

Once Burned. Twice Loved

A SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
C.K. O'CONNOR

Once Burned,

Twice Loved

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To Teri... Your bravery and strength are inspiring. You'll win this battle against cancer and show the world you are super woman. Love you a million times over and can't wait for your amazing huggles.



Chapter One

Elizabeth Sanders stared down at the gold-lined cake box her assistant and best friend Teri had just brought to her. Who delivers cake to a bakery?

Teri elbowed her. “Well, come on, open it.”

“You don’t think it’s just a little weird that a random cake is sent to me at my shop? And who the heck is CHP, Inc.?”

“You are such a worrywart. End the torture and open it!” The petite blonde bounced on her toes.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and slid the top off. An ornately decorated black, white, and gold box made of gingerbread sat inside with the words *Congratulations* boldly decorated across the top. “What in the heavens is this?” She mumbled. As she moved to lift the gingerbread out, she felt the lid of the box move. Setting it back down, she lifted the top and found a scroll inside.

“What is happening? This is insane.” Teri’s enthusiasm was contagious.

Elizabeth unrolled the scroll and read it, then read it twice more.

“Oh my god, you’re going to be on T.V.” She wrapped her arms around Elizabeth, squeezing tight.

The invitation to compete in the 2022 World’s Best Baker competition was there in black and white, but why? “Did you enter me?”

Teri let go and stepped back. “I wish I’d thought of it, but no, it wasn’t me. And I’m guessing you didn’t enter yourself.” She shrugged. “Does it matter? You’re doing it, right?”

“It says I have to be in Denver next month and could be there up to three weeks. I can’t close the shop for that long.”

Teri scoffed at her. “And what am I, chopped liver? I can run things while you’re gone. I’ll just book fewer orders than usual and see if any of the culinary kids at the college want an internship.”

“Ugh, I don’t know. It says we’ll be sequestered in a bubble for the duration because of the pandemic.”

“I’m still not seeing the problem?” She grabbed Elizabeth’s shoulders and turned her to face her. “You are going to make great connections in the baking world. America is going to see what you can do, which will boost your business. And with any luck, there’ll be a cutie there to kill time with.”

Elizabeth chewed her bottom lip. She never took chances, never went anywhere.

Teri growled in frustration. “A lot has changed in eight years. Don’t let what that jerk did to you ruin this opportunity. Sean MacNamara is long gone. It’s time for you to move on and live your life.”

Elizabeth hefted her suitcase onto the bed of her temporary room and glanced out the window. There could be worse places to be sequestered. They were on a private estate the

show rented out. The snow-covered mountains were blindingly bright and beautiful.

Elizabeth had never seen snow before and quickly realized her meager clothes wouldn't help much if she had to leave the house at all.

She grabbed her purse and left to find the library that was being used as a registration area. She couldn't imagine there had to be much more to do. She had signed less paperwork when she opened her bakery.

When the camera crew had come to town to film promo shots, it had really hit her what she signed on for. She had tried to back out, but Teri would wrap her in one of her infamous huggles as she called them and talk her off the ledge. If she could have brought her emotional support friend, she would have, but the bakery couldn't be closed that long.

She smiled and nodded at everyone she passed. So far, she hadn't recognized anyone. Not that she had expected to. She had tried finding out who the other contestants would be, but the camera crew had shrugged and said they just went where they were told to.

A banner hung above the library doors had the 2022 World's Best Baker logo sprawled across it. Two women with headsets sat behind a table. She waited behind an older man with a thick German accent, then took a deep breath when it was her turn.

"Hi, checking in. I'm Elizabeth Sanders." She held out her I.D.

“No need for that. We recognize you from the promo video that was sent back. Your shop was adorable.”

Elizabeth beamed with pride. She had worked hard to make the bakery a warm, inviting place. Between the large, cushy sitting chairs and the workstations with outlets at every seat, she had become a favorite place for students and creatives to come spend a couple of hours. Her dad had worried that would hurt her, but he didn't factor in how little willpower people had when a fresh baked good came out of the oven. Most people who sat there for a while working or socializing averaged three purchases over the length of their visit. When it was finals week at the nearby college, she stayed open even later and doubled her daily profits.

The blonde woman handed her a folder. “I'm Carol and this is Julia. We handle most of the details around here, so if you have any issues or questions, just ask for one of us. Inside your folder is a loose agenda of how the next couple of weeks are going to go. The dining room is down this hall at the back of the estate. We're having the kick-off dinner in there at six p.m. and you'll get to meet the other contestants and hear a little more about what to expect during filming.”

Julia chuckled. “Take a breath. You're looking a little green.”

Elizabeth cleared her throat. “Sorry, this is all so overwhelming.”

“Don't worry, most of our contestants have never been on camera before, so we're great at walking you guys through every step of the process. You're going to be fine and

hopefully, you'll have some fun, which is why you're here, right?"

Carol snorted. "That and the chance to win fifty thousand dollars."

Elizabeth's cheeks heated. "It sounds fun. I'm sure it'll be great." She nodded and made her way toward the door. The money was the real reason she finally decided to do this. Her parents had taken a second mortgage out on their house to help her open the bakery. She didn't want to be the reason they couldn't retire. The sooner she could pay them back, the better she'd feel.

Now that she was here though and seeing the camera crews setting up, she was getting excited. She'd never done anything like this. Heck, she'd never even been out of Florida before. She was almost thirty and had been living a safe life where she never took a risk or put herself out there. Maybe Teri was right, and it was time to move on. She loved her little bakery, but maybe it was time to explore more of the world.

Chapter Two

Elizabeth smoothed down her long sleeve sweater dress as she followed the crowd toward the dining room. Carol and Julia stood at the double doors, greeting everyone. “Contestants sit at one of the front four tables. Everyone else sit at any open table.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened as she stepped inside. This was not a dining room. A dining room seats maybe ten people. This was a ballroom that easily sat a hundred. She made her way to the front and chose a seat at the far-left table that was currently empty. One thing she’d learned as an introvert was to always put yourself in situations where people had to come to you. One by one, the seats started filling. A British woman in her forties asked if she could sit next to her.

Once she was seated, she held her hand out to Elizabeth. “I’m Delilah from the U.K. group.”

They had groups? “Elizabeth. I guess I’m with the American group.”

A man across the table waved at them. “I’m Pierre from France with the Europe group.”

One by one, they announced their names and countries. She probably should have binged the show before coming here to see how past seasons were done, but she was so worried about leaving the shop, she’d focused on that. “How many people are with each country?”

“They only chose three per country and if a country didn’t have that many entrants, they did a region.”

Her mind was spinning. Thousands must have applied. How did they get her name and what on Earth was special about her to get one of the three spots? She could hear her mother's voice in her head chiding her for doubting herself. Sean had broken her and it'd taken years for her to get her self-confidence back and even then, she still struggled with it often.

The noise in the hall grew louder as heads were swiveling and watching someone walk through the room.

Delilah grabbed her arm and squeezed. "Oh, my god. I heard he was coming. He's even dreamier in person, isn't he?"

Elizabeth stretched to see who had everyone so excited. She fell back into her chair. "No freaking way."

Sean MacNamara waltzed through the crowd in all his gorgeous glory.

One of the women from the Australian group turned to Elizabeth. "Have you met him before?"

"You could say that." Her stomach churned. She hadn't seen him in eight years and now he was here. He had been gaining popularity for a baking show he did on YouTube, but after he did a charity calendar shoot shirtless, he quickly went viral. Now he was known as the baking world's most eligible bachelor. Not that Elizabeth had been keeping up with his life.

The crowd erupted into cheers as Gavin Buckley walked up to the podium on the small stage. Gavin had been the host of the baking competition since the beginning. "Good evening. Thank you all for joining us. We've asked a lot of you this year. We're forcing you to stay confined in this bubble with us,

and you agreed to have your brain poked twice. I don't know about you all, but I hated that part.”

Laughter rumbled around the room. They had to have a negative Covid test dated for the day before their flight and then another rapid test had been done before they were allowed inside the property.

“But we don't want you bored while you're here, so we have plenty of entertainment planned to keep everyone busy between filming.” The projector screen behind him lit up with a list of contestants and their country. Elizabeth was shocked at how many names she had heard before. This wasn't a competition of unknowns and amateurs. This was more like the best of the best competing. “Tomorrow we're going to walk you through the set and show you where you'll be baking. We have a large storeroom of supplies you need to familiarize yourself with and there will be staff in there if you need to order any ingredients we didn't supply. Your orders must be in tomorrow. Once we begin filming, you have to make do with what is on property. Since the show was off last year, we've made this year twice as special. We'll have group competitions before the solo events start. We're going to test you on a variety of baking skills and delicacies from all over the globe.”

Her mind was spinning. She really should have studied her recipe books before coming. As soon as this was over, she was going to have to call Teri and have her take pictures of her personal recipes and pray there would be enough free time for her to research even more.

Delilah nudged her gently. “I made a list of everything the show has ever asked a contestant to make so I could practice. If you want a copy, I can email it to you.”

Elizabeth was shocked. Competitions usually brought out the worst in people. “You’d do that for me?”

“It’s a baking contest, not a reading one. If I can’t beat you in the kitchen, then you deserve to win.” She handed her phone over. “Put your email in and I’ll send it right now.”

Gavin continued. “Tonight, we encourage you to get to know your fellow contestants and all the support staff that will be your lifeline for the next couple of weeks. After dinner, you’re welcome to join us out in the garden, where several fire pits will be set up.”

The crowd clapped as he left the stage. A server walked up to their table and waved her hand behind them. “The buffet is open. You are welcome to go.”

Delilah hopped up from her chair. “You don’t have to tell me twice. With the time difference, my stomach has no idea when I’m supposed to be eating.

Elizabeth’s stomach churned as she went through the line, making her plate. She was afraid to look up and see Sean. They hadn’t spoken in eight years. Was she ready to put his past betrayal behind them? He had stolen the opportunity that had launched his career, but she had a good life. Did it really matter anymore? She believed in fate and that everything happened for a reason. She wasn’t meant to win that internship. That didn’t mean it didn’t hurt that he’s the one who ensured that happened.

Elizabeth sat curled in a heavy blanket in front of one of the fire pits. Delilah turned out to be quite a character. She was loud, blunt, and a whole lotta fun. She was the perfect opposite of Elizabeth's introverted side.

She sipped her coffee while Delilah told everyone about the most obscene cake she'd ever been hired to make.

Elizabeth felt Sean before anyone saw him. She knew he was right behind her. The group confirmed that when they all turned to look up at him. He was just a guy. They were acting like he was some big Hollywood celebrity.

"Keep telling your story. Don't mind me." Just hearing his voice sent an unwelcome shiver of desire down her back.

Delilah nodded nervously and turned back to the circle. It was funny to see her flustered.

Sean squatted next to Elizabeth's chair and sipped his drink while listening intently to the story. Elizabeth tried to focus, but he was too close and her body definitely remembered how much she had loved him.

At the first lull, he turned and smiled at her. "Hey, Lizzy. It's been a while. How are you?"

"I'm good." She muttered before taking a slow sip of her coffee. Ugh, he still called her Lizzy. He was the only person who ever did, and it unnecessarily excited her.

"I'd love to catch up. Feel like going for a walk? Or I know you must be freezing. We could go inside?"

Ha! She wasn't going anywhere alone with him. She wasn't sure who would win the war, her brain or her body, and she wasn't ready to find out. "Sorry, it's been a long night and I have a lot to do. I'll see you around though."

Like a coward, she slunk off to her room. Maybe after a good night's sleep, she'd be ready to face him, but she was still in shock he was even there. Did he know she was going to be there? He sure didn't look surprised or nervous. Did he have something to do with her being accepted?

Her insecurity won out. She flopped onto the plush king-sized bed. He probably hadn't thought about her in years. Why would she think she's important enough for the most sought-after man in baking to go out of his way to bring her there.

