

THEA DAWSON

Pride + Joyce



TALES FROM THE FLYING SAUCER CAFÉ: BOOK 3

PRIDE & JOYCE

A WELKINS RIDGE ROMANCE

THEA DAWSON

CONTENTS

1. Joyce
 2. Hunter
 3. Joyce
 4. Hunter
 5. Joyce
 6. Hunter
 7. Joyce
 8. Hunter
 9. Joyce
 10. Joyce
 11. Joyce
 12. Hunter
 13. Joyce
 14. Hunter
 15. Joyce
 16. Joyce
 17. Joyce
 18. Hunter
 19. Hunter
 20. Joyce
 21. Hunter
 22. Joyce
 23. Joyce
 24. Hunter
 25. Hunter
 26. Joyce
 27. Joyce
 28. Joyce
 29. Hunter
 30. Joyce
 31. Hunter
- Epilogue

JOYCE

The waitress walks by my table for the third time, her smile getting cooler with each pass.

The Taste of Heaven Food Festival brought a slew of people into town today, and the Cantina is filling up. I came in with a group, but now I'm on my own at a booth for six, fiddling self-consciously with the straw of my cocktail and taking up way more than my share of restaurant real estate. As soon as Blaze comes back from the bathroom, we'll see about moving to a smaller table, I silently promise the waitress.

Out of nowhere, a hand ruffles my hair, and a man's voice says, "What's nice a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

I know who it is without looking. Instinctively, I bat the hand away with a long-suffering sigh.

Hunter Baldwin, wearing an expensive brown suede jacket, his dark blond hair perfectly styled, slides into the booth across from me, aquamarine eyes twinkling and signature cocky grin firmly in place. The grin shows off slightly uneven teeth, the kind that in my family would have been straightened out with expensive orthodontia. They're not crooked enough to be unattractive, just enough to give him a slightly predatory look when he smiles.

If Chris Pine played a werewolf, that would be Hunter.

"Oh." I grimace. "It's you."

I sound disgusted but I'm not, really. Hunter Baldwin is not disgusting in any way, shape, or form.

He is annoying as all hell, though.

“Where is everyone?” Hunter looks around the empty booth. “Lucky sent me a text that everyone was hanging out.”

“Lucky’s dad showed up and took her and Anthony to dinner at Pie in the Sky. Bailey went home. Blaze is in the ladies’ room.”

I glance in the direction of the ladies’ room. Blaze ran in there in a hurry and hasn’t come out yet. I’m starting to wonder if I should go check on her.

“Where’s lover boy?” There’s a hint of a sneer in Hunter’s voice.

“Not coming.” I poke at my drink again with the straw.

Hunter waggles his eyebrows. “Looks like it’s just you and me then, Joyride.”

I’m not in the mood for his fake flirting. Hunter is the last person I want to talk to about this, but he’ll find out sooner or later. He might as well hear it from me.

I stare into the depths of my amaretto sour, which is now mostly ice. “Brandon and I broke up.”

The cocky expression fades and Hunter is actually silent for a moment. Then he leans closer. “Wait—what? Seriously? You guys broke up?”

“Yup.”

I tear my gaze away from my drink and look over and up at Hunter. He towers over me, even when we’re sitting. He and my brother, Noah, became friends when they played high school football together. Hunter isn’t as broad or tall as Noah, but he’s still got the well-defined shoulders and chest of a man who went on to get a scholarship to play football in college.

Normally, he’s smirking, ruffling my hair, making up stupid names for me, and generally treating me like I’m six years old. Now the smirk is gone and he suddenly looks as serious as I’ve ever seen him.

Oh shit, he looks *sorry* for me. This is the look I've been dreading—from my friends, and mostly from my family. The look that says, *Oh, you had it all and you lost it, you poor thing.*

I look again towards the ladies' room and to my relief, I see Blaze walk out, finally.

But the relief is short-lived. Her face has turned a delicate shade of green and she's pulled her normally perfect hair back into a sloppy ponytail.

I stand up as she gets to our table. "Are you okay?"

She puts up a hand to ward me off. "Don't get too close. I don't want you catching anything. I think I caught some kind of stomach bug. Not sure if it was something I ate or something I caught from the kids. I'm *so* sorry, Joyce. I've got to get home."

"You want a lift?" Hunter's face is creased with concern.

Blaze shakes her head. "I think we'll have a better shot at staying friends if I don't throw up in your Lexus. I just want to get home quickly. I'm *so* sorry," she says again. She's already backing away like she can't wait to reach the door.

"It's fine," I try to assure her. "I'm sorry you're not feeling well."

"Thanks." She's almost halfway to the exit now. "Sorry again!" She turns and practically runs out of the bar.

"Feel better!" I call after her then slump back into my seat. "Poor Blaze. I hope she gets home okay."

I feel bad for Blaze, of course, but I'm also sinking deeper into self-pity. I don't want to be alone tonight, and I was kind of counting on some sympathetic ears. Blaze knows about Brandon—I was on the phone last night with her for an hour after we broke up—and I was looking forward to a girls' night out to take my mind off him.

I take another sip of my drink before remembering that there isn't anything left. The ice rattles noisily.

Hunter flags down the waitress. “Two more of whatever she’s drinking, please. And some onion rings and mozzarella sticks.” He takes out a wallet and hands her an Amex card. “Start a tab for us, okay? And we’re going to move over there.” He gestures at a table for two in the corner and stands up.

“Oh, that’s okay,” I protest, even though the waitress is already out of earshot. “I should probably just go home.”

“C’mon.” Hunter jerks his head toward the table. “Let’s go somewhere where we can talk. You can tell your old friend Hunter all about what a jerk this guy is.”

Hunter never liked Brandon and is probably thrilled at the chance to say *I told you so*, but I get up and follow him over to the new table anyway. It’s a small, high table for two tucked away in a corner, and it does feel better, less exposed, less like the world is watching me fall on my face.

“You guys were together for what, four years?” Hunter gives a low whistle. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I bet,” I snort.

Hunter is not known for long-term relationships. Even back in high school, he was a certified man-slut, known for working his way through the cheerleading team. Not that I ever heard any cheerleaders complaining.

He didn’t go for skinny, bookish girls like me, and he probably considered me off-limits anyway because I was Noah’s little sister.

It didn’t stop me from having a massive crush on him, of course. I got over the crush—well, mostly—which is just as well. From what I can tell, he still goes for the cheerleader type—tall, blond, and shapely. Still-skinny, still-short girls with green and pink hair and coffee cup tattoos don’t make the cut.

Even our names are polar opposites. Hunter Baldwin sounds like a movie star. Joyce Babcock sounds like the quirky neighbor in a fifties sitcom.

“Okay, Joyride. I’m standing in for Blaze tonight. Pretend I’m your BFF. What did that asshole do?”

The thought of suave, cocky Hunter pretending to be my bestie actually pulls my lips into a reluctant smile.

“He’s not an asshole,” I tell him, trying to be fair. “We just didn’t see eye to eye on some important life decisions and decided we were better off apart.”

I’ve rehearsed this in my head, but this is the first time I’ve explained it out loud. It sounds okay, maybe a little stilted, but it’s honest. Hopefully, it will be enough to keep awkward questions at bay.

“Like what?” Hunter asks.

I roll my eyes, mainly at myself for thinking that I’d get away with a one-sentence explanation for my break-up with the guy everyone—including me—thought I was going to marry.

The waitress comes back, places two cocktails on the table, hands Hunter back his card, and tells us the food will be up in a few minutes.

Hunter clinks his glass to mine. “If you want to tell me, of course,” he adds. “We could also just get drunk.”

That gets another smile out of me. I actually do want to hash it out, in no small part so that I’m better prepared for the conversation I’ll inevitably have to have with my parents, who will quite likely take this even harder than me.

“There were a bunch of things,” I begin. “You know, he’s got this start-up in Albany, and originally the plan was to see about having him move out here since in theory, he can work anywhere, but I can’t. But lately, he was putting more and more pressure on me to close up the Flying Saucer and move there to be with him.”

“Strike one. What else did the jackalope do?”

I giggle at the word *jackalope* and wonder if the drinks are getting to me. “Isn’t that enough?”

“That cafe means the world to you, but I don’t see you sacrificing true love for that alone.”

For all his faults, Hunter is very good at reading people. It’s probably what makes him a good lawyer.

“He was also changing,” I admit. “When we started dating, he was more chill, more relaxed about everything. But as his business has gotten more successful, he’s gotten more...” I look for a word that will encompass how he cut his hair, started dressing more expensively, and acquired a faint air of smug superiority, “more corporate, I guess.”

“Corporate.” Hunter, the most corporate person I know, gives an exaggerated shudder. “Strike two. What else?”

Blame it on the drinks. I give in and decide to spill the rest of the story. “I don’t know if you remember, but one of my ovaries ruptured when I was in college.”

I know Hunter knew about the surgery because he sent me a teddy bear and a goofy note when I was recuperating, but I’m not sure if Noah ever filled him in on the repercussions.

“There were complications,” I continue, “and the upshot is that I have, like, a million-to-one chance of being able to conceive children naturally.”

“I remember—I didn’t realize...” His face darkens. “Wait, did that asshole break up with you because you couldn’t have *kids*?”

“For the *record*,” I make a slightly wobbly calming gesture with one hand. Yep, the drinks are getting to me. “I broke up with *him*. And not exactly. He always knew about the ovary thing, and I thought he was fine with it. But we were talking more and more about getting married and the future and all that stuff. We both want children, and I always thought we’d adopt, but Brandon made it clear he really wanted us to have our own. He was doing all this research on IVF and surrogates and stuff, and then he started talking about making appointments with specialists...”

I take another sip of my drink, remembering the endless conversations that gradually turned into disagreements and

then fights.

“I just couldn’t face all that effort and time and money going into something that was probably just going to end in disappointment,” I continue. “I just want children. I don’t really care if they’re genetically related to me. You know?”

“Not really.” He scoffs. “People who want kids are crazy.”

I give him my best *Seriously?* stare.

“Present company excepted, of course,” he adds quickly. “Yeah, genetics. Not what they’re cracked up to be. So you broke up.”

“I figure if it was that important to him, he should be free to go find someone with working ovaries.” I take another sip of my drink. “I just got tired of feeling like there was something wrong with me that needed to be *fixed*, you know?” My voice cracks a little at the end, and I cough, trying to cover it up.

“Guy’s a dick.” Hunter’s voice is firm. “You don’t need fixing, and you’re better off without him.” He takes a swig of his cocktail for emphasis. I get the feeling he’s more used to beer because it’s hard to swig anything out of a cocktail glass. “What the fuck are we drinking anyway?”

“Amaretto sours.”

He shakes his head in mock resignation. “Gonna have to turn in my man card after tonight.”

I manage a smile. Against the odds, Hunter is making me feel better. Or maybe that’s the amaretto sours.

Just then, a man walks up to our table and slaps Hunter on the shoulder. He’s about Hunter’s age and is dressed similarly in casual, expensive clothes. “Hey, man! Didn’t realize you were here, came over to say hi.”

“Hey, Phil.” Hunter gestures at me. “This is my friend Joyce. Phil and I work at the law firm together.”

Phil gives me a nod and vague smile, like I’m wallpaper, and turns back to Hunter. “Bunch of us are heading over to Jessica’s later. Want to come?”

I smirk into my drink. Jessica's is a notorious strip club just off the highway between Welkins Ridge and North Falls.

Hunter glares at Phil like he's trying to tell him something telepathically. "Uh, *no*. Thanks. I'll catch up with you on Monday, okay?"

Phil looks mildly surprised at being dismissed. He gives me another, closer look then sort of half-shrugs. "Right. See you Monday. You folks enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Sorry about that," Hunter mutters as Phil walks away. He actually looks embarrassed, which is funny. I didn't think anything could embarrass Hunter.

"It's fine if you want to go," I tell him.

"Nah, those guys are idiots," he snorts. "Besides, you shouldn't be alone. You should be getting drunk and crying on your best friend's shoulder."

"I'm fine, really," I insist, but it's not true. I was counting on company tonight, and I'm not ready to go back to my lonely apartment across the street.

"Forget it." Hunter rubs his hands together like he's getting ready for something. "I am down for the girl talk. Crying optional, but drunk for sure, yeah?"

I swirl the straw around in my drink. I'm kind of touched that Hunter, of all people, wants to keep me company. I mean, he's only doing it because Noah is his best friend... but it's still nice.

"So what do you say, Joyride?" Hunter grins that wolfish smile of his. "Let's make a girls' night out of it. Drinks on me."

And now I know the amaretto sours are hitting me hard because even though a smart little voice at the back of my head is telling me that I've already had enough and I should just go home now, what actually happens is that I lean forward on my elbows and smile up at him.

And say, "You're on."



WHEN I WAKE UP, the room is spinning, my mouth is dry and sticky, and my head is throbbing painfully.

Ugghh ...

I lie in bed, willing the room to stop moving or at least slow down.

Bit by bit, I piece together scenes from last night.

I was supposed to meet Blaze, but she bailed and Hunter found me.

And he was surprisingly sweet, and he bought me a lot of drinks, and when we walked outside after the bar closed, he kissed me under the full moon, and it was the most beautiful, romantic kiss I've ever experienced.

And I said something about letting him stay over at my place...

Moving as slowly as I can, I carefully roll over.

Beside me, Hunter is sound asleep, snoring gently into a pillow, one very bare, muscular shoulder visible above the quilt.

Oh, shit.

HUNTER

When I wake up, my head is throbbing and my body feels like I was run over by a truck. Reluctantly, I open my eyes. The first thing I see is a lamp with a shade that looks like it's made out of fake flowers.

Definitely not mine.

It's sitting on a round bedside table covered with a brightly colored checkered cloth, which is also definitely not mine, and I'm in a bed that's smaller than I'm used to, with an old-fashioned, wrought-iron headboard.

I turn my head in the other direction to find a fat grey cat glaring at me through yellow eyes.

Definitely, *definitely* not mine.

It's not the first time I've woken up hungover in a girl's apartment, so at first, I'm not particularly worried.

Then I remember whose apartment I'm in.

“Oh, *fuck!*”

It's out of my mouth before I realize that Joyce might not particularly appreciate it. The cat slow-blinks, his disapproval evident.

I roll over carefully, trying not to further unsettle my already unsettled stomach, but the space beside me is empty. My brain isn't functioning all that well, but eventually, I become aware of the sound of a shower running in the bathroom and realize that's where she must be.

Very slowly, I sit up, and gradually, the events of last night come back to me. Running into Joyce at the Cantina. Her telling me that she'd finally broken up with that loser she's been dating for four years. Celebrating with way too many amaretto sours—*note to self: never do that again*. We closed down the bar and I offered to walk her home, and there was a sweet, beautiful kiss on the sidewalk that somehow turned into some very hot groping in the stairwell up to her apartment, and then...

I check. Yep. Naked.

“Fuck,” I mumble again, scrubbing my face with my hands.

I've had a thing for Joyce for years, but she was the one girl who was always off-limits. Her brother is my best friend, her parents are the closest thing I ever had to a real family, and I owe all of them more than I can ever repay. Getting involved with her risks every truly important relationship I have.

And if, maybe, in my fantasies I sometimes dreamed that we did get together, it was certainly never a rebound fuck after a night of heavy drinking.

Will she be pissed? Will she regret it? Will she want more?

And if she does want more, would that be the end of the world? Smart, sober me never would have gotten involved, but now that dumb, drunk me has gotten us into this situation ... maybe we could see where it goes?

Maybe we can go out for breakfast and talk it over. There's a place in North Falls that does Sunday brunch—

Sunday.

I pull my arm out from under the cover and check my watch.

Looks like “Fuck” is the only word I'm capable of this morning.

I throw off the covers, dislodging the cat, who registers his annoyance with a scratch on my bare ass before jumping off the bed with a thump. Ignoring the scratch, I grope for my

clothes in a blind panic. Jeans and t-shirt on the floor, boxer briefs tangled in the sheets, leather jacket thrown over a chair. Socks? Still on my feet.

How much of a hurry were we in? Sorry, Joyce.

I pull on my underwear and dive into my jeans, trying to shove my feet into my shoes at the same time and not doing any of it particularly efficiently. I become aware that the shower has stopped running just as I'm pulling up the zipper of my jeans which is exactly the same moment that Joyce walks out of the bathroom.

I freeze, caught in the act of leaving without saying goodbye.

Her rainbow-colored hair hangs in damp, towel-dried waves around her sweet, heart-shaped face, and she's wearing a fluffy, fleecy pink bathrobe dotted with what I think are pictures of unicorns. The collar is open just enough to remind me that last night I was kissing her there and teasing her about a little tattoo she has right under her collarbone.

I don't remember what the tattoo was, but even in my hungover state, my dick gives a throb at the memory.

She stops short at the sight of me, half-dressed and clearly in a hurry, and her huge hazel eyes seem to harden.

Our eyes meet, then we both look away.

"Hi," I say, which seems inadequate. I clear my throat. "How're you feeling?"

Joyce crosses her arms over her chest. "Like I made a few too many bad decisions last night." Her mouth twists into a fake-sweet smile. "Leaving so soon?"

I finish fastening my jeans and grab my t-shirt. "Joyce, I'm so sorry. I know we need to talk, and I'm not trying to run out on you, I swear, but I'm supposed to play golf with one of the partners and a couple of important clients at ten, and I've got barely enough time to get home and change." I grab my jacket and shove an arm through a sleeve. "But I'm free after. Maybe we could get coffee or something later?"

On a practical level, this is a terrible idea. Assuming I get through the golf game without passing out, I'm not going to be good for anything other than a nap and maybe some catatonic television watching later. I'm certainly not going to be sharp enough to discuss an incredibly awkward sexual encounter with the girl I've liked for years but never allowed myself to see a future with.

But it's better than not trying at all.

Joyce's mouth twists wryly. "Is 'coffee later' part of the standard Hunter one-night-stand package, or do I get a special deal because I'm Noah's sister?"

My jaw tightens as I finish shrugging into the jacket. For a wild moment, I consider throwing my heart at her feet and having that heart-to-heart now. Then I catch sight of the clock on her bedside table. I want to punch a wall out of sheer frustration, but I don't have time for that either.

"Joyce, I *really* want to talk to you. I just can't right now —" I feel for my keys and wallet, which thankfully are in my jacket pockets. I hope I remember where I parked.

Joyce's fake smile fades, and she just looked tired. "It's fine, Hunter. We both had too much to drink, we made a mistake, no hard feelings. Let's just pretend it never happened."

The words land like a punch to my solar plexus. *A mistake.*

Always a mistake.

I turn to look in a mirror so that I don't have to look at her and run a hand through my hair, pretending to try to tame it. "Okay. Sure. Never happened."

"I won't say anything to Noah." She narrows her eyes at me. "And you won't either, right?"

I shake my head and regret it because it throbs painfully in response. "No. No, definitely not."

No, my best friend does not need to know that his sister and I hooked up at all, let alone drunk and on the rebound.

“I’ll walk you out.” Joyce heads out of the bedroom and down the hallway, leaving me no choice but to follow her. The cat watches, disdainful, as I do the walk of shame past him.

There’s an awkward pause as Joyce opens her front door. What’s the etiquette here? A kiss on the cheek? Shake hands? Fist bump?

“Thanks,” I say. “I guess I’ll see you around?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Feel better,” I tell her. I’m not sure if I’m talking about the hangover, the breakup, or me.

“Bye, Hunter.” With that, she literally shoves me out into the dim hallway and slams the door shut.

I stare at it.

A panda, I remember now. The tattoo under her collarbone was a panda.



“GOOD GAME TODAY.”

George McLaren, one of the senior law partners, gives me a hearty clap on the shoulder. It sends a throb of pain through my still hungover head, but I grit my teeth and grin at him.

I’m a mediocre player at best, so I know he’s not complimenting my golf game. What he’s saying is that I did a good job of representing the law firm to the clients we played with, a pair of business partners who are expanding their company.

When the clients finally left, I’d hoped I’d be released, but when a senior partner offers to buy you a drink, you don’t say no.

Now George and I are seated at the country club bar, which is all dark wood paneling and expensive rugs. Thanks to an unhealthy amount of ibuprofen, some strong coffee, and a lot of water, I’m still awake and somehow managed to be

charming and witty and social all through the game and a very long lunch. I don't think anyone noticed how hungover I was.

The bartender slides a couple of martinis in front of us. "Thank you, sir," I tell George, starting at the martini like it might bite me.

"Go on." George winks at me. "A little hair of the dog. Might make you feel better."

I sigh. So much for no one noticing.

George chuckles. "Don't worry, son. I don't think Doug and Andrew had a clue. But I heard some of the associates from the office went out last night, and you didn't have quite as much pep in your step as you normally do."

"I guess not," I admit.

Embarrassment blends with a touch of anxiety. The golf games are a test, a kind of rite of passage for the associates to make sure we have country club manners and good social skills. The firm even pays for lessons.

They're also an opportunity to impress the partners. Showing up hungover isn't a great look.

George chuckles again at the look on my face. "Don't worry, Hunter. You handled yourself well today, and I like to know that the associates are bonding with each other. Just don't make a habit of it." He nods at my glass. "Go on, have some. It'll make you feel better."

I manage a sheepish laugh. "Thanks for understanding, George." Swallowing my distaste for the drink, I take a sip and repress a shudder.

"You going to the Babcocks' anniversary bash?" George asks. "Nancy and I are looking forward to it."

Right. I'd conveniently forgotten about Joyce's parents' party, which will be held here in this very club a few weeks from now. The firm used to represent the Babcocks' company until they hired an in-house counsel a few years ago, and of course, they're all country club buddies. In fact, I owe my job in no small part to a reference from Joyce's father.

It shouldn't be a surprise that George and his wife were invited.

I stall for time. "Coming up soon, right? Yeah, I got an invitation."

I know perfectly well what the date is; the invitation, very fancy engraved letters on heavy ecru cardstock, has been stuck to my fridge for the past two weeks. I rsvp'd yes even though I wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing Joyce's twerp boyfriend.

The good news is that I guess he won't be there. The bad news is that now I have to wonder if my presence will make Joyce uncomfortable.

Of if she'll make me uncomfortable.

Maybe I should back out. It's not too late. Damn it, I wish I was thinking just a bit more clearly.

George's left eyebrow lifts ever so slightly. "I certainly hope you'll attend. You know how well-connected the Babcocks are. Could be a good opportunity for you to meet some new people."

And there's that decision made for me.

The subtext of George's remark is *meet some new people so you can bring some new business into the firm*. As an associate, the next step up is junior partner, and junior partners are expected to be rainmakers—at least if they ever want to be senior partners. It's our job to win cases, sure, but it's also our job to bring in new clients—new, *rich* clients.

And you don't meet new clients by sitting at home watching Netflix and feeling sorry for yourself because your best friend's sister literally shoved you out the door of her apartment this morning.

"Of course I'll be going," I tell him. "Wouldn't miss it."

"Excellent." George smiles approvingly at me. "Will you be bringing a date?"

I hesitate, not sure if this is a test or just casual conversation.

A vision of walking into the party with Joyce on my arm flashes through my mind, but I let it fade. “Going solo,” I tell George honestly.

“No one special in your life?” he presses.

It’s an unspoken rule that married lawyers don’t make junior partner and single lawyers don’t make senior partner. The firm likes its youngest, freshest lawyers to be focused on their jobs, working ten, twelve, or fourteen hours a day and bonding with their colleagues when they’re not working.

The associates with a life outside the office tend not to get promoted and generally disappear to work at other, lesser firms. Once you’ve made junior partner, you’re expected to find a respectable spouse, ideally one with good connections, pump out a couple of healthy, bright-eyed brats, and if you really want to play the game right, get a golden retriever.

Once you’ve made senior partner, you join this very country club.

I shrug. “Still looking for the right one, I guess.”

George nods sagely. “No rush. Time enough for domestic bliss in the future. We’re very pleased with the work you did on the Waterbury case, by the way.”

“Thank you for the opportunity. Interesting case,” I murmur, wondering how much longer I’ll be able to keep up the act. The ibuprofen is wearing off and so is the coffee, and it’s taking every ounce of willpower I have to stay upright. Just as well I’m not meeting Joyce this afternoon. Falling asleep on her while trying to explain my feelings wouldn’t exactly make a great impression.

Anyway, she probably feels as wrecked as I do, if not worse.

Please cut this short, George, I beg silently. I just want to go home.

George is in the middle of telling me about an upcoming case that they’re thinking about having me work on, when, like the answer to a prayer, his phone rings.

“Excuse me,” he mutters as he pulls the phone out of his pocket. “Darling, what is it?”

While George talks to his wife, I tune him out and look around the club’s bar. Members, mostly men and a few women, dot the room, most of them enjoying a drink after a game of golf or tennis.

I caddied here one summer when I was in high school, another job I owe to Joyce’s dad. It wasn’t like in the movies where the rich people were snotty to the poor kid. Mostly, they didn’t pay any attention to me at all—but the money was good.

I still feel like I’m trespassing when I come here. It’s crazy to think that in a few years, if all goes well, I could be a member.

Hunter Baldwin, the *mistake*, could be living a life that his drifter, grifter father could only ever have dreamed of.

Hell, I’m already living that life.

“Sorry about that.” George’s voice snaps me back to the present. He slips the phone back into his pocket. “Nancy needs me home to get ready for something we’re doing tonight. I’d better head out. Happy wife, happy life, right?” He winks. “You stay and finish your drink. Any interest in using the sauna? I’ll make sure you can get in.”

I shake my head quickly. “Thanks, but I should get home myself. Gotta get up early tomorrow.”

“Boss is a real hard-ass huh?” George gives me another, mercifully less enthusiastic pat on the back as he stands. “Great game today, son. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, George. Give my best to Nancy.”

I wait about ten minutes, then leave my undrunk martini on the bar and retrieve my Lexus from the valet.

It’s past four by the time I get back to my condo. I take a long, hot shower, place an order for take-out, then turn on a replay of today’s football game while I sprawl on my couch, waiting for my food to arrive.

Flat-screen TV, leather couch, a cashmere throw blanket in case I want to take a nap, hot food on its way. Normally, I revel in the big and small luxuries I've attained.

Today, though, none of it brings me any pleasure. I just feel sort of numb and distanced from everything.

From where I'm sitting, I can just see the Babcocks' invitation where it's stuck to the fridge. And having been able to put her out of my mind almost all day, I'm now forced to think about Joyce.

Should I call her? Should I text her? Should I take her at her word and assume she wants nothing to do with me?

Or should I just wait, pathetically, for her to get in touch with me?

I remember that shove out the door. I'm not sure if I'm being a gentleman or a coward, but in the end, I do nothing. She told me to act like it never happened, so that's what I'll do.

JOYCE

I give Hunter a shove, slam the door shut, and make it to the bathroom just in time to throw up.

Ugghhhh.

I kneel on the floor for a few minutes to make sure everything is out, then grab some tissues to wipe my mouth and slump against the tub. I feel marginally better now, and the worst of the nausea has passed.

The good news is that I don't have to be at work until noon. Lucky is opening the cafe, and since I live on the third floor of the same building, I can wait until the last minute before heading downstairs. That gives me more than three hours to pull myself together.

The bad news is that I had sex with Hunter Baldwin last night.

I have seen Hunter Baldwin naked.

Hunter Baldwin has seen *me* naked.

Which might have been bearable except for the look of panic on his face and the speed with which he was trying to leave.

Humiliation swells in my chest, and I press my hand to my sternum as if that could keep it down. It doesn't really help.

With a groan, I haul myself to my feet, brush my teeth, and stare at my reflection in the mirror. Even on my best day—and I am light years away from my best day right now—I'm cute,

not beautiful. My eyes are a little too big for my face and my chin a little too pointed. Underneath my bathrobe, I'm short and angular, and my body is dotted with adorable cartoony tattoos. My hair, still damp from the shower, hangs around my face like green and pink seaweed.

I look like a hungover anime character, basically, which is the complete opposite of the type of girl Hunter usually dates—tall, shapely, poised, with skin and hair that are practically airbrushed.

Aside from not being his type physically, we also have completely different outlooks on relationships. Hunter's been playing the field since high school; by his standards, three dates is a long-term relationship.

Me, on the other hand? I've only had sex with one guy, and we dated for four years, and I thought we'd get married.

I blink at the mirror. *Two* guys, I remind myself. I've had sex with *two* guys now.

Not that any of that has stopped me from having a crush on Hunter since I was in middle school. As long as I've known him, though, Hunter has taken his cues from Noah, treating me like a pesky little sister.

Until last night, anyway.

It's bad enough that Hunter and I had sex. What's worse is that I confided in him. I spent *hours* last night telling him about Brandon, about how I can't have children, about my family and how I love them but they don't really understand me...

Even at my drunkest point last night, I was sober enough to know that having sex with Hunter wasn't going to turn into a grand romance, but I guess I thought that we'd made it past that point last night and become friends in our own right, not just because we're both attached to Noah.

I got *emotionally* naked with him, and that's the part I regret the most.

When I finally come out of the bathroom, Wombat is staring at me, disapproval written all over his fat, whiskered

face.

“I don’t need your judgment,” I mutter.

I go to the kitchen and fill up his bowl with kibble, glancing at the kitchen clock. It’s been less than 48 hours since I broke up with Brandon and I’ve already had my first-ever one-night stand.

And not with some rando I could have forgotten about, but someone I will have to see again—and again, and *again*, given that he’s Noah’s best friend and practically a member of our family.

So there’s the awkward aftermath to look forward to...

And on top of that, the sheer, horrible *waste* of it all. I’ve had the hots for Hunter Baldwin since forever. I mean, if I was going to make an idiot out of myself over the hottest guy I’ve ever had a crush on, I’d like to at least remember it properly.

But the truth is, our one night of passion is just a jumble of hazy images and sensations. What I remember is good... but I don’t remember much.

I remember him racing out of my apartment like his hair was on fire, though.

I toast a slice of bread—pretty sure it’s the only thing I’ll be able to keep down—and sink into one of the two wooden chairs by the tiny kitchen table.

“I know it’s not very modern-woman of me, but I feel like a total slut,” I tell Wombat, but he’s face down in his kibble and doesn’t bother responding.

In my head, I revisit Hunter’s invitation to meet up and talk it over later. For all his devil-may-care attitude, Hunter’s not a completely insensitive guy. He probably dreads the awkward aftermath as much as I do, so I assume the offer was well-intentioned. But I’m still raw from breaking up with Brandon, waking up naked next to Hunter, and feeling the effects of way too many amaretto sours.

I’m definitely not up for a *let’s be friends* speech on top of everything else.

“This sucks,” I mumble into my toast. The only response from Wombat is an extra-loud kibble crunch.

So, Joyce, what have we learned from this experience?

Do not be alone with Hunter Baldwin.

Do not be emotionally vulnerable with Hunter Baldwin.

And so help me, God, I will never drink another amaretto sour.



“HOW’RE YOU FEELING TODAY?” my friend and barista Lucky asks in her broad Long Island accent.

She’s even shorter than I am, but unlike me, she’s all curves and she’s not shy about showing them off. Today, she’s wearing a short, low-cut, clingy knit dress, and as always, she has on a full face of makeup.

I wouldn’t say I’ve recovered from my hangover, but after Hunter left, I was able to get more sleep and I indulged in a sausage roll from the pastry case for lunch. I’m feeling closer to human, but it still takes me a second to realize Lucky’s talking about Brandon, not the hangover.

I pretend to be very engrossed in wiping down the espresso machine. “I’m fine. I just need some time.”

Agreeably, Lucky changes the subject. “How’s the hiring going?”

The one thing I don’t like about being a cafe owner is that I’m chronically short-staffed. Lucky has been working here since she showed up in town last summer. Since then, she’s appointed herself manager of her boyfriend Anthony’s music career, and she seems to be doing a pretty good job. The two of them are out of town at performances and music festivals more and more often. Another friend, Bailey, was working here, but she just quit to open her own art gallery.

Great for them, not so great for me. I need more baristas.

“Julian’s taking over weekend afternoons, Darcy is on for Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and I’ve got a few more interviews lined up,” I tell her. “They’re all college students, though, so I’ll be short-staffed again from Thanksgiving to New Year’s.”

Lucky grimaces. “Sorry, I wish I wasn’t gone so much.”

“No worries. You’ve been great, and it’s not exactly a forever job.”

“So... Did Hunter show up last night?” There’s something a little too casual in Lucky’s voice.

Unlike my parents, who adored Brandon, Lucky couldn’t stand him and was never particularly good at concealing her feelings. It was almost comical watching her try to pretend she wasn’t elated when I told her we’d broken up.

I turn around and narrow my eyes at her. “Kind of odd, now that I think about it, that you’d text Hunter to come meet us at the Cantina right before you and Anthony left.”

Lucky’s green eyes widen innocently. “My dad was in town. He wanted to have dinner with us.”

I cross my arms. “I hope you’re not trying to ship me and Hunter.”

Lucky’s big eyes somehow get even wider. “I would *never*.”

“Good. Because that is *so* not happening,” I warn her.

Because I’ve got both feet grounded in reality, even if Lucky doesn’t.

Lucky turns to greet the portly older man who’s just walked up to the counter. “Heya, Mayor! How’s it going? The usual?”

“Yes, please. Thank you, Lucky. Joyce.” He tips his baseball cap at me. “I hope you ladies are well.”

The Mayor was the mayor of Welkins Ridge for about twenty years and his name is actually Bill Mayer, so now everyone just calls him the Mayor. He’s a large man with a big

white beard who has a distinct Santa vibe to him, except for the Hawaiian shirts he wears year-round. Today, in concession to the fall chill, he's wearing a thick, cable-knit grey cardigan over a bright orange shirt covered with pineapples.

The Mayor won't win any prizes for fashion, but everyone loves him. While he was mayor, he helped make Welkins Ridge a tourist destination for UFO hunters. It's a quirky niche that has brought in a lot of jobs and money for the town.

I begin making up his usual large mocha as Lucky rings up the order. It has about a million calories, and we're forbidden from telling his wife that he orders one several times a week.

"Hey, Mayor," I greet him. "How're things at the shop?" The Mayor owns Out of This World, a shop across the street that sells alien-themed souvenirs and groceries.

"Got a nice bump from the Taste of Heaven Festival yesterday," he replies. "How're things here?"

"Same. The festival brought in a lot of customers."

"Think our friend Nikko will make it an annual thing?"

Nikko Cassavetti, a celebrity chef, organized the festival to raise money for our friend Bailey's art gallery. They had a passionate fling over the summer, but Nikko was offered a new television show back in New York City, which seems to have put an end to their brief affair.

I don't think Bailey would appreciate me sharing that with the Mayor, though.

"Can't say. Hang on, let me get your drink."

I think about Bailey and Nikko as I steam the milk. Anyone could see she'd fallen hard for Nikko, and I think he fell just as hard for her. But her life is in Welkins Ridge, and his life is in New York City, and it didn't look like there was a way to reconcile that.

I do kind of envy that she won't have to turn around and see him on a regular basis, though. I don't see Hunter all that often now that he lives in nearby North Falls, but he can be

counted on to show up at friend and family events, and I know I won't be able to avoid him.

I should call or text and just get The Talk out of the way once and for all.

But I've had a crush on him since I was a kid, and I'm still raw from feeling like I wasn't good enough for Brandon. Hunter and I are like oil and water, but I'm not anxious to have him confirm that I'm not good enough for him. I had enough of that from Brandon.

I mix the foamy milk in a cup with espresso and chocolate sauce and hand it to the Mayor with a cheerful if somewhat forced smile "Here you go!"

He looks petulantly at the cup. "No whipped cream?"

"I shouldn't be letting you have these at all."

He gives me a sly smile. "Don't you remember who pulled some strings with city hall when you needed those permits in a hurry?" He lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know we business owners should be sticking together."

"That was almost two years ago," I whisper back, "and I've paid you back with gallons of whipped cream since then."

Instead of replying, he pulls a sad-puppy face and hands back the cup.

I roll my eyes, but I'm a sucker for the Mayor. I take the cup and squirt a blob of whipped cream on the top. "From now on, I'll only give you whipped cream if you order a small," I say as I hand it back.

He gives a long-suffering sigh. "You'll make someone a very good wife one day, young lady. Well, I'd better get back to work. I'll see you two again soon."

With a wink and a smile, he heads back across the street.

