

Not

x

Getting fired was *not*
part of my plan.
And neither is *he*.

x x ♥

Going There



THE *NOT* SERIES

x

TERRI OSBURN

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

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Chapter One



“THIS IS IT FOR ME, JOSIE. WE MIGHT AS WELL SAY GOODBYE NOW.”

Landry Mortimer had a dramatic streak, but this was a bit much even for her. She’d predicted her occupational doom through our entire lunch hour.

“I told you. If they were going to let any of us go, they’d have done it by now.”

The whole team had been on edge since Goldberg & Proctor bought out Crawford Investments nearly a month ago. As a small financial firm, we had always been a close-knit group. Now there were new managers in nearly every department—including mine—and a simmering tension in the air that I hoped would fade as we settled into the changes.

“They let Marcus in the tax department go last week,” my coworker pointed out, “and Aurelia in receivables two days before that.”

“And no one since then.” I pressed the button for the elevator. “Besides, there are only three people in our entire department. If—and that’s a big *if*—they decide to let more people go, the cuts will most likely happen in one of the larger departments.”

Landry made the sign of the cross as we stepped into the elevator. “Believe what you want, but I’ve had a bad feeling since I left the house this morning. Mrs. Simpson’s orange cat crossed the sidewalk in front of me on my way to the bus stop,

and then I had to take a seat on the left side of the bus. Both bad omens.”

There were days I wondered how Landry’s brain worked. “How is an orange cat a bad omen?”

“Orange is the color of fire and Grandma Poppy always said where there’s fire there’s a demon waiting to make your life miserable.”

I was still processing that logic when the doors opened to the sixth floor.

“Drummond wants to see you,” said Calvin Mercer, breezing by us as we exited the elevator. “He’s been looking for you for thirty minutes.”

“Did you tell him I was at lunch?”

“Yep.” Calvin shrugged. “He still asked two more times. I’d hurry if I was you.”

My stomach dropped.

I barely knew Wendell Drummond, my new boss, but there was something about the way he looked through people that set my teeth on edge. We’d had four brief encounters, and at each meeting he’d needed to be reminded of my name. At least he’d come close during a get-to-know-each-other lunch the previous Friday, calling me Jesse instead of Josie.

Gathering a small notebook and pen, I made the short walk to his office on the corner. The office I hoped to occupy someday. Pausing to straighten my pencil skirt and make sure none of my turkey wrap landed on my shirt, I took a steadying breath and squared my shoulders.

“You asked to see me?” I said from his open doorway.

Glancing my way, he removed his reading glasses and waved them toward the chair before his desk. “Have a seat, Jackie.”

“It’s Josie,” I said, my jaw tight as I crossed the expansive space to take a seat in the stiff navy-blue chair. Sunlight streamed through the wall of windows behind him, making it difficult to read his expression. Surely he couldn’t be angry

that I took a lunch hour, and I hadn't gone a minute over my time. I never did.

I'd worked in the auditing department of Crawford Investments for six years before the buyout. Or hostile takeover, depending on who you asked. The greatest lesson I'd learned in that time was that I didn't have to *like* the people I worked for. I merely had to respect them, occasionally bow and scrape, and let my achievements speak for themselves. Just last year, I'd discovered a discrepancy that would have cost the company over two million dollars. Significantly more had the error resulted in the client taking their business elsewhere.

Thanks to my quick actions, the mistake had been corrected within hours and the client, as far as I knew, was still none the wiser.

Drummond dropped the glasses onto his desk and looked me straight in the eye for the first time ever. "I'll come right to the point. The company is streamlining operations, and that means some employees are being let go. I'm afraid you're one of them."

I couldn't have heard him right.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You'll receive a generous severance package that'll include compensation for any unused vacation time."

"Mr. Drummond, I—"

"This is effective immediately," he spoke over me. "You'll need to clean out your desk and vacate the building."

As I sat in stunned silence, he slid the glasses back onto his face and dropped his eyes to whatever reports he'd been reviewing when I walked in. "You're a talented auditor, Ms. Danvers. I'm sure you'll find a new position in no time."

My brain failed to process what was happening. I'd been here for *six years*. I had an exemplary record. I was the top performing auditor three years running, damn it.

When I remained seated, the executive looked at me once again, this time with brows arched high. “You can go now.”

Go where! I nearly shouted. Instead, I said nothing as I rose to my feet, chest tight and knees weak. I’d never been fired before. Ever. *You weren’t fired*, a voice whispered in my head. *You’ve been streamlined.*

I returned to my desk and stood behind the chair, staring at the company logo floating across my monitor. Though as of ten seconds ago, it was no longer *my* monitor. Or my desk.

“What happened?” Landry whispered from the cubicle behind me.

Numb, I said, “They’re letting me go.”

She was next to me in seconds. “What? *You?* But you’re the best auditor we have. This has to be a mistake.”

It was a mistake all right, but not in the way she meant.

Dazed, I reached for the pictures pinned to the corkboard on my right. The family snapshot from my sister’s wedding. My four best friends and I celebrating my birthday last month. “I have to pack up.”

“Josie, this is crazy,” Landry said, but she moved into action helping me gather my things. “Maybe he thinks you’re me. He can’t remember any of our names. I’m sure this is a mix-up.”

He’d called me Ms. Danvers. Drummond knew exactly who he was firing.

Before I could assure her there was no mix-up, Freddie Pena approached with an empty box in hand. “I was told to bring this to you,” he said with regret in his voice. Freddie worked in the mail room and couldn’t have been much over twenty-one. I’d heard that he’d delivered boxes to the others who’d been let go. The poor guy lingered awkwardly, required to do a job he clearly didn’t want.

“Yes,” I said, taking the offering. “Thank you.”

Freddie held his ground and I knew it was his job to ensure I both exited the building in a timely manner and that I did so

without taking anything that wasn't mine.

To spare us both, I said, "This will only take me a minute." Into the box went the pictures, a cactus in a tiny yellow pot, the plastic Crawford Investments cup I kept my pens in, and my *This calls for a spreadsheet* coffee mug. I tossed in the black cardigan I kept on the back of my chair, cleared out the chocolate stash from my top drawer, and nodded. "I'm ready now."

"Josie," Landry whispered. "What are we going to do without you?"

That was an excellent question. What *were* they going to do? This was Landry's first job out of college. Calvin had been with the company less than a year. Now they were the only auditors left, and neither could do even a tenth of what I did on a daily basis. I may have been losing my job, but Goldberg & Proctor was losing the only competent person in my department.

"I have no idea," I replied honestly. "You'll have to ask Mr. Drummond."

I started for the elevators and Landry fell into step beside me.

"You can't go with her," Freddie said with a hitch in his voice.

"What do you mean I can't?" Landry asked as we kept moving.

The young man gulped. "That's the orders."

Not wanting to make this more difficult for either of them, I stopped and turned to the young woman ready to defend my honor. "It's okay. Let Freddie do what he needs to do. I'll be fine."

Landry nodded, gave me a quick hug, and returned to her desk. Freddie breathed a sigh of relief, and we made the trip to the lobby in silence. Minutes later, I stood on the sidewalk outside the entrance to the building where I'd gone five days a week nearly every week for the last six years, five months, and

a week or two, give or take. With the weathered box in my arms, only one thought echoed through my mind.

What do I do now?

You know those people who have their entire life planned out? I, Josephine Amanda Danvers, was one of those people. Every decision I'd made in my thirty-one years had been painstakingly designed to get me where I wanted to go. A bachelor's in economics from Penn State followed by a master's in business administration with a focus in finance. Extra hours in the office, few vacations days taken, volunteering for extra projects to show my willingness to go above and beyond for the company. I was going to climb the corporate ladder, determined to make partner before I hit forty.

At some point along the way I'd find a husband, start a family, and fulfill every expectation heaped on my shoulders as a member of the Regent Square Danvers. My mother and matriarch of the family, Guinevere Danvers, would accept nothing less.

Crap. How was I going to tell Mother that I'd lost my job?

I made the bus trip across the Fort Pitt Bridge in a state of foggy confusion, my confidence withering in the face of this new reality. Like a robot, I stepped off on the other side and made my way into the incline that would take me up to Mount Washington, where I lived. Box propped on my lap, I stared out at the city skyline, still floating in a state of shock as we made the slow ascent.

"Your choice or theirs?" came a voice from beside me.

Startled, I looked over and realized for the first time that I wasn't alone in the car. My fellow passenger could best be described as scruffy. Hair in need of a cut, jaw in need of a shave, and an Oasis T-shirt that should have been donated to charity a decade ago. He watched me with bright-green eyes and a crooked grin that annoyed me for reasons I couldn't quite name.

"Excuse me?"

The frat house escapee nodded toward the box on my lap. “Did you wise up and walk, or did they do you a favor and let you go?”

For one, why did a stranger think this was any of his business? And for two, who would ever consider getting fired a *favor*?

“I prefer to ride in silence, if you don’t mind.”

He held up a hand. “Fine by me.” Then he muttered, “There’s no shame in getting fired.”

“I was *streamlined*,” I snapped, unable to help myself. “My company was bought out and the new one has decided to streamline the operation.”

“Ah, the culling of the herd.” Turning to face me, he stretched his arm across the back of the wooden bench. “Let me guess. You were the senior person in your department.”

How did he know that?

“Yes, I am. I mean... was.” Anger bubbled to the surface. “They’re going to be completely screwed without me. Landry is so new she barely knows where to find the spreadsheets that will need to be updated by Friday, and if avoiding work was an Olympic sport, Calvin would be a gold medalist. But *I’m* the one they let go. Me! The one with an exemplary track record.”

My neighbor nodded. “That explains it.”

Hugging the box, I said, “Explains what?”

“You’re expensive, likely due for a promotion, and probably a threat to whoever took over your department. You had to go.”

Was that the reason? That Drummond saw me as a threat? The thought eased my anger an infinitesimal amount. My termination was still unjust and a ridiculously stupid move, *but* I’d rather be seen as a threat than expendable.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.” The *why* didn’t change the reality. I was still unemployed.

“Like I said,” he drawled, settling back on the bench. “They did you a favor.”

There was that word again. “How could this be a favor?” I asked. “I worked my tail off for that company. I had a future there. And friends. Not to mention a 401(k) and three weeks annual vacation. Now I have to start all over again. I’m sorry but getting fired isn’t even close to being a favor.”

Undeterred, Mr. Scruff turned to me once more. “This is an opportunity to strike out on your own. Why would you go find another company who sees you as nothing more than a pencil pusher they can replace without a second thought? Start your own company. Be your own boss. That’s the only way to go.”

In half a second he’d gone from me being a threat to upper management to calling me a replaceable pencil pusher. The man needed to pick a pep talk and stick with it. What did he know anyway? I *liked* working for a company. I *liked* having an office to go to, a desk that was mine, and the structure and stability that came with an established business. That’s where I thrived and where I’d always seen myself. I would not start second-guessing my life goals because some stranger on the incline liked to hear himself talk.

“I don’t remember asking you for professional advice.”

He faced forward. “Fair enough. Take it or leave it. It’s your life.”

Yes, it was.

Seconds passed in silence as I mentally scoffed at his suggestion. Start my own business. What a ridiculous notion. My scoffing was interrupted when he mumbled, “Don’t be surprised if you’re back here with a box on your lap in a couple of years.”

“You don’t know anything about me or my life,” I said, my jaw tight as I struggled to remain calm. If there was one thing Mother had drilled into us, it was never to make a scene. “You don’t know what I do or what I’m capable of.”

“Neither do you by this reaction.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The nosy man shrugged. “You don’t think you’re capable of starting a business. You’d never succeed with that attitude so you’re right. Stay a cog in the wheel making money for someone else. That’s clearly where you’re supposed to be.”

The words hit like a blow to the chest.

“You don’t think I could run a business?”

“That isn’t what *I* think,” he replied, pulling a cell phone from his pants pocket. “That’s what *you* think. I don’t even know you, remember?”

I slammed the box onto the seat beside me and turned his way, barely containing the urge to poke him in the chest. “You said I’d never succeed.”

Green eyes remained on the phone screen. “If you don’t believe you can, then you can’t. You clearly don’t believe in yourself, so there you go. Being your own boss isn’t for you.”

It *wasn’t* for me, but not because I couldn’t do it. Or that I didn’t believe in myself. The jerk was putting words in my mouth and making me want to punch him in his.

“I never said I don’t believe in myself. And who are you to give advice anyway? Do you even have a job?” It was one thirty on a Wednesday afternoon and the man was dressed like a fifteen-year-old who’d raided the back of his father’s closet. That didn’t exactly scream independently wealthy.

Rolling his eyes, the smirk returned as he met my glare. “I started my own company two years ago and haven’t answered to anyone but myself since. Are you always so judgmental?”

The question knocked me off-balance.

“I... I’m not judgmental.”

“You assumed I’m unemployed because of how I’m dressed.”

I opened my mouth to deny the charge, but preferred not to lie. “You don’t exactly look like a CEO,” I defended.

“Maybe you need to expand your idea of what a CEO looks like.”

The incline jerked to a halt, nearly sending me to the floor. My adversary moved quickly, keeping both me and my belongings from flying across the car. Startled, I stared into concerned green eyes hovering mere inches from mine.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His breath was warm on my cheek, and the faint scent of a sea breeze floated in the air around us. I had no idea what the cologne was, but he smelled amazing. He also had really nice lips. Full and dark and not the slightest bit chapped. “Hello?” he said, snapping me out of my pheromone-induced haze.

“I’m fine.” I pulled away, feeling a lingering heat where his hand had touched my arm. “I just wasn’t paying attention.” Which was his fault, I nearly reminded him, but since he’d been nice enough to keep me upright, I swallowed the retort. Standing, I straightened my clothes and righted the cactus that had fallen over in the box. Embarrassed, I kept my eyes averted as I mumbled, “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

The car door slid open, but he made no move to leave. I picked up my belongings and nodded as I stepped past him, uncharacteristically flustered. I’d never been mesmerized by a man. A fact I took great pride in. As I climbed the three steps to the exit, I instinctively increased my pace when I heard his footsteps behind me. I needed distance from this stranger. Space to get my balance back.

Stepping into the warm August sun, I took a fortifying breath and looked both ways before crossing the street. As my sensible black pump lifted to step off the curb, a familiar voice called out from behind me.

“Hey, there. Wait up.”

Chapter Two



I HAD NEVER CROSSED GRANDVIEW AVENUE SO QUICKLY IN MY life. Speaking to a strange man on the incline was one thing. Having that strange man follow me home was another. A car rounded the bend to my left, giving me a second reason to pick up the pace. Reaching the other side, I cast a quick glance back to see he'd stopped in the middle of the street to let the car pass, but a second later he was back in motion, seemingly intent on catching me.

Why wouldn't he take the hint?

My apartment was to the right, but I thought I might be able to lose him if I made a left, then hid behind the MountVue Apartments until he went by or gave up. My friends and I had discussed scenarios like this. I could text for help if necessary, but at this time of day no one would be able to drop everything and come to my rescue. There was always 911, but this hadn't escalated to that level. *Yet.*

"Wait up," the man said as I rounded the corner.

Not much farther and I could duck out of view. Heart racing, the click of my heels on the sidewalk filled my ears as I tucked myself behind a fluffy green pine next to the side entrance of the apartment building. Spreading apart two branches at nose level, I peered through, waiting to see him pass. It didn't take long to catch sight of him, only he stopped in front of the bush and narrowed his eyes, looking straight through the branches.

I let out a quiet gasp and let the branches spring back together.

“Are you really going to hide in this tree?” the man asked, more humor than annoyance in his tone.

Lips pinched shut, I pretended not to be there.

“If I had any sense, I’d leave you in there, but now I’m tempted to see how long you can keep this up.”

A bug landed on my nose and he got his answer. Swatting at the air, I abandoned my hiding spot behind the shrub, nearly dropping my box in the process. He once again saved it, whisking it out of my hands before gravity won out. That freed up my other hand to join in the swatting, as I feared I had a cobweb stuck in my hair. I hated bugs of any kind, but spiders especially.

By the time I regained my composure, the reason for my near arachnid encounter had tucked the box under one arm and leaned a hip on the raised entrance porch. Bright-green eyes danced with mirth, and a grin tugged one side of his lips higher than the other. He had the nerve to look delightfully entertained.

“I’ll take that,” I said, jerking the box back against my chest. “Why are you following me?”

Ignoring my question, he said, “Why are you hiding in a tree?”

“I wasn’t *in* the tree,” I defended. “I was *behind* it.” Raised brows said I hadn’t answered his question, so I added, “A woman gets nervous when a strange man insists on following her.”

In response, he held up a picture in front of my face. “This fell out of the box back on the incline. I was trying to give it back.”

Between his fingers was the photo of me and my friends celebrating my birthday. It would have sucked to lose it, though I was sure Jacob would still have it on his phone. Becca’s boyfriend had been nice enough to be our designated

driver that night and had documented the shenanigans quite thoroughly.

Balancing the box with one arm, I snatched the picture from his grasp and dropped it inside with my other belongings. “Thank you,” I said, feeling like an idiot. Not that my concern had been a mistake, but if I’d stopped at the incline, we’d have been on the edge of a moderately busy street and if I’d felt threatened, ducking back into the incline station would have been a smarter choice than this shrubbery. Also less humiliating.

Taking a step back, he said, “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“Who said you scared me?” That was my pride talking. Heaven forbid I show the slightest sign of weakness.

With a gentle smile, he said, “No one. My mistake.” His face transformed and I found myself blinking in a silent haze. The way he went from irritating to frightening to butterfly-inducing in the span of a minute left my head spinning. He put more distance between us. “Good luck with whatever you decide to do.”

What I decided to do? “Excuse me?”

He nodded toward the box. “For a job.”

Oh, yeah. I was unemployed. How could I forget?

Taking a deep breath, I curled my arms tighter around the box. “Thanks. You too.”

Without commenting on my ridiculous response—since he was not in the unemployment boat with me—the man walked away, leaving me to drown in humiliation alone. If someone had told me that I would be fired *and* hide in a bush in the same day, I’d have said they were crazy. I was a Danvers. We did *not* get fired, nor did we *hide* from anything. Especially not in a bug-infested spruce. Yet both of those scenarios had come to pass.

Fighting off defeat, I leaned forward to see if he’d turned the corner. The walk to my apartment was shorter if I went the same way he had, but the last thing I wanted was for him to think the tables had turned and *I* was following *him*. Since I

didn't see him, I stepped onto the sidewalk and started walking, much slower than before lest I catch up to him. By the time I reached the main strip, he was nowhere to be found.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I made the rest of the walk focusing on the comfy pants and bottle of wine waiting for me at home. I wasn't normally an afternoon drinker, but today wasn't normal so what the hell? A little consolation consumption was the least I deserved.



“You got *what?*”

Becca Witherspoon, one of my best friends and my downstairs neighbor, hovered on the edge of my sofa, eyes wide with disbelief. I'd had five hours to get used to my new reality so a bit of the shock had worn off. She was hearing the news for the first time.

“Fired. Though Drummond used the term streamlining. They streamlined me right out the door.”

“Sounds like bulldozed to me.” Becca set her wine on the coffee table and patted my knee. “I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

As an event planner, Becca had connections, but not in my field. If I'd been a broker, I'd have had connections of my own, but there are no conferences for auditors. At least none I'd ever attended. Still, I believed my skills and experience would land me a new position, but I hated having to start all over again. Having to update the resume and hope that an HR person would find it good enough to pass on to a hiring manager.

Then there were the references. The managers I'd worked with for years had all been replaced when the new company stormed in, despite promises that all long-term personnel would be retained. So much for that. I knew how to contact one or two, but others hadn't only moved on to other companies, they'd moved to other states, and I didn't even know where they'd landed.

I added *track down references* to my growing list of things to do.

“I would say get me another bottle of wine,” I replied, “but waking up on my first day of job hunting with a killer hangover is probably a bad idea.”

“Have you told the others?”

By *others* she meant our friends, Donna, Lindsey, and Megan. Four of us had been together since college, while Donna joined the group later through Becca. Donna handled photography duties for most of the events organized through Becca’s company, and they’d become fast friends shortly after meeting. The rest of us took to her just as quickly, and she’d been part of the gang, so to speak, ever since.

Shaking my head, I swirled the last of the wine in my glass. “You’re the only one who knows, other than some guy I met on the incline.”

Why did I bring him up? Every time I thought about him, humiliation washed over me. I still couldn’t believe I’d hidden in that tree. The only reason he came to mind at all was my curiosity to know what kind of business he ran. He’d been right about me being judgmental, but a CEO wearing jeans and a ratty T-shirt didn’t compute in my mind. I was evolved enough to know that said more about me than it did about him.

“What guy?” Becca asked.

“Just a guy. He saw the box and guessed correctly that I’d lost my job.” Rising to my feet, I crossed the small space to my kitchen. “He tried to tell me that I should see this as a good thing because now I could work for myself.”

“You could,” she replied.

Not her too.

“No, I couldn’t.” I heard Mr. Nosy once again saying, *If you don’t believe you can, then you can’t*. My pride prickled as it had earlier in the day. “I mean... I *could*. But I don’t want to. You can’t climb the corporate ladder without the corporate part.”

Becca bounced to her feet, her dark-brown ponytail swinging from side to side. I hadn't realized before how long her hair had gotten.

"Who says you have to climb the corporate ladder?" she asked. "There's nothing wrong with being a success on your own. Look at Amanda."

Amanda Crawford was Becca's boss. She'd started her own company nearly twenty years ago and had built it into one of the most sought-after event planning businesses in the Pittsburgh area. Becca had been with her for nearly a decade, and they'd recently added more staff to meet demand.

"That's different," I said, downing the last of my wine before setting the glass in the sink with the other dirty dishes I'd been ignoring all afternoon.

"Why is it different?"

"Because planning parties doesn't require moving around millions of dollars, which also requires someone to make sure the right amount gets to the right places at the right time. That's what I do, Becca."

She shrugged. "That isn't *all* you can do."

True, I supposed. "You're missing the point. I *like* working with numbers, and I *don't* like working with people. Not the public, anyway. I don't have the capital to start my own brokerage firm, nor would I want to if I did." Annoyed that I had to defend my personal choices, I said, "Why are you taking his side anyway?"

Becca's face dropped. "Josie, I'm always on your side. It was just an idea."

"I'm sorry." I had no right to take my bad day out on her. "I appreciate your faith in me, but that isn't an idea I'm willing to pursue." I leaned a hip on the counter. "Tomorrow I'll polish up my resume, hit the job sites, and start applying. By next week, I'll have interviews lined up, and a week after that I'm sure I'll have my pick of positions."

Or so I hoped.

“I wish I had half of your confidence on any given day,” she said, carrying her own glass to the sink. “Don’t forget that we’re going to Megan’s game tomorrow. I’ll be ready by five thirty.”

I *had* forgotten. Soft-spoken librarian by day, Megan Knox had been playing softball since childhood. She was the only athletic one among us, highly competitive, and held her own on a coed team despite being barely over five feet tall.

“At least now I won’t have to rush home from work,” I said, doing my best to remain positive as we walked to the door.

Becca leaned on the wall as she slipped on her shoes. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I was a lot of things. Angry. Disappointed. Annoyed I hadn’t seen this coming. But I would also be okay. Eventually.

“This is a bump in the road,” I assured her. “I wasn’t excited about the new management anyway, right? Now I get to find something better.”

“Exactly,” she said as we hugged goodbye. Pulling back, she tilted her head. “You’re taking this really well. Are you *sure* you’re okay?”

If she asked me that one more time, I was going to throw her out of the apartment.

“I’m *absolutely* okay. Seriously. You don’t need to worry.” I swung the door open, anxious to return to my solitary wallowing. “I’ll be at your apartment at five thirty tomorrow.”

“If you need anything—”

“That’s enough mothering.” I nudged her into the hall. “I’ve got this.”

Eyes still filled with concern, she lingered in the doorway. “I don’t have a lot of meetings tomorrow so call if you need to.”

Crossing my arms, I laughed. “I’m unemployed, Becca, not ill. Go feed Milo before he gets hangry and pees on your pillow.”

Milo was Becca's feline roommate. He adored her but did not tolerate delayed meals.

"Okay, okay. Make sure you add that to your resume," she said, backing her way down the hall.

"Add what?"

"Pushy and pigheaded."

I offered a one-finger response and she laughed before spinning around to head for the stairwell. This wasn't the first time I'd been called either of those things, though I preferred the terms forceful and headstrong.

After closing the door, I remained in my tiny foyer, staring at the black pumps I'd kicked off earlier in the day. Normally, I liked a neat home, and that meant putting shoes in the bedroom closet where they belonged. Tonight I didn't care enough to pick them up. Instead, I strolled into the kitchen and opened the cabinet above the stove.

"Days like today are why I keep an emergency stash," I said aloud.

Tucking the bottle of Jack under my arm, I snagged a can of pop from the fridge, a glass from a different cabinet, and headed for the bathroom where I planned to soak in a very hot bath with a drink in one hand and a book in the other.

Tomorrow I would put on my big girl panties and find myself a job. Tonight, I would light some candles and indulge in my own little pity party.

Chapter Three



A WEEK LATER, I WAS NOT FEELING QUITE SO CONFIDENT.

My prediction that I'd have multiple interviews turned out to be incorrect. In fact, I had yet to schedule a single one despite having applied for no fewer than seven jobs. Only one company had even responded to my application, and after the initial email, which I answered immediately—because what else did I have to do but sit and refresh my email—they stopped corresponding. My follow-up message to say I was very interested went unanswered.

Adding to my increasing concern over finding another position was the fact I had yet to tell my parents that I'd lost the last one. There were two reasons for this. One, this news would give my mother yet another opportunity to voice her disappointment that I'd put my career ahead of finding a husband. I had not, of course, but she refused to budge in her belief that I'd be married with children, like my sister, if only I'd made myself *more available*.

What did that even mean? Was I supposed to stand on a street corner with a sandwich board declaring my singlehood? Dating apps were bad enough, and I'd sworn off those after the last guy I'd swiped on showed up to our coffee date with another woman. He'd explained that it would be more efficient to “whittle it down”—his words—by meeting with two of us at one time. Needless to say, I whittled it down for him immediately.

It wasn't like I wanted to be alone forever, but I wasn't in a hurry either. Maybe my biological clock was broken, but I

never understood the rush.

The second reason was that Dad would insist on helping me find a new position. As a high-level executive with a major insurance and investment group, simply put, the man knew people. Powerful people. On the surface, this sounds like a no-brainer. A favor here, a handshake there, and I'd be decorating my new desk in no time.

So why not let him make a few calls on my behalf? One word—pride.

Maybe I had too much of it, but I never wanted anything I hadn't earned. Both of my parents had gone to Ivy League schools, yet I'd insisted on going to Penn State instead of taking the legacy route. After graduation, Dad had pressured me to join his firm, but I'd stood my ground and made my own way. Even in high school, I'd transferred to the public school instead of attending the private academy to which Danvers had gone for the last three generations.

It wasn't until sophomore year of college when I'd discovered a biography on one of my great-great-aunts that I'd discovered the likely source of my independent streak. Winifred Abigail Danvers not only participated in the suffrage movement, but she'd practically been disowned by the family for her activism and for refusing to let her father marry her off. She also wore pants, rode a motorcycle, and had once been caught dancing naked under a full moon with a group of fellow rebels.

Great-Aunt Winnie had become my heroine and touchstone from that point on.

Now I'd been summoned for a family dinner and I had yet to decide what to do. Dad would definitely ask how things were going at work. He always did. It was the one thing we had in common. I didn't golf or smoke cigars, nor did I enjoy socializing at the country club. That left a matching work ethic as our one point of connection. I couldn't lie, of course. Especially not to my family. I was terrible at it, and the fallout would be much worse if they found out from someone else.

With a sigh of resignation, I pulled to the end of my parents' drive and made the short trek to the arched French doors at the back of my childhood home. Stepping into the burgundy dining room, I noted the place settings on the formal dining room table and wondered once again why we were having a family dinner on a Wednesday night. A Sunday was normal. Even the occasional Friday. Never a Wednesday.

From the kitchen I heard my mother's voice.

"The salads should be ready at exactly six thirty, Hildy. Make them exactly like the ones on Sunday. Those were perfect."

Hildy Kowalski had served as our housekeeper since I was in middle school, when her predecessor, Marjorie Clooney, had retired. Ms. Marjorie had practically raised my sister and me, and I'd cried for a week after she left. But then Hildy made me chocolate chip cookies and my heart was miraculously healed.

As I approached the kitchen entrance, a movement caught my eye from the giant great room to my left. The ridiculously large space was mustard yellow, over-furnished, and big enough to serve as a ballroom in an historical drama. Mother had been inspired by a British country home they'd toured during a trip abroad, and within two months of returning, she'd bought every piece of antique Chippendale furniture available in the tri-state area.

I leaned into the room to see Dad hand Tate, my sister's husband, a dark-amber drink. A second later, Dad finished off the last of his own, then reached for a decanter on the shiny chrome drink cart to make another.

Tate wasn't my favorite person, and I wasn't ready to face Dad's questions, so I moved on before they could notice me.

"Hello," I said, entering the kitchen. "What's on the menu tonight?"

I was hoping the direct question would eliminate, or at least delay, any work inquiries.

“We’re having poached salmon,” Mom replied, “Josephine, honey, you’re late.”

“It’s only two minutes after,” I defended.

She shook her head and her helmet of blond hair didn’t budge. “If you aren’t early, then you’re late. I’ve been telling you this for years.”

Yes, she had.

I reached for a cherry tomato and she lightly smacked my hand away. “Not before dinner. Go find your sister upstairs, and tell her we’ll be ready to sit down soon.”

The house was over thirty-five hundred square feet. Telling me she was upstairs told me nothing.

“What’s she doing upstairs?”

Mother continued surveying the wine options without sparing me a glance. “I have no idea, but she needs to get down here. Especially since she’s the reason we’re all here.”

Frances called this dinner? That never happened. Curiosity mounting, I climbed the back stairway originally installed for the servants. This was what you got with a house built in the late 1800s. There were six bedrooms, all painted a different color, which was how we’d been identifying them since childhood. I checked the blue room, the yellow room, and the green room with no luck. Then I heard a noise coming from the bath at the end of the hall.

I knew that sound, and it was not good.

“Frances?” I called, hurrying down the hall and swinging the heavy bathroom door open. “Are you okay?”

Her face hovered above the toilet, and I hurried over to hold her hair back. We hadn’t been in this situation in years, and when we had, the roles had been reversed. Frances had never liked alcohol. In my twenties, I probably drank enough for the both of us.

I rubbed her back as she finished and then handed her one of Mother’s decorative towels off the porcelain towel bar.

Frances wiped her mouth and took a steadying breath. “Thanks.”

Sweat dappled her forehead and I pressed the back of my hand against it. “You’re pale as a ghost and burning up. Why are you here if you’re sick?”

“I’m not sick,” she replied, stepping over to the sink to rinse out her mouth. “Do you know if there’s a toothbrush around here?”

Neither of us had lived in the house for years, but I assumed Mother kept necessities for when they had guests.

“Let me see.” The third drawer I opened held a toothbrush still in the package and three toothpaste options, all still in their boxes. “Here you go. Which one do you want?” I held out the choices.

Frances shook her head. “I don’t care. Just open one.”

I did as asked while she opened the toothbrush. A minute later, she dropped the toothbrush into the trash, hung up the towel, then fixed her wheat-colored hair around her shoulders. With a brisk nod and a forced smile, she said, “Okay, let’s go,” as if nothing had happened.

“Shouldn’t you go home?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she countered, walking out of the bathroom.

Following her, I pointed out the obvious. “I just held your hair while you puked. That doesn’t scream fine to me.”

“Drop it, Jos.” At the stairs, she added, “I need to get this over with.”

“Get what over with?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”



We took our seats at exactly 6:29, Mom and Dad at each end of the table, me to Dad’s right, Tate on his left, and Frances

beside him. Hildy delivered the salads, and as I popped a tomato into my mouth, Frances said, “I’m pregnant.”

The tomato went down whole, cutting off my airway. Shoving back from the table, I attempted to cough it back up as the sound of silverware hitting hundred-year-old china echoed through the room.

“Are you serious?” I heard Mother say, while Dad exclaimed, “Drinks all around.”

I continued choking without assistance. My eyes watered and I bent over, hands waving for someone to help.

“Russell, help your daughter,” Mom yelled, and a second later Dad whacked me on the back so hard the tomato flew across the table, hitting Tate in the chest. As I sucked in air, Dad returned to his seat and raised his glass as if I hadn’t nearly died. “To the next generation of Danvers.”

“It’s a Fitzgerald,” my sister reminded him. “Josie, are you okay?”

“That’s right,” her husband chimed in before I could answer. “Tate Reginald Fitzgerald IV.”

“We don’t know if it’s a boy.” Frances picked up the tomato that tried to kill me and wrapped it in a napkin.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mother asked, seemingly unconcerned for my welfare. She’d been begging for a grandchild for years so her preoccupation didn’t surprise me.

Flashing the same forced smile as earlier, Franny said, “We wanted to tell you all together.”

Mother’s smile faltered. “Do the Fitzgeralds know?”

Sipping water to soothe my painful throat, I prayed the answer was no. Though she’d approved of the marriage, and even set Tate in Franny’s path, Mother had never entirely taken to Tate’s family. They were *new* money—a term so ridiculous I couldn’t believe it still existed. While Great-Great-Grandfather Danvers had been a key player in the railroad industry in the early twentieth century, Tate’s ancestors had been coal miners and laborers. You know. The people who’d

made barons like my great-great-grandfather obscenely wealthy while making practically nothing for themselves.

“We told them on Sunday,” Frances said, popping a sprig of garlic roasted asparagus into her mouth. She cut a quick glance my way, as if looking for a lifeline.

“This is great,” I croaked through my sore throat. “When do we get to meet the little bean?”

“Josephine, do not call my future grandchild a *bean*.” Softening, Mom said, “When *are* you due?”

“Mid-March.”

Dad pointed his fork at Tate. “We’ll have cigars after dinner to celebrate. It’s never too soon to start on that college fund. Set up a time this week and we’ll take a look at your portfolio.”

“Yes, sir,” his son-in-law replied. “I always appreciate your advice.”

Talk turned to baby names, birth announcements, and themes for the nursery. I couldn’t help but notice Frances didn’t seem as excited as I’d expect her to be. They’d been trying to get pregnant for more than a year. By the time we reached the dessert course, Mother was well into planning the baby shower, which would obviously be held in the best party room at the club.

I considered joining the conversation, then realized that the announcement had hijacked the meal away from the typical conversation. Which meant no one asking me about work. I already owed one to the little bean.



Once dessert was cleared, the men returned to the great room, and Mom disappeared into the kitchen to help Hildy clean up. Last I heard they were discussing which room upstairs they should turn into a nursery. I gestured for Frances to follow me out the French doors to the back patio, and we settled into twin white rockers.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’m fine.” She pulled a blanket off the glider and draped it over her legs.

She didn’t look fine. “How often do you get sick like that?”

With a quick shake of her head, she looked up at the stars. “Not that often.”

These vague answers were not cutting it. “Franny.”

“Hmm?” Her eyes were still on the sky.

“Look at me.”

Brown eyes identical to my own turned my way. She was three years older, but we’d been mistaken for twins on more than one occasion.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why would anything be wrong?”

“I don’t know, but there’s definitely something up. What aren’t you telling me?”

Frances sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes. “I’m scared.”

Not the answer I expected. My sister was my rock. Together we’d endured our overbearing, if well-intentioned mother, and a doting father with high expectations. We were Danvers after all, and that came with certain expectations. Many a night we’d sneaked into each other’s rooms to lament whatever embarrassment or impossible challenge they’d tossed our way. As the older sibling, Frances had been my source of strength. The least I could do was return the favor now.

“You’re going to be a great mother, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Maybe, but that’s not it.” She pushed the rocker into motion. “I’ve already lost two babies, Jos. I don’t want to lose this one, too.”

I knew about the miscarriages, of course, and felt guilty that I hadn't considered how scary trying again must have been.

Rubbing her stomach, she added, "It's frustrating that they don't know why I failed before."

"You didn't fail," I snapped. "These things happen. There wasn't anything you did wrong."

