trying to tell



him when he blew up at people it made things tense in the kitchen and made it hard for everyone to turn out a good product every night. He didn't like hearing that, but for a while things would be okay. Then it would start over again. I talked to the owner of the restaurant and he agreed that we needed to let Jeremy go."

"You had to do it?"

"Yeah. I've done it before. It's not fun but sometimes it happens, and that's why I was paid the big bucks." I give a short laugh. "I wanted to be in charge of the kitchen and that's part of it."

"I hate that part, too."

"Yeah?" It seems funny that a big tough Navy SEAL would have a hard time firing someone.

"Yeah." His lips quirk. "So ... you fired him."

"I did." I sigh. "He didn't take it well. He was yelling and throwing shit around. It scared me, but I stood my ground, and he left."

"Did he throw something at you?" Cade's fingers press into my hip.

"No." I draw in another long breath and let it out. "Not then. But he came back ... later that night." I swallow, my throat constricted, my mouth dry. "He had a ... a gun."

"Oh, fuck, no." His fingers tighten even more on me.

"H-he started shooting." It's still hard to talk about this, even though I've recounted the story to so many people—the police, my family, my friends, my psychologist. "He killed two of my staff—my sous-chef Bahir and line cook Dang. He wanted to shoot me, too ... he tried." My voice cracks. "He missed me. I was yelling at everyone to get out of the kitchen, yelling at him to put the gun down, and h-he shot Bahir and Dang. They were ..." I have to stop and take another breath. "They were on the floor, bleeding. I ran over to Dang and I yelled at Kasey to call 911. Jeremy was about to take another shot and I was sure this time he was going to hit me. I was w-

waiting for the bullet to hit me while I was trying to stop Dang from bleeding. I was sure I was going to die.”

“Christ.” He pulls me closer, right up against him. “I heard about that. Now that you tell me. It was in the news.”

“Yes.”

“I never thought ... never connected that with you.”

I press my face to his chest. “Jeremy did fire another shot, and like I said, I was sure I was going to die. But he missed me. Two guys jumped him and took him down then. It was ... chaos. A lot of it is a blur for me ... I don’t even remember everything that happened after that. The restaurant was full of guests, everyone was screaming and panicking. Lots of them ran out. The police came. Ambulances. They took Dang and Bahir to the hospital, but ... they couldn’t save them.” I choke on the last words.

“Jesus. Jesus Christ, Reese.” He holds me tighter. “I’m so sorry. So fucking sorry.”

“It was so hard after that. I couldn’t go back to work. They said they wanted me to, but it was my fault that happened, and I knew they didn’t really want me there.”

“No. I doubt that.”

“That’s how I felt. And ... I was terrified. All the time. I couldn’t get out of bed for a couple of weeks, I was just so ... exhausted. Filled with dread. And guilt. Mostly guilt. Two people died because of me.”

“You know that wasn’t because of you, don’t you?” He pulls back and lifts my chin. “Because if you don’t, that psychologist you saw was a giant piece of shit.”

I snort-laugh. “Yes, we talked about that. Yes, I realize that the one who was responsible was Jeremy. But I can’t help but blame myself ... maybe if I’d handled things differently, he wouldn’t have flipped out like that. Maybe if I’d realized his anger issues were more serious, I would’ve done something different ... I don’t even know. Like hired security or something to watch for him.”

“You had no idea he was going to come back and do that. There’s no way you could know.”

“I know.” I let out a sigh. “I do know it, in my head. I’ve thought back and tried to figure out if I missed some warning signs, and I don’t think I did. But it’s hard to get over those kinds of thoughts. I’m supposed to stop thinking them, or reframe them in my mind. Like you just did ... there’s no way I could have known. But I can’t help the little voice in the back of my head that says I *should* have known.”

“Fuck, Reese.”

“Two people lost their lives because of ... because of it. I ... still don’t know how I’m ever supposed to get past that.”

Cade closes his eyes. “When I was in Yemen, one of my teammates was killed in an overnight raid. Like you, we all questioned what we could have done differently. I felt guilty as hell. And like you said, I know in my head it wasn’t my fault. But it’s hard not to think about all the hypotheticals. It’ll always be there. What made it bearable was when Ben’s widow hugged me and told me that Ben looked up to me and said he’d learned so much from me. She didn’t blame me. She didn’t blame any of us. She blamed the enemy we were fighting.”

I turn his words over in my head. *She blamed the enemy.*

“And that was exactly who deserved the blame,” Cade adds in his low, steady tone that permeates my senses, right to my heart, and eases the ache there. “Nobody else.”

“You’re right.” I choke out the words. “You’re so right.” Maybe, just maybe I can remember that and believe that the only one who’s to blame is Jeremy.

Cade circles his arms around me again and with my body flush against his, I feel he’s wearing underwear—snug, soft cotton. Somehow our bare legs are twined together and my breasts are against his chest and I sink into his embrace ... into the heat, the shelter, the comfort, the care . .

“You’re strong, Reese,” he says. “I can tell.”

“I didn’t feel strong. I felt ... helpless.”

“Sure. That’s normal. You went through something traumatic.”

“I ran away. I wasn’t strong enough to go back.”

“It’s not running away. It’s taking care of yourself. Doing what you needed to do for you.”

“Th-thank you.”

“And you’re getting through it.”

“And then something stupid like a loud noise outside freaks me out all over again.”

“It happens. You deal with it.” He pauses. “That’s why you didn’t want to be a chef again.”

“Yes.” Our eyes meet in the shadows.

“I’m sorry I pushed you into doing it.”

My eyes widen. “You didn’t push me. I decided to do it because ... well, for a few reasons.”

“Because you wanted to help.”

“Yes. But also selfish reasons. I love cooking.”

“Yeah. You’ve said that before.”

“And ... and I felt I needed to get back into it. I felt like it was something I had to do. And this was the right time. And the right place.”

“I’m glad.”

We share a slow smile. Heat and awareness pulse between us. A flood of longing slides through me, liquid heat, settling in my core.

Cade’s hand slides up my back, into my hair, and cups the back of my head. With his eyelids lowering, he slowly pulls my face closer. I feel his breath on my lips, my skin tingling everywhere, my mouth craving the feel of his mouth. My lips part, my own eyes drift closed and then his mouth brushes over mine.

His tongue lingers on my bottom lip and my breath seizes in my lungs as heat rushes through me. He slides an arm

beneath my shoulders, easing me to my back, and he kisses me again, long, slow, wet kisses. He doesn't push hard, and I sense he's giving me a chance to say no. My heart tilts. With a needy little moan, I kiss him back with everything I have. I want this. So much.

He groans, his free hand roaming over my body ... my hip, my waist, then up between my breasts. My short, stretchy dress is scrunched around my hips and I lift a leg to his hip so that his big thigh presses right where I need it.

“Christ, Reese.” He kisses my cheek, my jaw. “Want you so bad.”

“Me, too. God. I know we shouldn't but I can't ... I need you.”

“Mmm.” He nudges his thigh against my pussy. “Here?”

“Yes. There. Everywhere.”

His fingers curl into the neckline of my dress and tug it down, exposing the black lace demi-cup of my bra. He covers my breast and squeezes as he kisses me again, this time harder, insistent.

I roll my hips against his thigh, feeling the dampness of my panties. I ache there, with a throbbing heat. Pushing my breast into his hand, I stroke his tongue with mine as his kisses deepen even more.

Breathless, excited, wound up, I rub against him. His erection presses against my hip, a hot bulge that I yearn to explore.

“Dress needs to come off.” He pulls back and tugs me up to sitting. He grabs the crumpled dress and yanks it up and over my head. I reach behind my back to unfasten my bra and toss it to the floor. He studies me with avid eyes, then lays his palm between my breasts and gently urges me back down. His gaze roves over my chest. My nipples are hard, my breasts full and heavy, longing for his touch.

“Fucking beautiful, Reese.” He bends and cups one breast, plumping it for his mouth, and takes my nipple between his

lips. The tugging sensation reaches all the way between my legs.

“Oh, God.” I grab onto his shoulders, pressing my pussy into his thigh again, arching my back as he sucks and licks at the tender tips of my breasts, then draws a nipple deep and pulls hard, lifting his head. I gasp at the sharp sensation, my back arching. Slowly, he releases my flesh, staring down at the stiff, throbbing peak.

“Like that?” He meets my eyes and my body dissolved around me.

“Yes. God, yes.”

He touches his mouth to mine, and I cup his face. His hand moves down my body, between my legs, palming me over my panties. “You’re wet.”

“Oh, yeah.”

His fingers yank at my thong, pulling the flimsy fabric aside to slip through my wet slit. “Ah, damn, babe.” He stares into my eyes as he fingers me where I’m slick and smooth, both of us breathing fast and hard, mouths a breath apart. “So fucking wet. You want this, too ...”

“I do.” I want no doubt between us.

“My dick is gonna burst. Jesus.” He lowers his head to my breasts again, feasting on both of them, big, blunt fingers sliding over me, through me, then ... oh, God ... inside me. I shiver with excitement, sensation rippling through me.

He kisses me again, hard, fast, his touch becoming more frantic, then we both take hold of my panties, him on one side, me on the other. I pull my knees to my chest and we tug the panties down and off. Then Cade does the same with his underwear.

I don’t get much of a chance to study him, getting only a quick impression of thick length jutting from a thatch of dark gold hair. His hand goes to my pussy again, now unfettered by lingerie, and I lift my head from the pillow to seek out his mouth with mine, holding on to his face.

“Need a condom,” he rasps against my lips. “Sorry.”

“Oh, shit. Yeah. Don’t apologize.” I fall back to the mattress, sucking in air, my entire body pulsing with need as he rolls off the bed, rummages in the jeans he’d been wearing and suits up. It takes seconds, but it’s too long.

Back beside me, he resumes the position, on his side next to me, one arm beneath my shoulders, and he kisses me. He pushes my thigh up, then finds his cock and guides it to my entrance. I gasp as he penetrates me.

His jaw clenches; a groan rumbles in his chest. “So tight. I’ll be careful ... but man, I’m right on the edge here.”

“I know. I know. Me, too.” I pant against his lips. “Please, please. Fuck me.”

“Oh, yeah.” He pushes in deeper, and a pinching burn spreads. But it’s okay ... I want him inside me. All the way.

“Yes.” My hands move over his shoulders, so big and strong, his skin hot and sleek. “Do it.”

His entire body tenses and vibrates and then he’s in me. My body lifts, our faces nose to nose, my hand on his cheek, sensation flooding me, squeezing the air out of my lungs. The intense pressure of his throbbing cock inside me has pleasure sparking, then building. This is intense ... intimate. Almost overwhelming. And beautiful.

He brushes wet fingertips over my clit. Sensation jolts through me and a soft cry falls from my lips. His hand slides into my hair, gripping a handful as my body tightens and quivers, his fingers rubbing my clit in small circles. His thick cock slides in and out, gliding over sensitive inner nerves while his agile fingers play with my clit. Heat spirals, twisting up tight ... tighter ... oh, God ... my body contracts hard as I come, undulating as wave after wave of pleasure ripple through me. I can’t stop the noises that spill from my mouth until Cade captures them with his, sealing his lips over mine, his fingers still clenching my hair.

Without withdrawing from me, he rolls me to my side so we’re spooning again, so he’s fucking me from behind. He

bands his bottom arm around me and over my chest, his other hand squeezing my breast as he pumps into me in fast strokes. “Fucking hot,” he breathes near my ear. “Tight, hot pussy ... squeezing me. Loved making you come like that all over my cock.”

I can't speak, can only make strangled little noises as he drives into me again and again. He holds me tight against him and I push my ass back into his thrusts.

“There it is,” he grinds out. “Holy hell ... Reese ...” His body tightens, and he drives into me one last time with a raw, rough sound. He pulses inside me, holding me firmly, and my pussy quivers happily, maybe the same orgasm or maybe another smaller one.

My heart thuds, my ears buzz, and my mind is a jumbled mess. I fight for air.

He kisses my cheek, and I turn my face instinctively toward him. Our mouths meet and cling.

“Sweet Jesus,” he groans. “I'm sorry.”

Ah, hell. Those are some of the last words you ever want to hear after sex.





## CADE

I feel Reese's body tense against me and the change in the air around us to flat and cool. "What?"

"What what?" she asks stiffly, trying to push away from me.

I hold on to her. "What's wrong?"

"Clearly this was a mistake."

"Why ... aw fuck, no. I wasn't apologizing for having sex with you." I wish I could see her face.

"Then what were you apologizing for?"

I kiss her shoulder. "For being a minuteman. A two-pump chump."

She makes a strangled noise. "Oh. Well, that's a little exaggerated."

"Seriously. I can do way better than that. We barely had any foreplay."

Her body softens back into mine. "Oh, Cade."

"I'll show you," I promise. "Just give me a few minutes."

The atmosphere lightens. I hate to pull out, but I need to see her. Reluctantly, holding the rubber in place, I withdraw. Damn. She's exquisite.

"Be right back." I roll off the bed and make a quick trip to her bathroom to get rid of the prophylactic, then climb back in

with her. I pull her to her side, so we lay facing each other.  
“Okay?”

“Yes.”

“It was fast, but it was fierce. I just ...” I stroke her cheek.  
“I got kind of jacked up.”

She smiles. “Me, too.” Then her smile fades. “But it probably wasn’t a good idea.”

“You mean the whole employer/employee thing.”

“Yes.” She sighs. “I made this mistake once before.”

“Shit.” I scowl at her. “With chef superdouche?”

She rolls her lips inward as if trying not to smile. “Maybe.”

“Was that why you quit?” Then another thought strikes me.  
“That’s why he threw a beer bottle at you? Was he in love with you? Not that any asshole who actually loves someone would do something like that—”

“He was an asshole,” she says. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

“Fuck.” This pisses me off.

“Look, Casanova—you’ve probably slept with fifty women since I’ve known you and that’s not very long. Maybe we should just not discuss our sexual histories.”

I narrow my eyes. “Not fifty. Jesus.”

“Close.”

“Does that bother you?”

She purses her lips. “Of course not.”

“Liar.” I lean over and smooch her nose. “But okay, let’s just set that aside. This was completely consensual, right?”

“I think you know that.” She holds my gaze steadily.

“Yeah.” Her skin is incredibly soft under my fingertips. “I guess on the face of it, it’s a bad idea to sleep with your employee.”

“On the face of it?”

“But where’s the real harm? I don’t believe you feel like you were forced to sleep with me to keep your job.”

“Um, no.” Her dry tone makes me smile.

“We’re both adults. If we keep things out of the workplace, where’s the harm?”

She gives me a long, searching look. “Are you saying you want ... more than just a fast fuck?”

“Hey, I said I’m sorry about the speed,” he jokes. Because her question throws me.

Usually I make a quick exit after getting off, after making sure the woman I was with completely understood that I don’t do relationships and we wouldn’t see each other again. Yeah, considering Reese and I work together, that would be awkward.

But for once, I don’t want to get out of her bed and bolt. I don’t want to have that conversation where I make it clear she’ll never hear from me again.

I’m the guy who’s not into commitment. Relationships have never worked for me in the past. Anytime someone seems to care for me, it’s because they feel sorry for me. I gave up on that years ago, and in the Navy it was easier to just have one-nighters or short-term flings. There are only a handful of people in the whole world I’ve ever really cared about, and my mom and my brother both deserted me. My SEAL teammates have been the only people who’ve been there for me, especially Marco and Beck.

So this is a little unsettling, but I have to be honest. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying.”

She continues to regard me with an unwavering gaze.

I’m at a loss for words. Talking about feelings—hell, even *having* feelings—doesn’t come easy to me. I know I have to say something ... that if I want more than one fast fuck, we have to have some kind of conversation and agreement about what’s happening. Pressure makes my throat tighten up and I cough. “There’s something special between us.”

Fuck, that was lame. I sound like a bad romance novel. What I want to say is I've wanted to bang her brains out since the minute I walked into Conquistadors and saw her standing talking to Marco, waiting for her job interview. But that wouldn't sound right, either. I sigh.

"Okay, here's the honest truth. I don't know how to do this. I'm not into relationships."

Her eyes flicker.

"When I hook up with someone, I make sure they know this about me before we sleep together."

"Don't worry, I already knew that about you."

"No! I'm fucking this all up. Jesus. I mean, I also tell them it's only going to be one night ... because that's all I do. But I didn't have that conversation with you. Because ... well, the truth is I don't know why, but I do know ... I want more."

Her mouth softens. "Don't panic, Cade. You know I have my own issues. Getting involved with someone wouldn't be fair until I figure out what the hell I'm doing with my life."

Yeah, she has issues. But instead of scaring me off, it makes me want to look after her. Protect her. "I get it," I say. "But maybe I can help you figure things out."

"As long as we're agreed ... this doesn't affect anything at Conquistadors."

"Right." I wince inwardly, remembering my partners' admonitions to stay away from her.

"And it's just a ... short-term thing. For as long as I'm here. Or as long as we both want it."

My gut clenches. I try to keep my dismay at the reminder that she's only here temporarily from showing on my face, though. I tip her chin up slightly and lean over to lay my mouth on hers in a slow, gentle kiss. Something is better than nothing, when it comes to her. "Agreed."

She makes a soft noise and opens her mouth to me, kissing me back. She's warm and soft and naked against me and my dick is already chubbing up. She notices, too, sliding a hand

down between us to curl her fingers around my shaft. That just makes me harder, blood rushing there in excitement.

“I hope you have more condoms,” she whispers.

“Fuck.” I squeeze my eyes shut, disappointment carving into my chest. “I don’t. Just had one.”

“Damn.” She strokes me. “Well, there are other things we can do.”

“Ah ... hell ...”

She wriggles against me and lays a string of kisses over my chest ... down to my abs. The muscles tighten as she kisses her way lower still, my dick leaping to fully erect attention in her hand. “No ... Reese ... you don’t have to.”

“I want to.” Her thumb swipes over the head and my balls tighten, heat building.

“Reese ...”

She pushes the covers back and moves between my legs. Jesus. That’s a gorgeous sight ... naked Reese, right there, stroking my cock and studying it with avid eyes, like she wants to devour it.

“I don’t ... I don’t do this,” I grind out.

She pauses and gazes up at me. “What?”

“I ...”

“You don’t like this?” Her tongue strokes over her bottom lip and then her teeth sink into it. “I’m sorry ...”

“No, don’t be sorry. I do like it ... aw, fuck.” I close my eyes, my body aching with need.

“You’re beautiful, Cade. Let me do this for you.”

I blow out a breath. “Yeah ... do it. Suck me.”

“Mmm.” She releases my dick and lays both palms on my inner thighs, pushing them wider. My body tenses. This is a vulnerable position for me, but I let her continue, trying to just enjoy the sensations that flood my body at her touch. She caresses the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, teasingly,

slowly, up and down, dipping down to my ass cheeks, then back up. Shivers work over my body, my groin tightening to near pain. Then she bends down, her long hair trailing over my thighs, tickling me and making my dick twitch again. She opens her mouth on me and swirls her tongue around.