I glance at the walls of the cafe. The name, Flying Saucer, is a nod to the town's reputation as a place to spot UFOs. When I opened the business, I hired a local artist to paint murals on all the walls of cups and saucers, interspersed with

cupcakes and crullers flying through a brightly colored universe.

I loved the designs so much that I had a tattoo artist recreate some of them on my right forearm with a cheeky little cup and saucer on my ankle to boot. I glance at the tattoos on my arm as I wipe down the espresso machine.

I'm lucky, I remind myself. As long as I have my cafe, I can deal with the Hunters and the Brandons of the world.

It's busy enough for the rest of the afternoon that the time goes by quickly, but by the time Lucky leaves and I turn the sign on the window to closed, I'm wiped out.

I drag myself to the tiny office in the back and collect the mail that's piled up over the past few days as we prepped for the festival, some bills, some statements, some junk, and a formal-looking envelope from something called Brightside Properties.

I leave out the back way, locking the door behind me, then go around the corner and unlock the door that leads to the rest of the building.

I pause at the bottom of the wide stairway to unlock the mailbox that belongs to my apartment. There's another letter with Brightside Properties on the return address.

"Hey, Joyce."

I look up to see Melody, who owns the second-floor yoga studio, walking down the stairs, holding the same envelope in her hand.

"Did you get a letter from this Brightside company?" she asks.

"Yeah," I hold mine up. "I got two, one to the cafe and one to my apartment."

Melody reaches the ground level. She's taller than I am, and not surprisingly, very fit. She's dressed, as usual, in leggings and a cropped sweatshirt that shows off a sliver of bare skin and washboard abs.

Initially, I was intimidated by her. She's beautiful and blond and has an incredible body, but she also turned out to be really sweet. Like me, she dreamed of owning her own business for years and finally rented out the space upstairs about a year ago. Although there are several yoga studios in North Falls, hers is the only one in Welkins Ridge, and she does well, especially during the summers when she caters to the tourists.

"Looks like these Brightside people just bought the building," she tells me.

That's unsettling. "They're not kicking us out or anything, are they?"

She shakes her head. "The letter says that by law they have to honor the leases and to just start making rent payments to them instead of the old company."

"Well, that sounds okay. Maybe they'll spruce the place up a bit."

The building dates back almost a hundred years. It's got great bones, but it's definitely feeling its age, and the old landlord either couldn't afford or couldn't be bothered to do much more than the bare minimum of upkeep.

Melody doesn't look convinced. "I hope so. I signed on for another year last month, and I just put a ton of money into new branding."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." I try to sound reassuring but I'm so tired that I don't have the energy to force all that much conviction into my voice. "I signed a five-year lease and I still have almost three years to go, so we're sort of in the same situation."

"Five years, wow! You went all in," Melody's pretty green eyes are wide. "That was brave."

It could just as easily have been really stupid. Most coffee shops don't last more than a year or two, but real estate in Welkins Ridge was still cheap then, and the old landlord was desperate.

“I got a really good deal,” I explain. “Have you talked to Mark or Cathleen about it?”

Mark is a CPA with an office across the hall from the yoga studio. Cathleen does graphic design and printing services in the corner office next to his. There’s another apartment on the third floor across from mine but it’s been empty for the past month since the last tenant, Betsy, moved to Virginia to be closer to her grandchildren. Just as well; I don’t think she could have managed these stairs much longer.

I can barely face them today myself.

Melody makes a face. “Cathleen’s out of town, and Mark and I... well, he can be kind of grouchy. I just saw you and thought I’d get your thoughts.”

My thoughts are mainly on getting back to my apartment to nurse what’s left of my hangover. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.” I take a step toward the stairs.

“Do you think it would be worth talking to a lawyer, though, just in case?” Melody looks at me earnestly.

Hunter’s handsome face pops into my mind along with an ugly burst of jealousy. Melody, with her sculpted body and her perfectly styled hair, is way more his type than I am.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I’m sorry, Melody, I’m not feeling all that great. I really need to get home.”

“Oh, of course, I’m so sorry!” Melody steps back to let me pass. “You do look kind of rundown. Why don’t you come to my kundalini class tomorrow? We’ll be focusing on energetic realignment. Six a.m.!”

I’m already plodding up the stairs. “Maybe,” I say over my shoulder.

A couple of minutes later, I walk into my apartment, huffing and puffing from the two sets of stairs. Dropping my purse and the mail on the coffee table, I sprawl on the couch and check my phone, trying to repress the thud of disappointment in my chest when there’s no message from Hunter.

Well, what did you expect? You kicked him out and told him to forget it ever happened.

Yeah, but...

No buts. It happened. It's over. We're moving on.

HUNTER

“Hey, hey!” Phil walks into the break room as I’m pouring my coffee. “How was it with the manic pixie dream girl?”

Physically, I’m feeling better than I did yesterday, but my mood has only gotten worse.

Phil is a decent lawyer and can be fun to hang out with, but sooner or later, he usually manages to rub me the wrong way.

This morning, he’s working on sooner.

“What the fuck was that bullshit about going to Jessica’s?” I respond.

Phil raises his hands in apology. “Sorry, man. Didn’t realize you wanted to fuck her. You trend more high-maintenance. Figured she was just a friend or something.”

Since punching my co-worker will have me out on my ass faster than I can say *law school loan payments*, I settle for putting the coffee pot down harder than necessary.

“She *is* just a friend,” I tell him, hating myself a little for it.

Phil’s not wrong. I tend to go for the girls in high heels, short skirts, and long hair, with the attitude and the make-up to match.

Joyce isn’t my type, but being reminded of it by Phil doesn’t make it better.

“How was Jessica’s?” I ask. I don’t really care, but I want to get the topic off Joyce.

“Oh, man!” Phil chortles, reaching past me for the coffee. “You missed quite a night. We paid this chick to surprise Michael with a lap dance. You know how uptight he is. You should have seen the look on his face...”

Phil keeps talking but I tune him out. Mostly my mind is on Joyce and how badly we fucked up.

I fucked up.

I’ve fantasized about Joyce for years, but in my daydreams, it was slow, romantic, sweet even. That’s what I remember from our first kiss on the sidewalk after we left the bar. It was the kind of first kiss you dream about, the kind that sappy movies end with, the kind that is supposed to signal the beginning of something grand.

But the rest of the evening is a hazy memory of groping and gasping and tumbling into bed at her place. I remember the scent of her, the silky feeling of her skin, the delight I took in finally being able to run my hands through that colorful hair, but none of it is as clear and sharp as I’d like it to be.

What stands out in sharp relief, though, is the look on her face yesterday morning, disgust mingled with shame. Not to mention the way she shoved me out the door, like she couldn’t get rid of me fast enough.

Now I’m flooded with guilt for taking advantage of the situation and regret that my first and probably only time with her is nothing but a foggy collection of disjointed sensations.

And, okay, I’m hurt that she so clearly didn’t want anything more to do with me.

Then again, I probably didn’t do myself any favors by running out on her as fast as I could.

“You even listening, man?”

I look up to see Phil looking at me with a bemused smile. “Oh, yeah, sorry.” I wince. “Still tired from the weekend.”

He chuckles again and slaps my shoulder as he passes. “See you at the morning meeting.”

I take a sip of my coffee and make a face. I've poured way too much cream into it and it tastes like coffee-flavored milk. I toss it down the drain and make another pot. I still have five minutes before the meeting, and I need my coffee.

As the coffee brews, I brood.

A mistake.

Well, yes. I can see how it was a mistake, but that doesn't make it sting any less.

April, the firm's receptionist/office manager/all-around gal Friday, walks into the break room and interrupts my thoughts with a snap of her fingers. She points at my cup. "Don't you dare leave that on the counter. I'm an office manager, not a maid."

April is about Joyce's height, but curvier. Her hair is a natural shade of strawberry blond and she gravitates toward pastel suits. Most of the lawyers tower over her, but she has a no-BS attitude that comes from having to navigate an office full of overgrown frat boys, and she doesn't take shit from anyone.

"I'm still using it, geez." I pour myself a fresh cup of coffee and check out my reflection in the stainless-steel side of the coffee maker.

Women, by and large, seem to find me very attractive. Why can't Joyce be one of them?

"You think I'm good-looking, don't you, April?" I ask.

I'm not worried about her thinking I'm flirting with her. I know for a fact she has a serious girlfriend.

"Your ego is ridiculous, Baldwin." She looks me up and down. "But yeah, you're okay. What's the matter? Finally meet a girl who didn't fall for your charms?"

I cover up the pang with a wink and a grin. "Just want to be sure I'm not losing my edge."

She rolls her eyes at me. "Get moving. Weekly meeting is starting. George is already in the conference room."

“Shit.” I grab my coffee and forgo the cream altogether. Bad enough I showed up to the club hungover yesterday. I can’t afford to compound that by being late to the first meeting of the week.

Fortunately, people are still taking their seats when I walk into the conference room.

George clears his throat and begins to go over updates on cases and clients the firm is working with. My ears perk up when he mentions that the firm has just acquired a new client.

“Brightside Property Development Limited,” George reads. “They have a presence in Boston and Hartford, and now they’re moving into New York State. They’ve recently acquired a handful of properties in North Falls and one in Welkins Ridge. They have a potentially awkward tenant situation, and we’ll be working with their general counsel to make sure it all goes smoothly.”

I raise my hand. “Commercial or residential?”

“Commercial,” George replies. “Liza and Phil will be working on this one with me.”

Phil shoots me a shit-eating grin of triumph. I ignore him.

I’ve worked with real estate clients before, including Noah. I’m a bit surprised George didn’t put me on this one, but it’s not like I don’t already have enough on my plate.

Mainly I’m glad to know that whatever this company is, it won’t be competing with Babcock Construction, which only works on residential property development. With no pony in this race, I half-listen to the rest of the meeting, take a few idle notes, and finally escape back to my office to get some real work done.

Just as I’m sitting down in front of my computer, my phone dings with a text from Noah: **Two weeks from today, 7 am.**



SINCE NOAH DID NOT PUNCH me on sight when I arrived, I guess he doesn't know that I slept with his sister two weeks ago.

So that's a plus.

Not that Noah was ever the punching type. He's more the "deeply disappointed look" type. I can handle a punch. But when Noah was team captain and gave that look to a guy on the football team, we all felt it.

But things between us seem normal, except for the extra edge of anticipation in the air.

It's still early, and the sun has barely risen on the bright, early October day. Anthony, Noah, and I are standing at the edge of a large piece of property that Noah's company has just acquired.

Noah shoots me a grin. "Thought you might like to be here for this. Ready?"

"Thanks, man." I feel a thrill of ... something. Nerves? Excitement? Maybe just the tiniest shiver of sadness? "Let's do this thing."

Noah nods at the foreman who in turn gives a signal to the guy driving a crane with a wrecking ball. The ball swings wide and smashes into the double-wide I grew up in, turning it instantly into matchsticks.

I let it sink in for a moment, then let out a loud "WHOO-HOO!"

Noah and Anthony join me in cheering. The crane driver gives us a wave and rolls the crane away.

Anthony laughs. "Seems like the wrecking ball might have been overkill. We probably could've pushed that old place over on our own."

Noah nods. "Normally, I'd have just had it hauled off, but the wrecking ball was here anyway." He pats my shoulder. "Thought you might appreciate some dramatic flourish."

I look at the tangle of cheap siding and cement that is all that's left of my childhood home. As Welkins Ridge's fortunes

have improved over the past several years, the trailer park fell into deeper and deeper disrepair, not that it was ever in great shape to begin with. The company that owned it finally declared bankruptcy, and Noah swooped in and bought the property—with some help from yours truly, who negotiated the final deal and helped with the contracts.

Babcock Construction has its own legal counsel, a guy named Warren Smythe, but I sometimes assist with negotiations and contracts, and Noah made sure I had a hand in helping him acquire the place where I grew up.

“I do appreciate it,” I say. “Thanks, man.”

It rained last night and the ground is slick and muddy. I have a visceral memory of wading through dirty water on my way to school on rainy days. The entire property looks drab and hopeless, dotted with shabby buildings that aren’t in any better shape than my old trailer was. But Noah has a gift for turning muddy flats into picture-book neighborhoods. I’ve seen him do it.

Noah waves his hand over the property. “A year from now, this will all be high-quality, affordable family homes, with a playground, and right on the public bus route.” He turns to me. “And good drainage.”

I huff a short laugh. I moved in with Noah’s family the last semester of high school after early spring rains flooded the trailer park—and my trailer—and my dad disappeared for good.

“Think maybe you’ll buy one of the new houses?” Anthony asks me. “You know, come full circle?”

I’ve seen the plans and the pictures. This will be a beautiful neighborhood when Noah and his company are done with it. But it’s not for me.

“I’m sure the houses will be awesome, but playgrounds and white picket fences aren’t my speed. Gonna stick with my bachelor pad in North Falls.” I glance at my watch. “Wish I could stay and watch the rest of these buildings get smashed, but I gotta get to work,” I explain with some regret at having

to say goodbye so soon. Noah, Anthony, and I were inseparable in high school. Now it's rare that the three of us hang out.

Anthony is my best friend, but Noah is like the brother I never had.

By extension, Joyce should be like my little sister, and when I was sixteen and she was thirteen, she was. I never said it out loud, but in my heart, I adopted Noah's family as my own and swore I would always protect them, little Joyce especially.

Gradually, though, something changed.

Mainly, Joyce grew up.

Her snarky humor, the way her hair was a different color every time I saw her, and her courage in turning her back on the family business and striking off on her own all appealed to me. She's not a classic beauty, but there's a delicate sexiness to her that I don't think she's aware of. She's funny and kind and sticks up for herself and other people. It all sort of came together until I realized that my feelings for her went way beyond brotherly.

I wasn't planning on ever acting on it, but too many amaretto sours have a way of revealing your true colors.

I haven't heard from her since we hooked up and the more time passes, the more awkward it feels to reach out to her.

Anthony interrupts my thoughts as we start trudging back to where we parked our cars. "So, other than knocking down buildings what have you two been up to?"

"Busy," Noah says.

"Yeah, me too," I add.

Anthony waits for us to elaborate. When neither of us does, he laughs. "That's it? You've both just been 'busy'?"

"Not all of us are playing indie rock at music festivals," I remind him.

“Come on! Between a hotshot lawyer and a real estate magnate, I’d have figured at least one of you would be up to something exciting.”

“Twelve-hour days reading contractual fine print. Not as exciting as it looks on TV.”

Anthony shudders. “I don’t know how you do it. Sounds like a nightmare.”

Noah chuckles as he pats me on the back. “Hunter does great work, but he’s in it for the money.”

I chuckle, but Noah’s not wrong.

As it happens, I quite like the law, and I’m good at it, but it was the prospect of a stable, high-income career that drew me to it. Back in high school, I use to think that Noah, Anthony, and I were kind of like the three bears—except in our case, Noah was the rich kid, I was the poor kid, and Anthony was the normal, middle-class kid.

Now I’m practicing corporate law for North Fall’s largest firm. I own a condo, drive a Lexus, and wear shoes that cost more than a month’s rent in the crappy trailer that lies in smithereens behind us.

I’m not quite in Noah’s league yet, but I will be in time. Of course, if Anthony goes on to be a famous singer, he’ll have both of us beat, but that’s fine. All I ask is my own slice of the pie.

“We gotta hang out more,” I tell them. “Before Anthony gets rich and famous and forgets all about us little people.”

“You don’t have to worry about that just yet,” Anthony assures me. “And I’d like that. Lucky’s got me doing some gigs down in the Tri-State area over the next couple of weeks. Maybe when I get back?”

“Sounds good.”

“Well, you’re both invited to my parents’ for Thanksgiving,” Noah says. “As always.”

I’ve spent Thanksgiving with the Babcocks since high school. After Anthony’s parents died when we were in college,

he and his brother and sister spent Thanksgiving at the Babcocks until the kids were in college and Anthony moved to Boston for work.

Not having any family of my own, I've kept up the tradition.

"I'll be there," I tell him. "I'm very reliable when it comes to your mom's cooking."

"Thanks, man," Anthony says, "but we're going to be spending it on Long Island with Lucky's family. All the cousins and aunts and uncles."

Noah raises his eyebrows. "Must be getting serious if you're meeting the extended family now."

"Getting pretty serious," Anthony agrees.

He looks happy about it, and I'm happy for him. I like his girlfriend. Lucky combines pin-up-girl sexiness with a take-no-prisoners attitude, and she's been instrumental in getting Anthony out of his head and onto the stage, where he belongs.

"What about you?" Anthony asks me. "Still playing the field?"

I shift my weight, hoping that Noah doesn't notice my discomfort and grateful that he can't read my mind.

Because of course, I'm thinking of his sister. Naked.

"Meh, I'm not the stud I used to be," I say, trying to sound mock-regretful. "Mostly all work and no play these days. Hoping to make junior partner this spring."

"You've got junior partner in the bag," Noah assures me but his eyes glint with humor. "Not sure I see you settling down to a life of senior partner respectability, though."

"Ah, that's when I strike out for a bigger pond, somewhere a little less conservative. Albany, New York City, maybe. Wouldn't mind Boston, but I'd have to pass the Massachusetts bar." I've had this plan for a while, but suddenly it sounds about as appealing as a cold can of tuna fish. "We'll see," I add as we reach our cars. I unlock mine with a click of my key fob.

“Why’d you come back to this neck of the woods, anyway?” Anthony asks. “You could have gone anywhere.”

“Noah’s dad put in a good word for me with Dade Bristol,” I tell him. “It was a good opportunity.” I shrug like it was a foregone conclusion that I’d end up back barely ten miles from the hellhole where I grew up.

It wasn’t. I had some good offers from firms in other cities, but something pulled me back here.

Maybe it was because I had something to prove to the people I grew up with.

Maybe it’s because every time I drive up the highway to Welkins Ridge, I get to remember how far I’ve come.

Maybe it’s because the Babcocks are the closest thing I have to a family.

Or maybe...

But I don’t let myself go there.

Instead, I wave goodbye to my friends and head to work.

JOYCE

“How are your parents handling it?”

Blaze and I are standing in a corner of the North Falls Country Club’s main room. It’s cocktail hour, which will be followed by a sit-down dinner and dancing. The crowded room looks like Mom and Dad invited just about everyone in North Falls and Welkins Ridge combined.

They didn’t, of course. The guests are a carefully curated list of Who’s Who in the area, plus a handful of relatives and real friends. Blaze is here by virtue of being my best friend since grade school, but it doesn’t hurt that her step-brother, who is also here, is the current mayor of Welkins Ridge. Noah and his wife, Katie, are talking to a member of the North Falls city council who’s been influential in helping Noah and Dad get the permits they need to build more houses. Mom and Dad are laughing at a joke made by George McLaren, one of the partners at Hunter’s firm, who’s played golf with Dad since forever. Most everyone here has either money or influence or both.

If I were a better daughter, I’d be out in the crowd, meeting and greeting, but I don’t have the energy. I don’t know if it was breaking up with Brandon or my fling with Hunter, but I’ve felt tired and drained ever since the weekend of the Festival.

“Disappointed would be an understatement.” I sigh. “You’d think *they* were the ones who’d broken up.”

Blaze gives me a commiserating glance over her wine glass. “They just want you to be happy.”

“I know. It’s just that their version of happy and mine have never quite been in sync.”

“Did you tell them why you broke up?”

I shake my head. “Honestly, I was afraid they’d take his side. I just told them we just didn’t feel like it was going to work for the long term, and it was a mutual decision.”

“And they bought it?”

I snort lightly. “Oh, *hell* no. Mom is sure it’s my fault and that I’m making the biggest mistake of my life by letting him go. ‘You should be out there fighting for your man.’” I mimic her voice. “I’m half afraid he’ll show up tonight.”

The invitations went out long before we broke up, and naturally, Brandon was invited.

Blaze looks around as if Brandon might spontaneously appear. “Oh, he’s not that tactless, is he?”

“*He* isn’t, but I wouldn’t put it past my mother to lean on him to come anyway.”

I’m not really expecting Brandon to show up, but I take a surreptitious glance around the room anyway, taking in leather couches, Oriental rugs, and the enormous marble fireplace. My parents had assumed, and I guess I had, too, that Brandon and I would have our wedding here, and I’m suddenly glad that, at least, is off the table. When and if I ever do get married, I don’t want to have the reception in this stuffy old club, no matter how much it means to my parents.

Blaze puts an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. “I feel so bad about leaving you alone that night.”

“Don’t worry. I’m just sorry you got so sick.”

I haven’t told anyone, not even Blaze, about Hunter. She knows I’ve had a crush on him since middle school and would read way too much into it. And, honestly, I don’t want to relive the humiliating aftermath of him running for the door.

“How about we reschedule our girls’ night for next weekend?” Blaze suggests.

I frown at the glass of Chardonnay in my hand, my stomach rebelling at the thought of another night of drinking. “I don’t know... I think I might be coming down with what you had. I’ve been feeling kind of rundown.”

Blaze scoffs. “If you had what I had, you’d know it, trust me. And you’d be over it by now. The only good thing about it was that it only lasted twenty-four hours.” She shudders. “I love reading to the kids, but they’re germ factories.”

The thought of Blaze reading to a room full of third graders reminds me of why Brandon and I broke up and makes me sad all over again.

Although I’m not sure if I’m really sad about Brandon or about not having kids of my own. It’s all kind of tangled up now.

“You know what you need?” Blaze breaks into my maudlin thoughts with a cheeky grin. “You need a good rebound roll in the hay with some sexy stud you’re never going to see again. Get your groove back.”

Back in middle school and high school, Blaze and I were two dorks in a pod. She got teased for being chubby, I got teased for being skinny, and we both got teased for being nerdy book lovers with lousy social skills.

Somewhere in college, though, Blaze embraced her curves, started dressing to the nines, and discovered casual sex. Me, I rebelled with a handful of tattoos and turning my back on the family business.

I try to laugh but it’s not very convincing. “Yeah, I don’t think so. I’m not really the one-night-stand type.”

Liar.

“How do you know if you’ve tried it?” she points out logically.

I shrug halfheartedly. “Mm, I don’t know... I’m just not.”

Blaze wiggles her eyebrows. “Best way to get over a man is to get under another.”

Now I scoff. “I don’t think it works that way.”

Except maybe it kind of does because if I’m honest with myself, I’ve thought a lot more about Hunter over the past month than about Brandon.

I’m not sure the trade-off was worth it, though.

Blaze nudges me. “Come on, you’ve only been with one guy, *ever*. Don’t you want to know what you’ve been missing out on?”

“I wasn’t missing out on anything,” I reply.

Which is mostly true. From a technical standpoint, my sex life with Brandon was fine, though I have to admit, I never quite felt like we clicked on the passion level. The memory of kissing Hunter just outside the bar flashes through my mind like a shooting star.

“Look,” Blaze continues, “Brandon was a decent guy, but you two got way too serious way too young.”

“He was a good boyfriend. I was lucky to have him,” I reply.

Which is true—he was the perfect boyfriend, smart, handsome, thoughtful, and my parents adored him. It’s not like I have a long list of complaints.

But although I miss him, I’m not quite as heartbroken as I think I’m supposed to be. Am I defending him—or defending my choice to date him for as long as I did?

“*He* was lucky to have *you*,” Blaze says firmly. “Okay, let’s talk about getting you back in the saddle.”

“No saddles, Blaze.”

“One saddle?” She makes puppy dog eyes at me. “Brandon stole your mojo, and I think a hot, sexy, no-commitments, just-for-you and just-for-fun *fuck* would help you get it back.”

I take a tiny sip of my wine but it has a funny taste. I don’t want to explain that I’ve *had* my hot, sexy, no-commitments,

just-for-me and just-for-fun fuck, and my mojo is as awol as ever.

“You are a bad influence,” I tell my best friend. “Okay, let’s not talk about Brandon anymore. *Or* hypothetical one-night stands.”

She bats her blue eyes innocently. “I am the best influence. But fine. Any sign of my idiot stepbrother? He’s been avoiding me at the office. I thought maybe I could corner him here.”

Blaze and her stepbrother lock horns on a regular basis over funding for the town’s library.

“I haven’t seen him, but I know he was invited.” I glance reflexively around the room. No sign of Walden, but I’m just in time to meet Hunter’s gaze as he walks into the room.

An electric mix of anxiety, embarrassment and, okay, lust surges through me. He looks effortlessly elegant in a tailored navy suit and carries himself with that borderline-cocky air that always gets under my skin.

I don’t know why I wasn’t expecting to see him here; of course, my parents would have invited him, just like they invited Blaze. They’ve known him forever.

But conveniently, I hadn’t given any thought to running into him here. I guess if I had, I would have hoped that he’d do the gentlemanly thing and not show up.

But since when has Hunter Baldwin been a gentleman?

Now I’m face to face with that studly roll in the hay I said I didn’t want.

I look away quickly, but Blaze sees him at the same time and waves. “Hey, Hunter!”

He gives us a friendly smile and begins making his way toward us, accepting a glass of wine from a passing waiter as he comes. The hazy memories that I’ve tried so hard not to dwell on suddenly rise to the surface of my mind in painfully sharp detail, and all I can think of is what he looks like—and feels like—naked.

What are we going to say to each other? Will I be able to say anything at all, in fact? I feel like I've got a wad of cotton wool stuck in my throat.

Will he pretend nothing happened? Will he make sly references to it? Will things be weird between us, maybe forever?

I'm sure my face is bright red, and I think I'm breaking out into a light sweat. Hunter, on the other hand, looks completely relaxed.

Well, he's had more practice at this than I have. He's used to measuring his relationships by the hour, rather than the year. He's probably done the awkward aftermath so many times it's not awkward anymore.

He strolls up to us. Every move is fluid, confident, and controlled, and every move screams danger. I lock my knees to prevent myself from running in the opposite direction.

"Ladies." He lifts his glass to us. "You're both looking beautiful. I haven't seen either of you in ages. How have you been?"

I'm relieved ... and a little disappointed. Hunter is putting on his Charming Guest act, which I guess is better than the Sly Reference to Our Night of Passion act, but it still feels like he's putting a layer of formality between us. I might actually have preferred it if he'd come up and tousled my hair or called me some stupid nickname. At least then, I'd know we were back to normal.

There's nothing smarmy or fake about this polite and polished version. He just feels... distant.

Blaze begins filling him in on plans for a surprise party for Bailey, to celebrate her finally getting her art gallery going after working like a dog for years to save enough money.

Blaze goes over her plan, which is for Hunter to bring Bailey to the Flying Saucer after Bailey closes on the building she's buying. Hunter nods along, while I stand there like a third wheel. I pretend to sip my wine, but it has a strange acrid taste. I can't believe my parents would choose cheap wine for

this event, and I wonder again if I'm coming down with something that's affecting the way I taste. I'm only half listening to the conversation.

Hunter finally turns to me. "You're being awfully quiet, Joyride. I bet I can scare up an amaretto sour for you if the wine isn't to your liking."

I snap back to full attention. "The wine is fine."

"You sure?" He raises an eyebrow. "I kind of prefer girly cocktails these days myself. They're more... fun than my usual."

Is there an innuendo in those words?

Who am I kidding? *Yes.*

I shift awkwardly in my high heels. "Hm ... Yeah, I've kind of lost my taste for alcohol altogether."

I mean it literally—neither the wine nor any other drink has any appeal for me—but as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize they could be taken a different way.

And the flicker of expression across Hunter's face tells me that's exactly how he took them.

Crap, he didn't really expect anything more than that one night, did he?

No, I think it's more that he's trying to be nice the only way he knows how, and I just totally shot him down.

"I mean, I still like it," I say quickly. "I'm just not sure if having more is really a good idea."

Blaze looks at my wine glass. "You've barely had any," she points out. "Don't you like it? I think it's really good."

"It's very good," Hunter agrees, still looking at me. "Nice body, good legs. It's a sexy little wine for being so unpretentious."

He takes another sip, but his eyes are locked on mine, and I know it's not the wine he's talking about it. The heat in my face dials up a few degrees and the wad of cotton wool seems to expand in my throat.

He's flirting. But why? He's already... well, *had* me. Maybe he senses I'm ambivalent about what happened and is trying to make me feel better by playing the seduction game.

Blaze slaps him playfully on the arm. "Listen to you! How many girls have you seduced with the wine talk?"

Hunter turns his gaze to Blaze. I feel like a bright sun has just gone behind a cloud. I'm relieved to be out of the glare, but I miss the warmth.

"Not as many as you probably think," he tells her. "I'm pretty much all work and no play these days."

Something over Hunter's shoulder catches Blaze's attention. "Hey, I just spotted Walden. I'll be right back, okay?"

"No worries," Hunter is talking to her but looking at me. "We'll be fine here on our own."

"I just want to get Hunter's advice about an issue I'm having with my landlord," I add, to sound businesslike.

Blaze strolls off toward her stepbrother. I'm left staring at Hunter and groping for words, any words, but my brain feels like it's covered in a soft fog.

"Are you really having problems with your landlord?" he prompts.

I blink away some of the fog. "Can I talk to you for a moment? Outside?"

For a moment, his expression grows serious, almost resigned, then he smiles and bows me toward the door. "Your wish is my command."

The French doors that lead onto the patio at the back of the clubhouse aren't locked and it's easy to slip away. It's fall now. The evenings are getting colder and the air outside is cool and damp. The patio flagstones are surrounded by a low stone wall, dotted with ironwork tables and lit with strings of hanging lights that glow softly in the mist.

The club that felt so stuffy and dull inside is suddenly transformed into the most romantic place I've ever been.

Hunter promptly takes off his blazer and drapes it over my shoulders. “Here, I don’t want you getting cold.”

It’s such a sweet, old-fashioned gesture, the kind of thing my dad would do for my mom. The blazer, warm from Hunter’s body, is like a cozy blanket and smells like him. I snuggle into it without realizing what I’m doing.

And now, alone outside, and away from prying eyes, him standing close to me, still holding onto the lapels of the blazer he’s just put around my shoulders, and me close enough to smell his expensive cologne, I realize that coming out here with him was a mistake.

I suck in a deep breath of cold autumn air in an effort to clear my head. “I thought we agreed not to let anyone know about what happened between us.”

He pulls an exaggeratedly innocent face. “What? I was just making conversation.”

“You were not just making conversation. You were doing that fake flirting thing you always do.”

“Well, if I always do it, no one will think it’s strange,” he points out.

This impeccable logic flusters me more than it should. “That’s not the point!” I splutter.

The fake innocent look fades from his face and for once, he looks serious. “Then what is the point, Joyce?”

I stare up at him—he’s a lot taller than I am—and grope for an answer. “I don’t know,” I finally admit.

“Hey, I know it’s weird. And awkward.” Some of the flirty, confident tone I’m used to returns. “Let me take you out to dinner or something. Proper date, no amaretto sours. And we can just see how it goes.”

He gives me that devastating Hollywood smile, and I really, really want to say yes...

But I don’t.

For one thing, I'm not sure if he's just offering out of a sense of obligation because I'm Noah's sister.

For another, I just broke up with a guy I dated for four years. I need some time to focus on myself and get my head on straight.

And finally, because I can see myself falling for Hunter, and while it might be glorious while it lasted, I can't see it ending in anything other than very messy heartbreak, and I've had quite enough of that recently.

"I just don't think that's a good idea. I'm still kind of getting over Brandon," I say softly. "We made a mistake. Can we just put it behind us?"

He stiffens slightly at my words, and for a moment I wish I could take them back. Then he smiles that signature cocky grin, the one that has women swooning at his feet, and I know it was the right decision.

"Your call, Joyride," he says, his voice light. "Shall we head back in?"

He opens the door and gestures me toward it. I hand him back his jacket, already missing the warmth and smell of him, then step back into the bright, noisy club.

HUNTER

A master negotiator knows when to fold.

Joyce has turned me down twice now, smashing any lingering hopes that her initial reluctance to go on a date with me was just a hangover and embarrassment speaking.

It's just as well, I tell myself. Joyce thrives on stability. I'm a commitment-phobe. I wear tailored suits. She shops at second-hand stores. I could maybe see myself adopting a dog sometime in the distant future. Joyce wants to adopt actual humans.

I get my kid fix with Noah's children, especially his four-year-old, Teddy. He's a cute kid, and I like playing Fun Uncle, but God help me, I don't want to be responsible for raising an actual person.

No, Joyce and I were never meant to be, but I still regret the way our one night together went down. Drunk sex, taking off first thing in the morning—the whole thing felt tacky and tawdry. Joyce deserves better, and if we were only ever going to have one night together, I wish it had been something she didn't so clearly regret.

I'd like to stay out of her way, but less than a week after Babcocks' anniversary party, I'm driving Bailey to the Flying Saucer under a flimsy pretext of picking something up from Joyce.

It's evening, the cafe is dark, and the CLOSED sign is on when we get there, but the door isn't locked. "We'll just be a minute," I tell Bailey as I pull the door open.

She steps in, the lights go on, our friends pounce on her, yelling “Surprise!” and she bursts into tears. Happy ones, presumably.

Mission accomplished.

There are enough people here that it’s easy enough to avoid Joyce without being obvious about it. I stay long enough to shake a few hands, listen to Lucky give a congratulatory speech, and toast Bailey’s new venture. Bailey bashfully expresses her thanks, a big blue cake in the shape of the Pearson House is presented, and I figure it’s time to make my escape.

I’m heading for the door when I realize that I can’t leave until I make sure Bailey has a ride home. Blaze’s plan involved me driving her to the title office for the closing so she’d be a captive audience on the way back. Now she’s stuck here without a car.

I turn to check with Bailey, but she’s surrounded by too many well-wishers, so I stuff my hands into my pockets and prepare to wait out the crowd.

“Thanks for making sure Bailey got here!” Lucky wheels up to me with a big smile. “Everything go okay at the closing?”

“No problems,” I tell her. “The Pearson House is officially all hers.”

“Awesome.” Lucky gazes fondly at Bailey. “She’s worked so hard. I’m so happy for her.”

“Hey, I had to take a couple of hours off to help Bailey at the closing, and I need to get back to the office,” I tell her. “Can you make sure she has a ride home?”

Lucky makes a face. “It’s past six. Besides, you can’t leave. You just got here.” She snaps her fingers at Anthony, who is saying something to Blaze. “Hey, Anthony! Bring this guy a beer!”

“That’s okay, I don’t want a beer—”

But the next thing I know, Anthony is pressing an open bottle into my hands. “Come on, man. Just one.”

I guess one beer won’t hurt. “Fine, twist my arm,” I concede.

“Oh, I have a task for you!” Lucky says.

“I already did my task,” I protest, but she’s tugging me toward the back of the cafe.

“Do yourself a favor and don’t fight it,” Anthony advises, looking amused.

Lucky deposits me beside the cake table where Joyce is putting slices onto paper plates. I can’t say she looks overwhelmingly happy to see me.

She’s wearing a short plaid skirt, with tights and a crew-neck sweater, and her hair has morphed from pink and green to green and blue. The panda tattoo is sadly out of sight.

“Okay, you two are in charge of serving cake,” Lucky announces.

Joyce shoots Lucky a stern look. “I don’t think we need two people just to serve cake, Lucky.”

“Oh, I think we do.” Lucky’s smile is bright, but her voice is firm.

I feel like there’s a telepathic conversation going on right in front of me that I can’t follow. I put my beer down and pull a bottle of wine out of a cooler on the floor. “How about I serve drinks, and Joyce can serve cake?”

“Works for me!” Lucky says cheerfully. “I’ll start sending people your way.”

She wheels off into the crowd, and Joyce and I are left standing side by side at the table. I uncork the wine and fill a couple of paper cups but no one comes to claim them. An awkward silence descends.

I decide to make the first move, so I tousle her hair and grin at her. “How’s tricks, Joyride? I’m digging the new colors.”

She bats away my hand and tries to smooth down her hair. “Honestly, are you ever going to grow up?”

“I have a law degree and a Lexus. How much more grown-up do you want?”

“A little maturity would be a nice change.”

This is starting to feel almost back to normal. Progress.

I scoff. “You want maturity on top of a good job, great personality, and devastating good looks? Honestly, I think your standards are kind of unreasonable, Joyride.”

“You’re right. Asking you to act your age is definitely unreasonable.”

The Mayor, one of Welkins Ridge’s more colorful characters, walks up to the table, interrupting our bicker-fest.