"That's easy for you to say." A fair response. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, chin on her chest. "You didn't deserve that. Rationally, I know what you're saying, but those helpless creatures were in *my* body. I should have been able to protect them."

I wanted to argue, and yet, I understood. That didn't mean I had to let her spin down this dark path without a fight.

"You're past the first trimester, right? What does the doctor say?"

"Yeah. She says everything looks great." Flashing the first genuine smile of the night, she added, "We go in for the first ultrasound in a couple of weeks. Do you want to come?"

"Of course, I want to come."

Her face lit up in the gleam of the patio lights. "Great. It's nine o'clock the morning of the sixth. Do you think you can get the day off?"

Oh, yeah. "About that..."

"It's okay if you can't," Frances cut in, her shoulders falling.

"I have nothing to get off from," I confessed.

Blond brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

My turn to stare up at the stars. "I was let go last week."

She twisted in her seat. "You got fired a week ago and didn't tell me?"

Checking to see if anyone was in the dining room, I said, "Keep your voice down. I haven't told Mom and Dad yet

either.”

“What are you waiting for? You know it’ll be bad if they find out *before* you tell them.”

Yes, I did. “I want to find another job first. You know what they’ll say if I tell them now.”

She settled back in her chair. “You’re taking a real chance waiting. Do you have another one lined up?”

“I’m applying every day so something should come through soon.”

Back to looking like her old self, she cut me a knowing look. “That means no. Do you want me to see if Tate knows of any openings?”

If I wasn’t going to take help from Dad, I wouldn’t be taking it from my brother-in-law either. “I’ll figure it out on my own.”

“Don’t let your pride stand in the way for too long.” She knew me so well. “And don’t only look for auditor jobs. With your brain, you should be doing something more interesting. You could even start your own business.”

What was it with these people? “Why would I ever do that?”

“To work for yourself, for one thing.” Frances adjusted the blanket, tucking it behind her knees. “No one can fire you when you’re the person in charge.”

“I don’t want to be the person in charge. I want to do my thing and let someone else handle the big picture stuff.”

“What big picture stuff? It isn’t like you’d be a fortune five hundred company right out of the gate. You’d have to find a couple of clients, do the work, and manage the invoicing. Super easy.”

In her previous life, Frances had managed an entire marketing department before quitting after the second miscarriage. As she’d said, the doctors didn’t know why things hadn’t worked out, but they had suggesting reducing her stress levels as much as possible if she and Tate were going to keep

trying. She'd struggled with the decision, but in the end having a baby had been more important.

"None of that is super easy. Besides, what would I even do?"

She shrugged. "You can do anything. What do you want to do?"

I was pretty sure I'd made this clear already. "I'm an auditor. I audit."

Frances scrunched up her nose. "That sounds so tedious. There has to be something else. How else can you work with numbers?"

I couldn't believe I was bothering to amuse her, but I considered the questions. I was not a CPA so that was out. I could probably prepare taxes, but that was more of a seasonal thing, and I hadn't kept up with tax law changes in years.

"What about bookkeeping?" she asked.

Now my nose scrunched. "You think bookkeeping counts as something more interesting?"

"Than auditing? Yes."

"I *enjoy* being an auditor."

With a shake of her head, she said, "I refuse to believe that. Think about it, Jos. Freelance bookkeeping could lead to all sorts of fun discoveries. You might uncover an embezzling plot."

"I'm not freelancing for the mob, Franny."

"Regular people embezzle, too. You'd also get to see what weird things people try to count as business expenses." Getting excited, she scooted to the edge of her seat. "You might catch a guy using his business accounts to pay for his mistress. Or uncover a money laundering scheme."

She'd been watching way too many true crime shows. "You're confusing a bookkeeper with a forensic accountant, and I am neither of those things. I have applications submitted

with several companies, and something will come through soon. You don't need to worry about me."

"I'm not worried, but I still say you're passing up a prime opportunity here."

"I'm not passing up anything. You watch," I said, stealing a bit of her blanket. "I'll have a job in no time."

Chapter Four



ANOTHER WEEK PASSED AND I STILL HADN'T LANDED A SINGLE interview. I was starting to wonder if I'd been blacklisted. Even the two headhunting companies hadn't gotten me anywhere.

"This makes no sense," I said, pacing Becca's living room. "I'm qualified for every job I've applied for."

"Are you overqualified, maybe?" Megan asked, trying to be supportive. We'd all attended her game earlier in the evening, and she was still in her softball uniform, sitting on the floor so she didn't get Becca's furniture dirty.

My situation had gone on long enough to necessitate a brainstorming session. Becca and I had picked up tacos and met the other three women at her place.

"Possibly," I replied, "but I should have at least gotten an interview or two for them to figure that out."

"Why not ask your dad?" Lindsey said.

A hush fell over the room. "You know how I feel about that."

"I also know how you feel about paying your bills. That severance package will last only so long. There comes a time when a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, hon. It might be time to play that card."

I wasn't ready to admit defeat.

"Do you guys really not know anyone that's hiring?"

Gazes shifted as they all remained silent. Finally, Donna said, “You’re talking to a librarian, a school teacher, an event planner, and a photographer. How would any of us know about openings for auditors?”

This was what I got for not hanging around with more finance majors in college.

“There has to be something out there,” I whined, dropping onto Becca’s couch. Milo hissed and jumped over my shoulder from the back cushion. “Sorry, bud,” I mumbled.

“There is one option,” Becca said.

I knew immediately where she was going. “Don’t start that again.”

“What?” Megan asked.

Becca leaned forward and crumpled up her taco wrapper. “She could work for herself.”

“That’s a great idea,” Lindsay chimed.

“That’s a stupid idea,” I corrected. “Who would ever want to do that?” The room fell silent as all eyes turned to Donna. Well, crap. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” she said. “Enlighten me.”

I sighed and leaned forward. “I mean that what I do isn’t something that people do freelance.”

“There are no freelance auditors?”

“Of course, there are, but not on the level I want to be on. I’m a corporate person. I like the structure and the opportunity for advancement.”

“You mean so you can eventually run the place?” Lindsey asked.

“Yes,” I said, glad they were finally getting it. “Thank you.” My friends stared in silence until I said, “What?”

Becca arched a brow. “You said you want to run the business.”

“Well, an auditing department. At least.”

“Or the whole company,” Donna cut in. “At most.”

How had I dug myself into this hole? “It isn’t the same thing.”

Becca hopped off the ottoman.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“To get my laptop. We need to do some research to get you started.”

“I don’t—”

“Give up, Danvers,” Lindsey said, collecting empty wrappers off the coffee table. “For once in your life, give the hell up.”



Thirty minutes later, I sat quietly in a corner while my friends scoured the internet in an attempt to make over my life. Or at least my occupation. They’d ruled out financial planning, tax preparation, and finance analyst. The last because they couldn’t determine a clear definition of what a finance analyst actually did. I could have told them, but they seemed to forget I was there.

“This is it,” Becca said, and both Lindsey and Donna leaned farther over her shoulder.

“You’re being a good sport about this,” Megan said, handing me a glass of wine and joining me on the sofa.

I took a drink and tuned out the meddling group. “They mean well.” Which was true. For all their bossiness and interference, my friends were fiercely loyal and adorably enthusiastic about helping me.

“You aren’t going to do anything they suggest, are you?” Meg asked.

I swirled the Pinot in my glass. “Nope.”

Megan curled her legs up under her bottom. “Is it really such a terrible idea?”

“I never said anything was a bad idea. I said I don’t want to do it.”

As my parents could attest, I tended to dig in my heels when anyone tried to tell me what to do. Franny once said if I die before her, she’s going to put *Stubborn to a fault* on my tombstone. I reminded her that me dying first was highly unlikely, since she was the oldest, and that she’d once spent six months looking like an electrocuted poodle despite both Mother and I telling her not to get her hair permed. She conceded the second point but mumbled something about ordering the tombstone before passing so it would be ready whenever I got around to needing one.

“We’ve got it,” Becca exclaimed as the threesome charged the couch. Lindsey squeezed her butt between mine and Megan’s, straightening the computer on her lap. “A bookkeeping service. It’s perfect for you.”

I’d already gone down this road with Franny, but I didn’t want to burst their bubble immediately.

“*How* is it perfect for me?” I asked, pretending I would consider the idea.

“Because instead of double-checking numbers that someone else tracks, you get to do the tracking *and* the checking.” Donna knelt on the couch beside Megan. “The bonus is that you can do this for all sorts of businesses if you freelance. That means something different every day.”

A wildly inaccurate assumption.

“I assume you use some kind of bookkeeping software?” I asked her.

“Of course, I do.”

“Then you know that software like that comes with preloaded categories. All bookkeeping is pretty much the same no matter what kind of business you run. Money in. Money out. Expenses and Income. Nothing changes because the client changes.”

Becca pushed the laptop closed and snatched it off Lindsey’s lap as she bent down in front of me, bringing us

nose to nose. “*That’s* the part that’s perfect. You *live* for spreadsheets. Balancing accounts and eliminating discrepancies makes your day. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Jaw tight, I held her gaze. “Those are all duties I can perform as an *auditor*.”

“If you go back to another company like Goldberg & Proctor, you’ll have little if any control over what you do and how you do it,” she argued. “Josie, there’s structure and then there’s stifling. Think about it. You could create your own systems. Set your own schedule. Take only the jobs you want to take, and even set your own salary. You would have *complete control*.”

She knew me too well, damn it. Those last two words made my mouth water, as did creating my own systems. At Crawford Investments, I’d submitted suggestions for streamlining our processes and increasing efficiencies on three occasions. I’d been ignored all three times. I knew all the software programs currently in use, and how to manage them. I also knew how to interpret reports, as well as how to explain them to others in a clear and concise way.

“Well, hell,” I muttered. Knowing me well enough not to celebrate too early, the girls remained silent, waiting. “Fine. Let’s start a business.”



And just like that, Danvers Bookkeeping was born.

The name had been obvious to me, despite the girls wanting something cute. Donna had suggested Prima Donna Bookkeeping, while Megan went with Balance Bookkeeping for the alliteration. Lindsey offered Jo’s Bookkeeping, and Becca stretched it out to Josephine’s instead. I knew immediately that if I was going to do this, I was going to put the name Danvers on it, because doing so would make Dad happy.

My parents still didn’t know that I’d lost my job, and at least now I could present them with my new endeavor when I

finally confessed. Within a few days, I'd used part of my severance as startup money to open a business account, created a logo and letterhead, and had business cards printed. I needed a website, but wanted to wait until I had at least one client testimonial before making one. Putting *I've never done this before but you should totally trust me with all of your bookkeeping needs* didn't seem like a convincing sales pitch.

Luckily, Becca's boyfriend Jacob supplied my first lead, though he hadn't provided many details. All I knew was that a man named Miles Porter was in need of a bookkeeper. I had an address, which ironically wasn't far from my house, and come Friday morning I was standing on the sidewalk, looking up at an olive-green building with four entrances. There were three dormers along the top and a narrow turret on each end with a white block in the center with the number 1880 in the center—the year it was built.

I'd passed this building hundreds of times and always wondered what it looked like on the inside. I'd also assumed it contained four private homes. Apparently not.

Our meeting was scheduled for ten and I arrived seven minutes early. Mother would be so proud. There was no sign indicating the name of a business, which made me wonder if I'd been given the wrong address. With my luck, whoever answered the door would have no idea who I was or why I was here. Glancing through the glass into the interior, I didn't see a reception desk or anyone moving about. I did notice what looked like a stuffed peacock in a far corner, and a bright-green neon sign hanging on the wall above it that read, *Grow, Grow, Grow Your Goat*.

Okay.

I knocked and waited. No one answered. Concerned about being late, I tried the doorknob and found it unlocked. Cautiously walking inside, I called out, "Hello?"

When no one answered, I followed the sound of music to the doorway beside the peacock, which looked quite menacing up close. On the other side was a sleek, modern kitchen, all

white except for the bright-green subway tile backsplash. Someone here really liked that green.

Hoping I wasn't going to startle a homeowner, I called out again. "Is anyone here?"

A sound I'd only ever heard from a whoopie cushion caught my attention, and I realized there was someone upstairs. This was getting stranger by the second, and I debated going back outside and calling Becca. Then the music stopped and I froze. If I took a single step, the click of my heels on the hardwood floor would echo throughout the space. Even if I tiptoed, anyone upstairs would probably hear the front door open and close. Better to make my presence known, apologize for the intrusion, and get out.

Shoulders back and chin up, I climbed the stairs and emerged at the top into a scene I had never encountered before. There were balloons *everywhere*. Hundreds of them hovering at the ceiling, each attached to a different-colored ribbon. The whoopie cushion sound came again, followed by a quiet, "Damn it."

Through the wall of ribbon, I spotted a denim-clad pair of legs a dozen or so feet in front of me. "Hello?"

"Hold on." The person turned and shoved balloons out of his way as he walked toward me.

When he stepped out of the helium sea, my breath caught. "You?"

A crooked grin split his face as green eyes twinkled. "Well, what do you know?"

Chapter Five



“*YOU’RE* MILES PORTER?” I ASKED, KNOWING THE ANSWER but praying for a miracle.

“I am.”

I’d been rehearsing this moment for two days in order to appear professional and qualified since I had no previous clients to fall back on. Staring at the last person I expected—or wanted—to see, every ounce of preparation left my brain.

“Well, hell...”

He laughed. “Nice to see you, too. So you took my advice?”

A denial danced on the tip of my tongue, but not knowing how much Jacob had told him, I didn’t want to make this worse by lying.

“This is more a result of my friends’ enthusiasm and support, but in an indirect way, yes, I suppose I did.” That was as close to a concession as he would get. “If this is a bad time,” I said, cutting my eyes to the balloons behind him, “we can reschedule.”

And I could find another client that would take all my time so that I sadly would not be able to work with this man. In the days since our encounter, I speculated that he’d likely been enjoying a day off, which would explain the way he’d been dressed. Since he was currently wearing a vintage Rolling Stones concert tee with baggy jeans and black Vans, that assumption had obviously been wrong.

The eyes were the same. Still twinkling, as if he knew something I didn't, and the grin I'd recalled more often than I would ever admit was as annoying—and attractive—as before.

“No need,” he said, wading into the mass of balloons like a diver navigating a smack of jellyfish. A term I learned a few months before while listening to Megan read Jacob's daughter Sophie a story. Amazing what you could learn from a children's book. “Come on back.”

I followed him, sweeping hundreds of ribbons out of my face, and entered a small office on his heels. The space was tidy except for a stack of papers on a table against the wall. Tattered documents jutted out in all directions, and I instantly judged him to be one of *those* people. The type who think gathering receipts and invoices into a haphazard pile was a system of organization.

It was not.

Teeth on edge, I took a seat in a sturdy if dated chair on the far side of his desk, but instead of taking his own, Miles retrieved the messy heap of papers and dropped it on the desk in front of me.

“You might as well know what you're getting into.”

My heart sank. “What is that?”

“Every invoice, bill, and receipt for Hullabaloo for the last six months.”

Blinking, I repeated one word. “Hullabaloo?”

“That's the name of my company.”

Of course it was. “And what does Hullabaloo do?” I only knew that Jacob had met Miles the year before through an event involving his daughter.

“We plan kids' parties. Birthdays, bar mitzvahs, anything a kid wants to celebrate.”

So he was an event planner, like Becca, but with a more niche clientele. Odd that Becca hadn't mentioned the connection.

“Why only kids’ parties?”

He sat down, forcing me to lean to the side to see him around the paperwork. “Because I don’t work with adults.”

This contradicted our current situation. “Doesn’t that rule me out then?” Not that I’d agreed to take on the mess in front of me.

With a serious expression, he replied, “If I could find a ten-year-old math genius willing to untangle this knot, I’d hire them instead.”

So I was the second choice in lieu of a child prodigy. Good to know.

“What exactly *am* I looking at?”

“Nine days ago, Kayla, my office assistant, left without notice to hit the road with her guitarist boyfriend.” He pointed to the stack of papers. “I found this pile in her bottom desk drawer.”

Surely he hadn’t relied on manual entries. “Does your software not automatically import transactions?”

“It does, but those transactions still have to be reconciled and checked against all receipts and invoices. Statements have to be reconciled as well, for both bank and credit card accounts.”

“And she didn’t do that?”

“Apparently not.”

How in the world did this man stay in business? “That seems like something you’d notice. Did you not require monthly reports? You never opened the software yourself to, at the very least, monitor profit and loss statements?”

Another man might have taken offense, since I was essentially accusing him of incompetence in running his own business. To his credit, Miles did not.

“I maintain the actual accounts. I know what I have, what comes in and what goes out. I don’t rely on the software to tell

me where the business stands on a daily basis, but I still need it current and accurate.”

My brain struggled to process such a professional statement coming from a man dressed more like the guitarist his assistant probably ran off with than the leader of his own company. The day we met he'd called me judgmental, and here I was doing it again.

Leaning forward, I glanced at the top of the pile. “Are you sure this only goes back six months?”

“All transactions before that are at least categorized in the software, and the oldest statements here date back to March. I'd like to have the prior six months reviewed for accuracy, but that can wait until this is all caught up.” Brow arched, he said, “Are you interested in the job?”

I needed one answer first. “Why not hire another assistant? Why contract this out to me?”

“I'll fill the position once we're current again, but I can handle the rest of her duties for now. My team will pick up the slack where I need them.”

“You have a team?” The office had seemed abandoned other than Mr. Hullabaloo and his balloons.

“You'll meet them,” he replied, rising from his chair. “Are you in?”

Staring at the knot, as he'd called it, the thrill of a challenge made my hands itch. Perhaps this Kayla person had done more than shirk her duties. Maybe Franny had been right and I might uncover some nefarious activities in this endeavor. If nothing else, I'd have the satisfaction of creating order out of chaos.

Standing, I said, “I'll email you a proposal. How quickly are you looking to have this done?”

“How quickly can you get it done?”

I couldn't review the documents or the software until we had an agreement. Without knowing exactly what I was up against, I wouldn't know how much time I needed. Factoring

in that I hoped to take on other clients, and the reality that I'd never actually done this before, I could only guess at an answer.

“Without knowing what is in this pile or the current condition of your software, I estimate six weeks.”

He didn't bat an eye. “Works for me.” Extending a hand, he flashed a smile. “Welcome to the team.”



As he escorted me out of the office, I couldn't help but ask, “What are all of these balloons for?”

“Our client for Saturday requested that we fill the dance floor ceiling with balloons,” he said, strolling through the ribbons.

Every balloon he moved bounced back, making my path through more difficult. “A kid's party has a dance floor?”

“Sure. Kids love to dance.”

I associated dance floors with wedding receptions and maybe a graduation or anniversary party.

“I thought the rage was anything inflatable that they can jump on or slide down.”

Miles stopped and spun around, causing me to nearly run into him. “Those are *not* the kinds of parties we do.”

He hadn't so much as flinched when I'd questioned his business skills, but went all how-dare-you at the mention of oversized inflatables as if I'd insulted his mother.

“What kind of parties *do* you do then? I imagine kids are happy with cake and ice cream and a table full of presents they can rip to shreds. What else could they want?”

Head tilted, he narrowed his eyes. “Have you ever met a kid?”

Odd question. “Of course, I have.”

“Then you should know kids aren’t that simple.”

Feeling properly scolded, I opted to refrain from making any further party-related statements.

When we reached the kitchen at the base of the stairs, he gestured for me to take the lead into the front room. “Send the agreement over anytime this weekend, and we can get started on Monday. Does that work?”

I had a basic agreement template already established, but I’d designed it for ongoing record keeping, not a temporary job of this nature. Not that I would tell him that. The last thing I would do was appear unprepared.

“You’ll have it by end of business today. I can swing by Monday morning to pick up the links and passwords I’ll need, plus the stack of documents.”

“Pick up?” he said. “You’ll be working here.”

Oh, no, I wouldn’t. “I’ll be working in my own office,” I corrected.

“Not an option. For one, I don’t know you and you have no track record to go on. I’m trusting you because Jacob recommended you, but I still have to protect my interests.” He crossed his arms. “You work here or I find someone else for the job. Those are my terms.”

Every fiber of my being wanted to tell him where he could stick his terms. And yet, he had a point. I had no one to vouch for my trustworthiness. No references. No history of happy clients. And no proof that I wouldn’t do exactly what this Kayla person had done. The man may not have looked like a staunch businessman, but as I was learning, looks could be deceiving.

With a steadying breath and a clenched jaw, I conceded. “Fine. I’ll conduct the work in your office.”

The grin returned, sending me more than a little off-balance. “Then we’re in business.”

Suspecting I might regret this in the future, I nodded. “Yes, we are.”

Chapter Six



I DIDN'T BOTHER KNOCKING WHEN I REACHED BECCA'S FRONT door later that evening. She'd sent me three texts asking how the meeting went, and I'd have answered but I was too busy working on the agreement I promised to deliver by the end of the day.

"Hey, woman," she said as I strolled into her apartment. "Why didn't you answer me today?"

"I got busy," I replied. "Remember that guy I told you about the day I got fired? The one I met on the incline?"

She paused in stirring whatever was in the pan on the stove. "The one who said you should start your own business?"

"Yeah, that one. Guess who he turned out to be?"

"Who?" she asked, not making the connection.

Head tilted, I glared silently, brows arched.

The light went on and her face lit up. "He's Miles?"

"Unfortunately, yes." When her expression changed to wistful, I said, "Don't even think about it. We're complete opposites."

"Come on." She pulled the pan off the stove and dumped pasta into a strainer in the sink. "The universe is clearly throwing you two together. And opposites do attract sometimes."

“They also clash. No, thank you. Why didn’t you tell me he’s a party planner like you?”

Her gaze shot up. “He’s a party planner?”

This explained why I had so little to go on. “Did you not ask Jacob for any details?”

Becca shrugged and went back to shaking the strainer. “You said when it comes to bookkeeping, that all businesses are the same, so I didn’t think it mattered.” She turned again. “Wait. What’s the name of the company?”

“It’s called Hullabaloo.”

Her eyes widened. “The children’s party planners?”

“You’ve heard of them?”

“Heck, yeah. They’ve taken kids’ parties to a whole new level. Amanda says she’s glad they don’t do anything else or we’d have real competition on our hands.”

She had my attention. “What does ‘another level’ mean? How much can you do with a kid’s party?”

After dumping the pasta back into the pan, Becca poured in a jar of Alfredo sauce. “They make every party unique to the child with all sorts of themes. The typical stuff, like superheroes and princesses, but I’ve heard about others. They created a pirate ship the size of a small RV for one, complete with toy cannons that shot foam balls. Another had a playhouse that looked like a big red barn. That was a farmyard theme, I believe. Marquette showed me pics on their Instagram of their jungle concept. You’d have thought they dropped a whole rain forest into the family’s backyard. They’re new on the scene but you’d never know it.”

I hadn’t given much thought to how successful my clients might be. So long as they could pay for my services, I would punch in the numbers and provide the needed reports. In college, a creative writing professor once called me pragmatic to a fault. How pragmatism could ever be a fault was beyond me, but I was starting to see what she meant. Maybe my focus *was* a little narrow at times.

“He said he started the business two years ago. That doesn’t sound new to me.”

Becca pulled two bowls from the cabinet above her sink. “You don’t open your doors and instantly have clients waiting, especially in our field. People have to trust you with a great deal of their money, and often have no idea what they’re going to get for it. Social media is a great tool, but it gets you only so far. Word of mouth is everything.” Filling the bowls with pasta, she added, “You’ll see for yourself. Hopefully, Miles will tell someone about your services, and when you do a great job for that client, they’ll tell someone else, and so on and so on. That’s how any business grows.”

I knew this, of course, considering I was a business major, but after years of dealing with large corporations and millions of dollars, I’d lost sight of the basics. For my employee evaluations, I always scored high on job performance. This conversation made me realize that if I wanted my new business to work, at least until the right opportunity came along, I’d have to pay attention to my interpersonal skills. It wasn’t that I didn’t like people or that I’d ever be difficult to work with. I simply preferred to be judged on my productivity and measurable outputs rather than how well I could blow sunshine up someone’s ass.

“Did he hire you?” she asked. “You haven’t told me how it went.”

How did I answer that? The meeting went fine until the little battle of wills at the end. And my implying he’d failed to properly supervise an employee probably wasn’t the best approach. There’d also been the less than enthusiastic greeting when I’d first laid eyes on him.

“It wasn’t the best meeting I’ve ever had,” I answered honestly. “But he did offer me the work. There’s only one catch.”

After dropping a fork into one of the bowls, she pushed it my way. “What’s that?”

Sharing her food hadn’t been part of my plan, but I hadn’t eaten in hours and the Alfredo smelled amazing. I grabbed a

napkin and carried my food to the couch. “He insists that I work at his office.”

Becca took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa, bowl in hand. “Why would he insist on that? Won’t you just be maintaining his bookkeeping software? That mostly updates itself if it’s anything like ours.”

“This is more than maintaining,” I explained. “His previous assistant was doing the bookkeeping tasks until she ditched him nine days ago without notice. Turns out she was shirking her duties, and now I have a six-month mess to clean up.”

“Ouch for him, but good for you. This is the kind of stuff you live for. You’ll basically be auditing his books.”

In a roundabout way, yes. And I had to admit that my hands practically itched with anticipation at the thought of digging into that stack of papers. Organizing them. Comparing and checking for accuracy. My own little mathematical archaeological dig.

“I still don’t understand why you have to do that on-site,” she said, wrapping noodles around her fork.

“Since he doesn’t know me, and I don’t have any previous clients, he’s reluctant to let his financial records leave the office. Which is fair,” I said, a bitter admission. “For all he knows, I could crash his software and shred everything he gives me, then disappear.”

Becca paused with the bite halfway to her mouth. “Why would anyone do that?”

“I have no idea, but after learning a trusted employee screwed him over, I can’t really blame him.”

“That’s fair. Now that you have your first client, are you finally going to tell your parents what you’re up to?”

I needed to. Putting it off this long was already pushing my luck. “We’re having a family dinner on Sunday, so I’ll tell them then. What are the chances I can make it sound like it was my idea to leave the firm?”

Leveling me with a knowing look, she said, “If that was the case, you’d have told them before pulling the trigger. And you know your mother can smell a lie better than anyone. Especially from you.”

Good point. I would have to make my confession and deal with the fallout, but at least I’d taken control of the situation. Even if I had to be cajoled into it.

“You’re right. Maybe Mom will still be floating on her soon-to-be-a-grandmother high and skip the disappointment and ‘How could you not tell us?’ part.”

Becca’s expression softened. “I’m so happy for Franny. She’s going to be a great mom.” Poking me with her foot, she added, “And you’re going to be the best aunt ever. How much baby stuff have you bought so far?”

“I only found out ten days ago.” She stared in silence, waiting. “Okay, fine. I’ve bought two stuffed animals, three baby blankets, and a pack of booties. But in my defense, baby stuff is impossible to resist. It’s so damn cute.”

Smiling from ear to ear, she said, “I bought something, too.”

“What? We don’t even know what she’s having yet.”

“It works either way.” Setting her bowl on the coffee table, Becca bolted off the couch. “Hold on and I’ll get it.”

Seconds later she returned holding a tiny white T-shirt that read *Auntie’s Little Nugget* with a chunk of chicken in the center. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“You know my mother will never let her grandchild wear that.”

“Franny will,” she replied, knowing my sister was far less snooty than our mother. “I found it at this adorable little shop in Shadyside when I was scouting a venue. We *have* to go there. Everything is so adorable I nearly brought home half the store.”

Of course she did. I had the best friends.

“We need to take Franny with us. She hasn’t gotten to do any shopping without Mother tagging along. Mom tried insisting that they hire a professional to design the nursery, but for once Franny pushed back and said she’d do it herself.”

“Good for her.” Becca draped the tee over the back of the couch before picking up her bowl. “Are they going to find out the gender?”

Shaking my head, I couldn’t help but grin. “She says they don’t want to know and I’m convinced she’s refusing to do it to drive Mother mad. She’s already complaining about not knowing whether to buy blue or pink, which is ridiculously antiquated. Franny is making the nursery green and yellow with a cute little animal theme. All very soft and soothing and I love it.”

“A baby,” Becca whispered, her eyes glassy. “So sweet.”

Watching her closely, I set my fork in my bowl and leaned forward. “What is that look about?”

Startled, she met my gaze. “What look?”

“The one all over your face. You want one, don’t you?”

“Well... I mean...” she stammered. “I’ve always wanted to be a mom.”

“You want to be one *now*,” I said more specifically.

Pink floated up her cheeks. “We’ve talked about it.”

I bounded onto my knees. “Becca, that’s awesome.”

Blush deepening, she stared into her noodles. “Sophie keeps asking for a baby sister.”

Sophie had two parents who could provide her this desired sibling, but as far as I knew, her mother wasn’t interested in having any more children. I’d met the ex twice and she was really nice, considering she was meeting her former husband’s girlfriend’s friends, but I didn’t get an *I want a dozen more* vibe from her.

“Are you going to get married first or just go for it?” I didn’t have an opinion either way. People could do whatever

made them happy, and no matter which option Becca chose, I'd support her. A few years ago she'd been engaged to the love of her life until a tragedy took him the day before their wedding. No one would blame her for saying screw all the planning and waiting and getting on with the happiness part.

"I don't know," she replied, leaning her head against the back of the couch. "If the past has taught me anything, it's to live in the moment, so that's what I'm trying to do. Plus, I'm not sure I'm ready to plan another wedding. For years Brian and I kept saying that once we were married we'd buy a house and travel and start a family. Everything was somewhere out in the future, and then that future never happened."

I mimicked her pose, leaning my head to the side. "All the more reason to say screw the future and do what you want right now."

She smiled and dug back into her noodles. "Lindsey said something to that effect in front of Jacob and he nearly choked on his cheeseburger. To be fair, the way she said it was a bit more... blunt."

"Do I even want to know?" I asked, well acquainted with the crazy shit that came out of Lindsey's mouth.

Becca narrowed her eyes. "The words *knock her the hell up already* were involved."

That sounded about right. With a shake of my head, I said, "I love that woman."

"Me too," Becca replied. "Me too."

Chapter Seven



“HOW ARE THINGS GOING WITH THE NEW OWNERS?” DAD asked as Hildy distributed the salads around the table. “Are you showing them what you can do?”

I set my fork beside my plate. “I don’t work for Goldberg & Proctor anymore.”

The gathering fell silent. All except Mother, of course.

“What did you say?”

“They let me go,” I added.

Dad’s turn. “How dare they? When did this happen?”

The answer was about to make things worse. “It’ll be four weeks on Wednesday.”

Franny coughed hard enough that Tate reached over and patted her on the back. I had to give him credit. He was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

“You lost your job a month ago?” Mother demanded. “Josephine, how could you keep this from us?”

Guilt washed over me. I should have told them the night Franny announced she was pregnant. Instead, I’d used my future niece or nephew to rationalize my silence, and now I was paying for it. The hurt on Mother’s face was justified, and I didn’t blame Dad when he said, “I need another drink.”

“I’m sorry. I thought I would find another job right away, and then I could show you that there was nothing to worry about.”

“Are you telling us you still don’t have a job?” Dad asked, sitting back down with a full glass of scotch. He hadn’t even bothered to add ice.

“No, I do. I mean, not a job necessarily.”

“What does that mean?” Mother said, salad forgotten.

“I *tried* to find another job, but no one would even give me an interview. So... I started my own business.”

“You have a business?” Dad asked. “What kind of a business?”

“It’s called Danvers Bookkeeping.”

Silence reigned again. I caught Hildy’s gaze where she hovered inside the kitchen doorway, out of sight from the others. Her expression carried both pride and support. I always could count on her.

“That’s respectable,” Dad finally said, making an effort to also be supportive.

I understood. As much as Mother dreamed of me becoming a wife, Dad envisioned me at the helm of a Fortune 500 company. Now I was a disappointment to both of them.

“I know it isn’t ideal,” I conceded, “but I already have my first client, and I plan to add more in the coming weeks.” A bit of a stretch when I had no leads, but this was still the plan so technically it was not a lie. “This is my chance to build something from the ground up. In a few years I could have a full staff and expand to add other services.” Where that one came from I had no idea, but I liked the sound of it. “There are endless possibilities, and freelancing is the wave of the future. Companies are changing. Many are looking to outsource tasks that have traditionally been handled in-house.”

As the last statement sailed off my tongue, I remembered where I’d heard it. The night the girls had researched what I should do with my life, this had been one of Becca’s selling points. I’d rolled my eyes at the time, but she’d been right. Pride overrode the guilt, and I felt a wave of confidence. I could do this.

No one spoke for several seconds until Franny said, “I think it’s great.”

“It doesn’t sound very stable to me,” Mother said. “What about benefits? What will you do for health insurance? What if you can’t find more clients?”

“I agree with Franny,” Dad cut in. “If anyone can build a business empire, it’s my Josie.”

Tossing around the word empire felt premature, but this is where Dad and I had always connected. His faith in me boosted my confidence even more.

“Thanks, Dad. I appreciate that.”

“Are we ready for the next course?” Hildy said, charging into the room as if she hadn’t been listening the entire time.

Mother looked down at her full plate. “Not yet, Hildy. Give us another five minutes, please.”

Shooting me a covert wink, she said, “Yes, ma’am.”

The interruption worked. The topic was dropped and Mother returned to baby planning. For once, Franny didn’t look annoyed to take the brunt of her attention. Their belief in me meant the world, and I knew Mother would come around. Her questions stemmed from concern, and I couldn’t blame her for that. I *was* taking a risk, but a calculated one. And if Danvers Bookkeeping went down in flames, at least I’d know I tried.



“Good morning,” a woman said as I stepped through the front door of Hullabaloo on Monday morning. I hadn’t expected anyone to be inside and nearly leaped back through the doorway. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” Her soothing voice was light and musical and made me feel less foolish. “You must be Ms. Danvers.”

“Please,” I said, “call me Josie.”

There was professional, and then there was pretentious. Insisting they call me Ms. Danvers would be the latter.

“Nice to meet you, Josie.” She wiped her hands off on the paint-splattered apron draped around her neck. “I’m Samantha Deltorre, but you can call me Sam. I handle the artistic stuff around here.”

She looked to be about my age, with dark hair pulled up in a messy bun, enormous brown eyes, and a welcoming smile. Spread out in front of her were bottles of paint, several brushes, and stained scraps of cloth. Across her cheek was a slender line of red paint.

I nodded toward the banner on the table that read *Happy Birthday Ca* in the same red paint adorning her face. “So I see. Are you doing that free hand?”

“Yeah. I’ve done so many at this point I could probably paint them in my sleep.” Dipping her brush in a cup of paint, she said, “Miles is upstairs in his office. You can go on up.”

“Thanks,” I said, turning toward the peacock in the corner. He seemed less menacing today.

“Oh,” she said, “you’ll need to watch your step at the top. I’ve got stuff drying on the floor up there.”

Appreciating the heads-up, I nodded and made my way up the stairs. Sam had not been kidding. Where there had been a sea of balloons on Friday, there was now two large wooden circles, one painted black and the other painted red. On the far-right wall was a black spiderweb made of some sort of bands from what I could tell, and a matching white web hung on the opposite side. The circles rested on drop cloths that covered the entire floor, creating an obstacle course between me and the office.

Slowly and with great care, I placed my baby-blue heels in whatever paint-free spots I could find, struggling to keep my balance as I navigated my way between the circles. Going around either side would have required coming way too close to the webs, and I had no plans to destroy Samantha’s work nor to get paint on my matching baby-blue blouse.

Feeling proud of myself for making the trek without mishap, a voice called out as I reached the office door.

“Josie?”

I turned to find Miles standing to the right of the stairway. “Sam said to come on up,” I said, feeling as if I’d been caught sneaking around. Then I got annoyed for feeling guilty when I was right where I was supposed to be.

“Why are you over there?” he asked.

This was starting to feel like a prank. “She said you were in your office.”

He nodded. “Right. My office is over here.”

I stared at him, reminding myself that this was the moment those interpersonal skills were needed. “This is where we had the interview. I thought *this* was your office.”

“That’s Kayla’s old office.”