Chapter Three

She was actually at the competition and she was just as beautiful as the last day he'd seen her. When the show had approached Sean about competing, he was happy to do it. One night, while scrolling through Instagram and seeing Lizzy's latest creation, he got the idea of submitting her name and casually mentioning to the producers that she was an old friend.

He didn't do it just to see her. He did it because he owed her. He had come to terms long ago with what happened during the internship and while he felt terrible about the way it had gone down, he knew in his heart he hadn't done anything malicious. That didn't mean he didn't want to make it up to her now though. He wasn't too proud to admit she was a better baker than he was. She could be so much bigger than the little shop in their hometown, and he wanted the world to see that.

At ten a.m. on the dot, he entered the competition hall. It was a mirror of the ballroom where they ate their meals, but it was on the opposite side of the property. They had transformed it into a studio set with lights and rigging above a dozen kitchen sets. They lined large ovens and fridges along the walls behind each kitchen.

Carol and Julia stood at the far end and shouted for everyone to gather around.

“Good morning, everyone. We hope you slept well and had plenty to eat this morning. For the next two hours, we want you to walk around the kitchen stations getting used to the layout.” Julia swung a set of double doors open. “This is the

storeroom. Walk through it and see what supplies we've given you. If there are any special ingredients you want, just talk to anyone in the black polos. Have your orders in by the end of the day or you will not get them."

Carol scanned her clipboard. "We want everyone back in here at two p.m. for a practice bake. We'll give you an easy timed challenge so you can practice and use the ovens. The cameras will be on, getting test shots, and getting you used to the crew being in your area while you're baking."

Sean was excited. He'd never done anything like this before. His setup for his YouTube channel was nothing compared to this.

Julia continued with their instructions. "Tomorrow you report here at ten a.m. for our first group challenge. These are new this year but as we said before we are going bigger since we weren't able to film last year. No one will be sent home at the end of the group bakes. On Wednesday, we'll get started with the actual competition."

Carol took over. "In your welcome packets, we listed the times you can come here and practice. I would suggest you make sure you are up on baking breads, tarts, cakes, chocolate, fondant just to name a few. We don't want to give everything away." The group chuckled nervously.

They made it sound like simple bakes, but he'd seen enough episodes to know they usually choose intricate or rarely heard of recipes.

Carol and Julia stepped back and waved their arms toward two large digital clocks above the storeroom doors. "The most important part of the room. The left is a regular clock and the

right will be the countdown clock when you are being timed. Now go, explore, and have fun.”

Sean stood back, letting everyone disperse. Delilah and Lizzy were at a kitchen station going through the drawers. He was glad she found a friend. If she was the same as she was in high school, she was shy. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, he made his way to the supply room first.

It was the most impressive storeroom he'd ever been in. Floor to ceiling shelves stocked with ingredients grouped by type filled the space. They even had a section for dowels, cardboard rounds, and edible flowers. He took out his phone and made a list of ingredients from other countries that he didn't know as well so he could research them.

He rounded the corner of the dairy case and came face to face with Lizzy. “Morning. This is incredible, isn't it?”

She had a genuinely happy smile on her face. “It's unbelievable. It's so much more than I expected. I'm so glad my friend forced me to do this. Then again, see if I still think that after the first timed bake.”

Delilah came around the corner holding up a box of screws and nails. “Are we baking stuff to take to prisons? What on Earth are we going to be doing?”

They laughed at her perplexed look. Sean had seen some crazy challenges in the past. “I guess we have to be part architect too.”

“Bloody hell, this is going to be rough.” She spun on her heel and went back to the hardware section.

“She seems really nice.”

Lizzy shook her head excitedly. “She’s so funny. I wish Teri was here to meet her. I think they’d get along great.”

He knew from her website that Teri was her assistant at the store. “Well, I’ll let you get back to it. I’d still like to have that chat sometime. Find me when you have time.” He would not pressure her. When she was ready, she’d talk.

He hoped.

Maybe she still hated him and wanted nothing to do with him. He prayed that wasn’t the case. He’d never stopped thinking about her and hoped she’d give him a second chance.

Chapter Four

Delilah locked arms with Elizabeth as they walked back to the competition hall. Lunch was done, and it was time for the first practice bake. “Is it just me, or do you have a history with Mr. July?”

Elizabeth couldn't help blushing. A few years earlier, a well-known baker had started a charity to help feed children. He put together a thirst calendar done to raise money and Sean had been July. It was utterly ridiculous to see him shirtless while filling a cannoli with an unnecessarily large piping bag full of cream. It also happened to be torn out of the calendar and now in her desk drawer at home.

The truth was bound to come out, eventually. They were locked in a resort together. “We used to date.”

Delilah gasped as she pulled her to a stop. “You kissed that prime specimen of a man and didn't think to tell me?”

Elizabeth snorted with laughter. “You are too much, you know that, right?”

Delilah quirked an eyebrow at her. “Every woman and a few of the men here would kill to be in your place.” They started walking again. “Later we're going to have a drink and you are going to tell me everything.”

That's exactly what Elizabeth didn't want to do. She was going to have to face Sean eventually and talk. That didn't mean she wanted to rehash it again for her new friend.

Carol and Julia stood at the entrance to the hall, greeting everyone. “Find your name at a station and stand in front of it.”

Elizabeth was relieved to see Delilah was next to her, but not thrilled to see Sean across from her. Was the universe forcing them together?

Carol walked to the center of the aisle. “We’re going to run this as if it’s a real episode. When the lights come on, it’s going to be warm. You’ll have a few seconds to adjust your eyes before we start rolling.”

Everyone straightened their clothes and hair. Elizabeth was glad to see they looked as nervous as she felt.

Julia stood on an X at the end of the aisle. “I’m not as good looking as Gavin, but let’s all just pretend.”

The lights came on, blinding Elizabeth briefly. This was surreal.

Carol held up her hand. “Five, Four, Three, Two, One.” She pointed at Julia.

“Welcome to the world’s best baker competition. Bakers, we’d like you to create for us the perfect batch of brownies. You can add any flavors, extras into them, but we want eight perfectly matching squares. You have one hour and fifteen minutes. On your mark,” Elizabeth felt nerves rush through her. “Get set, go.”

All twelve bakers took off for the storeroom, grabbing a square tub to hold everything. Elizabeth grabbed what she needed, then ran over to the pots and pans area and grabbed a nine by nine.

She was the second one back at her station and wasted no time getting her batter together.

Julia walked up. “Hi, Elizabeth, why don’t you tell us about your brownies?” A large camera pointed at her as she glanced up.

She had totally forgotten about this part. She could multitask with the best of them but had never done it while being timed too. “Hello. So, my dad is a self-proclaimed brownie aficionado. I had to go through quite a few recipes before he found one he approved of. I’m lightly toasting marshmallow and swirling that throughout the batter.”

“That sounds sticky and delicious. I better let you focus. We don’t want your dad to be disappointed.”

She chuckled and moved on to the next station.

That wasn’t so bad. Maybe she could do this.

“Bakers, your time is up. Please set your brownies at the center of your station.”

Elizabeth let out a relieved huff. Her tray looked fudgy and delicious. She had done nothing like this since the internship and her anxiety of making the same mistakes was constantly in the back of her mind, but she managed to focus and get it done.

“Normally at this point, we’d have you bring your items up to the judge’s table, but since this was just practice, there is no need. We hope you got a good feel for how everything is going

to work. Your brownies will be served for dessert tonight, so go relax before dinner.”

The bright lights turned off as teams of staff members swarmed the stations and started cleaning. Elizabeth tried to help, but was shooed away. That was a nice perk, all the baking and none of the clean-up.

Delilah waited by the door. She was leaned back, stretching her back. “Goodness, I was so tense. How’d you do?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “My batter tasted good, but I guess we won’t know until tonight, will we?”

“Fair point. I’m glad we get to taste each other’s. It’ll help us know who our biggest competition is going to be.”

“You think you’ll be able to figure that out based on one tray of brownies?”

“No clue, but I’m competitive enough to hope.” She laughed loudly as she turned and walked out. “Let’s go get that drink now.”

Chapter Five

Sean sat in the back of the game room that had been set up, and people watched. He caught quite a few of them glancing at him, but they didn't approach him. He wished he had never done that photoshoot, since then people treated him differently.

“Oh look, open seats.” He glanced to his left to see Delilah pulling Lizzy along behind her. She sat down on the couch across from him and leaned forward, holding her hand out. “We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Delilah and I suppose you already know this is Elizabeth.”

He shook her offered hand. “Nice to meet you. Your caramel and pecan brownies were delicious.”

He was surprised to see her cheeks redden. “That's too kind of you. They were nothing compared to your cookie dough brownies.”

He nodded. “And Lizzy, your brownies were even better than I remember.”

Delilah choked on the sip of the drink she'd just taken. He hadn't thought there was anything wrong with what he said, but she sure enjoyed it. “Oh, would you look at that, my mum's calling. I'll be back.”

Lizzy dropped her head in her hand.

“There was no phone call, was there?”

She glanced up at him and shook her head.

He didn't know what to say next. Was she ready to talk?
“So, how are your parents?”

“They’re good. They actually helped me get the loan to open my bakery.”

“That’s awesome. I follow your IG account so…” Why did it embarrass him so much to admit that?

She glanced at her drink, swirling the ice. “I follow your YouTube channel, too.”

So, she has thought about him. Maybe the damage wasn’t so great that they couldn’t forget the past. “So, what’s next for you? If you win the prize money from this, are you going to open a second shop?”

“I really didn’t want to do this, but the money was the main reason I decided to. I would pay my parents back first, then whatever is left over I’ll use to expand the shop. The space next to me has been empty for a while. I already talked with the landlord and he said I could knock a large part of the wall out and expand. I’ll have more seating for people to hang at, but I’ll also have space to showcase local artists and writers.”

Sean was in awe. It wasn’t just about baking for her. She truly cared about their town, too. Unlike him, he’d left when he won the internship and never returned except to see his parents. Part of it was the shame he felt when he returned there, but it’s been long enough. He realized now that he had done nothing wrong. It might not have been gentlemanly, but it wasn’t malicious. “Can we address the elephant in the room?” She tensed immediately. “I wanted to say I’m sorry for everything that happened. I’m sorry I didn’t fight harder for you. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

He didn’t know if he’d ever really said those words to her before, but it felt good now. Whether or not she accepted his

apology, he felt better knowing he at least tried to make amends.

She was quiet for a minute. It was torture wondering what she was thinking.

Finally, she cleared her throat and looked up at him. “I was immature back then and blamed you when I shouldn’t have. I didn’t take responsibility for what was my error. I’m the one that forgot to make sure I shut the freezer. I know the competition rules said we couldn’t interfere or help each other. You didn’t cause my layers to not set. That puddle I served Chef was all my own doing. You made the best cake and deserved to win that internship.”

“You were my girlfriend. I should have put the rules aside and told you about the freezer when I saw it. I will always regret not saying something.”

She held her hand out to him. “Let’s let bygones be bygones. I think we’re successful and right where we are supposed to be, so it all worked out in the end.”

Did it all work out in the end? He’d lost the love of his life. His nominal celebrity status wasn’t worth the eight years he’d missed out on with her. He reached out and shook her hand, not wanting to let go.

“Oi, you two, let’s go,” Delilah yelled at them from the doorway. “They are doing karaoke down the hall and we’re next.”

“She’s serious, isn’t she?” Sean wanted nothing to do with singing in front of a room full of people.

“I think she is and honestly, I’m a little scared of her. I’ll do it if you will?”

His jaw fell open. His sweet, shy Lizzy was now a strong, beautiful woman, and he’d missed growing up with her. “Why not? How bad can it be?”

Chapter Six

Elizabeth stopped just outside the competition hall to answer her phone. “Teri, is everything okay?”

“You tell me. Your little performance last night is all over the internet.” Teri sounded way too pleased.

“Are you serious?” She’d seen the crowd holding up cell phones, but she had thought nothing of it.

Her phone vibrated against her face.