“Hunter, m’boy! Haven’t seen you in a while. How’re things in the big city?”

North Falls is a big city only in comparison to Welkins Ridge. “A thrill a minute. How’s life in the boondocks?”

“Slow and steady, the way I like it, especially now that the tourists have all gone home.”

“You love the tourists,” Joyce points out. “You’re the one who got them all here in the first place.”

“And my good deeds get me punished all summer. Now it’s quiet again, and I get to enjoy myself. How about a piece of that cake, young lady? In fact, better give me two slices, one for me and one for the missus.”

“How about some wine, sir?” I ask, feeling like I ought to make an effort to push the wine.

The Mayor sadly shakes his head. “Wife said it was cake or alcohol, but not both.” He leans forward conspiratorially. “She’s in collusion with my doctors.”

“She just cares about you,” Joyce whispers back, handing him two plates.

The mayor *hmpfs*. “Joyce, where’s that man of yours? Haven’t seen him around in weeks.”

Joyce’s cheerful smile vanishes. “Oh. Umm ... we broke up.”

Once again, I curse Brandon for breaking her heart—and for taking it in the first place. Fucking poser. What did she ever see in that guy, anyway?

The Mayor’s face crinkles with concern. “Well, ain’t that a shame. Sorry to hear it, m’dear. Figured you two were headed for the altar.”

Joyce waves him off. “It just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s not easy. But a pretty, successful young thing like you won’t have any trouble meeting someone new, I’m sure.”

Joyce’s cheeks glow pink, and she avoids looking at me. “Thanks, Mayor,” she mumbles.

“And what about you, Hunter?” The Mayor turns to me. “Behaving yourself?”

“Just giving the devil his due, sir.”

The Mayor guffaws, then looks at Joyce, cocking his head in my direction. “Did I ever tell you how rascal tried to shoplift a candy bar from me once?” he asks.

A sly smile spreads across her face as she looks at me. “Did he now?”

I guess having accidentally put Joyce on the spot, he feels the need to deliberately put me there, too. But if he’s intending to distract Joyce from her recent heartbreak, it’s worked, so I can’t fault him.

I shoot the Mayor a dirty look. “It was a long time ago. Sure you don’t want a drink, Mayor?”

Joyce’s grin just gets bigger. “Hunter, are you *blushing*? I didn’t know anything could embarrass you. Is there more to the story, Mayor?”

The Mayor, mercifully, just chuckles. “I’ve said too much. Thanks for the cake, m’dear. And again, I’m sorry to hear about you and Brandon.”

He wanders away and Joyce fixes me with an expectant smirk. “*This* I have to hear.”

Not my favorite story to tell, but at least it’s keeping the conversation going between us.

“Not a big deal,” I tell her, though it could have been. “I was in middle school. Tried to swipe a bag of beef jerky and a candy bar. Might have gotten away with it, but I got greedy and went for one of those huge chocolate bars. Tried to stuff it into my coat pocket, but it was clearly visible, and of course, the Mayor caught me.”

I’m keeping my voice light, but even now, fifteen years later, I can still remember the horror of being caught and the tearing regret at my stupidity. I wasn’t stealing just for fun. My dad had disappeared a couple of weeks earlier without leaving enough food or money. I was legitimately hungry and didn’t know what else to do. But it wasn’t until the Mayor’s beefy hand wrapped around my arm that I realized what a risk I was taking.

Joyce, oblivious to my history, laughs. “I wish I could have seen your face! What did the Mayor do?”

I manage a chuckle, though I’m sure there wasn’t anything funny about my expression at the time.

“He made me restock a bunch of shelves and sweep the floor in return for not telling on me. And then, even though the work was supposed to be a punishment, he gave me five dollars and told me I did a good job.”

What I don’t tell her is that I immediately spent the money on a few cans of tuna fish and a small carton of milk and asked him if I could have a job. I think he was genuinely regretful when he said he couldn’t hire me for real because I was too young, but he let me do odd jobs for him a few times a week after that. It kept me in tuna fish and beans until my dad remembered to come home and feed me.

“He’s a good guy.” Joyce smiles fondly at the Mayor, who is now talking to his wife and Athena Moonchild, a local farmer.

“Super good guy,” I agree.

As far as I’m concerned, the Mayor has free legal advice for life. I’ve even told him as much, though I’m not sure how seriously he took me. I think it gradually dawned on him that things weren’t exactly right at home, but I doubt he ever realized how dire my situation really was.

If he’d been the type to call the police to try to “teach me a lesson,” my insane home life would have unraveled immediately, and I probably would have been sent into foster care.

I might have gotten lucky and ended up somewhere better. But it could have been worse, too.

Better the devil you know, I figure.

“So that is the story of how yours truly learned never to step outside the law,” I conclude with a flourish.

“About a thousand lawyer jokes would say otherwise,” she replies.

“Lawyers learn how to get *around* the law, not outside it,” I explain with mock condescension.

“Feels like that might be a fine line.”

“Very fine, and quite blurry. Hey, do you want some wine?”

She makes a face as I hold the cup up. “No, thanks.”

“Oh, right.” I put the cup down. “You’ve lost your taste for alcohol.”

Maybe I don’t entirely hide the hurt behind the words because Joyce’s expression looks suspiciously like pity.

“Hunter...” she begins, but just then the crowd seems to remember that there’s cake. Suddenly we’re surrounded by people. Joyce is handing out plates and I’m pouring wine, and our moment of quiet is shattered.

I pour out a couple of bottles of wine, then, while Joyce is chatting with Bailey's grandmother, I slip away and head for the door without saying goodbye.

I've come a long way from being that terrified, hungry kid whose only choice for dinner was to steal a bag of beef jerky. I'm making more money than I could have dreamed of at that age, I've all the nice things I've ever wanted, and I'm only at the beginning of my career.

But here, surrounded by people who know me but don't know the *real* me, I feel like I'm still missing something.

I wonder if Joyce is watching me go, but I don't turn back, just in case she isn't.

JOYCE

I sink into the chair behind my desk in the cramped cafe office. Lucky is out on the floor serving customers and training my new barista, Mariah. I should be out there myself, but I'm just too bone tired.

For weeks now, I've been feeling mildly carsick just about all day, every day. And tired. Like, *exhausted*. I can barely find the energy to walk up the two flights of stairs to my apartment every evening.

I almost envy Blaze her stomach virus because at least it was over quickly. Whatever stupid thing I have has been lingering ever since I woke up next to Hunter. It's like the hangover that doesn't know when to quit.

To make matters worse, Lucky was gone for a couple of weeks with Anthony, leaving me short-staffed and filling in for shifts myself. She'll be gone again next week, and I know it's just a matter of time before she quits for good.

The good news is that I've hired three new part-time baristas, and it's quiet this morning, giving me a chance to catch up on some administrative stuff. I update some spreadsheets, then begin going through the mail that's been piling up. It's mostly junk, some invoices and bills, and another official-looking letter from Brightside.

I'm reading it through for the second time when Lucky taps on the doorframe.

"You look worried. Everything okay?" she asks.

I blink up at her. “Letter from the new landlord. Not sure what it’s about, exactly. Everything okay out there?”

Lucky nods. “Mariah had to head back to North Falls for her bio class,” she says. “Cute kid, I think she’ll do great. Blaze just came in. Thought you might want to say hi.”

Blaze comes in once a day for her signature drink, a soy vanilla latte. “Thanks, I will.” I push myself to my feet. “Who’s watching the floor?”

“Bailey.”

“She doesn’t work here anymore.”

“Try telling her that. I think she’s bored.” Lucky turns down the short hallway toward the cafe, and I follow. “Maybe you should think about taking some time off,” she says over her shoulder. “Breaking up with a guy can take a lot out of you.”

“I barely have enough staff to keep this place running as it is,” I remind her. “Besides, I’d rather keep busy.”

I round the corner and come out behind the cash register. Blaze is on the other side of the counter, and there are a handful of customers seated at tables around the room.

“Morning!” Blaze waves at me. I wave back.

Bailey has made herself at home behind the counter and is busy making a soy vanilla latte.

I put my hands on my hips. “Bailey, you don’t work here anymore, remember?”

Bailey has the face and body of a runway model and the fashion sense of a lumberjack. She’s wearing a plaid flannel shirt and jeans that aren’t quite long enough for her gazelle-like legs, leaving a few inches of bare skin between the cuffs and her sneakers.

“I know. I’m sorry—I mean, I’m not sorry,” Bailey looks flustered. “But your brother’s crew is knocking down walls over at the gallery, and they wouldn’t let me stay, and I don’t know what to do with myself.”

That pulls a laugh out of me. For years, Bailey worked multiple part-time jobs to raise money for her gallery and also take care of her grandmother. And now, it seems Lucky was right—she’s bored.

“Sorry for enabling her,” Blaze puts in. “I didn’t realize she was here under false pretenses.”

“Not your fault. This girl needs to learn how to slow down.” I turn to Bailey again. “I thought you’d be happy to have just one job.”

“I *am* happy,” she says quickly. “It’s just that I was so busy for such a long time, and now that I have downtime, I don’t know what to do with myself.” She sweeps the area behind the counter with her gaze. “Those shelves look a little dusty—”

“They do not look dusty!” Lucky objects. “I cleaned everything last night. You’re just going to have to get used to being a businesswoman who has people to do things for her.” She flaps her hands at Bailey. “I’ll make the latte. You go… read a book or something.”

Bailey looks at me for some sympathy. “Maybe next week when Lucky and Anthony are in LA—”

“No,” I say firmly. “You’re moving on to better things. I’ve hired three new people, and we’re covered for next week.”

“Fine.” Bailey’s shoulders slump in defeat, then she clears her throat. “I have some news, though.” Her gentle brown eyes drop to the counter, and her pretty face flushes. “Nikko’s back.”

There’s a collective intake of breath from me, Lucky, and Blaze.

“He’s going to be doing a documentary series up here about the local food scene,” Bailey continues. “And we’re talking about him opening a bistro above the gallery.”

“Whoa, when did this happen?” Blaze asks.

“A few days ago,” Bailey admits.

“A few *days* ago?” Lucky squawks. She narrows her eyes playfully. “Is that why we haven’t seen you around lately?”

The flush on Bailey’s cheeks grows deeper. “We’ve been busy.”

Lucky gasps. “Thought you said you didn’t have anything to do!”

“Well, I don’t have anything to do *today*,” Bailey explains. “Nikko had to go back to New York to talk to his producers, and he won’t be back until Friday. And...” she twists her hands together, “...I miss him.”

“But you guys are back together?” Blaze asks. “For real?”

Bailey’s face is bright red now, but she’s glowing with happiness. “Yeah. For real.”

All three of us say, “Aww!” at the same time.

I’m happy for Bailey, who is one of the sweetest people I know. But I’m a little jealous too.

“That’s great,” I tell her.

Her smile fades as she turns to me. “I feel bad, though. You know, with you and Brandon...”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I give her a hug. “I’m really happy for you.” I step back. “And you still can’t work here.”

“Oh, fine. Maybe I could buy some coffee for Noah’s crew, at least?”

“That you can do.”

“Great. I’ll take a dozen black coffees and a selection of pastries.”

Lucky begins filling a box with an assortment of crullers and scones. Bailey goes around to the other side of the counter where she belongs and lets Blaze pepper her with questions. I start to fill a dozen to-go cups with strong black coffee.

Coffee is my life. I love the taste of it. I love the smell of it. I love it so much, I’ve built an entire business around it. But as I inhale the scent of it, I’m suddenly hit with a powerful

wave of nausea. In my entire life, I don't think I've ever smelled anything quite so vile.

I drop the coffee pot on the counter, run for the bathroom, and make it just in time to throw up in the toilet.

Holy hell, it's like the hangover morning all over again.

I wipe my mouth with a paper towel and sit on the floor for a few minutes. The nausea has passed, but I'm tired, like all the life force has just been sucked out of me.

Thank goodness we don't have a lot of customers. I just hope that the ones we do have didn't hear me being sick. Talk about bad for business.

I struggle to my feet, clean myself up, and open the door to the sight of Lucky, Bailey, and Blaze standing there waiting for me. Lucky's arms are folded over her chest, and Bailey's warm brown eyes are full of concern.

Blaze's forehead furrows with concern. "Joyce, what is going on?"

I wave the question away. "I'm fine. I must have eaten something that disagreed with me."

"Bullshit," Lucky says. "You've been dragging your ass for weeks."

I push past them and look around the cafe. "Where'd everyone go?"

"I kicked all the customers out, said we had a problem with the plumbing," Lucky says. "Don't worry. I was nice about it."

"Lucky, you can't just kick customers out! I'm trying to run a business!" I scold, but secretly, I'm grateful. It's probably better than having customers think a barista has a contagious disease. "I should probably go home," I sigh, grateful again for the world's shortest commute but even so, not looking forward to the two flights of stairs between me and my apartment. "Just for a few minutes."

"You're staying right here where we can keep an eye on you," Lucky insists. "Bay, can you get her some soda water

and some of those crackers that go with the soup? You,” she takes me by the elbow and steers me toward the nearest table, “sit.”

Bailey scurries behind the counter again, and I sink into a chair without protest. I’m feeling much better now but still tired.

“I wonder if it’s time you saw a doctor,” suggests Blaze. “You haven’t been right for a few weeks now.”

“I broke up with the guy I thought I was going to marry, remember?” I reply, testily. “I’m just a bit run down.”

Like Lucky just said, breaking up with a guy can take a lot out of you. Except I don’t actually feel all that heartbroken.

Just *so* tired.

Bailey comes back with a glass of soda water and a dish of the crackers that we serve with soup. She hates to argue with anyone but she looks dubious. “Every time I’ve been in here since you and Brandon broke up, you’ve looked really pale. Maybe you need a rest.”

“She’s been working herself half to death since the breakup,” Blaze observes.

“It’s good to keep busy after a bad breakup, but she might be overdoing it,” says Bailey.

“Sitting right here, and you, Bailey Hart, are hardly one to talk about overdoing it,” I retort. Suddenly the oyster crackers she’s put in front of me look like the most delicious thing on earth. I grab a handful and stuff them into my mouth.

“*Hello?*” Lucky breaks in. “Am I the only one who can see the elephant in this room?”

The three of us look at her.

Lucky rolls her eyes as she puts her hands on her curvy hips. “You’re *pregnant*.”

I freeze, my mouth full of oyster crackers. Blaze and Bailey shuffle uncomfortably.

“What?” Lucky replies to our awkward silence. “You’re tired, you’re nauseous, and you had a boyfriend up until a few weeks ago. When was the last time you got your period?”

“Um...” I quickly swallow the oyster crackers. “I don’t really remember.” Since the surgery, it’s always been irregular.

Though come to think of it, it’s never been *this* irregular...

Lucky folds her arms over her chest. “Listen, I come from a *big* Catholic family. I’ve been around a lot of pregnant ladies, and honey, I think you gotta at least consider it.”

There’s an awkward exchange of glances between Bailey and Blaze, who then look to me to take the lead.

“Lucky, I can’t get pregnant,” I explain. “I had this thing with one of my ovaries a few years ago. Surgery, and there were complications. The doctor said the odds of my ever getting pregnant were practically non-existent.”

Good thing I’m not looking for sympathy because I don’t get it.

“*Doctors*,” Lucky snorts. “What do they know? They told my cousin Concetta she couldn’t get pregnant after a partial hysterectomy, and now she’s got a five-year-old. I’ll be right back.”

Apron still on, she heads for the door.

“Lucky—” I call after her, but she’s already gone, the bells over the door chiming behind her. “Where’s she going?”

“Maybe you should see a doctor, though,” Blaze says as if I hadn’t said anything. “I mean, you’re probably not pregnant, but something is off.”

“I’m *definitely* not pregnant,” I insist. “I mean, believe me, I’d be thrilled if I was, but I think it’s just like a low-level flu or something.”

“All the more reason to see a doctor, then, if you’re really sick,” Bailey points out sensibly.

“Or maybe it’s just low vitamin B or something,” Blaze adds, reassuringly. “Just get some bloodwork done and see

what's going on.”

Maybe they're right. Whatever it is doesn't seem to be going away on its own. “Fine, I'll make an appointment,” I agree.

Lucky is back five minutes later with a paper bag from the Out of this World General Store, which she hands to me. I open it to find a pregnancy test kit.

“Tell me you didn't go across the street for this?” I groan. “What did the Mayor say?”

The Mayor is certainly going to notice that the sign on the coffee shop across the street from him has been turned to CLOSED and that Lucky came right back in here.

“I told him it was for a friend. He totally thinks it's for me.” Lucky points to the bathroom. “Go. Pee on the stick. Favor to me. Just put my mind at rest.”

I fiddle with the box. Against all reason, I'm getting hopeful, and I don't want to because I know this will just end in disappointment.

Finally, I stand up. “This is ridiculous, but fine.”

A few minutes later, the four of us are crowded around the little stick that I'm holding.

“I think that's two lines.”

“Are you sure? I just see one.”

“Joyce, tilt it toward the light so I can see—yeah, I think that's two.”

“Whoa.”

“Oh, I see it now, it's getting stronger. Definitely two lines!”

“Oh my God! Joyce, you're pregnant!”

I'm not even sure who is saying what anymore. All I can do is stare at the two pink lines that are now clear and strong in the little plastic window.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. “Joyce, are you okay?” says Blaze. “Are you happy about this?”

Happy? Of course I’m happy. I’ve always wanted children, and having the option taken away from me was devastating.

But I’m also wildly unprepared. Daycare, cribs, car seats, finding a pediatrician—hell, finding an obstetrician—cloth diapers or plastic? I’ll have to get one of those baby slings. Should I find out if it’s a boy or girl before it’s born or should I wait and be surprised?

There’s too much to think about!

“Joyce?” Blaze sounds worried. “Say something? Please?”

“Yes!” I finally choke out, and the tears start to flow. “I’m happy!”

Immediately, I’m wrapped up in a huge group hug full of congratulations and cheering. I’m laughing and crying and apologizing to Lucky and thanking her and her cousin Concetta, and I’m going to have a baby!

We start to calm down after a few minutes, me grabbing a fistful of napkins from the dispenser on the table to wipe away happy tears.

“So...” Lucky’s voice breaks into my thoughts. She’s still smiling, but it looks forced, as if she’s bracing herself for bad news. “What are you going to tell Brandon?”

Her words bring me back down to earth. I hadn’t even thought about Brandon.

Because... I quickly go over the dates in my head... Brandon didn’t have anything to do with this.

Oh, *crap*.

HUNTER

C *an we meet? I need to talk to you.*

I stand outside Rudy's Restaurant and read Joyce's text for the hundredth time like it's a code I'm trying to break. She sent it a few days ago, and we agreed to meet at a place a few blocks from the law firm.

I've been trying to figure out her motive ever since.

I could just call her and ask her straight out, but that would take a level of maturity I apparently don't have.

Instead, I responded with a series of offers to test out the waters.

If she'd agreed to dinner (my first offer), I would have assumed she was interested in a relationship, or at least a proper date.

If she'd invited me to just "drop by her apartment sometime" (my next offer), I would have assumed (okay, hoped) that it was a ploy to get me back in her bed.

If she'd asked me to swing by the coffee shop, my final offer, I would have figured I was in for a just-friends speech.

But the fact that she chose neutral territory during my lunch hour suggests something... businesslike. It feels more formal than friendly, and I don't like it. I've known Joyce for almost fifteen years, and although our relationship might be prickly sometimes, we've never stood on formalities.

I put my phone in my pocket, straighten my tie, and walk into the restaurant.

She's already seated—I catch sight of her hair, which is purple and pink now, immediately—and my chest gives a funny little lurch at the sight of her. Her big hazel eyes are fixated on the wall across from her, and her little pixie face looks serious.

Now I'm getting worried.

I thought we were back on almost-normal terms after Bailey's party, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe she hates me. Maybe she's here to tell me what an asshole I am for taking advantage of her when she was heartbroken and drunk. The only excuse I have is that I was drunk too, and as a lawyer, I can tell you that's a lousy excuse.

Should I kiss her on the cheek? Or ruffle her goofy hair the way I used to? Neither feels right, so in the end, I just slide into the chair across from her.

“Hey!” I give her a big smile as I slide into the seat across from her, just in case we're still friends. “How's it going?”

She manages a polite smile.

Polite. Fuck. I don't want polite.

“Thanks for your text,” I continue. “Good to hear from you.” She drops her eyes to her lap. Now I'm really getting nervous. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah, I'm ... great, actually.” She finally manages a warmer, more real smile. The ice between us doesn't melt, not by a long shot, but I think I can hear it crack in the distance.

So maybe she's not here to tell me how much she hates me. I start to relax, just a little.

A waiter swings by to ask if we want anything to drink. I order an iced tea and Joyce orders lemonade, and I ask him to bring us a basket of their buffalo wings.

“That's the specialty here,” I tell her, trying to inject some normalcy into the conversation. “You'll love them.”

She gives me that tight little smile again, and I realize she's nervous. I want to reach out across the table and take her hand in mine but I hold back. I lean forward instead and lower my voice. "Hey, Joyce, are you really okay? You're making me worried."

She swallows and picks up her napkin but instead of putting it on her lap, she twists it between her hands. "Um, I need to talk to you about that night."

It's been weeks now, but there can only be one night she's referring to. Panic washes over me. I should have called her. She told me not to, but maybe I was supposed to and she's upset that I didn't? Joyce isn't the one-night-stand type. She's the long-term-relationship-with-the-dweeb-she-met-in-college type.

How badly did I fuck this up?

This time I do stretch my hand out and place it over one of hers. She stops twisting the napkin and looks at me.

"Joyce, I'm so sorry about that night. We'd both had too much to drink, and I should never have agreed to go back to your place—"

"Oh, that's not why I'm here," she cuts me off. "I mean, it's about that night, but we were both drunk, shit happened, and whatever. It's fine."

Okay... maybe she wants something more out of this after all? Although "shit happened, and whatever" doesn't exactly sound like a promising start to a grand romance.

But who am I kidding? Now that I'm sober and responsible again, I know that getting together with Joyce Babcock is a terrible idea. Getting involved with Joyce means risking my relationship with her entire family. Not to mention that under the tattoos and the colorful hair, she's a two-kids-and-a-white-picket-fence kind of girl. She's been trying to rebel against her upbringing since she was in middle school, but it's always been a little half-hearted.

She'd probably love a golden retriever.

Focus, Baldwin, I tell myself. I'm here to find out what's going on with her.

"All right...?" I say in my best *keep talking* lawyer voice.

"There's actually kind of a silver lining to the whole thing. It's kind of funny, really." She gives a shaky little laugh.

Now I can see that she's really anxious about something, and alarm bells are going off in my head.

"So," she continues, "you know how we talked about the fact that I couldn't get pregnant?" I nod. "Well, it turns out I can." She sucks in a big breath. "And I did."

I let go of her hand.

I have some dim idea that I should say something supportive now but I have no idea what that would be. So I just stare at her.

"Which is amazing!" she continues hurriedly. "I've always wanted children, and the doctor doesn't think there'll be any problem carrying the baby to term. I'm actually really happy about this."

I wish she looked a little happier. I wish I could make my vocal cords work.

The waiter startles me by dropping a basket of buffalo wings in between us. "Ready to order?" he asks cheerfully.

Joyce glances at me, but I'm literally incapable of speech right now. "We need a few more minutes," she says, and he walks away with a promise to be back.

The heaviest, most awkward silence I've ever felt descends between us. I've got to say something. Anything. I'm a *lawyer*, for chrissakes.

"Are you... saying it's mine?" My voice comes out in a hoarse croak, and I kick myself mentally.

Of course, it's yours, you idiot. Why the hell else would she be telling you?

I don't think I'm winning any points for sensitivity.

Her cheeks flush, which is a really pretty look on her but I don't think now is the time to mention it. "Yes. I got my period in between the last time I was with Brandon and that night, and the doctor confirmed the dates, so... yeah."

I suddenly realize how profoundly ignorant I am of the female reproductive system, which up until now has just been a glorious playground for me. I'm sure I was supposed to learn about pregnancy and menstrual cycles and shit in high school sex ed, but I was far more interested in the practice than the theory. Once I'd wrapped my head around birth control, I'd pretty much tuned out everything else.

Joyce reaches out and puts one gentle hand over mine. Now that she's gotten the big reveal out of the way, she seems more relaxed and in control of the situation.

Good thing one of us is.

"Hunter, I'm sorry for surprising you like this," she says, her voice gentle. "I swear I had no idea this was even possible. Brandon and I had unprotected sex for years, and nothing ever happened."

The thought of that loser having any kind of sex with her only makes things worse—but why am I judging him? He'd probably be thrilled. Instead, I'm the one who's just been told he's going to be a dad, and it feels like I'm trapped in a nightmare.

God, I'm an asshole.

Joyce continues. "Hunter, I want you to understand that I'm not asking for anything. You don't need to be involved at all if you don't want. I don't expect you to pay child support or share custody or anything."

A streak of bitterness darts through me. Well, of course not. Why should she? Noah's probably told her what my dad was like. And they always say the fruit doesn't fall too far from the tree.

"I just thought you had a right to know," she goes on. "And I didn't want you to hear from someone else that I'm expecting and wonder about it."

I know I should say something nice, that I want to support her, that if she's happy, I'm happy and all that garbage, but the truth is that I swore a long time ago that I'd never have children, and up until that night with Joyce, I've been incredibly careful to make sure I didn't, and holy *hell*, I'm going to be a father.

She bites her lip as she glances at the dish of wings between us. "Do you mind if I start on these? They smell incredible, and I'm suddenly really hungry."

I've completely lost my appetite and just gesture at her to go ahead. She grabs one and tears into it as if she's making a point.

"It's insane," she says through a mouthful of chicken. "One minute I'll be feeling like I just got off a roller coaster and I'll never eat anything again, and the next moment, I'm absolutely ravenous." She swallows the chicken and looks at me. "I'm ready for you to say something any time you are."

I stand up quickly, almost knocking over my glass of water and surprising both of us. "I need to go," I choke out. "Joyce, I'm sorry. I need some... time? I guess? I just—I wasn't prepared for this. I'm sorry."

I'm already two steps away from the table, then I remember to take my wallet out and throw a couple of twenties on the table.

The look on her face is... resigned? Exasperated? Maybe even a little pitying?

But it's not surprised. On some level, she knew not to expect anything.

And that's maybe the worst part of all.

"I get it, Hunter," she says. "Like I said, I'm not asking for anything. I just thought you had a right to know." She looks at the money. "That's too much. You didn't even eat anything."

"It's fine." I'd throw my entire paycheck on the table if it would let me get away faster, to somewhere I can think this through. "I'll see you around."

Before she can say anything else, I'm making a beeline for the exit, almost mowing down the overly cheerful waiter as I round the hostess stand and head out the door.

The crazy, horrible thing is that I know I should turn around and say something to Joyce, but it's like I have no control over the situation. I'm watching it all happen, and I don't feel like I can stop it.

Despite everything, I've turned into my father. The guy who couldn't get far enough away.

JOYCE

Maybe I had a little fantasy in which Hunter was just as thrilled about the pregnancy as I was and told me he'd be there for me and we'd make a go of it because he's always secretly liked me the way I've always secretly liked him.

I knew it was silly, but still, I'd hoped.

Instead, I feel like I got my ass handed to me.

It's not like I expected him to get down on one knee and offer to make an honest woman of me, but I didn't expect him to look like he'd just been given a death sentence, either. He literally turned pale. I was half afraid he was going to be sick.

I guess another part of me had hoped he'd make some sort of borderline-inappropriate joke, maybe ruffle my hair and call me Joyride, and if nothing else, we'd get back to being frenemies, like we used to be.

Or real friends, the way it felt we were the night of the amaretto sours.

But I guess that was just the alcohol.

Hunter has been a sexy, aggravating thorn in my side since I was in middle school, but he's also part of the fabric of my world. It makes me sad to think that he might be out of my life forever, but from the look of horror on his face and the speed with which he took off, I have a feeling I'm not going to be seeing him around that often.

I look at the basket on the table in front of me.

...At least he left all the wings.

I grab another one and force myself to take a civilized bite, resisting the temptation to shove the entire thing into my mouth. After weeks of feeling low-grade carsick twenty-four-seven, my appetite has suddenly roared back.

Mmm... spicy and salty and crunchy and tender and so full of flavor...

Who needs a man when there are buffalo wings in the world?

“Everything all right, miss?”

I look up to see the waiter, who now looks more nervous than cheerful.

I swallow. “Oh, yes. Thanks.” I pick up the menu, and *everything* looks amazing. “Um...double cheeseburger with fries. No—onion rings. No—both, actually. And a chocolate malt milkshake.” I should probably make some attempt to eat healthy. “And a side salad, please.”

The waiter glances dubiously at the empty chair across from me and then at the half-eaten plate of wings. “Your friend’s coming back?”

I smile at him. “Nope. It’s just me.”

He nods and walks away to place my order.

Under the table, I put a hand on my still-flat stomach. According to the book I picked up, Babcock Junior right now isn’t much bigger than a coffee bean. I smile at the cup and saucer tattoos on my forearm. Maybe I should add a special coffee bean tattoo to celebrate.

Can you get tattoos when you’re pregnant?

So many things I don’t know. But I’ll figure it out.

I’m hurt that Hunter couldn’t come up with so much as a smile for me, but mainly I’m relieved that the hard part—telling him—is over. Now I can start thinking and dreaming and planning and getting excited.

Next step: telling my parents. That'll be a little awkward, but once they get over the surprise, my mom, especially, will be thrilled. She was devastated for me when the doctors told me I couldn't have children. They're devoted to Noah's children and will love being grandparents again. Noah's kids will have a cousin, and Noah is going to be a fantastic uncle. My baby won't lack for a family that loves him—or her. But already, I have a funny feeling it's a him.

And if Hunter doesn't want to have anything to do with me and the baby, it's his loss.

I grab another wing and sink my teeth into it.



“*HUNTER IS YOUR BABY DADDY?*” Blaze's mouth hangs open comically.

I'm supposed to be getting “moderate daily exercise” so I invited Blaze to go for a walk by the lake to break the news to her about Hunter being my baby's father. Unfortunately, the wind was fierce and bitterly cold. We wimped out after ten minutes and came to Blaze's house. Now we're snuggled on her couch in front of her gas fireplace and drinking hot chocolate instead.

So much for being healthy.

“Yeah, Hunter,” I confirm, bracing myself for the interrogation.

I take a sip of the thick, creamy drink she's just handed me. I've been begging for her secret hot chocolate recipe for years. I've even promised I'll pay her a share of what I make selling it at the cafe, but she's always just smirked and refused to share it.

I'm draped in a pale blue wool blanket and Blaze in a white one. Blaze is the kind of person whose blankets coordinate with her furniture.

She was one of Noah's first tenants. He bought the property a few years ago, knocked down the run-down old

house that was on it, and built a cute little duplex in its place. Blaze's half is small but it has an upstairs and a downstairs and a little yard and feels much more grown-up than my eclectic apartment over the coffee shop.

"Hunter *Baldwin*?" Blaze continues. "The guy you've had a crush on since you were thirteen?"

"Yeah."

"Who you mooned over until he went to college? And continued to moon over until you went to college three years later? And continued to moon over even then until you finally met Brandon?"

"Why do you need to make me sound so pathetic?" I wait until she puts her mug down on the coffee table and throw a cushion at her. "I had a crush on him when I was in high school along with half the other girls in school. So?"

"So you're having his *baby*." Blaze hefts the cushion like she's thinking about throwing it back, but I know she won't risk hot chocolate all over her couch. She tucks it behind her instead. "But you say there's nothing going on between you?"

I shake my head.

"Nope," I reply. "Just that one night."

"So let me get this straight," Blaze picks up her hot chocolate again, "you've been in love with Hunter forever, you had sex with him, he knocked you up, walked away, and you're all, 'Oh, I'm fine'?"

"I *am* fine," I insist. "I had a crush on him when I was a kid, which isn't the same as being in love with him for real, and I'm excited about having a baby, even if it isn't exactly the way I'd envisioned. Hunter's not my type, and he's obviously not interested in being a dad, so..." I shrug. "His loss."

If I say it enough, eventually I might even believe it.

"Yuh-huh." Blaze does not sound convinced.

"Not a word to anyone yet, though. Not even Lucky or Bailey," I caution her. "I need to tell my family before I tell anyone else."

“Well, when are you going to tell them? Because I’m not sure how long I can keep this a secret.”

“Soon.”

“Soon?”

“I want to get through the first trimester first.”

“Math isn’t my strong suit, but isn’t that like... now?”

“Fine,” I admit, “telling them I’m preggers is harder than I thought it would be.”

“They’ll be happy, though, won’t they? Your mom was so sad when they told you you’d never have children.”

“I’m sure they’d prefer I was with someone, but ultimately, yes, they’ll be happy.”

The name Brandon goes unspoken, but I know Blaze is thinking it as much as I am.

“Understandable,” she says. “But you’ve always marched to the beat of your own drummer. They’ll deal.” Blaze blows on her mug. “How will they feel about the fact that Hunter is the dad?”

Okay, now we’re getting the heart of my reluctance to tell them. It’s one thing to say you’re pregnant. It’s another to admit it’s the result of a one-night stand.

“That part’s a little weird,” I admit. “Maybe I won’t tell them who the dad is just yet.”

Blaze tilts her head and gives me her best *Are you stupid?* look. “Then they’ll assume it’s Brandon and start sending out wedding invitations. You’ll be lucky if they don’t get him on speakerphone so they can both congratulate him at the same time.”

I shudder.

“You know your mom’s gonna ship you and Brandon until the bitter end,” she continues. “I think you gotta come clean, even if it means throwing Hunter under the bus. On the bright side, it could be what gets your mom to let go of Brandon once and for all.”

“You don’t think they’d be upset at Hunter, do you?”

I’m treated to a second *Are you stupid?* look. “Look,” says Blaze, “I like Hunter, but even your parents have to know he’s not exactly long-term commitment material. And Noah *definitely* knows it. None of them are going to love that your baby daddy is Upstate New York’s most notorious playboy, especially after you just broke things off with Mr. Steady and Reliable.”

I blow out a long breath and hold my mug a little closer. “Well, it’s not Hunter’s fault he’s not Brandon.”

“Some would say that’s a mark in his favor.” Blaze avoids looking me directly in the face.

“I thought you liked Brandon!”

Blaze shrugs. “I did like him. But like I said, you two were just babies when you got together—”

“We were twenty-one, not twelve.”

“Wouldn’t you always have wondered what you were missing?”

“Maybe.” I chew my lip. “I miss him ... sometimes, but not as much as I probably should. Now I’m wondering if he was just the safe choice.” I tug a lock of pink hair in front of my face. “It’s funny. I’ve tried to rebel against my family by being a hippie, and you’ve tried to rebel against your family by being a yuppie. You think either of us has actually succeeded?”

“Hell, yeah, we’ve succeeded.” Blaze’s voice is firm. “I love my family, but I am quite sure I was switched at birth. Quite possibly with you.”

I laugh. “Your family’s awesome.” Which is true. Blaze’s home life was all colorful chaos, in contrast to the structure and order I grew up with. “If our birthdays were closer together, I’d say you were probably right.”

“Every family is crazy in its own way,” Blaze says sagely, “but my family takes the cake. But we’re getting off-topic. I still need more details about you being pregnant.”

“Like what? Morning sickness? Fetal development? Due date’s in May—”

Blaze smirks. “About your night with Hunter. Was it...” she leans forward, her blue eyes eager, “*amazing?*”

I glance at the wall. Then at the other wall.

Blaze’s eyes narrow. “That good or that bad?”

“Well... it started off amazing,” I tell her. “We walked out of the Cantina and stood there and he kissed me, and it was *really* sweet. And I told him there was no way he could drive home in the state he was in and he should stay at my place. And I remember making out on the stairway up to my apartment, and that was really hot—I think he had half my clothes off before we even got to my door ... But after that it was... Well, what I remember was good, but it’s fuzzy.”

Blaze lifts an eyebrow. “Well, that sounds ... anticlimactic?”

That night is a jigsaw puzzle of sexy sensations—the smell of Hunter’s cologne, the feel of his hands on my skin, his mouth on my breasts, the delight I took in finally getting to touch him as much as I wanted ... but it doesn’t add up to a complete picture.