Perhaps it had been naive to assume a small office without a single window belonged to owner of the business. Still, how was I supposed to know where his office was otherwise? It wasn’t as if I’d gotten a tour during the interview, and Samantha hadn’t given any directions.

“Come on down, and I’ll get you set up.” With that instruction, Miles disappeared down a hallway, leaving me to once again traverse the painted mess.

With a deep breath, and swallowing a few choice words, I started back the way I’d come, reaching the narrowest point between the circles when a woman’s voice boomed behind me.

“Who are you?”

My heart dropped as I leaped in the air, catching my heel on the side of a wood circle and landing on my ass in the middle of the red one. I could feel wet paint beneath my palms, which meant my white skirt was no longer white. At least not in the back. Seconds felt like hours as I sat in silence, humiliation and anger forming a ball in my throat.

I could have been *at home in my slippers at my own desk* doing this damn job, but no. Because heaven forbid Miles Porter let his precious invoices out of his damn sight. I considered hauling my butt off the floor and saying screw this, but I had never walked away from a job—willingly anyway—and I would not start now.

At least whoever scared me wasn't laughing, but they weren't offering to help me up either. Gathering what little dignity I had left, I pushed my way back to my feet, trying not to create any more mess than I already had. A pointless endeavor but I tried anyway. Once upright, the same booming voice said, "Well?"

My jaw tightened. *Be nice, Josie. Be nice.*

Spinning to meet my interrogator, I discovered a plump woman, maybe five feet tall and possibly close to Mother's age. Dark-rimmed glasses dangled from a bright-yellow chain around her neck, and her brows nearly met in the middle. She didn't blink or move or smile. Who knew a kids' party company would have their own dragon lady?

For a split second, I considered not answering her. Then I decided I might need her cooperation in the future so I'd better cooperate now. "My name is Josie Danvers of Danvers Bookkeeping. I'm here to clean up what Mr. Porter's assistant left behind."

Forgoing a real greeting, she said, "You messed up Sam's circle."

I'd also ruined one of my favorite skirts and now needed a change of clothes, which I did not have. Biting the inside of my cheek, I replied, "You startled me."

Without apologizing, the woman crossed to the stairs and yelled down. "Sam, you need to get up here."

This was not how my morning was supposed to go. I was supposed to walk in, be given a work space, and dig into the task at hand. Now I couldn't even sit in whatever chair I might be given and was no closer to getting to work than I'd been an

hour ago when I'd changed for the second time trying to find the right outfit that said trusted, professional business owner.

So much for that. Feeling like a child about to face the principal, I stood my ground and waited for the artist to see what I'd done to her work.

Sam bolted up the steps, saying, "What is it, Kendra?" Neither me nor the dragon lady said a word as she took in the scene. "Oh, my. Are you okay?" she asked me.

Physically, I was fine. I would probably have a bruise on my bottom tomorrow, but nothing major. As for my pride? That was another story.

"I'm sorry I messed up your... circle. I was startled and lost my balance."

That's right. I'd throw dragon lady under the bus in a heartbeat. She'd tossed me under first and this was *her* fault.

"The paint can be fixed." She bent to see the back of my skirt. "I'm not sure your clothes can. We're probably the same size. You're welcome to change into the extra pieces I keep in my office."

At least one person in this crazy company was nice. "I'd appreciate that, thank you."

Wiping her hands on her apron, she took two steps to the left. "My workshop is down this way, and there's a bathroom at the end of the hall where you can change."

I cast a quick glance toward the dragon lady, and she stared back with a sour expression. I was pretty sure she hadn't blinked during the entire exchange, which was creepy as hell. Trying not to touch anything, I slid a finger around the thin strap of my purse, which had also landed in the paint, and made sure it didn't brush a wall as I followed Sam, hoping beyond hope that I would not have to deal with this Kendra person to fix the bookkeeping.

One encounter with the dragon was more than enough.

Chapter Eight



MINUTES LATER, I EXITED THE BATHROOM IN SKINNY JEANS, complete with shredded openings down the thighs, and a black T-shirt with the words *Make art* across the front. The girls would be amazed if they saw me like this, and Mother would faint. My wardrobe contained nothing even remotely like these pieces. I never saw the point in buying jeans with holes already in them. Not that I had a problem with anyone else wearing them. They simply didn't work for me.

If nothing else, I fit in with the others in the office more than I had upon arrival.

Sam had given me directions to Miles' office before I'd stepped into the bathroom to change. She'd also provided a towel to wrap my damp skirt in, since rinsing it thoroughly had been the best chance of saving it. The rest of my clothes were in an empty grocery bag, and I'd been able to wipe the paint off my purse with no problem.

When I entered the office at the end of the hall, I had to blink against the brightness from the sun streaming in the windows. Once my eyes adjusted, the Pittsburgh city skyline spread out before me.

"This view is amazing," I muttered.

"What happened to you?" he said, ignoring my statement.

Holding up the plastic bag, I said, "I fell onto one of those circles out there and got paint on my clothes. Samantha was nice enough to lend me some of hers. I don't live far from here

so I'll go home and change into something more professional at lunchtime."

He waved my words away. "You don't need to change. In fact, you should wear stuff like this from now on."

That would not be happening. "This is not appropriate work attire."

A muscle twitched along his scruff-covered jaw. Taking his time, he rounded the desk and propped his backside on the front of it. "You have pretty narrow ideas, don't you?"

This felt like a trick question. "Excuse me?"

"The day we met, you said I didn't look like a CEO. Now you say jeans and a T-shirt aren't *appropriate attire*." He said the last two words as if mimicking how I'd said them. "I have a news flash for you, Ms. Danvers. You don't need to dress like you have a stick up your ass to get your work done."

Turning the tables, I said, "That sounds very judgmental, Mr. Porter."

"I'm stating a fact."

"And I'm saying that I prefer to dress professionally while at work. Since I am *not* an employee here, I believe I get to choose my own dress code. That dress code will not include ratty jeans and a T-shirt."

Our gazes held for a long, tense moment before he said, "If you were at home, would you be wearing professional attire?"

I hesitated, debating whether to lie. Unless my workday included a video call with a client, I would, in fact, not wear my usual office clothes. But that had nothing to do with this conversation.

"No, I wouldn't," I bit out.

"Then you agree that you don't need to dress up to be productive?"

No way in hell would I agree with this man about anything.

“I do not. Can we move on to the reason I’m here?” The sooner I started this job, the sooner I could finish.

Like a switch flipped, he rose off the desk and pointed to a freestanding table I hadn’t noticed before. “I set you up over here.”

The stack of papers from the interview sat next to an open laptop. There was a cup of pens, pencils, and highlighters, as well as sticky notes and a fresh notepad, plus an adding machine with a fresh roll of paper.

“Are you serious?” I asked. He wanted me to work *in* his office? “Why can’t I work in the assistant’s office?” The last thing I wanted to do was spend all day with this man six feet away.

“This will work better so I can answer your questions.”

“I can call you if I have questions.”

“Or you can turn and ask me right here. What’s the problem?”

Becca’s voice echoed in my head. *Word of mouth is everything*. Telling my first client that I’d rather have a root canal without anesthesia than spend a single day working beside him was probably not the way to get a recommendation.

Swallowing my distaste, I flashed the best fake smile I could manage. “Working here is fine.”

We both knew I was lying, but he accepted my surrender without comment. Not long after, I was seated, logged in, and attempting to focus on the jumbled pile of invoices and bank statements. Miles worked quietly in my peripheral, even while making phone calls, but I still knew he was there. The constant awareness set my teeth on edge, but I refused to let him win another round. I would simply ignore him.

And tomorrow I would bring headphones to make ignoring him easier.



I saved every question I could until right before lunch and planned to do the same in the afternoon to limit our interactions as much as possible. Miles had been correct that the software had not been updated since March, and after a quick survey of both January and February, I knew the prior months would need a solid review as well.

That work had not been included in our contract, and I assumed once I'd cleaned things up, he would find a new assistant to take over the bookkeeping duties. Either way, anything before March was not my problem.

Once I had the answers I needed before lunch, I cruised through the afternoon with no problem. I didn't go home to change, partly to avoid another debate over proper office attire, but mostly because I'd forgotten that I needed to. It turned out jeans and a T-shirt were quite comfortable, and it was nice not to have to adjust my skirt every time I stood up. Not that I'd skip the skirt going forward, but one casual day wouldn't hurt anything.

During an afternoon break, I ran into Sam in the kitchen downstairs.

"I'm really sorry about this morning," I said as I filled a cup from the water cooler. "I'm not usually that clumsy."

"Don't worry about it. I hope you can save that skirt." After a short pause, she asked, "How did you end up between the circles though? I've been curious about that all day."

Because I'm an idiot, I nearly said. "My interview on Friday was in the small office in the back there. When you said Miles was in his office, that's the one I thought you meant."

"Oh, gosh," she said, her eyes wide. "I'm so sorry. I assumed he gave you a tour of the place so you'd know where to go today."

That's what he *should* have done. I saw no reason to let her take the blame for Miles' failure to do so, plus my mistaken assumptions.

"It's my fault for assuming I knew instead of asking to be sure." Taking the opportunity to appease my own curiosity, I asked, "Who is that Kendra woman? She's the only person who hasn't seemed happy I'm here."

"Ah," Samantha said with a nod. "This will take a minute to explain. Have a seat."

Even more curious, I climbed onto the stool opposite the artist at the high table in the corner.

"Well," she started, "how much did Miles tell you about the girl who handled the books before you?"

"Only that she quit without notice to run off with a guitar player."

"That sums it up." After a brief glance toward the stairs, she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Kayla is Kendra's niece, and she thinks Miles should have waited for Kayla to come back for her job."

Not an excuse to give *me* a hard time, but I could see where she might not like my being there. "Does she not know that Kayla wasn't doing the job even when she had it?"

Samantha jerked back. "She what?"

Well, hell. Now I was gossiping. How did I back my way out of this?

"I don't know the details," I said, holding my hands up in front of me. "There's some invoicing that wasn't updated in the system and that's what I'm here to fix. Maybe she got behind and didn't have time to catch up before leaving."

A gross supposition that wasn't remotely true based on the transactions I'd analyzed in the last few hours, but the last thing I needed was to cause unnecessary drama for my only client.

Staring at the table, Sam said, "This makes so much sense now."

Concerned, I asked, “What makes sense?”

“A week before Kayla left, I heard her and Kendra talking in Kendra’s office. She was whining that her job was boring, and she wanted to do something more exciting. Kendra told her she couldn’t leave before cleaning up the mess she’d made, and that if Miles found out he might fire *her* for convincing him to hire Kayla in the first place.”

Forget about me creating drama. This place had enough already. The fact that Sam hadn’t known the truth about Kayla meant that Miles probably never intended to disclose the extent of the young woman’s poor performance. *And* since Kendra was still employed, her job was obviously safe. If all of this was the case, then Miles was a pretty decent guy. An opinion that pained me to even admit.

Of course, I’d ruined his good guy plans by discussing something I had no business discussing. Maybe I could salvage this.

“Let’s keep all of this between us,” I said. “Kendra is still here; I’m taking care of the books, and everything can move along like nothing happened. That’s obviously how Miles wants it.”

Making a motion as if she were locking her lips and throwing away the key, Sam nodded. “I’m not saying a word to anyone, but I’m curious to see what will happen if Kendra’s right and Kayla does come crawling back.”

Something told me that was not going to happen.

“That’s up to Miles.” Sliding off the stool, I opted to make my exit before doing any more damage. “I’d better get back to work. Thanks again for understanding about this morning, and for lending me your clothes. I’ll bring them back tomorrow.”

“No rush,” she said absently, and I could see her mind still running through the news I’d shared.

So long as she kept it in her mind and didn’t let it out of her mouth, we were good. Otherwise, I’d have some explaining to do.



My slip bothered me for the rest of the day. I'd never worked for a company this small before, but I knew that gossip tended to spread like wildfire in any office setting. It was only a matter of time until Sam shared the news with one person, and before long, everyone else would know. I could tell from the payroll records, which had been current in the software, that Hullabaloo included two more full-time employees in addition to Sam and Kendra. I might as well have pulled the pin on a gossip grenade that was bound to blow up in my face.

Deciding I needed to get out in front of any fallout, I added a confession to my end-of-day questions.

"That falls under party supplies," Miles said in answer to my last query. "What else?"

I noted his reply before taking a deep breath and steeling my shoulders. "One more thing. I had a conversation with Sam in the kitchen earlier."

Miles leaned back in his office chair with a relaxed expression. "Okay."

"I mentioned why I'm here."

"To handle the bookkeeping," he said. "And...?"

"And... I included the fact that Kayla had not been doing her job before she left."

A hint of irritation creased the corners of his eyes as he leaned forward and crossed his arms on the desk. Apology prepared, I braced for the much-deserved reprimand.

"That's fine," he said.

My brain took a second to catch up. "What?"

He flattened his palms on the desktop. "It's fine," he repeated.

"But what about Kendra?"

Brows arched and I instantly knew I'd said too much.

“You had quite a talk down there.”

Wishing I'd never started this conversation, I tried to explain. “I only asked why she seemed so annoyed that I was here this morning. I never meant to stir up any trouble.”

“I'll talk to Kendra,” was all he replied. “Is there anything else?”

Uncertain where I stood, I shook my head. “Not right now.”

He turned back to his computer. “Then I'll see you in the morning.”

Nothing like blowing any future recommendations on the first day. I made a mental note to require all future contracts include a clause that my work would be performed in my own office to prevent any future foot-in-mouth incidents. After gathering my things, I crossed to leave, stopping in the doorway.

“I really am sorry,” I said, not wanting to leave without offering an apology.

“You're good, Josie. Don't worry about it.” The words were tossed over his shoulder as he stared at the monitor, making it impossible to read his expression.

Giving up, I walked down the hall and encountered Kendra near the top of the stairs. “Oh, hello.”

I received a huff in return before she started down the stairs, taking her time and holding tightly to the rail. The black bag on her shoulder looked heavy.

“Can I carry that for you?” I asked, shuffling down behind her.

“I've got it.” She leaned hard against the wall and hefted the bag up higher.

Pushing my luck, I stepped down beside her and shifted the bag from her shoulder to mine before she knew what was happening. The thing weighed a ton and I almost asked if she'd packed it full of bricks.

“You don’t have to do that,” Kendra snapped.

I would win this woman over if it killed me, and navigating the stairs under the weight of this bag made that a distinct possibility.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Take your time.” When I reached the kitchen, I rested the weight of the bag on the high-top table where Sam and I had chatted earlier.

Kendra moved with more ease the rest of the way down. “Like I said, you didn’t have to do that.”

“I know.” I pointed at a pin on her cardigan. “He’s a cutie.”

Looking down, she pulled her sweater forward to see which one I meant. Her face softened. “That’s my grandson, Archie, from when he played ball back in the spring. He’s only four but already a little slugger.”

I leaned in for a closer look. “He has all-star written all over him. My sister is having the first grandchild in my family next spring. Our mother is beyond excited. Are all of these your grandchildren?” I asked. There were three buttons in total.

Pride beamed from her eyes. “They are. The youngest is still in diapers so no buttons yet, but she’s already hurling her bottle hard enough to leave a hefty mark on her brother’s forehead, so there’s no doubt she’ll be on the mound at some point.”

“Sounds like baseball is in their blood.” Enjoying our truce, I lifted the bag back onto my shoulder. “I can carry this to your car for you.”

“There’s no need for that. I can take it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

Hesitating, I could see the debate playing in her mind. She didn’t want to like me. I was the enemy, here to expose her daughter’s mistakes and, at least temporarily, take her place. But I’d also proved to be a not-so-terrible person, and in the end, I was only doing a job. Whatever future her niece had here was not up to me.

“It *is* a little heavy for me,” she mumbled.

“Then it’s settled. Lead the way.”

Thankfully, she was parked right in front of the building because my arm was ready to fall off by the time I dropped the bag into the back seat of her Ford Escort. I stepped back and let her close the car door.

“Have a good night,” I said, turning for the corner.

“Do you need a ride?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m only a few blocks down. You go on ahead.” I’d already slipped and said the wrong thing once today. Best not to take any chances.

“I can take you.”

Searching for a plausible excuse, I said, “Really. I’ve been sitting all day so I need the exercise. I appreciate the offer though.”

A bitter edge returning to her voice, she said, “All right then. Never mind.”

Her car door slammed before I could change my answer, and Kendra pulled away without bothering to wave. Hopefully, whatever ground I’d gained wasn’t completely lost. I moved on, but within a few feet something made me look up to Miles’ office. He was standing at the window, watching me. Had he been there long enough to see me walk out with Kendra? If so, what did he think of me chatting with another one of his employees?

If he thought I was trying to fix my slipup from earlier, he was wrong. I simply wanted to show the woman I wasn’t an evil usurper here to bad-mouth her daughter. Looking away, I stared at the pavement as realization dawned. I *was* trying to fix my slipup. Or at least get out in front of it. Was that really so bad?

I glanced up again and Miles was gone. I barely knew the man, but he had a knack for making me feel like a shitty person. Or at least catching me at my shittiest moments. Feeling defensive, I moved on, mumbling to myself.

“You aren’t so perfect either, Miles Porter.” The words might have made me feel better, if I had any proof they were true. So far, my inaugural client was proving to be seemingly flawless, which irked me to no end.

Chapter Nine



ON THE WAY HOME, MY PHONE DINGED WITH A MESSAGE FROM Donna telling me Becca was hurt and to come to her apartment as soon as I could. I frantically typed back for more information, but no answer came. Thanks to power walking, I made the trip in half the normal time and burst into my friend's apartment, my heart racing.

“What happened?” I demanded. Dropping my bag of clothes, I rounded the corner to find Becca on her couch, her left foot propped on the ottoman and an ice pack on her ankle. “What did you do?”

She blinked. “How did you know?”

“Donna sent me a text that you were hurt.”

Becca rolled her eyes. “I twisted my ankle when I missed a step today. She shouldn't have bothered you.”

“How bad is it?” I crossed the living room and lifted the ice pack. Her ankle was purple and twice the size it should have been. “Shit, woman. You need to go to the hospital.”

The sound of a toilet flushing came from the hallway seconds before Donna walked out, drying her hands on a towel. “I told her that, but she's being stubborn. That's why I called in backup.” Checking the clock on the microwave, she added, “Lindsey should be here any minute, but Megan is working late.”

“Are you kidding me?” Becca squawked. “For heaven's sake. I'll be fine by morning.”

“Has she tried to put weight on it?” I asked Donna, ignoring the delusional patient.

“Yep. I had to catch her before she hit the floor.”

I turned back to Becca. “How did you get home?”

She avoided eye contact. “I took a car, like always.”

“And the stairs?” I pushed. “How long did it take you to get up here?”

Like a toddler caught in a lie, she stuck out her lip. “A while.”

“Where’s the little klutz?” yelled Lindsey, charging into the apartment like a woman on a mission. “Good, you’re still dressed. Jacob is on his way and he’ll carry you down to the car.”

Eyes closed, Becca slapped the couch. “Why did you call him? You’re all overreacting. It’s nothing.”

“Her ankle is huge,” I said.

“And she can’t walk at all,” Donna added.

“Then she can’t put up a fight,” Lindsey surmised. “Have you given her anything for the swelling?”

Donna nodded. “I gave her ibuprofen when I got here.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m a child.”

“Then stop acting like one.” Leaning over the ottoman, Lindsey checked the ankle for herself before gently lowering the ice pack and leaning her hands on each side of Becca’s foot. “If my ankle looked like that, would you make me go to the hospital?”

Becca held her gaze. “Yes.”

“That’s what I thought. Do we need to feed Milo before we go?”

She nodded and Donna moved into action, grabbing a can of wet food from the pantry and filling a stainless-steel bowl with tiny fish decorating the sides. The moment she popped the seal on the can, Milo came running from Becca’s room to

weave in and out around Donna's ankles until she put the bowl on the floor beside his water dish.

Lindsey was checking the feeling in Becca's toes when Jacob joined the party. Where Lindsey and I had stormed through the door, Becca's boyfriend strolled in with an air of calm competence, his focus on Becca alone. Within minutes, the patient was loaded into his back seat, Lindsey beside her. Donna and I waved them off and as the white Buick exited the lot, she turned my way.

"Now," she said, "what the hell are you wearing?"

I'd completely forgotten my borrowed clothes. "It's a long story that requires a glass of wine. Maybe two. Come up and I'll tell you."

"Wine on a Monday night?"

"That sounds very judgy," I said, leading the way up the stairs. "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

"Based on that outfit? Definitely."

"Okay, then. Wine first."



As we'd all surmised, Becca had a severe sprain, but luckily no broken bones. She'd be on crutches and in a boot for several weeks so she'd be staying at Jacob's place until she could get around on her own. His apartment wasn't far from her parents' house and Kathy, Becca's mom, would check on her during the day while Jacob was teaching, then he would take care of her in the evenings. This meant I got Milo, and he wasn't too happy about the temporary move.

I brought him up around midnight and when I left for work in the morning, he was still hiding under my bed.

Deciding what to wear for my second day on the job had proved more difficult than expected. I'd pulled out a lavender jacket, cream blouse, and black pencil skirt, but staring at the combination on the bed, all I could think was how out of place

I'd look. And how nice it had been the day before to move around without constantly tugging and adjusting my clothes.

At the same time, I had my side of the argument to uphold. As a compromise, I dug out a pair of black dress pants I hadn't worn in forever, kept the blouse and jacket, but switched and went for flats instead of heels. Hair in a twist and a thin string of pearls finished the look. Surveying my appearance in the full-length mirror on my bathroom door, I still looked professional if slightly less stern.

I could live with this.

When I entered the office and headed upstairs, I encountered neither Sam nor Kendra. The painted circles and cobwebs were gone and the place appeared deserted. Someone had to be there since the front door had been unlocked, and that someone was sitting behind his desk when I walked in.

"Good morning," I said, sliding my purse onto the end of my table.

"Morning," Miles replied, closing his laptop before rolling back from his desk. Crossing the small room, he stopped beside me and held out his business card. "If you have any questions today, call my cell."

"You won't be here?" I asked, ignoring the unexpected hit of disappointment.

"I've got a potential new client to meet, and Evan needs help at the workshop."

I recognized the name from the payroll records I'd seen the day before. "The workshop?"

He nodded. "We can't build the bigger pieces here, so the majority of our carpentry is done off-site at a building on Southern Avenue."

Southern wasn't far from my apartment, but I didn't say so. "Then I get the whole office to myself?" I asked, a little too much enthusiasm in my tone.

The crooked grin appeared and my heart skipped a beat. How the hell did he do that?

“Yes, the office is yours for today. Try to pretend you’ll miss me.”

Was he flirting with me?

“I doubt I can do that convincingly,” I lied. What was wrong with me? I’d wanted nothing more than to be rid of him yesterday. Now I was practically curling a lock around my finger and fluttering my eyelashes like a smitten cheerleader. Sobering, I pulled out my chair and sat down. “Don’t let me keep you. I’ll be fine.”

His chuckle sent a chill—the good kind—down my spine. “I’m sure you will. I’ll be back to check in this afternoon.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I said, trying to get us back on even ground. “Do whatever you need to do.”

He bent forward, his mouth hovering beside my ear. “I meant to check in on everyone, Josie, not just you.” His breath on my temple as he said my name sent heat curling up my neck. “Be good and try not to start a mutiny in the office while I’m gone.”

The comment hit like a bucket of cold water. I didn’t dignify the warning with a response.

He strolled out of the office, and I fought the urge to throw a stapler at his head. He was lucky I’d never been a violent person. As the sound of his footsteps faded down the hall, I closed my eyes and took a steadying breath. In the hours that followed, I was both aware of and grateful for his absence. The aware part was what worried me.

I would never be attracted to a man like Miles Porter. Never. So, he was cute, in a scruffy, refused-to-grow-up sort of way. And smart. And he had that stupid crooked grin that made me want to kiss it right off his face.

My fingers froze on the keyboard. Oh, no, no, no. I did not want to kiss my client. That was beyond ridiculous. Even if he wasn’t my client, Miles was not my type. Nor was he the type my family would ever, in a million years, accept. I imagined bringing him home to meet Mother and the horror that would follow for all involved.

With a huff, I reached for my purse. I'd brought my headphones so I wouldn't have to hear Miles' sexy damn voice making calls all day, sounding so... capable. That's all this was. Capable was my kryptonite when it came to men, and the primary reason I was still single. Men with the trait were nearly impossible to find.

And now I was working with one. One I didn't even like.

After slipping in my earbuds, I opened a random pop playlist and turned up the volume to drown out such ridiculous thoughts. The tactic worked. Mostly.



I saw Miles one time a day for the rest of the week, and any questions I had I saved for our brief check-ins whenever I could. When necessary, I sent questions through text, and he either sent back a reply within minutes or called to explain in more detail. I wouldn't say I looked forward to these visits and phone calls. I did, but I wouldn't say so out loud.

Kendra had warmed to me a bit. We'd crossed paths twice in the kitchen and once at the copier. I'd gone out of my way to be pleasant, and she'd responded with actual words instead of grunts. Short words that did not encourage further conversation, but I'd garnered a decent exchange when again inquiring about her grandchildren. That was clearly her soft spot.

Sam breezed in and out, and I only knew she was there when I'd find various art projects drying in the large open space at the top of the stairs. One day it had been a beautifully decorated apple tree. Another day it had been a life-sized ballerina. Friday morning I arrived to a six-foot-long banner that read Jonah's Bar Mitzvah across an azure blue background.

On Friday afternoon I met another member of the team. As I couldn't seem to meet anyone in this company without embarrassing myself in the process, our first encounter went much like the ones I'd had with Sam and Kendra. Thanks to

Adele wailing beautifully through my earbuds, I didn't notice a new person had entered the office until a finger tapped me on the shoulder.

"Holy shit," I exclaimed.

Leaping to my feet, I discovered a creature best described as wood nymph meets Beyoncé impersonator standing behind my chair. She had two large puffs on her head, kelly-green eyeglasses on the tip of her nose, and was stunning in an outfit I'd only ever seen on people far cooler than I am.

Heart racing, I pulled the buds from my ears and said the first thing that came to mind. "Who are you?" Not a shining moment for sure, but I quickly regrouped. "I mean, hello. I didn't hear you come in."

She laughed, a cackle that went up an octave at the end and made me want to both step back and laugh with her at the same time. "You're too cute. I'm Naima Rosewood. I'm in charge of social media around here, and Sam said I should come up and meet you."

"Oh." I slowly extended a hand. "I'm Josie Danvers."

Naima's hand was soft and firm. "Nice to meet you. How's it going stuck up here all by yourself? Sam said you don't venture out much."

Joke or not, I took Miles' warning to heart and limited my interactions with his staff as much as possible.

"I'm keeping my head down and getting the work done. I don't want to bother the rest of you or get in the way." Or land in any more wet paint.

"There aren't enough of us around here for you to get in the way." She stepped back and assessed me from head to toe. "I'm loving the look. Soft with a nice edge."

Looking down, I mumbled, "The look?" The black wide-leg trousers and red blouse had both been in my closet for years. I'd added a long gold chain Becca had given me last Christmas and simple black heels since the pants were too long otherwise. None of it said edge to me, but who was I to argue with an expert? "Um... thanks."

“No problem. I’ve gotta scoot so I can grab pics of tonight’s party before the guests arrive, but we should do lunch sometime.”

Uncertain how to respond, I nodded. “Sure, I’d like that.”

“Cool.” With a smile that could light up a city block, she gave me a wink. “See ya, Josie. Don’t work too hard.”

“I won’t,” I said lamely as she disappeared down the hall.

For several more seconds I remained standing, staring at the empty doorway, trying to process the last two minutes. Before I could return to my chair, Naima came charging back into the office. “I forgot. You’re coming to the cookout on Sunday, right?”

“I don’t know about a cookout.”

“Miles should have told you. I swear,” she said with a wave of her hand, “that man is clueless sometimes. We’re all meeting here at noon on Sunday. Party on the roof.”

Confused, I repeated, “The roof?”

“Yeah. That’s where we have our own parties.” Bright-blue fingernails catching the light, she counted off on her fingers. “We’ll have water, tea, lemonade, and pop, but if you want something else, bring it with you. The food is all taken care of.”

Not wanting to step on any toes, I said, “Are you sure I should be there? I’m not really an employee of the company.”

She pushed the glasses up her nose. “Of course, you should. You’re working here one way or another, so you’re included. See you at noon, okay?”

Not wanting to disappoint the force of nature staring me down, I nodded. “Noon Sunday. I’ll be here.”

“Beautiful. I’m off for real this time. See ya Sunday.”

She was gone again and I returned to my seat with a thud, instantly searching for ways to back out of this gathering. I could not show, and then give an excuse on Monday. Though that would be rude if Naima let the others know I was coming.

She was sure to tell Miles, and he would assume I skipped out to avoid him. More annoyingly, he'd be right.

That settled it. I had to go.

Chapter Ten



BY FRIDAY EVENING, ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS CRACK OPEN A bottle of red, curl up on the couch, and catch up on the latest Korean drama Becca had sucked me into. We'd been watching it together, but now that she was at Jacob's for a while, our evening viewing parties had been canceled and I'd missed two episodes so far. Sadly, there would be no streaming tonight. Instead, I had been beckoned by Dad to the club for a dinner to celebrate my new endeavor.

Dad spent every Friday night at the club, sometimes with Mom, more often with his cronies, and occasionally with me or Franny. He liked to have solo dinners to catch up on our lives. The irony was that Dad rarely asked about anything beyond what we did for a living. Though Franny no longer worked in marketing, she stayed busy with multiple volunteer organizations, which gave her plenty to report. Dad especially beamed when she was in charge of whatever effort was underway at the moment.

Tonight was my night, and I planned to cut out as soon as dinner was over. Dad always stuck around to have a cigar with his buddies, a habit that Mother strictly prohibited in the house.

"How are you, darling?" he asked when I reached the table and dropped a peck on his cheek.

"I'm good, Dad. How are you?"

"Oh, can't complain. Do you want a drink?"

I noticed his glass was already half-empty. He did love his whiskey. The only thing he loved more was negotiating a good deal. At fifty-seven, Dad still possessed the energy of a man half his age, a healthy head of hair, and the confidence of someone who'd never experienced real adversity. He was a hard worker, maybe to a fault, but he was also a middle-aged poster child for generational wealthy.

I'd watched more than one classmate portray a younger version of Dad during my early school days, and some innate awareness told me I never wanted to be one of them. Did I graduate college debt free thanks to my parents? Yes. Was I going to ride my family name and net worth to cruise effortlessly through life? Absolutely not.

Stifling a yawn, I feared one glass might put me under the table. "I'm going to stick with water for now, thanks."

"You heard her, Bobby," Dad said to the waiter hovering nearby. "Bring a wine list, too, in case she changes her mind."

That wasn't going to happen. "How is Mom?" I asked. Franny and I both knew that as soon as Dad got home from dinner with us, Mother's first question was always if we'd asked about her. If she so much as broke a nail, we knew within minutes since she insisted that the three of us have our own little group chat.

I loved my mother. Really, I did. But I still found her exhausting most of the time. She always meant well. Some mothers made no effort at all to stay in their children's lives, so we were lucky. I'd feel luckier if someone stole her phone now and then, but what could you do?

"She's obsessed," he replied. "All she talks about is the grandchild. The grandchild this and the grandchild that. I don't know how your sister puts up with her."

Franny had vented to me in private texts twice in the last three days, so I assume that's how she was coping. I didn't share this assumption with Dad.

"There's nothing wrong with being excited for your first grandchild," I reminded him. "Aren't you excited?"

“Of course!” Bobby set down my glass of water and added a wine list next to it. “Are you ready to order, sir?”

“I’ll have the usual. Do you know what you want, honey?” he asked me.

Dad’s usual was a New York strip rare enough that I feared that one of them was going to moo upon arrival someday. On the side he had a loaded baked potato and a glazed carrot. Not carrots. A single glazed carrot. I’d seen the bill for this side dish alone only once and wondered how they got away with such criminal activity.

“I’ll have the Maryland crabcakes, please.” Anything heavier would have made me even more sleepy.

“Another old-fashioned while you’re at it, son,” Dad said. “Are you sure you don’t want something else to drink?”

“I’m sure, thank you.”

“Your orders will be out shortly,” the waiter replied before leaving us once again.

“So,” Dad said, “how is the business going?”

After only a week, I didn’t know what he expected to hear. “I started with my first client on Monday, and so far things are going well.”

“Who are you working with? If you’d told me, I could have gotten you some good leads. Warren might need a bookkeeper over at his law firm. I bet we can get you a few more here tonight.”

I was not mentally prepared to network with Dad’s club crowd. Yes, they were men of power and probably a good source of business connections, but navigating that situation would take more energy than I currently possessed.

“This first client is taking all of my attention right now, but thank you for the offer.”

His smile widened. “It must be a big firm. Who is it?”

I wasn’t ashamed of working for Miles. He ran a perfectly respectable, if small company. But painted ballerinas and bar

mitzvah signs did not say success to someone who'd spent his life in the one percent.

"I'm afraid I can't say. You know how it is. Confidentiality clauses are very strict." My contract didn't include a confidentiality clause, but he didn't need to know that.

"Well," he said, spreading his napkin across his lap. "I'm proud of you no matter who it is."

If that was true, I wouldn't have had to lie.

"Now it's your turn," I said, changing the subject. "What's the latest acquisition in the works? I want to hear all about it."

Another lie, but nothing got Dad off a topic faster than letting him wax poetic about his own business dealings. By the time Bobby cleared our dessert plates, I knew the details of a merger that, if the FTC had any sense, would never go through, and Dad had downed three more old-fashioned. When it was time to go, I helped him to the smoking room, concerned about how he would get home.

"Why don't you skip cigars tonight, Dad? I'll drive you home."

"Nonsense," he argued, hitting me square in the face with whiskey-heavy breath. "The boys are waiting for me."

As we crossed through the main foyer, I spotted Chester Mankowski. He'd been the club doorman for as long as I could remember. No sooner did I catch his eye than he was taking up the slack on Dad's other side.

"Good evening, Mr. Danvers," Chester said, as if it was perfectly normal to drag a highly intoxicated man across hundred-and-twenty-year-old marble tiles. Then again, for Chester it probably was. "Did you have a good dinner tonight?"

"Yes, I did," Dad replied with a heavy slur.

Behind Dad's head, Chester mouthed, "I'll take care of him."

Hesitant, I tried again. "Are you sure you won't let me take you home? You could surprise Mom by getting home early."

“I’m not leaving without having my cigar first.”

Resigned, I let Chester take on all his weight, and I stepped away. “All right then, Dad. Thanks for dinner. I’ll call you next week, okay?”

A blind wave was his only response as the doorman assisted him into the heavily paneled room and closed the door behind them, cutting off the ever-present cloud of smoke before it could infiltrate the main foyer.

I considered calling Mom to come and get him, but I also trusted Chester not to let him drive. Maybe this way he would sober up a bit before Mom had to deal with him.

Looking forward to my one day off before I had to be anywhere, I pulled the valet tab from my purse and stepped outside.

“Do you have your ticket, Ms. Danvers?”

“Here you go, Louise,” I said, handing it over.

As I waited for my car, I ran through all that had happened in recent weeks. Franny’s announcement. My various encounters at Hullabaloo. Becca hurting her ankle, and this dinner with Dad. Then I had the cookout coming in a couple of days, and there was the added pressure of lining up additional clients. I hadn’t lied when I said this first one was taking all my time, but it was still temporary. I would need more work lined up to keep things rolling.

In that moment, though, I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want to be Josie the business owner, or Josie the high-achieving daughter, or even Josie the dependable cat-sitting friend. I wanted to breathe and be alone. To forget everything for a night. Maybe I would follow Dad’s lead and stop for some wine on the way home. Having one glass wasn’t the same as downing multiple old-fashioned, but it would ease a week of stress and help me sleep.

Sleep would be nice.



My cell phone ringer jerked me out of a blissful dream that involved sun, sand, and a glass of ice-cold sangria. Whoever it was better have a damn good reason for calling in the middle of the night. I lifted one side of my eye mask to answer and saw Franny's name on the screen.

"Shit." Throwing off the mask and sitting up, I said, "What's wrong?"