“I just sent you a link. Check it out.”

Elizabeth clicked the link that opened to a video of them on the makeshift stage with the headline, “Has the world’s sexiest baker found his pastry queen?”

“Oh, that’s a terrible headline, pastry queen, really?” She grumbled as she ignored Teri’s laughter coming from the phone.

She put the phone back to her ear. “You don’t have to take so much enjoyment out of this, you know.”

“In my defense, that headline is worth the laugh. In all seriousness though, watch it again and only look at Sean. That boy is lovesick.”

Her stomach did a flip. Did she want that to be true?

She didn’t have time to watch it and if that was true, she wanted to be alone when she saw it.

Carol poked her head out of the door. “In thirty seconds, we’re closing this door and you really need to be on this side

when it does.”

She nodded and started walking. “I gotta go, Teri. I’ll call you later.”

Carol pointed to the far end of the room. “We have divided the kitchens into your country/region. Please go stand with your teammates.”

Sean was talking to another man and woman at the U.S. station. They stopped talking when she walked up. “Hi, I’m Elizabeth.”

The man in his forties held his hand out. “Jimmy from Boston.”

The woman looked about their age. She gave her a small wave. “Fran from Seattle.”

Gavin entered the hall. “Bakers, are you ready for this?”

Carol directed him to an x on the floor. “Everyone else, please come around the front of your station and line up.”

The U.K. team was across from them. Delilah glanced at Sean, then waggled her eyebrows at Elizabeth. That woman was incorrigible.

Julia called out from behind the main camera. “Lights are coming on. We’ll count you in. Let’s introduce you guys to the world.”

The reality of their situation hit Elizabeth. She was really going to be on T.V..

Gavin smoothed his sport coat as the bright lights came on.

“Five, Four, Three, Two,” she did a silent one and pointed at Gavin. “Welcome to the World’s Best Baker Twenty

Twenty-Two. I am your host Gavin Buckley and boy do we have an exciting group of bakers this year.” He walked toward the Asian team. “Representing Asia, we have-” Elizabeth zoned out. The camera was right up in their faces, boom mic overhead. Everyone seemed so calm. Was she the only one who felt like a duck on a pond?

Gavin finished the rest of the groups and made his way to their station. “Representing the United States, we have Jimmy Campbell, Fran DeMarco, Elizabeth Sanders, and Sean MacNamara.”

They waved and smiled at the camera as the crew walked by. Gavin stopped in front of a table with three chairs Elizabeth hadn’t noticed before. “Now let’s meet our judges. From Baker’s Nation, we have Sandy Cannon.” A beautiful raven-haired woman walked out, waved at the camera, then sat in the first chair. “From the three-star Michelin restaurant ‘Fire’, we have Jaque Toosan.” The Frenchman Elizabeth had seen on T.V. and in magazines before walked out and took the second seat. He was even better looking in person. “Finally, our third judge is two-time Oscar-winning actress Belle Gaultiere.”

Several bakers gasped and clapped wildly. The show always had a celebrity judge, but actually being in the same room as one was still overwhelming.

Gavin went back to the center of the aisle. “To kick off this year, we thought we’d do our first ever group competition. No baker will be sent home. This is purely for our amusement. Now, bakers, we want you to show us what makes your home beautiful. Each of you will be responsible for producing one

bake that represents the area where you live. There are no limits on what type of bake you make or what flavors you include. It needs to be edible and flavor matters. The four designs must have a cohesive look to them and extra points will be given for intricacy and grandness. You have two and a half hours. Ready, Set, Go.”

Everyone took off running. Fran pulled out a sketchpad and pencils from under the table. “I’m going to do the Space Needle.”

Jimmy shrugged. “I could do Fenway Park.”

Sean glanced at Elizabeth. They were from the same area, so they had to decide who was doing what. “What if I do the Sunshine Skyway bridge with water and boats under it and you could do something with Disney World?”

She was a big Mickey fanatic. “I could do the Epcot ball with Mickey Ears on top?”

Fran sketched their ideas. “We can make it ‘Summers in Paradise’ so they are all in the same season?”

Everyone nodded. There was a large four-foot by four-foot board for them to share. They each had to get their grand sculptures in a two-foot by two-foot space.

Jimmy tapped his chin as he stared at the empty space. “Let’s get our bakes in the ovens, then we can work on the board. I’m thinking airbrush shredded coconut for the grass so it’s cohesive across the board?”

They agreed to the plan and took off for the storeroom. It was chaos as twenty people lugged buckets and squeezed around each other to get what they needed.

They allowed the teams to spread out, so there were two bakers to a station. Fran and Jimmy had gotten back first and took the first station. That left her with Sean in a small space where things were going to get hectic and they were going to have to move around each other a lot.

Elizabeth got the dough of her chocolate cake mixed and in the oven as the camera crew and Gavin stopped at their station. “Sean, tell us what you’re making.”

Sean barely glanced up as he worked with a ruler precisely cutting his dough. “I’m using gingerbread to make the Skyway Bridge and using isomalt dyed blue for the water, and the car and boats will be made of lemon cakes covered in fondant.”

“Wow, that sounds like a lot. Good luck with that.” Gavin turned toward Elizabeth. “Those are adorable. What are they?”

She kept rolling the modeling chocolate into tiny balls. “I’m doing the Epcot Ball at Disney World with Mickey Ears on top. The balloon and corn dog vendors are iconic, so they’ll be selling their goods beneath the ball.”

She tried not to look up again. Gavin really was too gorgeous. Did he realize the effect he had on people? He leaned close and inspected the faces she was carving. “You know I’ve never been to Disney World, only Disney Land.”

“I’d say that’s a travesty, but I’ve never been to Disney Land.”

“We make quite the pair, don’t we?” Elizabeth still hadn’t looked up, but she saw Sean’s head whip toward them. Did that make him jealous? “I’ll leave you to it. Good luck.”

Her shoulders relaxed as soon as the camera was out of her face.

The next two hours flew by. It hadn't been tense exactly as they were focused on their designs, but there had been plenty of times where they had precariously danced around each other to avoid contact. She didn't know his reason, but hers was simple. She didn't trust herself to get too close to him.

“Bakers, you have five minutes left.”

The four of them were furiously decorating the tiny details of their designs. She had molded a couple of character topiaries out of rice crispies and had just finished airbrushing them and getting them placed when the buzzer sounded.

“Times up. Hands off your presentations.” Gavin walked toward the judging area.

Fran gave Elizabeth a big hug, then Jimmy gave everyone a high five. Unsure what else to do, she fist bumped Sean.

“U.S. team, you're up first. Bring over your board and tell us about your design.”

Jimmy and Sean each took a side and shuffled to the table that was placed in front of the judging table.

They had agreed Fran would be the spokesperson for the group. “We present to you ‘Summers in Paradise’. Whether it's the Space Needle in Seattle, a baseball game at Fenway Park in Boston, a drive to the Gulf across the Sunshine Skyway, or hanging with Mickey at Disney World, you're guaranteed to feel like you're in paradise.”

The judges walked around, pointing out details and discussing the techniques that had been used.

Gavin waited until they had returned to their seats. “Now we’d like each of you to serve your tastings and let us know what they are.”

Sean snapped off one of the bridge structures, grabbed a lemon cake sailboat, and gave each judge a plate.

Elizabeth cut into her giant chocolate cake ball and put a vendor or topiary on each plate. Sandy gasped. “That is incredible. How did you get the isosceles triangles so shiny and perfect?”

Elizabeth beamed with pride. “Molds, tempered chocolate, airbrushing, and a lot of luck.”

Sean elbowed her. “Skill not luck.”

She stood nervously while the judges took their time tasting everyone’s items. Even though no one would go home, she still didn’t want her first judging to be negative.

“Team America, you should be proud of your piece. We can see how they are tied together and the variety of skills shown is impressive. Your flavors were delightful. I look forward to seeing what you do on your own.” Jaque gave each of them a steady look as he spoke. His poker face was admirable. If not for his words, she would have no idea what he actually thought about their presentation.

Sean and Jimmy moved their board back to their station, and the group stood back, watching as the rest of the teams went.

After the presentations, the judges whispered their deliberations. Gavin leaned in and shook his head at something they said. “Bakers, you all showed your mastery,

and we were all impressed with how flavorful your intricate designs were. For bragging rights only, the winning team is... Asia.”

The foursome hugged and high-fived each other. Elizabeth wasn't upset. Their designs were bright, beautiful, and lavish.

Gavin waited for them to quiet down again. “Your first day is over. Get some rest because it's going to be a long day tomorrow.”

Chapter Seven

As the lights went down, the stations were swarmed by staff cleaning them. Why hadn't Sean thought of hiring someone for that sooner? It would be so nice to put all your time and effort into a design and then be able to crash when you were done. That extra hour it took to clean up could definitely be used in more exciting ways.

Julia and Carol walked to the center of the room. "You guys have two hours to get changed and eat lunch, then be back here to start our next day's challenge."

Sean stretched his head from side to side. It was going to be a marathon day.

Delilah linked arms with Lizzy and guided her out of the room. "Let's eat first, then get changed. I'm starving."

Pierre, too big for his britches Frenchman, walked up and put his hand out. "I thought your bridgework was amazing. Very precise. Come, let's eat and compare notes on our competition."

Sean didn't have a valid reason to say no, so he reluctantly walked with him to the dining room. Lizzy and Delilah were just leaving the food line and heading toward a table.

Pierre didn't speak until they had food and were at a table. "I watch your show. You're very good. I think you will be my biggest competition. Lisa from Asia and Rosita from Mexico are also going to be tough to beat. Who do you have your eye on?"

His eyes immediately found Lizzy across the room. In all honesty, he wasn't there for the competition. It was a reason to see Lizzy again and ask her forgiveness.

Pierre turned and found who Sean was looking at. "Ah yes, the American. The others are whispering there is something between you. I was thinking of getting close to her, but if you are together, please let me know."

How gentlemanly... "We knew each other when we were younger, but we aren't together." It hurt to say it out loud and give the other man any opportunity to be with Lizzy, but who was he to get in the way?

"That is good. Many of the women have been eyeing you. I guess you are my competition in and out of the kitchen."

Sean had been so focused on Lizzy that he hadn't even noticed anyone else. Other than Delilah, and that was really just because she was hysterical. "I'm here to bake, so you will get no interference from me outside of the kitchen."

Pierre clapped him on the back. "Very good, my friend." He turned back to his food and ended the conversation, which was perfectly fine with Sean.

As soon as he was finished, he made his excuses. "Well, I need to shower and change. I'll see you back at the kitchens." The Frenchman waved as he continued eating.

That wasn't how he expected the afternoon to go. Pierre seemed nice enough, but he hoped the other man wouldn't want to become friends. He was too edgy, and it made Sean uneasy.

Sean made his way back to the makeshift studio and found the station with his name on the front. Glancing around, he saw Lizzy was at the next station over and Delilah was two past her.

He put on his apron and checked all the drawers to see where everything was located. Lizzy walked in and smiled sweetly at him. She put on her apron and faced his station. “So, what do you think we’ll have to do today?”

He shrugged. “Usually, they pick simple things that everyone knows how to do. The harder stuff comes later and usually, they give us a hint the night before, so we have a little time to prepare.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed. “That’s a relief. Delilah gave me a list of everything that’s been done in the past and I had to research half of them. I was panicking, thinking I have to cook something I’d never heard of right on the fly.”

A blonde from the U.K. team walked up shyly. “Sorry to bother you. Would you sign this for me?” She held out the infamous calendar. Sean glanced over at Lizzy. She looked away and started going through her station. One step forward, two steps back.

He smiled at the girl and took the calendar from her. His shirtless picture looked back up at her. He can’t say he regretted doing it because it launched his career, but it still felt weird seeing it.

He signed the bottom of the picture and handed it back. “Good luck today.”

Her cheeks turned red as she thanked him and hustled away to her station.