“That’s probably a good way to put it,” I agree with regret.

Blaze slumps back against the couch dramatically. “I am devastated. I’d hoped for so much more.”

“Think how I feel,” I reply. “At least I’m getting a baby out of it.” I sip my hot chocolate and remember our kiss on the sidewalk, the smell of fresh fall air and the scent of Hunter mingling in my memory. “Started off well, though,” I add softly.

Blaze brightens up. “You should ask for a do-over.”

“What?”

“A do-over. I mean, you’re already carrying his baby, what have you got to lose?” She frowns. “Pregnant ladies can have sex, right?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course pregnant women can have sex, but I’m not asking Hunter if he’ll have sex with me!”

“Why not? Stud deserves a chance to reclaim his reputation. You deserve that smoking hot roll in the hay we talked about.”

I rub my forehead. “I think things are a little too complicated right now as it is.”

“So keep it simple.” Blaze is warming up to her idea. “Say, ‘Hunter, I want a do-over, no strings attached.’”

“I’m not sure if we’re even on speaking terms right now.”

“So what better way to break the ice?”

“Give me a minute, I’ll think of something.”

I take another sip of hot chocolate and look around Blaze’s living room. Where I’ve decorated my apartment with hand-me-downs from my mother’s latest remodeling phase and things I found in thrift shops, Blaze has grown-up furniture that actually matches. It’s not expensive—librarians make even less than coffee shop owners, apparently—but it all looks nice.

“You have such a beautiful place,” I say with a sigh.

“Wow, you’re not even *trying* to be subtle about changing the subject.”

I laugh. “You really do, though.” My smile fades. “I think I may have to give up my apartment.”

“Why? You couldn’t ask for a better location.”

“Yeah, well, I may have to give up the coffee shop too.”

“*What?*” Blaze straightens up. “What are you talking about?”

“My landlord wants to convert the entire building into shops and apartments. They sent me a letter offering to buy me out of my lease.”

“Whoa, slow down! You are just one breaking news story after another this afternoon! When did this even happen?”

“So, right around the time of the food festival, I got a letter saying the building was under new management but that nothing had changed except I should send my rent checks to a different company. Then I got another letter asking if I’d be interested in a settlement in return for voiding the lease. But that came the same day I found out I was pregnant, and I kind of forgot about it in the excitement. But they sent another letter a couple of days ago. They want to buy me out.”

“So they want to make shops and apartments. But you’re a shop. And an apartment. Why can’t they just let you stay?”

“I got a pretty sweet deal because I signed a five-year lease when no one else was interested in that space. My guess is that they want to renovate the whole building and charge more than they’re getting from me. They’re offering me a nice chunk of money to let them out of it.”

Blaze’s forehead crinkles. “Wait, you’re not actually going to do it, are you? You’ve worked so hard to get that business up and running.”

“I don’t know how much of a choice I have,” I say honestly. “I don’t mind giving up the apartment. Can you imagine going up and down all those stairs with a baby, no elevator?” I bite my lip. “But I don’t think I’ll ever find a better location for the Flying Saucer. I’ve even looked around a little. There’s nothing.”

“So say no!” Blaze looks outraged. “Isn’t this exactly why you sign a lease? So they can’t kick you out whenever they feel like it?”

“Well, yeah. But I still have almost three years to go on that lease. They have a long time to make my life miserable if they’re not happy with me, and then at the end, they’ll refuse to let me renew the lease anyway.”

“At least it would buy you some time.” Blaze looks crestfallen. “That place is your life, and everyone loves it. Have you talked to a lawyer?”

“Not yet.”

“I know a good one.” She raises her eyebrows suggestively.

I give her a taste of her *Are you stupid?* look. “I am not hitting Hunter up for legal advice. I’ll talk to Warren, or just hire someone before I ask him for any favors.”

Blaze smiles. “But on the bright side, you could move into the other half of the duplex! The lady who lives there now isn’t going to renew her lease. I was talking to her the other day, and she wants to buy a house. And I bet Noah would give you a good deal, being your brother and all.”

I grimace. “It would have to be a very good deal seeing as I won’t have a job or any income if I get kicked out of my building.”

Blaze’s face falls. “Oh. I see your point. Listen, text me the info about your landlord. I’ll ask Walden if he’s heard anything.”

“Aw, thanks.”

“No problem. He’s a pain in the ass, but he’s terrible at keeping secrets.” She winks at me over her mug. “If he’s heard anything, he’ll tell me. Don’t worry about the Flying Saucer. One way or another, we’ll make sure you keep it.”

JOYCE

Friday morning a week later, and the cafe is a madhouse.

It's pouring rain outside, and it feels like half the town and their brother have come into the Flying Saucer to get out of it. I'm taking orders. Behind me, Lucky is scrambling to fill them with help from Mariah, who alternates between pouring drinks and making mad dashes around the cafe to clear and wipe down tables and mop up the water that gets tracked in with each new visitor.

The rain has brought an unseasonable warmth with it, and the air around me feels thick. Steam climbs up the windows with each damp new customer that comes in, and the heat from the coffee machines and the toaster oven swirls around me like a cloud.

It's just past eight a.m. and I showered less than an hour ago, but already I'm practically melting. I'm sweaty and hot and exhausted and insanely thirsty, but it's so busy that I haven't had time even to grab a glass of water.

I ring up an order, turn away to pass it on to Lucky, and turn back to find myself face-to-face with Hunter.

Oh, it's you, person who wants nothing to do with me or my baby.

Heat washes over me, bringing with it a wave of dizziness.

"Oh. Hi," I manage.

"Joyce." Hunter leans close over the counter, his voice low. "Can we talk?"

All trace of his normal snarky humor is gone. He looks as serious as I've ever seen him and his face is drawn. Maybe he's come to apologize? Or ... something?

But honestly, why here? Why now?

"I've got my hands full here, Hunter." I can barely keep the snap out of my voice.

"But sometime?" he persists. "Soon? We need to talk."

The line behind him just keeps getting longer and the headache that's been threatening to break through since I unlocked the doors this morning is pounding at my temples.

"Fine," I tell him. I'll say anything right now to get him to go away, but I know we need to talk, too. "Just not now. I don't know, call me later, or text me..."

Hunter begins talking, but the roaring in my ears gets louder and at the same time, the bustling cafe around me gets dimmer. The room seems to tilt, and I lean against the counter for support.

"Joyce?"

I hear Hunter's voice but it sounds like it's coming from a long way off, way down a tunnel or something. I feel sick to my stomach but I also feel too dizzy to make a run for the bathroom.

I can't think of a faster way to lose business than to throw up in front of all my customers. I brace my hands on the counter, willing myself to get back to normal but my head feels like it's in a vice and my vision is practically non-existent. I don't trust myself to move because I'm afraid I'll trip or bump into something.

There's a sudden flurry of movement, voices—Hunter's and Lucky's, I think—but they sound far away, and then everything goes dark.

I'm not really sure how I got here but I find myself sitting on the old loveseat in my office, another hand-me-down from my mother, bent over with my head on my knees.

Slowly the pressure in my head starts to ease and the dizziness recedes. Hunter is next to me, and he's stroking my back, up and down my spine, with one hand. The gesture is gentle and soothing and surprisingly sweet.

Part of me is tempted to just sit here and soak up the support.

Then I remember the madhouse that is the coffee shop this morning.

I raise my head. "I have to get back out there. It's a crazy day."

Hunter puts a hand on the back of my neck and gently but firmly pushes my head down again. "Nothing doing. Give this another minute, then I want you to drink some water."

I give a muffled laugh at this new nursemaid side of Hunter. "How do you know how to take care of fainting people?"

"Football," he answers. "Whenever we had practice in hot weather, inevitably some guy would get faint. Coach would make us sit on the ground, put our heads between our legs for a few minutes, then drink a bottle of water."

I turn my head without raising it to look at him. "Who knew football would be such good preparation for life?"

"Yeah, well, I can guarantee you none of those guys were pregnant." His expression grows serious. "Has this happened before? Since you got pregnant, I mean?"

I shake my head. "No, just regular morning sickness, and the other day I found myself dipping corn chips into the caramel sauce we use on the lattes. But I fainted a few times before I got pregnant. Hot and crowded and on my feet seem to be the common denominators."

"Well, you're taking the rest of the morning off."

I snort. "You're not the boss of me, Hunter Baldwin. I'm the boss. And I'm feeling a lot better, I promise. I can get back out there."

“Water first.” He gets up and leaves the room, then he’s back a moment later with a bottle of Evian water from one of the coolers up front. He twists it open and hands it to me.

The cold water is maybe the best thing I’ve ever tasted. Maybe I’m a little dehydrated on top of everything else. I gulp it down gratefully.

“Not too fast,” he cautions me. “Now how are you feeling?”

I assess myself. The dizziness is gone and the buzzing pressure in my head has subsided, but I still feel a little shaky and weak.

“Better but not completely back to normal. Thanks,” I add.

“Good,” he replies. “Sorry for dropping in like that, by the way. I should have called. I didn’t realize how busy it was going to be. I wanted to apologize for running out on you at the restaurant the other day.”

“It’s fine. I know it was a shock.”

“No, it’s not fine. I was a total asshole, and I feel terrible.”

I study his face. Hunter usually looks like he’s in on some private joke with the universe, but right now his expression is serious and he looks like he hasn’t slept.

“It’s fine,” I say again, not knowing what else to say. “Maybe I shouldn’t have sprung it on you like that.”

“Trust me, it was going to be a shock no matter how you did it. Listen, Joyce...”

Hunter leans back against the loveseat and I suddenly realize how very close we are to each other. We haven’t been this close, physically, since That Night. I get a whiff of expensive cologne and suddenly have a vivid memory of our bodies pressed together, him running his hands through my hair and whispering something in my ear that I can’t quite remember...

Hunter’s voice shakes me out of my reverie. “I guess this isn’t really the time to go into everything,” he says. “Basically, I always swore I wouldn’t have kids. I’m not sure if I’m cut

out to be a dad. Hell, I know I'm not. But I don't want to be the asshole who runs away from his responsibilities, either."

He takes my hand in his, the gesture at once comforting and a reminder that if we're anything at all, we're friends, nothing more.

"Hunter, I told you, I'm not expecting anything," I reply. "This baby is a miracle for me. I understand you didn't sign up for it. I just thought you had a right to know. You would have figured it out sooner or later anyway."

"Yeah, probably. Anyway, I want to do the right thing. I'm just not sure what that is. Can I do anything to help right now?"

I bite my lip. "Actually..."

"What?"

I hesitate a moment. This is a harder ask than I'd realized. "Would you help me tell my parents I'm pregnant? I mean, I know they'll be happy for me, but I know they'd also prefer I was married or at least with someone, and it's so soon after breaking up with Brandon... It would be nice to have a little moral support."

I think his handsome face actually gets a shade paler. "Tell your parents?" he repeats numbly.

"The whole family, actually. I was thinking I'd tell them on Thanksgiving. You're coming, right?"

"You sure you don't want to tell them privately, maybe?"

"It's just going to be Mom and Dad and Noah's family, no extended relatives." I shrug. "They'll all be in a good mood, and everyone gets to hear the news at the same time."

Hunter looks at the floor.

"We don't have to tell everyone the baby's yours if you don't want," I add. "Not just yet."

"They'll think it's Brandon's."

"Well, it's not, and I'll make sure they get that. They can just wonder for a little while. A little mystery won't hurt

them.”

There’s a long pause. Finally, Hunter says, “Okay. Thanksgiving. I’ll be there.”

Lucky sticks her head around the door frame, her eyes wide with concern. “How’s she doing?” she asks Hunter.

“You’ve got to stop talking about me in the third person, Lucky.” I try to stand up and sink right back down again. My legs still feel weak. “Can you and Mariah manage without me for a few more minutes?”

“Yeah, we got it,” Lucky says a little too quickly. “I called Julian. He’s on his way. How about I put the closed sign on the door, just until he gets here, so we can catch up?” she suggests. “We’re completely out of seats anyway.”

“I can’t afford to keep closing the cafe every time I get dizzy,” I reply, and suddenly I’m awash with fear. If I can’t keep the cafe up and running while I’m pregnant, how the hell am I going to manage with a baby? What if that payout from Brightside is really a blessing in disguise?

No, not going there. Not yet.

I’ll figure it out because I’ll have to. One challenge at a time. “Just go,” I tell, waving toward the main room. “I’ll be right out.”

Lucky disappears. I start to stand again, but Hunter pushes me firmly back down.

“Not a chance, Babcock,” he tells me. “You’re staying right here. I’ll take care of it.”

“How will you take care of it?”

“Just sit here, drink your water slowly, and rest. Do *not* stand up until there’s someone in here with you, okay? Coach always used to say it’s the falling that’s the dangerous part,” He looks at me sternly. “I know how much this baby means to you, and I don’t want you to take any risks.”

And he’s said about the only thing that could actually make me stay put. When I weigh the thought of a miscarriage

from a fall versus a handful of impatient customers, it's not a difficult choice.

Hunter leaves. I stay.

Curled up on the loveseat, I actually fall into a light sleep and I'm not sure how long I'm out when I'm aware of Lucky back in the room with me.

I blink and sit up. "What's going on?"

"Bit of a lull, finally. Mariah and Julian can deal," Lucky tells me. "How about you?"

"Much, *much* better," I tell her, stretching a little. "I can get back on the floor. What happened to Hunter?"

Lucky grins. "He was great. Picked up the ordering system in about three minutes and Mariah and I were able to focus on making the drinks."

"He stayed and helped out?" I ask, incredulous.

"Yep. Shirt and tie and all. He was good with the customers, too." She winks. "The older ladies especially seemed to like him."

"I bet." Hunter can charm the pants off anyone.

Including me.

My smile fades a little. Slowly, I stand up as Lucky hovers anxiously over me.

"I'm fine," I tell her, and I am. I actually feel great now, relaxed and well-rested and not even a little bit shaky.

Lucky takes a couple of steps back, but she doesn't take her eyes off me.

"Is Hunter still here?" I ask. I hope Lucky doesn't pick up on the sudden nervousness in my voice. "I should say thank you."

She shakes her head. "He left as soon as Julian arrived. Said was really sorry but he had to get to a client meeting. He made me promise to tell you to call your doctor to make sure —" She blinks. "Wait. Hunter knows you're pregnant?"

My expression must give something away because Lucky's entire face lights up. "Oh, my God! *Hunter* is the father?"

"Shh!" I hiss, making shushing motions as if the entire town could hear us. "Keep it quiet, okay? I still haven't even told my parents I'm pregnant, let alone that he's the dad!"

Lucky presses her lips together like she's trying to keep from exploding.

"I mean it, Lucky!" I warn. "Not even Anthony, okay?"

Lucky makes a strangled *mmph!* noise.

I cross my arms over my chest. "This is really killing you, isn't it?"

"So are you guys together or what?" she bursts out.

"No, we're not together. It's ... complicated."

"You made a baby. It can't be *that* complicated."

"The baby was an accident. A happy accident, but it's not like we meant it to happen. Being with Hunter was a one-time thing, and I don't want to put any pressure on him to be anything more than a friend right now. Okay?"

Lucky slumps dramatically against the wall, looks up at the ceiling, and folds her hands like she's praying for something. Then she straightens up with a bright smile. "Okay. Friends. Baby. Secret. Got it."

"Let's get back to work, Lucky." I walk past her into the little hallway that leads to the main part of the cafe.

Behind me, Lucky mutters something I don't quite catch, but she follows me and we get back to work.

JOYCE

Hunter parks the car in my parents' driveway, cuts the engine, and turns to me. "You ready?"

"I'm a little nervous, but I think they'll be excited," I tell him. "How about you?"

He stares through the windshield at the big house where I grew up. "Mostly just nervous."

I'm not used to seeing Hunter acting anything other than supremely confident. Seeing him look legitimately worried makes me want to wrap my arms around him and give him a hug, but I'm afraid that will send the wrong message.

Which is that for all that I brushed off our relationship to Blaze and Lucky, I'm still stupidly attracted to him and kind of wish that we could be more than just frenemies who happen to be having a baby together.

I fall back on our old habit of bickering. "C'mon, you big wuss. My parents love you. You're like their other son."

"Who knocked up their daughter." He cocks an eyebrow at me. "And so we go from merely awkward to excruciatingly weird."

"You know what I mean." I lower my voice. "Want to bet that Katie will find some way to be a bitch about it?"

For Noah's sake, I have tried, really tried, to love my sister-in-law, but I've never truly understood what he saw in her... except that she's very beautiful.

And polished.

And smart.

And ambitious.

So okay, I guess I can *sort* of understand what he sees in her.

Hunter lifts his hand at me. “High five to a fellow fan of Katie’s.”

I slap his palm. I probably shouldn’t feel good about bonding over a mutual dislike of my sister-in-law, but I like this feeling of me and Hunter being on the same side, even for a moment. I turn my attention back to the house. “Think I should tell them now or after we eat?”

Hunter sets his jaw, considering. “After we eat. If they kick me out, I at least want some of your mom’s pecan pie first.”

“Deal.” I open the car door. “But they’re not going to kick anyone out.”

Hunter politely opens the front door of the house for me. As I step in, my nephew, Teddy, comes careening around a corner and slams into my legs, wrapping his arms around me.

“Aunt Joyze!”

“Heya, Teddy!” I put down the casserole I brought on the hall table and swoop him up. I adore my nephew and his little sister, Lanie, but hugging him today feels extra special.

In a few months, I’ll have my own baby to hold.

Excitement rushes through me. It’s not just *my* baby—it’ll be a cousin for Teddy and Lanie, a grandchild for my parents, and a niece or nephew for Noah and Katie. My baby isn’t even born, and already he’s part of a family.

Teddy breaks into my reverie by grabbing my face in both hands and staring intently into my eyes. “Did you bring me treats?”

I’ve been known to sneak him a cookie or two from the café.

“Grandma’s in charge of treats today,” I tell him. “Did you say hi to Hunter?”

Without warning, Teddy launches himself out of my arms at Hunter. “Uncle Hunter!”

Hunter, wisely, has already put down the two bottles of wine that he brought and swoops in to catch Teddy before we all land on the floor. “Heya, buddy! Oof!” He pretends to sag under Teddy’s weight. “You’re... getting...so...big... Crushing...me...”

Teddy laughs with delight. Hunter is so good with the kids, Teddy especially. It’s bittersweet. I know not everyone wants to be a parent, and I get that, but something about the way Hunter plays with Teddy makes me think he’d be really good at it.

Mom comes in from the kitchen, dusting her hands on her apron, and hugs us both. “Happy Thanksgiving, you two! So nice of you to give Joyce a ride, Hunter.” She looks back at me, her eyes glowing with sympathy. “The break-up hasn’t been easy on her.”

“And it’s been three months, Mom,” I remind her. “And I can still drive!”

“The casserole looks delicious!” Mom picks it up off the table. “Come on through and say hi to everyone.”

I follow her into the dining room where Katie is settling Lanie, my nine-month-old niece, into a high chair.

I glance a little enviously at Katie, who is trim, perfectly coiffed and made up, and dressed in a figure-hugging designer knit dress. It would be nice to think that I’ll look as good as she does nine months after my baby is born. But the fact is, I don’t look that good now—I don’t think I’m yummy mummy material.

Which normally wouldn’t bother me, but Katie is the type of girl that guys like Noah and Hunter go for. And even though I know intellectually that looking like Katie wouldn’t suddenly make Hunter into husband-and-father material any more than having a baby will make me look like Katie, part of me can’t

help wondering if things would be different between us if I was just a little more his type.

Noah interrupts my thoughts. “Hey, you two finally made it! Joyce, you want to grab the potatoes? They’re on the stove.”

Between us, we get the food, someone wrangles Teddy into his seat between Katie and Noah, and we say grace and dig in.

Noah and Dad talk about the construction company, Katie complains about the waiting list to get Teddy into the best preschool in North Falls, and Mom tells us about a Christmas toy drive she’s volunteering for. Noah and Katie are having Christmas in Boston with Katie’s family, which I guess is only fair, but it’s still a bummer. Mom and Dad chatter about a cruise in the Bahamas that they’re taking with my Aunt Eileen right after Christmas. Hunter, who is seated across from me, between Katie and Mom, tells Dad about some pro bono work he’s doing but otherwise doesn’t say much.

I don’t talk at all. A zillion random thoughts ping around my mind—should I be working on a different set of ads for the cafe? How early are you supposed to put your kid on a waiting list for preschool? When should I tell my parents they’re going to have another grandchild? Will Mom give me the recipe for the pecan pie that Hunter likes so much?

It’s like stage fright. It’s ridiculous, because I know my parents will be happy for me. They’re modern people who live in the modern world. They barely batted an eye when my cousin Susie had a baby out of wedlock.

But there is still something very awkward about having to admit to your parents that you’re knocked up.

“Who’s ready for dessert?” Mom asks, standing up to clear the dishes.

“Actually, before dessert, I have some news.” The words come out in a rush before I remember Hunter’s joke about waiting until he’s had some pie. I smile around the table but manage not to make eye contact with anyone.

Mom sits back down. “Sure, sweetie. What’s up?”

I swallow. “Okay, remember a few years ago, the doctors told me I couldn’t get pregnant?” Suddenly, I’m overwhelmed with the sheer, happy good news of it, and the stage fright feeling vanishes completely, replaced with giddy excitement. “Well, it turns out I can and I did. I’m expecting a baby in May.”

There’s a stunned silence for a moment, then the table erupts in cheers and congratulations. Well, from Mom, Dad, and Noah, anyway, and Teddy joins in because they’re all making noise. Katie smiles in her fake way, and Hunter shifts in his chair.

Mom gets out of her seat to hug me. “Oh, you’re going to be such a wonderful mother, and I can’t wait to have another grandbaby!”

Dad stands up to hug me as well. “Congratulations, sweetheart. We’re thrilled for you.”

For the first time since I realized I was going to have to tell my parents, I start to relax. Hard part’s over. I’m happy, they’re happy, and we’re all living in the 21st century, no shotguns in sight.

I glance at Hunter. He’s smiling, but he still looks like he’s braced for impact.

“So,” Mom wipes away a few happy tears, “does this mean you and Brandon are getting back together?” She can’t hide the hope in her eyes.

Oops. Forgot about this part.

“Okay, well...” I pause. “Actually, Brandon isn’t the dad.”

This is greeted with another, somewhat longer moment of silence.

“Oh.” Mom finally breaks it. She tilts her head. “So, are you seeing someone new? Already?”

“Not exactly...” *Shit, why is this so hard?* “I, uh, well...”

Hunter’s voice cuts across the table. “I’m the father.”

All eyes swivel toward him.

Complete silence greets his pronouncement. No one congratulates Hunter or hugs him.

“You?” Noah stares at his friend, then glances at me. “Are you two ... involved?”

Hunter looks at me, and for a moment I have a wild, fleeting fantasy of him getting up and declaring his love for me and the baby and his determination to be the best father/partner ever.

“No,” he replies.

The daydream goes poof, and I snap back to reality.

“We, uh, gave it a try,” Hunter continues, “but it didn’t work out.”

Well, I guess that sounds a little better than *got hammered and had sex*. I flash him a quick smile, grateful that he’s trying to make things sound at least a little bit respectable.

“Oh,” says my dad.

“Well,” says Mom.

Noah just stares at Hunter. I can’t decipher the look on his face.

“But I’m here to support Joyce and the baby in any way I can,” Hunter announces.

“Well, of course you are!” Mom says in her encouraging voice, like she’s telling Teddy he’ll get taller if he eats all his vegetables.

“It’s very exciting.” Dad smiles at me, but it’s the same smile he gave me when I announced I wouldn’t be working for the family business. Like he’s working extra hard at being happy.

“Aunt Joyze is having a baby?” Teddy asks Katie.

“Sure looks that way!” Katie says with a bright, plastic smile.

Teddy looks at me. “Are you and Uncle Hunter in love?”

All eyes on Teddy. We're running a Babcock family record for awkward silences today.

Teddy continues. "Mommy says that when two people are in love, they take off their clothes and that's how babies get made." He jerks a thumb at his sister. "That's how Lanie got made."

Katie pats his knee. "Well, honey, it's a *little* more complicated than that."

Teddy turns to his mother, exasperated. "You *said* when two people are in love, they take off their clothes—"

My dad breaks into a hearty laugh that I recognize as his business laugh, the one he uses when clients make jokes. "Well, it seems like we're all getting a biology lesson today. Joyce, honey, we're truly happy for you. Your mom and I are very excited to be grandparents again, and we'll do everything we can to support you."

"Thanks, Daddy."

"Can it be a boy, please?" Teddy says from across the table. He shoots a disdainful glance at his sister. "Girls are boring."

Lainie blows a raspberry at her brother and a round of chuckles breaks some of the tension.

I smile at my nephew. "No promises, but I'll try."

Noah lifts a glass of wine in my direction. "Congratulations, Sis. I'm really happy for you, and I promise I'll be the best uncle ever."

Katie gives me her plastic smile and raises her glass as well. "Of course," she adds. "We're so happy for you."

Everyone lifts their glasses and I blush and smile. It's fine, I tell myself. They're happy. I'm happy. Everything is going to be fine.



TRADITIONALLY, this is the stage of Thanksgiving where Mom takes a well-deserved break, the adult children clean the dishes, and then we all go for a walk or play touch football or do something else as a family. Somehow, Noah and Hunter have disappeared, though, and I'm stuck in the kitchen with Katie.

"Those bacon-wrapped Brussels sprouts were delicious," I tell her, trying to make conversation. "I'd love the recipe."

"Thanks. Listen..." Katie purses her lips in that *about-to-give-a-lecture* way. "We're really happy for you, of course, but maybe save announcements like that for when the kids aren't around, okay?" She gives me her bossy, corporate smile. "I don't want them thinking that casual sex and unwed motherhood are acceptable."

I stare at her, openmouthed, for a moment before I can find my voice. "Weren't you already pregnant with Teddy when you and Noah got married?" I remind her. Katie had refused to walk down the aisle looking pregnant, and there had been a lot of fuss about moving the wedding up by three months.

"That was a *completely* different situation. Noah and I had been engaged for almost a year." She lowers her voice. "Trying to trap a guy like Hunter is just going to end in heartbreak."

"I wasn't trying to trap anyone!" I splutter, almost too outraged to talk. "I didn't even know I could *get* pregnant!"

She gives me another one of those fake smiles that tells me she doesn't really believe me. "Anyway, Noah and I aren't planning on having any more kids, so I got rid of all Teddy's old clothes, but let me know if you're having a girl, and I'll keep Lanie's things for you. You won't want to buy baby clothes brand new. The good ones are very expensive."

"I can afford baby clothes," I ground out through gritted teeth. "I have my own business? Make my own money? Remember?"

"It'll be interesting to see how well you swing running a coffee shop as a single mom." She sighs. "But I hope you're

not planning on getting back into Babcock Construction. That company is our children's legacy, and Noah has worked really hard to take it to the next level. It wouldn't be fair of you to expect to just waltz back in and take over half the business again."

"I have no idea how we got from me expecting a baby to me trying to steal your children's birthright," I tell her, "but I *have* a job, one that I love, and I will be just *fine*."

A nagging little voice in the back of my mind reminds me that I might not actually have a job if the landlord kicks us out, but I'm certainly not going to share that with Katie.

Katie just shakes her head with infuriating pity in her eyes. "At least you have your parents to fall back on. Not everyone is that lucky."

The last dish put away, I throw the dishcloth on the counter and storm out of the kitchen before I lose my temper and tell Katie where she can put her designer baby clothes and snippy attitude. At least I can look forward to telling Hunter this story on the way home. Maybe we can bond a little more over our mutual dislike of my sister-in-law.

But when I walk back into the living room, Hunter is nowhere to be seen. I open my mouth to ask where he went, but something holds me back.

Instead, I glance out the window. Sure enough, his car is gone. I frown at the empty space in the driveway.

He left without even saying goodbye.

HUNTER

After dessert, there's the typical bustle of clearing the table and taking the dishes into the kitchen. Despite all the chatter, though, somehow, no one says anything to me or even makes eye contact.

I stand and begin piling a few plates together. I'm wondering if I should just make my escape and let Joyce get a ride home with Noah, when Noah solves the dilemma for me.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" he says quietly.

My stomach rolls, and I wish I hadn't eaten Mrs. Babcock's pie. I barely tasted it anyway. Noah's been my best friend for over a decade. Now I've gone and knocked his sister up, and from his perspective, it probably looks like I'm the one who walked away from the relationship.

Not that there was ever really a relationship to begin with, which is probably even worse.

"Yeah, sure." I leave the dishes on the table and follow Noah out the door that leads from the living room to the back deck.

He turns to look at me, his arms crossed over his chest. "You and *Joyce*?"

I stuff my hands in the pockets of my dress pants. "Yeah. I didn't see it coming, either."

"It's not funny, man!" Noah growls.

“I didn’t mean it to be,” I say quickly. “I’m just saying I didn’t see it coming. I had no idea it was going to turn out like this.”

“How exactly *did* you think it was going to turn out? Joyce isn’t like the girls you date. She just broke up with the guy she’d been seeing for four years.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to point out what an asshole Brandon was, but I’m smart enough to keep quiet.

“Is there—are you—Is there any chance the two of you will try to make it work?”

She doesn’t want me.

But I can’t bring myself to say it. Saying it out loud will make it too real. I spread my hands out in a vague shrug.

“No,” I force out. “I guess it was kind of a rebound thing. But she’s happy,” I add. “She’s really excited about the baby.”

“So there’s a silver lining,” Noah huffs. “But that’s not an excuse. You have *no* idea how hard it is to raise kids, even when there’s two people. And for a single mom, doing it alone? While running her own business?” His jaw tightens. “You have no idea how difficult this is going to be for her.”

The aggravation in his voice takes me aback. Noah adores Teddy and Lanie. He loves being a dad, and he’s damn good at it. I’d thought he’d be as thrilled for Joyce as she is.

“She won’t be alone,” I insist. “I told you, I’ll do whatever I can to support her. Whatever she needs, I’ll do it.”

“Yeah, you’ll what? Throw some money at the problem?” Noah’s voice is bitter. “Where are you going to be at three in the morning when her baby’s screaming his head off, and there’s nothing she can do about it? Where are you going to be when the kid’s running a fever and someone needs to stay home with him? Fatherhood’s more than a monthly check. As you of all people should know,” he adds, twisting the knife in my gut a little harder.

“I’ll do whatever she wants.” I sound pathetic, even to myself.

“Bullshit,” Noah sneers. Noah almost never swears, so this is a very bad sign. “Literally, as long as I’ve known you, you’ve said you never wanted a family. Your longest relationship with a girl has been what? Five months?”

I swallow. “Six.”

Noah’s face darkens. “Meanwhile, Joyce gets out of a relationship she’s been in for *four years*, and you swoop in to take advantage? When the hell did this blink-and-you-miss-it relationship take place anyway?”

I brace myself for his wrath. “Uh, we got together the night of the Taste of Heaven Festival.”

Noah is silent for a moment. When he speaks, his voice vibrates with barely suppressed anger. “You mean, *literally* the day after she and Brandon broke up?”

“...Yeah,” I admit. “I ran into her at the Cantina. We both had too much to drink—”

“Christ!” Noah cuts me off. “She was *drunk*?”

Shit. I am digging myself deeper with every word. “We both were—”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” I can tell that the only reason Noah isn’t yelling at the top of his lungs is that he doesn’t want his entire family to hear this conversation. “You took advantage of my sister when she was heartbroken and *drunk*?” A vein in his temple throbs. “What the *fuck*, man? I thought I knew you!”

I’ve known Noah since we were freshmen in high school and I’ve never seen him lose his temper. He’s always been the most even-tempered guy I know.

Now I can tell he’s on the verge of punching me—and I almost wish he would, just to get it over with.

Noah clenches his fists. “Did you even actually have a relationship? Like, did you at least ever even go out on a date, or was this a typical Hunter one-night-stand special?”

“I asked her out.” I can’t keep the defensiveness out of my voice. “She turned me down.”

“Because she’s too smart,” Noah responds. “She knows you’re not relationship material.”

The words hit me like a slap in the face, stinging way more than they should. I’ve never claimed to be relationship material. Never wanted to be.

But hearing it from Noah, the most stand-up guy I’ve ever met, is a confirmation of a fear I’ve never acknowledged before—that I *can’t* be relationship material. That I’m not good enough. Not for Joyce, not for her family.

Not for anyone.

“No,” I agree after a pause. “I guess not. But I want to be there for Joyce. I’ll be there for whatever she needs.”

I can’t tell if Noah’s expression is disgusted or just weary. “She doesn’t need you, Hunter. She has us.”

I open my mouth to protest, but nothing comes out. Why bother? He’s right. I’ll pay for whatever she and the baby need, but they don’t need *me*. In fact, they’re probably better off without me.

I take a deep breath. “Maybe I should go.”

“Maybe you should,” Noah agrees.

“You’ll make sure Joyce gets home okay?”

Noah eyes me with disdain. “Like I said, she doesn’t need you. We’ll take care of her.”



THE PHONE RINGS while I’m sprawled on my leather sofa. The football game is on, but I’m not really watching it, more just staring into space. I’m not sure if I could tell you who’s playing, let alone what the score is.

I know who’s calling before I even look at the phone. I don’t want to talk to her, but I know I have to, so I silence the TV and take the call. “Hey.”

“Hey, you disappeared after lunch,” Joyce says. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I say, which is a lie. “I just remembered something I had to do.” I glance at the flatscreen, remembering how I used to watch games with Noah and Mr. Babcock, and click it off entirely.

Fortunately, Joyce doesn’t ask me what pressing matters I had to attend to on Thanksgiving afternoon. “I guess it could have gone worse,” she says, keeping her voice light. “No shotguns, right?”

My jaw tightens. No shotguns because her family would rather have her pregnant and single than mixed up with a guy like me.

“No shotguns,” I agree.

Joyce laughs a little but it sounds forced. “Did you notice Katie was the only person who didn’t say congratulations? She was a total bitch later when no one else was around.”

“Hah, yeah. Well, that’s Katie.”

An awkward silence spools out between us. Joyce finally breaks it. “Did something happen today? I noticed you and Noah disappeared after dessert. Did he say something to you?”

“Noah’s just worried about you. Your whole family is. They care about you.”

“They care about you too,” she replies.

I flop back on the couch and stare at the ceiling. Yes, they care about me the way people care about a prize show pony. I made them look good, and maybe there was even some genuine affection there, like you’d have for a favorite pet, but when push comes to shove, they don’t want to admit I’m their equal.

And I definitely felt the shove today.

“You’re their daughter,” I tell her. “It’s natural that they’d want to protect you.”

“Protect me from what, Hunter?” She’s starting to sound annoyed now. “Do you have bodies in your refrigerator I should know about?”

“No bodies.” I take a deep breath. “I just don’t think I’m father material.”

“Yeah, you said. Several times now.” Joyce sounds testy, but what the hell? She’s made it clear she doesn’t even want to have dinner with me, let alone have me in her baby’s life. “I don’t need you to be father material. I just thought we were friends, but when you disappear without saying goodbye, it makes me think maybe we’re not.”

Frustration, guilt, and anger well up inside me. “Joyce, look, I didn’t ask for this. I’m not father material and I’m not relationship material, either. Trust me, you’re better off without me in your life or in the baby’s life.”

“I’m sorry. Did you hear me asking for a relationship?” she snaps.

Well, no. The opposite. From waking up together to telling me she’s pregnant, she’s made it clear all along that she doesn’t want me in her life.

“Look, I told you about the baby because I thought it was the right thing to do,” Joyce continues, her voice businesslike and brisk. “Now you know, my family knows, and you don’t have to be involved. I can take it from here.”

“I’ll pay child support,” I tell her again. “I don’t want you or the baby to ever go without anything.”

“I’m not asking for a handout. I told you, I can take care of myself.”

“Child support isn’t a handout. I’ll have an agreement drawn up. You should find a lawyer to make sure the terms are what you want.”

“Aren’t you a lawyer?”

“Conflict of interest.”

“Whatever,” she mutters. “I appreciate you coming with me to tell my family. You’re off the hook now.”

There are so many things I want to say. That the only role models I had for good parenting couldn't even look me in the eye today.

That I'm not relationship material, but if there ever was anyone that I could see being with for the long term, it would be her, but she's said over and over that she doesn't want me.