A long groan tears from my throat as I reach for her head, gathering up her hair because I want the visual ... want to watch her suck me. She looks up at me, eyes big and shadowy as she slowly lowers her lips down my shaft. My fingers tighten in her hair and I let out another rough sound. “Oh, Christ. That feels incredible ...”

She gives a tiny jerk of her head, and her tongue comes out to lick over the supersensitive head, her lips just covering the tip. I shudder, blood pounding wildly through my veins. I thrust into her mouth, trying to be careful of her, holding her head with her hair twisted around my fingers. Sensation wraps around my dick and sizzles up my spine. Her tongue assaults me tenderly, lapping and teasing, making me shake.

“Reese ... holy shit. Watching my cock slide into those pretty lips—Christ.” I let out a groan, my hips lifting to fuck her mouth. She curves her fingers beneath my balls and gently squeezes my sac and I tense again, eyes closing. But it feels so good, so damn good ... I want this. Want her. My hips lift, trying to fuck her mouth.

She licks and sucks and teases as heat and pressure build, and I’m close ... so damn close ...

“Reese.” I use my fingers on her head to make her look at me. “I’m gonna come in two seconds ...”

She flutters her tongue on the underside of my dick, nearly making the top of my head blow off. Heat explodes in me and sweeps over my body, and I come, hard, shooting into her mouth. Her eyes close as she sucks greedily, fingers curled around the base of my cock and cupping my balls. I pulse into her mouth in agonizingly satisfying bursts.

My eyes fall closed, sensations whipping over my body. “Ah, hell,” I groan. “So good, babe. So good.”

She finishes with slow strokes of her tongue, then lazy kisses over my groin, my abs, and my chest, kissing her way back up just as she started. She brushes her mouth over my chin and stretches out over me. I close my arms around her and hold on tight, my heart still thundering.

“Was that okay?” she whispers.

“Fuck, yeah. That was better than okay ...” I’m lost for words. It’s been a long time since I let anyone do that and I could almost weep with the beauty of it, the closeness I feel with her, the trust and the amazing feeling of power she bestowed on me with her enthusiasm and delight. “That was amazing.”

She kisses my jaw and lets out a small sigh. “Yeah. It was.”

I roll her to her back and gaze down at her. Her swollen, shiny lips are the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen. Emotion swells in me, a need to give back, and I take my turn moving over her, between her legs. “My turn. Or your turn. Depending how you want to look at it.”

Those sexy lips curve into a smile as she bends her knees. “Yay.”

As she does, I make my way down her body, tasting her nipples, sucking them into my mouth in long, slow pulls that have her writhing. She definitely seems to like that.

I shift lower, parting her thighs, wanting to admire her as much as she had me, eager to study her feminine secrets ... that part of a woman so intimate and personal. And yeah ... “Beautiful,” I rasp out. Smooth and plump and pink ... I curl an arm around one thigh to rest a hand on her flat stomach, my other hand pushing the other thigh wider; I kiss her there, gentle, pursed-lip kisses up one side and down the other. I inhale her scent, delicate and sexy, then extend my tongue to lick, letting my tongue dip into her folds, tasting the sweet cream gathered there. “Yeah ... fuck, yeah ... you taste so good.”



“Mmm.” She spreads her knees wider for me, and I caress her belly in small circles as I lick and kiss and then suck soft flesh into my mouth. With my other hand I gently part her folds and plunge my tongue deeper, making her gasp, and then I drag my tongue all the way up, up to her swollen, quivering clit. Her body twitches hard and her breath comes in sharp little pants as I lick over the bud, then around it and over it. She vibrates beneath me, whimpering softly, and then I cover her clit with my lips and suck.

She cries out, hips lifting off the bed.

I suck on her through her orgasm, enjoying every soft cry and twitch, then lick again where she’s so wet and sweet. I lift my head and study her face, her cheeks flushed, eyes closed. I move off her and kneel beside her, leaning down to kiss her mouth, my hand still covering her pulsing pussy, holding her there as she kisses me back.

“Oh, God,” she moans. “Oh, my God.”

“Good?”

“Mmm. I can’t even move.”

“Don’t have to.” I haul the covers up over us and wrap her up in my arms again, her ass tucked against my groin. I breathe in the scent of her hair, my body relaxed and replete. “Go to sleep, Reese.”

“Mmkay.” She snuggles in, and when her hand finds mine and curls around it, my heart stutters.

That was amazing, hot sex. But it was more. I feel more for her than I have for any of the women I’ve been hooking up with lately. I know I’ve been using them to make myself feel better and in the end ... it took one woman, this woman, to make me feel better ... to make my stupid fears and insecurities seem like insignificant trivialities.

I’m fine. But now I have a new problem ... because my physical hang-ups are one thing, but Reese has stirred up feelings I didn’t think I had, and my emotional hang-ups are still very, very real.

I ride my bike up to the open garage door at Marco's house the next morning. Inside, sparks shower gold and blue as Marco cuts a sheet of metal. Upon seeing me, Marco sets down his torch and lifts the visor on his helmet to peer at me. He scans me up and down, taking in the bike. "What the fuck?"

"Come on. Let's go." I jerk my head. "For a ride."

Marco just stares at me, then yanks off the helmet and sets it down on a table. "Give me a minute."

"Sure. What are you working on?"

"A new sculpture. A turtle."

"Cool." Marco uses the welding skills he honed in the Navy to create metal sculptures that sell for shockingly huge dollars at a high-end art gallery.

Marco disappears into his house, then comes back with a different T-shirt on, carrying a bike helmet. "Just gotta get my bike from out back."

"We have to go by Beck's place," I tell him when he returns.

"Sure." He clearly wants to say more, but doesn't. He locks up the garage and we ride to Beck and Hayden's condo to find Beck on the patio, drinking coffee, enjoying the morning view over Sail Bay.

He glances up in surprise as we walk around the corner of the condo. "Hey. What's up?"

"We're going for a bike ride." I lift my chin. "You in?"

Now it's Beck's turn to give me a long stare. Beck's gaze slides over to Marco, then back. "Yeah, sure." He rises from a wicker chair and gulps down what's left in his coffee mug.

Once he's retrieved his bike and helmet, we all mount our bicycles. Beck leads the way and we get onto Bayside Walk, part of the Mission Bay Bike Path that'll take us in a loop of about twelve miles. We cycle along the curve of the bay without talking. I push my legs into the pedals and pull ahead of the others, setting the pace fast, until my thighs burn. I'm

going faster than the recommended eight miles per hour along this bike path, but there aren't a lot of other cyclists out so I push it for a while.

Then, slowing up, I let Beck and Marco catch up to me, both of them grinning.

"You better take it easy, man," Beck calls to me. "You haven't been on a bike in months. Your ass is going to complain about this."

I smile. "Probably, yeah. So be it."

At the basin, I pull over near a bagel shop. "Let's grab something to eat."

"You need to get in shape," Marco says, but willingly stops. "I could use a bagel, though."

"I need more coffee," Beck agrees.

We line up inside and get our food and coffees, then head out to the small patio to sit, watching the activity at the marina. The morning is fresh and cool, the air briny.

"Okay." Beck pries the plastic lid off his coffee and sets it on a napkin. "What the fuck, man?"

I knew this was coming. And I'm ready for it. "You know what happened last night with Reese?"

Beck and Marco exchange puzzled looks. "Yeah," they both say.

"She okay?" Beck asks.

"Yeah. Mostly." I rub my forehead. "She was involved in a shooting a few months back. In New York. You remember hearing about that restaurant that got shot up? Disgruntled ex-employee went back with a gun after getting fired? Two people died?"

"Yeah," Marco says slowly. "Jesus ..."

"Yeah." I nod somberly. "That was Reese's restaurant. Nova. She had just fired the guy that day."

"Was she shot?" Beck regards me steadily.

“No. But two of her staff were. They both died.”

“Fuck.” Beck bends his head.

“That’s shitty,” Marco says. “Wow.”

They both look like I just told them I have two weeks to live. Which tells me how much they care about Reese.

“Yeah. Really shitty. She went through a rough time. Still has some PTSD symptoms ... insomnia. Nightmares. Flashbacks. Last night ... well, you heard the noise. It startled her and she had a panic attack.”

“Shit.”

“She’s okay,” I repeat. “She got through it. She told me what happened. That’s why she moved here. She couldn’t go back to that restaurant. Feeling all kinds of guilt about it, of course. She didn’t want to work as a chef. Except ... she loves cooking.” One corner of my mouth lifts. “She apparently couldn’t stop herself from stepping in and trying to help.”

“Is she ... going to stay?” Beck picks up his bagel loaded with cream cheese and lox.

“Yeah. She wants to. She says it was time for her to get back into it, and she thought this was a good time. A good place. She doesn’t want to be in charge.” I meet Beck’s eyes, then Marco’s. “Understandably. But she wants to stay on. She was feeling okay this morning.”

Marco narrows his eyes on me. “And you know this how?”



## CADE

I suck in a breath and lift my chin. “I stayed with her last night.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Mmm.”

They both make noncommittal noises and regard me warily.

“I know, I know.” I hold up my hands. “You kept telling me to stay away from her. I tried. Last night ... well, I can’t explain it. But let me just say this ... she’s not just another piece of ass to make me feel better about myself.”

“And the bike ride today?” Beck hoists one eyebrow and takes a bite of his bagel.

I shake my head and look away. “I’m an idiot. She’s brave enough to go into a kitchen and start over, after what happened. After watching her coworkers die. Blaming herself for it. Having flashbacks and panic attacks. I’ve been there, too.” I rub the back of my neck. “But my issue is nothing. The truth is ... I’ve been more stupid and stubborn, than traumatized.”

“You? Stubborn?” Marco snorts.

I shrug. “I know I can be. At least I realize it. And last night, hearing what she’s been through, and how strong she was, I ... had to do this.”

“Asshole.”

I take a bite of my bacon and egg bagel sandwich. “Yeah.”

Beck shakes his head. “Well, glad that’s dealt with.” He eyes me. “Uh ... obviously, you haven’t had any problems ... in the sack.”

I chew my bagel, shaking my head. “Nope. Well. Nope.”

They both look at me expectantly. Fuck, I don’t want to talk about this. “Let’s just say any, uh, insecurities I may have had also fell by the wayside last night.”

“I don’t know what that means, but pretty sure I don’t really want to know.” Marco reaches out to slap my shoulder. “Glad to hear it, though.”

“No, no. Hold the fuck up here.” Beck glares. “You slept with our chef. Someone who works for us. This is not a good thing.”

I grimace. “I know. And I told you guys I wouldn’t touch her and yet ... I did. We talked about it, though. It won’t change anything at Conquistadors.”

“And if it does?” They both give me long, cool stares.

“I won’t let it. I promise. She doesn’t know how long she’s going to stay here. Her life is in New York.” I hate the way my gut tightens when I say that. “Seems like she’s a pretty ambitious, talented chef. Her future is not cooking bar food in a little tequila bar. But for now ... she’s helping us. And in a different way, we’re helping her. And she and I know exactly what’s going on.”

Beck’s jaw is tight as he nods.

Marco purses his lips. “Not gonna lie. I’m uneasy about this. Don’t get me wrong. I like Reese. We lucked out hiring her. I don’t want to fuck that up.”

“Neither do I.” I tilt my head. “Like I said, she’s not going to stick around here forever, anyway. So it’s not that big a deal. Okay?”

Slowly, they both nod, but I read the doubt on their faces.

Later, after our bike ride when I'm in my office, I sit back in my chair.

I don't blame Marco and Beck for being doubtful about what's happening. I'm doubtful myself. Have I been trying to convince them it's all going to be fine ... or myself?

Last night with Reese was ... fuck, I don't even know what. Disturbing. Hearing about her experience, seeing how deeply it affected her ... I've never been the most sympathetic guy, or at least that's how I want to be. I had to shut down emotions as a teenager, watching my mother walk out the door without us, watching my father self-destruct, then watching my brother ... I close my eyes as pain shafts through me.

I had to shut things down to save myself, because what sixteen-year-old kid could watch all that and not fall apart himself, for Chrissake? If I let myself feel fear, I'd collapse. If I let myself feel hope, I'd be crushed. If I let myself care, I'd be broken.

So I don't feel anything.

Okay, not entirely true. I feel a lot of guilt.

I know what Reese is going through. Guilt over something she really had no control over. It's not logical, but then emotions never are, which is why they're messy and unreasonable and something best avoided.

The weird thing is ... I'm damn good at shutting down emotions when it comes to myself. But when it comes to Reese ... *That's* why last night was so disturbing. Because I felt for *her*. I felt pain for Reese. I *hate* that she suffered through that. I hate that she's terrified and guilty. I feel those emotions inside me as if they're my own, and dammit, that's everything I've been avoiding.

Maybe it's a bad idea, getting involved with her. The sexual heat between us makes it impossible to resist her, though. I tried. Dammit, I tried. And then last night, even more dangerous than just attraction to her sexy body were all those feelings she stirred up in me. A need to make her feel better, no, to make her feel amazing ... to take care of her.



Yeah, that's definitely the disturbing part.

I have work to do. I need to focus on that.

But first, I should check on things in the kitchen.

Yeah, I'm fucked.

### Reese

I walk into the kitchen at Conquistadors with my head high, my insides a knot of nerves, not knowing what kind of reaction I'm going to get from the others here.

Last night was mortifying. But tempting as it was to just stay in bed forever, I've been there and done that. I got past it and I can do it again.

So I hold my head up. "Morning, Sid."

"Hey, Reese." Sid rushes over to me. "How are you feeling?"

His sympathy nearly makes me cry. "I'm okay. Thanks."

Danny's in the kitchen, too, holding a clipboard, and he follows behind Sid along with Jenn.

"Cade explained things to us." Sid shakes his head. "Lots of vets have PTSD issues, panic attacks ... after what you went through, it's not surprising."

Well, shit. Cade told them? Everything? Dismay has my heart dropping to my toes.

Damn. I didn't want people to know what happened back in New York. I didn't want them to know I'm a basket case. Oh, wait, I'm not supposed to think of myself that way; it's a denigrating ableist term for someone with a mental illness.

Anyway, people sometimes get weird about mental illness so I kind of wanted to keep it to myself.

Annoyance flares in my belly. Dammit. Couldn't he have just told them I wasn't feeling well?

Meh. I dove under the table and hid. Let's be real here.

“Let us know if there’s anything we can do for you,” Danny adds.

I bite my lip, my heart suddenly swelling up so big it nearly chokes me. “Th-thank you. I appreciate it. I’m feeling fine today, and much better than I was after it first happened.”

They all nod, and Jenn reaches out and gives my arm a brief squeeze.

Relief makes my knees wobble as I busy myself cooking. Maybe it’s not so bad that people know. “Okay, remember those Tater Tot nachos you made?” I ask Sid.

“Yeah.” His forehead creases. “You hated them.”

*Ack.* “It’s not a bad idea, actually. Let’s make them from scratch. Fresh potatoes, cooked, shredded. We’ll add some seasonings, some finely chopped jalapeños, shape them and fry them up crisp, and serve them with chipotle ketchup.”

“Okay. Sounds doable.”

I smile.

“What else today?”

“A new chile relleno. Pasilla peppers, stuffed with crab and chorizo and cheese. We’ll make fresh pico de gallo and roasted garlic cream to top them.”

“Sounds awesome.”

With my hands busy chopping, slicing and shredding, my nerves settle. I give the others direction of what to work on preparing for the lunch crowd and they all enthusiastically get to work, listening intently, eager to do what I ask of them.

God. What more could I want? I pause in my work for a moment to close my eyes and be grateful and appreciative for this opportunity.

“You okay?”

Cade’s deep voice has my eyes springing open. Immediately, my skin tingles everywhere and my belly flip-flops at seeing him—his shaggy blond hair hanging in his eyes, his blue eyes warm with concern.

He has to show up just when I close my eyes for two seconds to breathe a sigh of relief.

I shake my head “I’m fine. Really.”

“Sure?”

“I’m sure.” I set my hands on my hips and lift my chin. “Other than somewhat annoyed that you told everyone about what happened to me.”

His eyes shadow. “Oh. Uh. Yeah, I did.” He eyes me. “I thought it was better to be up-front. If we tried to hide things and pretend it was something else, they’d wonder. They’d talk. And that would be worse.”

I sigh. “Yeah. You’re right.”

His tense features relax.

“Everyone’s been great.”

“I know you hadn’t said anything about what happened in New York, but I figured they’d understand more if we were just up-front.”

“You’re probably right,” I agree with a wry smile.

“I did wonder about you.” He keeps his voice low, standing close enough that I can smell his fresh outdoor scent. “All the time.”

I bite my lip. “Yeah?”

“I wondered why you were here. Why you were a chef who didn’t want to cook. And I wondered ...” He lowers his voice even more, his mouth near my ear. “... what you taste like and what kind of noises you make when you come.”

I stare at him, my body flashing hot. Then I lift a hand and give his broad chest a mini shove. “You said nothing would change here at work,” I whisper. I bite my lip and give him a look up through my eyelashes, because damn, he makes me hot and I want to hear more, but we agreed—we have to keep things businesslike here at Conquistadors.

“Right. Sorry, sorry.” He shakes his head, a rueful smile tipping up his lips. He holds up his hands and steps back. “I

came to see how you're doing. But also to ask you something."

"What?"

"Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. We're closed for the day, so everyone can have family time."

I know that.

"Beck's going to be with Hayden and her aunt and uncle. Marco's going to be with Carrie's family. I'm going to be alone."

I lower my chin. "Me, too."

"Come to my place for Thanksgiving dinner. I'll cook for you."

"You can cook?"

"Sure. Nothing fancy. We can watch football."

My eyebrows rise.

"Uh ... not a football fan? Okay, we don't have to—"

"No, actually I like football."

"Awesome. Then you'll come?"

"I ... sure."

"Bring Jack. He doesn't have to stay home alone all day."

My heart tilts. "Okay."

"Good. Now get back to work. The night before Thanksgiving is the busiest night of the year."

I shake my head, smiling, turning away from him to focus on my chile rellenos.

After lunch, Carrie seeks me out. "Hey. I heard about what happened. Are you okay?"

I marvel at everyone's acceptance of my panic attack yesterday. Somehow I expected people to be awkward and uncomfortable, avoiding talking about it. Their sympathy takes me aback. Maybe it's because *I* feel awkward and uncomfortable about it.

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

Carrie’s head tips to one side. “I’m glad. I heard about that shooting ... I never in a million years would have thought you were involved. That must have been so awful.”

“It was.”

“I’m sorry you went through that.” Unexpectedly, Carrie pulls me into a hug. As she releases me, she smiles. “I’m glad you’re doing okay. And I’m even happier that you’re cooking again.”

I swallow what feels like a tomatillo in my throat. “Thank you.”

“We need to get together to talk about a few things for paint night.”