"Have you seen Dad?" she asked.

Caught between sleep and panic, I ran a hand through my hair. "I had dinner with him at the club. Last I saw him, he was headed into the smoking room with Chester."

"Was he drinking?"

Seemed like a redundant question. "He had some old-fashioned during dinner, but I figured Chester would get some coffee into him and sober him up." Not wanting to sound like a terrible daughter, I added, "I tried to convince him to let me drive him home, but he wouldn't leave."

"Where is he?" I heard Mother say in the background.

"Are you with Mom?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"It's two a.m. and he still isn't home," Franny answered. "The club closed two hours ago so we can't call there."

I turned and set my feet on the floor. "Have you called the police?"

Dropping her voice, my sister said, "I already suggested that and Mom says no."

What the hell? "What do you mean no? He could be hurt somewhere."

"Tate is out driving the route between the club and here," she said with way more calm than the situation demanded. "I just wanted to see if maybe he was with you."

Dad hadn't set foot in my apartment in years. Visits were conducted at their house or the club. I had no idea where this unwritten rule had come from. It was simply... a rule.

“No,” I said, “he isn’t.” Sliding off the bed, I crossed to my dresser. “I’ll go drive around, too. I know the area better than Tate does so if he took a different way, I’m more likely to find him.”

A beep echoed down the line and Franny said, “It’s Tate. Hold on.”

Before I could reply she was gone, leaving me in the dark—literally and figuratively—waiting to see if Dad was okay. Seconds passed with my heart beating in my ears. Something furry touched my calf and I screamed like the teenage victim in a slasher movie.

“Goddammit, Milo. You scared the shit out of me.” The cat didn’t respond and was likely back under my bed, more freaked out than I was.

“Josie?” said my sister.

“I’m here.”

“We’ve got him. Tate found his Mercedes up on a curb on Murray Avenue.”

“That’s the opposite direction from the house. Why was he over there?” The silence from the other end told me what a stupid question that was. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. Tate says he was sleeping. They’re on their way, and then I’ll go back with Tate and get the car. Sorry I woke you.”

Sorry she woke me? “Of course you would wake me for something like this. How is Mom? Is she okay?”

“She was scared, but she’s better now. I’ve got to go. I think Tate is back. Talk to you later.”

The line went dead and I remained there, standing in the dark in front of my dresser, hair half over my face, phone to my ear, and adrenaline pumping through my body. I’d gone from sound asleep to wide awake in a matter of seconds, and my brain felt as if it had been hit with a power surge.

“Holy hell,” I mumbled, lowering the phone and dropping onto the foot of my bed. Was I supposed to go back to sleep

after that? Especially knowing I was the one who left him. I knew he'd had too much, but I thought Chester would take care of him. Order him a car or call Mom if necessary. The doorman had known my family for decades. Why would he let a man clearly under the influence get behind the wheel?

But then *I* was his daughter. Why hadn't I insisted on taking him home? Why was I blaming a club employee when I was his family. After crawling up to my pillow, I dropped onto my back and reminded myself that Dad was okay. He was home safe, no one was hurt, and this certainly would never happen again. Mom wouldn't let it, for one thing. If she'd been frightened enough to call Franny over, then he'd really messed up. Dad would be lucky if she let him out of her sight for the next month.

Eyes closed, I tried to relax. My heart rate returned to a more normal rhythm, and I thought I might drift back off, until a fifteen-pound feline leaped onto my stomach, reminding me of two things. One, I desperately had to pee. And two, I'd forgotten to fill his food bowl before passing out.

Swinging my feet back to the floor, I checked the time—2:28. Awesome. Making my way toward the bathroom, I was grateful that at least I had the next day off.

Chapter Eleven



SATURDAY WAS UNEVENTFUL, THANK GOODNESS. BECCA PAID Milo a visit while picking up more clothes from her apartment. Jacob had carried her up the stairs, which was a very Jacob thing to do. The two were sickeningly perfect for each other, which Lindsey never let the rest of us forget. We'd all set Becca up on blind dates, and Jacob had been Lindsey's choice. She took great pride in that victory.

I called to check on Dad, and Mother said he was fine. She seemed to have forgotten the gravity of the situation. I pointed out that he could have really hurt himself or someone else, to which she called me silly and overdramatic.

She seemed a bit under-dramatic—if that was even a word—but once Mom shuts down a topic, it's done. The call didn't last much longer, and I spent the rest of the day on the couch binge-watching a random drama from my watch list, which I fell asleep in the middle of. In the evening, I debated what to wear to the Hullabaloo cookout. Cookout meant casual, and I felt pretty good with my final selection.

"There are you," called Naima as I stepped up onto the rooftop deck. It had taken an extra minute to figure out how to get up there, since I hadn't thought to ask on Friday. "Look at you stylin'."

If I was honest, *this* was the reason I'd put so much thought into my outfit. I wanted Naima's approval. The black cigarette pants that had been a hand-me-down from Franny when she'd grown out of them earlier in the year fit me like a glove and accentuated my long legs. I added the rust-toned

blazer with a drape wing collar for a casual chic touch, and the plain white tee plus black ankle boots added a bit of edge. Or so I hoped.

“You like it?” I asked, acting as if I hadn’t rejected seven other outfits before this one.

“Like it? I love it.” Mission accomplished. Naima pointed at a table to my left. “The snacks are out, so feel free to get yourself a little amuse-bouche to get started. Miles has the burgers and dogs on the grill, and we’ll add them to the table when they’re ready. Shouldn’t be long. Basic drinks are in the coolers at the end of the table, or if you want something harder, we’ve got several options downstairs in the kitchen. I’m headed that way. Do you want anything?”

No matter how casual a gathering, this was still a work event in my mind, and I never drank at work events. “Water is good, thanks.”

“Help yourself then,” she replied. “I’ll be back.”

As Naima disappeared down the stairs, I felt more than a little out of place. Hopefully, the others knew I was coming. I had no illusions Kendra would be happy to see me, but I didn’t want anyone to think I was crashing the party.

“What are you wearing?” Miles asked as I pulled a dripping bottle of water from a red Igloo cooler.

“Excuse me?”

“This is a cookout,” he said, as if I didn’t already know that. “You look like you’re dressed to go clubbing.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Do people still say *clubbing* these days?”

Miles was not deterred. “How hard is it to dress like a normal person?”

“How hard is it to wear a shirt that doesn’t have extra holes in it?” I asked. His collarbone was clearly visible through two holes along the right shoulder of his Foo Fighters T-shirt. The man either attended every concert that passed

through town, or he shopped at a secondhand clothing store with inventory exclusively from former roadies.

As if we weren't in the middle of an argument, he said, "How do you like your burgers?"

"I..." The mental left turn took me by surprise. "Medium," I finally managed.

"Do you want a hot dog, too?"

"Yes, please."

"All right then."

With that he walked away and I stared after him, wondering why he always threw me off balance like that. He'd started our little squabble, which he almost always did, and then right when I was winning, he shifted gears and pulled the rug out from under me. Whoever taught this man how to fight was either a masochist or a genius.



Over the next hour, I met Sam's girlfriend Lyla, who was charming and eclectic and also an artist, as well as Kendra's husband Howard, who turned out to be much friendlier than his wife. I'd barely gotten a word in before he'd told me how they met, that they'd be married twenty-five years come Christmas, and how much they enjoyed swing dancing until Kendra had hurt her hip the previous year.

This explained her struggle going down the stairs.

Naima introduced me to Evan Greer, whom Miles had mentioned earlier in the week.

"Evan is our carpenter," Naima said, beaming with pride. "He can build absolutely anything. It's his superpower."

The handsome young man lowered his chin. "You're embarrassing me, Nay."

"I'm telling the truth," she defended. "Am I wrong?"

He pulled her against his side and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "I'm a pretty good carpenter," Evan said to me. "We'll leave it at that."

I hadn't realized they were a couple until that moment. "Did you two know each other before working here?" I asked.

"No, ma'am," said Naima. "Evan's been with Miles from day one, and then I came on about nine months ago." Grinning up at Evan, she added, "I fell for him in less than a week. I mean, look at this bone structure." She cupped his chin and moved his head from side to side. "When you find a man this fine *and* smart *and* talented? Girl, I had to scoop him up."

"Who scooped who?" Evan said, taking her hand off his chin and kissing the back of it.

I almost asked if he had a brother.

Naima laughed into his chest. "Stop," she drawled out. "You can't be telling people I was too shy to talk to you. I have a rep to protect."

"No one would blame you," I said, sharing an understanding smile. "I'm glad you found each other. You're adorable together."

"It's all thanks to Miles," Evan said.

At which point the man in question joined us. "What did I do?"

"First," Evan said, "you hired the best social media manager in the city, who also happens to be the prettiest girl I ever met."

"Then you called this hunky carpenter into the office," Naima continued, "even though he had no reason to be here, because you thought we might like each other."

"*You* played matchmaker?" I asked, unable to picture Miles in the role.

He seemed like a live-and-let-live kind of a guy, while matchmaking required a certain level of meddling. I knew because I'd played the role myself the one time for Becca.

She'd left the date with a mild concussion, and I decided matchmaking was not for me.

"Don't let him fool you," Naima said. "Miles is a hopeless romantic." Taking Evan's hand, she led him away while sending a wink in my direction.

She couldn't possibly think...

"How was your burger?" Miles asked.

"It was good," I replied. "How was yours?"

"Good."

At this rate, we'd be talking about the weather next.

"Did you really set them up?" I asked, nodding toward the couple making googly eyes at each other by the food table.

Miles gave a one-shoulder shrug. "All I did was put them in the same room. They didn't need much help from there."

"Still a nice thing to do."

Taking a seat on the bench behind him, he said, "Evan went through a bad breakup six months before Naima joined the company. I thought she could probably bring him out of it, even if they just became friends."

I sat down next to him. "I've heard worse reasons to play cupid." Leaning back on my hands, I straightened my legs and crossed my ankles, my eyes locked on the city skyline. "This view is incredible. How did you get lucky enough to land a unit in this building?"

"You assume I can't afford it?" he said, tensing beside me. Considering how snarky I'd been since we met, I couldn't blame him for being defensive.

"That's not what I meant. Properties along Grandview get snapped up in seconds, if they ever come available at all. Did you have an inside connection or something?"

"Or something," he replied.

When he didn't elaborate, I took the hint and changed the subject.

“How often do you have these cookouts?”

“Once a month if we can. If we’re booked every Sunday, then we skip until the next month.”

His eyes were on the cup in his hand, and from beside him I could see how long his lashes were as they nearly brushed his cheeks. In truth, Miles had pretty eyes. At least when they weren’t scowling at me. Not that I didn’t do my share of scowling back.

“So,” I said, leaning forward to match his posture, “maybe we should call a truce.”

He turned my way. “I didn’t realize we were at war.”

I gave him a don’t-play-dumb look. “You’ve done me a real favor by giving me a chance with this job. Not many people would do that. I realize it’s probably hard to tell, but I *am* grateful.”

Green eyes narrowed as he examined my face for several seconds. “You almost got an apology in there.”

A *screw you* danced on the tip of my tongue, but I bit it back. “I’m sorry for my attitude this past week.”

The grin I’d nearly forgotten about curled his lips. “Apology accepted.”

Waiting for the same in return, I leaned forward, brows arched. Miles went back to staring at his cup.

“Hello?” I said.

Without meeting my gaze, he nodded. “I’m sorry for giving you a hard time about your clothes.”

Smothering my own satisfied smile, I said, “Apology accepted.”

Miles chuckled and a weight lifted off my shoulders that I hadn’t even known I was carrying. If getting fired from Goldberg & Proctor had taught me anything, it was that performance alone wasn’t enough to ensure success. Relationships mattered. Not that buddying up to Drummond might have saved me from being let go, but I may have

enjoyed my six years in that job more had I focused on the people around me as much as I had the numbers in my reports.

The team at Hullabaloo clearly liked each other. They went so far as to share a meal together once a month. Even before the buyout, the powers that be at Crawford Investments had thrown one annual party at the end of each year, and on rare occasions had ordered pizza when everyone was working late at tax time. The holiday party had come with an unspoken tension regarding what to wear and where we would be seated. The closer to the executive section you found your nameplate, the better chance you had of advancement the following year.

They'd turned a night of celebration into a competition brimming with jealousy and disappointment for many.

And it hadn't missed my notice that anytime Miles talked about the company, he used the word *we* instead of *I*. He saw everyone on the payroll as an equal. His success was their success and vice versa. I'd been mired in the corporate world for so long that I never even considered the possibility that a work place could be any different. That it could be kind and relaxed and collaborative.

"Are we good then?" asked Miles, drawing my attention back to the present.

He even cared if an abrasive contract worker who would be gone in a few weeks was good. How was I supposed to continue disliking this man?

"We're good," I replied.

"Hey, Miles," Naima called from across the roof. When he looked her way, she said, "Josie hasn't gotten the full tour yet. Why don't you show her around?"

Well aware of what she was doing, I started to protest, but Miles rose to his feet and turned my way. "You game?"

With the entire party watching, I didn't really have a choice. Standing, I tugged down my pant legs and motioned for him to go first. "Lead the way."



“You see what she’s doing, right?” I said as we reached the bottom of the stairs that led to the roof.

Miles kept walking. “Naima’s mission in life is to get me a date. I find it’s easier to go along, especially when the person she’s trying to set me up with doesn’t want to go out with me any more than I want to go out with them.”

Both a relief and insulting at the same time.

“A harsh way to put it,” I mumbled.

He glanced back over his shoulder. “What was harsh?”

“That you don’t want to go out with me.”

Without warning, he stopped and spun around. “You don’t want to go out with me either.”

The man needed to warn a girl before stopping so abruptly. I barely managed to put on the brakes in time to prevent breaking his nose with my forehead.

“Yes, but I didn’t say it out loud like that.”

“You say it every time you roll your eyes when you think I’m not looking.”

“I... You see that?” Now I was going to have to apologize again. Damn it.

“Josie, we’re different people. There’s nothing wrong with acknowledging that.”

I didn’t like the way he said *different people*. Like he was Glenda the Good Witch and I was her bitchy sister from the west.

“We aren’t *that* different. We’re both running our own companies.”

“That’s what we do, not who we are.”

He had an answer for everything. “We’re also both in our thirties and... and...”

“Are you trying to say that you want to go out with me?” he interrupted.

“Of course not.”

“Then what are we arguing about?”

We were arguing because he’d hurt my feelings by telling the truth about not wanting to go out with me. I didn’t even know *why* that would hurt my feelings, so I sure as hell couldn’t explain it to him.

“Forget it. Maybe this isn’t a good time for a tour.” I didn’t want to walk around the office acting like I was fine, and I wasn’t going up to the roof and having to explain why we were back so soon. “It’s been a rough weekend. I need to go home.”

“Josie, I—”

“It’s fine, Miles. We’re fine.” I slid around him. “Enjoy the rest of your cookout, and thanks for letting me come.”

“Anytime,” he said, confusion in his voice.

Halfway home I felt like a fool for making such a scene. Why had I reacted that way? He’d made an off the cuff statement that was absolutely true—for both of us—and I’d acted as if he’d insulted my family, my shoes, and my taste in music. Maybe I’d gone so long without a date that my ego had grown more fragile than I realized. That had to be it.

Because I did not care that Miles Porter did not want to date me. Not one bit.

Chapter Twelve



“HE SAID OUTRIGHT THAT HE DOESN’T WANT TO GO OUT WITH you?” Megan asked, lounging on the couch with my feline roommate purring away on her stomach. “In those exact words?”

Despite my resolution on the way home not to think about Miles and his brutal honesty, I couldn’t help but vent a bit when Megan stopped by to drop off cat food. I’d told Becca that I could get it, but she said I was doing enough keeping him and sent Megan on the errand.

The moment the food hit the empty bowl, the cat came running for his supper.

“Technically,” I said, “he told me that he doesn’t want to go out with me any more than *I* want to go out with *him*.”

Megan sat up. “But that’s true, right? I mean, you *don’t* want to go out with him.”

“Right.”

“Then he’s saying that you’re on the same page.”

“Well... yes.”

“But you’re mad?” she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Returning to the stir-fry on the stove, I waved off the topic with my spatula. “You had to hear *how* he said it to understand.” Time to change the subject. “How is Becca?”

“Good, but going stir-crazy. She finally arranged for one of those scooter things you rest your knee on while you walk so she can get rid of the crutches.” Megan joined me in the kitchen. “You should see the bruises under her arms.”

“If she has bruises, then she isn’t using them right.”

“Cut her some slack. She’s never been in crutches before.” She bit into a piece of raw green pepper. “So other than this guy pushing your buttons, how was the first week being your own boss?”

“I never said he pushes my buttons,” I snapped.

“Josie, what is up with you? Every mention of this guy sets you off. Is there something you aren’t saying?”

“He annoys me, that’s all.” Megan leaned her hip on the counter and watched me in silence. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I said, “What?”

She tilted her head to the side, trying to see my face, as I kept my attention on the stir-fry. “You like him.”

I stirred the veggies harder than necessary and sent a snap pea flying out of the pan. “I do not.”

“You could have fooled me. I haven’t seen you this worked up over a man since senior year when that rugby player in your finance class kept trying to cheat off you.”

“He was obnoxious,” I reminded her.

“And you dated him for three months after complaining about him for weeks.”

This was the problem with keeping friends around who had long memories.

“This isn’t the same thing. I’m not a lust-driven college student, and Miles is no rugby player.” I pulled the stir-fry off the stove and turned off the burner. “I don’t know why he bothers me so much. He just does.”

Megan pulled two plates from the cabinet. “Maybe you should figure it out. You need a good recommendation if you

want to bring in more business, so you should probably be nice to him.”

“I *try* to be nice to him, but then he opens his mouth and says something that...”

“Pushes your buttons?” she said dryly.

“Yes,” I conceded. “I’d swear he’s doing it on purpose.”

As I dumped a helping of veggies onto Megan’s plate, she said, “Maybe he is.”

“Maybe he is what?” I shifted to pour the rest of the veggies onto my plate.

“Doing it on purpose. Maybe he enjoys setting you off.”

Now we’d moved backwards from college to elementary school. “Why would he do that? And don’t say because he likes me. This isn’t fourth grade and that hair tugging thing was never acceptable.” Setting the frying pan in the sink, I mumbled, “I hope they aren’t letting boys get away with that anymore.”

“We aren’t,” Megan said. “At least not at the library. But back to your Miles person. What kind of stuff are we talking about? Teasing. Flirting? Is he being unprofessional?”

Miles wasn’t any of those things. And he definitely wasn’t *my* Miles.

“He’s totally professional, if you don’t count how he dresses. There’s no need to psychoanalyze this. He and I have different ways of seeing the world. End of story.”

Carrying her plate to the couch, she said, “How does he dress?”

I followed with my own plate. “Like he’s a roadie for a rock-n-roll reunion tour.”

Her nose scrunched up. “That’s how he dresses for work? To, like, visit with clients and stuff?”

“Yep.” Tired of talking about Miles and feeling a bit guilty about making him sound so bad, I said, “Let’s change the

subject. What's up with you and Ryan? You haven't mentioned him lately."

The couple had gotten together the year before after they'd both joined the same coed softball team. What Megan hadn't known at the time was that Ryan was also in a consultant position tasked with recommending possible program changes at her library. Luckily, they'd figured out that Megan's boss had altered her report on the programs in order to get them cut. With Ryan's help, she'd alerted the powers that be, and the jerky boss got his comeuppance.

"We're fine," she said, her lips curved down in a frown. "He's really busy right now. The current consultant project is expansive, and he's having to work a lot of late nights. I've only seen him once in the last ten days, and he's missed three games since the season started." Appetite seemingly gone, she poked at the stir-fry with her fork. "The project ends soon, so I'm trying to be patient until it's over."

I hadn't meant to make her sad. "Sorry you aren't getting to see him."

She shrugged. "We do video calls, but it isn't the same, you know? I miss the way he smells and how he kisses the top of my head." Snapping out of her funk, she loaded up her fork. "I shouldn't be whining. He's amazing and I'm lucky to have him. Even if only on video for now."

Wanting to make her smile, I asked, "What's the video equivalent of sexting?"

A blush shot up her cheeks. "*Josie.*"

"What? I'm just curious."

Eyes on her food, she said, "I don't know what it's called, but it works pretty well in a pinch."

We both burst out laughing, and I nearly choked on a baby corn. Megan was still blushing when I caught my breath, but she also had a glimmer in her eye. "Don't tell the others I said that."

"Of course not," I said, but we both knew I was lying.



I didn't see Miles Monday or Tuesday, and I'd learned the business well enough not to have many questions. The few invoices I wasn't sure of I set aside for the next time he came in and moved along with the rest. I'd thought it would take at least a week to get through each month of transactions, but they'd done less parties during March and April, which meant fewer documents to reconcile with the software. By Wednesday afternoon, I was farther ahead than expected, meaning this job would likely end sooner than the dates in the contract.

Anxiety brimmed since I had no other clients lined up. I hadn't even found any leads or been in discussion for future contracts. While eating leftover sushi for lunch, I stared out the window of Miles' office, contemplating my future. Did I scramble to line up more work, or did I go for the security and try again for a corporate job?

I liked the quiet of working alone, but I also missed having coworkers to talk to. Kendra, who still mostly ignored me, was always in her office on the other side of the floor, but Sam and Naima were rarely around. If I continued the bookkeeping business, I'd be working at home with no one passing through at all. Maybe I should break down and get my own Milo.

I'd never been a cat person, but the little guy was winning me over. He was quiet, self-sufficient, and purred softly on my lap while I streamed shows in the evenings. At least on the nights he was willing to grace me with his presence.

Closing my eyes, I pictured my apartment with a pretty white Persian prowling about. Mother would have a conniption at the thought of a cat clawing my furniture or walking across the counter, but Milo had done neither of those things. It probably helped that Jacob had lugged his large cat tree up to my place, which including three scratching posts and three elevated levels for his lounging pleasure.

What would I name this future pet of mine? Nothing as obvious as Sugar or Snowball. Maybe I'd go with Chardonnay or Moscato.

Testing it out, I said, "Come here, Moscato."

"Who is Moscato?"

The scream that followed was both unstoppable and humiliating. Leaping from the chair, I spun to find Miles staring as if I'd lost my mind. Which I had, thanks to him.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

He tossed his ever-present backpack onto his desk. "I didn't sneak up. I walked in. Do you expect me to knock on my own office door?"

Why did he always have to be the one in the right?

Knowing I'd already lost whatever argument would ensue, I changed the subject. "What are you doing here?"

Miles took a seat and pulled his computer from the backpack. "I have some paperwork to do and calls to make. I also figured I should check in on you. You haven't called me at all this week."

Did he sound disappointed about that? Did I want him to be?

"I only have a few questions, and I've been setting those invoices aside until you came in."

After tossing the bag onto the floor, he opened the laptop. "I'm in. What do you have?"

Carrying the documents to his desk, I set them next to the computer. "These look more like personal expenses, so I wanted to make sure they need to be entered."

He perused the invoices in silence, and as he scanned through them, his expression darkened. Staring at one in particular, he leaned back in his chair. "These were all paid for with the company card."

"They were," I replied, wondering why he was pointing out the obvious, "but none of them are actual party supplies."

At least they don't match anything I reviewed for March."

Miles' eyes went to the top of the invoice. "This is from late April."

"They all are."

Without another word, he typed something in on the laptop, followed by a couple of clicks before he sat back again. "Damn it."

"What am I missing?" I asked.

"It's what *I* missed that's the problem. Kayla must have been using the card for her own expenses, and I didn't catch it."

Not doing her job was one thing. Spending company money on coffees and, based on at least one receipt, an expensive leather jacket, was another.

"If she was stealing money from you, why wouldn't she throw away or at least hide the receipts?"

He ran a hand over his face. "Kayla wasn't the smartest employee, or, as we've seen, all that thorough. She probably didn't even realize she'd tossed these in the drawer." Dropping the papers onto the desk, he looked up at me. "The bigger question is how did she get the company card?"

My gut dropped. Hoping the obvious wasn't true, I said, "Who all has one?"

Resigned, he leaned his elbows on the desk. "I'm sure you know the answer to that."

Kendra.

"Do you think she gave it to her, or did Kayla take it without her knowing?"

"That's what I have to find out." Rising from his chair, he sighed. "I'll be back."

As I watched him walk out of the office looking like a man about to do something he did not want to do, I realized *this* was the reality of running your own business. I had no employees to interrogate, or potentially fire, but someday I

might. If I kept going. Did I want that headache? Did I want the potential disappointment of betrayal and the added responsibility of holding someone's livelihood in my hands?

On the flip side, no one else would ever hold that same power over me. That felt like a reasonable trade-off and was the point Miles had made that day on the incline. I had to choose between taking the power or giving it away.

That one was easy. I would *not* be going back to corporate America anytime soon.

Chapter Thirteen



MILES DIDN'T FILL ME IN ON WHAT KENDRA SAID ABOUT THE company credit card, and I didn't feel as if I had the right to ask. If the positions were reversed, I doubted I'd share the details either. This was an internal matter, and I was an outsider.

I was still curious as hell.

On Thursday, I spent time scanning through the rest of the pile, looking for more personal expenses Kayla might have failed to discard. When I called Miles to report finding two more, he said he'd already reviewed the credit card account, found those two, and a few more. Again, he kept the details to himself, and I didn't pry. Though I did feel as if he'd stolen my thunder a bit.

Who knew all those silly notions of me discovering nefarious deeds would turn out to be right on my very first job? Now I felt like a bookkeeping detective on my way to solving a mystery. Except Miles didn't need me to solve anything.

"Josie," he said, charging into the office as if I'd conjured up his presence, "I hate to ask this, but I need a favor."

My first thought was to say of course I'd testify, assuming he planned to press charges against Kayla for misappropriating company funds. In other words, stealing from him. Luckily, I didn't say as much aloud, saving myself from looking like an idiot when he continued speaking.

“My setup team has three people out sick, and the party starts in two hours. Can you help us out?”

The question was so unexpected, my mind went blank. Help set up a party? With no warning? On a Friday night?

Okay, so I had no plans and would likely spend the evening drinking wine with Milo on my lap, crying through a box of tissues while watching my latest Korean drama, but still.

“I...”

“Never mind,” he said, crossing to his desk. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

He could have at least let me finish. “I didn’t say no.”

Miles scrolled through his phone. “I get it. No worries.”

Standing before the desk, I locked my hands on my hips. “Are you listening to me?”

“Really, Josie, it’s fine.”

“Miles,” I said. He continued scrolling. “Miles!” I yelled to get his attention. He finally looked up, and I enunciated each word clearly. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help.”

His expression went blank. “You hesitated.”

“You surprised me,” I explained. “Hesitating doesn’t mean no.”

“Yes, it does.”

We were really going to argue about this? “Do you want my help or not?”

“Not if you’re busy.”

Ignoring the blow to my pride, I sighed. “I’m not busy.”

“You sure?”

Like I’d forget having a hot date on a Friday night. “What do you need me to do?”

He surveyed my appearance. “First, you’ll need to change.”

Not this again. “Miles, I’m not even wearing heels. I’m sure I can spread out tablecloths and hang streamers in my current outfit.”

The phone hit the desk and he crossed his arms. “Is that still all you think we do?”

Who taught this man how to ask for help? “Look, if you want my help, I’m willing to lend a hand. If you’d rather find someone else willing to adhere to your frat house dress code, then that’s your choice. Let me know what you decide.”

With that, I returned to my table and pretended he wasn’t there. I could almost hear his mind working behind me, which made ignoring him all the more difficult. At this point, I *wanted* to help. I wanted to prove that dress slacks and a silk blouse would in no way hinder my ability to do whatever the job required. He hadn’t asked me to help dig a ditch, after all.

After a full twenty seconds, he said, “If you’re going to help, we need to go now.”

Right. Because I was the one holding us up. Closing the laptop, I gathered my purse, my empty container from lunch, and rose to my feet. “Ready when you are.”

Miles looked around as if he’d lost something. Springing from the chair, he pulled a flannel shirt off the slender coatrack in the back corner.

“Throw this on.”

“Miles, I—”

“You’ll thank me later. Just wear it.”

With a roll of my eyes, I set my things back on the table and did as asked. The red and black material was soft, loose, and smelled like the man who owned it. Like sand and sea and the combination of both floating on a warm summer breeze. I loved his scent.

Resisting the urge to take a giant, telling sniff, I said, “Are you happy now?”

Dripping sarcasm, he nodded. “Euphoric. Now let’s go.”



“You were right.”

Miles popped the top on a can of soda. “Excuse me?” he said dramatically. “Can you repeat that? I’m not sure I heard you correctly.”

Such a smart-ass.

“You heard me. Why didn’t you tell me set up included carpentry, heavy lifting, and testing my balance on a ladder?”

He handed me the open can and reached back into the cooler for another. We’d worked for more than ninety minutes with a skeleton crew—including Sam, her girlfriend Lyla, Evan, and two members of the regular setup team—without a break. Thankfully, the DJ didn’t need our help once we had his table up and his area decorated, so we were enjoying the short lull before the guests started arriving in fifteen minutes.

“I tried to warn you,” he said.

“No, you didn’t. You told me to change clothes, but you gave no specifics why that might be necessary.”

Pausing to take a long drink, he sighed and held the cold can against his forehead. “If you didn’t argue with everything I say, we might have gotten around to specifics.”

“You—” I snapped my mouth shut to keep from proving his point. “At least I know for the next time.”

“Next time?” he repeated. “You planning to join the setup team?”

How did this man get me so discombobulated? “I didn’t say that.”

Miles shook his head and that irksome grin showed up. “You clearly said *next time*. I heard the words loud and clear.”

“Don’t look so smug. I mean if you desperately need my help again, I’ll know what to expect.”

“When did I say I was desperate?”

“Would you have asked me otherwise?”

This time he went silent, and I added a notch to my side of the scoreboard.

“You two are really cute,” Lyla said as she pulled a pop from the cooler. “It’s like watching one of those old movies from the fifties where the two leads bicker and insult each other while refusing to admit that they’re in love.”

“We are not in love,” Miles and I said at the same time.

“Right.” Lyla laughed. “My mistake.”

“She’s seeing things,” Miles mumbled as Lyla walked away.

“Definitely,” I grumbled.

Finally, we’d found something to agree on.

“Why do you argue with me so much?” he asked.

“I do *not* argue with you.” He held my gaze, his brows arched. “I don’t know,” I said. “You annoy me.”

Probably not the best thing to tell a client who would soon be deciding whether or not to give me a positive review.

To my surprise, Miles chuckled. “You’re no walk in the park either.”

“Excuse me? I’m an extremely nice person.” He watched me, his lips pinched tight, and even I couldn’t keep a straight face. “Oh, hell,” I said as we both burst out laughing.

“You’re real,” he said, catching his breath. “I like that part.”

Before I could respond, a little boy bounded through the back door of the VFW hall and ran toward us. He couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old, his hair long enough to pull into a ponytail, and from the smile on his face I could see he was missing two front teeth.

“Hey, there, Mr. Porter.”

“Hey, Bradley. Happy birthday.”

“Thank you. Daddy said I should come out and say thank you for making me such a great party.”

Miles shook his head. “I put together some fun decorations. You’re the one who’ll make it great.”

Some fun decorations? There had to be a thousand red and black balloons wound together to make that twenty-foot garland, which I’d learned how to make in record time an hour before. There was also a full-size race car built out of plywood by Evan and Miles and painted by Samantha. According to Evan, they’d been working on this party for six weeks, which explained the rubber floor tiles painted to look like asphalt, and the pit box currently holding the coolest race car-themed cake I’d ever seen.

“Even so,” the little boy said, “thanks for all your help.”

“You’re welcome.” Leaning forward, Miles rested his elbows on his knees. “When your friends get here, make sure you show them how loud your car can get, okay?”

The car got loud?

“You betcha,” Bradley said, running back to the building. “That’s the first thing I’ll do.”

As the door slammed and the boy disappeared inside, I said, “What car are you talking about?”

“The one inside.”

“The wooden one?”

“Yeah.”

I was still missing something. “That car doesn’t have an engine.”

Miles leaned back in his chair. “We put a speaker box up under the hood that’s attached to the steering wheel. When Bradley presses a button on the back of the wheel, it triggers the engine sounds that’ll come from the speaker. The wheel itself is basically a giant volume knob so the more he turns it, the louder the engine gets.”

“That’s genius,” I said. “Who came up with that?”

With a casual smile, he said, “I did.”

The man was full of surprises. “Is this the first time you’ve done something like that?”

Green eyes cut to the sky. “We made an elephant that roared when a kid on the back pulled the head up. That one was Evan’s idea.” A bit more contemplation. “Then there was the fire truck with a siren activated by the weight of the kids inside. Took at least four kids to set it off.”

No wonder he’d been so offended by my inflatable ball pit comment. What he was doing was so far beyond that.

“You’re creating memories that’ll last forever, and probably making these youngsters the coolest kids in school.”

“That’s our mission,” he said. “Kids deserve to feel special. Especially when they have something to celebrate.”

The temptation to analyze that statement was almost overwhelming, but doing so, at least out loud, would cross a line. Maybe it was as simple as wanting kids to feel special, but something told me Miles Porter didn’t have a lot of parties of his own growing up. We all had a childhood to get over, for one reason or another. Whatever his motives, Hullabaloo was doing something extraordinary for the children they served.

“I might have to change my opinion about you,” I teased. “You’re like a low-key superhero.”

Crooked grin curling his lips, he stood and held out a hand. “Ms. Danvers, are we starting to get along?”

I set my hand in his. “It seems that way.”

Miles tugged me to my feet, bringing us nearly nose to nose. “Thank you for helping out today.”

A little breathless and more than a little off-balance, I replied, “You’re welcome.”

The air around us practically crackled and somewhere in my brain a warning went off. The night had taken a turn I hadn’t seen coming. Despite knowing I should step back to break the spell, I didn’t move, and neither did Miles. Until my

cell phone rang. Then we leaped apart as if we'd been caught in a compromising position.

Blinking to clear my head, I checked the phone and saw Donna's name on the screen. "Excuse me," I murmured and stepped away to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, woman. We're up at Bigham Tavern. Where are you, and why aren't you answering texts?"

"I'm..." I glanced to Miles, who was packing the cooler into Evan's SUV. "I worked late. How long have you been there?"

"Not long. Tell that jerk you're working for that you're done, and get your ass over here."

Turning my back to Miles, I lowered my voice. "He isn't a jerk. I'll be there in half an hour." I was a good twenty-five minutes away from the bar she mentioned. "Order me some wings. I'm on my way."

There hadn't been time for dinner before setting up the party, and I was famished. For half a second, I considered inviting Miles to come along. Then I came to my senses.

"I need to go," I said, joining him at his car.

"No problem. Thanks again for your help."

"I was happy to do it." We were back to the stilted, professional version of us, and while part of me wanted to keep the progress we'd made, I knew keeping our relationship business only was for the best. "See you on Monday."

Miles nodded, and I headed off for my car feeling like I was leaving something behind. Shaking off the notion, I picked up my pace.

Chapter Fourteen



“IT’S ABOUT TIME YOU GOT HERE,” LINDSEY SAID WHEN I found her at the bar. The place was packed and I had yet to make my way over to the dining room to locate the rest of the group. “When did you start wearing flannel?”

I looked down. “Shit. I forgot to give this back.”

“Give it back to who?” She accepted a drink from the bartender, leaning forward and yelling, “I need a Pinot Grigio for my friend, please.”

“Thanks,” I said. “The shirt belongs to Miles.”

“Miles?” she repeated. “Your client?”

“Yeah, that’s why I wasn’t answering texts. We were setting up for a party.”

She stared at me as if I’d said we were burying a dead body. “How did you go from cleaning up his books to helping with setup?”

“He needed help, so I helped.” The bartender set a glass of wine on the bar and as I reached for it, I said, “Put it on her tab. Where are the others?” I asked, having to lean close to be heard.

“At our usual table, but this conversation isn’t over.” Taking my hand, she led the way through the crowded bar and into the attached dining room. We made a left and headed for a large round table in the corner. When we reached the others, she pulled me up beside her. “Look who I found.”

“Hey, Josie,” said Megan.