That she's better off without me but that she should give me a chance anyway.

That I want to at least go back to the way things were when we were, where I ruffled her colorful hair and called her silly names and teased her about stupid stuff, relishing the attention she gave me even if it was only because I was annoying her.

"Joyce—" I start, but I don't know how to finish.

"It's fine, Hunter." Joyce's voice is surprisingly quiet now, and that's somehow worse than if she were yelling. "I know you didn't ask for this, and like I said, I'm not expecting anything. I just hope we can be friends."

I bite back a bitter laugh. I've been friend-zoned by the only girl I could have seen having a future with, who happens to be carrying my baby, no less.

"Yeah, of course," I mumble. "Whatever you want."

"Well, okay." There's another long pause. "Guess I'll see you around."

"Yeah, see you."

I hang up and look around my condo. It's small but beautiful. I even hired a decorator. Nice rugs, nice furniture, expensive appliances. Even now, I wake up sometimes and wonder if I'm dreaming.

I've come a long way from being the kid who ate food out of cans and lived by himself in a trailer.

But I haven't come far enough. Even with a law degree, a Lexus, a fancy office, and expensive furniture, Joyce's family still thinks I'm trailer trash.

And I can't blame them because part of me believes it too.

JOYCE

“Is this a coffee with cream?” Officer Spivak hands back across the counter. “It tastes funny.”

I stare at the cup. “Sorry. Um...”

“That’s because this is yours.” Lucky hands him a different cup and flashes him a big smile. “Sorry for the mix-up.”

Officer Spivak takes his cup and heads outside to where his patrol car is parked. He comes in here at least a couple of times a week and always orders a large coffee with cream.

Lucky turns to me. “Gonna need a fresh oat-milk white hot chocolate.”

“Sorry.” I trash the first one, exasperated at my idiocy. “I’m so spacey lately.”

“Baby brain. My cousin Concetta put cat food in the dishwasher and her laundry in the garbage.”

I’ve been mixing up orders, which is bad enough. I’ve also messed up the schedule three times, forgot to increase our coffee order for the holiday months, resulting in an expensive run to the supermarket to tide us over, and I’ve lost my car keys three times in the past week. Stupidest part: they were on the hall table in my apartment every single time, I just didn’t see them.

I did manage to get the holiday decorations up around the cafe last night, but it took me twice as long as it normally would because I kept forgetting what I was doing. It might not

have happened at all without Mariah, Lucky, and Julian helping me out.

“I was finally over the morning sickness and now I can’t think straight. Please tell me Concetta got over it.”

“She got over it,” Lucky assures me as I steam the oat milk. “Took her a while, but she’s always been a bit of a ditz.” She rings up another customer. “Gonna need a medium double-shot mocha. It probably won’t last long.”

“The mocha?”

Lucky laughs. “No, the baby brain.”

I blush at what a dope I’m being. Since Thanksgiving, I’ve had more energy and my appetite has stabilized, but I’ve felt like my brain is wrapped in cotton wool.

I hand the oat milk white hot chocolate to a woman and apologize for the delay, then stare blankly at the espresso machine.

“Medium double-shot mocha,” Lucky reminds me.

I snap my fingers. “Yes! Right.” I get to work.

A few minutes later, the last in a long line of customers has been served, no other order screw-ups on my part.

“Whew!” Lucky says. “Time for a break.”

“Sorry I’m such a space cadet lately,” I sigh.

“You’re good,” she assures me. “Any word from Hunter?”

“A.k.a., He Who Shall Not Be Named?”

“Or father of your child. Whatever.”

“No. He ditched me at Thanksgiving, made it clear he’s not interested in being a dad nor is he interested in having a relationship with me—which is fine, because I’m not, either,” I add. “In fact, I think he’s pretty arrogant for assuming I’d even want him.”

Just then, the chimes over the door ring as Blaze walks in.

She stamps her feet on the mat and looks around. “Hey, you got the Christmas stuff up! Looks great! Did you see it’s

snowing?”

“Good timing. You missed the rush,” I tell her. “I’ll have your vanilla soy latte right up.”

“Actually, could I talk to you for a sec?” Blaze walks over to the counter and lowers her voice. “I had a chat with Wally.”

Uh oh. Blaze only calls her stepbrother Wally when she’s mad at him.

“What did he say?”

Blaze flashes Lucky a quick, questioning look.

“Lucky knows all about it,” I tell Blaze. “What did you find out?”

Blaze takes a deep breath and steps closer to the counter. “According to Wally, Brightside has signed a deal with Beans R Us. They’re going to try to open one of their stores downtown. As in, right here.” She points at the floor.

Beans R Us is a huge, highly successful chain. There are already a couple of them in North Falls.

“They can’t do that! What about the zoning laws?” I ask.

Welkins Ridge has strict laws preventing chain stores from opening in the downtown area. It was one of the policies the Mayor put into place in an effort to preserve the historic feel of the area and ensure that profits stayed in the community.

Blaze winces apologetically. “Wally says some of the council members are open to changing that if they think it means more business for the town.”

I swear under my breath. “So much for simply moving the cafe,” I say. “I can’t compete with a Beans R Us, especially if it’s in this location.”

Lucky taps the counter thoughtfully. “Think Nikko could help? Maybe throw some publicity your way with his show? It’s got a good David and Goliath angle.”

That’s Lucky, always thinking PR. I flash her a grateful smile but shake my head. “They haven’t even started shooting

yet. By the time they're ready to air, it'll be a done deal one way or another."

"I could talk to my dad," she offers. "Maybe he could pull some strings."

"That's okay," I say quickly. Lucky's dad is a nice man, but he's also a mob boss. Lucky swears he's "retired," but the thought of him owing him a favor makes me nervous.

"A petition, maybe?" Blaze suggests. "If enough people support you, the town council might get the message and keep the zoning laws the way they are."

I nod slowly. "Something like that could work. If the zoning laws change, it won't just be me who's affected."

It's the thin end of the wedge, I realize. If the zoning laws are changed, the Mayor's grocery store, Uncle Louie's Pie in the Sky Pizza, Mrs. Warnock's Milky Way Ice Cream parlor—any and all of them could be chased out by chain-store versions.

Not to mention that Welkins Ridge would lose all its charm and look like every other generic downtown in the country.

I rub my temple. "Crap, I can barely think straight these days as it is. But this could end up affecting a lot of people, not just me. I feel like there's just so much to think about!"

Lucky rubs my shoulder. "Christmas is in just a few days. Chill out, spend some time with your folks, and then let's work out a plan. We'll get some articles in the paper, we'll see about a petition—"

"We'll talk to a lawyer," Blaze adds with a meaningful look.

"I'll talk to Dad's lawyer," I reply. "Not Hunter."

Lucky opens her mouth as if she's about to argue, but just then, my phone rings. I get a nasty jolt when I see that the caller is Brightside Properties.

"I'd better take this," I mutter. "Lucky, watch the floor for me, okay?" I walk down the hall to my office before picking up. "Hello?"

A jovial man's voice responds. "Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Miss Joyce Babcock?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Joyce, my name is Robert Landsman. I'm the general counsel for Brightside Property Development Limited, your landlord."

I set my mouth in a grim line. "I know what Brightside is."

"Excellent! I was wondering if you'd had a chance to look over the letters we sent you?"

"Yes, and I'm not selling out."

"Joyce, we're offering you a very generous —"

"It doesn't matter," I respond. "If I take you up on it, I'll be out of a job. In any event, it's not generous enough to cover the actual value of the business or the amount of capital and labor I've invested in it. I have a lease that's good for another thirty-two months, and I expect you to honor it."

A moment of silence greets me. I have a feeling that Robert Landsman, Esq. thought I was going to be more of a pushover.

"You should think carefully about this, Joyce." There's an edge of condescension in his voice. "Welkins Ridge is becoming more and more attractive to new businesses. It's going to get harder for small businesses like yours to compete."

"Well, aren't I lucky to have two and a half more years on my lease. That gives me plenty of time to figure out how to deal with the competition," I tell him.

"You're a tough businesswoman." He chuckles. "I like that. How does this sound? We'll double the payout."

For a moment, I hesitate. It's a generous enough amount that I could coast for several months, looking after the baby and thinking about what to do next.

Thin end of the wedge, I remember.

“Robert, I hope your company will do the right thing and honor the lease I signed,” I tell him. “But if you don’t, I’ll fight you.”

Even as I say the words, I wonder how. Legal battles cost money, and Brightside is guaranteed to have much bigger pockets than I do.

Landsman lets the silence grow. I remember Hunter once saying that clever negotiators use silence to make their opponents uncomfortable, so I set my jaw and force myself not to say anything more.

Landsman finally realizes that I’m done with the conversation. He heaves a dramatic, sorrowful sigh. “Listen, Joyce. The holidays are upon us, no one wants a fight. I’m going to put our new offer in writing and send it to you. Why don’t you take a couple of weeks to think it over. We’ll talk again in the new year.”

“My answer will be the same.”

I hope I sound more confident than I feel. I’m overwhelmed and exhausted and wish I was thinking more clearly because if I can’t even get drink orders right these days, I probably shouldn’t be making life-altering decisions.

Landsman replies with another condescending chuckle. “We’ll see about that, Joyce. We can make your life easier, or we can make it much more difficult.”

“Are you *threatening* me?”

“Not at all,” he replies smoothly. “Just being honest. You have a very happy holiday now.”

And with that, he hangs up.



“I GOT a call from this Landsman guy as well,” Melody says.

The cafe is closed for the evening, but Melody, Cathleen, Mark, and I are meeting here to talk about Brightside. We’re

seated around one of the larger tables and I've made sure everyone has a hot drink.

My goal is to get us all on the same page so we can stand up to Brightside.

Cathleen and Mark nod. "We each got one too," says Mark. He's a good-looking, guy in his early thirties, but he's overly serious and I rarely see him smile.

"It's a healthy sum of money," Cathleen says, her gaze focused on the table. She's the oldest of us, probably close to forty.

Melody and I look at each other. Mark and Cathleen could take their businesses just about anywhere and they both have less time left on their leases as well. For them, taking whatever Brightside is offering makes sense.

"I hate to give up my studio here," Melody says. "I've put a lot of money into it, and I love the location." She shoots me a guilty look. "But it wouldn't be impossible to find another space for it."

I repress a sigh, wishing again that my mind was working a little more clearly. "I get it. I have the most to lose here, and I will completely understand if you guys take the payout. But if they can get a Beans R Us in here, I'm worried that it'll just be a matter of time before other local businesses get muscled out."

"That's just a rumor, though, so far—" Mark begins, but Cathleen shakes her head. "My brother-in-law is on the city council. He confirmed that Beans R Us is trying to get a foothold here. The council is thinking about making an exception for it because they think it'll bring more traffic into town." She winces as she looks at me. "Sorry."

I wave it off. "It's fine. But if they can make an exception for Beans R Us, they can make an exception for anything."

Melody suddenly puts her coffee cup down and lifts her head. "You know what? Yoga is about harmony and community and realizing the oneness in all things. It's not

about money, and it's *definitely* not about selling out to big corporate interests. If Joyce is staying, I'm staying!"

I flash her a grateful smile, hope rising in my chest.

"Everything is about money," says Mark, bringing me back to earth. "But I'm staying too."

The rest of us look at him in surprise.

"I do taxes and accounting for most of the small businesses around here. They go under, I lose the bulk of my income." He shrugs. "Pure self-interest."

Cathleen stares into her cup of herbal tea for a long moment, then sighs. "I've only got six months left on my lease. I could do most of my work from my kitchen if I had to, and honestly, I could use the money Brightside is offering. But I saw this happen when I lived in New Mexico. A lovely little town got taken over by big companies, and now their downtown looks like a strip mall. It's one of the reasons I moved back here." She looks up at us. "So I'm in. If you guys don't take the payout, I won't either."

"Okay," I breathe with relief. "Next steps? I was thinking we call the local paper and maybe start a petition."

"We should all be at the next city council, too," Cathleen adds. "But I'm swamped until after Christmas."

"I'm going out of town for the holidays," Melody adds, looking apologetic.

"So much for harmony, community, and oneness," Mark grumbles.

Melody's pretty face falls at his words.

"It's Christmas, for heaven's sake!" Cathleen snaps at him. "People have plans."

I sense our little coalition is more fragile than I'd like it to be. "Christmas is in just a couple of days," I say, "and we still have a little time before we need to respond to Brightside. Let's regroup next week, and we'll see what we can do on the public relations front."

This much, it seems, we can agree on. We stand up and I see everyone out.

Before I leave, I take one last look around the Flying Saucer. I'm grateful that I won't have to face down Brightside on my own, but I'm also aware that three other people are putting themselves on the line for me.

"Please let this work," I whisper to the dark cafe, then I step outside and lock the door.

HUNTER

Not gonna lie—it stings that I wasn't invited to the Babcocks for Christmas. Except for when I was in law school and couldn't afford the flight back, I've had Thanksgiving and Christmas with them since I was a junior in high school.

I don't hear from Joyce or Noah, and I feel like I'm missing a limb. They were the two people I cared about most in the world, and I've managed to piss them both off.

Noah, at least, understands why I'm distancing myself. He practically told me to. Joyce doesn't understand, but maybe Noah will fill her in on what my family life was really like and why the thought of having tiny helpless people dependent on me scares me to death.

To make matters worse, this is the only time of year when there really isn't much to do at work, so I can't even distract myself there. Most of our clients slow down around the holidays. Almost none of them are doing deals or signing contracts, and the firm practically begs employees to take PTO.

So I spend Christmas in my condo, watching football, eating take-out, and swiping on Tinder in a vague effort to move on.

And that's how I meet Carly and set up a date for two nights after Christmas.

When I meet her at an upscale wine bar in North Falls, she's friendly, funny, and very beautiful. She's got long,

honey-colored hair, a tastefully tight blouse, and legs that she shows off in a skirt that's way too short for late December.

She's exactly my type.

She's back in North Falls for the holidays with her parents. On Monday, she'll be heading back to Hartford, where she works, and in February, she'll be starting a new job in Spain, so it's pretty clear she's not looking for any kind of commitment.

"I just thought it would be nice to get out of the house," she purrs over a glass of pinot. "I've been home four days, and my family's driving me crazy. You live alone, right?" she asks with a suggestive smile.

"All alone." I smile back, but I'm not as excited about the prospect of taking her back to my place as I should be.

We have a few drinks, then go down the street to an equally upscale restaurant for dinner. It's a nice evening, the kind that a few months ago would have ended up back at my place for a fun night of adult playtime.

I tell myself I should go for it. From the way she's flirting, I can tell she's pretty much a sure thing, and it's not like I owe anyone anything. Neither of us is drunk, and I definitely won't forget to use a condom this time. Maybe a night with her will help get Joyce out of my head.

But when the check is paid, and she reaches across the table, strokes the back of my hand, and suggests going back to my place for another drink, I find myself shaking my head.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "Work's been crazy lately, and I'm really tired."

She looks taken aback, but she's polite about it. I walk her back to her car, give her a quick kiss on the cheek, and watch her drive out of my life. No regrets.

Not about her, anyway.

I get into my own car, but instead of driving back to my condo, I find myself turning onto the highway that stretches between North Falls and Welkins Ridge. It's late, past eleven,

and there aren't any other cars on the road. But I'm not sleepy, despite what I told Carly. In fact, I'm kind of wired, and I wonder if a drive might calm me down.

I'm not really thinking about where I'm going until I find myself driving to my old high school. I pull into the parking lot by the football field and shut off the engine. The field is empty but the goalposts are lit up by stadium lights. As I sit there, the car gradually getting colder, a gentle snow starts to fall.

High school was some of the best memories of my life and some of the worst, but I still love the old school.

High school was my first experience of being *someone*. I'd been a loner in middle school, but on the team, I started to make friends. My coach drilled it into us that we had to keep our grades up or we'd get cut from the team, and I took him seriously because I was terrified of getting cut. Football was the only family I had.

Until I became friends with Noah.

I used to fantasize about the Babcocks adopting me, welcoming me into their incredibly clean, normal home once and for all, and in the end, they kind of did, by letting me stay with them for a good chunk of senior year. But it was a favor, as much maybe to Noah as to me, and I was never an official part of the family.

As my grades got better, my teachers started to notice me. Mr. Babcock went with me to talk with my guidance counselor about making sure I got into the honors and AP classes. My coach pointed me out to college recruiters.

I got a full scholarship to one of the state universities and then got accepted to law school, and now I'm an associate lawyer at one of the best law firms in North Falls.

Pretty good for a kid who was living on his own and eating tuna fish out of the can when he was fourteen.

Pretty good ... but never quite good enough.

Somewhere in the distance, the sound of sirens pulls me back to the present.

I start the car, put it in reverse, and pull out of the parking lot. I'm heading back toward the highway when I veer off into the downtown area at the last minute. It's stupid, but I decide to drive past the Flying Saucer. Maybe I'm kind of hoping that the light in Joyce's apartment might still be on. I'm not going to bother her. I just want some reminder of her.

The sound of sirens is louder now. I try to turn down Elm Street toward Main, but a cop is in the street putting up cones to block off the street. I stop the car and open the window.

"Officer, what's going on?"

"Fire on Main," he says. "You live around here?"

Alarm prickles up my back. "Main Street? Where?"

"Between Cedar and Birch."

The prickles get stronger. "What building?"

"Sir, do you live around here?"

My heart starts to race. "What building? Not the Flying Saucer Cafe building?"

"Yes, that's the building. Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to keep moving—"

"My girlfriend lives in the apartment over that building!"

"Firefighters are on it. Best thing you can do is stay out of the way right now." The officer's voice is infuriatingly calm. "I'm going to have to ask you to keep moving."

Cursing, I step on the gas, pull into the first space I find, then tear out of the car and past the cop with the cones. He yells something after me but I ignore him.

Main Street is a blaze of flashing lights, smoke, sirens, and movement. There are three fire trucks and several police cars taking up most of the street, and men are dragging hoses into the building.

My breath catches and my throat constricts so tightly that I can't make a sound.

"Joyce!" I finally manage to shout.

No one pays any attention to me. I run up to the nearest fireman who is pulling equipment out of one of the trucks. “My girlfriend lives in there!” I yell at him.

“We need you to stay out of the way, sir. Check with the ambulance,” he calls over his shoulder.

I glance up at the building. Behind the smoke, flames can be seen flickering in the third-floor windows. Is that Joyce’s apartment? Did she get out?

I look around wildly. A white ambulance is parked at the end of the block, out of the way of the hustle and bustle. I run over to it as fast as I can.

And to my relief, she’s there. She’s sitting in the back of the ambulance, a blanket around her shoulders. She’s oddly lumpy, but as I get closer, I realize she’s got that stupid fat cat tucked into her fluffy unicorn bathrobe, and she’s holding onto him like her life depends on it.

I grab her. “Joyce, are you okay?” I turn to the nearest EMT. “Is she okay?”

“She’s going to be fine. She’s just a little shaken up,” he assures me.

“She’s pregnant. Did she tell you she’s pregnant?”

“No need to yell, sir. I can hear just fine. Is that true, ma’am? You’re pregnant?”

Joyce just nods, her face blank.

“Okay, your baby’s probably just fine, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to see your doctor as soon as you can just to be on the safe side.”

Joyce nods again.

“You’re sure she’s not hurt?” I ask the EMT.

“She’s had a real bad scare but no sign of injury. But ma’am, I can take you to the emergency room if you’d like to get checked out.”

“You should go to the hospital,” I tell her. “I can take you if you don’t want to ride in the ambulance.”

She shakes her head. “I’m okay. It was just...” She looks down the street, her big eyes reflecting the lights of the trucks and police cars. “Hunter, my cafe...”

I glance over my shoulder. I’m no expert and I have no way of assessing the damage from here, but from the number of firetrucks and firefighters who are here to tackle the flames, I’m thinking it must be a pretty big blaze. At least one of the huge pane-glass windows at the front of the cafe has been broken, and thick, dark smoke is billowing out.

“They’ve got it under control,” I tell her, although I have no idea if they actually do. “What happened?”

For a moment, I think she’s not going to say anything, but then she does. “I was asleep and the alarm went off, and the next thing I knew, there was smoke everywhere. I couldn’t see anything. It took me forever to find Wombat. He was hiding under the couch.”

“Tell me you did not risk your life for that stupid cat,” I mutter. “Fuck, you could have been killed.”

She clutches the lumpy cat a little tighter. “I couldn’t leave him!” Her voice catches. “Hunter, what if it’s gone? What if the Flying Saucer is gone? I put everything I had into that cafe!”

“It’s okay. Don’t cry.” I put an arm around her, grateful when she leans into me. “You’ve got insurance, right? We’ll sort it out. I’ll help with anything I can, I swear.”

She swipes a hand over her eyes. “And my apartment.” She blinks rapidly, trying to hold back tears. “Everything I own is in there. My driver’s license, my purse—” She clutches the cat a little tighter. “I just...” She swallows. “I don’t even have my phone. Mom and Dad left for their cruise yesterday, and Noah and Katie are in Boston. Can you call Blaze? I can stay with her.”

“Come home with me.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize I’m saying them, but they feel right, like she doesn’t belong anywhere else.

She opens her mouth as if she's about to argue. She could go to Blaze's or Bailey's or Lucky's. I'm certainly not her only option, and I hold my breath waiting for her to remind me of the fact.

"Please," I add. "I mean, I'll take you anywhere you want, but ... Come home with me."

"What about Wombat?"

"Wombat, too. *Mi casa e Wombat's casa.*"

A ghost of a smile flickers across her face. "If you're sure you don't mind...? I think I want to get away from here."

"Of course I don't mind. I just want to be sure you're safe."

The EMT goes through a list of things to watch out for, takes our names, and lets us go. I help Joyce down from the back of the ambulance—which is when I realize she's only wearing slippers.

I scoop her up, cat and all, into my arms.

"For heaven's sake, Hunter, I can walk," she objects, and I'm relieved to hear a little of her fighting spirit return.

"No, you can't. There's broken glass all over the street, and the snow'll go right through those slippers. Car's only a block away. Just hold onto that damned cat."

She puts one arm around my neck and secures the cat, who is still hiding in her bathrobe, with the other, and I carry her down the street, tucked up against me.

And for the first time since that night when we kissed on the sidewalk, something feels right again.

JOYCE

It takes me a moment after I wake up to realize where I am.

Then I remember that I'm in Hunter's condo. In Hunter's bed. It's warm and soft and large... and empty, except for Wombat, who is curled up next to me, snoring softly.

The scent of smoke still clings to my hair and skin, but my pajamas and bathrobe are gone, replaced with the t-shirt Hunter gave me to sleep in. It's huge on me, luxuriously soft, and smells like him.

I sit up against the pillows and look around the room. I was here once, when Hunter had his condo-warming party a couple of years ago, but I haven't been back since, and except for a brief tour, I didn't spend any time in his bedroom.

The room has an expensive, monochromatic, masculine feel. Chocolate-brown curtains match the chocolate-brown duvet and coordinate with the cream-colored sheets and the brown and cream geometric rug on the hardwood floor.

Everything matches. Everything is expensive. It's pretty much the opposite of my eclectic, hand-me-down apartment.

I think of my apartment with a pang. Who knows if there's anything left of it—not to mention my beloved cafe?

I roll over and pull Wombat closer for a cuddle. I'm grateful, of course, that we both made it out, but in the grey light of early morning, it's dawning on me that everything I knew and relied on has changed.

It also occurs to me that Wombat will need a litter box or a chance to go outside soon. Wombat seems to have the same idea. He struggles out of my arms and jumps to the floor with a thud.

I push myself out of bed and look around. My bathrobe and pajamas, which I left lying on a sleek leather armchair by the window, are gone, replaced with a large black robe that can only be Hunter's.

It's enormous on me, but it's less awkward that walking around his apartment with only a t-shirt on. I roll up the sleeves as much as I can, tighten the belt, and tiptoe down the hallway.

It opens up into a large living room with a small kitchen separated by a counter, a pair of elegant leather bar stools in front of it. I wonder if Hunter ever has people over to watch him cook—or if he cooks at all.

Hunter himself is sprawled on the couch, snoring lightly, a blanket over him and a throw cushion under his head. The couch isn't long enough for his tall frame, and I can't imagine he slept well. Guilt twists in my chest. I had the enormous bed all to myself last night while he slept squashed on a couch. I wish I'd insisted that he take the bed last night, but I was so shell-shocked that I pretty much let him put me to bed like a baby.

I bite my lip. I don't want to risk setting off an alarm by opening a door for Wombat, and for that matter, I don't have any actual clothes, but I don't want Wombat to have any accidents either. Now more than ever, I can't afford to replace any of the expensive rugs in this place. But I don't want to wake up Hunter, who looks like he's sleeping soundly, if a little cramped.

Wombat finally makes the call for me. He jumps up onto the back of the couch and stares down at Hunter.

"Wombat!" I hiss, but it's too late.

Wombat jumps onto Hunter's stomach.

“*Ooof!*” Hunter’s eyes pop open. “The fuck?” he mumbles. His eyes focus blearily on Wombat. “Oh. Devil cat, we meet again.”

“Sorry!” I say, still whispering like the damage hasn’t already been done. I make a grab for Wombat but he’s already jumped away, surprisingly nimble for a cat of his size.

Hunter sits up and rubs his eyes. “Everything okay?”

“I think Wombat needs the bathroom.”

Hunter shakes his head like he’s trying to shake the sleep away. “I put a litter box in the hallway bathroom. He already used it, so he knows where it is. He’s probably hungry. There’s some dry food and some cans in the kitchen. Didn’t know which you fed him.”

I know for a fact Hunter doesn’t have a cat. He’s always said he hates cats. “Really? Thank you.”

Hunter yawns, shoves the blanket off himself, stands up, and stretches. He’s wearing a t-shirt identical to mine but his stretches snugly over his chest. He’s also wearing plaid flannel boxer briefs that show off his long legs and lean muscles and a substantial bulge in the front. Yes, I notice everything.

I look away quickly.

He takes a few steps toward me. “How’re you feeling today?” His aquamarine eyes are unusually serious and he looks older, somehow.

“Fine. Well, I guess it’s all still sinking in,” I add. My stomach squeezes.

My life, up in smoke.

I’m not ready to think about it, so I change the subject. “Where did you get kitty litter? What was open at that hour?”

He stumbles toward the kitchen. “There’s a twenty-four-hour supercenter off the highway.”

I know the store he’s talking about. It’s a forty-five-minute drive from here, which means Hunter can’t have gotten more

than a few hours of sleep.

“Hunter, that was so nice—” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“It’s fine.” He juts his chin at Wombat. “Can’t risk pissing off that cat, he’s got it out for me. You want some coffee? Are you allowed to have coffee?” He frowns at the kitchen, still looking sleepy. “Sorry, should have picked up some decaf. I could go get some.”

My brain hasn’t fully caught up to Hunter buying kitty litter, but it seizes on the word *coffee*. “Yes, please. The doctor said a cup a day was fine, just not to overdo it.”

He walks past me to the kitchen area where he pops a pod into a Keurig and presses a button. The machine makes a gentle whirring noise.

I take a seat at one of the bar stools. “Did you get any sleep? I’m sorry I took your bed.”

“No biggie,” he says. “Couch is comfy.”

“Then you should have let me sleep on it.”

“Joyce, it’s fine.” Looking more alert now, he glances at me over his shoulder as he takes a bowl of sugar down from a shelf. “What kind of jerk would make a pregnant woman sleep on the couch when there’s a perfectly good bed?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to point out that there was more than enough room in the bed for both of us, but I bite that thought back. There’s no telling how he’d take it. And I’m not a hundred percent sure how I’d mean it.

“Um... thanks for the bathrobe,” I say instead.

“No problem. I put your clothes in the wash. Figured you wouldn’t want them smelling like smoke.” He points to a plastic bag with the supercenter logo on the coffee table. “Got you some new clothes, too. Nothing fancy, just some sweats and a t-shirt. I figured you wouldn’t want to go all day wearing your pajamas. Got you a pair of sneakers, too. Super cheap, but they’ll tide you over until we can get you something better.”

I find myself simply staring at him. Hunter has shown flashes of thoughtfulness in the past, but I would never have expected him to think of so many things that I need, let alone get them for me.

“That was so sweet. You didn’t have to do that. I could have asked Bailey or Blaze to bring me some clothes.”

He pulls a small carton of cream out of the fridge and puts it on the counter next to the sugar. “I may not know a lot about women’s fashion, but I know that Bailey is a foot taller than you, and anything that fits Blaze could fit two of you. Lucky’s your best bet, but only if you like short and tight.”

“You’re right,” I concede. “Sweats are probably more my speed.”

There’s a moment of silence as I stir in generous helpings of sugar and cream into my coffee.

Hunter is being incredibly kind and thoughtful, and yet... there’s something not quite right about the situation. It’s overly polite. Formal. Not like us. I actually preferred all the annoying bickering we used to do.

Does he still feel awkward about the whole one-night stand thing? Is he treating me like I’m fragile because of the fire? Or because I’m pregnant? Or is it something else?

I’m trying to think of a way to ask when he rubs a hand over the stubble on his jaw and says, “I think it would be a good idea if we got you checked out by a doctor today.”

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

He shakes his head. “It’s really quiet this time of year. No one goes into the office unless they have to. I should try to get some work done here, but I can help you out with whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Hunter, but I’ve already imposed too much. If I could just borrow your phone to call Blaze, she can come pick me up—”

“Damn it, Joyce!” Hunter slaps the counter between us. I jump, startled. “I want to help! I want to help, okay?” he

repeats. He runs a hand through his already tousled hair. “Look, I know I’ve been a jerk about the whole pregnancy thing. I’m trying to do better. I *want* to do better. *Please*. Let me be helpful.”

I think of the kitty litter, the cat food, and the clothes. “You’ve already done so much—” I start, but Hunter leans across the counter, his face just inches from mine, and plants his hands on either side of the cream and sugar. His eyes are dark and serious and there’s no trace of his signature cheeky charm.

“Joyce, I know you don’t like to take help from anyone, and I know you don’t want me anywhere in your life, but you could have been killed last night. You may not care about that, but I do. So will you please just suck it up, and let. Me. Help?”

I blink at him. He thinks I don’t want help? He thinks I don’t want him in my life? I could have been killed last night —

My breath catches as the enormity of what’s happened finally catches up with me. I *could* have been killed last night. And I’ve probably lost both my business and my home in one fell swoop.

I put a hand over my mouth and choke back a sob.

Then Hunter is on the other side of the counter, and he’s guiding me gently to the couch, his strong arms around me.

“I couldn’t find Wombat, and it was so dark and there was so much smoke. I couldn’t breathe!” I choke out. “And what if it’s all gone? Everything I own?” I hiccup. “Where do I even start?”

I can’t hold back the tears anymore and let him pull me up against him and hold me close as I sob for what feels like hours into his chest.

Maybe he was right to treat me like I’m fragile.

Hunter just holds me and lets me talk and cry myself out until I run out of tears. Finally, exhausted, I pull away to see that I’ve left a damp patch on his light grey shirt.

“Sorry,” I sniff.

Hunter reaches one long arm around to a box of Kleenex on the side table and hands it to me. “Don’t be sorry. You’ve had a hell of a shock. I’m amazed you’re handling it as well as you are.”

I dry my eyes and blow my nose, but I don’t move. I just sit there, soaking up the comfort of Hunter’s strong arms. For a long time, neither of us say anything.

Hunter finally breaks the silence. “Hey, how about I make us some breakfast?” he asks gently.

I’m about to say that I’m fine and will get something later, then remember what he said about letting him help. “Thank you,” I reply. “That would be nice.”

“How does scrambled eggs and toast sound? I’m not much of a cook. We can go out for a proper meal later when more places are open.”

“Eggs and toast sound perfect,” I tell him.

He pulls the blanket he was sleeping under over me and starts to get up, but I grab his hand and he sits back down.

“Hunter... what did you mean when you said I don’t want you in my life?”

He looks away. “I asked you out twice, and you turned me down.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “I figured you felt obligated.”

“Obligated?”

“You know, because I’m Noah’s sister, and we slept together. I figured you were just trying to be nice.”

He snorts and then laughs, but there’s something bitter about the sound. “Nice? You thought I was trying to be *nice*?”

I shift under the blanket. “I mean... I know you’re not into relationships, and it’s not like I’m your type. I figured you were just trying to let me down easy.”

He stares at me with such intensity that I have to fight the urge to squirm under his gaze. “Do you have any idea how fucking terrified I was when I realized it was your building on fire?” he asks. “When I saw all those fire trucks and realized there were fucking *flames* coming out of the window of your apartment?” He shakes his head. “Man, I thought I knew fear when you told me you were pregnant, but I didn’t know anything. Last night—that was the scariest fucking moment of my life.”

He stops talking and we sit there, just looking at each other.

He was terrified of losing me in the fire? He meant it when he asked me out? Does that mean...

I don’t even realize that we’re drawing slowly toward each other until we’re so close that I can see each fleck of gold in his turquoise eyes, each bit of stubble on his unshaven chin.

Whatever is about to happen is interrupted by the sound of Hunter’s phone ringing.

Turning away, Hunter picks it up off the coffee table and glances at it. “It’s Noah,” he says. “I texted him and your parents to let them know what happened.” He hands me the phone with a sigh. “He’s not calling for me.”

JOYCE

“Noah?”

“I just got Hunter’s text about the fire. My God, Joyce, are you okay?” Noah’s voice is panicked but groggy. He must have just woken up.

“I’m okay,” I tell him. “It was scary, but I’m not hurt, and I don’t think anyone else was in the building.”

“Katie and I will be back from Boston in a couple of days,” Noah continues. “You know where our key is. You can stay at our place as long as you need to.”

Hunter is right next to me and can hear what Noah is saying. He mouths the word *Katie*, makes a face, and shakes his head. I have to look away so I don’t laugh.

“Thanks, but I can stay at Mom and Dad’s,” I tell Noah.

“They won’t be back from the cruise until next week. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Then I can stay with Blaze—”

“Stay here,” Hunter whispers. “As long as you want to.”

I snap my gaze to him. “Uh...”

“Joyce?” Noah’s voice brings me back. “You still there?”

“Yeah.” I turn my attention back to my brother. “Sorry.”

“I don’t want you staying with Hunter,” he says.

Beside me, Hunter flinches, almost imperceptibly. He gets up and walks into the kitchen.

Anger spikes through me. Hunter has been nothing less than amazing since he found me last night. I want to ask Noah why he's so angry, but I don't want to get into it with Hunter right here.

"I can take care of myself, Noah!" I sound snappier than I mean to. "I'm just ... really tired," I say more gently. "I think I need more sleep."

It's a lie. I'm wide awake, but as much as I love Noah and know he wants what's best, he feels suffocating at the moment. I need time and space to think.

"Yeah, of course." Noah can't completely hide the hurt in his voice. "We're here for you, whatever you need, okay?"

"Thanks, bro. I love you," I whisper, getting choked up again.

"I love you too, Joyce."

I hang up and stare at the phone in my hand.

"Everything okay?" Hunter asks.

"What's the deal with you and my family?" I turn to look him in the face. "You and Noah have been best friends forever. My parents brag about you like you were their own son. I don't understand what happened."

"They just want what's best for you, Joyce."

"That's a cop-out that doesn't explain why you and Noah suddenly aren't talking to each other."

Hunter brings our coffee cups over to the couch. He hands me mine, sits down, and studies the far wall. "I told him we were drunk when we hooked up."

I groan. My overly protective big brother does not need to know anything about my sex life, least of all that. "Seriously?"

"Sorry." Hunter grimaces. "It slipped out. But mainly it's that he knows that commitment isn't my strong suit. He thinks I took advantage of you while you were getting over Brandon, and he's pissed. Which I understand."

The reminder of Hunter's playboy persona stings, but I'm not going to let that distract me from getting to the bottom of the story.

"We were both pretty toasted. I don't think you took advantage of me any worse than I took advantage of you," I tell him. "But there's something weird going on with you and my parents, too. I always thought they thought of you as one of the family, and now you're like the black sheep. Do you have a criminal record or something I don't know about?"

I'm joking, but his expression grows deadly serious. "No," he replies. "But my dad is doing twenty years in a federal prison for fraud, assault, and armed robbery."

"Oh."