“Right.” I give a thumbs-up. Our first night is coming up next week.

“Do you ever get a night off anymore?”

“Things have been busy planning the new menu and getting everyone up to speed on the new dishes. I’m off tomorrow of course, but it’s Thanksgiving. Then I’m supposed to be off Sunday.”

“Supposed to be?” Carrie’s eyebrows lift.

“I might come in just to check on things ...”

“You take your day off!” Carrie grins, shaking her head. “I figured you were a Type A.”

“Ha-ha. Yep.”

“Okay, Sunday you and Hayden and I will go out for breakfast again. And we can figure out the last details about paint night.”

Geez, these people are determined to bring me into their lives. As with Cade, getting involved even in friendships feels risky. But Carrie’s warmth and caring is hard to resist, and it’s fun hanging out with her and Hayden. “Okay.”

“Great!”

Beck and Marco also take a turn checking in on me, and I pick up a weird vibe from both of them as they ask how I'm doing, giving me a odd look that makes the back of my neck tingle. I'm busy, though, and it's not until after the dinner rush that it strikes me—Cade must have told them we slept together.

I groan and slap a hand to my forehead. Shit. Does Carrie know, too? Does everyone know? Oh, my God, this is more embarrassing than the panic attack. Throwing down a towel, I stride out of the kitchen and across the hall to the office. Yep, Cade's in there alone, frowning at his computer monitor.

“Did you tell them we slept together?” I demand.

His head jerks up. “Tell who?” he asks cautiously.

“The whole fucking world!” I nearly yell.

“Calm down, Reese.”

My eyes pop open wide.

Alarm crosses his face. “Forget I said that. No, I didn't tell the whole fucking world. I told Beck and Marco. I kind of had to. I also had to reassure them that we know what we're doing and it won't have any impact on things here.”

I draw in a long breath and blow it out. “They'll tell their wives. Er, wife and fiancée.”

Cade swipes a hand over his face and grimaces. “Not gonna lie, they probably will.”

I sink into a chair. “Shit.”

“Is it that bad?”

I bite my lip. “It's not that bad.”

“Whew. Glad to hear.”

My lips twitch. “Not the sex with you.”

He grins.

“That was phenomenal. I mean ... Carrie and Hayden are wonderful and I really like them ... but this is going to give

them the wrong idea about ... me. Us. What's happening here." I wave a hand.

He gets up from his chair, rounds the desk and props his butt against the edge. "It doesn't matter, Reese." He reaches out and takes hold of my hand. "It only matters what we think."

"I feel like ... I'm getting too involved in people's lives here. I just came here to get away from New York. I don't know how long I'll be here."

"I get that." He slowly draws me up from my chair so I stand next to him. He drops my hand and curves his fingers around my waist. "Live in the moment."

"Right. Right." That's been my motto ever since I left New York. *Don't think about the past. Don't worry about the future.* "Sometimes it's hard."

"Yeah." He squeezes me gently, then his hands slide around to my back, then lower to my ass. My belly does a lusty flip. "Right now ... it's very hard." He bumps me with his pelvis.

Um, yeah ... he's hard. I choke on a laugh. "Oh, my God."

He grins and nuzzles my cheek. "How much time do you have?"

"Not enough for sex in the office with my boss."

"You make it sound so dirty. I like that." He kisses one corner of my mouth, pulling me tighter against his erection. My breasts tingle. "It wouldn't be the first time someone had sex in this office."

My stomach turns over and I shove at his chest. "Eeeew. I don't want to hear about all the women you've done in here." I try to escape his grip.

He laughs, not letting go. "Not me. Beck and Hayden. Not sure about Carrie and Marco, but there's a good chance."

I eye him suspiciously. "Not you? Seriously?"

"Not me. Not here."

“Oh.”

He kisses my nose, then my mouth. “I’ll wait till tomorrow. You’re coming to my place.”

“Right.” I’m going to his place.

“With Jack.”

“You really want to make sure I bring him.”

“Yeah. I kinda like the dude. And he likes me.”

I smile. Jack does like Cade. Why not? He takes him in the ocean and lets him swim and gives him treats. The weird thing is ... that all makes me like Cade, too.





## REESE

Cade doesn't live far from me, on Law Street, but Jack and I drive there since it's drizzling. His house is a big concrete rectangle, very modern and simple, with no front yard really, just a driveway to a double garage. Jack and I climb concrete steps to the front door and I ring the bell.

Cade opens the door almost immediately. "Hey. You're here. Come in."

He looks so good—relaxed and at ease, wearing a long-sleeved navy blue Henley shirt that hugs his biceps and broad chest, loose faded jeans and—I sigh inwardly—bare feet. Gah.

He steps aside and Jack and I enter a small foyer.

He closes the door and moves around me, surprising me by bending and brushing a kiss over my mouth. My lips tingle and part, and my breath catches in my throat.

"Hi." He smiles into my eyes.

"H-hi."

"What have you got here?" He takes the shopping bags I carry.

"I couldn't come empty-handed. I brought wine and some snacks. I made a cranberry relish. And dessert. Okay to let Jack off the leash?"

"Of course."

I bend and unclip him, then look around as I follow Cade up a short set of shiny oak steps and into a great room. The

house is equally simple inside, with white walls, gleaming oak floors, two sets of sliding doors that lead to what appears to be a wraparound balcony with a small but tidy yard beyond that, and a sleek galley kitchen open to the rest of the room. The scent of roasting chicken fills the air. The white counter is covered with dishes and food. A small dining table—white, of course—is already set with place mats, dishes, and cutlery, a small orange pumpkin acting as a centerpiece.

“I brought a water dish for Jack,” I say. “It’s in one of those bags.”

“Here it is.” Cade moves to the sink to fill it and set it on the floor.

Jack’s nose is in the air sniffing, the chicken aroma no doubt tempting him. He pads over to the big beige leather sectional in the corner of the room, sniffs around a couple of tub chairs and a square coffee table. Facing the sectional, mounted on the interior wall, is a big-screen TV with a football game playing.

I turn back to Cade. “I like your house.”

“Thanks. I can show you the rest of it. But first, how about a glass of wine?”

“That would be great.”

He moves to the fridge. “Red or white?”

I step over beside him and he straightens, holding a bottle in each hand. “Are you having some?”

“I’m going to have a beer. I’ll have a glass of wine with dinner.”

I inspect the label, not recognizing either of them, but I love a good Chardonnay. “White, please.”

When he’s poured me a glass and opened a beer for himself, he leads me on a tour. On that level is a laundry room and a room he uses as an office. Then we climb more shiny oak stairs to a second level where there are three bedrooms and a generous bathroom. Up here, the walls are the same clean white, windows all with white Venetian blinds and the

floor the same polished oak. Two of the bedrooms are nearly empty, one containing only a double bed, the other some boxes. The master bedroom has simple oak furniture and a king-size bed.

“It’s lovely. So much light.”

“Thanks. From up here, you can see the ocean. Come on.” He leads the way across the bedroom to sliding doors onto yet another balcony. “Too bad it’s kind of gloomy today, though.”

I peer out the door and yes, can see the ocean, rough today with whitecaps. “Nice.”

“Yeah, on a sunny day it’s great.”

Two wicker chairs and a table sit out on that balcony. It would be beautiful to sit out there on a nice day.

Jack follows us back down the stairs, his nails clicking on the wooden floor.

“So what are you cooking?” I move back to the kitchen island where a couple of white stools sit under the counter overhang. “Chicken?”

“Yeah. Not a turkey—that’s too much for two of us. Er, three.” He looks at Jack. “You like chicken, Jack?”

Jack’s head tilts.

“He does,” I say with a smile. “And so do I.”

“Good. Hopefully it’s edible. Hard to screw up a chicken. Also made some potatoes and a salad.”

“I brought a bacon spinach cheese dip and some bread.”

“Well, that definitely outclasses the bag of potato chips I was going to serve.”

I laugh and pull the baking dish out of the bag. “Nothing wrong with potato chips. This needs to be heated up.”

“Microwave okay?”

“Sure.”

Together we move in the small area, slicing up the baguette I brought, drinking our wine and beer and talking

about the weather and the football game that's on. It's easy ... but also ... a little thrilling. Tingles slide up my spine every time we brush together, and I have a hard time taking my eyes off him to focus on food. I want to watch his strong arms and hands as he lifts the baking dish into the microwave. I want to watch his beautiful face as he concentrates on slicing bread and pouring mixed nuts into a bowl. I want to watch his sexy bare feet move over the hardwood floor.

I still almost can't believe we slept together. And wow ... I get all hot and clenchy every time I remember how it felt having him inside me ... how it felt having his tongue on me ... his mouth ... his big body next to me in my bed. I swallow a whimper.

I stopped and bought condoms on my way over. He probably has some, but just in case he doesn't, I don't want another situation like the other night. Not that there's anything wrong with a little oral sex, but I'm dying for him to fuck me again.

"Do you miss being with your family for Thanksgiving?" Cade asked when we're seated on the couch, food spread on the coffee table in front of us. "You said you have a sister, right? Is she married?"

"No. She's a lawyer at a big law firm in Manhattan. And I do miss them. They're all together today. Apparently, my aunt is hosting this year so they've gone over there. My cousins will be there, too."

He regards me with a crease between his eyebrows. "Damn. I'm sorry, Reese."

"What are you sorry for?" I shrug and pick up a piece of baguette. "My choice to move here. I knew what it meant." One corner of my mouth lifts. "But yeah, a day like this that's a big family holiday is a bit tough. What about you?"

"I don't have any family, so not a big deal for me. Except ..." He pauses. "Usually Beck, Marco, and I would be together."

Ah. I bite my lip. Yeah, those guys are his family. I know Beck's family is back East and not really close with him. Marco doesn't have his own family, either, but has clearly been taken in by Carrie's, from what I've seen. "This is the first Thanksgiving since they got together with Hayden and Carrie."

"Yeah." He shrugs. "It's nice for them."

Somehow I sense that expressing sympathy isn't the right approach with Cade. He's a strong, proud man. But damn, I hate to think that if it weren't for Jack and me, he'd be here alone today. It gives me a tight ache in my chest.

Or maybe not. Maybe he wouldn't be alone. Knowing him, he could have easily found some hot babe to hook up with, even on Thanksgiving.

But he didn't. And we're here, together, two loners. He's probably feeling sorry for *me*, now that he knows what happened to me.

We sit side by side on the couch, snacking and halfheartedly cheering on the Trojans while awareness prickles over my skin, the air around us electric. Every time he moves and brushes against me I want to leap onto his lap. I want to grab his stubbled face and press my mouth to his. I want his hands all over me.

"When you said you didn't deserve fun ... was it because of what happened at Nova?"

His unexpected question startles me. "Um. Yeah."

"You know that's wrong, right?"

I'm silent. "I know. But it's how I feel. Why should I be allowed to have fun, when two people died? Their families aren't having fun."

"Ah." Now he does what I wanted all along—pulls me onto his lap and wraps his arms around me. "Of course they're grieving. But life isn't over for them. And it shouldn't be over for you."

“I know.” I press my nose to his neck and breathe in his scent. “I just think I should suffer for a while.”

“I told you about my buddy dying in Yemen.”

I nod and finger the placket of his shirt.

“I felt guilty about that. But that was nothing compared to how I felt after my brother died.”

I lift my head. “Your brother died?”

“He took his own life.”

“Oh, my God.” I stare at him openmouthed.

“My dad was drunk—as usual—and was on a tear because my brother needed a few dollars to pay for a field trip at school. He was fourteen. My old man got pissed off every time money came up. We never had enough. He couldn’t hold down a job. He got a disability pension, but it didn’t go far. Dallas and I both had jobs but we used our money to pay for groceries. Dallas had some money hidden in his room and it was gone. We knew Dad took it to buy booze.”

Pain blooms behind my breastbone and I make a soft noise.

“Anyway, Dad was yelling and told us we were good for nothing but sucking money out of him and he’d be better off if we’d never been born.”

I press my fingers to my mouth.

“And Dallas took him seriously. He hung himself in the bathroom.”

“Oh, dear Lord.” My stomach tightens and my chest aches.

“Yeah.” He strokes a hand over my back, as if I’m the one who needs comforting. “It was bad.” His voice has gone deep and low with remembered pain. “After that, I didn’t give a shit about my old man anymore. I’d tried and tried to get him help, to get him to stop drinking, thinking maybe we could have a sort of normal life. Somehow. And then maybe Mom would come home. But after that ... I stopped trying to help him. I just let him drink himself to death. But I felt guilty.”

“Oh, Cade.”

“I should have saved my brother. Somehow. I should have tried harder to get Dad to stop drinking. I should have stopped him from taking Dallas’s money. There were so many things I blamed myself for.”

“And none of that was your fault.”

“Right.” He meets my eyes with a faint, wry smile. “I get why you feel guilty, Reese. And I know even when you believe those things aren’t your fault, it still hurts. But don’t let it stop you from living your life.”

“Right. You’re right.” I tip my head. “You’ve made a good life.”

“I have. I was seventeen when Dallas died. I didn’t know what I was going to do with my life, because all I could see ahead of me was living there with Dad, finding some crap job to support us and making sure Dallas was okay until he graduated and we could both get out. But when he was gone, there was no reason to stay, so as soon as I finished high school, I left to join the Navy. But I still felt guilty leaving Dad on his own.” Cade shakes his head. “Even though I told myself I’d given up on him.”

“You couldn’t save him. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Oh, Cade. That’s so awful.” I ache for him, for the teenager he’d been, going through such terrible things, but I admire him for the man he’s become despite those things. Or maybe because of those things ... because things like that could break you, or they could make you stronger. And Cade is a strong man.

I touch his face, wishing I had the words to tell him the admiration and ... and ... oh, man. I care about him. I wouldn’t have this swelling emotion in my chest if I didn’t care.

I admired him from the moment I met him in that job interview months ago. His need for control annoyed me, but he impressed me with his work ethic and the responsibility he



feels for everyone around him. His intelligence, his confidence, his decisiveness ... all traits I admire, because I'm like that, too, wanting to take charge, make things happen, accomplish things. I understand all that.

Knowing these things about him now, though, makes that admiration feel like ... more.

I lean in and kiss him, like I wanted to, my hand on his face. He kisses me back, quickly taking control—of course—his big hands pulling me closer, sliding up into my hair to cup the back of my head, tilting it for a better angle, a deeper kiss. He licks into my mouth and I let him, our tongues sliding together, liquid heat drizzling down through my body right to my core.

His hands move on my body, under my T-shirt over my bare back, down to my hips, my ass, tingles following in the wake of his touch. My heart speeds up and I explore him, too ... the big muscles of his shoulders and upper arms, the soft skin at his throat in the opening of his shirt, his silky hair long enough to tangle my fingers in. We groan in unison, kissing on and on, until finally he lifts his mouth from mine and leans his forehead against mine. We both breathe rapidly. I stroke the back of his neck.

“I wanted this,” he rasps. “With you.”

“Me, too.”

“But this isn't what I invited you over here for.”

“Right. Chicken.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, that. I mean, I didn't just invite you over here to screw around.”

I meet his eyes. “I know.”

He clears his throat. “Okay, good. Let's get that chicken out of the oven and eat.”

Disappointment pinches, but I suck in a breath and lift my chin. “Okay.”

He smiles into my eyes. “Later ... I do want you. I want you in my bed. Under me. I want to bury myself inside you

and fuck you.”

My belly flips. I swallow. “Okay.”

We move apart and I tug my shirt down. Jack lies on the floor, nose on his paws but his eyes alert and watching us. I smile. “You feeling neglected, Jack?” I pat my knee and he rises, tail wagging, and pads over. I rub his head.

“He’s a good boy.”

“He is.”

Cade stands and strides over to the kitchen. I follow along, wash my hands at the sink, then help him get our meal together. We eat at the small table, Cade holding my chair for me as I sit, making my heart flutter.

The chicken is perfect, with crisp golden skin and juicy meat.

“This relish is great,” Cade says of my cranberry concoction. “I don’t usually like cranberry sauce, but this is good.”

“You mean cranberry sauce in a can?” I wrinkle my nose.

“Yeah. That’s what we had when I was a kid, every Thanksgiving. A red jelly cylinder.”

I grin. “Yeah, me, too, actually.” I take a bite of the potatoes he made. “This is all good. Thank you.”

We chat as we eat, but the humming sexual tension never quite goes away. It’s fun and exciting and exhilarating, brushing my leg against his under the table, touching his hand when I hand him the pepper grinder, him leaning over to wipe a bit of cranberry off my chin with a fingertip.

We find we have more things in common as we talk, other than our need for control and desire to succeed—simple things like a love of anything pumpkin, deeper things like a need for quiet alone time, a similar outlook on crime and social issues, racism and the environment. We also discover differences, like our views on solving religious conflicts and terrorism, not surprising I suppose, given Cade’s military background. Nonetheless, we’re able to have a spirited, open-minded

conversation and share our opinions, and weirdly that makes the tingles flowing through my veins intensify.

Jack sits patiently at our feet.

“He’s good at the table,” Cade comments. “Must have been well trained.”

“I can’t take credit for that. But I’ve been careful not to undo the training by feeding him at the table.”

“Can he have some chicken?”

“Yes. When we’re done.”

We eat the dessert I brought—pumpkin bars with cream cheese frosting.

“Fantastic.” Cade swipes up a fingerful of frosting. “This gives me ideas.”

My eyebrows rise. “Really.”

“Yeah.” He leans over and touches a finger to my bottom lip. I open and he slides his finger and the frosting inside. I suck it off, lick his finger, then gently bite down. His eyes darken. “I’d like to lick this off you.”

“That sounds ... messy.”

“So practical.” He sighs. “I thought you liked food.”

“I do like food. I’ve just never been one to bring it into the bedroom.”

“Seriously? You’re a chef. No whipped cream? No chocolate sauce? Strawberries—”

“Jesus.”

He gives me a wicked grin, and with his shaggy, sun-bleached hair, tanned skin, and white teeth he now looks every inch the surfer dude I thought him to be when we first met. He leans over and kisses me, licking a last bit of frosting off one corner of my mouth. “I have some things to teach you.”

“Umm ...” Maybe sex has been a bit too ... functional in my life. Maybe I’ve missed out on the fun of it. Imagining

Cade licking strawberry juice off my body makes my inner muscles squeeze. "I'm always open to learning new things."

"Perfect. Let's bring these pumpkin bars upstairs."



## CADE

“Okay, you convinced me.” Reese smiles up at me much later, her eyes hazy from her orgasm. “Cream cheese frosting is perfectly fine in the bedroom.”

I grin back at her. “Good.”

“Who cares if the sheets are sticky,” she mumbles. “So worth it.”

“Sex is messy.”

“True.” I kiss her again, lazy, wet kisses that taste of sugar, vanilla, and cream cheese. She sighs into my mouth.

I slide an arm under her and roll, pulling her with me so she’s on top.