Julia whistled loudly. “Everyone ready? We’re starting in two minutes, so get situated and stand in front of your station.”

He took a last look around where all the tools were and walked around the front.

Gavin walked in and got on his mark. The lights went bright, and they were counted in. “Welcome back to *World’s Best Baker*. It’s day one and our twenty bakers are ready to dazzle with their confections.”

He went on and introduced the judges and recapped each baker while the camera panned down the aisle. He smiled and waved when his name was called and chuckled at Lizzy’s awkward wave.

“Bakers, are you ready for your first challenge today? You have forty-five minutes to make six identical molten lava cakes. When the judges cut into them, we expect the center to ooze out.”

Sean’s eyebrows rose. Forty-five minutes was tight. They weren’t kidding around.

Gavin counted down and everyone took off for the storeroom at the same time. It was complete mayhem as everyone grabbed what they needed.

Sean filled a basket and ran back to his station. As he unpacked the last of his ingredients, he saw Lizzy get back to her station. She was all business. He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. She deserved this, and he couldn’t wait for the world to see how amazing she was.

Sean had just wiped the edges of his serving plates clean as the clock ran out. Everyone threw their hands in the air. They all looked a little worse for wear, but given the hugs and high fives going on, they all seemed happy.

The stage lights dimmed as Carol walked to the center aisle. You guys have a few minutes to clean up, go to the bathroom, and such. Our teams are going to clean your stations, then we'll get to the judging.

Sean caught up to Lizzy as she walked out of the studio. "So, how did your first official competition bake go?"

Her cheeks were pink as she gave him a huge smile. "That was so much more fun than I thought it would be. Of course, ask me again after the judges taste it."

"I'm sure it will be fantastic. I only had time to glance at them, but they were artfully crafted and will probably taste just as good."

"Fingers crossed." She nodded at him before ducking into the restroom. He hadn't even realized he had walked with her all the way to the door. Doubling back, he used the men's room and went back into the studio. Walking up and down the aisle, he was impressed with everyone's creations. A few of them had issues with making all six identical, but if the taste was outstanding, it wouldn't matter how they looked.

Julia shooed everyone to their stations. "Lights are coming on in ten seconds."

Gavin got in position and pasted on his perfect smile as the lights came up. “It’s time for our first judging of the competition. One baker will be going home after this challenge.” Sean was surprised to feel nervous. “Let’s start with Maya. Please bring your dishes up to the judges.”

If they went down Maya’s side first, then to his side, he would be the eighth to go. It was going to be a nerve-wracking wait.

When it was Delilah’s turn, he was happy to hear the judges give all good remarks. Unfortunately, Pierre did too. “Sean, please bring your dishes up.”

He nodded at each judge as he set a plate in front of them. “Today I’ve made a chocolate chip lava cake with a creamy caramel filling.”

For thirty seconds there was complete silence as they took bites of each component separately and then together. Finally, Sandy put her spoon down. “That is delicious. The caramel was just soft enough to ooze beautifully, and it was so luxurious tasting.”

Jaque shook his head. “I agree and I appreciate you went outside the norm and didn’t give us a traditional chocolate cake.”

Gavin stepped to the front. “Thank you, Sean. Elizabeth, you’re up.”

He gave her a thumbs up as they passed down the aisle.

She set her plates down and stood back. “I’ve made for you a banana bread cake with a butterscotch filling.”

Right out the gate, she was showing her uniqueness. After a few seconds of silence, Belle put her spoon down and pushed her plate away. “That’s the first dessert I’ve finished on my own since I was a little kid. That was so good.”

Jaque and Sandy gave her glowing reviews. Even Gavin leaned forward and tasted a bite. He wiped his chin and stepped back. “Thank you, Elizabeth. Let’s move on to Andreas.”

Her smile went from ear to ear as she walked back. As she passed by, he whispered to her. “Great job.” She nodded and got into position.

Once the last two bakers had gone, Gavin stepped in front of the judge’s table. “We’re going to give the judges a few minutes to deliberate.”

Everyone stood silently, waiting until Gavin nodded at the judges and turned back to the camera. “Okay, we have our first challenge winner of 2022 and that is Elizabeth.”

Her mouth fell open. She clearly hadn’t expected to win. Once the clapping settled down, Gavin let out a deep breath. “Our first baker going home is Selene.”

The tiny girl from Brazil held her chin high as she nodded and waved before walking off stage.

“How’s everyone feeling? You guys ready for another challenge?”

Sean had really been hoping they were going to get a break so he could congratulate Lizzy.

“For your second challenge, the judges would like you to make two dozen macarons. You’ll have one and a half hours.

On your marks, get set, go.”

Just like before, they took off for the storeroom. Recipes were rolling through his brain as he studied the shelves. Inspiration finally dawned on him.

Chapter Eight

Elizabeth's back was killing her. It wasn't being on her feet baking for so many hours that was the problem. She was used to that. It was the tenseness of the competition and rushing around that did it.

She sat at the now empty dinner table and sipped from her hot tea.

Sean walked up with a plate mounded in meats and cheese. "Mind if I sit?"

She held out her hand at the empty table. "You have your choice of seats." She glanced at his plate as he sat down. "Didn't you eat dinner?"

He shrugged. "I wasn't in the mood for anything heavy. Do you ever get that way sometimes? You're so tired you just need something light?"

"I know exactly what you mean. I did not expect to be so sore."

"I've done quite a few competitions, and it doesn't seem to get any easier." He popped a pepperoni in his mouth before continuing. "There is an activity center across the lawn. I heard it has an indoor pool and a hot tub. The heat would probably feel good."

She studied his face, trying to see if he was just being friendly because they were the only other person each other knew here, or did it mean something more? "It's February in Colorado. I most definitely didn't pack a bathing suit."

He shrugged. “Me either, but I have a pair of basketball shorts. You had to have brought something for lounging around in?”

She did pack yoga pants and a couple of t-shirts. “You think it’s okay to go in our clothes?”

“Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission?”

She nibbled her lip. She didn’t want to jeopardize her place here, but she was obsessed with water and the idea of sinking into one hundred- and four-degree water sounded incredible. “Okay, give me ten and I’ll meet you in the front hall?”

He popped the last chunk of cheese in his mouth and jumped up. “See you in ten.”

She gulped down the last of her lukewarm tea and groaned as she pushed herself out of the chair. Every step up the stairs was painful, but she kept imagining the steam from the hot tub and pushed through.

Her yoga pants stopped just below the knee, so she grabbed her razor and shaved up to that point. She wasn’t willing to expend more energy than necessary and just maybe that would help keep her from getting any ideas with Sean.

She grabbed the first shirt in the dresser drawer, then pulled on sweatpants and a sweatshirt. Hopefully, it would be enough to get her from the main house to the activity center without freezing to death.

She hustled back downstairs the best she could. Sean took her breath away when he came into view, leaning against the wall by the front door. It hit her again that he was really here and that the last eight years had been really good to him. She

shook the thoughts from her head and stopped next to him. “It’s not a far walk, is it?”

He glanced at her sweats and smiled. “You’ll probably be pretty cold with so few layers on, but we can walk fast.” He held up a small duffle bag. “I wasn’t sure what winter stuff you had, so if you need extra layers on the way back, I brought a beanie, scarf, gloves, and a blanket I stole from the couch in the library.”

She felt stupid not having thought about the warmer items. In Florida you slip on your flip-flops, make sure you have sunglasses, and go. Going out in the snow was a much more in-depth task.

“Ready?” He paused with his hand on the front door.

She nodded and followed him out the door. The blast of cold air hit her hard. Any thoughts of aching muscles were forgotten by the sting of the air against her skin. “Holy crap, move fast.” She pushed him to walk faster. “It’s so much worse when the sun is down, isn’t it?”

“Thankfully, the staff shoveled the walkways so at least we’re not trudging through the snow, too.”

She pulled her hoodie tight as she rushed to keep up with him.

They got inside the building and instantly sighed in relief from the heat warming the area. It was a small room with drinks and snacks lined up. Signs on the walls pointed the way to the gym, pool, hot tub, and sauna. “Wow, I think I read this used to be someone’s house. Can you imagine having all of this to yourself?”

Sean led the way down the hall toward the hot tub. “It seems like overkill to me, but I guess if you have this much money, you probably think nothing of it.”

The door to the hot tub area was fogged up. Elizabeth was getting more excited with each step they took. She peeked inside, glad to see no one was there. Not that she was looking for alone time with Sean, but with him, she didn’t have to put in any effort. Even though they hadn’t seen each other in eight years and their breakup had been bad, they’d still been friends since they were thirteen. It was nice to relax and be herself without worrying about what anyone else was thinking.

She slid off her sweats, folded them, and put them on the small table against the wall. It was scary to pull off her thick socks, but the ground was surprisingly warm. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he pulled off his sweatshirt, shirt, socks, and shoes.

She still felt weird going in fully clothed, but the steam rising was going to be worth it. With each inch of her that sank into the water, she sighed. She sat in the far corner and watched him turn on the jets at the wall panel, then walk in. For a baker who dealt in sugar all day, there wasn’t a doughy part of his body. Abs had always been a weak spot for her and he definitely hadn’t had that six-pack the last time she’d seen him. The small tuft of hair on his abdomen trailed down and disappeared behind his shorts.

She coughed and looked away. She did *not* need to go there.

He sat across from her and pointed at her shirt. “I really loved that school.”

She glanced down and saw it was from their culinary school. “It was definitely nicer than any kitchen the high school had.”

“How many hours did we spend at Mrs. Hendricks getting our portfolios together?”

Their high school culinary teacher was sweet and good at what she did, but the oven and mixers the school had were not going to cut it. They told her of their plan to apply for culinary school and she jumped at the chance to help them. They’d go to her house three times a week and learn from her. Her husband was a chef, so their kitchen was state-of-the art.

“It’s been so long since I talked to anyone back home except my parents. Is she still working at the school?”

When Sean had left, he had truly left everything behind. Looking back now, she couldn’t say she blamed him. He was training under one of the country’s best bakers and then his own career took off. Why wouldn’t he take advantage of that fame and live a glamorous life in Boston?

He gave her a small wave. She hadn’t realized she was off in her own world. “Oh, sorry, yeah, she’s still teaching. Every semester I let her bring her classes to my shop so they can see what a proper kitchen should look like.”

“You do a lot for the community, don’t you? What am I doing to help people?”

She was taken aback by his tone. He genuinely sounded sad. “That calendar you did made a killing. Your picture was a big part of that.”

He rolled his eyes. “You saw that, did you?”

She thought about the picture still hidden in her drawer. What would he think if she admitted that? She didn't have the nerve to find out. "I had bought a copy... to support the kids."

"To support the kids?" He lifted one eyebrow and gave her a side smile. "That the only reason?"

Her mouth opened and closed several times. She didn't know how to respond.

His face turned serious. "I think when I get home, I'm going to make some calls and see if I can get donations to remodel the school kitchens."

Tears stung Elizabeth's eyes. She had the same idea and hoped one day to do it. She had no qualms with him doing it first. "I think Mrs. Hendricks would be thrilled. She had told me once she wanted to have her husband's restaurant sponsor a rebuild, but then she found out he was having an affair with his sous chef and they divorced."

His jaw dropped. "I hadn't heard that. I feel so bad for her. He'd seemed like such a nice guy."

"Nice guys can have affairs, too."

"Valid point." He slid lower in the water and leaned his head back against the wall. "This feels so good. I'm glad you're here. It's good to see you again."

Her mouth went dry. "It's crazy that we both got into the same show." I guess fate decided they needed us to see each other again.

"How are you feeling about tomorrow's hints?"

She shrugged. “I’m familiar with both, so now it’s just deciding on recipes. There are some fierce bakers in there. What about you? Are you ready?”

“I haven’t figured out my flavors yet, but I’ll decide before I go to bed tonight.” He tilted his head up to look at her. “Did you ever imagine yourself doing one of these on national T.V.?” He smiled excitedly.