I sit back and absorb the words. I'd never given much thought to Hunter's father. Noah had mentioned once or twice that he was "not a good guy," and implied that he'd moved away.

"I'm sorry, Hunter," I say. "I didn't realize... That must be hard for you."

"Bastard's exactly where he deserves to be. I hope they find a reason to keep him there longer."

"Oh," I say again.

He turns his head to look at me. "Did Noah ever tell you about what my life was like in high school?"

"I remember that you lived with your dad. And then with us for a few months. I kind of knew you didn't have a lot of money," I add, embarrassed at the wealth I took for granted growing up.

Hunter scoffs. "That's the nice way of putting it. My mom died when I was a toddler, and my dad basically left when I was in middle school. He'd come home every few months, hand me some cash, and tell me to stay out of trouble. I have no idea what he was doing when he was away. I'm sure it wasn't anything good. He came home less and less as I got older. By the time I was in high school and on the football team with Noah, he wasn't showing up at all. He'd send some

money once in a while, which was never quite enough. I was basically on my own.”

“Hunter, that’s awful,” I say, horrified. “I knew things weren’t good, but I didn’t realize they were that bad.”

He shrugs. “It was what it was. I was just as happy he wasn’t around. He was a real son of bitch.” His jaw tightens and he fixes his gaze on the far wall. “When he was around, he’d always reminded me that I was a mistake, that he’d never meant to have kids, that my mom was an idiot for getting pregnant with me... You get the picture.”

I put a protective hand over my belly. “I’m sorry,” I say again. “Those are terrible things to say to a child.”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Anyway, you can see why I might not be their first choice for their daughter.”

For a long moment, neither of us says anything.

“Well, no,” I finally tell him. “I don’t really see that at all. Your dad might be a criminal, but *you’re* not. You’re a lawyer, for crying out loud. That’s like, the *opposite* of being a criminal!”

“About a thousand lawyer jokes say otherwise,” he reminds me with the ghost of a smile. “But you can see that they might not be thrilled to know that your child’s other grandfather is in prison.”

“All right,” I admit, “I can see that my pillars-of-the-community parents might be less than thrilled at that. But that’s him, not you. They adore you. You literally lived with us your last semester of high school. I think you’re reading too much into this.”

“Joyce, look, I love your parents. I respect them. I owe them more than I can ever repay. But they have a very clear idea in their heads about where I belong. Have you ever noticed how good they are at letting people know how much they helped me? That I wouldn’t be where I am now if it hadn’t been for them? I’m their prize charity project. There’s a place for me in their universe, and it’s not as their equal.”

“But—” I start to object, but the words trail off.

Thinking about it, he's right. Mom and Dad brag about Hunter, maybe more than they brag about me, but there's a self-congratulatory edge to their boasting. Mom loves to talk about how much Dad helped Hunter in high school, and he always responds by telling people how Mom was the only real mother figure Hunter's ever known.

"I guess I never really noticed," I tell him. "I'm sorry. I don't think they meant to make you feel bad."

"It's fine," he says. "They deserve all the credit they can get."

I snort. "They don't deserve *all* the credit. *You* were the one who got a scholarship, and *you* were the one who worked extra jobs and got good grades and made it through law school. And I know my dad put in a good word for you with your firm, but it's not like they would have hired you if you were insanely well qualified. *You* deserve credit for having come this far, and my parents should be grateful that this baby's going to have some of your DNA!"

I finish, slightly out of breath and surprised at how passionate I feel. I'm angry at my parents on Hunter's behalf and impressed by his dignity.

He smiles at me. Not the typical cocky Hunter smile. A real smile, warm and sweet and even a bit shy. "Thanks, Joyce. That means a lot. Really."

Neither of us seems to know what to say next. The silence stretches out, and I pretend to sip my now-lukewarm coffee, wondering how to restart the conversation after Hunter's deeply personal revelation.

I'm reminded of that night before it turned into *That Night*, when I felt like we'd bonded as friends.

This time, I want us to stay friends.

"Did you mean it about me staying here?" I ask.

"Yeah, I meant it," he says quickly. "We should get to know each other better anyway. You know, on account of ..."
He gestures vaguely at my stomach.

“I think that would be nice. But I’ll pay rent, and I’ll sleep on the couch,” I insist.

“No, you will not pay rent, and the condition of you staying is that you get the bed.”

“You can’t sleep on the couch,” I argue. “You didn’t look at all comfortable, and you need a good night’s sleep because—unlike me for the foreseeable future—you have a job.”

“I also have a blow-up mattress, and I can sleep in the study until I can buy something better.”

“That’s ridiculous. I can sleep in the study—”

“Good grief, woman, you’re stubborn. My house, my rules. You’re sleeping in that bed whether you like it or not.” He puts his mug down on the coffee table with an air of finality. “Now that’s settled, should we argue about something else, or should I go make breakfast?”

“We do argue a lot, don’t we?”

It’s true. We bicker all the time. It started around the time he moved in with us the last semester of his senior year. I didn’t stop having a crush on him, but I got over my awe of him and found my voice. I was jealous of all the cheerleader types I saw him with and took it out on him with ongoing, adolescent snarkiness.

If it ever bothered him, he never let it show. He’d laugh me off, and of course, that just got under my skin even more.

You’d think we’d have outgrown it by this stage in our lives, but Hunter has never missed a chance to tease me, from my tattoos to my hair to my taste in men.

Especially my taste in men.

Now that I think of it, Brandon was the butt of most of Hunter’s humor over the past couple of years.

“You really hated Brandon, didn’t you?” I say.

He looks confused. “Why are we talking about your dweeb ex-boyfriend?”

“Because arguing—” I don’t have the patience to explain my train of thought. “You just never liked him. Why?”

He pauses for a moment, maybe wondering if he should tell me what he’s really thinking. “Dude’s a fake, a poser,” he finally says. “Wants everyone to think he’s a hotshot entrepreneur when his whole business was bankrolled by mom and dad.”

“In fairness, I had family money to start the Flying Saucer,” I point out.

“You sold your share of the family business to fund your business. He just got a wad of cash. You took a risk. He didn’t.”

“Is that really why you didn’t like him?” I’m starting to wonder if there might have been more behind Hunter’s antipathy toward Brandon.

Hunter scoffs. “Isn’t that enough? He was all shine, no substance. You’re better off without him. I bet he wasn’t even all that good in bed.”

I guess I’d hoped to hear him say he was jealous, and instead, he just gets under my skin again.

“That has nothing to do with any of this and is absolutely none of your business!” I splutter. “Anyway, you’re one to talk.”

His eyes narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Heat blooms across my cheeks. “Nothing,” I mutter and pull the bathrobe tighter around me.

“No, no, no.” Hunter leans closer. “That meant something. What?”

“It’s just, you know…” I shrug awkwardly. “It’s not like our night together was anything to write home about.”

He straightens up. “Wait, are you telling me it wasn’t good?”

I bite my lip, sorry that I said anything. “It was fine.”

“*Fine?*” He pulls in a breath. “Okay, given how much I’d had to drink, it’s within the realm of possibility that you didn’t get the absolute best version of me,” he winces like he’s bracing for bad news. “It sounds like you’re saying it wasn’t *great?*”

“Well...” I decide to go with lighthearted but honest. “It was okay.”

“‘Okay?’”

I study the space over his head, really wishing I’d kept my mouth shut. It’s one thing to have a post-coital rehash with your bestie. It’s quite another to deliver a less-than-glowing critique straight to a guy’s face.

“It was okay,” I say again. “That’s not terrible,” I add quickly.

“Whoa. ‘Not terrible’ sounds... pretty terrible.”

“It wasn’t terrible. It just wasn’t great, is all I’m saying.”

“Yeah, but with me, it’s never ‘not bad.’ It’s always great.”

I guess sparring has always been our comfort zone. I shouldn’t be surprised we’re back here. I smirk. “Sorry, Casanova. It started off great, but it ended up squarely in okay territory. But don’t feel bad. We were both drunk. Maybe we should get dressed.”

“No, not changing the subject. It was ‘*okay?*’” Hunter sets his jaw and stares into my eyes. “Orgasm-wise, on a scale of one to ten, with one being a barely noticeable blip and ten registering on the Richter scale, how would you rate it?”

So much for comfort zone. Looking Hunter straight in the face and talking about orgasms is decidedly not comfortable... My hormones are scrambling my ability to think clearly, but the air between us shimmers again with that sparkly tension from earlier this morning.

Not comfortable... but kind of exciting.

I cover up the confusion with a scoff. “Dude, your ego is out of control. I’d rate it as a big ol’ goose egg because I didn’t actually come at all.”

“Shut the front door!” Hunter holds both hands up in what I think is mock horror—but might be real horror. “Are you telling me you *faked* it?”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t *fake* anything. You just didn’t notice.”

Hunter puts his hand over his heart and does an exaggerated double-take. “I didn’t *notice*?”

“No, you, um, finished—obviously, or we wouldn’t be here now,” I pat my baby bump, “and you said,” I clear my throat, “and I quote, ‘That was awesome, babe,’” and then you rolled over and went to sleep. Or passed out, I guess might be more accurate.”

Hunter sinks his head into his hands and lets out a long, deep groan as if I’ve physically wounded him. “‘That was awesome, babe,’ and then I passed out? How are you even still speaking to me?”

I give him a commiserating pat on his firm shoulder. “I don’t really remember it that well, anyway. I think I passed out about five seconds later myself.”

He straightens up. “You don’t *remember*?”

He leans closer, the scent of him filling my nose and triggering a visceral, full-body reaction. I’m never not attracted to Hunter, but maybe the conversation is having an effect or maybe it’s the hormones because my body suddenly goes into overdrive. Nipples tighten, my undies get damp, and a soft, liquid warmth spreads throughout my belly.

“When I’m with a girl, she *remembers*,” Hunter tells me. “It’s like trumpets and strobe lights and angelic choirs.”

I snort to cover up the rush of sensations. “Well, don’t you have a high opinion of yourself! Sorry, pal. The choir stayed mum.” I spread my hands out. “I think you might just have to let this one go.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I’m not letting it go. I have a reputation to uphold. I want a do-over.”

I blink. “A what?”

“A do-over,” he repeats. “You. Me. In the bedroom. Best hour of your life, guaranteed.”

I stare at him, unable to tell if he’s being serious or silly. Part of me hopes he’s just being silly.

Another part of me *really* hopes he’s being serious.

I decide silly is safer. “And then I, what? Leave a review on Yelp?”

“Reviews are welcome, but all you really need to do is bask in the afterglow.” He smirks with infuriating confidence.

I laugh nervously. “Funny. Blaze told me I should ask you for a do-over.”

“Gah!” He slaps a hand to his forehead and the sexual tension between us fades abruptly. “You told *Blaze*?”

“Oops.” I wince. “Sorry.”

His gaze locks onto mine and he brings his face to mine, so close that I can feel the heat from his skin.

The tension is back like it was never gone.

“That’s it.” His voice is low, almost a growl. “My reputation is at stake. I *demand* a do-over.”

A playful smile hovers on his lips but his eyes are dark. However this started, I don’t think he’s joking anymore.

A shiver of desire trembles through me. “Demand, huh?”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” he reminds me.

“Oh.” I let this sink in. “Maybe I should be more demanding myself.”

“Maybe you should. You’re going to have to let me prove it to you now.”

My breath hitches. “Prove ... what exactly?”

He leans in close, brushing my hair with his cheek. “Prove how good we can be together,” he whispers in my ear.

JOYCE

“**G**ood together...” I echo. I’m not sure if it’s a statement or a question.

It doesn’t matter. Hunter wraps one hand around the back of my head and draws me toward him. Memories of our night together flood my mind. The velvet sensation of his lips, the scent of his cologne, the way his mouth is gentle but dominant at the same time.

Oh, this is a bad idea... At least that’s what my brain says.

The rest of me violently disagrees.

I could have been killed last night. I could have died, crawling around on the floor of my apartment trying to find my stupid cat. I could have spent my last days on earth serving lattes and worrying about my lease, and as much as I love my job, that’s not exactly living life to the fullest.

Screw all the common sense. I’m alive, and I want that do-over.

In a burst of assertiveness and spurred on by desire, I shift to straddle Hunter’s lap. Hunter gasps as I slide forward, pressing my core into the hard bulge in his boxer briefs.

“I like this dominant side of you, Joyride.” He grins, showing me a glimpse of his werewolf teeth. “And I like to see you living up to your name.”

In response, I rock myself back and forth on him. “Like this?”

He closes his eyes and groans. “Like that.”

I continue rocking while he pushes open the front of the bathrobe and tugs on the collar of the t-shirt I’m wearing.

“There it is,” he chuckles and leans forward to kiss the cartoon panda I have just under my right collarbone.

“You like pandas?” I murmur.

“I like *this* panda.”

He kisses the tattoo again, then begins working his way up my neck with a combination of kisses and gentle nips that sent sparkly shivers of lust throughout my body until I’m practically vibrating with desire.

Hunter’s hands slide under the oversized t-shirt and around my waist, pulling me closer for a deep and lingering kiss. One hand slides up my back, warm and strong on my bare skin. The other finds its way to one breast and begins to knead it gently. He brushes a thumb over one hard and sensitive nipple and I wonder if I could come from this alone. I think, given enough time, I could—but I’m not that patient.

Eyes closed, I grab his wrist and direct his hand down to my pussy. “Touch me,” I beg.

He swears under his breath. I shift myself up and his large hand cups me. I’m sure my panties are already soaking. He begins to rub me, then stops.

I look down into a pair of turquoise eyes dark with desire.

“You. Me. Bedroom,” he says in a soft growl.

“You’re such a Neanderthal,” I whisper back.

“You bring out my inner caveman.”

He slides his hands under my butt and lifts me effortlessly off the couch, and for once, I don’t mind being short. I feel delicate and protected and incredibly feminine.

Instinctively, I tighten my legs around his waist, grab his face and pull him in for another deep kiss.

He pulls away. “Hold that thought. Can’t see where I’m going.”

He walks down the hallway to the bedroom while I busy myself kissing his neck, my entire body pulsing with anticipation.

He lays me down gently on the still-unmade bed, lies down next to me, and pulls me into his strong arms. “You ready for the full Hunter experience?”

“I hear it’s all strobe lights and earthquakes. But no pressure,” I add.

“Are you kidding?” He grins. “I do my best work under pressure.”

He peels the bathrobe off me, kisses me, long and lingering, then pulls my t-shirt off.

A wave of shyness washes over me. My tiny mosquito-bite breasts and my dainty but obvious baby bump are on full display right now.

I reach to pull the duvet up but Hunter stops me. “Uh uh. Gonna just admire the view for a moment here.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, you need to take your shirt off too. You promised the full Hunter experience, remember?”

“I guess I did, boss lady.”

Hunter sits up on his knees and pulls his t-shirt off over his head. It joins the bathrobe in a soft, expensive pile next to us. Something in the air between us shifts and shimmers. It’s as if before we were just playing, but now, both of us mostly naked, it’s inevitable.

Hunter Baldwin and I are going to have sex.

I pull in my breath as I let my gaze rove over his magnificent body. The full Hunter experience is very impressive. I’ve seen him without a shirt on before, of course, at the lake and when he lived with us, but that was when he was off-limits.

He’s not off-limits anymore.

I sit up and run my hands over smooth skin and firm muscles, then lean forward to kiss his neck. Hunter tilts his head back, closes his eyes, and lets out a deep sigh that sends a surge of longing through me.

I examine his naked skin in the dim morning light. “No tattoos at all? Not one?”

He chuckles. “I can’t commit to anything that permanent.”

It’s a gentle reminder, but a reminder nonetheless that this is probably fun and games, nothing more. Although he did ask me to move in with him... Will the invitation still be open after this?

Am I overthinking this?

Yes.

I’m living for the moment, at least for *this* moment. I’ll let the chips fall where they may and deal with them later.

Hunter points at his magnificent chest with both hands and gives me that cocky grin. “But do you really think a little ink could improve on this?”

I snort at his ego but I have to admit... probably not.

“I could picture you with some ink.” I trail one finger across a muscular bicep. “I’m thinking a picture of Wombat, right *here*.” I give the bicep a poke.

He laughs. “No offense, but if I ever get a tattoo, it won’t be of Devil Cat.”

I lean in and kiss the smooth skin of his chest then run my tongue over his nipple. He sucks in his breath. “Wait, wait, you’re stealing my moves,” he mutters and gently pushes me over onto my back. “This is your do-over.”

He pulls me to the edge of the bed, pulls off my panties, and kneels on the floor between my legs.

“Oh, I like where this is going,” I breathe.

“Legs on my shoulders,” he orders, then he pushes my thighs apart and buries his head between them.

One touch of his tongue and I'm a goner. He licks and teases and kisses, tracing my folds with his tongue, kissing my inner thighs, then teasing my clitoris with a series of alternating slow and fast licks.

We definitely didn't do *this* the night we hooked up. I'd have remembered—and I wouldn't have let him out of my sight ever again.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, any residual shyness forgotten. "Oh, Hunter!" I sigh. "This is amazing!"

In response, he wraps his mouth around my clit and slides one thick finger into me at the same time. I gasp, and push against him, eager for more.

The finger slides out and is replaced with two fingers. He pumps me, gently at first and then harder, while he continues to torment my clit.

"Hunter, I'm going to come," I pant. "Come here, I want you inside me."

He doesn't reply, just shakes his head between my legs, and I give in to his incredibly skillful tongue. I let myself go, let the heat that's been building burst into glorious sensation that floods my entire body with warmth and light.

I actually scream a little.

Hunter pulls himself up until he's lying beside me, balanced on his elbows. "That was the strobe lights. Ready for the earthquake?"

I manage a shaky laugh. "I don't know if I can... you know ... again."

"What? Of course you can."

I shake my head and close my eyes. "I've never been able to twice. But that more than made up for the first time."

"Sounds like a challenge to me. You know I can't turn that down."

He bends down and wraps his mouth around one nipple and all thought flies out of my head. My breasts have been

extra sensitive since I got pregnant, and it feels like they've just been waiting for Hunter's tongue. A warm surge of desire floods the lower half of my body.

"I like a guy who likes a challenge," I murmur.

After spending several beautiful, agonizing minutes on one nipple, he moves to the next, one hand sliding down between my legs to play with my pussy, which is aching for him all over again.

"Hunter, I want you," I tell him. "I want you so badly."

In reply, he slides one finger into me and sucks harder on my breast. To my surprise, I am definitely building toward a second climax now and I find myself bucking my hips against his hand, needy for more.

"Hang on." He pulls away from me long enough to shuck off his boxer briefs. His cock, smooth and thick and very, very hard, springs free. I stroke it, a bit nervous when I realize my fingers don't quite meet around it. Nervous... and also turned on.

"Let me get a condom."

He reaches for the drawer of the nightstand but I pull him back. "We don't need one, remember?"

"Oh, right!" He bursts out laughing. "Man, this is going to be even more fun than I thought." He slides over me and settles between my legs. "Ready?"

"Oh my God, yes."

And I am. I've never wanted anything as much as I want Hunter right this moment.

Not taking his gaze from mine, he slides into me with exquisite slowness, giving me time to adjust to his size. "You feel so good, Joyce."

I just nod, not sure if I can form words at the moment. Once in, he begins moving with incredible control. "What can I do to make this better?" he whispers.

"It doesn't matter," I breathe. "I could just do this forever."

And I could. I don't even care about another orgasm right now. It's enough to feel him in me and around me, warm and strong and incredibly sexy.

“Well, I'm not going to make it that long, especially like this. Hang on.”

Without warning, he flips us so that I'm on top and straddling him. Initially, I feel exposed, but when I look down at him and see the absolute desire in his eyes, my shyness turns to a sense of power.

I spread my hands across his firm warm chest, and begin to piston myself up and down.

He groans and grips my thighs, bucking his hips into me before sliding a hand to my pussy and stoking my clit.

I tilt my head back as the fingers of his other hand find my nipple, pinching, gently at first and then harder, almost to the point of pain but never crossing the threshold.

I begin to post faster, and his fingers adjust to my speed. I never would have thought I'd be ready for another orgasm so soon after the last, but the heat is building and now it's undeniable.

I raise and lower myself on him again and again until the heat explodes throughout my body and I hear myself cry out Hunter's name.

The tremors are just subsiding when he flips me over onto my back again and drives into me with fierce passion until his body suddenly stiffens and he comes with a groan of ecstasy and collapses into my arms.

We lie there, tangled up, sweaty, and breathless.

Then I open my eyes to see Hunter, propped on one elbow, staring down at me, his turquoise eyes twinkling. “Amazing, right?”

“Your ego is incredible,” I reply.

He chuckles. “Someone at work said the exact same thing. But seriously—choirs? Strobe lights? Earthquakes?”

I close my eyes again and nod. “Fine. You win,” I pant, still catching my breath. “All of the above. Five stars. Would *definitely* recommend.”

HUNTER

Much later in the day, I'm sitting by myself in the waiting room at Joyce's doctor's office.

After our epic do-over, we finally got around to those scrambled eggs. After that, Joyce spent half an hour on the phone talking her parents out of cutting their vacation short to come home, and then snagged the last appointment of the day with her doctor.

She also called her insurance company. Between the holidays and the snow, which hasn't stopped falling since last night, they said it would be a while before they could send anyone out to do an official investigation of the fire, but in the meantime, they'll cover her lost income.

Then we argued some more over who would pay which bills—she thinks she's paying for groceries, but she's not—fooled around again, retrieved her car, picked up some clothes she had at her parents' house, and now we're here.

I think it might have been the best day of my life.

I've been coming up with excuses for years about why Joyce and I should be together, and now I can see what bullshit they really were.

Why was I so sure I shouldn't be with her? Because I was worried about what her family would think? Because I thought we'd want different futures? Because I was afraid of being a father?

All those fears faded into nothingness last night when I thought she might have died in the fire.

But she's alive, and so am I, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to show her that I'm here for her.

I almost offered to go with her into the doctor's appointment but decided that was probably crossing a boundary. I figured if she needs me, she'd ask.

But she didn't.

So I hang out in the waiting room fiddling with my phone. I scan the local news for any updates about the fire, but there's nothing there that I don't already know. The forecast for tonight and the next couple of days is all snow, though. Good thing we're stocked up on kitty litter and kibble.

Finally, Joyce comes out again.

I stand up. "How'd it go?"

"Everything looks good. The doctor doesn't think there's anything to worry about, given that I was only exposed to the smoke for a few minutes. Um..." She looks shy. "They asked if I wanted to have an ultrasound, since I'm here anyway, and I wondered if you'd like to be there for it?"

I sit up straighter. "Like, to see the baby? For real?"

"I don't know how much we'll be able to see, but ... yeah."

"I'm in."

"Really?" She looks surprised but happy. "You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure." I'm more than sure; suddenly I can't wait.

A few minutes later, she's lying on a bed, her sweatshirt off and her t-shirt pulled up. A middle-aged woman in purple scrubs spreads clear goop on her stomach, making pleasant conversation about nothing in particular.

Until she asks, "Do you want to know the sex?"

"Yes," says Joyce at the same time I say, "No."

We look at each other. “You don’t want it to be a surprise when the baby’s born?” I ask.

“It’ll be a surprise now,” she points out. “But it’s fine. I can wait.” She turns to the technician. “Don’t tell us.”

“I might not even be able to anyway,” she says. “Depends on how shy your little one is feeling. But we can at least make sure everything looks good, see if your due date is on track, and all that good stuff.”

She fiddles with some instruments and begins gliding a wand over Joyce’s bare stomach. The room fills with a fuzzy *lub-dub* sound.

“Heartbeat sounds good,” the tech observes.

I don’t remember doing it, but I realize Joyce and I are holding hands.

“Do you have a preference?” I ask her. “Boy or girl?”

“I think it’s a boy, but I don’t really care, I’d just like to know. Do you have a preference?”

“Girl,” I answer immediately.

“Seriously?” Joyce looks amused. “Would have figured you’d want a boy.”

I make a face. “Boys are assholes.”

The sonogram technician clears her throat. “I have three sons, and they’re very nice kids,” she says, but she doesn’t sound too offended. She turns the screen toward us. “Anyway, even if you did want to know, I don’t think our little friend here is going to be terribly cooperative. But we’re getting a nice profile, can you see?”

I stare at the screen, trying to make sense of what’s on it. To be honest, all I see is a screen full of black-and-white static.

I hold back a sigh. Already I feel like I’m missing the boat. I’m staring right at my kid and I can’t even see her. Or him. Doubt washes over me all over again.

“Um, we don’t actually know what we’re looking at,” Joyce admits, to my relief.

“Sorry.” The sono tech chuckles. “I’m so used to this that I forget that people need some context.” She points at the screen. “They’re giving us the classic ultrasound pose. This round bit here? That’s the baby’s head in profile, that’s the tummy, and this bit’s a leg.”

Joyce gasps. “Ohhh, I see it now!” She clutches my hand tightly. “Oh my God, Hunter, that’s our baby!”

Some distant part of my brain thinks it funny how such a tiny woman can have such a strong grip, but it’s completely overshadowed by the fact that I’m looking at my daughter’s profile for the first time.

I’m sure it’s a girl.

“How is she? Is she healthy?” I ask the tech.

“Doc gets to make the final call, but I can’t see anything here that would raise any alarms,” she replies. “And I *didn’t* say it was a she,” she adds.

“It’s a girl,” I say. I don’t know what I’m basing that on, but in my heart, I’m completely confident. A smart, sassy, angel-faced pixie like her mother. “And she’s beautiful.”

I lean down and kiss Joyce. “She’s perfect. Whatever you’re doing, keep doing it.”

“She’s your baby too—oh, crap, now you’ve got me doing it!” She rolls her eyes. “Are you really going to make me wait another four and a half months to find out for sure?”

I grin at the tech. “Our first fight,” I explain.

Joyce laughs. “This is not even close to our first fight!”

The tech just shakes her head with the air of someone who’s seen it all.



WE STOP to get Thai take-out on the way home and drive home slowly. The roads are quiet and the snow is falling thick and fast. It makes the night soft and light, and I think how

perfect this is, a beautiful quiet night, Joyce beside me, a healthy baby girl on the way, and Thai food to look forward to.

The only thing missing is a golden retriever.

I chuckle softly.

Joyce turns to me. “What’s so funny?”

I shake my head, unable to stop smiling. “I don’t know what you did to me, Joyce. A few months ago, I thought I had it all, and now I realize how much I was missing.”

“Aww!” Joyce puts a hand to her heart. “Hunter! That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said. I think it’s the nicest thing *anyone’s* ever said.”

“If the weather wasn’t getting so bad, I’d go out and start buying baby things right now. How do you feel about golden retrievers?”

“I was thinking a stroller might be more practical.”

“Okay, but we should think about getting one. I always wanted a dog growing up. I think every kid should have a dog, don’t you?”

“You don’t think a fat, lazy cat is good enough?”

“Just chew on it for a while. We can circle back. Okay, names.”

“I dunno—Butch? Rover?”

“For the baby, wise-ass, not the dog. How about Emma or Charlotte?”

“Very classic. But it *could* be a boy,” she reminds me.

“Mmm...” I pretend to give this some thought. “Nah. I’d be open to Sophia or possibly Amelia. Sophia Babcock-Baldwin—that has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Oh, very subtle, getting your name in there,” she laughs. “Anyway, I was thinking something more unusual.”

“No weird names.” I turn into my driveway, push the button for the garage door and pull in after it opens. “They’ve done studies. Give her a name like Moonbeam or Saffron, and

her chances of getting into Harvard go way down.” I put the car in park and turn the engine off.

“I was thinking more like Arwen or Nyra. And also, how about we get through the third trimester at least before we start thinking about Harvard? And since it *could* be a boy,” she reminds me, “how about Gale?”

“*Gale?*” I scoff. “For a boy? Why would you do that to an innocent kid?”

“From *The Hunger Games*. It’s a cool name!” she insists.

I grab the food, and we clamber out of the car and into the condo, laughing and arguing.

“Be right back.” Joyce kicks off her shoes and heads down the hall. Apparently, pregnancy means frequent bathroom breaks. I’m taking the food out of the bags when my phone pings with a text.

Phil: Betting on a snow day tomorrow. Gonna meet up with some people at the Remington. Stay at my place if you don’t want to drive home.

A dive bar in the city and a night on Phil’s couch? Or a cozy night in with Thai food and Joyce?

Not all that difficult a choice.

Nah. Gonna stay home. But thanks, I text back.

Phil: DUUUUUDE!!!! Don’t be an old man!

I’m breaking an unspoken law firm rule, but screw it. **I think I’m coming down with something,** I type back. **Have fun and stay safe. It’s getting nasty out there.**

Phil: Sure thing, MOM. He adds a “loser” emoji for emphasis.

“Who’re you texting?” Joyce comes back into the living room. She’s changed into her pajamas and my robe and looks adorably sexy.

It can wait. I put the phone down.

“Some idiots from work are going to go get drunk in the snowstorm.” I put my arms around her. “You look cozy. You going to make room for me in that bathrobe?”

“Feed me dinner, and I’ll see what I can do.” She smiles suggestively.

“And I thought *I* was a good negotiator. Dinner’s ready. Let’s eat.”

I turn down the lights and we eat dinner by the window, watching the snow fall in fat, fluffy flakes, lit up by the street lights.

“Maybe we’ll have a snow day tomorrow and we’ll be able to stay in bed all day,” Joyce suggests.

“I hated snow days when I was a kid,” I tell her. “But I think I’d like one with you.”

“Seriously? Who hates snowdays?”

“Because I’d have to stay home. Being alone was bad, and being with my dad was worse. I actually liked school because it got me out of my house.”

Her expression grows serious, and she squeezes my hand. “Hunter, I’m so sorry. I wish things had been different for you.”

“It’s in the past,” I tell her. “Right now, I want to focus on the future. Our future.”

She wraps her arms around me. “How about another do-over?” she whispers.

“Another one?” I pretend to be surprised. “I didn’t make it up to you enough this morning?”

She gives me a faux-serious stare. “Could have just been a fluke.”

I pull her closer. “What is going to take for you to believe how good I am?”

A smile hovers on the corners of her mouth. “You’re just going to have to prove it to me, over and over again.”

My phone pings again.

Phil: Last chance, loser!

I turn it off and throw it on the couch. Then I pick Joyce up and carry her down the hall to the bedroom where we belong.

HUNTER

We wake up to a snow-bound world. The office is shut, with orders to do what we can from home. The firm is still in holiday mode, though, and there's not that much to do. We're stuck inside, Joyce because she doesn't have any winter clothes, and me because I don't want to be anywhere that Joyce isn't.

I'm glad Joyce's parents are in the Bahamas. I'm glad the roads are too snowy for us to drive anywhere, or for Joyce's friends to drive to us. I don't even mind that Noah isn't speaking to me.

I want to keep it all close and private and not have to share it ... at least for a while.

We're snuggled up on the couch, doing an online crossword together. Joyce has adopted my bathrobe and t-shirt. I'm thinking that once the crossword is done, I'll see about peeling both of them off her again.

"Maybe after lunch, we could scope out pre-schools online?" I ask her.

Joyce giggles. "I guess that makes more sense than worrying about Harvard."

"Katie was saying there's a waiting list for the best ones," I remind her. "And I want nothing but the best for our little girl."

"For all her faults, Katie's very protective of her kids," Joyce says, "but I'm not sure I'm ready to follow her lead

about pre-schools with waiting lists. And I hope you're remembering that our little girl could be a boy," she reminds me. "You'll be happy either way, right?" There's an undertone of warning in her voice.

I kiss the top of her head. "Of course I'll be happy. Girls are just easier, is all I'm saying."

"Ha. Not according to my mom."

I laugh. "How much trouble could you have caused her? You always had your nose in a book."

"She's biased because Noah was such a saint." Joyce sniffs. "Perfect grades, great athlete, popular with everyone. Did chores without being asked, and he even kept his room cleaner than mine." Her mouth twists ruefully. "Not easy to live up to, I'll tell you that."

"He is kind of saintly," I agree.

"Well, it sounds like he hasn't been all that saintly to you." She leans her head on my shoulder. "I want you guys to be friends again."

I blow out a breath. I want to be on good terms with Noah again too, for both Joyce's sake and my own. Noah will always do the right thing, even if it's difficult for him, and if Joyce wants him to, he'll accept me as part of her life—but that doesn't mean he'll be happy about it, or that we'll ever get back to being real friends.

My plan is to be patient and treat Joyce as well as I can and hope that eventually her family comes to see that I'm sincere.

"Yeah, I hope so," I reply. "I mean, door's open as far as I'm concerned. Maybe he'll come round if we can get it through his thick head that I'm really into you."

I look at her as I say it. The words *I love you* hover on my lips, but I chicken out before I can say them. We've known each other for almost fifteen years, but whatever we have here, now, is still fresh and fragile. I don't have much experience in relationships, but instinct tells me not to rush it.

She smiles. “You know, I think I’d much rather talk about how into me you are than what a blockhead my brother is.”

I put the crossword puzzle down, ready to get to work on that bathrobe, but just then my phone rings. I glance at the caller ID and hand it to her. “Insurance company.”

Until we replace Joyce’s phone, she’s been giving out my number for people to contact her.

She takes the call, and rather than eavesdrop, I go to the kitchen to make coffee for me and tea for her. When I get back with the mugs, she’s just putting the phone down.

“Any news?”

“They were able to send someone around for a preliminary look.” She takes a breath. “Sounds like my apartment is toast.”

I put down the mugs and pull her in for a hug. “Sorry.”

“Yeah. At least I didn’t have much that was valuable. Anything I really cared about is still at Mom and Dad’s. The better news, though, is that they think the building is still structurally sound, and it didn’t look like the cafe was in terrible shape. The firefighters had to break one of the windows, and I guess there’s some smoke damage, but unless their main investigator guy finds something different, they’re optimistic that I could get the Flying Saucer up and running again fairly soon.”

“That’s fantastic!” I give her a kiss. “Any idea what started the fire?”

She shakes her head. “This was just a preliminary thing. I guess they have to send a real investigator out to get all the details, but between the weather and the holidays, they’re short-staffed. My guess is that it was something to do with the wiring. The lights were always flickering. The whole building needed some serious TLC.”

She reaches for her tea and blows on it. “My big worry is that the landlord will use this as an excuse to get rid of us once and for all. I’ll have to go back and read the lease agreement. There’s a clause in there about damage to the building and what it means for the lease.”

“Why would your landlord try to get rid of you, especially if you’re willing to rebuild the cafe?”

“The nutshell version is that the owners are trying to buy out the leases of all the tenants so they can renovate and make more money. According to Blaze’s brother, there’s a move afoot to replace the Flying Saucer with a Beans R Us. And if Beans R Us can get a foothold, I’m worried that other big chains could come in and replace local businesses, like the Mayor’s grocery store.”

My frown gets deeper. “Are you kidding me? Why didn’t you tell me about this? This is what friends who are lawyers are for.”

“We weren’t on speaking terms, remember?”

“For the record, I was always on speaking terms with you. Anyway, now we’re on better-than-speaking terms. Can you dig up a copy of your lease?”

“I guess it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have you look at it. Can I borrow your laptop?”

A few minutes later, Joyce has downloaded the lease for the cafe, and I’m looking it over. “There’s a pretty standard clause that says if the building becomes unusable, then the lease is void. But if the building is sound and the cafe isn’t seriously damaged, you might be okay.”

“With the old landlord, yes, I probably would have been,” she explains. “The issue is that a new company bought them out. By law, they’re supposed to honor the old leases, but my guess is that if they can use this to get rid of us, they will.”

Something cold prickles down my spine. “A new company?”

“Uh-huh.” She takes a sip of her tea. “Some retail property developer. They bought the building last September. Initially, they said to just keep paying rent as usual, but over the past few weeks, they started putting pressure on me and the other tenants to give up our leases.”

The cold prickle becomes a colder wave. Didn’t the firm pick up a new client that had just bought a retail building in

Welkins Ridge? It was around September...

I stare at the screen, pretending to be engrossed in legal fine print, but actually thinking through what has the potential to be a horribly complex situation.

At the time he announced the new client, I thought it was odd that George had put Phil, who has less real estate experience than I do, on that case, but it would make sense if the client had Joyce in its crosshairs. George knows I know the Babcocks. He wouldn't have wanted to have me representing a company that was working against a friend.