“Oooh.” She blinks at me. “Smooth move.”

I draw her head back down to meet my mouth again, hand moving over warm skin—her smooth back, the curve of her ass, then up to cup her face. I push her hair back and our mouths separate by only a breath so I can look into her eyes. The connection draws out, sizzling hot. Flames lick over my body and a groan rumbles in my chest.

We kiss again, bodies rubbing together, hands everywhere we can reach. Her breasts press against my chest, still damp from me licking frosting off her stiff little nipples. The kisses grow harder, faster. I nip at her lip and the heat between us intensifies, becoming incendiary. My heart pounds, my skin feeling too tight, too hot.

“Need another condom.” I slap a hand onto my nightstand where I tossed a few packages earlier, the ones that Reese produced. That made me laugh.

Reese takes it from me, rips it open, then shifts off me. I watch her focus, rolling the latex down over my aching shaft with slender fingers. Lust throbs inside me. Then she moves back over me. Watching me, she reaches for my cock and lowers herself onto it.

My gaze drops to where we’re joined and I stare as my dick enters her. “Fuck, that’s good,” I groan. “Look at your pretty pussy taking my cock. So hot.” I curve my hands around her waist and hold her as she lowers her body, taking me inside. “Oh fuuuuck.” Slick heat surrounds me, gripping me, and it’s goddamn heaven.

She bends over to kiss me again, stretching out on my chest. I circle an arm around her back and kiss her again, hot and hungry. Then she buries her face in the pillow beside my head and slides an arm beneath my neck as she moves on me, hips lifting up and down.

Sensation shoots through me, exquisite pleasure at the slick pull of her body on me.

I lift a hand up into her hair and cup her head, my other hand going down to the swell of one firm ass cheek, holding it as it rises and falls, her body rolling against mine. She pants near my ear and lets out a soft moan.

“That’s so good ... fuck.” Electricity sizzles through my body, tightening every muscle. I lift my hips to meet hers, thrusting up deeper inside her, making her gasp. My fingers tighten in her hair and tug, and she whimpers. “Okay, babe?”

“Mmm. I like that.”

“Good.” I give another pull. Her breath hitches and her pussy squeezes me. “Oh, fuck, yeah.”

Then I let go of her hair and grasp both her ass cheeks to help her move on me, pulling on the resilient flesh as she lifts,

quicken the pace. I slide one hand between her cheeks, my middle finger brushing over the puckered entrance there. She gasps, her face turning into my neck, her lips finding my skin.

“Okay?” I murmur.

“Mmmm.”

I bury my hand deeper in her crease, rubbing over her there with more deliberation.

“Oh, God,” she moans. “That’s so hot.”

“Christ, you feel good. Riding me like that. Fuck me, Reese.”

Her mouth opens on the skin of my neck and sucks, and heat flashes through me straight to my dick. Her fingers dig in to my shoulder.

I reach down and withdraw my dick out of her pussy, tap it against her ass, then slide it slickly up the crease, over her anus, then back down. I love how her body quivers against mine, how her fingers tighten on me, her breath hot and fast against my neck. She likes this.

I like this.

I enter her pussy again, but use the wetness left on her cheeks to play more there, circling and teasing. She whimpers

Pushing up, she sets her hands on my chest, straddling me. Our eyes meet and hold, heat filling the room, sparks sizzling through my veins. I grasp her waist, then slide my hands up over her narrow rib cage to cup her breasts. “Such pretty tits.”

They fill my palms perfectly, nipples hard, and she covers my hands with hers, helping me massage her as she continues to rise and fall, sliding up and down on my cock. Then her hands slip over my wrists to stroke up and down my arms. My skin prickles everywhere, sensation sliding down my spine to tighten at my lower back.

Her hair is a tousled mess, her cheeks and jaw pink from rubbing against my stubble, her mouth swollen and pouty. I’ve never seen anything so hot in my life. “Gorgeous.”



I knife up to sit, sliding my arms around her waist, and bend my head to suck a nipple into my mouth. Yeah. Hell, yeah. Closing my lips around the nub, I tug it into my mouth, my eyes closing. She holds onto my shoulders, back arching to push her breasts out, soft, sexy noises of pleasure falling from her lips. With one hand on her back, holding her, the other rubbing the crease of her ass, I suck and nip at her nipples, moving back and forth between them, until she's shaking.

“Oh, God, Cade ... that's so good...” Her fingernails dig into my shoulder, scraping over my scalp, and she yanks on my hair. Fiery sensation flashes over me.

“Yeah. Fuck, yeah.” I rub my face against one soft curve, kiss her between her breasts then roll down to my back. My cock slides out of her and I ease her to her side next to me, lifting her thigh over my hip then entering her again. Once again, I slide my fingers through the crease of her ass. She gasps.

Her face against my shoulder, her arms around me, her knee bent and up at my waist, she pets my back as I caress her ass, all while sliding in and out of her tight, wet pussy. This time, I let my middle finger penetrate her opening there.

Her body jerks in my arms and she cries out.

I pause. “Okay?”

She gives a tiny nod, moving against my hand, encouraging me. We fuck each other, harder, faster. Flames burn in my balls, and the base of my spine aches. I kiss her shoulder and then her breath comes faster, her body tight against me, and with a long, hard shudder, her pussy ripples around me.

“Oh, yeah,” I groan. “Love that. Fuck yeah, Reese.”

And then it overcomes me, rolling over me, slamming me with unbearable pleasure. My vision darkens, my arms convulse around Reese as wave after wave of ecstasy rocks through me.

We don't move, breathing hard. My heart knocks against my ribs. I kiss her mouth, hard. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

She smiles against my lips. “Yes. I am very thankful.”

“Me, too.” I smooch her once more. “Pretty sure this is the best Thanksgiving I’ve ever had.”

Reese

“It seems to be going well.”

I stand with Hayden and Carrie near the bar, surveying the customers sitting in front of easels, trying to paint a picture similar to the one displayed by Cissy Garr, a local artist Carrie knows through G Gallery. Everyone seems to be having fun, but best of all they’re ordering lots of food and drinks.

“Yes,” Hayden replies to Carrie.

I narrow my eyes at the woman flirting with Cade. Turns out one of his hookups wants to enjoy paint night. Or wants another chance to get with him, more likely.

Usually Cade is politely dismissive of the women who show up looking for more action with him, but tonight he’s hanging around Nerissa’s easel, admiring the picture she’s painting. Nerissa’s breathy giggle and fluttering eyelashes make me want to go over there, pick up the canvas, and smash it down over her head.

I grit my teeth. I’ve seen this before. It bugged me before. But tonight ... damn. I hate this burning in my gut.

I’m jealous.

Maybe I was always a little jealous when his “girlfriends” showed up, and that’s why it bothered me so much. But now that Cade and I are together—we haven’t exactly defined our relationship—I’m pissed. Do I have a right to be? We agreed we’re exclusive, although we both agreed that neither of us wants anything serious or long-term. But that doesn’t stop that fire from burning in my belly as I watch Cade smile at Nerissa.

“I better check on things in the kitchen.” I whirl around and stalk past the bar, down the hall and into the kitchen. Things are quieter here, now that the rush of everyone

ordering has slowed down, Sam washing dishes, Jenn and Paul cleaning up while Sid finishes up a last order of nachos.

I stand for a moment. There isn't anything I'm really needed for here. Nonetheless, I grab a broom and start sweeping.

"Busy night for a Tuesday," Sid comments. "That was good."

"Yeah." I bend my head and attack the floor.

"Sometime I'd like to do that," Jenn says. "Paint, I mean. It looked like fun."

"It did. Although I'm sure I'd be terrible at it," I reply. "I think my creativity is limited to food."

Cade walks in. "Don't know I agree with that," he says in a voice low enough for only me to hear.

I glare at him and keep sweeping.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "You don't need to clean up."

"Yes, I do. I'm not above helping to clean up." I grab a dustpan and begin shoveling the crap on the floor into it.

Cade regards me impassively for a moment. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Mmm. Come see me in my office once you've finished sweeping." This time he speaks loud enough for everyone to hear, his tone brisk and businesslike. He strides out.

"Uh-oh. In trouble with the boss," Paul says.

I scrunch up my face.

"I was just joking," Paul adds hastily.

I force a smile. "I doubt I'm in trouble for working too hard."

They all laugh. I finish sweeping, wash my hands, and walk into Cade's office. He's alone.

“Close the door.”

His firm tone makes my spine stiffen, but I quietly close the door and face him. “Yes, Mr. Hardy?”

He snorts and leans back in his chair. “Mr. Hardy. Ha.”

I lift my eyebrows and cross my arms. “What did you want to see me about?”

“You don’t need to sweep the goddamn floors.”

My chin jerks down. “Seriously? You’re angry about that?”

He leans forward. “Yeah. I am. Now you tell me—what are *you* angry about? And don’t even fucking think of saying *nothing*, because I know damn well when a woman says nothing’s wrong that means something’s wrong and I don’t like passive-aggressive games.”

My mouth falls open. I gape at him, my mind whirling. “Why are you angry about me sweeping?”

“Did you sweep the floors at fucking Nova?”

I purse my lips. “I may have. Once.”

“Right. Well, you’re not doing it here, either. We may not be a high-end place like that, but you’re a chef and you don’t need to do that. Now answer my question.”

My chin lifts again and I square my shoulders. “Jesus.”

His eyebrows rise and his gaze stays on me.

“Fine. I was jealous.”

He blinks.

“You were all over that ... Nerissa, or whatever her name is.”

His jaw drops. “Nerissa. You’re kidding me.”

“I know she’s one of the women you went out with. And obviously she didn’t come here tonight to paint a picture of palm trees and a sunset.”

Cade laughs.

I frown. "I told you I was jealous. The least you can do is not laugh at me."

He sobers and rises from his chair. "You're right. I'm sorry. I just find it amusing that you're jealous of her." He stops in front of me, our bodies brushing together. He stares into my eyes. "I'm with you. Not her. I was being polite to a customer. A paint night customer."

I sigh. "Look, if we're being honest ... it bugs me when all those women come in here to beg you to see them again."

"We talked about this. I was honest with them."

"I know." I drop my gaze. "Now we're together ... I don't know. I wish it didn't happen."

"I can't change the past, Reese."

"I know." I lay my forehead on his chest. "I'm sorry I was jealous."

"I'm sorry you were, too. Because you don't have to be. Listen." He sets his hands on my hips. "I screwed around a lot. With a lot of women."

"You don't have to remind me," I mutter.

"I was being an idiot. None of them meant anything to me and in retrospect I wasn't very fair to them. I was ... compensating."

I lift my head, my face all scrunched up. "Compensating? For what? You're not exactly, uh, lacking. If you know what I mean."

"Actually, I am."

My forehead tightens even more. "What are you talking about?"

His lips tighten, but his gaze stays firmly on my face. The moment stretches out almost painfully and then he says, "I only have one testicle."

I blink. Tip my head. Think about that. "No. I'm pretty sure you have two." I experience a flutter between my legs remembering last night when I went down on him ... and how

much he loved it when I licked his balls ... sucked them ... squeezed them.

“One’s a prosthetic.”

I stare back at him. He’s not joking. “I-I ... really?”

“Really.”

“Oh.” I consider this even more. “How did it happen? Were you injured in combat?”

“No. Fuck.” He swipes a hand over his face. “All those fucking years in the Navy and barely a scratch on me. It happened when we were mountain-biking. My tire hit a big rock on the path and I fell. Got twisted up in the bike.” He winces, remembering.

“Oh, no.” Sympathy floods through me, solidifying like a rock in my stomach as if I’m feeling his pain. I touch his face. “You’re okay, though. Obviously.”

“I am. It was a painful recovery. I didn’t handle it well when they told me I’d lost a nut.” He closes his eyes.

I have no idea what this means medically but I already know he functions absolutely fine as a man. Better than fine. “God. I’m so sorry. That must have been difficult.”

He bends his head in agreement.

“You have nothing to compensate for.” My tone is dry and a look of relief passes over his face. “Seriously.” I kiss his mouth, sliding my arms around his neck. “You’re the best lover I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” One corner of his mouth lifts.

“Hell, yeah. I’d think that was obvious.”

“Everything works now. For a while ... it didn’t.”

“Oh.” I tighten my arms around his neck to hug him. Oh, God. That must have been awful for him. “You’re fine. And being a good lover is about much more than just ... everything functioning. Which you absolutely do, but also ... you’re considerate. Generous. And, well, controlling. But weirdly, in bed that’s a turn-on.”

He hugs me back, his arms tight around me.

“Is that why you didn’t want to go bike-riding with Beck and Marco?”

“Yeah.” He buries his face against my hair.

“Ah. But you did.”

“Yeah. After you told me about the shooting. You were so brave. And ... I was being an idiot.”

“Fears aren’t stupid.”

“I know. I just ... you inspired me.”

“Oh.” My chest fills with warmth. He’s told me stories from his SEAL days. Sure, getting back on a bike seems like a small thing, compared to some of them. But I know how irrational fear can be. And something that’s so deeply threatening to his manhood ... I’m a woman, and I can’t exactly relate, but I understand that it could be devastating. “You’ve done incredibly brave things, Cade. You’re a hero.”

He lets out a shuddering breath. “No. I think *you’re* the hero.”

We stand, wrapped in each other’s arms for a few moments, silent, emotion pulsing around us. He told me this about himself ... something so personal, something that makes him vulnerable. That means so much to me, that he trusts me that way.

I’m curious about whether he can still father children ... but bite back the question. That isn’t my business. We aren’t getting married or anything; we’re just having fun together. He used condoms, but those were for more than birth control, because I’m actually on the pill, so that doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t matter to me. But for his sake ... I hope he can.

“Thanks.” His voice is low in my ear. “Thanks for not freaking out about it. I’ve never told anyone else I was with.”

I pull back, my chest filled with emotion. But I play it cool. “No one needs to know,” I say casually. “But thanks for telling me so I understand ... what you were going through.”

Okay, he was a manwhore but he was trying to prove he was a man. I don't condone it; it's kind of misguided actually. The number of women you can have sex with has nothing to do with being a man. But I guess for a guy something like that is probably pretty traumatic.

"Just so you know, none of those women mattered. Not even Nerissa. However ..." He captures my chin between thumb and forefinger and nudges it up. "You do matter. Which means no sweeping. Mopping. Carrying out the trash."

I smile at him, shaking my head.

"Let's go."

"Uh ... go where?"

"Your place. You're done working tonight."

"Man, you're bossy."

"Yes. Because I'm the boss." He kisses my mouth, and my lips tingle as always. "Right?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Yes. You've made that clear. Overriding my decision about the scallops."

"Not this again."

I sigh. "I'm over it. Really."

We had a disagreement the other day because I wanted to buy the big, beautiful jumbo scallops at Food Depot but Danny balked at the price. When we went to Cade to resolve the difference of opinion, he sided with Danny.

I had such a beautiful idea for them ... but in the end, I knew he was right. It's not the kind of dish that's right for Conquistadors. I fumed about it for an hour, then let it go. Also, he gave in to my desire to start sourcing our cheeses from a local cheese market rather than Food Depot, where I can get more authentic and fresh cheeses, and some of our produce from a local farmers' market.

"Then why'd you bring it up?"

"Because you annoy me when you're bossy."



“Because you’re bossy, too. Come on. You can have your own way with me ... in bed.”

I grin. “Okay, then.”

“Holy shit!”

I’m reading the online article over Cade’s shoulder in his office—a review of Conquistadors by a well-known blogger.

“If you’re looking for fresh modern Mexican food, look no further than Conquistadors, a local tequila bar that is taking the San Diego bar scene by storm. With a newly revamped food menu and an impressive selection of fine tequilas, Conquistadors is well worth a visit,” I read aloud.

“New chef Reese Kirkwell stresses the importance of showing people the contemporary side of California Mexican food, with fresh ingredients, many of them locally sourced, and interesting combinations. If you’re looking for burritos and tacos swimming in cheese and bland salsa, this is not the place for you. Although there are certainly dishes featuring cheeses, such as the Calabacitas toast with Oaxaca and Cotija cheese. This is clean food, free of pretense and wonderfully executed.”

I peer at Cade. “This reviewer talked to me? I don’t even ... oh. Wait.” I slap my forehead. “Shit! I had no idea she was a food critic.” I sigh. “Damn. In New York we had inside tips if food critics were coming to the restaurant. She got me.”

“Apparently, she also talked to Marco.” Cade continues reading. “Marco Solis, one of three partners who own Conquistadors, says that their goal with the tequila bar isn’t just to serve delicious drinks and cocktails but to educate people on the amazing experience of tasting fine agave spirits. ‘It’s about being authentic, but having fun with it,’ Solis says. And during our visit it was apparent from the full crowd enjoying delicious contemporary food and traditional Mexican spirits that they are succeeding in their goal. Conquistadors is highly recommended.”

“Oh, my God!” I clap my hands together. “That’s amazing!”

Cade pushes back from the desk, stands and grabs me, giving me a spin. “It is. And it’s thanks to you.”

“No.” I grin at him, dizzy and bubbling inside. “Not just me. Everyone here.”

“No, really. If it weren’t for you and the new menu, this wouldn’t have happened.”

I tip my head, happiness fizzing in my chest. “I really think it’s a team effort. But I’m so glad I’ve been able to contribute.”

“Me, too.” He kisses me hard on the mouth. “We should celebrate. Too bad we drank all that expensive tequila.”

“We do have some champagne.”

“Perfect.”

“Do the others know about this?”

“Nope. Gotta get Beck and Marco in here.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him. “They’ll be so happy.”

“Yeah.” His hands tighten on my waist. “Fuck, yeah.”

“And Carrie and Hayden,” I add. “I know that Carrie’s photographs and all her Instagram posts helped get word out, too.”

“Absolutely. We’ll have a little party later.”

“Great!”



# CADE

I tap my champagne flute against Reese's and share a smile with her.

We're sitting in my living room later that night, with several bottles of champagne. We decided to celebrate away from the bar, so Beck and Hayden and Carrie and Marco came over here.

Yeah, the others know we're together. This isn't the first time the six of us have gotten together. Reese was mostly right—Hayden and Carrie have enthusiastically welcomed Reese into their friendship, but they haven't gone overboard in thinking I'm about to propose marriage to her. At least, they haven't said anything when I've been around. And Beck and Marco have slowly accepted what's happening, because Reese and I have kept our word that whatever is between us personally won't interfere with work.

Well ... we try. Sure, we have disagreements. She wants to spend outrageous amounts of money on seafood and goddamn "fleur de sel" instead of regular salt, and to buy food from more expensive places. We both like getting our own way and being in control. But dammit if her confidence and smarts didn't win me over (and turn me on, truth be told). We can butt heads all the time and it'll just make me hornier for her.

But when we sit down and talk about things rationally and when I ask her to make a business case for spending more money on things ... she does. And we both see where it's the right thing to do and where it doesn't make sense.