“Where have you been?” asked Becca at the same time. “And what are you wearing?”

Five sets of eyes—both Jacob’s and Ryan’s included—stared as if I’d walked up wearing a raccoon around my neck. The table was loaded with platters of wings, beer bottles, wineglasses, and small plates of celery with ranch dressing on the side. This was my favorite place for wings, and I was grateful to see there were plenty left.

“It’s a shirt,” I said, lowering into the empty seat beside Donna.

“A shirt that belongs to *Miles*,” Lindsey added. She said his name as if we were in middle school talking about the cute boy on the bus.

Refusing to make this a thing, I rolled my eyes and kept quiet.

Lindsey sat down beside Ryan. “Not only that. She helped him set up a party.”

“Yes,” I said, cutting this off before it got out of hand. “They were shorthanded and he asked for my help so I went. It’s no big deal.”

“Did he pay you for your help?” Becca asked, dipping a celery stick into a cup of dressing.

I hadn’t thought about that. “I’m not on his payroll, so no.”

“You did this out of the goodness of your heart?” Donna asked. Her tone gave the impression she didn’t think I *had* a heart.

“Can we change the subject?” I asked, reaching for an empty plate in the center of the table.

“No,” the girls said collectively.

If I wasn’t so hungry I would have left. So I’d done Miles a favor. And I was wearing his shirt. And I might have sniffed it a couple of times on the drive over after standing close enough to smell the same cologne on his skin.

“You’re blushing,” Donna said.

“What?” I loaded five wings onto my plate. “I am not.”

“Your cheeks *are* pink,” Ryan pointed out from my other side.

Grabbing extra napkins from a stack in front of Donna, I shook my head. “It’s hot in here, that’s all.”

“Is it getting hot at the office is the question.” Lindsey wiped the corner of her mouth. “Spill, girlie.”

They would poke at this until I gave them an answer. “There’s nothing to spill. Miles and I are becoming friends. He’s a nice guy.”

“Last weekend you said he was obnoxious and that he annoys you,” Megan reminded me.

I shrugged, ready for this conversation to end so I could eat my wings. “He *was* annoying last week, and he might be annoying again next week. But today he was nice, and I was impressed by what he did for the party.”

Becca’s ears perked up. “What did he do?”

Since she didn’t organize the same kinds of events, I saw no reason not to share.

“This one had a race car theme, so not only did they make a literal highway out of black foam flooring pads, but Miles and Evan—he’s the carpenter—built a full-scale wooden race car that has a speaker under the hood. When the kids push a button on the steering wheel, engine sounds come out of the speaker, plus they can make it louder by turning the wheel.”

“Like a giant volume knob?” Jacob asked.

“Exactly. Isn’t that cool?”

Becca wasn’t as excited as her boyfriend. “We don’t do stuff like that.”

I swallowed a bite of wing, which was amazing. These had the perfect amount of sauce.

“You don’t throw parties for kids,” Jacob reminded her.

“True,” she conceded. “The youngest we go is teenagers, and that’s typically graduation parties.”

“We’re losing the thread,” Donna cut in. “You’re wearing the man’s shirt—still—and you did manual labor to help him out. Either you’ve been body snatched, or there’s more than a new friendship going on here.”

Dropping a bone on my plate, I wiped my hands on a napkin. “There is nothing else going on. He suggested that I change before helping with the setup, and I was too stubborn to listen. So he lent me the shirt to protect my clothes.” I slipped out of the flannel and laid it across my lap. “Now it’s off. Can we please talk about something else?”

After a momentary pause, Megan spoke up. “We have some news to share.” She smiled at the man beside her. “Ryan and I are looking for an apartment together.”

“That’s great,” said Becca.

“Since when?” asked Lindsey.

Donna said dryly, “What took you so long?”

I don’t know why I didn’t think of this when she said they were struggling to see each other lately. They’d been together for a year already, and she’d moved in with her previous boyfriend only a few months after they’d gotten together.

“We wanted to be sure,” she said in reply to Donna’s comment.

Ryan leaned over and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I was sure a long time ago.”

My friends were so sappy. The only reason Becca and Jacob weren’t under the same roof full-time was Jacob’s daughter. He and his ex-wife had agreed not to move partners in unless vows had either been exchanged or were imminent. Of course, if they were talking about having a baby, that qualified as imminent.

The conversation turned to areas of town where they should look, an eventual housewarming party, and what Megan’s father had said about the impending living

arrangements. She'd been raised by a single father, and to no one's surprise, Daddy Knox—whom we all loved—was in full support of the cohabitation.

I imagined what Mother would say if I ever announced I was moving in with a boyfriend. Then, for some unfathomable reason, I pictured that boyfriend being Miles. Like I could ever take him home to meet the family. Him in his baggy jeans and ratty T-shirts. Mom in her Prada kitten-heel pumps, which she wore even for dinner in her own home. Talk about oil and water.

Even though such an event would never happen, a tiny hint of sadness crept in at the impossibility. Which made no sense at all. He was my client, and that was all he needed to be. Pushing the thoughts away, I reached for my wine and tuned back into the chatter happening around me, determined to put Miles Porter out of my mind for the rest of the weekend.



“Oh my gosh, Josie, look at this one.”

Franny had uttered this phrase no fewer than seventeen times since we'd entered the store Becca had mentioned weeks ago. She hadn't been up for a shopping spree, even with her fancy leg scooter thing, but did give us her blessing to shop without her.

The tiny pink outfit included a sun bonnet and ruffles sewn across where the baby's bottom would be. “It's adorable,” I cooed. Like Franny, I'd echoed this sentiment several times already, but what else could I say when adorable was the perfect descriptor for every item in sight?

The ultrasound had been conducted the previous Tuesday, and I'd been ousted by Mother, as only two were allowed to accompany the expectant mother during the procedure. Short of tying the woman to a post, there had been no way I was going to win the privilege, so I settled for blurry black-and-white images sent to my phone in real time. There'd been a

head, hands, and even a tiny nose, but the rest of the image could have been a Rorschach test for all I could tell.

Halfway through the session, thanks to Mother's incessant prodding, the doctor announced that they were having a girl, and much celebration ensued. Dad had been the only outlier, but I couldn't blame him. As a man with a wife and two daughters, he'd always been outnumbered in his own home. As for the wife and daughters, we were ecstatic to add another little girl to the ranks.

"I already have so much pink," she muttered, biting her lip. "Maybe I should skip this one and focus on adding other colors."

Doing my part as Auntie Enabler, I said, "It has ruffles on the butt. You can't *not* get it."

She tossed the outfit in her basket, as I knew she would. "You're right. What was I thinking?" Spotting something down the aisle, she bolted off with an "Oh, I have to have this."

Before I could follow, a familiar voice behind me said, "I can't believe what I'm seeing."

My back stiffened as I spun to find Miles leaning against a rack of pirate-themed outfits.

"What can't you believe?"

His gaze dropped. "You're wearing jeans."

What was it with this man and my wardrobe?

"Yes, I am. I even own other pairs." At the risk of being nosy, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you are, I assume. Buying baby stuff."

My brain skidded to a halt. Why had I not thought of this? I'd *assumed* Miles was single. He never wore a ring, but I knew from experience that not all married men did. That had been a lesson learned—and a bullet dodged—in my early twenties. Then again, he could be having a child without having put a ring on anyone's finger.

“I didn’t realize you—”

“Okay,” a woman said, walking up to him carrying a miniature Pirates uniform, “what about this?” She was visibly pregnant with a round face, dark eyes, and a button nose typically seen on fairy-tale princesses.

“Didn’t your mom already buy that?” he asked.

“She got him a hockey jersey, not baseball.”

Miles nodded. “Then go for it.”

I had never felt like such an intruder in my life. And despite absolutely *nothing* going on between me and Miles, a boulder of guilt formed in my gut. My continued protests that I wanted nothing romantically to do with my client didn’t negate the occasional thoughts that had run through my mind. Thoughts I should not be having for another woman’s man, especially when she would soon be having said man’s baby.

“Hi, there,” the woman said to me with a smile. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

If I could have crawled into a crater at that moment, I’d have done it. “You aren’t interrupting anything. I was... We were...” Desperately searching for Franny, I backed up several steps. “I should go find my sister.”

“Josie is doing some bookkeeping for Hullabaloo,” Miles cut in, looking as relaxed as ever. “She thinks I’m a pain in the ass.”

“Wha...” So much for a future business referral. “I never said that.”

Ignoring my protest, he winked at the pregnant woman. “Don’t listen to her. She can’t stand me.”

“Stop that,” his companion said with a laugh. “He’s teasing, Josie. Miles is a born flirt. Something he inherited from his dad. Uncle Calvin could charm the stripes off a tiger if given the chance.”

Wait. Uncle Calvin?

“Then you two aren’t...?” I asked, bouncing my gaze from the woman, to Miles, to her rounded belly.

“This is my cousin, Chelsea,” Miles said. “Her dad is my mom’s brother.”

A breath of relief escaped before I could stop it. “Oh, thank goodness.”

Brows arched, Chelsea looked from me to Miles. “Thank goodness?”

Oh my God, I’d said it out loud. “I mean, thank goodness that he doesn’t really think that I think he’s a pain in the ass. I’d never want to give off that impression to a client. Or anyone else for that matter.” I was rambling now. “Congratulations on the little one,” I offered, trying to change the subject.

“What little one?” she said with a straight face.

Now I really did need the earth to swallow me whole. “I... Uh...”

“Chelsea?” Franny said, appearing out of nowhere.

“You know each other?” I asked.

“She runs a bakery near where I used to work.” My sister went in for a hug. “I still think about that Matcha Tea Cake all the time.”

Chelsea accepted the embrace. “You should come in and get some.” Pointing to the basket hanging off Franny’s arm, she said, “Are you expecting, too?”

So she *was* pregnant. Miles’ family had a strange sense of humor.

Franny nodded. “I’m having a little girl in the spring. How about you?”

“A boy in December.”

Taking the woman by the elbow, my sister said, “Then I have to show you this precious outfit I saw over this way.”

The pair charged off, as I was still reeling from the brief encounter. My brain had gone from *holy crap, I've been secretly lusting after a married man* to *oh, thank goodness he isn't married* to *holy crap, I've been lusting after my client* all in under a minute.

“What are the odds?” Miles said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“The odds of what?”

“That your friend knows my cousin.”

“Oh.” I glanced in the direction of the two pregnant women who were fawning over a miniature track suit. “Franny is my sister, actually.”

“So you’re going to be an aunt. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It hasn’t really sunk in yet. Do you have any nieces or nephews?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m an only child. Thanks again for helping out last night.”

The abrupt change of subject gave the impression he didn’t want to talk about his family.

“You’re welcome.” Remembering the flannel, I said, “Sorry about taking your shirt. I’ll wash it tomorrow and bring it back on Monday.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have others.”

An awkward silence fell between us. This wasn’t a typical social situation, and Miles and I weren’t exactly friends. If the last few minutes had proven anything, it was that I knew very little about him. Nor should I. He was a client I’d likely never see again once our contract ended.

“She won’t mind at all,” Franny said as the women rejoined us. “Chelsea invited us to lunch. We’re going to check out, then we can all head down to that cute little cafe a block from here. The one we went to with Becca and Megan a few months ago. What was the name?”

“Cafe Moulin?” I said.

“That’s the one.” She turned to Chelsea. “They have the most amazing crepes. Both sweet and savory. You’re going to love it.”

I hadn’t seen Franny this animated in a long time. It made me wonder how often she got to hang out with friends.

“Sounds good to me.” Chelsea turned to Miles. “Do you have time to eat with us?”

“I’ve got an hour before I need to head out. Are you sure you ladies want me tagging along?”

“Of course,” Franny assured him. “You don’t mind, do you, Josie?”

“Not at all,” I said, knowing any other answer would make me look like a jerk.

“Then it’s settled.” She took Chelsea by the elbow once more and the pair strolled off toward the counter.

Crooked grin in place, Miles nodded in their direction. “After you.”

Anxious to get this over with, I kept my mouth shut and headed for the register.

Chapter Fifteen



THE NARROW CAFE WAS REMARKABLY QUIET FOR A SATURDAY lunch hour, so we were seated at a table next to the windows within minutes of arriving. Franny and Chelsea did most of the talking, and after a brief debate on whether to go sweet or savory, orders were taken and the food delivered in record time.

Three bites into her spinach and feta crepe, Franny said, “What do you do, Miles?”

His gaze met mine. “I run a party planning company.”

Chelsea reached for her water. “Your sister and Miles are working together.”

Franny blinked. “They are?” She turned my way. “*He’s* the guy you told me about?”

I nearly choked on my avocado toast. On the drive to the store, she’d asked how work was going, and I’d mentioned that the person I was working for had some interesting ideas on how to run a business. I might have also said that he could be annoying at times, but we were learning to deal with each other. All of which was true, and none of which I wanted repeated in front of Miles.

“Yes,” I replied, avoiding Miles’ gaze. “How long have you been running the bakery?” I asked Chelsea.

“Six and a half years,” she replied, rolling with the change in topic. “The first couple of years were tough, but as more companies moved their operations to the Strip District, things picked up. Now that Miles uses us for all his parties, I’ve been

able to add more staff, and I'm looking at potentially opening another location out this way."

"That's great," Franny said. "Our mother is always organizing charity events. Maybe she could use your services, Miles."

"I only work with kids," he replied.

"That's seems limiting," she said. "Don't you think you should expand into other events?"

He shook his head. "No."

The conversation stalled as Franny gave me an *I see what you mean* look.

"He's great with kids," Chelsea said. "You should see the things he comes up with. He once created building blocks out of foam that actually fit together. Each piece was numbered so throughout the party, the kids built what turned out to be a full-sized replica of the Bat Mobile."

My sister did not look impressed. "I guess some kids might like that."

There were rare moments when Mother's voice came out of Franny's mouth, and this was one of them. Fearing what she might say next, I stuck a piece of toast between her lips. "You have to try this," I said. "When in December are you due, Chelsea?"

"The fifteenth, but my doctor says he could come early." She sliced through her ham and Swiss crepe. "I'm hoping he does. My birthday is July third and it's nearly impossible to have the day be about you when you're born that close to a holiday. I'm sure being close to Christmas would be even worse."

"Josie was born in July," Franny cut in. "How about you, Miles?"

Without looking up from his food, he said, "June second."

The conversation waned and we ate in silence for what felt like an eternity, but was probably under a minute, until Franny set down her fork and excused herself to use the restroom. I

wanted to apologize, but for what? I couldn't exactly say 'Sorry my sister is being a bitch right now.'"

After two more bites of his food, Miles pushed back from the table. "I need to get going."

He'd said he had an hour and we'd hardly been in the restaurant for twenty minutes.

"So soon?" Chelsea said. "At least let them box up your food."

"I'm not that hungry. Take it home with you." He dropped a couple of twenties on the table and without looking my way, said, "Enjoy the rest of your lunch."

The bell rang over the door as he left, and Chelsea frowned. "I wish he didn't get so defensive."

"Franny was out of line," I said, ignoring the ping of guilt from being disloyal to my sister. "Do you know why he only does kids' parties?" When I'd asked during our initial interview, he'd only said he didn't work with adults, but he never said why.

She sighed. "He has a few reasons, but mostly because it's what he enjoys. Making a living at something you love isn't an easy thing to accomplish. That Miles does so while also making children happy is pretty impressive. He's a really good guy."

"Yeah, he is," I agreed.

"That's much better," Franny said, returning to her seat. "Where did Miles go?"

"He had to leave," Chelsea said.

"That's too bad," she said, her expression saying quite the opposite. "Have you designed your nursery yet? I was going to do green and yellow before I found out the sex, but now I'm leaning toward a ballerina theme. Lots of soft pinks, and I found a darling mobile with little pointe shoes that spin around. I've also talked to a muralist about creating a ballet scene on the focal wall. I can give you her number if you want."

Chelsea's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Um, sure. That would be great."

The rest of the meal passed with Franny droning on about nursery artwork, the stroller she'd special ordered that all the A-list actresses were using, and how she couldn't decide whether to buy the christening outfit from Bloomingdale's or Saks Fifth Avenue. Chelsea nodded along, but even I could hardly tolerate how pretentious my sister sounded.

The thought returned about what would happen if I ever did bring someone like Miles home to meet the family. The man would run within minutes, and I wouldn't blame him. As Franny continued blathering on, I wanted to run away myself. This was why I hadn't bothered to date in the last few years. This and the fact that I hadn't met anyone who made me want to bother.

Now I had a business to build, and that was more than enough. Either the right guy would land in my lap, or I'd spend the rest of my life as a single woman, which didn't sound so bad.

"How did you hook up with Miles?" Franny said, dragging me back to the conversation. Did she say hook up?

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Were you not listening?" she asked, waving a hand in front of my face. "I was telling Chelsea how you started this business a few weeks ago, and I couldn't remember how you got connected with Miles."

"Oh."

Should I mention our encounter on the incline? The universe clearly had a twisted sense of humor, tossing us together out of nowhere like that, and then him being the job lead from Jacob. Suddenly, my own thought came back to me.

...the right guy would land in my lap.

"Josie?" my sister said, "why are you so distracted?"

"I'm fine," I said, ignoring where this little thought train was heading. "My friend Becca's boyfriend knew that Miles

was looking for a bookkeeper. He gave me his email.”

“That’s right,” Franny said. “I knew it was through someone.”

“It’s wild that you started a bookkeeping business right when Miles needed one,” Chelsea said, waving over our waitress. “You never know how life is going to throw people together at the right time.”

“Yeah,” I said with an empty chuckle. “Life is funny that way.”



“Do you believe in signs?” I asked Franny as we drove back to her house. Checking my mirror, I changed lanes for a turn ahead.

“Like zodiac signs?” she asked.

“No, like signs from the universe.”

She shrugged. “I’ve never gotten one.”

“Never?” I made the right onto Shady Avenue. “You can’t think of one time that felt like the universe was trying to tell you something?”

Lips pursed in thought, she shook her head. “Not once.”

To be fair, Franny wasn’t the deepest person I knew. She could get a sign once a month and not notice.

“What about Tate?”

Her tone changed to one of boredom. “What about him?”

“Didn’t you two have a class together in high school, and then not see each other for, like, seven years before meeting up again?”

“Yes, but how is that a sign?”

Good question. “I don’t know. I guess some higher power putting you together more than once.”

Franny scoffed. “We weren’t put together by a higher power. We were put together by Mom and Dad.”

Getting frustrated, I said, “Try to think a little bigger with me here.”

“What are you getting at, Josie? Tate and I are together because Dad worked on a business deal with my now father-in-law, and the two of them thought their kids should get married. Then Dad spent months convincing Mom this was a good idea, she convinced me, and a year later I was walking down the aisle.” Lowering her visor, she added, “No signs. No higher power”

“You left out the part where you guys fell in love.”

I was not the most romantic person, but even I knew the falling was the best part. Or so I assumed, having not experienced it for myself.

“Love doesn’t have any more to do with my marriage than it has to do with Mom and Dad’s. Or Tate’s parents, for that matter.”

Slowing for a red light, I argued, “Mom and Dad love each other.”

“You’ve always been so clueless, Josie,” she said with a sigh.

The light changed, but I was too busy staring at my passenger to notice. A car honked, and I cut my eyes back to the road. “What are you talking about? I’m not clueless.”

“When was the last time you saw Mom and Dad be affectionate with one another? Hold hands or kiss good night? They don’t even sleep in the same room anymore.”

Okay, I was clueless about that. “Since when?”

“Since three years ago.”

“Why did I not know that?”

“Because you almost never visit them unless you’re summoned for dinner, and even then you cut out as soon as humanly possible.”

She was making me sound like the worst daughter ever. “I’m not going to apologize for having my own life.”

Dark eyes like our father’s cut my way. “And I don’t? Is that what you’re saying?”

Now she was putting words in my mouth. “That is *not* what I’m saying. You have a husband and your volunteer work, plus soon you’ll have a little one to take care of.” Getting back to our parents, I said, “The only reason I don’t see them as often as you do is because Mom is always busy with her charity work, which you’re also involved in half the time, as well as her social groups. Dad is at work or at the club. I had dinner with him there last week.”

“Because he *asked* you to dinner.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I made a left on Douglas. “If you think I’m such a selfish, horrible daughter, why have you waited this long to tell me?”

Franny’s voice softened. “I don’t think you’re a horrible daughter, Jos, but you aren’t around much, and when you are, you aren’t all that observant.”

“Observant about what? I see as much as you do.” Making one concession, I added, “Except that sleeping arrangement stuff.”

“You see what you want to see,” she said, her eyes locked on the scene out her passenger window. “You always have.”

After making another left onto Beechwood, I made the right into Franny’s driveway, too stunned by her statement to speak. I was an intelligent woman. I paid attention to the things around me. My parents may not be the most affectionate, but they’d been married for nearly forty years, and I had no reason to think they were anything other than a happy couple.

A happy couple who no longer shared a bedroom.

Going back to how this debate had started, I asked, “Do you not love Tate?”

Quietly, she said, “Tate is fine.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

Reaching for the door handle, she said, “Yes, it is.”

Hands locked on the wheel, I stared at the rosebush at the corner of the sprawling red brick home that had belonged to Tate’s grandparents once upon a time, while Franny grabbed her bags of baby clothes off the back seat. I should have helped her carry them, but I didn’t feel like going inside.

“Thanks for taking me shopping,” she said, lingering with the back door open.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

After a heavy pause, she leaned into the car. “Ignore what I said. My hormones are all over the place. I don’t know what’s going to come out of my mouth half the time.”

Numb, I said, “It’s fine.”

But it wasn’t fine. It was far from fine.

Seconds passed until she said, “Drive safe,” and closed the car door. I waited until she disappeared around the back of the house to set the car into motion. Then I went straight home, opened a bottle of wine, and curled up with Milo and my remote for the rest of the day.

Chapter Sixteen



AROUND NOON ON MONDAY, MILES VISITED THE OFFICE WHILE I was out to lunch, so I'd missed him. He didn't make another appearance until Friday afternoon, and by then it seemed too late to apologize for how Franny had acted.

I hadn't talked to her since and had spent the week reassessing my entire life. Was I really so shallow and self-absorbed that I'd failed to notice my parents growing apart? Or that my sister didn't love her husband? I'd been her maid of honor, for heaven's sake. Yes, she'd been incredibly nervous leading up to the wedding, but I'd assumed she was having cold feet or worried that the day wouldn't be perfect. What would happen if a fly landed in the punch bowl or the cake fell over or any of the hundreds of other details she and Mother had spent nearly a year stressing over went wrong?

But were the nerves reluctance instead of anticipation? Dread instead of the normal jitters? As I reflected, snippets of different moments floated to the surface. The drop of a smile when someone congratulated her. Hands shaking when she passed me the bouquet. And the days before the wedding when she'd barely eaten a thing. Every action had a different meaning now. Had I misinterpreted everything?

You see what you want to see.

"Have you seen Sam or Naima?" asked Miles as he charged into the office in the middle of my mental review.

I managed not to leap out of my skin this time. Spinning around, my answer died on my tongue as I stared in stunned

silence.

“Well?” he said.

“What are you wearing?” Ironic that I was the one asking this time.

“Clothes,” he answered impatiently.

These weren't any clothes. Where were the saggy jeans? The ancient T-shirt? In their place was fitted dress pants, a starched button-down, and a sport coat. All in matte black. He'd even shaved and styled back his hair. I wasn't blind. I recognized that Miles was an attractive man. Or would be with a little more effort. It turned out I was right. The man was freaking beautiful.

“Who are you and what have you done with Miles?”

He was not amused, and neither was I. He cleaned up well, damn him.

“Have you seen them or not?” he pressed.

“Sam was in this morning, but she left early since she and Lyla were driving to Erie to visit Lyla's family this afternoon. I haven't seen Naima. I assume she's out at a party location taking pictures.”

This was how Naima spent most Fridays, collecting content to share online.

“Shit.” Miles pulled out his phone as he crossed to his desk. “She isn't at the venue.”

That was strange. “Have you asked Evan?”

“He doesn't know either. They had a fight and she won't take his calls.”

Now *that* was strange. She hadn't mentioned anything when I'd seen her the day before so the squabble must have been new. Naima was a professional. I couldn't imagine she'd let her personal life get in the way of doing her job.

“Have *you* called her?”

Green eyes snapped up. “Of course, I have. It goes straight to voicemail.”

Whatever the crisis, he didn’t need to be so snippy. I’d answered his questions to the best of my knowledge. It wasn’t my fault he didn’t get the answers he wanted.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked as I turned back to my work.

Aware of how pathetic I’d sound admitting for the second Friday in a row that I had no plans, I considered lying. I could have dinner plans. Or even a hot date. It could happen. But if his current mood was any indication, whatever he needed was important.

Conscience kicking in, I said, “Nothing, why?”

“Do you have a black dress?”

The man who accused me of overdressing every single day since we’d met was asking if *I* had a little black dress? Oh, the irony.

“I have several.”

“Good.” Miles slid the phone into his inside coat pocket. “We can swing by your place so you can change.”

“Hold on,” I said as he headed for the door. “Where are we going?”

“A wedding.”

Not the answer I expected. “You want me to wear black to a wedding?”

Miles looked at his watch. “Can we talk about this on the way?”

Conceding, I closed the laptop and gathered my things. As I met him at the door, I asked, “Whose wedding is it?”

His hand landed on the small of my back, sending a shiver up my spine, as he answered, “My mother’s.”



What kind of car a man drove never mattered much to me. I knew enough about vehicles to drive one. Anything beyond that was over my head. However, I did prefer that a man taking me out do so in a car that was at least in one piece. Which Miles' car technically was, but only thanks to duct tape, upholstery pins, and I assumed an occasional prayer.

Since the level of tension emanating from my driver was enough to power a small electrical grid, I kept my opinion to myself. Who was I to judge? My oil should have been changed two thousand miles ago, and the floor in my back seat was cluttered with a number of wadded-up fast-food wrappers.

I would not be casting any automotive stones.

To save time, Miles waited in the car while I changed. The details I'd dragged out of him during the two-minute drive to my apartment was that we were going to the Botanical Gardens, a location I loved and where I'd attended countless weddings in the past. It seemed as if all my old high school friends had tied the knot there.

Miles had urged me to hurry, which added pressure as I surveyed my closet. I'd not been lying when I said I owned several black dresses. Knowing this was a wedding, I really wanted to go with color, like the lavender number I'd bought last year and only worn once. Yet I knew Miles would march me right back up the stairs if I dared to defy his all-black orders.

Without knowing how formal the wedding would be, I went with simple and elegant. The A-line coat dress was matte black with slender lapels and cuff accents on the three-quarter length sleeves. A narrow black belt cinched in the waist, and I snagged a black clutch on my way to the bathroom, where I added a gold chain and matching dangling earrings.

I looked more fit for a funeral than a wedding, but this was what Miles wanted, so this was what he would get. The hair went from a high ponytail into a black clip, and I added a

touch of red to my lips. Rubbing them together, I transferred the essentials into the clutch and topped off the cat food before racing back downstairs.

When I slid into the passenger seat, Miles dropped his cell phone into the center console and put the already running car in gear. “We should just make it,” he said, checking both ways before pulling out of the lot.

“Can I ask my questions now?”

He made a left onto Southern Avenue. “Fire away.”

I went with the most pertinent question first. “Why am I here?”

“You mean in my car or on this planet?”

Such a comedian. “I need to know what role I’m playing. Am I your pretend date? Pretend girlfriend? Though I’d assume your mother would know if you were in a relationship.”

“Not if I could help it,” Miles replied. “You’re my date.”

The lack of the word pretend made me slightly uncomfortable, but I knew he didn’t really mean *date* date. This was a favor, not a date.

“How do we know each other?”

“This isn’t a play, Josie.” He took a right at the fork. “There’s no need to make up a story.”

“Then I’ll go back to my first question. Why am I here?” Before he could speak, I said, “I mean, why do you *need* me at this wedding? Why not go alone?” He’d never struck me as the insecure type, and with this being his mother’s wedding, I assumed he would know plenty of other guests with whom he could spend the evening.

Checking the rearview mirror, Miles hesitated and I thought he might not answer. “My mother has issues with how I live my life. She thinks I should be in an office downtown, working nine to five, with a wife and kids at home. If I show up alone, she’ll be disappointed and spend what should be *her* day trying to find *me* a date. I wouldn’t put it past her to have

a single woman on Lenny's side of the hall picked out already."

As far as motives went, not disappointing his mother was a good one.

"Then you want her to believe that we're dating," I said. "What were you going to do if you'd been able to find Sam or Naima? Doesn't she know them already?"

"Mom's never met any of my employees. And I had no intention of bringing either of them to the wedding."

"But you asked about both of them."

"A leg on the giraffe for today's party broke off. Evan couldn't find the paint Sam used to make the new leg match. I needed to know where she left it. As for Naima, I want to know where she is because she should be out taking pictures of the setup." Taking a right at the light, he shifted over to the left lane. "Plus, Evan is worried about her."

None of this made any sense. If he never planned to take one of them...

"So I'm not some desperate last resort for date duty?"

He glanced my way for the first time since I'd returned from changing. "Why would you think that?" Eyes dropping, he added, "You look really nice."

Had I been sucked through a portal into an alternate reality? One in which Miles Porter dressed like a hunky CEO, and I was willingly going on a date with him. Ignoring the compliment, I stared out the passenger window and watched a loose piece of gray duct tape flap in the wind atop the side mirror. There went my theory.

Surely in an alternate reality, Miles would drive a better car.



"You had me worried," whispered Chelsea as we slid in beside her mere seconds before the procession started.

“It’s been a rough day,” Miles whispered back.

She sent a smile my way, but didn’t look surprised that I was there. I opted not to think too deeply about that. The rest of the car ride had been quiet other than some classic rock playing on the radio. We were well into September, and that meant temperatures cool enough to ride with the windows open. At least the driver’s window. The passenger window on Miles’ car didn’t go down.

There were about fifty people in attendance inside the restored nineteenth century barn. Fairy lights made the vaulted ceiling look like a star-filled sky, and since the gathering was so small, the building had been set up for the ceremony at one end and the reception at the other. Decoration was minimal but romantic with lots of white draping and olive-toned greenery.

A tall, older gentleman fidgeted at the front in his navy suit complete with boutonniere. I assumed that was Lenny. Next to him was a man closer to my age but a spitting image of the groom. Most likely a son. Next to the open spot for the bride was a slender, middle-aged woman with light-brown hair and dark-rimmed glasses.

“Is that a relative?” I asked Miles, leaning close so no one else would hear.

“Her best friend from high school,” he replied.

The wedding march began and we all rose from our seats, turning to watch the bride make her walk to the altar. Miles was on the aisle, forcing me to lean around him to see. A heavysset woman with the same green eyes as her son walked alone, her gaze locked on the man waiting for her near the officiant. She looked incredibly happy, until she saw Miles and the smile slipped into a frown. She recovered so quickly, I doubted any of the other guests had noticed.

Why wasn’t Miles walking her down the aisle? Did he not like that his mother was marrying someone new? That would explain the all-black outfits. Were his parents divorced or had his father passed away? Had his father ever been in the picture at all? Dang it, why hadn’t I asked these questions on the way there?

The ceremony lasted less than ten minutes, and once the newlyweds made their way back down the aisle, accompanied by exuberant applause, an usher appeared to dismiss the guests over to the reception area one row at a time. We took our seats at a round table reserved for the bride's family, not far from the longer, slightly raised one where the wedding party would be. Chelsea introduced me to her husband, Tim, as well as Miles' other cousins, Kathy, Darlene, and Mary. Of the three, only Mary had a spouse in tow. Since he'd stepped outside for a cigarette as soon as the ceremony had ended, he wasn't included in the introductions.

Light music played softly through the speaker system as conversations buzzed around us while Miles stared at his phone. Before long, he put the phone away and said, "Evan found Naima. She got a flat tire on the way to the party venue and her phone was dead."

"Oh, wow. Is she okay?"

"Yeah. He got the donut on and now they're at a tire shop waiting for a replacement."

"They?" I said, hoping this meant they'd kissed and made up.

Miles nodded. "She never stays mad at him for long." Looking around, he said, "I need a drink. What do you want?"

"White wine is fine."

With another nod, he left the table in search of the bar. I hadn't noticed until he was gone that several guests were watching me and whispering behind their hands. I couldn't blame them. I was the mystery girl who'd walked in with the bride's son. With luck, they'd refrain from wandering over and asking a bunch of questions I had no idea how to answer.

"How are you?" Chelsea asked.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"Huge," she answered with a laugh, her hand on her protruding belly.

Shaking my head, I said, "You look gorgeous."

All pregnant women were gorgeous, and they deserved to be told so.

“Not remotely true, but I appreciate the sentiment anyway.” Scooting her chair closer, she said, “I didn’t realize last weekend that you and Miles were a thing.”

So much for worrying about the other guests. “Oh, we aren’t.”

She leaned back, her eyes wide. “But you’re his date, aren’t you?”

How to answer that? “Well, yes. I mean, I’m here with him, but I’m not *with* him.”

My answer appeared to increase her confusion, but if I elaborated, I might say something Miles doesn’t want anyone to know. I was essentially a decoy to keep his mother from playing matchmaker, but the more people who knew that, the more likely she was to find out. To prevent any uncomfortable scenes, saying as little as possible felt like the best way to go.

“We’re getting to know each other,” I added, which could be interpreted in numerous ways, and Chelsea was free to make of it what she liked.

Before Miles came back with our drinks, the happy couple returned from outside, where I assumed they’d been taking pictures. The gathering again applauded, and spoons were tapped against glasses until the couple obliged and shared a sweet kiss before sitting down at the main table. I’d never attended the wedding of two complete strangers before, which made me feel like an interloper crashing the party. As the catering staff began serving the meal, I tried to ignore the continued attention.

Was it really that unusual for Miles to have a date? I was started to wonder if I’d grown a third eye on my forehead without knowing it.

“What was your name again?” asked Kathy as she shifted over to sit in Miles’ empty chair.

“Josie Danvers.”

She tapped her bottom lip. “That sounds familiar. Did you go to North Hills High School?”

“No, I went to Taylor Allderdice.”

The woman leaned back as if I’d spit on her. “That’s a fancy school.”

The school was large and nearly a hundred years old, but I’d never considered it fancy.

“It only looks that way because of the pillars,” I explained. “It’s like any other public school.”

The four-story building featured six Greek-styled pillars at the entrance. We also had some famous alum, but they certainly hadn’t been famous while attending.

Without another word, she returned to her seat and started a quiet conversation with her sister, Darlene, whose eyes cut to me twice, and I did my best to pretend I wasn’t the topic of their conversation.

Miles lowered into his chair and set a wineglass down in front of me. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“Peachy,” I replied. “Half of the guests won’t stop staring at me, and your cousin over there doesn’t like me because I went to Allderdice.”

“Didn’t Jeff Goldblum go there?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make the school *fancy*,” I defended.

“Who said it did?”

I reached for my drink. “Kathy did.”

He held his glass in front of his lips. “She also thinks gravity is a hoax. Ignore her.”

I laughed as he downed his drink and set the empty glass on the table. “Do I need to drive us home?”

The question had sounded less suggestive in my head.

“Maybe,” he said. “We’ll see how bad this gets.”

The poor man looked completely miserable. “Is this not a happy occasion for you?” I asked, hoping the alcohol might

make him more willing to talk.

Miles stared at his glass. “She’s happy. That’s all that matters.”

“Why aren’t *you* happy?” I pushed.

With a deep sigh, he said, “You want to know the last time I wore this getup?”

“When?”

“My dad’s funeral.”

I closed my eyes as the sadness in his words pierced through me. Keeping my voice steady, I asked, “How long ago was that?”

“Two years, four months, and eighteen days.” Snatching the glass and rising to his feet, he added, “But who’s counting?”

Chapter Seventeen



AFTER FOUR MORE DRINKS, MILES STOPPED SULKING AND started to smile again. He introduced me to the few family members who came by our table, but he made no effort to go about mingling on purpose. I could tell the difference between the relatives who said hello out of curiosity about his date, and the ones who were truly happy to see him. Before long I concluded that Miles didn't see his family very often. There was no open animosity, so I had no idea why, but then some families were like that.