Joyce obviously doesn't know our firm is working with them, or she would have said something. How would she react if she found out?

For all intents and purposes, our relationship is barely a day old. How will she react if she finds out my firm is working for the company that's out to destroy her business?

Would that be the end of us?

I also have to consider the firm's point of view. As it is, they don't love it when associates have families and personal lives of their own. I can only imagine how they'd react if one of those associates was quite literally sleeping with the enemy and expecting a baby with her to boot.

It's not a good look. At best, it could delay my promotion to junior partner. At worst, it could get me sidelined into less and less interesting work until I finally get the message and quit on my own.

But I'm not 100% sure her new landlord is Brightside. As long as she doesn't say the name and no one at work tells me anything about it, I have plausible deniability.

Some, anyway.

I'm doubly grateful now that I didn't go out with Phil last night. Get a few drinks in him and that idiot will yak all night about his cases, especially if he thinks he has something to brag about.

I close the laptop. “Complicated situation. I’m afraid tenant law isn’t my specialty.”

“Oh.” She looks a bit taken aback at my sudden loss of interest. “Yeah. Well, no worries.”

“You know, I was thinking, once the roads are clear, we should go run some of those errands. You know, replace your phone, get you some proper winter clothes, all that stuff.”

“So practical! And here I was thinking all that could wait, and maybe we could enjoy being on vacation a bit longer.” She raises her eyebrows meaningfully.

“Are you talking about one of those vacations in bed?” I ask, Brightside already half-forgotten.

“You know, I got the strobe lights, and the earth definitely moved, but the choir was still a little faint...”

She doesn’t need to tell me twice. I push the laptop away and get to work on that robe.

JOYCE

Wouldn't you know it—the first call I get on my new phone is from Robert Landsman, the lawyer from Brightside's.

“Joyce,” he says in his smarmy voice, “on behalf of Brightside, let me say how very relieved we all are that you weren't hurt in that terrible fire.”

I bet you were. “Thanks, Robert. I'm looking forward to getting the Flying Saucer re-opened as soon as possible.”

As it happens, I'm sitting in my car across the street from 2432 Main. It's been a week now since the fire, and except for getting my car, I haven't set foot in Welkins Ridge.

I was afraid it would be too painful to see my building, but in fact, the sight of it makes me faintly optimistic. In my imagination, it was a charred and broken ruin. But while the entrance is crisscrossed with caution tape, and one of the front windows of the cafe has been replaced with a plywood board, it otherwise looks pretty much the same as it always did.

“Well, that's exactly what I'm calling about.” Landsman continues. “I'm sure you're aware that there's a clause in your lease—as in most leases—that if the premises become unusable due to fire, flood, acts of God, yadda, yadda, the lease is terminated. I'm *so* sorry about your business.”

“I guess the keyword here is unusable,” I reply.

“Joyce, it's clear that the building is unusable. Preliminary inspection by our insurance company shows that your

apartment was destroyed. Now, as a gesture of goodwill, we'd like to offer you a little cash gift, a severance package, if you will. Not as much as we discussed last time, you understand, but enough to show that we want to part as friends."

The smart thing to do would be to talk to a lawyer before I say anything else, but I don't want to disturb Hunter at work. In any case, he hasn't shown any interest in my lease predicament since I shared the whole issue with him. If it's not his thing, it's not his thing.

"That's interesting, Robert," I reply. "Because according to the preliminary report from *my* company, the building is structurally sound, and the damage to the first floor was relatively minor. I sort of worry that if I took your little cash gift, I might have to sign something saying that I'm giving up the lease, and I think I'd rather wait and get the full story from the fire investigator."

"Our insurance company is also preparing an official investigation," Landsman says smoothly. "Our offer is only good until then."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to wait and see, then, won't we?"

"Joyce, I strongly suggest you consider this. We're being quite generous under the circumstances."

It's his very generosity that makes me think his position isn't as strong as he wants me to think. "Yeah, well, I guess I'd prefer to let the professionals sort it out. I'm sure you'll be in touch one way or another."

I hang up on him and get out of the car. The sidewalk has been shoveled, but I still pick my way carefully, afraid of slipping on an icy patch. Fortunately, the library isn't far.

I walk up the steps and push my way into the old building, trying to get as much of the snow off my feet as possible before walking all the way in. Blaze keeps the library running on a shoestring budget, and she gets upset when people track mud and water over the ancient carpet that she can't afford to clean or replace.

Blaze waves at me from behind the reference desk. “They’re waiting.” She points behind her. “Come say hi when you’re done!”

I wave back and head to my meeting. Inside the cramped conference room, Melody, Cathleen, and Mark are seated around a small wooden table.

Melody jumps up as soon as she sees me and gives me a hug. “Oh, my gosh, Joyce! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

“Thanks. I’m really sorry about your yoga studio.” I turn to Mark and Cathleen. “And your offices. I hope you didn’t lose too much.”

“The important stuff was all backed up,” Mark replies. “No one’s allowed to go in yet, so I’m just waiting for my insurance people to figure out the extent of the damage.”

“Pretty much the same boat for all of us, I think,” Cathleen adds. Her face is drawn and she looks older than when I last saw her just a few weeks ago. “Could be better, could have been a lot worse. We’re very glad you got out safely.”

“Thanks, me too.” I sit down at the table with them. “So... I just got a call from Brightside’s lawyer.”

“Oh, that guy.” Mark’s voice drips with disdain. “I told him where he could shove his cash gift.”

“You thought that was suspicious too?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What cash gift?” Melody asks.

Mark takes the lead and explains that the buyout is still on the table, just greatly reduced.

Cathleen and Melody look at each other. Melody bites her lip.

“Spit it out.” Mark sounds impatient as always.

“It’s just...” Melody begins. “I’m losing money every day that I don’t have an open studio, and it could be months before I could re-open at 2432 Main, assuming that’s even a

possibility. By that time, my lease could be practically over anyway.”

“Mine would certainly be,” adds Cathleen. “I’m not sure if they’ll offer us a similar deal, but if they do, it might be hard to turn it down.”

“If they offered me something, chances are they’ll be calling you soon,” Mark points out. “But if they’re offering at all, it suggests that maybe the damage isn’t as extensive as we think.”

Melody turns to me. “Joyce, what do you think?”

“I think Landsman’s a snake,” I reply, still smoldering over the conversation I just had with him. “And I agree with Mark. I don’t think they’d be making the offer if there wasn’t a chance we could still use the building. I’m going to wait and see what the insurance investigation finds out. But I can’t tell you what to do. If taking whatever they offer makes sense for you, you should do it.”

“There’s an available space on Poplar Street that I could get now.” Melody looks apologetic. “It’s not as good a location, but it’s not bad. I just need to put down a deposit.”

“If they get a Beans R Us in 2432, this town will change, and not for the better,” Mark warns.

Melody’s gaze drops to the table.

“It’s not Melody’s responsibility to save the town from itself, and it’s not mine either!” snaps Cathleen. She rubs her temple. “I’m sorry. This whole thing has hit me pretty hard. My laptop was in the building, and I can’t buy a new one until I get some money from the insurance company, so basically, I can’t work, meaning I have no income at the moment.”

I wince. Mark and I talked Melody and Cathleen into turning down Brightside’s buyout, and now they have nothing.

“I understand,” I try to reassure her. “No one’s going to think less of either of you if you take anything Brightside offers.”

Mark's light snort suggests he might, but the rest of us ignore him.

There's a long silence.

"Maybe..." Melody begins. "Maybe we could just see how it goes. Any thoughts on when the insurance reports will be done?"

Cathleen looks weary. "Mine had some song and dance about the holidays and a bunch of claims related to the snowstorm... They made it sound like it could be a while." She shakes her head wearily. "Sorry, all of you. But if Brightside offers me anything at all, I'm taking it."

I don't want to pressure Melody, so I avoid eye contact.

"Yeah, I don't know..." she says, idly tracing the wood pattern of the tabletop. "It's a tough decision. I'm just going to leave it up to the universe and cross that bridge when I come to it."

Mark rolls his eyes, and I jump in quickly before he says anything. "I think that's a great idea."

"I gotta run." Mark stands up. "I assume we're done here?"

I push myself to my feet. "Thanks for taking the time to meet up, you guys. It was good to see you all."

"Nothing else to do," Cathleen mutters, but she manages a smile and a small wave before she walks out the door.

"I'll be in touch if I hear anything useful," Mark says as he brushes past me.

Melody brightens up as we walk out together. "Oh, I heard from the grapevine that you're pregnant! Congratulations!"

"Thanks," I smile back. "Due in early May."

"As soon as I get the studio up and running again, you'll have to come in for some prenatal yoga." Her pretty blue eyes grow serious. "Assuming I can get it running again before your baby is born."

“I’d like that,” I reply. “I’m sure you’ll get the studio going soon, one way or another.”

She gives me another hug before she waves goodbye.

I walk over to the reference desk.

“Nice timing!” Blaze stands up. “I’m dying for a break. Want to join me in the back for a cup of coffee?”

I look around the library. Gigi, one of Blaze’s senior volunteers, is sitting behind the check-out desk reading a celebrity gossip magazine. As far as I can tell, there’s no one else in the building.

“I can see how overworked you are.”

“I’m dying for a break because I’m bored, okay? Between the holidays and the snowstorm, we’ve barely had five patrons come in this week. Come on. I’ll take you to the secret inner sanctum, a.k.a. the break room. You can handle things out here, right, Gigi?”

Gigi surveys the empty library over her bifocals. “I’ll do my best,” she says drily.

I follow Blaze past the checkout desk down a short hallway and into a tiny room about the size of my office at the cafe. There’s a wooden table for two, a miniature refrigerator, and a drip coffee maker.

Blaze sighs and pours me a cup of coffee. “I can’t even tell you how much I miss the Flying Saucer. The coffee here is terrible. And I have no one to blame but myself because I ordered it.” She hands me a cup.

“Thanks?”

“Oh, I don’t expect you to drink it. I’m just being hospitable.” She sits down across the table from me. “So. You and Hunter Baldwin. Living the dream. Tell me *everything*.”

I pick up the mug. It’s warm in my hands and it smells like coffee, so those are points in its favor. “Me and Hunter. It’s ...” My voice trails off.

“That good or that bad?”

“It’s amazing,” I admit. “Hunter’s been incredible. He’s thoughtful and sweet and funny...”

Blaze narrows her eyes at me. “It sounds like there’s a *but* coming.”

I put the mug down and lean forward. “I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Blaze scrunches up her face. “Don’t tell me complaining because things are too good?”

“No, I’m not complaining, I just—” I try to marshal my muddled thoughts. “I mean, I know he *likes* me. But I can’t help wondering if he’s convinced himself he has deeper feelings for me just because of the fire.”

Blaze tilts her head, confused.

“Because he thinks I could have died, and now he’s sort of romanticized all that drama. But what if wears off? What if he wakes up one day and realizes I’m not dead and remembers that I’m his best friend’s skinny little sister with the weird tattoos and wonders what the hell I’m doing in his condo?”

“It’s an excellent bet he already realizes you’re not dead.” Blaze takes a sip of her coffee.

“Do you know what I mean, though?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she concedes with a sigh. “You’re doing that borrowing trouble thing your mother’s always warning you not to do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, Hunter likes you. A lot. Why can’t you just take that at face value?”

I stare into my undrunk coffee. “Well, I mean, I know he *likes* me—”

“Fine, he *loves* you, okay? Even if he hasn’t said it. I know it, Lucky knows it, Bailey knows it. Don’t you remember how he’d always find an excuse to swing by the Flying Saucer even though it’s half an hour out of the way from anywhere he’d usually be? And how he was always picking fights with you

just to get your attention? Here, I'll prove it." Blaze pulls out her phone.

"You're not calling him, are you?" I sit up, alarmed.

"No, I'm Facetiming Bailey and Lucky. Hang on a sec."

Lucky picks up immediately. "Hello, hello!"

I catch a glimpse of blue sky and a palm tree behind her. "Where are you?"

"City of Angels, baby! Gonna make my man a star. What are you ladies up to?"

The screen splits as Bailey comes on. "Hi. Oh, wow, it's everyone!"

"I'll make this quick," says Blaze. "Is Hunter in love with Joyce?"

"Are we finally figuring this out?" asks Lucky.

"Oh, he's crazy about her," Bailey adds.

"You guys don't even know about the kitty litter," says Blaze. "After the fire, Hunter spent half the night shopping for cat food and kitty litter for Wombat and clothes for Joyce because she'd lost everything."

"Aww!" Lucky and Bailey chime in harmony.

"I always knew he was sweet on you," Lucky adds.

"Totally," Bailey agrees.

"Seriously?" I can't quite get my head around this. As long as I've known him, I assumed I was squarely in "Noah's pesky little sister" territory as far as Hunter was concerned. "You really think so?"

"Don't overthink this," Lucky orders. "Hunter's got the hots for you, and he's expressing it through kitty litter. Hey, I gotta run, but I'll be back in town in a few days. What say we have a girls' night out next Friday?"

"That sounds great," I reply, and Blaze and Bailey agree.

Is it possible that all this time, I've been missing signals from Hunter? By the time I say goodbye to Blaze and leave

the library, I've forgotten my aggravation about Brightside.
Instead, I'm encouraged about Hunter.

Maybe we have a future together after all.

HUNTER

Friday morning, Joyce walks into the kitchen, still looking sleepy. Adorably, she's wearing the dress shirt I discarded last night before we got into bed, and, as far as I can tell, nothing else.

“Any chance you can get off early tonight?” she asks, through a yawn. “Maybe you could join me and the girls at the Cantina?”

Now that the holidays are over, work is back in overdrive, and I've been coming home later and later.

I put a pod of decaf into the coffee maker for Joyce and click the button. “Gotta bring home the bacon,” I point out. “Besides, what kind of girls' night out would it be if I showed up?”

She wraps her arms around my waist and leans her head on my chest. “I hate that you're working so hard. Especially since I'm not doing anything.”

“You're growing a human. That's got to take some effort.”

“You know what I mean. I'm having lunch with my mom today, but mostly I'm just sitting around waiting. It sucks being in limbo like this. Maybe I should start looking for a real job.”

With a fleeting sense of guilt, I wonder, again, if I should tell her that the firm is representing the building owners and decide against it.

Not my case, not my clients. I'll tell her eventually, but things are going so well right now, I don't see any point in rocking the boat. She's been here a couple of weeks now and things are great between us. Instead of feeling restless and edgy the way I usually do after a few dates with the same girl, I'm more content and comfortable than I've ever been in my life—even with the two of us living together.

I know Joyce is bored being home all day, but I try to make it up to her at night, and one way or another, she'll have a job again soon.

“Don't give up yet. The insurance people will get their act together sooner or later,” I tell her.

“I'm not so sure,” she grumbles. “I call them practically every day. I guess they finally got someone out to look the building over officially, but he hasn't filed his report yet or maybe he has and it's just taking a while to process... I don't know. Meanwhile, that snake, Landsman, keeps calling to try and bribe me into giving up—”

“Here's your coffee.” I put her cup down in front of her and pretend I didn't hear her last sentence. I've been working hard to avoid any discussion about her landlord, and I'm kicking myself for bringing up her situation with the insurance company. “Have a seat. I'll get the cream and sugar.”

She sits down on one of the counter stools, but her expression is borderline suspicious. Or maybe just annoyed. She's got to think it's weird that I'm willing to talk about anything except the most important thing that's going on in her life at the moment.

“I'm really sorry, but I have to run,” I tell her. “Early meeting with a client. I'll see you later tonight.”

Her expression softens. “Don't work too hard.”

“No promises. Have fun with your mom.”

I drop a kiss on the top of her head and head out.



I CHECK QUICKLY to make sure no one is around as I walk up to April's desk. "Hey, April, the firm has a life insurance policy benefit, right?"

I know it does, but I never signed up, because why? I've never had anyone who depended on me. But if something happens to me, I want Joyce to have a decent cushion to look after herself and the baby.

April raises her eyebrows. "Yes. If you want to sign up, open enrollment ends and the end of January. Which you'd know if you ever read the emails I send out," she adds.

"I'll check my inbox," I promise.

"You can sign up anytime if you have a qualifying event, like... getting married?" She tilts her head questioningly.

"Not getting married, April," I say firmly. *Yet.*

She narrows her eyes and taps her fingers on her desk as if trying to solve a puzzle in her head. "You're ... making sure your parents will be cared for in their old age if something happens to you?"

I snort. Like my dad would ever get a penny out of me. "Why do I have a feeling that these are not HR-approved questions?"

She snaps her fingers. "I got it! You got careless, knocked some chick up, and now you want to make good!"

Shit.

I'd actually been planning to tell April about Joyce and the baby sometime when we were safely away from the office, but now I realize I need to be more careful. I don't think April would deliberately rat me out, but carelessness could cost me.

"Ha ha," I reply. "Just trying to be a grown-up, April."

April grins. "Birth, adoption, and marriage are considered life events, meaning you could sign up when they happen, not just during open enrollment."

"Good to know."

“All right, Baldwin, some of us have work to do. Go find the email, then get your paperwork in by the end of the month. Let’s catch up over lunch soon.”

“Lunch” is our code for *We’ll talk about it outside the office.*

“Got it. Thanks, April. And yes, lunch soon.”

“And don’t be a slacker, or you’ll have to come clean about that life event!” she calls after me as I head down the hallway to my office.

I cringe, hoping no one else heard.

I stop by the break room for a cup of coffee on my way to my office only to find Phil already there. I’ve been trying to steer clear of him since I realized that he’s almost certainly working for Joyce’s landlord, but I can’t simply walk out of the room without being rude.

I reach for a mug. “Hey, Phil. How’s it going?”

“Could not be better, my man,” he crows. “Remember that property development case George put me on? Had some drama over the holidays with one of their buildings, but it’s going to work in our favor. Easy case, and if it goes well, it’s gonna mean a lot more business for the firm. I see your’s truly getting a nice career boost out of this.”

Shit. My barely plausible deniability takes another hit. I’m tempted to stay and grill him on his plan, but I think the wiser course is to steer clear.

“Hey, I just remembered a call I need to be on—” I turn around and almost run smack into George who is standing just outside the kitchen.

“Morning, George.”

“Hunter, could I have a word with you for just a moment?”

“Sure.” A lead weight in my stomach, I follow him a few steps down the hall.

“I was passing the break room, and I couldn’t help overhearing you and Phil talking,” he begins.

“We were barely—”

He holds up a hand. “I know you have more real estate experience than Phil, and under other circumstances, I’d have put you on the case, no question. But the fact is that one of the tenants involved is Trevor Babcock’s daughter. I know you’re close to the family, and having you on the case would be a conflict of interest.”

And there go the last sheds of my plausible deniability.

“Oh, I see.”

“So don’t take it personally,” George continues. “I probably should have explained earlier.”

“Of course. I understand.” I hesitate. “I guess it’s not really my business, but Joyce has worked hard to set that business up, and it’s very much part of the community. Do you think there’s any chance of mediating the situation so she can keep the storefront?”

George fixes me with a keen look. “How close are you to Joyce?”

Now doesn’t seem like the time to tell my boss that she’s moved in and is expecting my baby.

I’m not proud of what I say next, but I have a bad feeling that I can’t afford to screw this up. The firm doesn’t love associates with family commitments, and I’m willing to bet they really don’t love associates who have family commitments with people that major clients are in legal disputes with.

“Her brother’s one of my best friends,” I tell him. “I guess she’s kind of like a kid sister to me.”

George’s forehead wrinkles with concern. “Must have been quite a shock. I understand she lost her residence as well as her business in the fire.”

“Yes... Noah says it’s been hard on her.”

I figure that’s only sort of a lie. Noah’s not talking to me, but he’s probably said as much to someone.

“Well, the important thing is that no one was hurt,” George continues. “Businesses and apartments can be replaced. People can’t.”

I repress a shudder at the thought of Joyce alone in the smoke-filled apartment, looking for that idiot cat. “For sure. Her family is very relieved it wasn’t worse.”

George pats me on the arm. “It’s admirable that you want to take care of your friends.” He sighs. “Cases like this can be difficult, but you have to remember that it’s not personal. You’ll understand that I can’t discuss the case with you. I’ll remind Phil he shouldn’t be putting you in any awkward situations, either.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

My mind is racing. Brightside is a big company with deep pockets. Dade, Bristol & McLaren is the best law firm in the area. Even with insurance money for the fire and with her family’s resources behind her, I very much doubt that Joyce has much chance of holding onto the property.

“I believe you’re up for a promotion to junior partner in the spring?” George continues, his genial expression belying the fact that he’s masterminding the destruction of my girlfriend’s livelihood.

“That’s right, sir.”

“Well, keep up the good work, and I’m sure you won’t have a problem. But remember,” George fixes me with a stare over the top of his glasses, “you have a duty of confidentiality to the firm. You can rely on us to treat your friend fairly, but we’re relying on you to put the firm’s interests first. Hard work and loyalty are Dade, Bristol & McLaren’s key values.”

George’s expression is kind and fatherly, but the implication is clear. Firm first, Joyce second, or I can kiss my promotion, and maybe even my job, goodbye.

I manage a smile. “Of course, George. I’m sure Joyce will be fine, whatever happens.”

George walks away down the hall, leaving me to wonder, for the first time, if the price of my promotion might be a little

too high.

JOYCE

Mom gives me a big hug when I walk into Bambi's, the bistro that Bailey's boyfriend Nikko has carved out above her art gallery. He opened it shortly before Christmas, and it's already getting rave reviews.

It's on the second floor of the Pearson House, the old Victorian that Bailey bought last fall. She hired the construction side of Noah's company to renovate it, and they did an amazing job. Noah kept most of the period details, like the wall sconces and fireplaces, while knocking down a few walls and enlarging the window that overlooks the street to give it a more spacious, modern look.

Mom likes it, partly for the snob value of eating at a restaurant created by a Michelin-starred chef, partly because Noah was responsible for the renovation, and partly because the food really is amazing.

Mom steps back to look at me. "How are you feeling? I think you're starting to show!"

I put a hand on my belly. The truth is, I'm filling out all over. My breasts and hips seem to be expanding at the same rate as my tummy. I definitely look rounder. "I can't tell if I look pregnant or just fat."

"You look beautiful," she says loyally as we take our seats. "Are you feeling any kicks yet?"

I smile. "Some flutters."

Mom grills me about the pregnancy until we place our orders, and then she asks about the cafe.

It's only about a block and a half down the street and I had to drive past it on my way here. Nothing seems to have changed since I last saw it.

I sigh. "It's a complicated situation. I had two different insurance policies with one company, the landlord had its own insurance policy for the building with a different company, so I'm trying to negotiate for A, the right to rebuild the cafe, and B, the money to do it. Meanwhile, Brightside is still looking for ways to get rid of me altogether. They're offering me money to walk away, but that makes me think the building might still be usable. Their general counsel is a total jerk," I add.

"That's probably why they hired him," Mom says knowingly.

"Yeah. I called Warren this morning to ask if he'd represent me, so now it'll all get funneled through him." I wave my hand dismissively. "He can deal with Landsman."

There's a question in the way Mom raises her eyebrows. "Warren's a good lawyer, but I'm surprised Hunter isn't taking care of it."

She and Dad know I'm staying with Hunter, though whether they think we're romantically involved or just roommates, I can't say. Either way, they haven't objected, but they haven't exactly expressed wild enthusiasm either.

"Hunter's very busy," I say quickly. "He works insane hours as it is. I can't ask him to take this on too."

I don't add that Hunter, although sympathetic, is surprisingly uninterested. Every time I bring up the cafe or anything to do with it, he manages to change the subject or finds an excuse to leave the room—or even the house, like he did this morning.

"Well, I do hope it all works out," she says. "But if it all proves to be too much, especially with the baby on the way, I

just want you to know that there's always a place for you at Babcock Construction.”

I feel a twinge of guilt. I worked for Babcock Construction during summers in college, and I know I don't want to go to work there full-time. But I also know that I have a safety net that Melody, Cathleen, and Mark don't. Maybe I should have encouraged them to take whatever Landsman offers.

But I don't want to get into all that with Mom. She's only trying to be helpful.

“Shouldn't that be Noah's call?” I tease her.

Mom and Dad have officially stepped back from the business since Dad's health got the better of him, Dad because it was time to slow down, and Mom because she wanted to support Dad and make way for Noah.

Mom has way too much energy to retire, though. She's still involved behind the scenes of the company, and she's thrown herself into a number of charitable causes to keep herself busy.

“I'm on the board of the company. I can probably pull some strings,” she says with a smile. “Besides,” she pats my hand, “Noah would do anything for his little sister.”

It's true. I have no doubt Noah would find a job on his staff for me if I wanted it. He would do anything for anyone in his family. But when I've hinted that he reach out to Hunter, he's been frosty.

“Thanks, Mom. I appreciate it, but I really love the Flying Saucer, and I love that it's my own thing.”

It was Mom and Dad's dearest wish to pass their business on to both me and Noah, but Noah was always the better fit. Charismatic and popular, he fits in with the country club set and enjoys making deals.

Me, I enjoy making coffee. I like that I've created a space for people to hang out and socialize and feel like they're part of a community. I like getting to know my regulars and meeting the tourists in the summer. And I want to succeed on my own terms, not because my family gave me a job.

Mom sighs in resignation before putting on her business face. “All right. Do you have enough money?”

“Yes, my insurance company is replacing my income until we sort everything out. Hunter won’t let me pay for anything anyway,” I add, hoping to score a point on his behalf.

But Mom just frowns. “Well, don’t become too dependent on him.”

It seems like my family is determined to see the worst in Hunter no matter what he does. “Mom, it’s fine. I have money. I’m not dependent on him, okay?” I reach for a sip of water.

“Have you heard from Brandon?” Mom drops the question in a little too casually.

I put my glass down harder than necessary. “No, I have not heard from Brandon. Why would I? We broke up, Mom, remember?”

“Shh, shh.” Her voice is reproofing. “I was just wondering. You did date for four years, you have friends in common. It’s not impossible he would have heard about the cafe and reached out.”

“Well, he hasn’t.”

“I see.” Mom changes the subject. “Well, it’s been very sweet of Hunter to put you up. I completely understand that you wouldn’t want to be on your own at a time like this, but now that we’re back and the weather is clearing up, why don’t you plan on moving home?”

I kind of saw this coming and repress a sigh. “Mom, I’m not moving home. I’m going to stay with Hunter.”

“Well, it’s your life, of course... but is that really fair to Hunter? I mean, he didn’t ask for any of this, and he never really struck me as the family type. You know, with everything that happened with his own father.”

The waiter comes by to see if we need anything, which gives me a moment to appreciate my mother’s cleverness in making Hunter seem like the victim here.

Once the waiter is out of earshot, I lean closer to her. “His dad was a jerk who abandoned him when he was a teenager. Despite that, he got through college and got into law school and now he has a really good job. I don’t understand what you and Dad have against him.”

Mom’s eyes fill with hurt. “We don’t have anything against Hunter, Joyce. We love him. We’ve always welcomed him into our home. He’s like our other son.”

“But his father is in prison and he grew up poor, so you don’t think he’s good enough for me,” I fill in for her.

Mom’s expression grows incrementally harder. “Joyce, you’re my daughter. I don’t think *anyone* will ever be quite good enough for you. I love Hunter. So does your father. But he had a terrible start in life. And if his reputation with women is anything to go by, commitment isn’t his strong suit. I’m not blaming him. It’s no wonder he has trouble trusting people, but that doesn’t bode well for a long-term relationship with him.”

“Well, that’s for me to worry about,” I tell her firmly. Hunter and I...” I hesitate a moment, not sure exactly how to explain our relationship. “We’re not just friends. We’re together now.”

“Oh.” Mom smiles in a way that reminds me of Katie. “I see.”

“You and Dad mean the world to him, you know,” I continue. “It would mean a lot to both of us if you could be a bit welcoming.”

Mom sniffs. “I’ll try, sweetheart, for you and the baby. And Hunter.” She leans forward slightly. “You’ve been under an awful lot of pressure lately, though, what with the breakup and the baby and losing everything in a fire. I’m worried that you might not be making the best decisions right now. I just thought Brandon was a better fit for you, that’s all.”

I bite my tongue for a moment before speaking so I won’t say anything I regret. “Brandon wasn’t the right guy for me, Mom,” I explain. “He’s a decent person, but he didn’t break my heart because, at the end of the day, I wasn’t truly in love

with him. I liked him a lot, and I liked that you and Dad approved of him, but ultimately, he wasn't the one."

Mom dabs at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "And Hunter is?"

I hesitate. I want to say *yes* with all my heart but the fact is that I'm not a hundred percent sure myself.

He's been thoughtful and charming, and the sex is amazing. But on the other hand, I hardly see him during the week, and he's utterly indifferent to the central drama of my life, the fate of the Flying Saucer. We've never said "I love you," and never talked about whether we'll continue living together after the baby is born.

Despite assurances from Blaze, Lucky, and Bailey, I've been shy about pressing him for a label to put on our relationship. I sort of assume we're exclusive since we're living together, but honestly, I'm not even 100% sure about that.

He's clearly excited about the baby, in a completely unexpected and deeply touching way—but is the Bad Boy of Welkins Ridge High School equally excited about *me*?

"I don't know yet," I tell her, honestly. "He's happy about the baby, and he's been incredibly kind and supportive, and we're just going to take it one day at a time and see where things go."

"While living together." Mom doesn't bother to hide her skepticism.

"Yes, while living together." I poke at a bit of pasta with my fork. "Can you please just be happy for me?"

"Of course."

Mom and I pick at our meals for a few minutes in silence. Time to change the subject.

"What have you been up to lately?" I ask. "You said you were doing some fundraising thing?"

It's a smart move. Mom loves to talk about the charities she's gotten involved in since she and Dad retired. Again, I'm

reminded of Hunter and the way they boast about him, but I push the cynical thoughts out of my head and listen to Mom. She actually does do a lot of good in the community—why shouldn't she get a little credit for it?

Mom dives into a description of the gala she's planning for early February to raise money for the Welkins Ridge food bank. She's heading up the committee, selling tickets, getting donations for a raffle...

"Since you're not working, why don't you help me?" she interrupts herself to ask. "We could use someone on the committee who's good at social media." She gives me a meaningful look. "It's a good cause."

I recognize this as a not-so-subtle attempt to draw me back into my parents' country-club world, but she's right. Hunter works twelve-hour days more often than not, and I'm getting bored staying home alone. It would be nice to have something meaningful to do with my time.

By the end of lunch, I'm officially committed to handling the social media for the gala, and I've promised to attend the next committee meeting.

We walk through the art gallery on the way out of the building, stopping to chat with Bailey for a few minutes, then step outside into the cold, squinting into the bright sunshine that reflects off the fresh snow.

I hug Mom goodbye then walk up the street to 2432 Main and take a moment to look at the building.

I'm going to get you back, I tell the building silently. To be honest, I'd feel better if Hunter were representing me. He's a good lawyer, and he knows how important this is to me.

But I guess Warren will have to do.

JOYCE

Hunter is pulling a pan of leftover lasagna out of the oven when I get home from my night out with Bailey, Blaze, and Lucky. He's taken off his blazer, but he's still wearing his shirt and tie.

To think I used to turn my nose up at men who wore suits to work. Even with oven mitts on, Hunter is positively scrumptious in his expensive shirts and conservative ties.

I give him a kiss. "Are you just getting home now?"

He smiles but his face is drawn. "No rest for the wicked, right? You want some?" He nods at the lasagna.

I shake my head. I had a deliciously greasy burger at the Cantina. "I'm good, thanks, but I'll sit with you."

"How was lunch with your mom?" he asks, digging a piece of lasagna out of the pan with a spatula.

I hang up my coat and sit down at the table. "She thinks since I'm not working, I should help her with this fundraising gala she's doing for the food bank," I tell him. "So now I'm on a committee with a bunch of middle-aged Ladies Who Lunch."

Hunter brings his plate to the table and sits down across from me. "Cool. Tell your mom I'll buy tickets for us."

"You don't have to suck up to my mom."

"I'm only sucking up a bit. Besides, the food bank helped me out a bunch of times when I was in high school. It's a good

cause.”

It gives me a pang to be reminded of how little he had back then. “I’m so sorry you went through what you did when you were a kid. But I love how generous you are.”

“Don’t give me too much credit,” he tells me. “I might see if I can get the firm to pay. Galas like that are good places to network, and they’re a write-off for the firm. Sign us up for a couple of tickets either way. How was your night out with the girls?” he asks, taking a big bite of his dinner.

“We had fun,” I tell him. “It was nice to get out and see everyone.”

And it was. I used to spend my days constantly interacting with people at the cafe, and by the time I got home, I was happy to hang out with just Wombat. Since the fire, though, I haven’t spent much time with anyone other than Hunter, and he’s not even around that much. It was good to get out of the house and spend some time with people.

I admire Hunter’s dedication to his job, but I also worry, both about him and about our relationship.

Hunter eats while I fill him on my evening with the girls. Eventually, I get up the nerve to ask what I’ve been wanting to know for a while now.

“So, we were talking, and Bailey asked if you got any kind of paternity leave. You know, for after the baby is born?”

Hunter gives me an odd, almost furtive look. “Yeah... I looked it up. Technically, we get four weeks paid leave.” He takes another bite.

I don’t like the sound of *technically*. “So, have you talked to anyone about taking that leave?”

There’s a pause, while he eats another bite of lasagna. I feel guilty for interrupting his dinner with serious conversation. It’s late, and he’s probably starving.

He swallows and looks up. “Honestly, I don’t know if taking leave is such a hot idea. I’ll be eligible for promotion to junior partner right around the time the baby’s born. Taking

leave might make it look like I'm not that serious about the job."

I'm tempted to point out that *not* taking leave might make it look like he's not that serious about the baby, but I bite my tongue. He's working his ass off, and I'm determined not to give him a hard time about it.

"Okay... Well, what about arranging to take it sometime after you get your promotion? Maybe I could be home with the baby for a couple of months, then you could look after it while I focus on getting the cafe up and running again?" *Or at least figuring out my next steps*, I don't add.

He swallows another bite. "Maybe, but I don't know about a whole month. Even the senior partners don't take that much time off. Tom's wife had twins last year, and he was out of the office for maybe a week."

"I hope he's making enough money to pay for a nanny," I grumble, forgetting my resolution not to complain. "What's the point of working so hard if you never get to live your life?"

His jaw tightens. "I don't want my kid to have to rely on a football scholarship if they want to get an education."

The conversation is starting to get tense so I try to lighten it up. "I thought we were having a girl?" I tease.

He doesn't smile back. "You know what I mean."

"I'm sorry, Hunter. I know you're working hard for the baby, and I think you're wonderful for it."

He reaches up and puts one hand over mine. "Joyce..."

Something about his tone of voice, the way he's barely meeting my eyes, sets off alarm bells deep in my soul. "What's the matter?"

He pauses for a long moment, clearly thinking something over. Finally, he speaks.

"This is going to sound really shitty, and I'm sorry, but I need to not let the firm know I'm in a relationship right now, let alone having a baby."

I feel like he's just splashed ice-cold water in my face. I thought he was excited about the baby. I thought he was excited about *me*.

“Why?”

“It's hard to explain, but the firm doesn't love it when associates have family obligations. They like to know we're one hundred percent focused on the firm.”

“That's ridiculous. All the partners there have families. George and Nancy have three kids—”

“I'm talking about the associates. The grunts, like me. At my level, our lives are supposed to revolve around the firm. And I mean, they kind of have to. You've seen what kind of hours I'm working.”

“Are you saying they'd fire you if they found out you had a—” I stop myself before I say the word *girlfriend* because even now I'm not one hundred percent sure that's what I am. “If you had a baby on the way? I mean, is that even legal?”

“It's not a rule, just kind of a code of conduct. Part of the culture. They wouldn't fire me, or if they did, they certainly wouldn't give that as a reason. But it could slow things down. Fewer opportunities, getting sidelined, that kind of thing. I've already seen it happen to a couple of other lawyers who weren't willing to play by the firm's rules. They just got more and more irrelevant until they got the message and resigned.”

“That's not fair!” I object. “They shouldn't be allowed to treat people like that just because they have families! Or any kind of life!”

“It's not fair, but it's the way it is. Once I've got the promotion, some of the pressure will be off, but right now, I want to dig in and make myself as valuable as possible.”