She had never been after fame. The only reason she had such a busy Instagram account was because Teri forced her to take the pictures and she handled all the postings and comments. Maybe that’s what had caught the attention of the show’s producers. If so, she owed Teri a big raise and all the huggles she could want.

When the jets shut off, neither moved. Thirty minutes had come and gone and she wasn’t ready to leave the cocoon of warmth.

Sean groaned as he sat up. “I guess we should get back and get ready for tomorrow.” She watched him step out of the spa. His basketball shorts were firmly plastered against every curve of his body.

Yep, the last eight years had been really, really good to him.

Ugh, she had to stop thinking about him and his muscles.

He held out her towel to her. “You might want to change into your sweats before we go. It’s better to have one less layer than for it to be a wet one.”

She nodded, grabbed her bag, and went into the door marked as the women’s locker room. She changed quickly, then flipped her head over and twisted her hair into the towel.

No way was she going back out there with wet hair. If anyone didn't like it, they could bite her. She wasn't getting hypothermia just for the sake of vanity.

She met him in the entryway and laughed at him holding the blanket open for her. "Trust me, you're going to want this." He wrapped it around her shoulders and took her bag from her. "Hold tight and love the hair, by the way." He winked and opened the door.

The blast of cold air instantly started sapping any heat she had stored up. "Good lord, forget walking fast, we're jogging back." She took off at the fastest pace she could. Her hotness level was probably through the roof right now. Who wouldn't want a woman in sweats, cuddled under a blanket, a towel wrapped around her head, running as she slid on the thin layer of snow that was on the ground?

If someone didn't like her for who she was, she didn't have time for them, anyway. At least that's what she told herself knowing he was following close behind her.

Chapter Nine

Sean brushed off his workstation then stood in front of it ready for the count in. The first challenge of the day was bread. He wasn't worried about the bake itself, just about doing it better than at least one other person in the room.

He glanced over at Lizzy. She bounced on her toes excitedly. He'd made the right decision getting her on the show. Would she care if she knew it was him? Every nineties rom-com told him he should tell her because secrets like that could really mess things up. How was he going to tell her though? And how did he bring something like that up?

Carol walked into the room with Gavin and stopped at his spot. "We're going to count you guys in, get in your places."

Everyone got situated. The lights came up, and she counted Gavin in. "Bakers, week one is done. Everyone feeling good?" There were nervous chuckles all around. "Let's welcome your judges back, then we'll tell you what your first challenge is going to be."

They clapped as the trio came in and got in their seats.

Gavin continued. "Today we'd like you to bake 3 loaves of bread. Each must have a different flavor and we expect intricate cuts. You have two and a half hours. Get ready, get set, go."

Sean took off for the storeroom. Three loaves in that short a time meant he needed every second he could get and also knocked out some of the ideas he had in his head.

Delilah was standing on her tippy toes, trying to grab something off the top shelf. He reached over, grabbed it, and handed it to her.

“Thanks, mate.” She nodded and hustled off.

He got everything and rushed back to his station. Luckily, they had two ovens each, so he could have something going at all times. He put together his tomato and basil loaf and set it to proof while he moved onto his stout and chocolate soda bread. Once that was ready to proof, he was able to put the first loaf in the oven.

Lizzy was at the ovens, putting in two loaves that were intricately braided.

He rushed back and got his orange, cinnamon, and cranberry loaf together and proofing. This one had the most intricate pattern on top, so it took him the longest to cut. Once he was done, he set it to proof and put the second loaf in the oven.

He came back to his station to find Gavin waiting there. He held up the open can of stout. “No one told me we could have a drink during the show. I’m missing out.”

Sean gave his best obligatory laugh. “No drinking for me either. That went into my stout and chocolate soda bread loaf.”

“That sounds awesome. Do me a favor, when you cut a slice for the judges, set one aside for me.”

Sean nodded. “You got it.” He didn’t wait for Gavin to leave, he just turned and ran for the oven that was beeping.

The tomato and basil loaf was out and smelled incredible. Now he wished he’d eaten more than a bagel at breakfast.

He set it aside to cool and put the third loaf in. With a few minutes' break, he walked over and peaked at Lizzy's station. "How's it going over here?"

She gave him a thumbs up. "I've got one cooling and two baking. I'm a little worried one of them might be under proofed, but we won't know until we cut into it, will we?"

A loud crash across the aisle had everyone turning in that direction. Callie from the U.K. team was standing with a horrified look on her face and a loaf of bread at her feet. She'd spun too fast, taking the pan out of the oven and had dropped it.

Everyone went back to what they were doing as Gavin and the camera went over to talk to Callie.

Sean's second timer went off. The blast of aroma from his chocolate and stout bread was mouthwatering. This recipe was always a hit. If this didn't save him, nothing would.

With nothing better to do, he stood at the oven and watched his last loaf as the timer ticked away. Lizzy grabbed one of her loaves out of the oven. "Does it help to watch it?" She gave him a cheeky smile.

"Absolutely. The bread is so excited for the audience it has a better rise." Total crap, but sounded good.

He finished setting up all three loaves on the serving boards as the show timer buzzed.

Now to survive the judging.

Sean cracked his neck as he stood in front of his station. The first challenge had finished with Pierre taking first place and Maria from Mexico going home. Everyone had been pretty silent during the lunch break, thinking about the next bake. It was the quietest the dining room had been since they got there.

Julia whistled and pointed at the lights. By now, they knew the drill. They counted Gavin in and even though it was the same day for them, they had changed clothes and pretended it was the next day.

“Bakers, it’s your second challenge of week two and this is a fun one. We would like you to make a cake, any cake, any flavors you want. But when the judges cut into the cake, they want to see another design inside. You’ll have two hours and forty-five minutes. On your marks, get set, go.”

Sean hadn’t done one of these since culinary school, but he was confident he could pull it off. He grabbed the ingredients for his apple and caramel cake and hustled back to his station.

Lizzy was already at hers and measuring ingredients in a bowl.

Delilah scurried by them, giving him a huge grin as she went. If she wasn’t going straight back to the U.K. after this, he should ask her to be on his YouTube channel. His fans would get a kick out of her snarky personality.

He pushed his plans aside and focused on the cake in front of him. He was going to have to make a couple of batters in order to get the colors he needed for his decorative apple with a stem and leaf cake center.

As he got his first pan in the oven, Gavin yelled out, they had two hours left. The pressure was on and Gavin loved it.

Delilah sat at the dinner table, still red faced from the earlier competition. When they announced she had won the challenge, you would think she'd won the entire show with how excited she was. The only Indian in the competition, Archana, had been sent home.

Sean sat across the table with his dinner plate mounded with food. "Congratulations again Delilah, your cake looked awesome."

"Awe, thank you, Sean. That means a lot to me." She cleared her throat and tried to blink away the still lingering tears. "I must have looked like a fool. I thought Gavin was going to piss himself when I yelled out."

Everyone at the table erupted into laughter. It had looked like Gavin was going to have a heart attack. For the other man's sake, Sean hoped the editing team would take that bit out. Then again, it would make for good television.

Lizzy wrapped her arm around her new friend and gave her a squeeze. "We need to celebrate. What do you want to do?"

Delilah pursed her lips as she thought about it. "Only so much we can do locked in here. How about we play cards? We can sneak into the storeroom and steal their pie weights to use for betting."

Sean held his hand up. "I'll get them. That way, if we get caught, I'm the only one in trouble."

“Brilliant, now does anyone know where we can get cards?”

Blake, the other guy on the U.K. team, spoke up. “I saw several decks in the library near the board games. I can grab those if you’d like?”

If Sean didn’t know better, he’d swear the man was blushing. Was he into Delilah?

She smiled at Blake as if seeing him for the first time. “That’s nice of you. Thank you.”

Jimmy wiped his face clean and leaned back in his chair. “What do you guys think of tomorrow’s challenges?”

All the producers had said was that there would be tarts and deceptive bakes. Sean thought he understood the second one. He’d seen some amazing creations where something looked like a phone or a sub sandwich, but when you cut into it, it was a delicate pastry or cake. He’d never attempted one before, but confidence was half the battle.

No one seemed eager to give any detail about what they were thinking. Smart really, it was a competition after all.

Lizzy sipped from her drink. “I actually could use a little research time so I can only play until eleven, okay?”

Delilah nodded to her. “Whatever you need, love.”

Everyone finished their plates and cleared their table. Sean ran off to get the pie weights and Blake grabbed the cards and rushed back.

Sean came back carrying two large jars full of beads. “Pierre was in their practicing. He gave me an odd look but

didn't say anything.”

“All work that one is.” Delilah finished shuffling the cards and passed them out. “Let's see how good you all are before I suggest we go to one of our rooms and make it more interesting with strip poker.”

Lizzy's jaw dropped open. Sean wasn't comfortable with the idea either, but he hid his shock better than she did. “Let's take it one game at a time.”

Delilah wiggled her eyebrows up and down. “I didn't know Americans were such prudes, but okay. Let's see what you got.”

Sean never cared about winning so much in his life.

Chapter Ten

Lizzy thought she would be more nervous. There were plenty of nerves with the challenges, but the excitement was usually the resounding feeling she had.

Gavin pasted on his signature bright smile as they were counted in. “Week three bakers, and your first challenge is to make twenty-four miniature tarts using three different flavors. This means eight of one flavor, eight of another, and eight of a third. You have two hours. Ready, set, go.”

While everyone else took off running, she pulled out a small notebook. She wanted to get everything she needed in one trip and three tarts was a lot. She thought back to her recipe books and settled on apricot custard for one set, chocolate and raspberry for another, and baked alaska for the third.

With her list in hand, she rushed to the storeroom. It was actually nice to come in when most everyone was done. She wasn't vying for space to grab ingredients.

Now she had to hurry, two hours wasn't very long. Thank god they had washed and returned all the pie weights last night or this whole bake would have been ruined.

She unpacked her basket and heard a jingling. She glanced over. Sean was holding up his jar of pie weights and smiling at her.

With no time to spare, she gave him a small smile and eye roll and got down to business.

“The winner of today’s tarte challenge is Elizabeth.”

Her jaw fell open. How on earth had she won a second challenge? She glanced over at Sean who looked thrilled for her. How had he not won any yet?

Gavin took a deep breath. “Sadly, one of you has baked for the last time with us. The person going home is Andreas.”

The German man looked shocked but recovered quickly and left the stage after waving goodbye to everyone. She had no idea how she was going to handle that when it happened to her.

Gavin clapped his hands together. “Get some rest bakers. Tomorrow’s bake is going to be a doozy.”

Once everyone was changed and back from lunch, they lined up for their second challenge of the day.

Gavin smoothed his hair and smiled as the lights went up. “Week three and we’re on to the second challenge of the week. I’m really excited about this one. Today is all about deceptive foods. You can be as creative as you want, but taste will matter as much as design. You have two hours.

Elizabeth had been up for hours the night before researching deceptive foods. It’s not that different from any other intricately designed cake. It was more about being clever. She had to trick the judge’s brains so their minds said

they were biting into one thing, but they would taste something completely different.

She already had her plan in mind, so she took off for the storeroom and got what she needed.

This was going to take every ounce of focus she had.

“The winner of today’s deceptive food challenge is Sean. Your hot dog with relish, chips, and fruit salad really blew the judges away. Every single bite tasted the exact opposite of what it looked like.”

Once everyone was settled, Gavin turned serious. The nausea was threatening to overwhelm Elizabeth. She really didn’t want to go home.

“The baker leaving us today is Jimmy. While they appreciated your pepperoni pizza, the flavors and textures just didn’t hit the mark.”

Elizabeth was bummed to see one of the bakers she’d gotten to know leaving. Not that everyone wasn’t nice, but there was a core group that had gotten close.

Gavin waited until Jimmy was off stage before continuing. “I hope you’re ready. The bakes are getting harder and longer.”

Elizabeth couldn’t imagine what they had planned next.