Mother had two sisters, who each had children of their own, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen any of them. Probably at a wedding much like this one.

I found myself watching Miles closely. He was so in and out at the office that other than our bickering matches, I'd had little opportunity to get to know him. To figure out what made him tick. There had been the party setup, but we'd been focused on work, not socializing. I knew that his employees liked and respected him, and I knew how he felt about corporate America. In all other areas, the man was an enigma I had yet to decipher.

Nearly two hours into the night, Miles had yet to speak to his mother, nor had she taken a moment to come to him. As he relaxed, his arm draped across the back of my chair and an extra button undone on his shirt, I took the opportunity to broach the subject.

“Are you going to talk to your mom?”

A muscle twitched along his jaw. "I should."

He didn't so much as shift in his chair.

"We've eaten and the cake has been served," I pointed out. "The evening will probably end soon."

Shoulders falling, he nodded. "You're probably right." Taking my hand, he said, "Come on."

I hadn't meant for him to take me with him. The newly married couple were visiting with guests in a far back corner, so Miles led me through the tables, accepting greetings along the way. I hadn't realized how much we stood out until we were passing by all the other guests. There were lots of pink and red dresses. Even a pretty orange and a floral print with bold yellow petals. The men wore light-toned shirts, some with ties and some without. There was even a Hawaiian shirt, which belonged to the groom's brother, according to Chelsea.

Then there was Miles and me in black from head to toe. I had a feeling this was his way of making a statement.

"Hey, Mom," he said when we reached the couple.

The groom acknowledged him first. "Hiya, Miles," he said, wrapping him in a hug. "We're so glad you're here."

After a couple pats on his new stepfather's back, Miles turned to his mother, who greeted her son with far less enthusiasm. She leaned in for a kiss on the cheek, saying, "It was nice of you to come."

As the daughter of Guinevere Danvers, I'd witnessed a cold greeting or two in my day, but none ever directed at me. How did a woman greet her own child in such a heartless way? Miles looked neither surprised nor hurt, which meant this likely wasn't an unusual occurrence. I knew in that moment I was not going to like this woman.

"I told you I'd be here," he said.

"Yes, you did." Her eyes cut to me, her brows arched. "I see you brought someone with you."

Miles turned and pulled me up beside him. "This is Josie Danvers. Josie, this is my mom, Ruby, and her new husband,

Lenny.”

Engaging all my meager acting skills, I plastered on a friendly smile. “It’s nice to meet you both. The wedding was beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Ruby said. “How long have you known my son?”

An odd question to start off with, but I rolled with it, determined to make this as painless for Miles as possible. “A little over a month, I guess. How long have you two known each other?”

“We went to high school together,” Lenny said. “Ruby was the prettiest girl in school. Took her a while to come around, but I finally caught her.”

Miles cleared his throat. “I wanted to say hello before we left. I’m glad the day turned out nice,” he added. “For both of you.”

Lenny opened his mouth to speak, but Ruby cut him off. “I want you to come talk to Lenny tomorrow.”

“I don’t have time tomorrow, Mom.”

“Sunday then. We’ve talked about it and he’s ready to bring you on at the company.”

Bring him on? Did she not know Miles ran his own company?

“Mom, we’ve been over this.”

She was not deterred. “This is the chance at a real job. You’d have benefits and good pay. Real security.” Turning to me, she said, “You should encourage him to do this.”

Too stunned to reply, I looked at Miles. His jaw was clenched tight enough to snap a tooth.

“Let it go, Mom. Please.”

“The boy doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to do,” Lenny said.

Ignoring her husband, Ruby went on. “You’ve always been exactly like your father. No sense of responsibility. You think an honest day’s work is too good for you?”

“Hold on,” I cut in, but Miles squeezed my hand, sending a silent message not to get involved.

“Like I said, I’m glad you two had a nice wedding.” He extended a hand toward Lenny. “Take good care of her.”

“He will,” Ruby said. “Unlike your father ever did.”

I’d never wanted to punch a woman so badly in my life. Where did she get off saying such awful things? Miles ran a lucrative business, with exceptional employees, that made continuous profit. That wasn’t an easy accomplishment for any business, let alone one as new as Hullabaloo. And what he did made a difference in children’s lives. He made people happy, which was something his hateful mother had probably never done even once. Clearly not for her own child.

Miles turned away, but I stayed planted in place. I couldn’t let her get away with saying those things. If Miles wasn’t going to stand up for himself, then I would.

“I don’t know anything about Miles’ father, but I know that your son is an amazing person. He’s intelligent, kind, *and* he cares about the people around him. He’s also successful doing something he clearly loves, which not many people figure out how to do. I know I haven’t.” Turning to Lenny, I said, “I’m sure you have a perfectly fine company, but Miles has one, too, and he deserves respect for what he’s built.” My eyes cut back to Ruby. “Anyone who can’t see what a good, *responsible* person he is, is blind.”

Before the older couple could respond, Miles snatched my hand and dragged me away. That’s when I realized the room had fallen silent, and my impassioned speech had been heard by all. I didn’t regret my words, but I did regret embarrassing Miles in front of the entire reception.

We left the barn without speaking, still hand in hand, but in no hurry. When I could no longer stand the silence, I said, “I’m sorry.”

He didn't respond, and I knew I'd crossed a line. Several actually.

"I shouldn't have done that."

"It's fine," he finally said.

"She was so awful to you, and—"

Miles spun me into his arms and kissed me senseless. The contact lasted mere seconds but was enough to soften my bones and empty my head, all at the same time. Standing beneath a clear, star-filled sky with a cool breeze raising goosebumps along my arms, I stared into sparkling green eyes mere inches from mine, completely speechless.

Brushing a thumb gently across my lips, he whispered, "You're amazing, you know that?" Formulating a response was beyond my capabilities, but I didn't feel amazing. I did, however, feel many other things. "I want to show you something," he said.

Nodding like the befuddled woman I was, I mumbled, "Okay."



We hadn't walked far when Miles stopped and gestured for me to sit down on a backless bench. Even with only the moon illuminating our surroundings, I recognized where we'd come. He settled beside me, leaned his elbows on his knees, and stared at the stone wall in front of us.

"I'm sorry I dragged you here."

"To the celebration garden? Don't be. This is one of my favorite spots."

Though the barn was a beautiful venue and perfect for receptions, many of the weddings I'd attended had taken place in this garden, though the name was a bit deceiving. A flat patch of grass with a wide sidewalk down the center, the real attraction was the curved wall with a set of arched doors at the center. Draped with floral displays, this area was both

romantic and whimsical, and despite my best efforts to convince Franny to have her wedding here, she and Mother had insisted on the traditional church ceremony.

Miles sat up. “I mean to the wedding. I handled everything wrong tonight.”

He’d known the evening would be hard, and I was happy that he’d brought me along, even if only for moral support. “Your mother was the one in the wrong. And I wasn’t at my best either.”

“Do you really believe all that stuff you said about me?”

I nodded. “I see how your employees feel about you, and how well you treat them. I’ve seen the numbers so I know how well the business is doing financially. You may not be the type to toot your own horn, so to speak, but she needed to know that you’re doing okay. Better than okay.” Curious, I asked, “Why haven’t you told her yourself?”

Running a hand through his hair, he looked up at the stars. “I’ve tried, but she’s stuck in the past. She sees me as a replica of my dad.”

“I know this is none of my business, but what was so terrible about your father?”

“Dad was a dreamer. He wanted to be his own man, and he was constantly coming up with one scheme or another that was going to make him rich.” Hands locked on the bench seat, he sighed. “The problem was, none of those schemes ever panned out. Still, he kept trying, and no matter how much Mom nagged him, he wouldn’t give in and get a job. Bills went unpaid, eviction notices came, and eventually she’d had enough. They divorced when I was ten.”

My heart ached for the little boy who had gone through that. “I’m sorry.”

“They were better off apart. The problems really came when she used the missed child support payments as a reason not to let him see me.” Eyes locked on the looming doors, he said, “I used to sneak out of ball practices to go get ice cream with him. She’d get so pissed when she found out.”

What a horrible, horrible woman.

“Once I was old enough to choose, I picked Dad. She’s never forgiven me for that.” I had no words, so I wrapped my hand around his. “Do you want to know why my company is called Hullabaloo?” Miles asked.

“Why?”

“It was Dad’s favorite word. He said it *all* the time. Since I started the company a month after he died, I couldn’t imagine naming it anything else.” Standing, he pulled a set of car keys from his pants pocket and held them out to me. “I’ve bored you long enough. Let’s get out of here.”

I wasn’t remotely bored, but it was chilly and I didn’t have a wrap. “We should get coffee into you if you’re going to drive home from my place.”

“Is that your way of inviting me up?”

“You wish,” I replied, getting us back on less romantic ground. As good as that kiss had been, Miles was still my client. My first and *only* client. Mixing business with pleasure would not be a smart or professional move, especially when I was just starting out. “We’ll stop and get some on the way.”



By the time we reached my apartment, I felt confident Miles was safe to drive home. He’d ordered black coffee and finished the cup as I pulled into the complex parking lot. Pulling up to the back door of the building, I put the car in park and struggled to figure out what to say. *I had a nice time* didn’t really seem apropos. Not that I’d had a terrible time, but my confrontation with his mother didn’t fall into the *nice* category.

“Thanks for telling my mother off,” he said with a soft chuckle. “That probably spared me having to join them for Thanksgiving.”

I did not want to be the reason Miles was alone on a holiday. “Once you tell her I’m not your girlfriend, she’ll let

you come.”

“Is that option off the table then?”

“Afraid so. You’re my client, after all.” Trying to keep things light, I said, “Besides, we’d probably fight all the time. I’m independent to a fault, and you’re... you.”

He turned to face me. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” I looked him up and down. “You don’t dress like this all the time.”

“I dress like a normal person. Not like I’m going to high tea or something.”

“You see?” I said, unhooking my seat belt. “We’d never get along.”

He undid his own and climbed out of the car at the same time I did. “Did you pick a fight on purpose?”

“I made an observation. *You* turned it into a fight.”

Following me to the door, he said, “I want to see you again.”

The temptation to give in and let this happen had me picking up my pace. “You’ll see me on Monday.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

“Miles.” I held a hand up to stop him from coming any closer. “You’ve built your business, but mine is just getting started. I need to keep the boundaries in place, and I need you to respect them.”

Jaw tight, he stepped back. After blowing out a breath, he said, “I’ll see you on Monday then.”

This was the right decision, even if it felt wrong. “Thank you,” I said and stepped inside.

The click of the door echoed through the stairwell as I stood with my back pressed against it. Eyes closed, I listened for the sound of his car driving away. The sound didn’t come. The temptation to go back out was suffocating. I took several deep breaths before pushing off the door and racing up the

stairs. If he wanted to sit out there all night, that was his prerogative. I'd made my decision and would not be changing my mind.

Chapter Eighteen



“ARE YOU SURE YOU WON’T CHANGE YOUR MIND?”

Becca had already asked this twice before. “Yes, I’m sure. You are not paying me for keeping Milo.”

My dear friend was moving back into her apartment, and though I was happy to have her back, Milo was ecstatic. He hadn’t left her lap since she’d walked in. Or rolled in, rather. You’d think she was gone two years instead of two weeks. Jacob had dropped her off but had to leave to get to his daughter’s basketball game.

“But you bought that canned food, and he scratched the back of your chair.”

I hadn’t noticed the chair until this morning. My guess was that he was upset about me being gone the day before, then also being out all evening. As much as the feline might pretend otherwise, he’d gotten used to hanging with me in the evenings. I vacuumed around the chair a couple of days before and the scratches hadn’t been there, so they were definitely new.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Your clothes are put away,” said Lindsey as she returned from the bedroom. “I’ll take the dirty stuff with me and wash them tomorrow.”

“I can do the laundry,” I offered. “I’m doing my stuff tomorrow anyway. I’ll throw it all in together.”

“You sure?” she asked.

“Ladies, I can do my own laundry,” Becca argued.

“How?” Lindsey said. “Are you going to carry one sock at a time to the washer?”

Making a ha-ha face, she said, “My laundry basket rolls, remember? I can pull it behind me.”

“The food is here,” called Megan as she and Donna sailed through the front door. They each set two large bags on the kitchen island.

“Where are the drinks?” I asked.

“Right here.” Ryan entered the apartment and closed the door behind him. “I had to park the car.” He set the two drink holders next to the food and dropped a kiss on Megan’s lips. “Have fun and call me when you’re ready to go.”

She nodded. “I won’t stay too late.”

“Stay as long as you want.” After another kiss, he waved to the rest of us on his way out. “Have fun, ladies.”

The door closed again and Lindsey said, “You two are nauseating.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Becca cut in. “She’s jealous.”

“Who ordered the pimento and short rib?” Donna asked.

“That’s me,” Linds said, taking the sandwich and a paper plate over to the couch.

The rest of the food was distributed, including a large order of jerk chicken nachos placed on the coffee table for all to eat, and we took our places around the living room. I settled on a large cushion on the floor beneath the window and dug into my black bean burger, only half paying attention to the conversation around me.

Sleep had not come easy last night as encounters with Miles played over and over in my mind, and not only the ones from the wedding. The day we’d met, when he’d gone out of his way to return my picture. Most men would likely have run the other way after discovering a woman hiding in a tree. Then the day of the interview, when my response to learning that *he*

was my first potential client had been the words *well, hell*. Yet, he'd still hired me.

Every interaction had been either contentious or carried an air of sexual tension, often both at the same time. I couldn't decide if I'd willfully ignored the latter, or if this too was a case of what Franny called my seeing only what I wanted to see. I'd convinced myself that he was a presumptuous ass who thought he knew everything. The more time I spent with him, the more he proved me wrong.

We'd obviously been dancing around something more than a professional connection, and it had taken an unexpected kiss for me to realize it. I'd always considered myself an astute person. A keen observer. If the last few weeks had proved anything, it was quite the opposite. I was embarrassingly clueless.

"Josie!" Donna yelled, scaring the crap out of me.

"Holy shit, what?"

"We've been saying your name for thirty seconds," Becca said at a much more reasonable volume. "Where did you go?"

Coming back to the present, I looked down to realize my burger hadn't been touched. "I have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"Nothing ever keeps you from eating," Lindsey chimed in. "What's going on?"

If there was ever a time I needed an outside prospective, this was it. Though I knew the girls would be on my side no matter what, I also knew they'd never lie to me or refrain from telling me when I was being an idiot.

"I went to a wedding with Miles last night," I said, setting my plate on the coffee table and pulling up my knees.

"The guy you're working for?" Megan asked.

"The guy I'm working *with*," I corrected. A power imbalance was an added complication I could not have handled. Yes, Miles could refuse to give me a good review, but

I'd landed the contract with Hullabaloo without any previous testimonials, and I could do so again with someone else.

Donna scooted to the edge of her seat. "Was this a *date* date?"

"I didn't think so at first, but by the end of the night things changed."

"What changed?" Lindsey asked.

Where to start? "First, the wedding was his mother's."

Donna bolted to her feet. "He took you to his mother's wedding?"

"Yes," I replied. "They don't get along so I think he wanted someone there for moral support. At least that's what I assumed."

"Never assume anything when it comes to a man. Did he make a move on you?" Lindsey asked. "Are we talking sexual harassment?"

"Calm down. Miles wouldn't sexually harass anyone."

"That's a staunch defense for a man you don't like very much," Becca pointed out.

All eyes watched me expectantly. There was no lying to these women. They knew me too well. Hell, I was in this situation because I'd spent weeks lying to myself.

"He's a really good guy," I said. "Really good. He let me know he's interested in more than a working relationship."

"That's great," Megan said, but the rest held silent. "Isn't it?"

Donna spoke up first. "When you run your own business, there has to be clear boundaries."

"That's what I told him." Hands clasped on my knees, I focused on my neglected fingernails. "Not crossing that line was tougher than I expected."

"You like him," Becca said in a low whisper.

Did I? I respected him. I appreciated how he spent his time making people happy. I sure didn't mind how he kissed. But this all could have been the heat of the moment last night. How vulnerable he'd been. Not many men would have been so open, especially with a woman they hardly knew.

"Maybe," I said, giving the most honest answer I could. "But like Donna said, there's a line you don't cross."

"How long are you working for him?" Lindsey asked.

I had to stop and think. "There's two more weeks on the contract, but I'll probably finish the job before then." The idea of not going into that office made my chest ache.

"Wait," Donna said, sitting back down, "this isn't a permanent thing?"

"He only needed me to clean up the books because his previous assistant did nothing for the last six months." She'd also stolen from him, but that was a detail I wouldn't be sharing. "We agreed to six weeks, and then the job is over."

"Then what the hell is the problem?" Lindsey said, loading a handful of nachos onto her plate. "Wait it out and start dating him in two weeks."

"That isn't how it works," I argued. He would always be my first client. The contract running out wouldn't undo that. "It's a business connection, and I'm not going to be known as the woman who screws her clients."

"You said yourself," Becca added, "in two weeks he'll no longer be your client."

Was no one listening to me? "Donna, help me explain this." She ran her own business. She understood.

"I'm with her," she said with a nod Lindsey's way. "Once you aren't working together anymore, it won't matter. In fact, I wouldn't even bother waiting the two weeks. So long as you can keep it business during the day, there's no reason you can't have a little fun at night."

Crawling to my feet, I grabbed my plate off the table and headed for the kitchen. "I need new friends."

“Get you some,” Lindsey, the hard-ass of the group, said, “but they’ll tell you the same thing.”

So no friends at all was the way to go. Fine by me. “Good night.”

“Oh, come on, Josie,” Becca called as I marched to the door. “Don’t go.”

I closed the door behind me.



Half an hour later there was a knock at my door. I was surprised they let me stew for that long. The question was, who’d drawn the short straw and been sent up as the sacrificial lamb? I opened the door without a greeting and walked back into the living room, sitting down in front of my second glass of wine. When I was mad, they tended to go down quicker.

Megan quietly shut the door and took a seat on the opposite end of the couch. “Hi.”

“You didn’t need to come up here.”

“I’m sorry we upset you.”

Somewhere around the bottom of my first glass, I knew why I’d gotten so mad, but I wasn’t ready to say so.

“I thought you guys would be on my side.”

“We’re always on your side, Jos. But we made a pact a long time ago not to lie to each other, remember?”

I rolled my eyes. “We were nineteen years old, for heaven’s sake. That was about not letting each other wear something ugly to a party or believe that the cute guy in art history was into us when he wasn’t.”

“Or when one of us was being stubborn and getting in our own way.” She was using the voice she used with kids at the library, and I didn’t like it.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child,” I pouted, sounding exactly like a child. “I can’t go out with every client that hits

on me.”

“Be honest,” she said. “If you didn’t like him, you wouldn’t be this annoyed, would you?”

I hated when she crawled inside my head like that. “He’s all wrong for me.”

“How so?”

Where did I start? “He dresses atrociously.”

“That can be worked with.”

“We bicker all the time.”

“It’s called banter. All the great couples do it.”

This one she wouldn’t have an answer for. “My mother would never approve of him.”

Megan opened her mouth, then closed it again. After a brief pause, she said, “Does your mother *have* to approve of him?”

I laughed. “You’ve met my mother. Do I really need to answer that?”

“Let me put it another way. Do you think you’ll be happy with someone your mother *does* approve of?”

Franny popped into my mind. She wasn’t happy, and though Tate wasn’t Mother’s favorite person, he’d ticked all the boxes. From the right family—meaning one with money and status. Went to the right schools. Belonged to the right church. Worked in the right field. Socialized with the right people.

Could I find a man who met all of that criteria, who also made me laugh, didn’t have a pretentious bone in his body, and saw me as an equal?

“Maybe not,” I replied, “but I also couldn’t be happy knowing I’d disappointed my parents and all of their hopes for me.”

Now we’d reached the crux of the matter. Miles would never fit into my family, and I never wanted to be in a

situation where I had to choose between him or them. No matter what, someone would get hurt. It was better not to create that situation at all.

“Here’s my suggestion,” Megan said. “Take some time and see if you might be wrong. If you like him, then there must be something about him that your parents would like, too.”

Unlikely, but a fair proposal. He *had* cleaned up nicely, and he ran a successful business. Said business not being in the finance sector didn’t have to be a deal breaker. Miles could be charming when he wanted to be, but could he charm my mother, the Danvers dragon? If he did, he’d be more than a hero on a white horse. He’d be a damn miracle worker.

“I’ll think about it,” I told her. “But I’m not promising anything.”

“That’s good enough for now.” She rose to her feet. “Are you coming back down?”

I reached for my glass. “No, I’m in for the night. You go on.”

“It won’t be the same without you.”

“It’ll be better without me making things awkward. Tell them I love them and I’m fine.”

Megan smiled. “I can do that.” She leaned down and kissed my cheek. “You know we want you to be happy, right?”

I did, but that didn’t mean I always had to appreciate their methods. “I know. Now get going. I’m going to soak in a hot bath before bed.”

On her way to the door, Megan said, “Don’t have too much more wine then. I don’t want you to slip trying to get out and hurt yourself.”

Take one naked tumble and they never let you forget it. “Yes, Mother.”

That earned me a narrow-eyed glare. “I’m serious.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Good night.”

She lingered in the doorway long enough to say, “Love you.”

As much as they annoyed me, I did have the best group of friends. “Love you, too.”

Chapter Nineteen



“BRING ME ANOTHER SCOTCH.”

Dad had downed two drinks already, and we’d only sat down to lunch fifteen minutes ago. I caught our waiter, Vincenzo’s attention as he went by me and whispered low enough for Dad not to hear. “Hold off on the drink until our food comes, please.”

Vincenzo nodded and sailed off toward the kitchen.

I’d been summoned to the club on Sunday morning with the order that we needed to discuss Mother’s birthday. She was turning fifty-five in a couple of months and, according to Father, this was a milestone that should be properly celebrated. I asked why Franny wasn’t also in attendance, and Dad said she was too busy with baby stuff and this one was up to the two of us. Odd, since there were many months to go before the little bean arrived, but if he wanted to pair up and get this done, I was willing to help.

And by help I meant to suggest we see if Becca would plan something on short notice.

Minutes later, our food arrived and we embarked on the usual Dad chitchat. How was the business? How was my portfolio? Which he knew more about than I did since he managed it. To my surprise, he asked if I was dating anyone. Though the way he phrased it made me wonder if Mother had put him up to it. Dad had never asked about my love life or the lack thereof.

“I’m not seeing anyone,” I said, which was true. Toying with the idea of seeing someone and actually seeing him was two different things.

“No one at all?”

Why did his tone make it sound as if he knew something I didn’t? “No, no one. Why?”

“Just curious,” he deflected. “You went to school with Lance Meacham, didn’t you? He’s moved back from New York City to join the firm.”

Lance Meacham had been an arrogant jerk in high school, and I doubted he’d changed in the last thirteen years.

“Yes, I remember Lance. Please let Mother know that I am *not* interested in being set up with Lance, nor will I ever be.”

“Who brought up your mother?” he asked. Dad was a terrible actor. “I’m only making conversation.”

“When have you ever taken an interest in my love life?”

Wiping his mouth, he reached for his glass, only to find it empty. “Where is Vincenzo with my drink?”

“It isn’t even one in the afternoon, Dad. You don’t need another drink.”

His face darkened. “I won’t be told by my own child what I can and cannot have.”

Though my bisque was excellent as usual, I’d suddenly lost my appetite. I was tired, more than a little irritated, and had no interest in fighting with my father.

Setting my napkin beside my bowl, I pushed back from the table. “I’ll talk to Becca about planning a party for Mother. I’m sure she’ll have some ideas for us.”

“I’ve already set it up with the staff for us to walk through the event rooms today.”

“The rooms here?”

“What other rooms would I mean?”

Struggling for patience, I asked, “If you’ve already talked to the staff here, what do you need me for?”

He loaded a bite of steak onto his fork. “I already told you. You’re going to help plan the party.” After washing the food down with a sip of water, he made a face as if he’d been forced to drink battery acid. “Where’s that damn waiter?”

Ignoring the question, I pointed out the obvious. “You’ve been a member of this club for decades, Dad. You know what all the event rooms look like. Why do you need to tour them today?”

“To decide which one we want.”

As far as I knew, events were typically booked a year in advance, if not longer. What made him think anything would be available for a party in two months?

“What if they’re all booked?”

He waved the question away. “Whoever has the room we want will have to rebook.”

I imagined getting the call two months before my wedding that my venue had been swiped out from under me. The panic. The logistical nightmare. No way would I do that to someone.

“Dad, I don’t think—”

“Are you ready for your tour, Mr. Danvers?” asked a smiling young woman who’d approached our table. She looked to be around my age, with red hair pulled into a tight bun, and dark-rimmed glasses perched high on her nose. She was the epitome of professional, down to the thin leather binder hugged tightly against her chest.

“Brittany, this is my daughter Josephine. I’ve recruited her to help with the planning.”

“Nice to meet you, Josephine.”

“Please, call me Josie.” My parents had never accepted my nickname, and I had no problem correcting them when necessary. “Are you sure there are rooms available on such short notice?”

She nodded toward Dad. “We can work something out for Mr. Danvers.”

So Dad was right. They’d kick another party out of their reserved space so that we could have it. The thought made me both nauseated and angry.

“We don’t want to inconvenience anyone,” I said, hoping Brittany would get the message.

“Let’s see what room you’d like to use and discuss the options from there.”

Dad set his napkin beside his plate. “I’m sure it can all be worked out. We’ll follow you, Brittany.”

“Yes, sir.”

She led the way through the dining room, and I followed behind Dad, hoping that there had been a recent cancellation, leaving a room open right when we needed it. If that was not the case, I’d do whatever I could to keep Dad from ruining someone else’s big day.



After declaring the ballroom too large, and the next two rooms too small, Daddy Goldilocks found the last option, the Vista Lounge, to be just right. The room featured circular windows—one of which included a door to the outside patio—that overlooked the golf course, dark-burgundy carpets, and mustard-yellow walls. A party was in the process of setting up, so we lingered along the edge to stay out of the way.

“Is this room available for our night?” I asked. Since Mother’s party would be the Saturday before Thanksgiving, I crossed my fingers that Brittany would say yes. No one planned a wedding that close to Thanksgiving, did they?

She opened her leather binder and said, “We can make it work.”

Not the answer I’d hoped for. “Do you mean the room *isn’t* booked already?”

Her smile never faltered. “If this is the room Mr. Danvers wants, then things can be arranged.”

Meaning someone could be *arranged* right out of their space.

“We don’t—”

“Josie?” said a familiar voice before I could finish.

Turning, I found Evan holding a life-sized two-dimensional ballerina. The same one I’d seen drying in the Hullabaloo offices a couple of weeks ago.

“Hello,” I said, stunned to see him. “Are you guys doing a party here?”

“We are.” He tilted the ballerina as if making her dance. “I need to get this on her stand.” Looking behind him, he called out, “Hey, Miles, Josie is here.”

My heart stopped as the man who’d kissed me two nights before strolled our way, hammer in hand, and a dirt smudge across his cheek. Where I’d have cringed at his appearance a month ago, I found him kind of hot today.

“You know these people?” Dad asked.

The question snapped me out of my lusty thoughts. “I do, yes.” Once Miles joined us, I said, “Dad, this is my client, Miles Porter. He owns Hullabaloo Events. Miles, this is my father, Russell Danvers.”

His expression unreadable, Miles extended a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

To Dad’s credit, he accepted the handshake without hesitation despite the clear presence of sawdust on Miles’ palm. “Nice to meet you, too. I hope you’re happy with the service my daughter is providing?”

“She’s been a valuable asset,” he said. Quite possibly the most un-Miles-like thing I’d ever heard him say.

“Hullabaloo,” Dad repeated. “That’s an interesting name for a company.”

“I think so, yeah.”

Afraid this would turn into a repeat of lunch with Franny, I said, “We should get out of your way.”

“What kind of events do you do?” Dad asked, ignoring my comment.

“Parties for kids.” Miles pointed to where Evan was struggling to get his giant ballerina to stand on her own. “This one is *The Nutcracker* as a theme.”

As if on cue, two men entered from the patio carrying a large nutcracker, complete with bright-red jacket and gold trim. Close behind them was Sam with a large stuffed bear in pointe shoes. She saw me and waved.

“Children only?” my dad asked. “No weddings or fundraising benefits?”

I was having déjà vu.

“Nope. Just kids.”

Every muscle in my body tightened, braced for what Dad was sure to say next.

“Can’t say that I blame you. Those fancy things my wife drags me too are tedious enough. Planning one must be hell.”

Wait. What did he say?

“We like to avoid tedious,” Miles replied. “There’s still a ways to go, but the goal today is to create the general scenes from the ballet without making it look too Christmas-like. One side will have the Land of Snow while the other the Land of Sweets.” He looked at his watch. “The cake should be here soon. It’ll sit on a high table surrounded by various toys that the kids will each get to take home.”

Mother had taken Franny and me to see *The Nutcracker* every year for as long as I could remember until I went off to college. I’d never imagined seeing it turned into a party backdrop.

“Sounds like a serious undertaking,” Dad said. “I thought children’s parties involved hyping them up on sugar and sending them home. This is something else entirely.”

Something quite impressive. Are you sure you won't consider taking on the task of my wife's upcoming birthday party?"

"Unless your wife is turning twelve, I'm afraid not."

Dad laughed. "She acts like a twelve-year-old half the time. A mean one."

That seemed disloyal. "Mother isn't that bad."

"You haven't been married to her for thirty-five years," Dad pointed out. Pulling a business card from his pocket, he held it out to Miles. "If you're ever in the market for investment or insurance advice, give me a call. I'm always happy to work with a visionary like yourself."

Had someone spiked my bisque or did my father call Miles a visionary?

"I appreciate the offer." Miles slid the card into his back pocket. "If you ever throw a kids' party, Josie knows where to find me." With a wave of his hammer, he crossed the room to join Evan, who had moved on to the nutcracker.

"I like him," Dad said, convincing me that I'd passed out and this was all a figment of my imagination. "Says a lot about a man who owns the company and isn't afraid to get his hands dirty."

Amusing coming from a man who'd never done a day of manual labor in his life.

Megan's words sprang to mind. *If you like him, then there must be something about him that your parents would like, too.* Could she actually be right? Miles had obviously won Dad over, but Mom would be a tougher nut to crack, no pun intended. If anyone could do it, Miles might be the one. He'd won *me* over, and I'd considered him a pompous ass when we first met.

As we followed Brittany from the room, I glanced back one last time and locked eyes with Miles. He tapped his forehead as if saluting, and I offered a hesitant wave. Maybe I needed to reconsider the possibilities after all.



I was sitting in the dark when Becca wheeled herself into my apartment.

“Turn on a light, woman.” She rolled over to the floor lamp beside the couch and turned it on, then dropped into a chair. “Talk to me. I’m lonely.”

“Since when do you get lonely?” I asked.

“Since I’ve lived with Jacob for two weeks. I got used to having someone around.”

“You’ve got Milo.”

Becca shook her head. “Not the same thing.”

She had a point. What was a moody feline next to a beautiful, doting man who lived to fulfill your every whim? Now that the school year had started, said doting man—who was also a history teacher—wouldn’t be staying over as often as he did in the summer.

“How are you handling work with that little scooter of yours?”

“Not great. Since it’s a pain in the butt to get around, my meetings with clients are having to take place in the office, and I’m not taking on any new events until I can get back out to the venues.”

Because so much of her work involved showing clients the possibilities of a space, while also understanding their own vision for an event, I could see how not being able to be inside the event spaces would be difficult.

“That should only be a couple more weeks, right? When do you go back to the doctor?”

She pursed her lips into a pout. “In ten days. I’m officially over this.”

“I’m sorry.”

With a last huff, Becca said, “Enough of my whining. Why were you sitting in the dark?”

“I was thinking.” I’d done nothing *but* think since leaving the country club. “I had lunch at the club with Dad today to talk about Mother’s birthday in November. She’s going to be fifty-five and he thinks we should throw her a party.”

She perked up. “Really? Do you want my help?”

“I might eventually, yes, but what would you do if a venue took away your room two months before your event?”

“Our spaces are locked in with a contract.”

“I know, but what if, for some reason, the contract got changed and the site said you could no longer have the space on your date?”

Her brows drew together. “I’m confused. Did you have a room for your mom’s party and they’re trying to take it away from you?”

Sitting up, I grabbed a pillow and hugged it to my chest. “No, I think we’re the reason they’re doing it to someone else.” Becca gasped and I cringed. “It’s that bad?”

Torn between making me feel better and being honest, she said, “Well... if it’s a simple party, like a birthday or maybe retirement, it could probably be moved. But if it’s a wedding, there are so many details that would be locked in by now. Caterers, a DJ or a band, a photographer. Trying to rebook any of them for another date with so little notice would be nearly impossible. They’re bound to have other events locked in that would make them unavailable for the rescheduled event.”

That’s what I was afraid of. “I managed to get Dad not to lock in the date yet, hoping we find an alternative, or that I can convince him to have something smaller at home. I haven’t heard Mother mention anything that makes me think she’s expecting a big affair.”

“Whoever you save from being booted out would be eternally grateful if you can do it.”

“Hopefully Dad had enough to drink during lunch that maybe he won’t remember the party discussion.”

Head tilted, she asked, “He drank during lunch? That seems kind of early.”

Yes, it did. I was starting to worry that maybe he needed to cut back. “Not too much,” I lied, “but enough that he might not notice a twisting of the facts later on.”

She made no further comments, and I fell silent, wishing I hadn’t mentioned the drinking. Dad liked his scotch, but I liked my wine, so who was I to cast judgment? Not that I’d had wine at lunch. Or that I’d ever drank enough that my brother-in-law had to come find me stuck in a hedge. Still, if Dad needed to cut back, that was something that needed to be discussed in the family only.

“We missed you last night,” Becca said, changing the subject. “Are you still upset?”

“No, but that’s something else I’ve been thinking about.” I nearly reached for my wineglass, then noticed it was empty. After talking about Dad, I figured maybe I didn’t need to open another bottle tonight. “I ran into Miles at the club today.”

“Miles belongs to the club?”

I couldn’t picture that no matter how hard I tried. “No, he was setting up a party, and I introduced him to Dad.”

In a hushed tone, she said, “How did that go?”

“Brace yourself for this one.” Pausing for dramatic effect, I said, “Dad likes him.”

Becca leaned forward. “Really?”

“As a business owner,” I emphasized. “It’s not as if I introduced him as the man I might or might not be considering going out with.”

“Hold on. Last night you weren’t considering that at all. In fact, you got really mad when we said you should. What changed?”

I'd assumed Megan had shared our conversation when she went back to the party. Guess not.

"Beyond the client thing, I didn't think my parents would approve of Miles. You know how they are."

She'd been around my family enough to know that I wasn't being a snob. The first time I'd taken Becca home for a visit, during sophomore year of college, they might as well have put her under a naked light bulb and conducted a full interrogation. After dinner, we'd overheard Mother say, "This is why we shouldn't have let her go to that state school."

I'd been mortified, certain that Becca would never speak to me again once we got back to campus. Thankfully, she'd overlooked my embarrassing family, and I'd agreed never to put her in the same position again. I'd brought her and our other friends to things like Franny's bridal shower and wedding, but never to a private dinner at the Danvers' dining room table. Thankfully, my parents were much better behaved when in a larger social setting.

"If your dad already likes him, then you're halfway there, right?"

"More like forty percent. Mother is the tougher sell."

Scooting to the edge of her seat, Becca said, "Do you really like him?"

That was one conclusion I had come to. "Yes, I do."

"Then don't pass up this chance because of your mother. You never know what's going to happen tomorrow." A truth Becca knew better than anyone. "Go for what makes you happy today."

Not yet ready to commit one way or the other, I said, "You sound like a love guru."

She reached for her scooter and jumped up on her one good foot. "You should always listen to your guru."

Laughing, I followed her to the door. "How did you get up here anyway?" My apartment was two flights of stairs above hers.

“I cheated and took the freight elevator.”

“You can get fined for that.”

“And I’ll claim a lack of accessibility in this building. They’ll withdraw that fine real quick.” I held the door as she rolled into the hall, saying, “Give the man a chance, Josie.”