Seeing someone who mirrors my own decisiveness and determination is frustrating but also exhilarating. She challenges me and provokes me ... and I love it. I enjoy those animated discussions—some might call arguments—but we both listen to each other and yield gracefully when it makes sense. I admire that.

And I really am grateful to her for what she's done for Conquistadors. I appreciate how she doesn't take all the credit for it, even though it's true that if it weren't for her, we'd either be still struggling with Sid and his attempts to improve the menu or we would have fired him and had to search for someone else.

We never would have found someone as good as Reese.

I watch her laugh at something Beck says, her smile brilliant and beautiful. And it strikes me that she's changed lately. Despite taking on more responsibility, she's more relaxed and happier. She loves what she does and everyone there loves her.

My gaze lands on the chalkboard on the wall where Reese has written "Soup of the day—tequila", and I smile.

Christ. I'm getting in deep with her. All these feelings ... this isn't like me.

"It's true," Reese says. "Tequila won't save your life. But it's worth a fucking shot."

Everyone laughs.

"I like you." Beck lifts his champagne glass. "You fit in here. Cheers."

Reese's smile glows.

She makes me laugh. She makes me proud. She makes me horny.

I suck in a breath, suddenly uneasy. Check that—I'm fucking terrified.

I gulp down the fizzy wine in my glass, the bubbles stinging my nose. "Pass that bottle," I say to Beck.

“Sure.” Beck picks up the open bottle of Veuve Clicquot and hands it over. I fill my glass, this time a little sloppily, champagne fizzing over the rim. Ah, well. “Anyone else?”

“Sure.” Reese holds out her glass. “Maybe I should do it, though. There’s an art to pouring champagne.”

I catch the teasing glint in her eye and shake my head. I fill her glass, too, this time carefully pouring the champagne down the side of the glass, then hand it back.

“Champagne makes me frisky,” Carrie says.

“Pour her another one, too,” Marco says.

We all laugh. Carrie holds out her glass with a grin. “That’s not scientific, is it, Hayden? You’re the one who knows about aphrodisiacs.”

Hayden perks up. “Well, as a matter of fact, there is some evidence that champagne is an aphrodisiac. Because of the bubbles, it hits your bloodstream faster than still wine. It’s effervescent ... fizzy ... it makes you giddy. But the main reason is that the scent of dry sparkling wines replicates the aroma of female pheromones.”

We all stare at Hayden.

“Pheromones are very important when it comes to sexual attraction,” she adds. “It’s a sort of unconscious form of communication. There’s a pair of nerves that run from the nose to the brain in front of cranial nerve one, the olfactory nerve ...” Her voice trails off. “Um ... too scientific?”

“Yeah, maybe a bit, sweetheart.” Beck rubs his wife’s shoulder. “I like the way you smell, though.”

She smiles. “That’s good. Have you heard of pheromone parties?”

“Um, no.” We all respond negatively.

“People wear a T-shirt for three days then bring it to the party. They put the shirt into marked bags and everyone sniffs the T-shirts to find one that’s attractive to them.”

“Hmm.” Carrie taps her chin. “Should we host a pheromone party at Conquistadors?”

“No.” All three men speak at once.

Reese grins. “It’s an interesting idea and it has some merit. Honestly, if you don’t like how someone smells, how are you going to spend time with them?”

“Right?” Carrie bobs her head.

I like how Reese smells. Sometimes when she comes out of the kitchen, she’s self-conscious about smelling like grease or garlic, but it doesn’t bother me, and even fresh out of the shower, her skin holds a scent I find irresistible. Addicting. So yeah ... I believe in pheromones.

“So no wonder champagne makes you frisky,” Hayden says.

I meet Reese’s eyes, which sparkle with amusement and ... yes, heat. I lift an eyebrow.

She nods. Without saying a word she’s telling me that the champagne is making her frisky, too.

Fucking awesome.

Reese

“I love the way you smell.” I press my nose to the side of Cade’s neck and breathe him in.

“Oh, yeah ... me, too. Love the way you smell everywhere ...”

I push up to sit, straddling him, back arching, head falling back. Behind me I grab Cade’s thighs. Flat on his back in the bed beneath me, Cade powers his hips up into me, his thumb circling my clit. I cry out again as sensation lashes through me, his cock thrusting up into me, so deep, setting every sensitive nerve ending inside me on fire. Heat spreads through my body, and all my inner muscles squeeze.

“Fuck, yeah,” Cade growls. “Ride me, babe.”

My breasts bounce as our bodies slam together, and he lifts his free hand to squeeze one, his other hand still working my clit. I whimper, watching his taut face, sensation coiling tighter inside me. “Oh, God.”

The tightening inside me winds up higher ... higher ... and I let out a low groan as I strain for it, wanting that ultimate peak. There it is, yes ... I cry out as I come in long ripples of exquisite pleasure, one of Cade’s hands between my legs, the other cupping my breast. I give a few more small whimpers.

“Squeeze me hard,” he mutters. “Fuck, that’s good.”

Then he rolls up to sitting, grabs my hips, and in a fast movement swings me onto my back and beneath him. I love his strength and control.

He enters me again, on his knees between my thighs, driving into my still tender pussy with hard strokes. Hands at my knees, he lifts my legs and stares down at me with scorching intensity as he fucks me, hard. I gaze back at him, the bed bouncing with every lunge. I’m still coming, the continued pressure inside me prolonging the ecstasy, a burning sensation moving over my clit.

“Beautiful,” he rasps out. “So fucking beautiful.”

Our eyes meet and hold and then he groans, his head tipping back, and he holds himself deep inside me, all throbbing heat and pressure. His fingers might be leaving bruises on my legs where he holds me, but I don’t care. I love how this man, always in control, comes apart and loses his mind when he’s with me.

“Christ, Reese.” He falls over me, taking his weight on his elbows, but still his big body is a delicious pressure on me. He buries his face in the side of my neck, his breathing rough. “Christ. You fucking amaze me.”

I wrap my arms around him, hands smoothing up and down his damp flesh, and open my mouth on his big shoulder in a long, slow kiss. I close my eyes as emotions churn up inside me.

I’m not supposed to care this much.



I've been feeling so good lately, but my life is still a mess. I'm still running away. I still have a life in New York—my apartment, my friends, my family. I have no job, but New York is where I need to be to build my career. This is a temporary thing, a place to come and heal. But I've made friends ... I have people who care about me here, people I care about ... especially Cade. And when I decide to leave it's going to be awful.

Maybe I should leave now.

"Reese!" Tony calls to me. "There's a guest out front who wants to speak to the chef."

I frown at him. "What? Why? We're in serious weeds here."

Since that review at Joy Dizon's blog, we've been crazy busy, every night.

Tony shrugs. "I don't know. I don't think there's a problem." He grins. "Probably just wants to pay his compliments to the chef."

"Ha. Okay, I'll be there in a minute."

"Table four."

I finish the dish I'm making with a topping of shaved cabbage, wipe my hands on a towel, and head out front. I'm probably all shiny and red-faced. I smooth back my hair and walk toward table four, where three people are dining. My footsteps slow as I approach, though.

Graham.

My former boss. My former lover.

I haven't seen him in years, other than on TV. I haven't seen him since the day he threw a beer bottle at me. He's now a famous reality TV star, legendary for yelling and insulting and crushing people vying for the top spot in the television kitchen. He's turned his temper into a TV ratings asset.

As I near the table, I sense the electric atmosphere in the room. Conquistadors is buzzing; probably a lot of guests have recognized Graham. My eyes shift around and yeah ... everyone is scrutinizing him, whispering, smiling excitedly.

He's still devastatingly handsome, his dark hair just tipped with silver at his temples, his thick eyebrows and deep-set eyes giving him an intense, broody look. A layer of stubble darkens his strong jaw, and his sculpted lips form an imposing line.

He looks up at me as I stop next to the table and his eyebrows rise. "Reese."

"Graham. Hi."

He stands and sets his hands on my shoulders, pulling me into an embrace, kissing my cheek. "Lovely to see you." He draws back and smiles. "You're as gorgeous as ever."

I smile tightly. "Thank you." I cock my head and move away from his hands. "Lovely to see you, too. What brings you here?"

"You." His eyes crinkle up attractively. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Yeah, I was attracted to him, back as a young prep cook in his kitchen. He knows he's good-looking. "I heard you're working here now."

"Ah. Let me guess. Joy Dizon's review."

"Yes. It was definitely glowing." His eyebrows slope down over his nose. "This doesn't seem quite ... you, though."

I lift my chin. "What does that mean?"

"Darling. You were the Rising Star. You had such a bright future. What happened?"

I stare at him. "You didn't hear about Nova?"

He frowns. "Nova? Oh ... in New York. Right. I hear they're closing down."

"What? Really?" I haven't heard that. But then I've deliberately shut myself off from all news about the industry, especially in New York.

“Yeah.”

“But you heard about the shooting there ... yes?”

“Yeah. Saw it in the news. That was fucked up. You were lucky.”

“Lucky. Well. I didn’t feel very lucky. But thanks for your concern.”

“Reese.” He shakes his head. “I was concerned about you.”

“Oh. Okay.” I never heard from him, but I’m not going to call him on that. I heard from a lot of people, but after a while I stopped responding to emails and messages, so it’s possible he tried to contact me.

“This place is cute.”

“Yeah. It is.” I smile as I survey the table. “How was your meal?” I know exactly what table four ordered, and their empty plates seem to attest to satisfied customers.

“Fabulous. Seriously. You really are talented.”

“Thank you.” My heart does warm a bit. He’s an asshole, but he’s a talented and knowledgeable asshole.

“Given what you have to work with.” He gestures.

That doesn’t sit right with me. Sure, this is a small bar and restaurant, but that doesn’t preclude quality.

“I have a proposition for you,” he says.

I smile faintly. “Oh, yeah?”

“We need to talk. Can you take a break and sit with us?”

“I can’t right now. We’re super-busy. I need to get back to the kitchen.”

“We drove all the way down from L.A. to see you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“You’re going to drive all the way down here again tomorrow?”

He lifts a shoulder. “We’ll get a hotel room tonight.”

I shoot a curious glance at his companions—an older, balding man with black-framed glasses and a woman about the same age, with short blond hair and a stick-thin frame. “Well, okay, then. I can meet you somewhere in the morning.”

“We can have breakfast together,” he says. “Is there anywhere decent nearby we can stay?”

“There are a number of hotels close to here.” I name off a couple that are walking distance, a little farther up the beach.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of The Palms,” he says. “We’ll stay there. Meet us at ten.”

“Um, okay. Sure.”

“Great.” He kisses my cheek again and smiles. “See you then, Reese.”

I turn to go back to the kitchen. Cade is standing at the end of the bar, watching me. “Who the fuck is that?” he growls as I pause near him on my way by.

“Graham Sand.”

Cade’s eyes fly open wide. “No way. Chef Superdouche?”

“Yes.”

“The asshole who threw a bottle at you?” He straightens, throwing back his shoulders, and glares at Graham’s table.

I pat his chest. “That was a long time ago.”

“What the hell is he doing here?”

His anger takes me aback. “He, uh, heard that I was working here. He saw Joy Dizon’s review.”

“He came to see you?” His jaw tightens.

“Yes.” I shake my head. “He’s impressed with my cooking. It’s all good.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Yeah?”

“Sure!”

“He had his hands on you. He was kissing you.”

“On the cheek.” I glare at him. “Jesus, Cade.”

Anger flows off him in waves. “You didn’t need to let him do that. You didn’t need to talk to him.”

“He’s a guest.”

“I can kick him out.”

“Cade. Don’t be ridiculous.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw. “Ridiculous?” He lifts one eyebrow.

I shake my head. “He’s an important guest. Can’t you tell how the place is buzzing because he’s here? Everyone knows who he is.”

Cade shoots Graham a narrow-eyed look. “I don’t give a shit.”

I draw in a long breath, seeking patience. “I don’t have time for this. I have to get back to work. Things are crazy tonight.”

I debate telling him about my breakfast meeting with Graham and his proposition and decide against it. He’s riled up enough.

“Yeah. They are.” He crosses his arms over his broad chest, biceps bulging, and frowns.

“You should be happy things are busy!”

“I am happy.” The scowl on his face says otherwise.

I sigh and shake my head. I start past him, then stop. “You’re not going to kick him out, are you?”

His lips thin. “They’re done eating. Hopefully they’ll be gone soon.”

Crap. Why is he so pissed? Sure, Graham hugged me and kissed my cheek, but he’s nobody to me. Not anymore. It’s like Cade is jealous.

He shouldn’t be jealous. Same as I shouldn’t have been jealous when Nerissa came to paint night. Neither of us has

any claim on the other and our relationship is not one that gives us any right to be jealous.

Things are getting too serious. The depth of my feelings for Cade is starting to scare me, and I'm painfully afraid that his feelings for me are growing, too. That will make it so much harder to end things when the time comes.

And when will that be? I've always figured someday I'll go back to New York. I needed to get away, to have some time to heal and deal with the guilt and sadness that swamped me after the shooting. Lately I've been more at peace. Happier. Content. I'm having fun changing things up here at Conquistadors. It's a professional challenge, even though as Graham noted, I'm somewhat limited in what I can do here. I enjoy the sun and the beach and the people. But this isn't my home. This is like an extended beach vacation that has to end at some point.

I spend the rest of the evening focusing on the food, trying to put Graham's surprise appearance and Cade's unreasonable jealousy out of my head. The busy pace helps, as well as Paul dropping a huge container of salsa that shoots up in the air and spatters all over the floor along with me and Jenn, which means a big clean-up job and an urgent rush to prepare more, while cursing under my breath. And my paring knife is missing, goddammit.



## REESE

I drive to The Palms the next morning, parking around the corner on a side street. The elegant hotel is across the street from the beach, and I walk through the cool, tiled lobby to the restaurant. The big Christmas tree in the corner glitters with red, green, and gold ornaments. Christmas in California still seems so weird to me—lights and decorations on palm trees, big artificial trees with colorful ornaments and lights, fake Santas when there's bright sunshine and no snow whatsoever.

I spot Graham already here, with the same man and woman he had dinner with last night.

He again rises and greets me with a kiss on the cheek and a smile. "Good morning, Reese. Have a seat." He holds the fourth chair at the square table for me and I sit, hanging my purse over the back of the chair. "Coffee?"

"Yes, I'd love some."

He picks up the thermos on the table and pours coffee into the cup at my place setting. "Still drink it black?"

"Yes." I smile.

"Let me introduce you. Reese, this is Bob Crisoforo, and Loni Quinn. Loni is the producer of my TV show and Bob is my partner in a new restaurant we're opening in Santa Monica."

"Oh, you're opening a new restaurant! That's awesome." I know Piccolo in New York is still his, but he spends most of his time on the West Coast now because of his TV show. I smile at Bob and Loni. "Nice to meet you."



“And you,” Bob says with a smile. “Graham’s been raving about you.”

“Oh.” My cheeks heat and I glance at Graham as I pick up my menu. “Um, thanks?”

He grins. “All good, Reese. I’ve followed your career, you know. You’ve lived up to the potential I saw in you when you started at Piccolo.”

“Thank you.” I keep my response simple, trying to hide my surprise.

“You were getting great press at Nova.”

“Yes. We were.”

“None of that team player shit.”

I blink at him.

“It was you,” he stresses. “Take the goddamn credit for what you accomplished. That was your biggest weakness as a chef.”

Stung, I frown at him. “My weakness was that I wasn’t enough of an asshole?”

He laughs. “Yeah.”

I bend my head and stare unseeingly at the menu. “I don’t want to be an asshole drama queen. I want to make good food. I want to motivate others by setting an example for them, not by abusing them.”

“You think I abused my staff?” He lifts an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Sometimes.”

“Huh.”

I catch the wide-eyed expressions on Bob and Loni’s faces. “Sorry,” I say with a smile. “But I’m sure that doesn’t come as a surprise to you. I’ve watched the show.”

Graham grins. “You *do* have a backbone, darling. I like that.”

A waitress appears to take our orders. My stomach feels tight and unsettled, so I request a two egg omelet with wheat

toast. When the waitress departs, I pick up my coffee again and sip it.

“Last night,” Graham says. “That Shakshuka was fabulous. Cilantro, avocado, cotija ... truly inspired.”

“Thank you.”

“The shrimp mole enchiladas were amazing, too. Your mole sauce ...” He closes his eyes and sighs with pleasure. “I detected a hint of cinnamon ... yes?”

I smile. “It’s my secret recipe.”

“Good girl. The ahi enchiladas, though ... the kale was just wrong.”

I lift my eyebrows and sip her coffee. “In your opinion.”

“Ha. Yes. In my opinion.”

“I loved the ahi enchiladas,” Bob says with a thumbs-up. “Even with the kale.”

“Kale is so over,” Graham says. “I’m using a lot of turnip greens and mustard greens now.”

“Interesting.”

I have no idea what’s going on here. He mentioned a “proposition” and with Bob and Loni here, it probably isn’t a sexual one, so ... *get to the point, dammit.*

Graham move his cutlery. “So. I mentioned last night a proposition.”

“Yes.” I smile casually.

“I want you to work at Grand.”

I blink. “What?”

“Grand. That’s the name of the new restaurant. It’s my name ... first and last, combined.” He grins.

“Right ...”

“We need a chef de cuisine. I can’t be there all the time, obviously, so I need someone for the day-to-day kitchen duties. Someone capable of executing my vision for the

restaurant. We want the best talent for this restaurant. I want you.”

My jaw goes slack and I carefully set down my coffee cup. “Um. Wow.”

“Let us tell you about the concept,” Bob says. “We’ve got a ten thousand square foot space on Ocean Avenue. We’ll be opening in less than a month.”

“Leaving it a little late to hire a chef de cuisine,” I comment.

“We did have someone else,” Graham admits. “But he ended up taking a job with Todd English in Vegas.”

“Oh. So I wasn’t your first choice.” I’m really only teasing.

Graham leans closer. “A very close second, darling.”

“We’ll have an outdoor seating area in the ground floor courtyard, and a patio on the second level,” Bob continues. “The main dining room has a double-height ceiling and natural light from a twenty-foot oval skylight. The whole place is lavish and cosmopolitan—chandeliers dripping with crystals, lots of gilt-framed mirrors, a spiral staircase to the second level, low lighting, very swank, very glam.”

I nod.

“The menu will be multi-ethnic dishes,” Graham says. “I want to focus on shareable plates, tapas style, reinterpreting classics. Chipotle mahi tacos. Heirloom tomatoes and burrata. Pizzettas with summer squash, asadero cheese, huitlacoche cream.”

“It sounds amazing,” I say slowly. “If I’d known this was a job offer, I wouldn’t have insulted you earlier.”

Graham laughs, along with Bob and Loni. “I want someone who can stand up to me. That was my only concern about you. But you’ve grown up a lot since Piccolo.”

“Um, thanks, I guess.” Feeling stunned and dizzy, I don’t know what to say. “I’m flattered that you thought of me.”