Once the cameras were off and the judges gone, Carol walked to the center of the aisle. “Tomorrow’s hints are Crepes and Koravai bread.”

By the looks on everyone's faces, they looked as clueless as she did with the bread. This might actually require some baking practice.

Delilah caught up with her in the hall and linked arms with her. "After dinner, you want to research what the heck that bread is and come make some?"

Lizzy's eyes were wide as she nodded eagerly. "You read my mind." She glanced back and saw Sean and Blake a few steps behind them. "After dinner we're going to come back here to practice bake if you'd like to join us?"

Both men looked surprised at the invitation. Just because it was a competition didn't mean they had to be cut throat about it.

Chapter Eleven

Another day, another challenge. Thank god they all loved baking so much or the burnout would be insane. Not because of the cooking itself, but because of the cameras, time clocks, and judging.

Gavin nodded at each of them as he walked down the aisle and got into position. He turned on the charm as they counted him in. “Week four, did you all expect to still be here?” It was a rhetorical question, but of course Pierre answered yes. “Your first challenge is to make a crepe cake. It should have at least thirteen layers. When the judges cut into it, they expect to be able to count each layer. You have two hours.”

Sean hadn’t expected the bake to be a layered crepe cake, but he’d done it before. He gathered the ingredients he needed. Lizzy stopped next to him as she was grabbing a jug of milk. “I hate making crepes. I love to eat them but my technique isn’t the greatest. I really should have practiced them last night instead of only focusing on the bread.”

“You are too good to let a crepe send you home. You got this. Just remember your training.”

She blew out a deep breath and moved on to the next aisle.

Sean got back to his station and laid out everything. Gavin and the camera popped in. “Sean, how’s it going?”

Sean smiled and shrugged. “I’m still here, so I’ve got no complaints.”

Gavin glanced at Lizzy and back at him. “I heard that you and Elizabeth are from the same hometown?”

Sean glanced at her. How much did she want people to know? If she had heard the question, she gave no indication. He was on his own to answer. “We did. We’ve actually known each other since middle school and went to the same culinary school.” He held his breath to see if Gavin knew more and was going to bring up their dating or the internship.

Gavin’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Really, it’s a pretty small town, isn’t it? Pretty cool it produced two insanely talented bakers.”

“Come on now, thirty thousand people isn’t that small.”

Gavin held his hands up. “Valid point. Well, I’ll let you get back to it.”

Sean let out a sigh of relief. If the show knew the truth, they would probably love to add the drama. The viewers would eat it up.

He glanced over at Pierre, who was already constructing his cake. He had to get a move on. It didn’t matter if he won the show, he just wanted to beat the Frenchman.

There were so few contestants left they fit at one lunch table. Delilah held up her teacup and saluted Blake on his win for the crepe cake challenge. They had sent Maya home. Other than signing the calendar for her, he had had little interaction with her.

Fran's phone chimed. "That's my alarm to go back to the studio. You guys ready for this?"

Everyone groaned as they got up. None of them had experience with the specific bread that was next. With so few bakers, there was no wiggle room to error at all.

They got into position and pasted on their smiles as Gavin started the show. "I hope you rested up. Today is going to be your longest bake to date. We would like a masterful centerpiece made of Koravai bread. These are often served at weddings and large celebrations, so we expect intricate decorations and it needs to be at least three tiers. You have five hours. Ready, Set, Go."

Sean's research had revealed how insanely gorgeous these centerpieces tended to be. The fact that it was all made from bread was more impressive than anything. He was comfortable sculpting cakes, but he'd never done anything so large with bread before. Their practice sessions had all gone well. None of them had built one to completion, but it was enough that they got a feel for the dough and cooking times.

Lucky for them, the show had provided two mixers at each station so they could multitask to get all the dough going.

Lizzy gave him a stressed smile as she rushed past him with her tub full of ingredients. They thought they were sore before, after five hours of kneading bread, they were going to wish their arms had fallen off.

The judges walked by each station, studying the centerpieces from every angle. They made their notes, then sat at their table.

Gavin walked to the center of the aisle. “Callie, you’ll bring yours first, and the judges will choose which parts they want to taste. Do you need help carrying it?”

She shook her head. “No, I got it.”

Hers was the smallest of the group. If the idea was to outdo everyone else, she really hadn’t done anything really risky. Of course, if the flavors were impeccable, that could save her.

One by one they went. Pierre was the only one who didn’t ask for help. Sean wasn’t too proud to have someone help. Why take the risk of it falling?

The last one to go was visually the most impressive. Fran had done three layers with perfectly braided twists. The impressive part was the path going from the bottom to the top. There was a carriage made of bread, taking a tiny bride and groom to the very top, which was an impressive multi-towered castle.

Everyone was quiet during the deliberations. This far in no one wanted to go home.

Gavin nodded to the judges as they gave their decision, then called for everyone’s attention. “I don’t think anyone doubts who this week’s winner is. Congratulations, Fran.” Once the hugs and handshakes were done, Gavin turned serious. “Unfortunately, the baker leaving us today is Callie. Your bake was excellent. It just wasn’t quite up to par with the rest of them.”

She nodded in agreement, but Sean could see the tears welling in her eyes.

Once the lights were off, Carol took over. “Your hints for tomorrow, we’re heading back to an 18th century Dutch dessert and you need to hone your skills on injecting into jelly.”

She gave them a mischievous smile as she turned and walked off.

Delilah asked. “Well, who’s up on their Dutch desserts?”

If anyone was, they didn’t admit it. Sean certainly wasn’t. It was going to be another long night of practice. He’d done his fair share of injectables, but had he ever done anything worthy of keeping his place in the competition?

Liz laid her apron on her station. “I don’t know about you guys, but for me it’s food, shower, then back here.”

Sean had hoped to have enough free time to spend time with Lizzy. He didn’t expect her to just fall back in love with him, but he wanted to leave there with at least her friendship and, if he was really lucky, an idea if she wanted more.

They’d been best friends since they were scrawny kids with braces. He wanted nothing more than to have that again with her.

Chapter Twelve

Elizabeth stood at her station, glancing at the clock nervously. Delilah hadn't come in yet and had missed breakfast. She'd gone to her room and knocked, but got no answer.

As she contemplated mentioning it to Carol and Julia, Delilah came rushing in with Blake hot on her heels.

Elizabeth's jaw fell open when Blake reached up and tucked a lock of Delilah's hair behind her ear and whispered something before going to his station.

Delilah turned and met Elizabeth's eyes. To say her face turned red was an understatement. Maybe the reason Delilah hadn't answered her door was because she hadn't stayed in her room the night before.

This was going to be the longest challenge ever, waiting to get to talk to her friend and get all the details.

They counted Gavin in. "Bakers, we're going on a journey today. We want you to go back to the 18th century when the Dutch created the stroopwafel. We want two dozen uniform stroopwafels and while you can have some creative freedom, the judges expect it to be obvious what it was intended to be. You have one hour."

When they had researched the night before, stroopwafels had been at the top of every list that came up for Dutch desserts from that time period. Most of them had only practiced one batch before moving on to the injectables. Getting the pastry thin enough while still having room to cut it

in half to fill with caramel was no easy task. No one had gotten them perfect, and they definitely hadn't been uniform. She just had to hope the baking gods were on her side for this one.

“If I never make another stroopwafel in my life, it'll be too soon.” Delilah picked her nail as they waited for the next challenge to start.

At the end of the hour, they had all looked a little worse for wear and there really wasn't a perfect set of 24 among them. Sadly, Fran's pastry hadn't cooked properly, and she wasn't even able to plate enough. Pierre had gloated throughout lunch for winning the challenge.

Not that Elizabeth didn't like the man, she just didn't like ego's and his was huge.

Delilah paused in the hallway. I'm stopping at the loo before heading to the dining room.

Elizabeth knew this was her only shot at getting her alone. “I'll go with you.”

Blake shook his head at Sean. “Why do they always go in groups?”

Delilah snorted. “Get stuck in a stall with no toilet paper and you'll understand why.”

As soon as the bathroom door closed behind them, Elizabeth spun on her. “Spill it.”

“There’s not much to share. We stayed up talking after everyone was done practicing and then we went back to his room. We fell asleep sitting up on the couch talking.”

Elizabeth squinted her eyes at her friend, trying to decide if she was telling the truth. “Talking, that’s it?”

“Not that I wouldn’t be interested in more, but seriously, we talked about home and how we got into baking. It was really nice. Turns out we’re less than an hour from each other, so when we get back home, we’re going to meet up for drinks.”

Elizabeth wrapped her in a hug. “I’m happy for you. I hope it works out.”

“What about you and Sean? Are you thinking about giving it another go?”

Elizabeth leaned against the sink and threw her head back. “I don’t see how that’s possible. We have our businesses fifteen hundred miles apart. I can’t ask him to move and my shop is still taking off and I owe my parents a ton. I just don’t see it happening. What good is a long-distance relationship? I’m going to want a family in the next couple of years and that’s going to be pretty difficult from two different states.”

“I think you owe it to yourselves to at least have the conversation. I’m a firm believer where there’s a will, there’s a way, so I hope you’ll at least consider telling him what you want and maybe he’ll surprise you. Now, can I please go to the bathroom? I really did have to go. That wasn’t an excuse to get away from the guys.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Sorry, sorry. Go on.”

Elizabeth studied the row of tools they had given each station for the next challenge. She was excited about this one.

Gavin nodded at each of them as he walked down the aisle and got into position. Carol counted him in. “Bakers, only one more bake until the semi-final.

Elizabeth’s stomach clenched. She hadn’t even realized the finale was so close. How in the heck was she still there?

“Today you will make a cake with any flavor and filling you want. On top of that should be a dome of jelly. Inside that dome, we want intricately injected designs. You have two hours and forty-five minutes.”

That really wasn’t enough time.

“On your marks, get set, go.”

Elizabeth smiled proudly as the judges studied her cake. She’d made a red velvet cake with cream cheese icing. Inside the dome was a red rose with more petals than she’d ever managed in her life. She’d even managed to get dew drops on a couple of the petals.

Jaque leaned back and studied her silently.

She wanted to throw up.

He sat forward again and steepled his fingers together. “That... is one of the best injectable designs I’ve seen. Incredible.”

Belle nodded eagerly. “Red velvet is one of my favorite flavors and you nailed it. I liked the little mini chocolate chips inside too.” She held her flat stomach as if she’d eaten too much. “Absolutely fantastic.”

Tears stung Elizabeth’s eyes. She croaked out a small thank you and stepped back toward her station.

Gavin walked in front of the judge’s table. “We’re going to give them a minute to deliberate.” As it got closer to the finale, the judges were taking longer and longer to make their decisions.

The lights dimmed, and Delilah pounced on Elizabeth, squeezing her in a hug. “Someone’s in it to win it.”

Sean held up his hand to high-five her. “There is no doubt you won this one and you absolutely deserve it.”

She could feel her cheeks burning. “You guys are too much.”

Pierre walked up and held his hand out. “I underestimated you. Well done.”

Everyone stared at him in surprise. She would have expected him to shrug and tell her it wasn’t bad.

Carol whistled to get everyone back in position.

The lights came up and Gavin stood with his million-watt smile. “That was my first time seeing a jelly injected dessert. All of you should be proud of your creations. There was one that stood apart from the rest though. The winner of today’s challenge is Elizabeth.”

She had hoped she would win, but wanted to keep her expectations low. Hearing her name called out was incredible. She knew there were tears rolling down her cheeks, and she didn't care. She had put everything she had into that challenge.

“Unfortunately, this is still a competition, so we will be saying goodbye to one baker today.”

Delilah grabbed Elizabeth and Blake's hands and held tight.

Elizabeth reached out and grabbed Sean's.

Sean glanced at Pierre, but the Frenchman's arms were crossed in front of him.

“The baker going home today is... Blake.”

It wasn't a surprise, but it still stung. They gathered in a group hug before Blake pulled away and walked off the stage.

Gavin clapped his hands together. “The semi-finals. Holy cow. Get some rest bakers. These last two bakes are going to be long ones.”