“I’m still thinking about it. Do you want me to go down with you?”

She continued rolling. “No worries, I’ve got it.”

She wavered, nearly falling over, and I bolted after her. “You’re going to hurt yourself even worse on that thing. Like it or not, I’m taking you home.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Fine, my ass. Watch what you’re doing.”

“You’re being very bossy.”

“And you’re being very stubborn.”

“Takes one to know one.”

We sounded like squabbling little girls on the playground.

Pressing the button for the large elevator hidden at the end of the hall, I offered the only suitable response. “And I know you.”

Chapter Twenty



“YOU’RE IN A GOOD MOOD TODAY,” SAM SAID AS SHE JOINED me in the office kitchen Monday morning. “What’s the whistling about?”

I hadn’t noticed I was whistling before she mentioned it, and saying *I’ve decided I might date your boss* didn’t seem like an appropriate answer. Miles might take umbrage at not being the first to know.

Sliding my leftover spinach calzone into the fridge, I deflected. “Just loving the cooler weather. Fall is my favorite time of year.” Which was true, if not the real reason for my happy little tune. “How did the party go yesterday?”

“Great. The birthday ballerina cried when she saw the room for the first time. That’s exactly the sort of reaction that makes all the weeks of hard work worthwhile.”

“That nutcracker was gorgeous. Nice job on that.”

Sam slid a plastic storage bowl in next to my calzone. “That was all Miles.”

I thought *she* was the artist here. “I realize he built it, but I’m talking about the paint job.”

She shook her head. “Miles did all of it. There was so much with the two backdrops that I couldn’t have possibly done it all by myself. Thankfully, he’s a better artist than I am.”

With that parting revelation, she disappeared up the stairs, leaving me blinking in confusion, holding an empty coffee

mug. I'd known Miles was the brains of the operation and that he could build as well as Evan, but I'd had no idea about the art skills. Was there anything the man couldn't do?

Other than dress like a grown-up.

"There you are," said the artist in question. I glanced up to see him hovering halfway up the stairs. "We need to talk."

His tone put me on high alert. "About what?"

He nodded toward the upper floor. "I'll tell you in my office."

No, that wasn't ominous at all. Following up behind him, possibilities raced through my mind. What could be so serious, and why wouldn't he tell me out in the open? The answer had to be Kayla. Maybe he'd uncovered more of her nefarious shenanigans.

"Close the door behind you," he said as we stepped into his office.

Now I knew this was about Kayla. "What have you uncovered?" I asked.

Instead of sitting down behind his desk, Miles propped his derriere on the front of it and crossed his arms. "We need to discuss the remainder of your contract."

I stopped halfway across the room, my heart slamming to a halt in my chest. Was he really going to end this job because I'd refused his advances? Anger ignited in my belly as sirens roared in my ears. How could I have been so wrong about him?

Jaw aching with the effort to keep my mouth shut, I focused on remaining calm as I strolled over to my chair. Standing behind it, I said, "What about my contract?"

"We need to extend it."

My jaw dropped. "What?"

"Only if you agree, of course. I'm not sure what other work you have lined up."

“Are you saying you want me to become your full-time bookkeeping service?”

Miles shook his head. “No, I still only need you for the six-month review.”

Then why would I need more time? “I’m not sure I understand what you’re suggesting.”

“You know my cousin, Chelsea.”

“Yes.”

“And you know she’s pregnant.”

He needed to get to the point. “What does she have to do with my work for Hullabaloo?”

“I’m hoping you’ll add her as a client.”

Now he’d knocked me completely off-kilter. Needing a second for my caffeine-starved brain to catch up, I said, “Let me get this straight. You want me to work for you beyond the end of our current contract, despite not having any additional work for me to do, and you also want me to offer my services to your cousin?”

If I had this straight, then all the secrecy and closing the door stuff was for nothing.

Miles ran a hand over his face. “I’m not explaining this well.” No, he wasn’t. “Chelsea had a scare yesterday. Some bleeding.”

“Oh my gosh, is she okay?”

“For now, yeah, but the doc says she needs to be less active and lower her stress levels. She’s still doing the majority of the baking at her original location, handling all of the invoicing, billing, and payroll, plus she’s trying to open the second shop. Something has to give.”

Where I fit in was obvious. “I would be more than happy to help her out, but what did she plan to do when the baby came? Can her staff not run the bakery without her? At least the baking part of it.”

Moving around to sit down behind the desk, he said, “That I don’t know. Her husband called me in a panic last night, and I’m not even sure she knows he did it. Chelsea is a bit of a control freak and sucks at asking for help. She’s even worse about taking it when it’s offered.”

If her business was successful enough to be expanding into new locations, then she probably should have delegated the bookkeeping long before now, be it to an in-house employee or to a service like mine. And while I’d be helping out a woman in need, this additional work was exactly what *I* needed to keep my business going. A win-win for both of us.

“Do you think she’d hire me?”

“I can’t guarantee it, but once she realizes she needs to for the health of the baby, the choice should be clear.” Opening his laptop, he added, “When we’ve talked about this before, her excuse was that she didn’t know how to find someone she could trust. Learning what Kayla pulled here convinced her even more so that she was right to keep total control.”

I had to give Miles credit for not doing the same. He’d gone so far as to not only trust a total stranger, but to trust one with no proven track record or experience. If not for him, I might still be floundering in search of my first client.

“This doesn’t sound like an easy sell, but I’m happy to answer any questions she has to make her feel comfortable enough to hire me.”

Typing away, he said, “She’ll trust you. I’ve already told her how good you are.”

There was that word of mouth Becca had talked about. I’d been worrying about getting a recommendation for weeks, while he was already out talking me up to others.

“I appreciate that.”

A few more taps of his keyboard and he sat back with a nod. “I’ve sent her an email with your contact information. I added that your business is new and you could use the work so that she’ll think she’s doing you a favor. I hope you don’t mind.”

He had no idea how accurate his statement was. “I don’t mind at all. But I still don’t understand the part about extending my contract with you.” Not that I wouldn’t mind more time hanging out around Hullabaloo, but without adding to the scope of my work, what was the point?

“You’re working here five days a week, but Chelsea needs you more than I do. I was thinking you could split your time between there and here, and that means you’ll need more than the allotted six weeks we agreed to.”

He was right. Unless I wanted to work day and night, which I did not, learning Chelsea’s business enough to fully take it off her hands would require several days in her shop. Probably weeks. And with her health being an immediate concern, that probably needed to start right away. But then there was the dating thing, which, of course, Miles knew nothing about.

After Becca left the night before, I’d gone back to ruminating in the dark and decided to pursue something more personal with Miles—if he was still interested in doing so—but under the condition that nothing could happen between us until *after* our contract had ended. Another two weeks hadn’t seemed all that long to wait. Extending the contract an unknown amount of time beyond those two weeks changed things up a bit.

“Before I agree to altering the contract,” I said, “there’s another element we need to discuss.”

“I intend to pay for the additional time,” he said, making a reasonable assumption as to what I meant.

Rolling my chair over to sit down in front of his desk, I said, “I mean a discussion about us.”

Dark brows arched. “I thought there wasn’t going to be an us?”

Crossing my legs, I straightened my jacket and linked my hands in my lap. “I’m willing to reopen that topic.”

Sexy grin sliding into place, Miles leaned forward. “I’m listening.”



“I have terms,” I said, approaching this conversation the only way I knew how. With logic and practicality.

Miles sat back. “Okay.”

“You need to write up your review of my services before anything personal happens between us.” Wanting to be clear, I added, “Not that you *have* to write one, and I’m certainly not saying that I’m offering you a date *in exchange* for a good review. That would be unethical.”

“Agreed,” he said a little too quickly. “Next?”

This was where things got dicey. “I don’t believe we should go on any official dates until the contract ends, and Danvers Bookkeeping is no longer working with your company.”

Green eyes narrowed. “I’m not good with that.”

The response was both flattering and troublesome, but I felt strongly about my stance. I needed the clear delineation between our professional and personal relationships. Still, this *was* a negotiation.

“Do you have a counteroffer?”

“Have dinner with me tomorrow.”

He wasn’t even trying to compromise. “If you aren’t willing to negotiate in good faith, then we might as well call the whole thing off.”

Two fingers tapped the desktop as he stared me down. Determined not to flinch, I stared back.

“I’ll give you until the original end date, two weeks from now.”

A small step toward a middle ground, yet one important unknown variable remained.

Rolling backward, I snagged my cell phone and opened my calendar app. “How far beyond that date were you

planning to push out the contract?”

“If you continue working here two days a week, how much more time would you need?”

Running some quick calculations in my mind and adding a small cushion to make sure I could deliver, I said, “Three weeks. But,” I added, before he could respond, “during that time I work from home.”

“So we add three weeks onto the contract,” he repeated, “during which you’ll work for me two days a week from your apartment, and we start dating two weeks from now.”

I’d been worried he might reject the work from home caveat, but if we were going to take this dive, I needed some kind of separation between business and pleasure, even if only geographically.

“Yes.”

“Agreed.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and bolted from my chair, my hand extended. “Then it’s a deal.”

Miles rose as well, took my hand, and pulled me across the desk to plant a hard kiss on my lips. “You didn’t really think I’d seal that with a handshake, did you?”

Realizing in that moment that I was dealing with a formidable opponent, a zing of anticipation weakened my knees and sent heat crawling up my cheeks. I’d always said I’d never met a man who made me want all those things Mother droned on about. The husband, the home, the family. I could imagine having them all with Miles. A thought that both scared the crap out of me and made me disgustingly happy at the same time.

“You’re lucky I like you, Mr. Porter,” I said.

“I like you, too, Ms. Danvers.”

We stared at each other like infatuated teenagers for another five seconds before hearing a gasp and a giggle from outside the office door. With a roll of his eyes, Miles crossed

the room and whipped the door open to discover Sam and Naima on the other side, smiling from ear to ear.

“It’s about damn time,” said Naima. “We thought you two would never figure this out.”



“You negotiated starting a relationship?” Lindsey asked while removing the cork from a bottle of Prosecco.

I’d messaged the group chat on my way home, and within an hour three of the four were at my door, champagne in hand. Megan had practice but would be over afterward.

“Technically, he started it,” I said, “though at the time he thought we were only discussing the length of my contract.”

“Leave it to you to approach a romance in the most practical way possible.” Becca held out her empty glass for Lindsey to fill. She’d gotten much better on her scooter and could hobble around without it when necessary.

Glass of bubbly in hand, I collapsed onto my couch. “I wasn’t the only person involved. Miles was enjoying that negotiation as much as I was.”

“Because he knew you were going out with him no matter what,” Donna said, settling on the cushion beside me. “It was a no-lose situation.”

True. Though I still believed he’d enjoyed what was essentially a round of mental foreplay. At least it had been for me. One of my favorite things about Miles was his total lack of pretense, but a close second was how his straightforward approach to life complemented my pragmatism. Where he was creative and playful, I was sensible and anchored. He softened my edges, while I...

While I what?

“Can anyone name my positive traits?” I asked, truly curious.

“Are you fishing for compliments?” Lindsey asked.

I was quite serious. “Miles is a great guy. He’s fun and lighthearted, but also insanely smart and capable. He built this business out of nothing and tops himself with every party he does. His employees love him, his clients love him, and he’s turning a profit despite the fact that on paper his entire business plan should not work.” I stared at the bubbles in my glass. “I don’t have much to offer beyond all that.”

After a brief moment of silence, Donna nudged me in the side. “Get your head out of your ass already. You’re stable, competent, generous, *and* caring. You’re also brave for going out on your own with this business, which you two clearly have in common. You’re loyal, dependable, plus, you stand to inherit a fortune. You’re like a golden retriever and a winning lottery ticket all rolled into one. Who wouldn’t want to date that?”

Another pause and we all burst out laughing. Once I could breathe again, I said, “Thank you for boosting my ego and bursting my bubble all in one speech.”

Laughter subsided into giggles as Lindsey lowered herself into the chair across from me. “Does he even know the inheritance part?”

I slowly sobered. Miles had shared the gist of his past the night of the wedding, but we’d never talked about my family. He knew where I went to high school, and Dad had given him a business card when we met at the club so he knew what my father did for a living. Then again, Dad could be any insurance salesman. Miles probably wouldn’t know that Dad was the chairman of the board and worth millions—much of which was generational wealth—unless he looked him up.

Something I couldn’t see him ever doing.

“Do you think it would matter?” Becca asked.

Part of me said Miles wouldn’t bat an eye at the status of my family. Another part wasn’t entirely sure. He’d struggled his whole life, and I’d never struggled a day of mine. How would he feel about that?

“Probably not,” I said, trying to convince myself as well as them. “Besides, Dad isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. It’ll be years before we have to deal with any inheritance.”

“We?” Donna repeated. “Are you already at the *we* stage?”

After taking a long swig of Prosecco, I laughed off the question. “I’m not at any stage yet and won’t be for two more weeks.” Hopping up off the couch, I said, “I’m hungry. Who wants cookies?”

“I never say no to cookies,” Lindsey replied.

Becca hovered near the island as I crossed to the fridge and pulled out the ready-made cookie dough. “He likes you for you, Josie. Don’t worry about all the other stuff.”

Pressing the button to preheat the oven, I shrugged off her words. “I’m not worried.”

We both knew I was lying, but she was considerate enough not to say so.

Chapter Twenty-One



INSTEAD OF GOING INTO THE HULLABALOO OFFICES ON Wednesday morning, I had my first meeting with Chelsea at her bakery. Buttercream Dreams didn't open until ten, but the baking started before dawn, and I knocked on the kitchen door at exactly six o'clock. Thankfully, she had coffee waiting, and I settled onto a high stool in front of a stainless-steel prep station so we could talk while she worked.

Miles had been out of the office the day before so we hadn't seen each other since our *love negotiation*, as Megan had called it when she'd finally joined us, but he did send a text that said *11 more days*. I couldn't help but smile at the fact that he was counting down until our first date. We'd agreed to have dinner the night after the original contract end date, though he'd refused to tell me where we would be going. Only that I had to wear jeans, which I'd reluctantly agreed to do.

"So that's the basic supply side of things," Chelsea said, wrapping up a forty-five-minute explanation of how the purchasing worked.

The bakery did more in one week than Hullabaloo did in three months, and what I'd learned so far made up a fraction of what I would be taking over. The sheer magnitude of what the woman did on a daily basis made my head spin.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

"Of course."

"Why haven't you hired an office manager before now? I mean, the bookkeeping plus payroll is a full-time job. Add on

all the other stuff—like marketing, product development, fulfilling orders, and daily kitchen operations—and when do you find time to sleep?”

She slid a large white bucket over to the prep station. “You sound like Miles.”

“You’re only one person,” I reminded her. “We don’t know each other very well, and I don’t mean to overstep, but this is *a lot*.”

“The bakery is my baby.” She dropped a hand to her belly. “My first baby, anyway. You don’t hand your baby over to just anyone, you know?”

I did know, and I was honored that she trusted me enough to put part of it in my hands. “All I’m saying is that there are lots of good people out there ready to help. Maybe keep that in mind going forward, because once that little one gets here, nothing is ever going to be the same again.”

A timer went off and Chelsea hopped into action. “That’s what I’m worried about. I don’t want to have to choose between this place and the baby. I mean, the baby will always come first, of course, but I’ve worked too hard to not keep giving this place my all.” Sliding on a set of oven mitts, she pulled a sheet tray from one of the ovens. When she dropped the pan on the table in front of me, steam filled the air and the smell of chocolate overloaded my senses.

“Those smell amazing. What are they?”

“Chocolate scones. You’re welcome to have one once they cool a bit.”

I could already see that working here was going to wreak havoc on my waistline. “Maybe one couldn’t hurt.”

“By the way,” she said, sliding a new tray of scones into the oven. “I’m surprised Miles was willing to let me have you.”

An amusing turn of phrase. “I think as soon as Tim told him what the doctor said, he made up his mind you needed me more than he did.”

Chelsea stopped with one mitt off. “Tim told him what?”

Shit. Me and my big mouth. “Can we rewind and pretend I didn’t say that?”

“Miles said I was doing you a favor.”

“You are,” I assured her. “My contract with Miles was supposed to run out in less than two weeks, and I had no other work lined up. I promise you, I need you as much as you need me.”

Dropping the mitts on another prep table, Chelsea ripped off a paper towel, folded it in quarters, and placed a scone on top of it. “That man needs to worry about his own business,” she grumbled.

“Please don’t be mad,” I pleaded. “They care about you and want you and the baby to be okay.”

Her expression softened as she rubbed her belly again. “I know. And I can never stay mad at Miles. He’s always been my favorite cousin.”

Hoping there might have been one bright spot in his childhood, I asked, “Did you two spend a lot of time together growing up?”

“I wouldn’t say a lot, but we made the most of the time we had.” Hesitating, she said, “How much has he told you about his childhood?”

I could appreciate her not wanting to reveal details that Miles preferred to keep quiet.

“That his parents split when he was ten and that he eventually chose to live with his Dad, though I don’t know at what age that happened.”

Chelsea physically relaxed. “He’s told you more than he tells most people.” Crossing to a metal shelf, she grabbed a heavy-looking mixer and I bolted off my stool.

“I’ll carry that.”

“Don’t be silly. I do this every day.”

“But you’re—”

She gave me a stern look. “I’m pregnant, not impaired.”

Properly chastened, I returned to my stool and remained silent as she set up the machine, gathered ingredients, and created a circle of bowls, measuring cups, and a scale. As items went into the metal bowl, she said, “You asked me once why Miles only works with kids, and I didn’t give you the full story. Considering what you already know, I don’t think he’d mind me telling you.”

Like a child about to hear their favorite story, I leaned forward on my elbows to listen.

“Miles missed out on a lot as a kid,” she started, “mostly thanks to adults who couldn’t be grown-ups about pretty much anything. I love Aunt Ruby, but she has a selfish streak a mile wide and holds a grudge like no one I’ve ever met. She used Miles as a pawn, and Uncle Calvin treated him like a sidekick more than a son. They were mental equals, even when Miles was far too young to understand why that was a problem.”

Chelsea cracked two eggs into the bowl and upped the speed on the mixer. “As a lonely kid who had to grow up way too fast, he’s dedicated his life to making sure that other kids get to actually *be* kids. That they’re celebrated and that they feel special, even if only for one day a year.” Reaching for a sheet pan, she added, “When it comes to adults, he’s very particular about who he lets join his inner circle. They basically have to see the world like he does, or at least understand and support his mission.”

The one quality all Hullabaloo employees had in common was a childlike quality. They were artists and free spirits, and though they never compromised the quality of their work, they didn’t take themselves too seriously either. Except for Kendra, and even she had lightened up. The physical therapy for her hip had improved her mobility, and she and Howard had even gone dancing the week before.

Sliding a fork into my scone, I said, “I’m surprised he didn’t rebel against both of them.”

Adding flour to her bowl one cup at a time, Chelsea shook her head. “Miles was always a miniature adult, especially once

he moved in with his dad. By the time he was sixteen, he was working three jobs in addition to going to school.”

“How?” I asked. There weren’t enough hours in the day for that.

“Paper route at dawn, bussing tables at a diner after school, and then he stocked shelves overnight at a local grocery store on the weekends.”

“When did he do his homework?”

Another cup went in. “I don’t know, but he kept his grades up high enough to graduate top ten percent in his class.”

The man was a damn genius. If he’d done that well while working his butt off, I could only imagine what he might have achieved if he’d been granted the same opportunities that I’d had and not needed a job at all.

“Did his dad ever support them?”

“Now and then.” The last of the flour went in and Chelsea wiped her hands off on her apron. “He took a sales job while Miles was in college to help pay tuition. Only then did Ruby start helping. She couldn’t stand the thought of Calvin getting credit for something and not her.” As the mixer did its work, she settled on a rolling stool. “I wish Miles would take advantage of some of his success to make his life a little easier. The man is stubborn to the core.”

Still processing the revelations about Miles’ parents, I took a second to catch what she’d said. “What do you mean?”

“He won’t even pay himself a salary,” she said, rubbing her forehead with the back of her arm and leaving a streak of flour behind. “Why do you think he drives that piece of shit car and his clothes are all so old? He takes enough to feed himself and the rest goes back into the business.”

So much made sense now. My mind went back to the first day, when I’d checked the payroll section in the Hullabaloo bookkeeping software. Everyone else’s name had been there except for Miles. Why had I not made that connection?

“But what about rent or a mortgage and utilities?”

Chelsea hopped off the stool and turned off the mixer. “He lives in a small room at the office. Didn’t you know that?”

Stunned, I said, “No, I had no idea.”

Pouring the yellow batter from the mixing bowl onto the sheet pan, she said, “Maybe that one he didn’t want you to know. How about we both keep this conversation to ourselves?”

I nodded. “That’s a good idea.”



Thanks to Hullabaloo booking a large Halloween party, Miles was spending nearly all his time in the workshop with Evan. I didn’t know what they were building, but the word *epic* had been tossed around.

Sam was also spending her time on the build, and Naima and Kendra had both taken the day off, leaving the office deserted. I was alone with the knowledge that somewhere close by was a room that constituted Miles’ home. The temptation to snoop around and find it was nearly overwhelming. Of course, I did *not* go snooping, but I wanted to.

He’d sent occasional texts to check in, and Thursday afternoon we’d had a brief phone conversation about my first day with Chelsea. Neither my slipup about Tim talking to Miles or his cousin’s revelation about his living arrangements came up in the conversation. What happened in the kitchen stayed in the kitchen.

Speaking of kitchens...

“There you are,” said Mother as I stepped into hers at ten minutes to six Sunday evening. The comforting scent of meat and potatoes floated in the air, along with a slight burnt smell. “Where’ve you been?”

I pressed my cheek against hers. “You make it sound like I’m late. I’m ten minutes early.”

“Is it not six o’clock yet?”

“Not yet.” As there were no fewer than three clocks in the room, her unawareness of the time seemed odd. Glancing around, I noticed an unusual absence as well. “Where’s Hildy?”

“Today is her daughter’s birthday so we’re on our own.”

Mother never flew solo in the kitchen. “Are you okay?” I asked, noticing her hands shaking as she sliced the tomatoes. “Let me do that.”

Without looking up, she dropped the knife and moved out of the way. “Fine.”

Were we having an argument that I didn’t know about? She had yet to look at me, and as she stepped away, there was no clicking of heels on the tile floor. Glancing down, I was shocked to find her feet bare.

“Where’s Franny?” I asked, thinking maybe they’d had a disagreement that had frazzled her.

“In the great room with your father and Tate.”

Nothing about this dinner was normal. Why would my sister voluntarily listen to Tate and Dad rattle on about stock prices and their latest golf scores instead of helping Mom in the kitchen? Especially knowing Hildy wasn’t here.

“Why don’t you go get her, and we can all finish getting dinner ready together?”

Shaking her head, Mom searched a series of drawers, opening and closing them one after another. “Your sister is busy.”

Okay, so we were on our own. “What are you looking for?”

“The salad tongs. Where does she keep those damn things?”

“Mom, are you okay?”

Her head snapped around and a thick curl bounced over her forehead. “I’m fine, why?”

Maybe because I'd never seen a single lock of her hair move independently of the others. Or because she wasn't wearing shoes, she had mascara on only one eye, and she was searching for salad tongs that were on the counter right in front of her.

Putting down my knife, I took Mother's hand and led her to the small table by the window where Hildy liked to have her tea. Once she was seated, I said, "What is going on?" using the same tone I would if I'd found a lost toddler at the mall.

"I'm not used to doing dinner on my own," she said, sounding much like a lost toddler. "I burnt the croutons so we need to toast more."

We would all survive one salad without croutons. "Did something happen today? You seem a little stressed." Understatement of the year.

"Your father..." Her words trailed off as she tucked the stray lock behind her ear. "It's fine. The roast and potatoes are ready and we can skip the salads."

This was an unheard of breach of protocol. One did not skip the first course. Ever. Not according to Guinevere Danvers.

Opening yet more drawers, Mother found the pot holders and opened the oven, only to step back when the heat hit her in the face.

"I'll get it." Taking the mitts before she could argue, I removed the roasting pan from the oven and set it on the stove. "Where's the serving platter?"

With a resigned sigh, she said, "I don't know. We'll put the pan in the middle of the table."

That was the last straw. Who was this woman and what had she done with my mother?

Before I could fully embrace my body snatchers theory, Franny breezed into the kitchen. "Please tell me we're ready to eat."

“Yes, we are.” Tossing a kitchen towel at Franny’s head, Mother said, “Set that in the middle of the table.” Without further instruction, she swiped the mitts, grabbed the roast pan, and turned toward the dining room. “What are you waiting for?” she asked my stunned sister. “Go.”

Franny hopped into action, and I followed behind, debating between two possibilities. Either I was in the middle of a dream and would wake up at any second or my family had lost their collective minds. Pausing in the doorway, I pinched my arm and waited. Not a dream.

This was going to be a very interesting meal.

Chapter Twenty-Two



I HAD HOPED THAT MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, WE WOULD SIT DOWN to dinner and the world would fall back to normal. That wish could best be described as a piss in the wind.

The minute I entered the dining room, I understood what was happening. Understood was the wrong word, actually. I didn't understand anything that was happening, but I did discover the source of Mother's odd behavior.

Dad was drunk. Not a little tipsy on his way to drunk, like during most dinners. He was *needs assistance to reach the table* drunk. Tate kept him upright, preventing him from veering into the sideboard. Once Dad was seated, Tate took his usual place beside him, avoiding eye contact with the rest of us. My guess was that he'd encountered Mother upon arrival and recognized the severity of the situation.

Franny's face was so tightly pinched she was in danger of swallowing her lips. She glanced from Mom to Dad and then to me with an unreadable expression. I couldn't tell if she was mad, sad, or disappointed. Likely a combination of all three.

"Where's my salad?" Dad slurred.

"We're not having salad," Mother replied. "Josephine, dish up your father's dinner."

Because the roast had gone straight from the oven to the table, the meat had not been cut, nor was there a knife available to do so. Not that I would be pointing this out. We should have skipped the dinner and had Tate help Dad upstairs

to his room. Unfortunately, no one else appeared to be on board with such a plan.

As I lifted his plate, Dad grabbed it. “Why are you taking that? It’s mine.”

“I’m going to dish up your food.”

“I can dish up my own damn food.” I didn’t recognize the man beside me, with spittle at the corner of his mouth and unfocused eyes.

If I let him attempt this on his own, there was bound to be a mess, so I used my most placating voice when I said, “Since I’m closer to the pan, it might be easier for me to reach.”

The ploy worked and he released the heavy bone China. “Go on, then.”

I broke the meat apart with my fork as the others waited in silence for their turn. Managing to pry off two good-sized chunks, I added two small purple potatoes to his plate and set it down in front of him. “Here you go.”

He dug in without bothering to thank me. Mother nodded for Franny to go next, and she dished up both hers and Tate’s food. Mother took her turn, and minutes later, we were all eating in tense silence, the only sounds those of forks on porcelain and the ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the corner. The thing needed to tick faster because I wasn’t sure how long we could maintain this level of quiet discomfort. It felt as if we were eating in a powder keg and one spark would set the whole thing off.

Dad’s fork hit his plate. “Where’s my drink?”

Spark. Lit.

“You don’t need a drink,” Mother growled.

“The hell I don’t,” Dad fired back.

“Why don’t we—”

“Not now, Josie,” Franny cut in.

I met her gaze and she shook her head.

“You’ve had enough,” Mother said to Dad. “More than enough.”

Slamming his hands on the table, he pushed up from his seat. “Goddammit, I said I want a drink.”

He didn’t make it far, crumbling to the ground after two steps. Tate moved to help him, but Franny locked a hand on his arm, keeping him in place. As Dad moaned and grumbled incomprehensibly, I glanced around, wondering why no one was taking action. They may have been fine ignoring him, but I wasn’t. Slamming my napkin onto the table, I bolted to my feet.

“Josie, sit down,” Franny said.

“Screw you,” I fired back.

Squatting beside him, I got my arm under his and helped him back to his feet. The stench of liquor made my stomach turn, and I struggled to hold his weight, but letting go would mean him hitting the floor once again. Propping him up, I looked around at my family.

“We need to get him upstairs.”

No one replied. Finally, I turned to Tate. “Please, help me get him up the steps.”

He looked to Franny, who nodded, granting her permission. If I hadn’t been tending to Dad, I would have crossed the room and slapped her off her chair.

Even with Tate’s assistance, helping Dad to his room had been difficult. At the top of the stairs, I remembered what Franny had said about our parents not sharing a room anymore. Then which one was Dad’s? Taking a guess, I motioned toward the bedroom they’d shared while I was growing up. It was obvious when I pushed open the door with one foot that I’d guessed correctly. Ties, dress shoes, and various other pieces that when put together would make up a whole suit were strewn about the floor and tossed over furniture.

We crossed to the bed, and Tate lifted him onto the mattress. Before laying him down, I helped him out of his

jacket and tie, then his shoes. One he was on his back, I loosened several buttons on his shirt, including his cuffs, and before I'd pulled the blankets up over him, he was snoring peacefully.

“Thank you,” I whispered to Tate.

“No problem.”

Anger swelled in my chest as I watched my father sleep, replaying the scene in the dining room. How could they be so callous? Had he done this to himself? Yes. Did that mean he deserved to lie on the floor like a dog? No.

“Don't be too mad at them,” Tate said. “This has been happening a lot lately.”

I spun to face him. “What's been happening?”

He pointed at Dad. “This is the fifth time I've helped get him up here in the last two weeks. I don't know what your mom does when I'm not around.”

Why didn't they tell me? “We need to get him into treatment.”

Tate ran a hand through his hair. “I suggested that, but they said this is a family issue that doesn't concern me.”

The words weren't spoken with any sort of anger or animosity, and I realized I didn't really know my brother-in-law very well. I'd always seen him as a bit of a buffoon, smiling and clueless and surfing through life on a silver platter. In that moment I realized he was much more. Tate was kind and caring and deserved a better woman than my sister. When the day came for the two to part ways—which was as certain as the sun coming up tomorrow—I knew whose side I would be on.

“Thank you, again, for all you've done. Do you mind staying up here for a while? I'm afraid he might get sick in his sleep and...”

He shook his head. “I don't mind. Good luck down there.”

Patting his arm, I said, “Thanks, I'm going to need it.”



The dining room was deserted when I returned, but nothing had been touched. Not a plate nor a fork nor the roast remained in the center of the table. I made a pass through the empty kitchen and finally found them in the front parlor. Featuring powder-blue walls, a woodburning fireplace, built-in bookshelves, and French doors that led out to a cobblestone patio, this was Mother's favorite room. She'd added a dark-blue sofa, two buttery-yellow chairs, and a large area rug with a pattern in the same two shades.

Above the fireplace hung the last family portrait we'd taken, shot the summer after my senior year of college. None of us were smiling, and I realized we'd been dysfunctional for far longer than any of us would willingly admit.

You see what you want to see.

Franny had been right. I'd chosen to ignore what we'd all become. At the same time, they were *my family*, and I would take whatever measures necessary to protect each and every one of them, even if it meant going against the others to do it.

"We need to discuss rehabilitation options," I said, not bothering to even have the argument about what had happened tonight. This problem was bigger than one night.

"Don't be dramatic," Mother snapped, her bare foot bobbing up and down as she lounged in a yellow high-back chair, a snifter of wine in her hand.

"You don't think what happened tonight was dramatic?" I asked. "Dad needs help."

Franny dropped onto the blue sofa. "He needs to stop drinking."

"Yes," I agreed, "but he needs help to do that."

Mother scoffed. "Danvers do not go to rehab, Josephine. Tomorrow, I'll have Hildy remove all the alcohol in the house. That will take care of it."

She couldn't really be that naive. "What about at the club? Are you going to tell them not to serve him?"

"I would never embarrass him that way."

Which meant she knew he'd make a scene, and she would never allow him to embarrass *her* that way.

"This isn't something we can ignore," I argued. "Or keep ignoring, I should say. We've all watched this happen and said nothing."

"What do you mean *we all*?" Franny said. "You're never around to see anything."

I'd had enough of her shit tonight. "What is your problem? Am I supposed to stop my life and move back in here to make you happy? Is that what you want from me? Because last I checked, you don't live here either."

"I still come see them."

Did I move out of state and no one told me?

"I'm here almost every Sunday. You make it sound as if I go months without showing my face and that's bullshit."

"Josephine, I will not have that language in my house," Mother warned.

But she'd allow my father to drown in scotch to protect her precious family image. Nice to see her priorities were in order.

Taking a deep breath, I tried again. "We cannot ignore Dad's condition. He's clearly an alcoholic, and if we don't get him the help he needs, he's going to drink himself to death. Saving him is more important than protecting the Danvers name."

Neither woman appeared moved by my statement, and watching them stare into nothingness in silence drained what little energy I had left. I'd had a long week, bouncing back and forth between Hullabaloo and the bakery, plus we'd all attended Megan's game the previous afternoon and gone out for drinks after.

The night's events put my own drinking into prospective. How often did I turn to alcohol because I'd had a hard day, was stressed, or with the excuse that I needed it to unwind? If I wasn't careful, I'd be on the same path as my father, if I wasn't already.

"Decide what you're going to do. I'll be researching rehabilitations centers, and if I have to go around the two of you to make this happen, then I'll do it."

"You don't have the power to make that decision," Franny argued.

Ignoring her, I headed for the door. "I'm giving you a week to decide, then I'm taking action."



I didn't want to see or talk to anyone after I left my parents' house, but there was no ignoring the message that came in with a ding as I pulled into the apartment parking lot. The call for a group chat.

These weren't your usual group chats of today. Established during our college years, if any member of our inner circle encountered an emergency or situation that demanded immediate attention, they could call a group chat, at which point, the rest of us would drop everything and report for duty, so to speak.

At least Becca had been the one to call the chat, meaning I didn't have to turn the car around and go back out. I went up to my place to change first, since I smelled like a bar rag at last call, and when I walked into Becca's apartment, the chatter was so loud no one heard me come in.

"This better be good," Lindsey was saying. "It's a school night you know."

"Could you be patient for once in your life?" Becca replied.

Not only was Lindsey the hard-ass, the protector, and the most grounded member of the group, but she was also the

worst driver, known to display disturbing levels of road rage. She and Becca had known each other since middle school, and they bickered more like sisters than best friends. A thought that made me wish Franny and I were that close.

“Hey, Josie,” said Megan as she walked out of the kitchen with a bottle of water. “Do you want a drink? I can open a bottle of wine.”

I wasn’t proud of the fact that even on a Sunday evening, she assumed I’d want wine over anything else. “A bottle of water is good, thanks.”

“You’ve got it.”

“What’s this about?” I asked, stepping into the living room.

Donna scooted forward on the couch. “Now that you’re here we can find out.”

Becca stood and hobbled over to stand next to her chair. “All right, all right, everyone take a seat. Here, Josie, you can sit here.”

Megan handed me my water as I headed for the chair, then once we were all settled, four sets of curious eyes stared at Becca. She clasped her hands together on the handle of her scooter and took a deep breath. The moment I saw her lips curl into a smile, I knew what was coming.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, as if unable to hold the words in any longer.

The room erupted, as expected, though I struggled to muster up as much enthusiasm as the others. Not that I wasn’t ecstatic about the news, but the family drama had drained my emotional well and there simply wasn’t much left to pull from.

“What did Jacob say?” asked Megan.

“He’s very happy. We both are.” I sensed a *but* coming. “But... there are a few things to work out.”

“Like what?” Lindsey asked.

Becca rubbed her forehead. “There’s the obvious. We aren’t married yet.”

Donna twisted the top off her water bottle. “That’s an antiquated system propagated by society to keep women beholden to men and to give them built-in caretakers for the rest of their lives. You don’t need some certificate to become parents.”

We collectively turned her way and I couldn’t help but ask, “Don’t you make your living off of that antiquated system?”

She leaned back in her seat. “This is about Becca, not me. Let’s stay focused.”

Megan laughed. “Your turn will come.”

“It isn’t nice to threaten people like that,” Donna mumbled.

When Becca teetered on her scooter, Lindsey hopped up off the couch. “Sit down already, woman.” Once our hostess was seated, Lindsey asked, “Do you *want* to be married?”