“Say you’ll take the job. Working here in that little tequila bar can’t be what you want to do for the rest of your life. I was surprised to see that’s where you are now.”

“Um.” A tightness develops behind my breastbone. “Yes, funny how things work out.”

He leans closer. “This is going to be a fabulous restaurant. In a fabulous city. Do you want to talk money?”

My eyes widen. “Uh ...”

He names a salary that makes my heart skip a beat. “Sound fair?”

I’m stunned but not stupid. I shrug. “Starting low, are you?”

He laughs again. “Damn, Reese. You have to come work for me. Come on.”

Luckily the waitress arrives with their breakfasts and the conversation pauses while we’re served.

“So?” Graham asks moments later. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have questions?” Bob says. “We’ll answer as many as we can.”

I cut off a piece of my omelet and pop it in my mouth, thinking. This is undeniably an exciting opportunity. Getting in on the ground floor of one of Graham’s restaurants, which will absolutely do well now that he’s pretty much a household name. That alone will bring people in, and if the food is as good as Piccolo ... it will be a smash hit.

I worked for Graham before, and it was a challenge. But I’m older and wiser and more experienced, and this time I’ll be the one in charge ... sort of. As he said, he won’t be there on a daily basis. It will be my kitchen to run.

And I can do it.

Can I?

But what about New York? What about what happened there?

The possibilities do start a tingle that spreads to my fingers and toes, but doubt also clamors inside me.

“You need to think about it,” Loni says. “We understand that. Right, guys?”

Graham frowns. “I thought you’d jump at this opportunity.”

“I really am intrigued,” I say slowly. “And as I said, flattered. But yes ... I would like some time to think about it.”

“So you can make nachos at a tequila bar?”

I regard him steadily, tipping my head. “You were raving about my food a few minutes ago.”

Graham sighs. “You’re right. I’m just ... determined that we’re going to work together again.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay. That’s all I can ask for. How much time do you need?”

I bite my lip. I have no idea.

“I’ll give you until the end of the week.” It’s Wednesday. “We’re on a tight schedule to be open in January. I’ll call you Friday. Give me your number.”

We exchange cell phone numbers and finish our meal, talking about Graham’s TV show and people we both knew.

I go home to get Jack and take him for a walk before going to Conquistadors. A nice long walk on the beach will clear my head and help me think.

Cade

“Jesus, who crapped in your corn flakes?”

I frown at Beck. “What?”

“You’re all pissy today. What’s going on? We’re still not making enough money?”

“No. We’re doing great.” The sales numbers are definitely looking up. Reese is bringing in all kinds of new customers with her food. Word is getting out about our tequila-tasting nights, which sell out immediately, and the paint night was a big hit, too. “No worries about being shut down because of our booze-to-food ratios.”

“Good to hear. It’s been fantastic seeing how busy we are every night.”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s the problem?” Beck’s gaze sharpens. “Is it Reese?”

“Uh. Sort of. I’m just ... ” I rub the back of my neck. “Last night her old boss was here.”

“No shit. The celebrity chef dude?”

“Yeah. The one she had an affair with.”

“Oh.” Beck’s eyebrows shoot up. “Didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. It was a long time ago, but ... makes me wonder what the hell he was doing here. Clearly he hunted her down.”

“You think he wants her back.”

I feel like an idiot. “He kissed her.”

Beck rolls his eyes. “Kissed her like, bent her over his arm and stuck his tongue down her throat? Or kissed her like, a peck on the cheek?”

“It was a peck,” I admit. “Still. It pissed me off.”

Beck purses his lips. “Uh-oh.”

“What?”

“You’re jealous.” He shakes his head sadly.

“So?”

“That means you’re falling for her.”

“No, I’m not.”

“For what it’s worth, I think she’s falling for you, too.”

“Nope.”

Beck’s mouth twists. “No?”

I shake my head. Then, striving to keep my tone casual, I voice my biggest fear. “She probably just feels sorry for me.”

“What the fuck? Why would you say that?”

Argh. I shouldn’t have said that. I laugh. “I’m kidding.”

He gives me a slitty-eyed look as he leaves.

I slump back in my chair. The truth is, anyone I’ve ever thought cared for me just felt sorry for me because of my fucked up life. But Reese makes me want to believe. She’s become so important in my life ... not just here at the restaurant, but away from it. It fucking scares the shit out of me.

And yeah, I’m jealous of Chef Superdouche. I want nobody else to touch her. She’s mine. Maybe ... okay, maybe I’m falling for her. And could Beck be right? Maybe she’s falling for me, too. Maybe this could all work out okay ... except why was that asshole here? What was he saying to her?

“Okay, back to business,” Beck says. “Word of mouth is working out great, but apparently we still need to do some advertising. Danny thinks social media advertising is our best bet, given the demographic of our customers.”

“Right.” I need to focus on work, not on Chef Superdouche kissing Reese.

## Reese

I can’t exactly talk to Cade about this, even though he is, as well as my lover, my best friend. I feel like I can talk to him about anything, but how can I tell him about this job offer and ask his opinion?

What would his opinion be? Would he want me to take this fantastic opportunity for my career? Would he be even a little

sad that I was leaving? And would that be professionally sad ... or personally?

I sigh. I need to talk to someone. So I text Carrie.

*Sup?* comes Carrie's reply, making me smile.

*You busy? Need to run something by you.*

*Want to meet for coffee?*

*Sure. Thanks!*

We arrange to meet at a coffee place on the beach, not far from Conquistadors. We sit out on the patio with our cups. The sun is bright, but a cool breeze off the ocean keeps the temperature mild.

"What's going on?" Carrie leans forward. "Is this about Cade?"

I bite my lip. "Um, not exactly. Sort of. Damn."

Carrie tilts her head.

"It's complicated." I sigh. "This morning I got a job offer."

Carrie's forehead furrows. "Oh. Wow. Where?"

"A new restaurant that Graham Sand is opening. In Los Angeles."

Carrie's eyes widen. "Oh. Oh! That's ... wow."

"Yeah.

"Apparently, Graham has been following my career. He saw Joy Dizon's review and he came to Conquistadors last night to check out my cooking firsthand."

"And he obviously liked it."

"Yes. He approved. We had breakfast this morning—" Carrie's shocked gasp makes me pause and wave my hands. "That's all it was. Breakfast. And his business partner and producer were there."

Carrie purses her lips.

"And he told me about the restaurant and offered me a job as chef de cuisine there."



Carrie nods.

“It sounds amazing,” I continue, folding my paper napkin over and over. “Very high concept. He’s a big name now, so I know it will do well. He offered lots of money.” I give a short laugh.

“Probably a lot more than you make here.”

I shrug. “Well, yeah.”

“Sounds like a fantastic offer.”

“It is. I ... I don’t know what to do.”

Carrie regards me somberly. “Why aren’t you jumping at it?”

That’s the big question, isn’t it? “I don’t know.”

“I think you do know.”

I sigh. “Well. I feel a sense of loyalty to Conquistadors. Things are going well, but I’ve just gotten started ...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not that it’s all my doing,” I add quickly.

“It is.”

I make a face. “It’s everyone. You think your photographs and Instagram posts haven’t helped? They absolutely have. And the others in the kitchen are great ... they just need some guidance. The floor staff is a good group now, too ... nice personalities, strong customer service skills—”

“That’s not it,” Carrie interjects.

I sigh. “You mean Cade.”

“Well?”

“Cade and I aren’t serious. I was up-front with him that I didn’t plan to stay here forever.”

“Was he up-front with you? He usually only spends one night with a woman. But you ...”

“Yes, he was honest with me about that. He wanted more than one night, but nothing serious. So we were on the same

page about that.”

“So if you move to Los Angeles, it’s no big deal.”

My heart contracts and I bend my head. “It shouldn’t be.” I do a fast breath in and out. “There’s also ... you. And Hayden. And Marco and Beck. You all are m-my friends now.” My voice shakes and I fight for control.

“Yes, we are. And selfishly—I don’t want you to go.” Carrie reaches over and squeezes my forearm.

I attempt a smile.

“I know your career is important to you,” she says slowly. “But make your decisions for the right reason. When I was going to Spain, I thought I had to prove something. I thought I had to prove myself to my family. To everyone, really. But it turned out I actually didn’t, and I’d made this crazy plan to move to Spain for the wrong reasons.”

I move my head up and down, taking in her words, but this isn’t really the same.

“Anyway, we can still be friends,” Carrie says brightly. “L.A. isn’t that far.”

“Right. And thank you.”

“I think you and Cade need to talk about this.”

I scrunch my face up, then relax it. “Yeah.” I sigh. “I, uh, never mentioned that Graham and I had a relationship ... years ago ... when I worked for him.”

“No. You didn’t mention that.” Carrie leans forward. “Does Cade know that?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Carrie draws out the word. “Does Graham want to renew that also?”

“No!” I pause. “I don’t think so. No. This was a business offer.”

“Okay.” Carrie nods, her face wearing a troubled expression.

“I’ll talk to him,” I say. “It’ll be fine.”  
So why do I feel like throwing up?



## REESE

I can't put it off forever, since Graham gave me only a couple of days to think about his offer. Cade is coming to my place tonight after work, which has become a routine in recent weeks. Sometimes I stay at his place, but I have to plan ahead and bring Jack when I do. Poor Jack, who still has no forever home.

Oh, my God, what will I do without Jack? The idea of giving him back to the shelter makes my chest hurt.

On top of my stomach, which has been in painful knots all day.

"All set?" Cade smiles at me as I leave the kitchen.

"Yeah. I'll get my purse."

"Another busy night." He follows me down the hall.

"No kidding! I'm surprised there aren't dollar signs on your eyeballs," I tease.

"Ha-ha. Believe me, doing the books is a lot more fun now than it was a few months ago."

"Even with my expensive cheese and fancy salts?" I grab my purse and come to stand in front of him, smiling.

"Yeah." He kisses my mouth softly. "Even with all the crazy shit you buy."

"Told you."

"Yes. Yes, you did. Let's go."

We leave through the back door and climb into his SUV.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” I blink at him.

“You’re twisting your shirt. You do that when you’re nervous. Although I haven’t noticed you doing it as much lately.”

I look down at the hem of my white shirt between my fingers. “Oh.”

“Something bothering you?”

“Well, there is something I need to talk to you about.”

After a beat of silence, he says quietly, “That’s never a good thing.”

“Well. It might not be ... bad.”

“That doesn’t sound promising, either.”

I bite my lip.

When we’ve greeted Jack, let him out to pee in the yard, and given him more attention, I finally turn to Cade. “Let’s sit down.”

“Another bad sign.” He shoves a hand into his shaggy hair. “But sure.”

We move to the couch and sit side by side, but I shift, curling one leg under me so I can face him. “Okay.” I take a breath. “Graham came to the restaurant the other night because he wanted to check out my food. And he wanted to talk to me.”

Cade’s face tightens. “Uh-huh.”

“He offered me a job,” I say in a rush, because clearly he’s thinking other things. “It was business.”

Cade stares at me. “A job.”

“Yes.” I dip my chin up and down quickly. “He’s opening a new restaurant in Santa Monica.” I tell him about it and the job offer. “I can’t believe he wants me for the job,” I finish. “Isn’t that ... amazing?”

“Amazing. Sure.” I can’t read the expression on his face. This is the Cade I got to know when I first started at Conquistadors. Impassive. Inscrutable. Totally in control. My insides constrict even more, along with my lungs.

“Sounds like a fantastic opportunity.”

“I know.” I bite my lip.

“Are you going to take it?”

I gaze at him. I start shaking inside. “I don’t know.”

“Is New York better than Los Angeles for your career?”

“Um. No. Not necessarily.”

He nods. “Did he offer you decent money?”

“More than decent.”

His eyes flicker. “More than you make here.”

I close my eyes. “Money’s not everything.”

He hitches one shoulder. “If you say so.” He pauses. “Are you afraid?”

I blink. “Fucking terrified.”

His face softens. “Don’t make decisions based on fear. Right? Make decisions based on hope. Possibility.”

His words play over in my head.

“You should do it,” he finally says in a low, firm tone. “It’s a fantastic opportunity for you. Unless you still want to go back to New York. But an actual job offer is probably better than going back and looking for a job. Right?” He only pauses for a fast breath. “The way you describe this new restaurant, working for someone famous like that ... sounds like it would be a huge boost for your career.”

“I-I think it would.” My heart is slowly, painfully, cracking. My belly is so rigid it hurts, my throat tight.

His lips lift into a near smile. “You got what you needed here, Reese. You’re doing better emotionally. You’ve only had one little panic attack since that Dumpster incident.”

Yes, I had another panic attack, for no apparent reason other than Jack escaped out of the yard and I was stressed trying to find him for about five minutes. But it wasn't a bad attack.

“And you don't have nightmares anymore. You're back in the kitchen, cooking, which is what you needed. You're ready to move on.”

My throat thickens even more as I regard him. *I don't want to move on. I want to stay here. I want to stay here with you.* My sinuses burn and pressure builds behind my cheekbones.

“And so am I,” he says lightly. He pats my knee. “So thanks.”

What the hell does that mean? Was he only using me, like all those other women ... using me for sex because he thought he was less of a man after his bike accident?

My head spins and my hands start to shake. I clasp them together so tightly it hurts.

I swallow painfully, nodding even though I don't know why I'm nodding. I have to say something, but I can't get words out, and if I do I'm going to sob. I don't want him to see me cry. I never cry.

I stand and cross over to my tiny kitchen where I grab a bottle of water from the fridge. I crack it open and drink some, the cold soothing my aching throat. Now I can speak. “Want one?” I hold up the bottle.

“No, thanks.” He stands, too, shoving his hands into his back pockets. His shoulders hunch up. “I should go. I guess.”

I gulp more cold water. “Okay.”

“When do you have to give him a decision?”

“By Friday.”

He makes a rough noise, then shakes his head. “You don't have to give us two weeks' notice, if you want to leave right away.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”



“Okay. Night, Reese.”

He leaves, closing the door quietly behind him. I move toward it to lock it, then lean there, my head pressed against the door. Tears slide from my eyes. For a moment I let the sobs come, quietly, my face contorting. Then I suck in a long, shaky breath and lift my head.

I can't cry. I'm stronger than that. I cried way too much after the shooting and I'm not going back to that depressing black place again. I'll be fine.

I sit on the couch and Jack jumps up next to me. I slide my arm around his solid body and pull him closer for a hug. He laps at my wet cheek. “Jack. Oh, Jack.” I bite my lip. “Do you want to come to Los Angeles with me?”

He licks again.

How would I do that? I have no place to live there. Graham needs me right away. I'll be pressed to find somewhere to live and move there.

Once again my eyes sting. I don't want to go. I don't want to leave everything I have here. But now ... I have no choice. Because Cade doesn't care about me. I've gone and fallen in love, but he hasn't. And now there's no way I can keep working at Conquistadors. Talk about painful and awkward.

Shit. I've screwed things up so badly. I should have known that getting involved with my boss was a bad idea. I should have known better than to think that I could possibly be deserving of so much goodness—friendship. Belonging. Love.

I've dedicated my life to my career, spending more time in the kitchen than anywhere else. I rarely saw my friends and family. And after the shooting, I realized how isolated I'd become. Here, it's different.

A sob rises in my throat and I bend my head to lean it against Jack's. It all feels so overwhelmingly sad right now. It's late. Maybe a good night's sleep will help me see things more clearly in the morning and know what my next steps should be.

## Cade

“I’m sorry.”

I keep my face neutral, watching Reese across the office from behind my desk.

“I’ll work today. I hate leaving you in a lurch, but it’s probably better if I leave right away.” She squeezes out a tight smile.

“Yeah.” I see her point. It’s awkward. We vowed that nothing at work would change when we started sleeping together, but breaking up ... yeah, that makes it uncomfortable.

It makes it fucking fiery burning hell, is what it makes it. She’s actually going to leave. She’s going to take the job with Chef Superdouche and move to L.A., which admittedly isn’t the end of the earth, but still ...

Spots float in front of my vision and I clench my hands into fists, then swallow. “Okay. Appreciate that.”

She dips her head briefly, then turns and leaves to head to the kitchen.

She’s gained golden color from the sun since she’s been here, a few tiny freckles on her nose, but today she’s as pale as the day she came in for her job interview. But she seems composed and sure of herself. She’s made her decision.

I have to accept that decision.

It’s not surprising, really. I didn’t sleep at all last night, going over and over things in my head. I knew this would be the outcome. Of course it would.

Why was I so goddamn stupid as to think there was any possibility we could really have something together? That she might actually care about me? I’m an idiot. I know better. Love doesn’t exist. For me, anyway. Yeah, Beck and Marco seem happy, and I don’t want to be all cynical and harsh their glow, but for me ... nah.

I should have stayed tougher. I know better than to let myself have all those feelings. Damn her! She makes me laugh. She makes me hurt for her. She makes me realize I'm a stubborn idiot because she is strong and brave.

She makes me ... care.

I'm supposed to be in control. I'm not supposed to have these feelings. I'm not supposed to have *any* feelings. Boy, did I fuck up.

I lower my head to my desk, my entire body burning.

I probably screwed up by telling her so much about myself. Why would she want to be with someone so messed up? Like so many other people I thought cared, she probably felt sorry for me. Like every other time I dared to hope ... I was disappointed. I should have known better.

Whatever.

“Uh ... you okay?”

I lift my head to see Marco regarding me with a notch between his eyebrows. “Yeah. Fine.”

“Problems with the sales numbers?”

“Nope. Sales numbers are good.” I slap my keyboard to wake up the monitor and present the spreadsheet I was working on. “Fantastic, even.”

“Okay, good.” Marco eyes me. “We still on for go-kart racing tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Sounds great.” I have to tell Marco and Beck ... Reese is leaving. I pull in a long breath through my nose. “I do have some bad news, though.”

“What?”

“Reese is leaving.” I keep my voice calm and low.

“What?” Marco drops into a chair, jaw slack.

“She's leaving. Today will be her last day. She got an amazing job offer in Los Angeles. Big new restaurant.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

I huff a laugh.

“I didn’t realize she was looking for another job,” Marco says slowly.

“I don’t think she was. Yet.” I shrug. “This was never going to be a long-term thing for her. But the opportunity presented and she took it.”

Marco’s eyes narrow. “What does that mean for you two?”

“It means nothing.” I hold Marco’s gaze. “We were never meant to be long-term, either. We knew that.” I can pretend I don’t care, just like he did when Reese told me her news last night.

Marco slowly turns his head from side to side. “Jesus. And she’s leaving after today?”

“Yep.”

“What the hell are we going to do?”

I sigh and rub my forehead. “That I’m not sure about. Maybe Sid has learned enough from Reese to handle things himself.”

“I don’t know. Fuck.” Marco stares at the floor. “Maybe we should hire another chef?”

“Sure.” That’s my thing ... hiring staff. “I’ll get on it.”

“Are you okay?”