Once the lights were down, Julia walked over. “Tomorrow you'll have the semi-final bake, then the finale will be filmed the following day. Your hints for the next challenge... be ready to go back to your childhood and make sure you are up on the best edible yet durable bakes are.”

What... the... heck?

A durable but edible childhood bake? How do you even prepare for something like that?

Chapter Thirteen

Sean watched Delilah and Blake leaving the dining room holding hands. It was only him and Elizabeth left at the table. “So, I guess those two are going to disappear for the night. Got any big plans?”

Trying to be friends without putting pressure on her was harder than he expected it to be.

“I was just going to stream something on my laptop. I’m open if you have any ideas though?”

“We could go check out the library. See what games are there. Or the room we did karaoke in had a pool table?”

“Oh my god, I haven’t played pool in years. I used to like it.”

“You’d be in good company. I can’t remember the last time I played either. Shall we?”

She nodded. “Sure, let’s go see who sucks worse.”

The entertainment room was blissfully empty. It had gotten significantly quieter since most of the competitors had gone home.

The balls were already racked on the table. He handed her a cue stick. “You want to break or you want me to?”

She shrugged. “You can.”

He angled his shot and sent the balls scattering across the table. As expected, none of them went in. He really did suck.

“Why don’t we make this more interesting? Each time one of us gets a ball in, we get to ask the other person a question. Whoever wins gets to ask the other person for a favor. It goes without saying that if it’s anything crazy or too personal, we can ask for an alternate question or favor.”

He didn’t know what to say. This was really exposing themselves to each other. He was starting to think she wasn’t interested in getting close again. “Sure, I’m game.”

She smiled mischievously as she bent and knocked a solid straight into the corner pocket.

His jaw fell open. “Did you hustle me?”

She strolled past, glanced over her shoulder, and shrugged. “I guess it depends on your definition of sucking.”

“Has it really been years since you’ve played?”

“I guess you’ll have to get a ball in and ask me again.”

He loved the playful side of her. He hadn’t seen that side of her since they broke up.

“My first question is, do you live alone?”

Tame question, he didn’t mind that. “I have a one-bedroom apartment and live alone.”

She leaned down, aimed, and got another ball in.

He gasped. “You did hustle me!”

“Next question, did you fall in love after me?”

His mouth went dry. Did he admit you can’t love someone else when your heart was already taken? “No, there’s been no serious relationship since you.”

She swallowed loudly and bent down to take a shot. The ball bounced off the edge of the pocket and rolled away.

He was relieved she had missed. He really didn't think she was going to give him a chance. He studied the table and found a stripe that was so close to a pocket there was no way he could miss it.

He took a steadying breath and shot. The ball rolled in gently.

“So, I guess you want to know the last time I played?”

“Pfft. No, I'm not wasting my question on that.”

He leaned against the table and studied her for a few seconds. “That time we got locked in that supply room at school... were we actually stuck?”

Her head fell back as she laughed loudly. She shook her head. “I told Sharon to wait thirty minutes and come pretend to accidentally rescue us.”

“If you had wanted to get me alone, you could have just asked.”

“You were being too much of a gentleman. I wanted to kiss you, but didn't want to make the first move.”

She was right. His father had drilled into him manners and how women should be treated. He had been dying to kiss her, but kept psyching himself out. Granted, they were sixteen, so confidence wasn't abundant back then. “I have a feeling you are way more devious than I ever gave you credit for. Anything else I should know about?”

“Guess you have to sink another ball to find out.”

He shoved off the table and took aim. There was no easy shot, so any shot was going to be a Hail Mary. The ball he hit spun off to the side and knocked one of her balls in.

“Thanks for that.” She winked and leaned down. She locked eyes with him as she took her shot and sank two in.

What was going on? Who was she?

She walked up and sat on the edge of the table next to him. “Do you think you’ll ever move back to Florida?”

Was she asking out of innocent curiosity, or did he dare to read into her question? “I really have no set plans. I’ve just been going where the work takes me.”

She chewed her bottom lip, then broke eye contact and looked at the ground. “Did you ever think about me?”

His heart fell into his stomach. He could hear the vulnerability in her voice.

He stepped in front of her and lifted her chin until she met his eyes. “I’ve never stopped thinking about you. You haunt my dreams. When I close my eyes I can remember the taste of your soft lips and the smell of your strawberry shampoo. Leaving you is the biggest regret of my life.”

The words were out and he couldn’t take them back.

He leaned toward her slowly to see if she’d let him kiss her.

She jumped off the table and rushed past him. “I’m sorry. I’ve got to go.”

He let out a frustrated breath as the door closed behind her. He’d misread the signals and now he had no shot of being friends with her again.

Chapter Fourteen

The semifinals... they'd made it.

Elizabeth prayed the extra makeup she'd put on hid how red her face was from crying herself to sleep. Sean had shocked her, and like a coward, she ran. She shouldn't have. That was exactly what she had wanted to happen, but his words and the way he smelled as he came close overwhelmed her and she panicked.

She feared him. Not physically. She was scared of loving him again. She didn't think she could risk another breakup.

Elizabeth jumped when the studio lights turned on. She was so in her head she hadn't realized the show was starting. She glanced at Delilah, who was giving her a questioning look.

She could feel Sean next to her, but she hadn't had the nerve to look at him yet.

Gavin smiled brightly. "The semifinals. There's four of you left. Elizabeth-" The camera came in for a closeup. She smiled and waved at it. "Sean, Delilah, and Pierre. Only three will go on to the finale. For your challenge today, we want you to make us a functioning yet edible board game. It should have moving pieces and they have to taste as good as they look. It can be a made-up game or one of your favorites. You have four hours, so make it count. Ready, Set, Go."

She paused, needing to have a plan first. She looked around and noticed the others had done the same. It was the first time no one had taken off for the storeroom.

Her favorite game growing up had been Mouse Trap, but no way was she attempting that. Finally, she settled on her version of Candy Land. It would be small pastries and treats along the board, and the winning spot at the end would lead to the large trophy made of cake.

She made a list of elements and what she would need for each. It was ambitious, but it was the semifinals. She had to go big or risk going home. More than anything, she wanted it to be her, Sean, and Delilah in the finale.

Sandy pushed her plate back. “Delilah, your version of London Bridge is unique to be sure. The flavors are excellent and even though that bridge had to be structurally sound, you managed to make it edible, too.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Delilah went back to her station.

Gavin turned to the judges. “This is it. You have to decide which three bakers are going on.” He turned back toward them. “We’re going to give the judges a few minutes to discuss.”

The lights kicked off.

They immediately turned and inspected each other’s games. Delilah picked up one of Sean’s dinosaur eggs and bit into it. “Going with a made-up game was smart.”

He dipped a dinosaur in the molten lava and bit into it. “I loved dinosaurs as a kid, so it was a good excuse to make a bunch of them.”

Pierre was bent close to Delilah's. "Heads on pikes is a bit brutal for a family show, don't you think?"

"They taste delicious, though." She chuckled as she popped one into her mouth.

The cherry cordial inside that oozed out really was brilliant.

Carol whistled to get their attention. "Lights are coming up."

Delilah, Sean, and Elizabeth held hands.

"Bakers, if it were up to me, you would all be going into the finale. The winner of today's challenge and first baker going into the finale is the person who gave us plenty of laughs along with fantastic flavors. Congratulations Delilah."

She squealed and jumped up and down. Elizabeth hugged her tight. "Congratulations, that was amazing."

Gavin got their attention. "The next baker going into the finale is... Sean."

He actually looked surprised. How could he doubt himself?

It came down to her and Pierre. No matter what, Elizabeth was proud of herself and how far she'd come.

"The final baker going on is... Elizabeth."

She stood in shock. Delilah and Sean were shaking and hugging her, but she was shocked. She didn't hear Gavin's show ending. It wasn't until the bright lights cut off that she snapped out of her daze.

Pierre stormed over to Julia and Carol. "I'd like to speak to the judges. I want to know why I wasn't chosen."

They tried to calm him, but when it was clear he wouldn't, Carol disappeared and came back with Jaque.

The judge walked right up to him and crossed his arms. "You are questioning us?"

Pierre nodded. "I want to know why I wasn't chosen."

Jaque didn't blink an eye. "Your pastry was hard as a rock and you used so much rose water and lavender, I thought I was eating a bouquet of flowers. Don't be a sore loser. It doesn't look good on anyone."

He turned and walked away like a boss.

Elizabeth poked Sean and Delilah. "Come on, let's give him some privacy." No matter how unfriendly he was, she could still imagine his pain.

Carol caught up to them in the hall. "Don't you want your hint for tomorrow?" They nodded to her. "You're going to need attention to detail and sculpting skills."

For once, Elizabeth was excited. She did tons of sculpted cakes every week. She knew from his show that Sean was masterful, too.

She studied them as they waited in line for their dinner. If she didn't win, which of them would she want to take first? She hadn't known Delilah very long, but she'd grown close to her and knew she could use the money to start her own bakery. But Sean was insanely talented and deserved to win, too. Ugh, she was so glad she wasn't a judge.

Chapter Fifteen

Sean didn't think he'd ever been this nervous. He was going to be happy no matter who won, but he'd be lying if he didn't admit a small part of him wanted it.

Delilah walked up and hugged them both. "No matter what happens today, I am so glad I met you both."

Gavin paused by their group and held his hand out to each of them. "Watching you guys has been awesome. When the contestants get along, I think it makes it that much better to watch and cheer for them." Carol called for him. "Guess I better go get in position. Good luck today."

Delilah fanned herself. "He really is a doll, isn't he?"

The lights kicked on and they got into position as they counted Gavin in. "Bakers... the finale. You baked your hearts out to be here and it's well deserved. For your final bake, we want you to think about someone you admire. Whether you know them personally or not. You will need to make a realistic 3D bust of this person."

Sean glanced at the girls and they both looked as surprised as he did. Not everyone could do facial features to the level they would need to be today.

"Since this bake is for the win, we don't want to see a plain marble bust. There should be lots of details and you can make it as big as you'd like. Like always, flavors still matter, so take that into account while planning. You'll have six hours. One last time, Ready... set... go!"

All three turned to their stations first and used the sketchpads to come up with their designs. He had to think back on his life. He really wanted to honor someone who influenced him. With a plan in place, he listed out what he needed and rushed to the storeroom.

As time ticked by, he glanced up several times to see the girl's cakes coming together. Elizabeth excelled in the detail work and Delilah's airbrushing skills were some of the best he'd seen.

When the clock ran out, they threw their hands in the air, then looked at each other and burst into laughter. Not that anything was funny. It was more like all the stress and tension of the last six hours needed to escape.

The lights dimmed, and they all crashed onto chairs as the kitchen crews cleaned their stations. Sean wanted to study the other two cakes but knew that would have to wait.

They were signaled to get back into position. He stood next to his cake, proud of what he had accomplished.

Gavin held his hand toward Delilah. "You will go first. Do you need help carrying it?"

Delilah's eyes widened as she nodded. "That would be brilliant."

They walked the cake forward and set it in the center of one of three tables set up in front of the judges. As the three got up and walked around it, they asked her to explain her choice.

"Someone I truly admire is Prince Harry. Royals are a big deal to us in the U.K. He left the monarchy for love and there is no grander reason than that. The well-being of his wife and

children meant more to him than anything. For that reason, he will always be a prince to me.”

Jaque nodded at her. “Very good. Please plate the elements you want us to taste.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Sean could see Elizabeth gently rocking back and forth. She always self-soothed that way when she was really nervous.

Gavin waved toward him. “Sean, you’re next. Want some help?”

“Sure.”

His legs felt like lead weights as they walked to the center table. Jaque bent close, studying the face. “Tell us about her.”

“This is Mrs. Hendricks. Elizabeth and I actually went to the same middle school and high school. Mrs. Hendricks was our culinary teacher in high school, and she was the one that helped both of us fall in love with baking. She gave a lot of her personal time to help us prepare for culinary school, too. Thanks to her, I have a career I love and a best friend for life.”