“I always thought I would be before I had kids.”

I recalled our previous conversation. “You told me that you’d both agreed that if it happened now, you’d be okay with it.”

Megan had not gotten this message. “Wait, then this isn’t an accident?”

Hands clasped in her lap, the new mom-to-be confessed, “Not an accident. We sort of decided since I was there for two weeks that we might as well...”

“Boff your way into parenthood?” Lindsey finished for her. “That’s one way to spend your recovery.”

“Though I’m six weeks along, so I was already pregnant before I hurt my ankle.”

Donna did some fast math. “So that’s a... mid-April due date?”

Becca nodded. “Which leads to the second reason I called you all here. To keep things stable for Sophie—and because

we're both ready for the till-death-do-us-part part—Jacob and I would like to get married at Christmastime. Will you all help me make that happen?"

As if she had to ask.

Much screaming, laughter, and a few happy tears followed as we attacked the wedding plans like generals going into a major battle. As an event planner, Becca knew that she'd have to make compromises. Planning a wedding in under three months would take precision, determination, and a miracle or two, but if anyone could pull it off, it was us.

When I finally crawled into my bed that night, I was grateful for such good friends and for the distraction that had kept me from curling into a sobbing mess hours before. I had no idea what the future held for my family, but I had not been bluffing. I *would* go around them to get Dad the help he needed, because letting him die when I could have done something simply was not an option.

Chapter Twenty-Three



THE WEEK FLEW BY AND I HARDLY MANAGED TO CATCH MY breath at the bakery before Chelsea tossed something else my way. Each new challenge forced me to dig deeper for undiscovered skills I never knew I had. Chelsea's system was good, but I knew I could make it better, and since we'd agreed I would continue as her permanent bookkeeping provider, I had the leeway to shape her software how I saw fit.

By the end of the day on Friday, I'd laid eyes on Miles only twice, had tossed down enough cupcakes to consider adding elastic waist pants to my wardrobe, and had not heard a single word from my mother and sister. Oddly enough, Tate had sent a text to say that he'd been keeping an eye on Dad at the club and that this week had been better than the previous one. I hadn't asked Tate to become my spy on the inside, but I appreciated the update.

"Enjoy your weekend," Chelsea said as I gathered my things to leave.

The gleam in her eye made me laugh. "It's a first date," I reminded her. "You can take that naughty look off of your face right now."

"He's sent me seven texts in the last two hours asking if you were ready to leave yet. I don't think he's going to make it until tomorrow." As if on cue, my phone dinged with a message. Chelsea rolled her eyes and said, "Told you."

Instead of something flirty, as I expected, the message simply said, *Come to the office when you get done*. Earlier in

the week I'd found more suspicious transactions that had taken place not long before Kayla disappeared. Because I'd been so busy with the bakery, all I'd had time to do was hand them over. Maybe he'd discovered the source, and we needed to check them against the software.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but this looks like business." Pulling on my coat, I added, "Do not be lifting any more of those flour buckets over the weekend. I've made sure Arvid knows to keep an eye on you."

The dang things were twenty-five pounds each, and I'd caught her carrying two at a time. Arvid was her assistant baker who would be running the kitchen while Chelsea was out on maternity leave, though I didn't envy him the task of keeping her *out* of the bakery.

"I was dragging, not lifting," she defended.

"That's probably worse." No wonder the little dude kicked all the time. "I'll see you on Monday. Have a good weekend."

"Wait." She crossed to the walk-in cooler and returned with a white box. "Don't forget your cupcakes."

During lunch the day before, I'd revealed my love for mint chocolate chip ice cream. Like the doll she was, Chelsea had presented me with my own mint chocolate chip cupcakes upon my morning arrival.

"You're spoiling me rotten," I said, taking the box. "But I'm not complaining."

The chuckle made her rounded belly bounce. "I didn't think you would."

At the car I sent a text to let Miles know I was on my way. Whatever new developments I might learn about Kayla, at least I had sweets to share that might make the news a little easier to swallow.



The Grow, Grow, Grow Your Goat sign was the only light when I entered the Hullabaloo office, casting a green glow over the walls and stuffed peacock beneath it. The footsteps from above let me know Miles was in his office, and I climbed the steps with cupcakes in hand. At the end of the hall, I leaned into the office and spotted him working at his computer with nothing more than his dim desk lamp to light the room.

Odd to find him here on a Friday night instead of out overseeing a party. Whatever he'd discovered about Kayla must have been serious.

"Hello," I said, stepping inside. "You need more light or you're going to strain your eyes."

Miles spun around at my greeting, then rose from his chair without a word, crossed the room, and cupped my cheeks with his hands. Before I could think, his mouth was on mine, gently tasting and teasing, before he pulled away and pressed his forehead to mine.

"I've been dying to do that."

Breathless and a bit stunned, my voice came out as a croak. "I can tell."

Lifting his head, he reached to take my hands and noticed the bakery box. "What is this?"

I held up my gift. "Chelsea made me mint chocolate chip cupcakes."

His face fell. "You like mint chocolate chip?"

If he made one dumb crack about toothpaste... "Yes, I do."

"I knew you were perfect." Another quick kiss, and then he dragged me to his desk where the chair I normally used at my table had been rolled over and placed next to his. Beside them was a bottle of champagne in a small bucket of ice that was sitting on a plant stand. "I wanted to celebrate," he said. "The end, well, almost the end of our working relationship, and the start of something new."

Naima had been right. The man *was* a hopeless romantic.

After Sunday, I'd put myself on an alcohol hiatus, so I said, "Do you mind if I stick with water?"

He didn't question my request. "That's fine." Crossing to the mini fridge in the corner, he returned with two bottles and handed one to me. Removing the top off his own, he held it up in a toast. "To random encounters and new beginnings."

"Hear, hear." I tapped my bottle lightly against his, still curious how he had the night off. "I thought we agreed on doing this tomorrow?"

He swallowed and said, "About that... Half the setup crew is sick again so I can't take the night off. I'm sorry."

Though I'd been excited about the date, I didn't mind a rain check. The mental fortitude required to get through the week had been enough to wear me out. Plus, I had information to discuss with Mom and Franny, and their concession week was up in two days. Most likely they thought I was bluffing, and we would all act as if nothing ever happened.

If that was the case, they were going to be highly disappointed as I'd found a place ready to take Dad as early as next Wednesday.

"It's okay," I said, toying with the label on my bottle. "We can do it another night."

A warm fingertip lifted my chin until I was gazing into concerned green eyes. "What's wrong?"

I hadn't meant to be so transparent. "A family thing. It's nothing."

"The look on your face says it's more than nothing. Anything I can do to help?"

My earlier fears about how Miles would feel about my family returned. I'd been worried he might not be comfortable around them because of our history and the high expectations that came with being associated with a Danvers. After last weekend, an entirely new reality crept in. What was I doing attempting to start a relationship while my family was falling apart?

All of my ridiculous, shallow concerns about him fitting in and earning Mother's approval, when I should be considering the fairness of bringing him into such a mess. There was never any question about whether Miles was good enough for them. *They* weren't good enough for *him*.

"Do you know anything about my family?" I asked.

His brow furrowed in thought. "I know your Dad is pretty high up in Holbrook Investment Group and that your family's been a big deal in the city for a long time."

"How long have you known that?"

"Josie, I grew up in Pittsburgh. I've heard of the Danvers. As for your Dad, his title is on his business card." Taking my hand, he asked, "Why does any of this matter?"

Did it matter? I hadn't believed so, but now it felt as if we didn't know each other at all. Miles had never once asked about my family or personal life, and though he'd been open enough about his childhood, he hadn't even bothered to let me know that this office building was also his home.

"Why didn't you tell me that you live here?"

He sighed. "I see Chelsea's been talking."

"Why didn't *you* tell me?" I repeated.

"It never came up," he replied. "I'm not ashamed of where I live, if that's what you're implying."

Was I? Had I believed that he was keeping this secret out of fear that I wouldn't go out with him if I knew? Once again, my arrogant assumption said more about me than it did about him.

Chest tight, I paced away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to suggest that." Rubbing the back of my neck, I paced the other way. "This isn't a good time to do this. I've got a lot on my mind, and I've been spending long hours at the bakery." Starting my day at six every morning was taking a toll, especially since I hadn't slept much since Sunday. "I should go home."

"You don't look like you should be alone."

Alone was exactly what I needed. “I’ll be fine. Really. Sleep will help.”

Sleep wouldn’t do anything to fix the gaping alcoholic wound in my family, but I wasn’t ready to share that truth with anyone just yet.

“At least let me follow you to make sure you get home okay.”

A sweet gesture, but unnecessary.

“I’ll be fine.” No sooner did I get the words out than my phone rang. I pulled it from my purse to see Franny’s name on the screen. Rejecting the call, I shoved it back in. This was not the time. “Good luck with the party tomorrow.”

The phone rang again, and again it was Franny. She needed to catch the damn hint. We could have talked anytime this week, but now she expected me to drop everything on a Friday night to have this conversation? Screw that.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Miles asked, walking with me to the door.

“I promise. I’m just a little tired.”

The ringing started again, and he said, “Maybe you should get that.”

This time the caller was Becca, so I answered. “Hey, can I call you back when I get home?”

“Josie, why aren’t you answering Franny’s calls?”

Un-freaking-believable. “Because I don’t want to talk to her right now. She shouldn’t be calling you to tattle on me.”

“There’s been an accident, Jos. That’s why she’s calling. Your parents were in a car accident.”

My heart stopped and the cupcakes hit the floor. “What? Where? Are they okay?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s good. They’re at UPMC Shadyside.”

“I need to get there.” Ending the call, I ran out of the office.

“Josie, wait,” Miles said, following me. “What’s going on?”

“It’s my parents,” I replied, racing down the stairs. “I can’t talk. They’ve been in an accident and I have to get there.”

He caught me as I rounded the corner into the reception area. “I’ll take you. You can’t drive like this.”

Tugging my arm, I tried prying his hand away. “I’m fine. Let me go. I have to go.”

Miles took me by the shoulders, holding me in place. “Josie, I’m not letting you drive when you’re this upset. What hospital is it?”

A hot tear rolled down my cheek. “UPMC Shadyside.”

With a steady nod, he took my hand. “Okay, then. Let’s go.”



I expected him to drop me off at the main entrance, but instead he went straight to visitor parking. Too anxious to argue, I was out of the car before he’d cut the engine, and minutes later, with me frantically rushing here and there and Miles patiently asking directions, we located the room number Franny had given me on the way. She’d said Dad was in surgery, and that Mom had some broken bones and a head injury, but they were both still alive. In a cryptic tone, she said she’d tell me the rest when I got there.

“How are they?” I asked once we reached the room, which turned out to be Mother’s.

She was sleeping and Franny shushed me to speak softer. “Both bones in her right forearm are broken, and she has a concussion from hitting her head against the passenger window.” Cutting her eyes to Miles, she said, “What’s *he* doing here?”

“He drove me. What about Dad? Is he going to be okay?”

With pursed lips, she said to Miles, “Thank you for bringing her, but you can leave now.”

“I can stick around.”

“That isn’t necessary,” Franny growled.

“Forget about Miles,” I snapped. “Tell me about Dad.”

She crossed her arms. “I’ll tell you after he leaves.”

For crying out loud. “Why can’t you tell me now?”

Jaw tight, she stared at me in silence, brows arched as if I should be able to read her mind. A machine beside Mother’s bed beeped away as the silence continued, and I finally got the message.

“Miles,” I said, turning his way, “I need you to go.”

“Are you sure?”

“She told you to go,” Franny hissed.

“I’m talking to Josie, not you.” Rubbing my arms, he softened his voice. “I don’t mind staying.”

Anxious to get him away from my sister before she said something that would make him never want to speak to me again, I said, “You need to go. Now.”

“I—”

“Please, Miles, just leave.”

Dropping his hands to his sides, he straightened and stepped back. “Call me if you need anything.”

Franny huffed and I wished I could make her leave instead, but since that wasn’t an option, I bit my cheek and said nothing. Once he was gone, I turned on her. “Why do you have to be such a bitch?”

“What the hell are you doing with that guy on a Friday night? Please, tell me you aren’t dating him.”

Who I did or did not date was none of her business, and I had no plans to stand around debating how much better Miles

was than any of the men she and Mother would deem worthy of my time.

“He’s gone now, isn’t he? Now tell me what happened to Dad,” I ordered.

She dropped into the blue vinyl chair at the foot of Mother’s bed. “They’re trying to stop the internal bleeding. I’m not sure if they’ll deal with the broken shoulder now or wait until he’s more stable.”

“Internal bleeding?”

“That’s what the nurse said. They were already working on him when I got here.”

I stepped up to Mom’s bedside to examine the bandage around her head. Her right eye was swollen and red, and there were scratches on the side of her forehead that I could see.

“Has she been awake at all?”

“Not since I got here. They’re keeping her drugged up for the pain, and she should go into surgery for her arm in an hour or so.”

Realizing there was someone missing, I asked, “Where’s Tate?”

Her eyes dropped to the floor. “He’s dealing with the police.”

Oh God. “This was Dad’s fault, wasn’t it?”

She nodded.

“He was drunk.”

Another nod.

Closing my eyes, I asked, “Was anyone else hurt?”

Franny sighed, rubbing her temple. “They took the woman to Presbyterian. I don’t know how bad she is.”

If there hadn’t been a chair behind me, I’d have hit the floor. “He nearly killed a woman?” I whispered.

“A young mother. Or so they assume. There were car seats in the back of the minivan, but thankfully no children were in

them.”

This had to be a bad dream. Any minute I would wake up and all of this would have been a nightmare. A warning of what *could* happen if we didn’t do something.

But there was no *could* about this. Why had I agreed to wait a week?

“Why did Mother let him drive?”

Clearing her throat, my sister shook her head. “I guess we’ll have to ask her that.”

“We should call Presbyterian and see how she is.”

“Absolutely not,” Franny said. “The lawyer says we aren’t to talk to anyone.”

“A woman could die,” I argued. “All because we *ignored* the fact that our father has a damn disease and needs help. Screw the lawyer. We should at least check on her.”

Rising from the chair, she rushed over to close the door. “Keep your voice down. Don’t you understand? Daddy could face criminal charges. Even if she lives, this is serious, but if she doesn’t, we’re talking vehicular homicide. So no, not screw the lawyer. The lawyer is the one who is going to get Daddy out of this.”

Out of this? “What do you think he’s going to do? *Buy* his way out? You don’t kill a woman and walk away.”

“I’m sure the lawyer will use whatever means necessary,” Franny mumbled. “Let’s hope she *doesn’t* die, and we’ll deal with the rest later.”

In that moment, I wanted to be anywhere but in that room. Anywhere away from my callous, selfish sister. But there was no getting away from this. This was who we were. The great Danvers family.

Except there was nothing great about us, and I doubted there ever was.

Chapter Twenty-Four



COME MORNING, I HAD A CRICK IN MY NECK FROM SLEEPING sitting up and would have traded my car for a toothbrush. At some point during the night, the police had arrived to take Mother's statement, but she'd been in surgery. Since neither Franny nor I had been present during the accident, there was nothing we could tell them. I checked my phone for news about the other victim, and as far as I could tell, she'd made it through surgery and was expected to recover.

Thank God. Not for Dad's sake, but for her own and for her family.

Tate had taken Franny home around three in the morning. He'd had Dad's car towed once the police had finished with it, and based solely on the news story photos I found online, the thing was a mangled mess. I didn't want to think about how fast Dad must have been going when he'd plowed into the side of the minivan.

Dad made it through surgery but remained in ICU. I'd gotten to see him for a few minutes, but between the bandages and all the tubes, I could have been visiting a stranger and not realized it. They did repair his shoulder while he was under, and according to the surgeon, they'd managed to stop all the bleeding. He'd ended our brief encounter saying that Dad was lucky to be alive, and I could tell by the look on his face that he knew exactly what had caused the accident.

I nodded in silence since there wasn't anything else to say. He *was* lucky, in more ways than one.

The sun had barely come up as I scrolled through my phone, checking for any updates, when Mother finally woke up.

“Frances?” she mumbled, her lips swollen and voice hoarse.

“I’m here, Mom,” I said, hopping out of the chair. “It’s Josephine.”

Trying to lick her lips, she said, “Water.”

The nurse had left a small cup with a straw on the rolling cart during the night, saying I could give her some if she asked.

“Here you go.”

She sipped from the straw, then laid her head back down. “Where’s your father?”

“He’s in ICU. They took him into surgery last night, and the doctor says he’s going to be okay.” A bit of an understatement. What he actually said was that Dad would need constant monitoring for the next forty-eight hours and that if he survived that long with no more bleeding, then he’d still need months of therapy for his shoulder, which might never be the same again.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I asked, “Mom, what happened last night?”

She didn’t answer right away and her eyes were closed so I thought maybe she’d fallen back to sleep.

“We had dinner at the club,” she murmured. “Then we were driving home. Your father was angry that I wouldn’t let him stay and have his cigar.”

I wanted to ask if he’d been drinking, but I knew enough about legal matters to realize that if she said yes, then gave a different answer to the police, I’d have to be the one to tell the truth. Then again, there was no avoiding the science. Surely they’d tested Dad’s blood and knew exactly how much he’d had to drink before getting behind the wheel.

That was for the lawyers to figure out.

“How do you feel?” I asked instead.

As if unaware of the cast, she tried to lift her right arm. “What...”

“It’s broken,” I explained. “And you have a nasty bump on your head so don’t move around too much.”

Eyes closed again, she whispered, “I shouldn’t have let him drive.”

“We’ll get it all worked out, Mom. Right now, you need to rest and focus on recovering.”

Several seconds passed as machines beeped and muffled voices could be heard from the nurses’ station down the hall. I rubbed the back of Mom’s hand, grateful that no matter what was ahead, at least they were both still alive.

Glancing back up to her face, I noticed a tear run down Mother’s cheek. “Is that woman okay?” she asked. She must have still been conscious at the scene.

“The news reports say she’s going to make it.”

Another tear followed the first. “Thank goodness.”



The next few days passed in a blur, while also lasting an eternity. I spent nearly all my time at the hospital, going between Mom and Dad’s separate rooms. Thankfully, they weren’t far from each other. Mother had been asked if they wanted to share a room and had given a clear and concise no. She’d asked about him a couple of times, but once she knew he’d come out of ICU and was recovering down the hall, the questions stopped.

The police had come and gone, never permitted inside the hospital rooms without a lawyer present. I’d been asked to step out during the interviews, which was fine with me. Chelsea had sent a concerned text on Saturday, and I’d let her know it looked like both parents would be fine, but I couldn’t say for sure when I would return to work. Yet another perk of being

my own boss was not having to request time off. I could simply take what I needed.

It wasn't until Sunday that I'd found the time to call Miles, but he hadn't answered, so I fired off a text with the same information I'd given Chelsea and that I'd let him know when things calmed down. The one-word response of *Fine* worried me. Franny had been awful that first night, and I hadn't been at my best to handle the situation. I couldn't even fully remember what all had been said. Only that I'd been anxious for him to leave to get him away from my hateful sister.

On Tuesday afternoon, I left Franny and Tate on visiting duty while I made a quick trip home to shower and change. I wasn't sure if Miles was in the office, since he hadn't answered my call that morning or returned the text asking if we could meet. Since he spent a lot of time at the workshop, and it was closer to my house, I tried there first.

"Hello?" I called, ducking inside the open garage door. The interior was dark enough to force my eyes to adjust, making it difficult to see when I first walked in.

"Hello?" came the answer back, but I couldn't tell where the voice was coming from.

"It's Josie," I yelled, blinking. The voice did not respond, and a feeling of unease danced up my spine. No calls and no texts for three days. Today he didn't answer or respond to my message.

Shit, what did I say on Friday?

"Is Miles here?" I asked, hoping the dread was no more than my overactive imagination creating problems where none existed.

"I'm here," he said from my right. My eyes had finally adjusted, and it was immediately obvious that my imagination had not been running away at all. Miles was not happy to see me.

"I hope it's okay that I'm here. I tried to call."

"What do you need?"

I needed him to tell me what the heck I'd done wrong. "Can we talk?"

He nodded toward the stairs, which led to who knew where since I'd never been here before. "I'm working."

Now I was getting annoyed. "I'm pretty sure your boss would be fine with you taking a break."

Capitulating the slightest bit, Miles shifted and crossed his arms. "How are your parents?"

The story had been all over the news, including the part about Dad being under the influence. The family had not made an official statement other than the lawyer saying that we were fully cooperating with the investigation. The other driver, whom I now knew was named Danica Ferrenzi, had already left the hospital, and I was certain a settlement would be offered, though I couldn't guess for how much.

"They're going to be okay. Dad has a ways to go, but at least he's alive."

"Good for his sake that the other driver is, too." So he had been following the story.

Feeling like an idiot standing in the middle of a garage bay, I asked, "Can we sit down somewhere?"

"Josie, you don't need to do this."

Confused, I said, "Do what?"

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he said, "I got the message. There's no need to let me down easy or however you planned to do it. I'm a big boy. I'll be fine."

I looked around, thinking maybe there was a hidden camera somewhere. "Is this a joke? Because if it is, I'm not laughing."

"Wasn't the joke on me?" he said, visibly angry. "I should have figured it out when you insisted on waiting the two weeks. Then all that stuff about who you are and who your family is. It must have taken a lot for you to consider dating someone so far beneath you."

The son of a...

“I wanted to wait the two weeks so that the lines between our professional and our personal relationships weren’t blurred. Which is exactly the reason I gave you. And my questions Friday night had nothing to do with you being *beneath me*. The reality is that my family is a dysfunctional mess. My father is an alcoholic and has been for years. My sister is in a loveless marriage to a man who deserves someone way better than she is, but her head is too far up her own ass to see what’s right in front of her. My mother has been barely tolerating my father for years because Danvers don’t get divorced, and the only reason he was behind the wheel on Friday night was because she didn’t want to make a scene at the club by wresting the keys away from him.” Taking a breath, I added, “So excuse me for asking you to leave the hospital before my sister could truly insult you and so that I could find out what happened, because she was never going to tell me so long as anyone outside of the family was around.”

A muscle twitched in Miles’ jaw. “I heard what she said after I walked out.”

I racked my brain trying to remember. “What? What did she say?”

“She asked if we were dating.”

The conversation came back to me. Franny was being an ass, and I refused to answer her. “That’s what you’re mad about? That I didn’t declare us a couple to my judgmental sister while my father was having lifesaving surgery? Are you serious right now?”

Miles closed the distance between us. “You *did* answer. You said, ‘He’s gone now, isn’t he?’ Meaning if we were dating, you wouldn’t have made me leave.”

By all that was holy, this man was going to drive me off a freaking cliff. “Like I said, Franny was not going to tell me what happened to our parents until you left the room. That’s what I meant. That you were gone, and she needed to tell me instead of trying to push me into a conversation not worth

having. My family has very specific ideas about whom I should date, and I'm sure you can imagine what they are."

"Your sister has made it abundantly clear that those ideas don't include me."

"They don't, but only because all they care about is money and lineage and the proper education. But that's not what *I* care about. I want a man who hears me. A man who can stand on his own while not being threatened by a woman who does the same. I want someone who can make me laugh, challenge me to see life in a new way, and who isn't afraid to call me on my bullshit when I need it." Furious, hurt, and on the verge of tears, I added, "I thought that man was you. I guess I was wrong."

Without another word, I left the same way I'd come in and managed to hold off the tears until I pulled away.



"I'm sorry," Becca said, patting my head as I cried in her lap. "Maybe the next guy won't be such a jerk."

Miles wasn't a jerk. Until today.

"There won't be a next guy," I whined around a hiccup. "Dating is for idiots."

She handed me another tissue. "That isn't true. Megan and I found good guys, and you can, too."

"You found the last two on earth. There aren't any more." I blew my nose loudly and curled up tighter into a ball. "I can't believe he thought I was that shallow."

"He was hurt, that's all. You said Franny was pretty awful."

She was. I knew she was going to ruin this for me, but Miles should have known better. After all those weeks of getting to know me, how could he think such horrible things?

"Where is Donna?" I asked, sitting up. "It doesn't take this long to run up to my apartment and come back."

I'd decided to put a hiatus on my alcohol hiatus for one night, and Donna had agreed to run upstairs to grab a bottle of wine from my pantry. One bottle split three ways was better than me drinking the whole thing alone in my bathtub.

"I'm sure she'll be back any second." Becca carried the small trash can stuffed full of used tissues to the larger can in the kitchen and dumped it. "We should have had her grab a box of tissues. At this rate we're going to need another one."

"I'll run up and get it." I put on my slippers and flung the front door open only to find Donna reaching for the doorknob on the other side. And she wasn't alone.

"What are you doing with *him*?" I asked, confused as to how she and Miles would be together.

Donna cleared her throat. "He showed up at your door and made a compelling case as to why I should help him find you."

Becca stepped up behind me. "Who is that?"

"Miles," Donna answered, tugging Becca into the hall. "We're going to let them talk while we go raid Josie's fridge. She's got cupcakes."

The pair took off down the hall before I could argue, leaving me and Miles staring at each other through the open doorway. He wore a white button-down shirt with what looked like brand-new jeans. Same old black Vans, of course.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

I seriously considered slamming the door in his face, but the *compelling case* Donna had mentioned piqued my curiosity. "What did you tell Donna to get her to bring you down here?"

"Mostly that I'm an idiot."

Then we agreed on one thing.

"I'll give you five minutes," I said, leaving the door open as I walked away. Before I reached the sofa, it clicked shut behind me and I braced for whatever came next, hardening my heart so I wouldn't get hurt again.

“I was an ass earlier,” he said. “I was insecure, and I let that cloud my judgment.”

Mildly appeased, I said, “Yes, you were.”

“You aren’t an easy woman to get to know, Josie.”

One step forward, two steps back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s an observation, not a complaint. I like that there are layers with you. First you see the competent businesswoman, then you get to the next layer and discover someone who really cares about what they do and the people around them. If you’re lucky, you get to the layer that reveals the passion simmering beneath the always composed outer shell, but the problem with outer shells is that sometimes they crack. I think you see those cracks as flaws, but to me, the cracks are where the real beauty lies. Vulnerability isn’t easy for you, is it?”

Feeling dissected, I shook my head. “I don’t like being vulnerable.”

“Why?” he asked, his voice gentle.

I had a feeling he knew the answer better than I did, but I went along. “Because it’s a sign of weakness.”

“It’s a sign of being human,” he countered. “But there’s also nothing wrong with being weak. We all feel that from time to time, and if we’re lucky, we have someone beside us willing to hold us up.”

My chest ached and I took a seat on the ottoman. “I don’t want to have to be held up.”

Miles closed the space between us, squatting down to my level. “I hate to break this to you, but you’re as human as the rest of us.”

Exhaling, I wiped my nose on my sleeve. “That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Dropping to the floor, he leaned his elbows on my knees. “How about we make a deal? You go on pretending that you’re invincible, and I won’t mention it when you’re not. I’ll

just be there, whenever you need a hand or a pillar or someone to call you on your bullshit. How's that sound?"

"That sounds good," I said with a snuffle, "but what do I do for you in return?"

Grin sliding into place, he said, "I'll let you buy me a whole new wardrobe."

The laughter burst out of me. "You'd really do that?"

"I'd do anything for you, Josie."

He needed to know what that really entailed. "The next few months are probably going to be pretty tough for my family. Lots of news stories, and formal charges will likely be filed. Mother might not be kind at first, and you already know what Franny is like. Are you sure you want to deal with all of that?"

Rising up high enough to place a kiss on my forehead, he tucked a loose lock behind my ear. "Like I said, anything for you. We'll get through it one day at a time, so long as we're together. Okay?"

Brushing my thumb across his precious cheek, I nodded. "Okay."

Chapter Twenty-Five



“WHERE’S MY SPRIG? I CAN’T FIND MY SPRIG!”

The Halloween party was in less than an hour and I was missing the most crucial part of my costume.

“I never should have agreed to this,” Miles said from the bathroom.

Because setup had taken so long, we’d only had enough time to rush back to his place to get dressed. In a few days, we’d be moving him into his new apartment, but for now, his single bedroom off the office kitchen had to do.

I still couldn’t believe I’d never noticed the door beside the fridge.

“This costume was your idea, remember?” I said, dabbing more green paint on my face.

“I clearly didn’t think it through,” he said.

Miles squeezed through the bathroom door and stood with his arms out. I turned to see what the problem was and instantly doubled over in laughter.

“You look like the poop emoji,” I said once I could take in enough air to speak.

“It’s supposed to be a chocolate chip.”

Thank goodness I’d taken the mint half of the costumes.

“I’m sure the kids will get that,” I choked out, knowing full well I was lying.

He sat down on the bed. “We have to think of something else.”

Was he kidding? “We have less than an hour. You wanted to go as mint chocolate chip, and that’s what we’re doing.”

“I look like a giant turd,” he argued. “Maybe I can turn this into an ice cream container.”

Dropping the green makeup onto the makeshift vanity, I stomped over to the bed. “There’s no time to change now, and if you did manage to turn that turd into ice cream, then my costume wouldn’t make any sense.” Leaning to the right, I spotted my sprig on the floor between the bed and the window. “There it is.”

Miles resorted to begging. “Josie, you can’t make me do this. The kids are going to laugh at me all night.”

Ignoring his pleas, I lined my sprig up with the sticky strips on my leotard and stuck it in place from chin to knees. “Your life’s passion is to make children happy. Think of how much fun they’re going to have following the giant turd around.”

“Stop calling it a turd. It’s a chocolate chip.”

“Of course it is.”

As I checked my hair in the mirror, he walked up behind me until both of our faces were in the reflection. “If they don’t know that I’m a chocolate chip, then no one will know what you are either. They’re going to think you’re parsley, and no one likes parsley.”

Damn it, he had a point.

Meeting his gaze in the glass, I said, “What do you propose we do?”

“There are pirate costumes downstairs. We could be changed in minutes.”

Checking the clock, I ripped off my sprig. “We need to hurry.”



After the last month, a party where I could be unrecognizable was exactly what I needed.

Reporters had been hounding my parents' house since the day police filed formal charges against Dad, including driving under the influence, reckless operation of a motor vehicle, and DUI aggravated assault. The most likely punishment, according to the lawyers, would be a substantial fine and the loss of his license. We'd already determined that he would have a full-time driver going forward—even if they'd have let him keep his license—and the club was under strict orders *not* to serve him alcohol for any reason.

Dad was on a very short leash and participating in outpatient treatment for alcoholism.

Thankfully, the other driver made a full recovery, and a settlement had been reached to cover all her medical costs, plus the replacement of her vehicle, with a substantial additional bonus that would be a good start to her children's college funds.

Because we'd agreed to face the situation as a family, I'd endured the barrage of reporters and cameras camped at the end of my parents' driveway several times, which resulted in my face appearing on numerous websites and in print publications. Miles had visited the house with me and had been deemed everything from my bodyguard to our gardener. Thankfully, he found these presumptions amusing.

Mother had changed after the accident. Maybe it was the brush with death, but she became nicer, less uptight, and even calmer. She and Dad spent long hours each evening talking in the great room, and according to Hildy, she'd been spending the night in his room since he came home from the hospital.

Franny was still a pill, but once I'd told her that she could either accept Miles or take a flying leap off a short pier, she chose to at least be cordial. Of course, Mother's birthday party was off the table, for obvious reasons.

Even the Kayla situation had worked itself out, when the delinquent assistant returned to town and not only offered an apology, but negotiated a payment plan to reimburse Miles for all of her personal expenses charged to his account. She wasn't offered her old job back, but all parties were happy with the resolution, and Kendra had even taken over the bookkeeping duties.

The Halloween party was held at an area rec center and all the children in the area were welcome to attend for free. Because of the sheer magnitude of the event, all the girls volunteered to participate, some passing out candy and others running different games.

"How is it going?" I asked Becca, who was handling the welcome table, where every child who entered the building got a tote bag, glow stick, and the candy of their choice. She was dressed as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, complete with sparkling red shoes.

"Great," she said, yelling to be heard over the earsplitting screams and laughter surrounding us. "I can't get over how cute all the costumes are. I've seen everything from a bumblebee to a fighting turtle, with countless princesses tossed in between."

"Do you need a refill on the candy?" I was pretty sure Miles had ordered a metric ton of the stuff.

She shook her head. "My scarecrow has already gone off to get some." That was Jacob.

I gave her a thumbs-up and moved on to the games. Donna and Lindsey were running the ring toss, while Megan and Ryan handled the pin the tail on the Steeler booth. Why anyone thought football players would have tails I didn't know, but the kids looked to be loving it, and the team had donated small bright-yellow megaphones as prizes, which many kids were using to make the party even louder.

"How are we doing, matey?" asked Miles, sliding up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist.

“My booty is about beat,” I replied. “You did a great job in here. The transformation is amazing.”

The gymnasium had a haunted corner for the older kids, which Sam and Evan were running and I would be avoiding at all costs. The row of games along one wall could have been straight out of a traveling carnival, and Miles had even thought to include a ball pit for the tiny ones to enjoy.

Chelsea was set up in the far corner, with more glow in the dark goodies than I thought was possible, and Kendra and her husband were leading the dancing on the mini-ghouls stage.

“I couldn’t do it without my team.”

The man never took credit for anything.

Spinning in his arms, I leaned close to his ear. “They pull them off, but these are your designs. *You* created the layout, and *you* went above and beyond to make sure these children experienced a party like nothing they’ve ever seen before.”

He leaned back with a smile. “This *is* pretty cool.” Pretty cool was a rave review for Miles. “You want to know what’s even cooler?”

I slid my arms around his neck. “What?”

“You,” he said, dropping a kiss on my nose. “I know the last few weeks have been rough. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you bowed out on this one.”

“Are you kidding? This is my reward for surviving the last few weeks.” I curled in closer. “Besides, I’m happy to be anywhere that you are.”

“Get a room,” taunted Naima right before snapping our picture. “That’s going on the website,” she announced before prancing off in her bright-red platform boots.

“That costume is perfect for her,” I said. Few people could pull off the Ziggy Stardust suit.

“You’re perfect,” Miles reminded me, which he did often. We both knew it was far from the truth.

“And you’re delusional, but I love you anyway.”

Green eyes went wide and I realized what I'd said. We hadn't thrown around the *L* word yet.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

Heat rising up my cheeks, I nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"Good, because I love you, too."

If anyone had told me three months ago that by Halloween I'd be running my own company, disgustingly in love, and would declare said love while dressed as a seasick pirate—thanks to my minty green makeup—I never would have believed them. Thank goodness they'd have been completely correct.



Thank you so much for reading *Not Going There*! I hope you enjoyed Josie and Miles' story, and if you're so inclined, all reviews are greatly appreciated. Simply click over and [leave one now](#).

If you haven't read the other books in the NOT series, *Not You Again* (Becca and Jacob) and *Not Playing Fair* (Megan and Ryan) are both available [on Amazon](#) and in the Kindle Unlimited program.

With all the books out there, I'm truly grateful that you took the time to read mine. If you'd like to keep up with future sales and releases, you're always welcome to check out my website and [subscribe to my newsletter](#).

Thanks again and happy reading!

Terri

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Stand-Alones

Ask Me To Stay

Wrecked

Awakening Anna

Love Me, Cowboy

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I need to thank you, the readers, for your patience while I had a difficult time this past year. Not only should this book have been out months ago, but I had to cancel another book entirely. Sometimes life gets in the way, as we've all learned in the last couple of years.

This story is a product of very long hours, and like most of my books, written in the wee hours of the night. So thank you to my pets for dealing with random and wildly changing feeding times, plus not complaining when we slept all day and stayed up all night.

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For my favorite boys, stay safe and see you in 2024. To my Kpop Buddies, thank you for being so fabulous, and for putting up with my odd, middle of the night messages.

About the Author

Terri Osburn writes contemporary romance with heart, hope, and lots of humor. After landing on the bestseller lists with her Anchor Island Series, she moved on to the Ardent Springs series, which earned her a Book Buyers Best award in 2016. Terri's work has been translated into five languages, and has sold more than one and a half million copies worldwide. She resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with three moody felines and two high-maintenance terrier mixes. Learn more about this author and her books at www.terriosburn.com.