I give Marco a cool look. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Marco stares me down. “You’re not being a dumbass, are you?”

I frown. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You’re just going to let her walk out of here?”

“I can’t stop her!” I close my eyes and take a breath. “This is an awesome career move for her. She wants to do this.” She *needs* to do this. She needs to overcome her fear, to prove she can still be a badass chef in a high end eatery.

“You think?”

“Yeah.” Annoyance edges my voice. “She’s leaving, isn’t she?”

“Remember when Carrie went to Spain?”

“Yeah.”

“She didn’t really want to go. She wanted me to tell her that I didn’t want her to go, either.”

I give Marco a black stare. “She’d already decided not to go.”

“I didn’t know that.” He sighs. “Think about it.”

Fuck that. I’m not thinking about it anymore. I thought about it all damn night, tossing and turning and sweating in my bed. “It’s done. And I have work to do.”

Marco’s face tenses, but he nods and leaves.

She’s really leaving.

## Reese

It’s weird not going to work.

I haven’t worked at Conquistadors that long, but it’s become a big part of my life—well, it’s the people there, really. The regulars, my coworkers, Beck and Marco, Carrie and Hayden. And Cade. Most of all Cade.

The last two mornings I got up and took Jack for a walk on the beach. I couldn’t stop myself from looking for Cade, thinking maybe he was surfing as he often did in the morning. But I didn’t see him.

I survey the duplex. I’ve accumulated a bit of furniture that I’ll have to move. The small Christmas tree in the corner that Cade and I bought and decorated the other day blinks at me, the tiny white lights flashing. I move over to look at it, fingering the ornaments we bought at a gift shop up the beach while we were Christmas shopping ... seashells, anchors, and driftwood with red ribbons, the little palm tree and the dolphin and the tequila bottle. Jesus, I’m going to cry again.

I suck in a deep breath and let it out.

I called Graham late Friday and told him I decided to take the job. For some reason, I put it off all day, until I couldn't put it off any longer. He was flatteringly happy.

I go online and scroll through apartment listings. There's no point in actually going up to L.A. to look at places until after Christmas. If I'm going to do this, maybe I should sell my New York apartment. Really start over. My parents will probably help with that since they're there, helping ship the things I left in storage. It makes sense to do that.

Tomorrow is Christmas.

I sigh. I've worked many Christmas Days—that's not a big deal in the hospitality business. But I've never been alone on Christmas before.

I should have given in to my parents, who've been bugging me to come home for Christmas. I put them off with excuses, not wanting to tell them the reason I want to stay here is because of Cade. And now ...

A longing so intense it's painful rips through me, and I actually double over, gasping. God. Why, *why* did I fall so hard for Cade? I should have known better. Like all those other women, I *knew* he wasn't going to commit to something long-term. I thought I could do it. Instead, I fell in love.

Maybe I should call Graham back and tell him it was a mistake. I'll go and beg for my job back at Conquistadors.

I'll be another of Cade's discarded companions, begging him for another chance.

Crap. I am not going to be that girl.

I'll be fine. It'll just take a while. Once Christmas is past, I'll be busy moving and diving into the opening of Grand. I won't have time to miss Cade or anyone else at Conquistadors.



## CADE

“I don’t know how to make that mole sauce.”

I give Sid a long look. “How hard can it be?”

“She never told me everything she put in it. I can make *a* mole sauce, but it won’t be the same.”

“Whatever. People won’t notice the difference.”

Sid winces. “They probably will. I’m not sure exactly how she made that shakshuka either, and it’s really popular at lunch.”

“Great.” I sigh. I rub the back of my neck. “I’m working on hiring a new chef.”

Sid’s dejection is obvious on his face. “I’m sorry. I should have learned more ...”

“Not your fault. This happened fast.”

“Still don’t get why she left,” Sid mutters. “I thought she liked it here.”

“This place is small potatoes for her. It was only ever going to be temporary.”

“I guess.”

“Do your best, okay? We’re relying on you to keep things going.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I go back to my office. Beck is behind the bar, stocking the fridge with beers. Marco and Danny are in the walk-in doing



inventory. It's Christmas Eve. We agreed we'll close for Christmas Day this year, to spend time with family, and since we don't have a chef, it's one less day to worry about how to make the menu items she created, without her.

I blow out a long breath as I sit in my chair. Just when things were going so well ... *shit*.

We'll get back on track. We always do. We've all overcome bigger problems than this.

Instead of seeing the spreadsheet on my computer screen, I'm picturing Reese. Laughing at the beach when Jack learned how to surf. Beaming when she created something amazing and delicious, and people loved her food. So excited the day that blogger reviewed the restaurant, but not taking all the credit even though she deserved it. Breathless and smiling the day we played tourist and I took her to Sea World, and she patted a dolphin's head while feeding it smelly fish. When I told her about my bike accident and how it impacted me—not laughing or belittling me, just accepting it.

I thought she probably felt sorry for me, but in truth, she didn't seem to pity me. She was sympathetic, yes, but understanding and supportive. Reassuring.

Not pitying.

I rub my eyes and try to focus again on business. I have bills to pay, expenses to track.

My head jerks up when the office door slams shut.

Carrie.

I frown. "Hey, Care. What's up?"

"You're an idiot." She points at me, advancing into the office. "Are you going to let her go?"

"Uh ..." Probably not much point in asking who she's talking about. "Don't think I have much choice. She made her decision."

"She doesn't want to leave!"

I scowl at her. "How the hell do you know?"

“Because I’m a woman.”

I squint at her. “That makes no sense.”

“Yes, it does.” She plants her hands on my desk and leans in. “I’ve been through this myself.”

“Right.” Marco mentioned that, too—when Carrie was planning to move to Spain to study photography. It was a dream of hers ... apparently. Or maybe not, because she changed her mind, but she didn’t tell Marco that, and he went chasing after her when he thought she was moving to Spain for nine months.

“She’s in love with you,” Carrie states. “And I think you love her.”

I lift an eyebrow. “I think I know how I feel.”

“No, you don’t.” She stares me down. “You don’t have feelings, do you?”

I scowl. “What the hell?”

“You pretend you don’t have feelings. You shut them down. I know you had a rough life.”

Yeah, my family background came out in some discussions with my friends. I never share a lot about it, but apparently enough that Carrie thinks she knows what I went through.

“I get why you do it,” she continues. “But you do have feelings. You and Marco and Beck are like brothers. You’d give your life for them if you had to.”

I stare at her. I can’t deny that.

“You care about the people who work for you, even though you pretend you’re all about the bottom line. You probably should have fired Sid months ago but you kept giving him more chances.”

My gut tightens.

“You even care about me and Hayden.” She juts her chin up. “Because of Beck and Marco.”

Damn. It's true I've developed some affection for her and Hayden. Okay, fuck, I'd lay my life on the line for them, too, if I had to.

"All those women you slept with ... I know you didn't love them. But every time one of them showed up here looking for you, brokenhearted, you treated them gently. With respect and courtesy. You're not a heartless asshole."

"Gee, thanks."

"And Reese ... come on, Cade. Admit it. You have feelings for her."

I swallow.

She holds my gaze and I almost want to chuckle because she's fierce and passionate and kind of cute. But I rub at my churning gut and don't smile.

"Look, when I was going to Spain, I realized I was going for the wrong reasons. I kept telling myself I had to prove I was doing something serious and worthwhile ... but I didn't have to go to Spain to do that, so I changed my mind. I should have told Marco that, but I didn't, because I thought he didn't care. He didn't want me to go, but he was too scared to admit it. To himself, and to me. If he had ... everything would have been different. Don't sit here pretending you don't give a shit whether she stays or goes, because you do. And don't just admit it to yourself. If you want her to stay ... *tell* her."

I stare into Carrie's eyes, my jaw slack. I let her words play over and over in his head. "But ... what if ... she still leaves?"

She closes her eyes briefly, then straightens. "Then you're no worse off than you are right now. But at least you were honest. With yourself, and with her. And she'll be making that decision knowing that. Which she's not right now. Right now she's leaving, thinking you don't care."

"Jesus." I rub a hand over my mouth. "You don't pull any punches."

"Someone needs to tell you to get your head out of your ass."

I choke out a mirthless laugh. “Thanks.”

She gives me a long, stern glare, then whirls around and stalks out.

I lean back in my chair, slouching down and closing my eyes.

Carrie sort of knows what she’s talking about, since she and Marco went through something similar. Maybe she has a point.

I admire Reese for her bravery in getting through that shooting, seeing her coworkers bleeding on the floor of the kitchen she was responsible for. Being strong enough to move across the country to heal, to set foot into a kitchen again. And being brave enough to do that job again. She called me a hero ... but I’m a goddamn coward.

I understand why true intimacy is hard for me. I understand why I always try to maintain control over my emotions. The chaotic life I grew up in taught me to be afraid of those feelings, to be afraid of losing control, and real intimacy with someone makes me feel like I’ve lost control.

*Reese* makes me feel like I’ve lost control. And now I’ve lost her ... because I’m too chicken shit to admit I’ve fallen in love with her.

Could I really have what my friends have? For a brief moment I thought ... maybe. Maybe things between Reese and me could really be ... something. Then Chef Superdouche showed up and took her away from me and I realized I’m never going to have that.

*She’s leaving, thinking that you don’t care.*

I do care. And she should know that. Even if it doesn’t make any difference, she should know that. She should know that I think she’s brave and strong, talented and smart, funny and generous. She should know that she inspires me to be better ... to be brave enough to admit I have feelings for her. That I love her. And to be brave enough to tell her that.

Christ. I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling.

Has she left already? She can't have found a new place in L.A. and moved there already. I have to find her. I'll jump in my SUV and hit I-5 and head north if I have to. I'll track her down, wherever she is. Somehow.

Reese

My heart bumps when my phone rings. I grab for it and peer at the screen. It's Ventura Animal Shelter. Huh. I swipe to answer the call.

"Hi, Reese?"

"Yes."

"It's Bev at Ventura Animal Shelter."

"Yes, hi." My belly tightens. I haven't decided what to do about Jack yet. I don't want to give him up, but taking him to L.A. to live in an apartment when I'll be working long hours getting the new restaurant established probably isn't the best for him. The decision is another thing I'm procrastinating on, but now Bev is calling me.

"Great news. We have someone who wants to adopt Jack!"

"Oh." I press a hand to my stomach. "Th-that is great news. Do they want to meet him?"

"Nope. They're willing to take him right away."

"Oh. Okay." Maybe Jack is going to be a Christmas present for some lucky kid.

"I can come by this afternoon and get him. Would that work for you?"

"Sure." I start shaking inside. I look over at Jack asleep on the rug in sunlight pouring in the front window. "No problem."

"Great! I'll see you around one o'clock."

I end the call and carefully set down my phone. The trembling intensifies, and my heart squeezes so hard. I stare at Jack, that pressure and stinging in my nose returning. But I can't cry.

I rub my nose and glance around. I have to pack up his things.

This is just as well. I don't have to make the decision, now. And it's for the best for Jack.

Hopefully it's a good home he's going to. I know the shelter is diligent about screening prospective families who want to adopt dogs. I myself had to go through a screening process just to foster dogs. So I don't need to worry about him.

My bottom lip quivers. I'm going to miss him, though. So much.

I find a reusable shopping bag and start filling it with his toys, his leash, his dishes. There's half a bag of food left and a box of dog biscuits, so I add those, too, and the bottle of dog shampoo. I even add the old towel I use for him after his swims and baths.

I don't tell him he's leaving. He'll find out soon enough.

At about twelve-thirty, I sit down on the floor beside Jack and stroke his back. He gazes up at me with his big brown eyes and I lean down to kiss him right between the eyes. Then I kiss his nose. He licks my chin.

"I love you, Jack." I give him a shaky smile, still petting his fur. "I love you so much."

Jack doesn't usually put up with a lot of affection but today he stays there, letting me rub and hug him until Bev arrives.

I clip on his leash and hand over his bag of belongings. "He likes to swim," I tell Bev. "You'll tell his new owner that, right? He even knows how to surf. He loves it."

Bev's kind eyes warm. "I'll tell them, yes. Anything else they should know about?"

"He's a good boy."

Bev smiles. "Yes."

"He gets two treats at bedtime. And he needs a walk in the morning. He likes to be rubbed behind his ears, but only for a

minute. Too much affection bugs him.”

I hold it together as Bev walks out with Jack. I roll my trembling lips tightly inward as I watch Jack jump into the backseat of Bev’s car, then turn around and put his paws on the door to look out the window ... at me.

Tears stream down my face as I stare at him out the door. I wave, trying to smile for him. “Bye, Jack.”

Unable to watch anymore, I turn away, close my door, and slide down to the floor with my back against it. I rest my head on my bent knees and cry.

I haven’t cried like this. And I know it’s not just about Jack. It’s about ... everything. The emotions I’ve held inside for too long. I tried to keep my heart guarded and tough, but somehow I’ve developed all these feelings. Joy. Friendship. Love. Love for a damn dog. My heart is so full but it’s also breaking apart because I’ve lost those things, too, things I didn’t think I wanted, didn’t think I deserved.

Now I’m really alone at Christmas.

I sit on my couch in the dark. The only light in the room is from the twinkling white lights on my little tree. I lean back, a pillow on my lap, listening to the Christmas playlist I found on Spotify.

I wasn’t hungry, but I made myself a grilled cheese sandwich for dinner, washing it down with a glass of milk. My plate with an uneaten crust and the empty glass sit on the coffee table. Usually Jack would be whining over that crust, and the place feels empty without him.

I listen to the current song ... “Blue Christmas,” that old Elvis tune, sung by The Lumineers.

Sweet baby Jesus in the manger, this is a sad song. But very fitting for my current mood. I pick up the small remote that can skip to the next track, but lower my hand and torture myself by listening to the entire song.

The next one is much more upbeat, and I bop a bit to the opening rhythm of Wham’s “Last Christmas.” Then the vocals start.

Damn. This one is no better. I sigh.

I really need to get my shit together. I have a fantastic career opportunity I'm embarking on. Los Angeles is an exciting city. Opening a fabulous new restaurant is going to be amazing. I should be happy.

Right.

So many things replay through my head. Cade telling me not to make decisions based on fear. Am I afraid to take that job in L.A.?

My experience have made me strong. Resilient. Assertive. But the time I had to be the strongest, I couldn't stop a tragedy. I always swore I would defend my team, and then I couldn't, when it mattered most of all.

But I remember Cade's story about blaming the real enemy. I wasn't the one responsible for the shooting. I *know* that, even though I'll never really get over feeling regret for what happened.

I can do that job in Graham's new restaurant.

But then I remember Carrie's words. *Why* do I want to do that job? Am I trying to prove something? Am I trying to show that I'm strong enough, that I'm over what happened? Is that a good reason to do it?

I'm happy here. I have friends. I love the ocean. Conquistadors is small, but I love being a part of it, making it better. I love Jack.

And I love Cade.

I feel like there's a weight on my chest, a huge, crushing weight.

*Bing-bing.*

The unexpected noise of my doorbell startles me so much I nearly fall off the couch. What the ... who's here?

My heart lurches into a rapid rhythm. Should I ignore it? I push up off the couch and pad in bare feet over to the door. The outside light is on and I peer out the small window.



Oh, my God.

My eyes pop open wide as I take in the dog on my front step with a big red bow around his neck.

“Jack!” I twist the dead bolt and fling open the door. “Jack! What are you doing here?”

As if the dog can answer me. But I always talked that way to him.

Has he run away from his new home? Somehow managed to find his way back here?

Jack bounds at me, tail flailing madly, tongue lolling, and I crouch and catch him in my arms, tears stinging my eyes. “Oh, my God. Jack. I miss you already. What is going on? How did you get here?”

I look around, and then I see the man standing to the side, in the shadows watching us.

Cade.



# REESE

Reese

“Merry Christmas.” Cade moves into the light. He’s wearing a jacket against the chill of the night, hands in the pockets.

“M-merry Christmas.” I peer at him over Jack’s head, Jack still wildly licking my face. I draw back to avoid his tongue getting in my mouth. “What’s going on?”

“I have something to tell you. And I brought you your Christmas present. Er, presents.”

My gaze falls to the bag at his feet on the sidewalk, a bright, glossy Christmas bag.

I swallow, staring at him. “Okay.” I have a present for him, too, just a small thing, that I bought a couple of weeks ago, which sadly I accepted I wouldn’t be able to give to him. “Come in.”

He picks up the bag and I rise, shooing Jack into the house. He barks and runs a lap around the living room—up onto the couch, down, around the coffee table, back up onto the couch. He pauses, panting, barks again, then jumps down and does another lap.

“Oh, my God.” I laugh, pressing a hand to my fluttering heart. “He’s happy to be here.”

“Of course he is. This is his home.”

I turn to him, wide-eyed. “How do you have him? I don’t understand.”

He smiles, his eyes warm as his gaze moves from Jack to me. “I adopted him.”

I gape at him. “You ... did? How?”

“I called the shelter and told them I wanted to adopt him.”

“It can’t happen that fast. They have to screen people.”

“I made it happen.”

I don’t question him. I fully believed he can make anything happen.

“It’s Christmas,” he adds. “He’s your Christmas present.”

“Oh, my God.” I blink. “You’re giving him to me?”

“If you want him. If you can take him to Los Angeles with you. If you can’t ... I’ll have him. And maybe ... you can visit us.”

“Oh, God.” I sniff in a shaky breath and brush my fingers over the corner of my eye. “Oh, Cade.” I press my fingers to my lips. Our eyes meet and a lovely warmth swells around me. “Thank you.”

“I need to tell you some things. It might not change anything, and that’s okay, because I ... I just want the best for you.”

“D-do you want to sit?” I gesture at the couch.

“Sure.” He sets the gift bag on the coffee table.

Embarrassed, I whisk away the plate and the glass and carry them to the kitchen, then return to sit also. He’s draped his jacket over the arm of the couch. I face him, my insides both hot and shivery, my hands shaking. My heart is going crazy, beating out an erratic rhythm.

Cade’s beautiful, sculpted lips lift at the corners in a slight smile. “First, I want to apologize. Because I wasn’t honest with you.” He clasps his hands loosely together and looks down at them. “When you told me about Superdouche’s job offer, I should have told you how I really felt.”

I nod slowly.

“Part of it was that I didn’t want to hold you back. And that’s the truth.” He meets my eyes. “You’re an amazing, talented chef and you should be working in some big, fancy place in Los Angeles, and probably have your own TV show someday.”

I choke out a laugh. “I don’t think so.”

One corner of his mouth lifts higher. “I want you to be successful and have the career you’ve always wanted.” He reaches for the big gift bag on the table and pulls out a bottle of Veuve Clicquot with a red ribbon tied in a bow around the neck. “This is another part of your present. Because a job offer like the one you got is something to be celebrated. It’s a testament to how good you are at what you do. I feel like shit that I didn’t even congratulate you about it.”

My bottom lip quivers as I stare at the champagne. “Oh, God. Th-thank you.”