He didn’t turn around to gauge Elizabeth’s reaction. He just prayed she was okay with how much he shared. Who knew what she thought of him calling her a best friend too. His spiel had sounded good in his head, now he wasn’t so sure.

Sandy smiled at him. “Very sweet. Teachers truly do shape us, don’t they?” He nodded but didn’t answer. “Your baking utensils and pans look realistic. I would never guess those are pastries if I hadn’t watched you make them. Please plate your tastings for us.”

He gripped his hands behind his back. They loved every element he gave them. Belle had moaned more than once.

Gavin nodded at him, then turned to Elizabeth. “That leaves you. Would you like help?”

“Yes, please.”

He stood next to Delilah, watching the judge’s faces as they studied her cake.

“This is my assistant chef, Teri. She came into my life a few years ago and helped me build my bakery from the ground up. She’s been through a lot in her life, but she is one of the toughest women I know. She’s actually the reason I’m here. It was her insistence that I do this. She is one of the purest souls I know, and I wanted to share her with the world.”

Jaque crossed his arms as he stood up straight. “It was brave of you to do a bust from the waist up. And you managed to make her arms look real, yet strong enough to hold up the cake in her hands.”

Belle pointed at the small, round cake. “Is there a special meaning behind the design?”

Elizabeth smiled brightly. “It’s the cake I made for her when we celebrated her beating cancer.”

“Awe, that is so sweet. Great work.”

Gavin walked to the center. “We’re going to let the judges have some time, so feel free to talk amongst yourselves.”

As soon as the lights dimmed, Delilah spun toward Elizabeth. “I don’t care if your cake tastes like crap, I want you to win.”

Elizabeth looked horrified. “Oh my god, I didn’t do that for a sympathy vote or to pull on heartstrings. Do you think the judges think that?”

She looked panicked. Sean reached out and touched her shoulder. “No one thinks that’s why you did it. We know how much Teri means to you. And we all know Jaque isn’t going to fall for something like that.”

Delilah rushed to agree. “I didn’t mean you did it for any underhanded reason. I truly want you to win.”

Elizabeth hugged her. “I appreciate that, but all three cakes looked amazing. I’ll be happy no matter who wins.”

Gavin walked over. “They’re ready. Are you?”

The three grabbed hands and lined up near the display tables. The lights came back up. “The judges really struggled with this decision. They were all incredible, but only one can win. The winner of the ‘The World’s Best Baker 2022’ is... Sean.”

He stood frozen as Elizabeth and Delilah jumped on him. Elation filled him as each judge walked over and shook hands with him. He still couldn’t believe he’d actually won. Maybe he had wanted it more than he thought.

He caught sight of Elizabeth talking to Sandy.

Elizabeth... he’d taken another competition from her. Would she truly be okay with his win, or did he just mess everything up again?

Chapter Sixteen

Sean hadn't gotten a free minute to talk to Elizabeth. After the show ended, they went back to their rooms to clean up, then went to dinner. He had been surrounded by people congratulating him and talking about his plans for what's next. The show had him film a few small interviews, then Carol and Julia made him sit down and sign a ton of papers detailing the prizes he won and all the legal and financial strings that go along with those.

By the time he'd been free of everyone, it was almost midnight and he'd lost sight of Elizabeth long ago.

When she didn't show up for breakfast, the panic set in that she was avoiding him.

He couldn't just leave without talking to her. He went to her room and knocked. On the third knock, she opened the door. Her hair was tangled, and she was still in her pajamas.

"Did I wake you?"

She yawned and waved him inside. "Yeah sorry. I'm an eight to nine-hour sleeper and haven't gotten that much since we got here. Since there wasn't anything I was required to be at this morning, I decided I was going to sleep in."

Relief flooded him. She wasn't avoiding him.

"Well, you missed breakfast. I bet the studio is still open if you want me to make you something?"

She waved him off. "No need. I'll grab something at the airport."

“Oh right. I haven’t even called about a flight yet.”

She tossed her hair in a messy bun. “As soon as I knew I was in the finale, I called and got a ticket. I’ve never been away from the shop before and while I trust Teri implicitly, I need to get back.”

He rubbed his palms nervously on his jeans. “Speaking of the bakery. I’m sorry you don’t get to pay off your parent’s loan. I could split some of the winnings with you?”

She gave him an exasperated look. “Absolutely not. You earned that money, and I want you to do something incredible with it. What are your plans for it?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve had my eye on a place near my apartment where I could open my own shop. Or I have a friend out in L.A. who’s been trying to get me to come out there and work in his restaurant. He wants to earn a Michelin star and says he needs me as his pastry chef.”

“Oh, wow, those are both great plans.”

Did he hear disappointment in her voice?

She glanced around the room. “Well, I guess I better start packing. Do you want to exchange numbers and we can stay in touch?”

That sounded like torture. “That would be great. I’m glad we’ve reconnected.”

“Me too.” She held her arms out and hugged him tight.

He held on longer than he should have, but not knowing the next time he would see her, he wanted to remember everything about her.

Chapter Seventeen

Teri squealed as Elizabeth got in the passenger seat. “I want to hear everything!”

Elizabeth chuckled at her friend’s enthusiasm. “Let’s start with thanks for picking me up at the airport.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She reached over and squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “I’m sorry you didn’t win.”

“Really, I’m totally fine with it. It was such an amazing experience. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I just wish you could have been there to meet Delilah and Sean. I think you would get along like gangbusters with Delilah.”

“Speaking of Sean...”

Elizabeth dropped her head back against the headrest. “We cleared the air on the past and are going to stay in touch.”

“By that karaoke performance, I thought maybe there was more there?”

Tears filled Elizabeth’s eyes. “I thought maybe there was too. I asked him what was next for him and he said either a shop in Boston or a restaurant in Los Angeles. He didn’t say anything about Florida or me.”

Teri gave her a side-eye. “Maybe he didn’t know you were an option? Men can be dense. You shouldn’t have left without telling him you wanted more. You didn’t even give him a chance to choose you.” She huffed and pulled the car over to the side of the road.

She grabbed her phone and was quiet for several seconds. “There you go, that’s that.”

Elizabeth’s phone lit up in her hand. It was an alert that she had a flight the next day. “What did you do?”

“I booked you on the first flight to Boston. You’re going to get your man.”

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped open. “Just like that, jump on a flight, and hope he’s okay with me just dropping in. I don’t even know where he lives.”

Teri tsked. “By the time you land, I’ll have an address for you. Leave it to me.”

“Sometimes you scare me.” Elizabeth was scared, scared of rejection. But she was also excited. She never would have done this on her own and Teri forced her to fix her mistake of leaving without telling him the truth.

“I may scare you, but you love me.”

Elizabeth squeezed Teri’s hand. “You know I do.”

As soon as the plane touched down, Elizabeth turned airplane mode off her phone. As promised, there was a text from Teri with Sean’s address.

She stood in the airport, staring at the exit doors. She’d spent the entire flight psyching herself up for this. In her head, she imagined a perfect fairy tale ending where he opens the door, thrilled to see her. He’ll kiss her and tell her he still loves her.

Her luck though... he'd think she was a creepy stalker.

How did Teri get his address anyway?

"I'm doing this. I came this far."

She nodded at her own pep talk, ordered a ride, and waited outside.

She was in a second new state in a month. She took advantage of the drive to take in the sights. Living in a city was nothing like anything in Florida. Did he like the speed and the noise of the city more than their hometown?

The driver pulled over and let her out at a brownstone. She buzzed the door to his apartment and waited. After a couple of minutes, she pushed the button again. Still no answer. Now what did she do? Glancing up and down the road, she didn't see a coffee shop she could wait in, and it was freezing.

Dejectedly, she sat on the top step to map out how far it was to walk somewhere warmer.

Her phone lit up with Teri's face on the screen. She was too cold to worry about a greeting. "I'm here and he isn't answering."

"I might know why."

"He's still in Colorado, isn't he?" She knew it was a risk since he hadn't booked a flight by the time she'd left.

"No, he's definitely not in Colorado. He's actually standing in front of me."

Elizabeth shot to her feet. "He's there? He's standing in the shop right now?"

There was silence for a second, then Sean came on the phone. “Looks like we had the same idea.”

Her stomach clenched. “You down there to visit your parents?”

“I’m here for you. I shouldn’t have let you go without telling you how I really felt. I didn’t want to lose more time with you.”

Oh my god.

“I’ll give you the choice. You can fly back down here or I can fly home?”

“What kind of choice is that? Get your butt back here.” Elizabeth laughed at Teri’s interjection.

She stared at the snow piled up and down the street. “Well, it’s absolutely freezing here, so home sounds good to me.”

“Okay then. You head home and I’ll be here waiting for you.”

That sounded like heaven to her.

Prologue

Elizabeth leaned against the wall of the bakery and took in the sights around her. It had been three months since they'd filmed the show and three weeks since it aired. From that day on the store had been a mad house of people coming in to meet her.

The bell over the door rang as a woman squealed and ran toward her. "I'm here, did you miss me?"

Every head in the store turned to watch Elizabeth get squeezed into a bear hug.

"Delilah, you are too much." Elizabeth kissed her best friend on the cheek.

"I wouldn't want it any other way." Blake stood behind them smiling.

Elizabeth reached out and hugged him. "It's good to see you again. I'm so happy both of you made it."

Delilah snorted. "Like we would miss the grand opening of your expansion. We're bloody celebrities now, people will be flocking here to see us."

"Last I heard you didn't have the money to do an expansion. How'd you manage it?" Blake asked as he leaned close to the glass case and studied the desserts.

"Someone from the City Council contacted me after I got back and showed me a few grants and things I could apply for. It's all part of their revitalizing downtown plan."

The door to the kitchen swung open. Teri walked out with a large cake box in her arms. “Oh good, they’re here. I’m so happy to finally meet you guys in person.”

Gary the teen working behind the counter took the cake from her.

Delilah held her arms out wide. “I’ve heard all about your amazing huggles so get over here and let me have it.”

Blake glanced past them. “Are we going to see Sean?”

Elizabeth pointed over her shoulder. “Only if you are going back to the kitchen. He and Teri are creating a special cake for the big opening and don’t want me to see it. Do you know how hard it is to be here and not go back there?”

Delilah locked arms with Elizabeth and leaned close. “So last we talked, Sean hadn’t decided what his next steps are. Any news?”

“Actually yes, his chef friend that had tried to get him to move to California agreed to partner with Sean and open a restaurant half an hour from here. He’s wrapping things up in Boston and moving down permanently.” Elizabeth held her hand up to stop Delilah before she could interrupt. “And yes, he’s getting his own place and we’re taking it slow.”

Delilah blew out a breath, her bangs lifting off her face. “Not too slow, I hope.”

Elizabeth ignored her friend’s mumble.

The kitchen door swung open again as Sean walked out wiping his hands on a towel. “I thought I heard your voices out here.”

He shook Blake's hand and crushed Delilah in a hug. It was still adorable to see her blush around Sean.

"Are you guys ready for tonight? The news crews will be here around six." Sean absently wiped the counter as he asked.

"I wasn't sure how fancy to go so I brought a bunch of dresses. I was hoping Elizabeth could choose. I don't want to outshine her after all." She winked at Elizabeth.

Looking around the bakery full of customers, and her friends playfully bickering was overwhelming. Elizabeth had been happy before the show but now her life was full and she was grateful for each of them. Thanks to Teri, Elizabeth was able to be once burned, twice loved.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cassidy lives in the Tampa, Florida area with her high school sweetheart, their three children, her dog Flynn who she loves obsessively, and her grand dog, Ryder. She loves reading and going to the movies. She also loves to travel and hopes to one day watch a baseball game in every MLB stadium in the country.

She also writes under the pen name C.K. O'Connor. Books by C.K. range from sweet romance to young adult to historical romance.

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