“But ...” He pauses. “In all honesty ... I don’t want you to go.”

My breath catches in my throat.

“I never thought I would have what Beck and Marco found,” he continues quietly. “Love wasn’t something I figured was for me. But ... I love you, Reese. I didn’t plan it ... and you know I like to plan things.”

I smile tremulously, twisting my fingers together, my heart now slamming against my breastbone. “I don’t think love is something you can really plan.”

“Right? That’s it exactly. It just crashes into you.” He meets my eyes. “I love you. I thought you should know that. And like I said, maybe it doesn’t make any difference, but I wanted you to know that. Before you go.”

I swipe under my eye. Damn these tears. I am not a crier. They just keep leaking from my eyes.

Is this for real? Is this happening? I study his face, his bronzed skin, sun-bleached hair, and earnest eyes, the ice blue warmed to a soft angora blue. Earnest. Apprehensive. Hopeful?

I have to tell him, too. “I love you, too.”

His eyes light up and his lips part. “Really?”

“Really.” My voice is shaking but I keep going. “I didn’t want to leave. But you ... didn’t care and I thought you were just using me for sex, like all those other women, only more than one night, and even if I didn’t take the job, I couldn’t stay. Knowing that.”

“Fuck, no, I wasn’t using you! You were never like any of those others. Never.” His firm tone convinces me. Maybe because I already knew that, deep down inside. “Jesus, Reese ... come here.” He sets the champagne down, reaches out and pulls me toward him and I go willingly, nearly throwing myself into his arms, relief and love and joy swelling up so huge inside me I could burst from it.

“When I was a kid, I couldn’t let myself feel things. If I let myself feel fear, I’d collapse. If I let myself feel hope, I’d be crushed. If I let myself care, I’d be broken.”

My chest feels like a band is tightening around it, stealing my breath.

“I had to shut things down to save myself. What kid could watch all that shit and not fall apart? So I didn’t let myself feel anything. And I still try to do that. I tried to convince myself I didn’t feel anything for you. But I was a fucking idiot. Because I do.”

He cups my face with both hands and kisses me ... long, slow, so tenderly and lovingly, I melt, just disintegrate into a puddle of sticky, gooey, lovely gladness. I clutch at his shirt, pulling myself closer, opening my mouth to his, our tongues sliding together. I can’t get close enough, want to climb inside him.

“I love you.” He brushes his mouth over mine again. “So much.”

“I love you, too.”

He wraps his arms around me and crushes me to him, and I press my face to his chest, trying not to sob, because Jesus,

this crying has to stop, only now I'm just happy, although still a little incredulous that this is happening.

Jack leaps up to the couch behind me and paws at my back, whining, and I laugh, lifting my head.

"He doesn't like that you're crying."

"It's okay, Jack. They're happy tears." I pat his head, then gently push him away.

"I can't ... I *won't* ask you to give up your dream job," Cade says, looking into my eyes. "I wanted to encourage you to follow your dream."

"I know. And I think I love you even more for that." I touch his face. "You told me not to make my decision based on fear. And I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do that again." I pause for a breath. "But I thought hard about it, and I wasn't afraid to take that job. I could do it." I meet his eyes.

He smiles. "I know you could."

"I know it's my dream job and I should be thrilled to work for Graham again and be part of something so exciting ... but that's not what I *really* want. I worked my ass off in New York, and for what? I ended up with no life. I hardly ever saw my friends or family. Coming here ... being part of something that's like a family, making a contribution and making a difference ... I love that."

"Really? Are you sure?" He holds my gaze steadily.

"I'm sure. Dating the boss probably wasn't the best idea ..."

His lips twist into a crooked smile.

"But it's actually nice being with someone who works in the same business, who has the same schedule, and understands the demands. I love working at Conquistadors."

He closes his eyes on a long exhalation. "Thank God." He opens his eyes again. "I would love it if you'd stay here and work at Conquistadors and be my girlfriend. But I understand if you don't want to do that."

I sniffle again. “I do want that.” I press the edge of my hand to my stinging nose. “I *do* want to stay here. I love everybody here. I’ve made friends here. And most of all, I love you.”

He smiles a joyful, beaming smile that makes him look like that laid-back surfer dude again. “Wow. So you’ll stay?”

“Yes. I’ll stay.”

“Fuck, I think *I’m* gonna cry.”

“Ha. No, you’re not. And I’m done crying, too, dammit.”

“Here’s the rest of your present.” He reaches out for the bag.

I shift off his lap to take it. “I have a present for you, too. It’s really nothing ... and kind of silly.”

“You just gave me the best present.”

I smile into his eyes for a few brimming seconds, then reach into the bag. There’s something wrapped in tissue, something soft ... I open it to find a red apron. I unfold it and read the words *Cooking is my superpower. This is my cape.*

My heart lodges in my throat and I stare at it with blurry eyes. “Thank you.”

“There’s another one.”

I dig into the tissue and pull out a black apron that says,

*The chef is always right.*

*The chef is always right.*

*The chef is always right.*

I sob-laugh and clutch it to me. “I love it. And I’m so glad to see this.” I shoot him an evil grin. “Let me get your present.”

I hurry into my bedroom and find the gift bag I shoved in my closet to get it out of sight.

I hand it to him and he opens it to pull out a similar tissue-wrapped package. He unfolds it and finds another black apron. This one says, *I’m not stubborn, my way is just better.*



“For when you help me cook,” I say, lips quivering. “Not at Conquistadors, but here, or at your place.” I discovered he loves to grill steaks on the barbecue on his balcony.

“Perfect.” He grins, such a beautiful, joyful smile it makes my heart squeeze. He leans over and kisses me, a soft, lingering press of his lips on mine. “It’ll be great at my place when we’re cooking and wearing nothing but these aprons.”

I laugh and lean my forehead against his. “Okay.”

We set aside the gifts and move together again, kissing with all the built-up emotion inside us, holding each other with hungry hands and impatient touches. “I still can’t believe this,” I murmur. “Oh, God, I’m so relieved and happy.”

“Me, too, baby. Me, too. Let me show you how much.” He pulls me to stand and leads me to my bedroom. With slow, deliberate movements he undresses me. Sadly, I’m wearing a thick navy sweater over black leggings, and basic beige bra and panties that are not even a little sexy. But his eyes heat as he studies me, as he unclasps my bra and cups my breasts with reverent hands, then goes to his knees in front of me to slide my panties down my legs. He presses kisses to my lower belly and I slip my hands into his thick hair, my mouth falling open to exhale softly as he kisses my curls and then lower still. With his hands on my thighs, he eases my legs apart and kisses and licks me there, making me tremble and shake, my knees going wobbly as heat gathers and coils inside me.

“Sweetness,” he murmurs, and he goes back onto his heels then stands to pull his long-sleeved tee over his head. I take a step back and sit on the side of the bed to watch him open his jeans and shove them down, along with his boxer briefs, revealing his handsome body to me, all the muscles of his chest and abs, his strong thighs dusted with gold hair, and his beautiful erection, thick and hard, traced with veins.

He moves closer and I reach for him, curling my fingers around his shaft, making him hiss. “So beautiful,” I whisper.

He bends to kiss me again, then lifts me easily to move me farther onto the bed, coming down over me. I part my thighs to cradle him there, reveling in the weight of him on me. My

hands move over his shoulders, the back of his neck, his back, as he kisses me over and over again until my head is spinning and my pussy aches for him. He kisses my throat, my chest, my breasts, tugs my nipples into his mouth with heated pulls that drag a scorching path to my core, and I arch up into him in entreaty. "Please," I breathe, holding his head to my breast. "Please ..."

"Condom."

"Oh ... I have some ... but do we need them?" I look into his eyes. "I'm on the pill ... I don't know if you ..." I trail off.

His lips twitch. "I can still get you pregnant."

"Oh." I give him a slow smile back. "That's good. I mean, not that I want to get pregnant ... right now ... but you know ..."

He brushes his mouth over mine. "I know. Got enough testosterone to knock you up, baby, but yeah, we don't want that right now, so glad you're on the pill."

"And I'm safe ..."

"Me, too." He holds my gaze steadily. "I've always used protection and I'm safe, too. I would never put you at risk."

"Then please ... do me ... bare."

He groans. "Christ, yeah." His hand shakes as he grips his cock to slick the head of it through my wetness, and then he pushes inside me. "Reese ... I love you."

"Love you, too."

"Feels so good. Nothing between us." He kisses me again, then rests his nose alongside mine to gaze into my eyes.

Nothing between us.

"All my life I've been scared of this," he confessed in a low, choked tone. "Of being so honest with someone. Of feeling like this. Having nothing between us. It almost cost me ... you. Everything I always wanted but was afraid I could never have."

I stroke his back, his thick length filling me with delicious pressure, filling my body, love filling my heart and soul; I'm saturated and overflowing with emotion. "Oh, Cade."

We move together, sighs and whispers mingling, bodies sliding and plunging and bucking together, sensation pouring through me in a torrent of heat, building and twisting, emotion nearly choking me. I rock up into him, seeking that perfect feeling, his body inside mine giving me what I need to rocket me up to the stars. It bursts inside me in a shower of light and heat, and I cry out, arms and legs wrapped around him as I pulse and shudder.

"Yeah, give me that," he murmurs at my ear. "Give me everything ... ah, Reese ..." His body judders and presses and fills me with liquid heat as he comes, too, and he gives me everything I want, too. We give each other everything. I hold on tight, my heart racing, breath jagged, my eyes stinging.

After a moment he moves, slow, wet glides in and out, and I love how that feels. I kiss his shoulder, sift my fingers through his hair, and let out a long, satisfied sigh.

"I want to tell you more," he murmurs later, curled up together in my bed. "I told you about my dad ... how fucked up my life was. How I lost my brother."

"Yes." I lay my lips to his chest where his heart beats.

"It made me afraid." He caresses my hip. "To feel anything. I wanted him to stop drinking. I wanted a normal life. Anytime it seemed like there was a chance ... any hope ... he fell off the wagon. He didn't just fall off the wagon ... he dragged the wagon into the street and set fire to it, and then passed out beside it."

I squeeze my eyes closed at the shaft of pain I feel, thinking about Cade as a boy enduring that. Over and over again.

"So I stopped hoping. And after my brother died, I stopped caring. I fucking hated him. People judged me for leaving him to join the Navy, knowing he wasn't going to make it on his own."

“Oh, Cade. You had to save yourself.”

“Yeah. And it took a long time for me to learn. But I knew I couldn’t save him. I still felt guilty about it, though. Anyway, people either felt sorry for me or judged me. I didn’t want either of those things. I thought it was a pretty long shot that someone would ever love me for who I am.”

I clamp my teeth down on my bottom lip. “You are loved, Cade.”

He smiles. “Yeah. Thank God for that. Sometimes friends who love you are a pain in the ass, but we can both thank Carrie for smacking me around.”

When he tells me about the conversation he had with her, I smile and hug him. “She told me the same thing. She made me think hard about why I would take that job. She’s a smart woman.”

“Yes, she is.”

“I will definitely thank her.”

He rolls me to my back and moves over me, staring down into my eyes with such intense devotion, my heart brims over. “Christmas is about love and giving. I never had a lot of Christmases that were like that. I have to tell you ... it almost scares me, feeling this happy.”

“It’s okay to be scared. I’m a little scared, too. But we’ll be together, so it’ll be okay.”

“Yeah. That’s what I want ... to be together, with you.”



## REESE

“So what’s your resolution for this year?”

I push out my bottom lip. “I don’t really like making New Year’s resolutions.”

Cade leans down and kisses my pout, letting his tongue linger.

I shiver, my belly growing warm.

“Why not?” he asks, nuzzling my ear.

“I don’t know. It always seems so self-righteous. Eat healthy. Work out every day. Take online courses. Eh. Why wait for January first to do that?”

“Good point.”

We’re standing at the railing of a beautiful yacht, cruising across the San Diego Harbor, having finished a five-course dinner of lobster and filet mignon (it was good, but I could have done better), ending with chocolate truffles and champagne. Along with Beck and Hayden, and Marco and Carrie, we danced to the DJ, and now as the clock approaches midnight, we’ve all moved to the railing of the yacht.

The downtown skyscrapers glitter against the dark sky, and the water of the bay glimmers with multicolored reflections. We’re nearing the Coronado Bridge where fireworks will go off at midnight. The salty, chilly air tosses my hair around my head, and Cade reaches out to smooth strands back from my face.

“But there *are* a couple of things I want to focus on this year,” I say.

“Yeah?”

I nod seriously. “I want to have more sex.”

Cade chokes on his champagne. “Well, I’m definitely in support of that one. As long as it’s with me.”

“Of course. Or, you know ... a *ménage à moi*. When you’re not around.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “Right. You know, you can do that when I *am* around.”

“Mmm. You want to watch?”

“Hell, yeah. Okay, this is a great resolution. What else do you want to focus on?”

“Making you happy.”

“Ah.” His lips curve and his eyes warm. “All the sex will definitely do that.”

I shake my head, smiling.

“You do make me happy, baby.”

“I want you to know how loved you are.” I hold his gaze earnestly. “I want to make you toast with peanut butter and bacon, and pizza with ranch dressing.”

His smile shines. “I want you to feel loved, too,” he murmurs. “And I want to make you happy.”

“I think if we focus on that, we should be good.”

“I agree.”

“What about you? Do you make resolutions?”

“Make more money.”

“Phhht.” I roll my eyes, lips twitching.

“Convince you to have more fun with me. And you know what that means ...”

“Lots of sex?”

He laughs. “Yeah, but also skydiving.”

“No! I told you already, I will not jump out of an airplane.”

“You’d be strapped to me. Hayden did it.”

My insides quiver at the idea. “Do I have to do that to prove I love you?”

“No.” He brushes his mouth over mine again. “I’m teasing you. I know you love me and I know you’re brave about important things. I’d love you to experience it, but you don’t have to prove anything to me.”

I suck briefly on my bottom lip. “Okay, good. But that sort of leads to the last thing I want to focus on this year. Which is being more involved in the community. Maybe with Carrie’s gallery ... or Beck’s foundation.”

His eyes warm even more. “I like that idea, too. And I’m there with you.”

“Okay. I want to give back ... and get to know more people here. Now that I’m staying. I kind of held myself back when I got here because I didn’t want people to ask questions about my past.”

“Yeah.” He tugs another wayward strand of hair out of her eyes. “I saw that. And I wondered why.”

“Now you know.”

“It’s almost midnight,” Carrie says, moving closer.

And then the fireworks explode with a bang.

I jump, my breath catching. Cade slides an arm around me and pulls me against his big, strong body and I snuggle in and let out a long exhalation. I turn my face to the sparkling colorful lights showering above us.

“Happy New Year.” Cade bends his head and kisses me, a long, ardent kiss full of love and passion. I slide my free hand around his neck and kiss him back.

He lifts his head and we smile into each other’s eyes as fireworks explode in the sky. “Happy New Year,” I say back.



We clink champagne glasses then turn to our friends. Beck and Hayden are still kissing, Carrie and Marco laughing intimately together. Then they separate and we all exchange hugs and kisses. I give tight squeezes to my new friends who are now so important to me. I watch Cade and his buddies exchange bro hugs, big, badass Navy SEALs who aren't afraid to show their affection for each other.

“Happy New Year!” we all exclaim to each other.

“It's going to be a good year,” Carrie says. “I can feel it. Hayden's making breakthroughs in her research. G Gallery is doing great. Marco and I are getting married.”

“Oh! When?” I ask. “I didn't know you'd set a date.”

“June,” Carrie confirms.

“Also, Conquistadors is doing well,” Beck says. “People are loving the new menu.”

My heart expands in my chest.

“And Cade got his head out of his ass and told Reese he didn't want her to go,” Carrie says, to which everyone laughs, although Cade's expression is sheepish. “I'm so happy for both of you. And I'm happy for us, that you're still here,” she tells me.

“Me, too.” I can't stop the smile that pulls at my lips, or the happiness that bubbles inside me. I lift my champagne glass. “To all of us ... to all of us who've conquered obstacles and overcome challenges.”

We all lift our champagne glasses. “To Conquistadors.”

Beck turns away briefly then returns, holding up a bottle. “One more toast.”

“Oh my God!” Hayden claps her hands together. “It's Jiminez Ultra!”

“And I got special glasses made.” Beck hands the bottle to Marco and retrieves a box. He removes six tequila glasses and hands one to each of us.

I hold my glass up to read the words etched on it: AND THOSE WHO DRINK FROM THE AGAVE WILL LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

Perfect.

I press my fingertips to my mouth and look around at the others, my heart overflowing with love and affection. Then I meet Cade's eyes, warm and brimming with the same emotion I feel.

"Let's drink from the agave," Beck says, pouring the golden spirit into our glasses. When we all have some, he holds up his glass. "To all of us. And to happily ever after."

And we all toast to that.

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Thank you for reading Long Shot! For more of Cade and Reese, [click here](#) to sign up for my mailing list and get access to a bonus epilogue!

If you haven't read Beck and Hayden's story, you can catch up with them in [Body Shot!](#)

And Carrie and Marco's story is [Hot Shot!](#)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I pitched the idea for this series thinking it was kinda fun but kinda crazy—three former Navy SEALs who now own a tequila bar in San Diego ... and, oh yeah, one of them's a billionaire. And yay, I got to write it! So many things I love in these books – beach, palm trees, tequila! Hot Navy SEALs! Feisty women! A pupper!

How could I write books about tequila without PG Forte? Again, I have to thank you for the cristalino tequila and the Jiminez Ultra (I made up the name but you gave me the idea). The next time we see each other, tequila shots are on me!

Thank you to my Sweet Heat Readers who always help me out when I have questions like, “Are bars and restaurants open on Thanksgiving in the U.S.?”, and “What weird food combinations do you like?” And as always thanks to *you*, for reading!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Jamieson is a best-selling author of over seventy romance novels and novellas. Her writing has been described as “emotionally complex,” “sweet and satisfying,” and “blisteringly sexy.” She likes coffee (black), wine (mostly white), shoes (high heels) and hockey!

[Sign up](#) for updates about her new books and what’s coming up, visit her website at [www.kellyjamieson.com](http://www.kellyjamieson.com) or contact her at [info@kellyjamieson.com](mailto:info@kellyjamieson.com)

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***Wynn Hockey***

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In It To Win It

Win Big

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Must Love Dogs...and Hockey

You Had Me at Hockey

Talk Hockey to Me

***Bears Hockey II***

The O Zone

Good Hands

Scoring Big

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Loving Maddie from A to Z

Dancing in the Rain

Love Me

Love Me More

Friends with Benefits

2 Hot 2 Handle

Lost and Found

One Wicked Night

Sweet Deal

Hot Ride

Crazy Ever After

All I Want for Christmas

Sexpresso Night

Irish Sex Fairy

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Rigger

You Really Got Me

How Sweet It Is

Screwed

Firecracker

Royally Indecent