The good mood I was in when I got home has drained away. I'm pissed at the law firm on Hunter's behalf, but I also feel like the ground has dropped out beneath me.

I don't like the idea of being kept secret. Would Hunter go along with this idiocy if he was as crazy about me as I am about him?

I press my lips together and stare at the table.

He slides a hand across the table and puts it on my wrist. “Joyce, I can’t risk this job, not yet. You didn’t grow up like I did. You don’t understand what it’s like to be really, truly poor.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I have privilege coming out my ears, I get that, and I’m grateful.” I raise my gaze to his. “But you’re not in this alone, Hunter. I’ll get the cafe up and running again, or if I don’t, I’ll do something else. I’ll go back to work for my family if I have to. And even if you lost your job and I never worked again, it’s not like my parents would let their own grandchild starve. There’s a safety net here. It’s not all on you.”

His mouth twists. “And if I use that safety net, it’s going to prove to your family that I’m as irresponsible as they think I am.”

“Nobody is saying that!”

Between Hunter and my family, I’m not sure who is driving me crazier. Noah and my parents seem determined to see the worst in everything Hunter does, while Hunter is so desperate to prove himself that I’m afraid he’ll miss the forest for the trees.

“Anyway,” I continue. “Is this really what you want for the long term? My parents were incredibly successful, but they were still home for dinner every night. We took vacations together and did things on the weekend. All the money in the world wouldn’t make up for not having my dad around.”

“Yeah, well, trust me.” He scoffs. “Having a dad around isn’t always a blessing.”

“Is that what this is really about?” I take his hand in mine. “Are you worried about being poor, or about being a bad father? Because if what I’ve seen so far is any indication, I don’t think you’re capable of being a bad father. And as long as you’re around, I know that you’re not going to let either me or the baby down. There has to be some kind of happy medium, is all I’m saying.”

“I don’t think the law offices of Dade, Bristol & McLaren know much about happy mediums.” He shoots a crooked smile at me. “Is *this* our first fight?”

“That was not our first fight.” I smile back, though it does feel like a more serious disagreement than our usual bickering.

He gives a deep sigh. “Look, once I get the promotion, my hours should get more regular, and my job will be more secure.” His voice is reassuring. “Let’s just keep this on the down-low until then, and I can see about taking some time off after the baby’s born. Okay?”

I nod. It’s all I can ask for, really.

He pushes his now-empty plate to the side, leans over the table, and kisses me. Already I’m forgetting what we were talking about.

“Hey,” he whispers in my ear, “since we’ve had our first fight, how about our first make-up sex?”

“Not our first fight.” I can’t repress a smile. “But I’ll take you up on the sex.”

HUNTER

Turns out you can buy a really nice stroller for the price of two tickets to Mrs. Babcock's gala, so when I catch April in the breakroom a couple of days later, I ask her if the firm will spring for the tickets.

"I'll have to run it by George, but there's money in the budget." April settles down at the table and pulls a sandwich out of her lunch bag. "Should be okay."

"Tell him Helen Babcock is organizing it," I add. Maybe the McLarens' long friendship with the Babcocks will be a mark in my favor, Brightside notwithstanding.

In fact, George may already know about the gala, though from what I understand from Joyce, this isn't one of the big, swanky black-tie shindigs that the senior partners like to attend. It's formal but relatively small. Odds are slim that anyone else from the office will be there.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and turn back to see April's eyes narrow thoughtfully. "You're not generally the type to go to these things unless a senior partner drags you by the ear," she observes.

I can hear the question in her voice and decide not to answer it directly. "Trying to impress a girl," I confide in a tone that leaves my intentions open to interpretation.

"Figures," she snorts and takes a bite of her sandwich.

Phil walks in and thumps me on the back, sloshing my coffee onto the counter. I barely avoid splashing it all over my

newly dry-cleaned shirt.

“Hunter, my man!” he crows.

“The hell, Phil,” I grumble, reaching for a paper towel. “Watch what you’re doing.”

Phil opens the fridge and pulls out a soda. “Haven’t seen much of you lately.”

“Busy.”

I’ve been trying to avoid both Phil and George. Fortunately, I’ve had so much work to do that it hasn’t been difficult. I kind of wonder if George hasn’t overloaded me in an effort to keep me from poking my nose into other cases.

I wipe up the coffee and turn to leave, but Phil is in the way.

“What’s happened to you, man?” he asks. “You don’t even return my texts anymore. We went to that new bar in the south end last weekend. The women—oh, my God! You don’t know what you’re missing out on, Hunter. We all scored, and these chicks were *hot*.”

“Dude,” I cock my head meaningfully in April’s direction, “not appropriate for the office.”

He snorts. “April doesn’t mind, do you, April?”

“Leave me alone, I’m eating,” April replies through a mouthful of egg salad.

Phil grins at me. “See? April’s one of the guys. She doesn’t care. You should come out with us sometime. You know, bond with your workmates and all that shit.”

“Maybe in a few weeks when I come up for air,” I tell him.

I have zero interest in yet another night of drunken debauchery with my colleagues, but I figure I need to keep playing the game a little longer, at least until I make junior partner. Then maybe some of the pressure will be off.

Phil shakes his head in mock sadness. “It’d be good to hang out with you, maybe get your advice on that property

client. Not that we need it—it's falling in to our laps even as we speak.”

Phil's trying to get my goat, but I don't care that he got the case and not me. I'm more trying to figure out whether to remind him he's not supposed to talk to me about it or encourage him to keep talking so I can glean more information.

Phil makes the call for me. “Oops, sorry,” he adds with the air of someone who is not sorry at all. “Not allowed to discuss with the common folk.”

He shrugs with fake regret and mimes locking his lips and tossing away the key. You can get away with dorky gestures when you're a hotshot like him. Having lorded his status over me, he leaves without another glance at April.

April rolls her eyes as I slide into the seat across from her.

“Sorry about that,” I say in a low voice.

“Why? You weren't the one being a douche.”

“I know, I just didn't like seeing him put you in an awkward position.”

April snorts. “Trust me, I've dealt with a lot worse. But thanks for trying to defend my honor. You're a prince compared to most of these other bozos.”

From her tone, I suspect that's less of a compliment to me and more of an insult to the other guys here.

I glance at the hallway briefly to be sure no one's coming and lower my voice. “Hey, what do you know about that case Phil was just talking about?”

“Brightside?”

I nod.

April pops open a can of diet soda and takes a sip before answering. “Not a lot,” she says quietly. “They've got some tenants they're trying to cut loose, and George is working with their general counsel to stay within state law. I overheard Phil

say something about a nuclear option if the tenants don't cave, but that's about all I know."

"Nuclear option?"

She shrugs. "Just Phil being Phil. I doubt very much actual nukes are involved."

I ponder this. *Nuclear option* sounds bad, but April's right—it also sounds like typical Phil posturing.

"Why?" April takes another bite of her sandwich.

"Call it professional curiosity," I say casually.

She swallows. "Or call it the fact that you're family friends with one of Brightside's tenants?"

"You know about that?"

Because of course, she does. April knows almost everything that goes on around here.

April leans closer over the table. "Yeah, and I think it was a shitty move on George's part," she whispers. "I've scheduled dozens of golf games and dinners for him and the Babcocks. They've been friends for years, and he should have stepped back from this one." Her mouth twists in distaste. "But that would have meant letting one of the other partners have it."

I lower my voice even more. "April, if you hear anything of interest about that case, anything you can share without getting in trouble...?"

We're both whispering so quietly now I can barely hear myself.

April raises her eyebrows. "Taking this personally?"

I hesitate, wondering if I should tell her about Joyce. "You could say that."

April puts her sandwich down and fixes me with a stare. "You know, you've been kind of a reformed character lately, not going out with the team supporting good causes. Anything *you* want to share?"

I hesitate. I want to tell her about Joyce, and I will, but now isn't the time or place. "I told you, I'm trying to impress a girl."

One corner of April's mouth lifts in a crooked smile. "Why do I feel like there's more to this story?"

I shrug. "Can I help it if you have an active imagination? We'll do lunch soon."

She gets the hint that I don't want to talk about it here. "Fine, but I'm not risking my job over you," she warns.

I grin. "Thanks, April." I glance at the kitchen clock. "Duty calls. I've got to get back to my desk."

"Get out of here and let me eat my sandwich in peace," she grumbles.



"SO GOOD TO SEE YOU GUYS!" Bailey gives each of us a big hug as we step into her gallery.

It's a Saturday afternoon and after running some errands, we decided to swing by Bailey's art gallery to say hi. Joyce is also in the market for a birthday present for her mother.

"Place looks great, Bay," I tell her. It's the first time I've been in since she opened.

She's turned the first floor of an old Victorian house into an art gallery that showcases local artists, and as it happens, there are a lot of them in the area. Welkins Ridge was something of an art colony back in the seventies and eighties. Now most of the artists are older, but they're still producing some beautiful work, from handblown glass and hand-tooled leather to paintings and sculptures.

"Thanks." Bailey looks pleased. "Things are slow at the moment, but we had a really good run-up to Christmas. And I think it'll pick up again in the summer when the tourists are back."

“I’m sure it will. You’ve got some beautiful stuff here,” Joyce adds, looking around. But there’s a wistfulness in her eyes that tells me that her mind is on the Flying Saucer, barely two blocks up the street.

“Joyce is looking for a birthday present for her mom,” I tell Bailey, hoping to get Joyce’s mind off the café.

“Yeah, it’s not for another few weeks,” adds Joyce. “But when I was here the other day with Mom, I saw some nice scarves that I think she’d like.”

“The ones over here?” Bailey leads us to a corner that’s dedicated to textiles, from handpainted silk to handwoven cotton and hand-knit wool. There are scarves, sweaters, hats, and more.

“Yes, these.” Joyce lets a pale green silk scarf flow through her hands. “These are totally her style.”

“There’s more here.” Bailey opens a drawer beneath the display. “I just don’t have space to put all of them out at once.”

“They’re all gorgeous,” Joyce murmurs, beginning to look through them.

Not having much of an opinion on scarves, silk or otherwise, I stand back and let them look through the options. I’m sort of tempted to buy a pair of hand-knit socks, partly to support Bailey’s business and partly because they do look really cozy, and then something catches my eye.

I pretend to look around more while Joyce and Bailey debate the colors that will look best on Mrs. Babcock. The deal is finally done, the scarf is bought, and Bailey sends us off with more hugs.

I get Joyce settled in the car and turn on the heat, then I pretend I’ve left something in the gallery and run back in.

I’m back a few minutes later with a paper bag that I hand to Joyce. “Couldn’t resist. I got this for you. Well, I guess it’s not really for you, but you get to open it.

Joyce gives me a curious smile, opens the bag, and bursts into laughter.

She pulls out a frilly pink baby romper covered in tiny pictures of golden retrievers. The fabric is some kind of super-soft flannel, and it's honestly the cutest thing I've ever seen.

"That's adorable, Hunter," she says. "But what if it's a boy?"

"Then we'll save it for the next one," I say with a wink. Her coat is open so I slide a hand under her oversized sweater. "Okay, kick once if you like the name Sophia." No response. "Amelia? Do I have a Charlotte?"

Joyce's baby bump is becoming more conspicuous, but you still wouldn't guess she was pregnant if you didn't already know. According to the books, we're still a few weeks away from being able to feel the baby kick from the outside, but I enjoy playing the game—and it gives me an excuse to get under her clothes.

Joyce laughs at my name game and strokes my hair. "That was really sweet, Hunter." Her expression softens as she stares at the romper. "I just realized this is the first baby thing we've bought. It's so tiny. Can you believe they make people this size?"

I love seeing her look so happy. The romper was expensive, but I decide that I'll be Bailey's best customer if it means seeing that look on Joyce's face more often.

Just then, Joyce's phone dings with a text. She pulls it out of her pocket and smirks. "From Bailey. 'Congratulations, I didn't realize you were having a girl!'" She sighs with mock exasperation. "Honestly, what am I going to do with you?"

I grin and put the car in drive. "Let's go home and I'll give you some ideas."

HUNTER

The good news is that I'm able to get off work earlier than usual to go to Mrs. Babcock's fundraiser. The bad news is that I'm still late.

The gala is held in the former ballroom of the Grand Lake Lodge, a resort hotel built almost a hundred and fifty years ago for wealthy city folk who wanted to spend their summers upstate. When I get there, the cocktail hour is finishing up, and people are taking their seats as caterers circle the room pouring wine.

I scan the room and spot Joyce seated at a table with Noah and Katie and four other people around our age that I don't know.

Now I wish I'd gotten here in time for a couple of cocktails.

I catch Joyce's eye, and the way her face lights up at the sight of me warms me right down to the bottom of my no-longer-bachelor heart and makes me forget all about my issues with Noah. I smile back and make my way to the table, weaving through the well-dressed crowd.

I get there and am about to lean down and give her a kiss when a voice says, "Hunter, you made it!"

I turn to see George McLaren seated at the next table, practically back-to-back with Joyce.

Shit, I should have thought to ask April if anyone else from the firm had bought tickets.

Has he seen Joyce? Did he realize she's pregnant? She's filling out, her petite frame developing sexy curves that it never had before, but she could still be mistaken for gaining weight rather than having a baby.

I turn my back on Joyce, her face still upturned and waiting for a kiss, to shake his hand. "Hard to get away. Boss is a real hard-ass, you know. Nancy, so nice to see you." I nod at his wife, who gives me a gracious smile in response.

George chuckles. "And goodness me, Joyce and Noah, didn't see you there." George waves at Noah and stretches around to manage an awkward handshake with Joyce. I breathe a sigh of relief that he hasn't yet seen her standing.

"Heard about the fire, my dear," George says to Joyce. "What a terrible thing to have happen. Nancy and I are so glad you weren't hurt."

He looks sincere, his bushy grey brows furrowing in concern and his eyes glowing with sympathy. You'd never know he was representing the company that's trying to put her out of business.

"Thanks, George. I'm hoping to get the cafe up and running again soon," Joyce replies.

I'm wondering what I can do to put a stop to the conversation when Joyce's mother gets up at the front of the room. "Good evening everyone," she trills into a microphone. "So lovely of you all to come and support this wonderful cause!"

"You folks enjoy the dinner," George stage-whispers. "I'll catch up with you later."

I slide into the empty chair next to Joyce without kissing her. "Sorry I'm late," I whisper.

"It's fine. I got your text," she whispers back, but her eyes are focused on the centerpiece and her smile has vanished.

After Mrs. Babcock has made her welcome speech, Joyce introduces me to the other people at the table, a couple of food bank volunteers and a married couple whose office bought tickets.

“And of course, you know Noah and Katie,” Joyce adds.

Katie gives me her standard fake smile. Noah barely manages a nod in my direction.

Mentally, I groan. Joyce has been trying to convince him that I’m a reformed character, supportive and committed, and my performance just now probably made it look like I’ve totally friend-zoned her.

Under the table, I take Joyce’s hand. “I’m really sorry about earlier,” I whisper.

“It’s fine,” she whispers back, but her smile is almost as fake as Katie’s. “God forbid the boss finds out you have a life outside the office.”

The caterers begin serving our table. “I’ll make it up to you,” I say, still whispering.

“Forget it,” she whispers back in a tone somewhere between annoyed and resigned.

I turn on the charm and jump into the conversation around the table. Katie, for all her faults, is good at keeping up appearances and knows how to keep the talk flowing. Joyce warms up and joins in. The four people I don’t know turn out to be reasonably interesting and pleasant. No one asks Joyce why she isn’t drinking and her pregnancy doesn’t come up, and overall, the dinner ends up being more fun than I’d anticipated.

But Noah barely looks at me the entire time. The moment the last speech is over, he stands up, issues a curt goodbye to the table, and tells Katie he’s going to go fetch her coat.

Katie manages a somewhat more gracious goodbye and takes off after him. Behind us, George stands up but he and his wife only get a few steps before they’re waylaid by another couple and begin to talk.

Thinking it might be an expedient way to hide Joyce’s baby bump, I insist on fetching her coat from the cloakroom, feeling a little guilty that she seems touched by my thoughtfulness.

When I get back to the dining room, she's standing and talking to her mother. George is just a few feet away, his back still to her.

I eye her as I get closer. She's wearing a black lacy dress with no waist. If I didn't know her, would I think she was pregnant or had just gained a few pounds?

Just as I've convinced myself that she just looks a bit chubby, she puts her hand on her stomach, accentuating the bump.

Yep, definitely pregnant.

I walk up to the group, greet her mother politely, and hold out Joyce's coat.

"Thanks," she says with a small smile as I help her into it. I used to watch Mr. Babcock for clues about how to behave and I remember how he'd help Mrs. Babcock with her coat when she was dressed for formal occasions.

Mrs. Babcock's face softens slightly, and she thanks me for coming. I tell her I'm happy to support the food bank, we make small talk for a few minutes, then say goodnight.

We're walking through the lobby when we run into George and Nancy again. Now with Joyce bundled in her coat, I'm less worried that George will see she's pregnant and more worried that either he or Joyce will let something slip about Brightside.

"You kids heading out for a night on the town?" George asks genially.

"Just walking Joyce to her car," I reply. "Then I think I'll head home."

I don't miss the way Joyce's eyes narrow before she's distracted by Nancy, who tells her how sorry she was to hear about the fire.

"Are you staying with your parents now?" Nancy asks.

"I'm staying with a friend," Joyce replies with a Katie-smile.

Something about the way she says *friend* makes me think I might be sleeping on the couch tonight.

“Oh, hey, Nance,” George pats his wife on the arm, “I just caught a glimpse of Aaron Wolner, I need a word with him.” He turns to Joyce. “Tell your mother she did a great job. You two kids have a nice evening.”

Relieved, I watch him and his wife push through the growing crowd in the lobby to find their friend. Then I turn and see the look on Joyce’s face and the relief slips away.

“You’re mad, aren’t you?”

She stuffs her hands into the pocket of her coat. “Mad? Just because you’re so clearly being embarrassed by me?”

“I’m not embarrassed by you!” I tell her, horrified that that’s what she thinks. “I told you, now is not a good time for people at work to know I’ve got a baby on the way.”

“Well, I think that’s ridiculous, but even if it’s true, I’m not sure why you couldn’t even introduce me as your girlfriend. I mean, am I crazy to think that I might be your girlfriend, seeing as we’re living together now?”

The reason I couldn’t call her my girlfriend, of course, is that it’s bad enough that George knows I’m a friend of her family’s. But I haven’t figured out yet exactly how I’m going to explain the situation to Joyce and I don’t want to get into it now, in a crowded hotel lobby with my boss lurking nearby.

“Of course you’re my girlfriend!” I hesitate. “I mean, you want to be, right?”

She rolls her eyes in exasperation. “What I *want* is to be with someone who’s not embarrassed to be seen with me!”

“I’m not embarrassed to be seen with you!” I’m whisper-shouting now and wishing we weren’t having this conversation here. “This is nothing to do with you. This is just about how things are at work.”

“Assuming that’s true, it’s insane!” she whisper-shouts back.

“Of course it’s true—”

“If that’s the kind of office culture you’re dealing with, why are you even working there?”

“It’s the best law firm in North Falls!”

“You could get a job at any law firm in the area. You could even start your own firm!”

“Any other firm would be a step down, and none of them would pay as well. And going off on my own *definitely* wouldn’t pay as well.”

She snorts. “Great. So you have to keep your entire personal life a secret, but you’re happy to keep taking their money.”

I clench my hands at my sides. Frustration with her, with myself, with the firm, and with the situation overall is building. There are so many things I want to say at once that I’m not sure how to get any of them out coherently.

“Yes!” I finally shout. A couple of people nearby turn to look at us.

I lower my voice again. “Yes, okay? I’m happy to keep taking their money. They pay my law school loans and my car loans and my mortgage. You have parents who will give you a job and money and a roof over your head anytime you like—” I jab at his chest with his thumb, “but *I* don’t have a backup plan. I *need* this job, Joyce. I can’t afford to just walk away, especially now I’ve got a baby on the way to provide for!”

Her eyes widen at the vehemence in my voice, and for a moment, she’s silent. “You’re right,” she concedes, the anger gone from her voice. “I am lucky. I’ve had an easy life. Being able to walk away is a privilege that I take for granted, and I know you haven’t had it nearly so easy. But can you see that this kind of sucks for me? You don’t want anyone to know we’re together, and you certainly don’t want anyone to know I’m having your baby. I appreciate that you’re trying to do the right thing, Hunter, but I have a bad feeling that you’re going to end up breaking my heart along the way.”

“What? No. The last thing I would ever do is hurt you. Joyce, I—I—”

Panic gums up my vocal cords. I've never told a girl I loved her before. I think—and hope—that's Joyce is trying to tell me the same thing. If I have the power to break her heart, it stands to reason she loves me, right? But that doesn't make it any easier to get the damn words out.

She waits for a beat to see if I'm going to say anything worthwhile, then slumps in disappointment when I don't.

"I get it, Hunter. I'm not the kind of girl you'd normally get involved with. You're trying to do the right thing by me and the baby and you've been amazing for it, but this weird friends-with-benefits who are having a baby together—" She looks toward the door. "Maybe it's time I moved out."

A breath of winter air brushes against me as someone opens the lobby door.

"No!" I grab her arm. "Please don't think like that. Look, I don't want to get into it here, but there's something I need to talk to you about. As soon as we get home."

I'll come clean about Brightside. She'll be upset, and she'll definitely want me to leave the firm, but at least there won't be any more secrets between us, and maybe I'll be able to think of something, some kind of compromise that will let me have both my job and the woman I love.

Her mouth twists dubiously, but she nods. "Okay. I guess —" She looks over my shoulder. "Oh, hey, Officer Spivak."

I turn to see a pair of county police officers walking toward us, out of place amongst the dressed-up gala attendees.

"Office Spivak's one of my best customers. Or was," she explains. "What are you doing here?"

Officer Spivak looks at the ground and shuffles his feet. "Joyce, I'm really sorry to do this, but um... I'm here to arrest you."

"What?" Joyce and I say at the same time.

Officer Spivak clears his throat. "Joyce Babcock, you're under arrest for arson."

JOYCE

I t's past midnight before Hunter shows up, Officer Spivak a few steps behind him.

At the sight of him, I get up from the hard bench where I've been sitting and rush to the bars of my cell.

"Where have you been? What's going on? Did they tell you anything? They said I'm being accused of trying to burn down the Flying Saucer!"

I don't know whether to be outraged or terrified, so I'm settling for borderline hysterical.

Hunter takes my hands through the bars. Behind him, Officer Spivak clears his throat. "Uh, you're not really supposed to—"

"I'm her lawyer, she's my client, and if I want to hold her hand, I will," Hunter snaps. "Now, would you please excuse us? We need some attorney-client privacy, please."

Officer Spivak looks deeply unsure of himself but backs off to the far end of the hallway.

Hunter lowers his voice. "I talked to your dad. He knows a judge who's going to see about setting bail. I got here as quickly as I could, but by that time you were in the back getting booked—"

"They fingerprinted me! And took my mugshot!" Officer Spivak was nice about it, but the entire ordeal was humiliating. "And I was arrested in front of so many people! How am I ever going to live this down?"

My parents and most of their friends were at the gala, people I've known my entire life. Officer Spivak read me my rights and put handcuffs on me in front of all of them.

"Shh, it's okay." Hunter's voice is soothing. "We'll get you bailed out of here soon, and then we'll go home and get a good night's rest, and sort it out in the morning."

"Thank you," I sniff. I don't want to compound the embarrassment of being arrested by bursting into tears. "Why would they think I burned down my own building?"

Hunter's gaze drops to the ground.

"What?" I say. "You know I would never do something like that!"

"Well, yes." He raises his gaze to mine. "Of course, accusing you of arson is a mistake because obviously you didn't do it on purpose, but ..."

"On purpose? I didn't do it at all!"

"Well... apparently, it was your oven." Hunter looks as if the words are being dragged out of him. "According to Brightside's insurance investigation, it wasn't turned off, and it overheated and caught fire."

I feel the blood drain out of my face. "Are you saying the fire was my fault?"

Hunter's aquamarine gaze meets mine. "I'm afraid it looks that way."

I stare at him, unable to speak. This is like morning sickness but worse because it's a double whammy of nausea and guilt.

"Think carefully about that night," Hunter tells me. "Do you remember turning the oven off?"

I grip his hand more tightly and lean my forehead against the bar of the cell. A couple of hours ago we were on the verge of breaking up, but right now I want nothing more than to feel his strong arms around me.

“Hunter, I was a basket case right around Christmas, forgetting orders and losing things,” I admit. “Lucky said it was hormones.”

“Can you remember what you did that night?”

I close my eyes and think back to my last night in my apartment. “I remember it was a really quiet day at the cafe, and I closed about ten minutes early. I went up to my apartment. Mom had sent me home with a casserole after Christmas, and I put it in the oven to heat it up. I know I took it out because I remember eating dinner...”

I wrack my mind, trying to picture myself turning off the oven, but I can’t.

“I don’t remember.” I open my eyes. “I don’t remember if I turned it off or not. Oh, Hunter, I feel sick about this! It must have been on for hours. Plus I hadn’t cleaned it in months. I kept meaning to, but there were so many other things going on. If there was spilled grease or something in there...” I put one hand on my heart. “Oh, my God. What if someone had been hurt? What if it had spread? What if—”

“Stop.” He puts a finger to my lips. “You know how your mom likes to say don’t go borrowing trouble? Don’t. It didn’t spread, and no one was hurt. You’ll drive yourself crazy thinking about all the what-ifs.”

I nod, only half listening. Then I remember why I’m here. “But I didn’t do it on *purpose*! Do they think I did it deliberately?”

“I guess there’s some doubt about whether it was an accident,” he admits.

“I would never do something like that! Someone could have been killed. *I* could have been killed! It doesn’t make any sense that I’d do that!”

“I know, I know.” His voice is soothing. “It’s absurd. Someone is probably just trying to impress their boss by saying they caught a criminal, but we’ll get the charges dropped, I promise.”

So many awful thoughts are racing through my mind now that I can hardly keep up. “What if this means the insurance company doesn’t pay? Hunter, I put *everything* into the Flying Saucer! What if I go to prison? What about the baby? Melody and Cathleen and Mark—they were counting on me to help save their businesses, and I’ve ruined them—”

“Deep breath,” Hunter orders. “No more what-ifs. This was an accident. We know it was an accident because we both know you’d never do this deliberately. So we’re going to fight this, and we’re going to get the charges dropped, and the insurance company is going to pay for everything because that’s why people have insurance—”

“Yeah, to cover themselves when they do stupid, idiot things like set a whole building on fire!” I’m honestly not sure which is worse right now, knowing that the fire was my fault or being accused of doing it deliberately.

“And it’s going to be fine,” Hunter continues as if I hadn’t spoken. “We’ll have you out of here very soon.”

I’m exhausted and frightened and furious. All I want right now is to go home and curl up in bed with Hunter.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” I say in a low voice. “I know you’re doing everything you can for me and the baby. I shouldn’t have given you such a hard time.”

He shakes his head. “No, you had every right to be mad. I should never have tried to keep you secret. Keeping a girl like you secret—now *that’s* a criminal act.”

Despite everything, I manage a soft laugh. “That’s sweet. Thank you. Maybe I overreacted a bit. I guess I’m kind of insecure.”

His forehead furrows. “What are you insecure about?”

“Because I’m not the kind of girl you usually go for. I’m not a corporate glamazon. I’m just a short hippie with a coffee fetish and cartoon tattoos.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he says firmly. “You’re beautiful, and I love your tattoos and your coffee, but there is so much more to you than that.”

I blow out a long breath. “At Thanksgiving, Katie accused me of trying to trap you by getting pregnant,” I admit, looking at the floor of the cell. I’ve never told anyone else about it, but her words have gnawed at me ever since. “I didn’t, of course, but I know it might feel like that, and I don’t want you to think like I’m trying to push you into a relationship you don’t want.”

Hunter cups my chin in his hand and raises my face to his. “Katie is an idiot,” he says flatly. “I mean, we already agreed on that, right? I’ve always liked you. I’ve had a thing for you for years.”

“You have not,” I scoff.

“I have so. Do you remember the first time I had dinner at your family’s house?”

“Um... Noah brought you home after a football practice, right?”

“Yeah, and Noah went to get a shower, and I was stuck downstairs with you and your mom, and I had no idea what to say to either of you. You wouldn’t talk to me, so I figured you didn’t like me. Your mom was getting dinner ready, and I was trying to make a good impression, so I asked her if I could help. And she told me to help you set the table.”

“I kind of remember that. It wasn’t that I didn’t like you,” I add. Even then, I liked him a bit too much. “I was just shy.”

“Well, back then, I figured most people just didn’t like me, and I’d never set a table in my life. And I thought, oh, crap, these people are going to see right through me. They’re going to realize I’m total trailer trash and never invite me here again.”

I squeeze his hand. “My parents are snobs, but I don’t think they would have held it against a sixteen-year-old boy if he didn’t know which side of the plate to put the forks on.”

“I know that now. But at the time, it seemed like I was about to blow my one chance to make a good impression.” He smiles. “And do you remember what you did?”

“I showed you how to set the table?”

“Yeah, but I think you knew I was embarrassed, didn’t you?”

I nod as the memory sharpens. My alarm at being alone with a gorgeous high-school boy. The flash of doubt on his beautiful face. The way he looked at me as if he didn’t know whether he could trust me. The feeling of confidence that welled up in me when I realized he wasn’t as self-assured as he looked.

“You didn’t say anything,” Hunter continues. “You just took the forks out of my hand and put them on the left side of each plate, and you pointed at the knives to the other side where the knives went. And you didn’t say a word the whole time because you knew your mom could hear us from the kitchen and you didn’t want to put me on the spot.”

He leans closer and strokes my hair. “And you kept it up the entire dinner. You sat across from me, and I watched everything you did. And you knew I was watching, and every time there was something I was supposed to do, you’d give me a look, a kind of *pay attention now* look. When you put your napkin in your lap, so did I. And when you put some butter on the side of your plate, I did too. And that’s how I got through my first dinner at your family’s house without making an absolute ass out of myself.”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal,” I say softly.

“It was,” he insists. “You grew up in that house, so you thought napkins and placemats and dinner rolls were normal. But if you could see where I grew up—well, you’re never going to see it because it’s gone now, but trust me, finding myself in the middle of your dining room, it was like being in a foreign country where I didn’t speak the language and didn’t understand any of the rules. I *really* wanted your family to like me, and I was terrified that I was going to blow it. And you made sure I didn’t.”

I start to shake my head, still not convinced that I did anything special, but he holds up a warning finger.

“You could have teased me or made fun of me. You could have let me sink or swim on my own. But you saw I needed

help, and you helped me.” He draws my hand to his mouth and kisses it through the bars. “You were kind to me, and I’ve never forgotten it. I love your tattoos, and I love you.”

My breath catches, and I all can do is stare at him in response.

He clears his throat. “I’m sorry. I tried to say it earlier, and the words just got stuck. But I do love you, Joyce. And I should be shouting you from the rooftops, not trying to hide you in a corner. But I *need* this job, Joyce, at least for now. I don’t want you and the baby to ever go without anything.”

I hold onto his hands and look into his beautiful turquoise eyes. “I love you too, Hunter. As long as the baby and I have you, we’ll have enough. “

Just then, Office Spivak walks down the hall toward us again. “Joyce? Got some good news. Judge came through, and your dad posted bail. You’re free to go.” He unlocks the cell door, and I collapse into Hunter’s arms, relishing the way his arms tighten around me.

“Let’s go home,” I breathe.

A few minutes later, I’ve retrieved my purse and other belongings from the police, signed some papers, and been made aware of various rights and obligations. Never I have been so ready to go home as I am now.

Hunter puts an arm around me as we walk into the lobby. “Straight home, yeah? We’ll pick up your car tomorrow, okay?”

I nod against his shoulder. “Sounds good. I’m wiped out.”

As we walk toward the door, a skinny middle-aged man gets up from a bench and walks over to us. “Joyce Babcock?”

“Yes?”

He hands me a manila envelope. “Joyce Babcock, you’ve been served.”

JOYCE

“I’ve been what?” I ask, but the man is already walking away, leaving Hunter and me alone in the sheriff’s office lobby.

“Shit,” Hunter breathes then mutters something that sounds like *the nuclear option*. “Joyce, let me see that.”

He reaches for the envelope, but I’m already opening it.

“Joyce, there’s something we should talk about—”

I pull out the papers and scan the cover letter, the bottom dropping out of my world as I absorb what it says.

“What is it?” I hear Hunter ask through the roaring in my ears.

“It’s from your law firm.” I look at him. “I’m being sued for *three million dollars!*”

“Fuck, that’s insane! Let me see—”

He reaches for the papers again but I snatch them away, a sick realization dawning. “How did you know my Brightside was the owner of the building?”

“What?”

“Back in there,” I jerk my head toward the direction of the jail. “You said *Brightside’s* insurance investigation. But I never mentioned the building owner by name.”

His face pales. “... Didn’t you?”

“No, because you never wanted to talk about the situation. You changed the topic every time I brought it up. I thought it was weird because you’ve been so supportive in every other respect. Did you know? Did you know the firm was representing Brightside?”

He hesitates, and the look on his face confirms my worst fears.

“You knew,” I repeat. It’s a statement this time, not a question. “How long have you known?”

He makes a clumsy gesture with his hands, so at odds with his normal confident poise. “I knew that the firm was representing Brightside back in September, but I didn’t make the connection to your building until after the fire. Even then...” He runs a hand through his hair. “Well, I guess I knew. It just wasn’t confirmed. It wouldn’t have changed anything, though,” he protests. “I can’t tell the firm who to represent. And I couldn’t give you advice without jeopardizing my job.”

“Could you have at least told me that my landlord had engaged one of the best law firms in the area?” I snap. “Because at least then I would have known what I was up against. Three *million* dollars!” I take a step away from him. “Where am I supposed to come up with that kind of money, Hunter? Not to mention charges of arson!”

“It’s a tactic,” he insists. “They’re trying to intimidate you.”

“Well, it’s working. I am officially intimidated. And having me arrested! That’s part of all this, isn’t it!” I wave the papers at him. “Now that I think about it, it’s a little odd that the police knew to find me at the Grand Lake Lodge tonight—unless George tipped them off. Did you tip *him* off?”

“No!” he protests. “Well, not intentionally. But I did say your mom was organizing the gala, though, so he might have figured you’d be there,” he admits. “It’s part of the intimidation, making a public arrest like that. It’s a one-two punch, first the arrest, then the lawsuit. Come on, Joyce. Show me the papers. We can fight this—”

“*We?*” I scoff. “*We* aren’t fighting anything. You can’t represent me against your own boss.” An ugly thought occurs to me. “Is this the real reason you’ve been so squirrely about letting people know we were in a relationship? Was it about wanting to look like you were serious about your career, or was it about not letting them know that you were in a relationship with someone they were going to sue?”

Hunter studies the police station floor. “A bit of both,” he says quietly. “I was going to tell you the whole story when we got home tonight. I just didn’t want to get into it at the gala.” Then he raises his gaze to mine again. “But look, I had no idea they were going to pull something like this! Show me the papers. I can at least look them over. Maybe I can recommend another law firm.”

“Because giving me advice yourself would be a conflict of interest.”

“Yes.”

“Unless you quit.”

He closes his eyes. “I’ll start looking for another job tomorrow.” He opens his eyes again. “But I can’t just walk out, not until I have a backup plan.”

I shove the envelope under his nose. “Hunter, ten minutes ago you said you loved me. Now the company you work for is suing me for three million dollars. If *that’s* not a conflict of interest, I don’t know what is!”

“Joyce, it’s not like the movies, where you quit in righteous indignation and everything falls into place a week later.” He’s trying to make his voice sound soothing, but it just ratchets up my anger another notch. “This is real life, and North Falls is not that big a city. I can’t afford to just walk out on Dade Bristol. I need to leave them on good terms. And I need to at least get a good reference from George.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “You know, my family’s company was a Dade McLaren client for twenty years before Dad and Noah hired Warren,” I remind him. “I’ve known the McLarens since I was a kid. My father has referred millions of

dollars' worth of business to them. Now George is threatening to sue the daughter of one of his oldest and most loyal friends, and you want to stick around for a good reference? What makes you think they'll show any loyalty to you?"

He spreads his hands out again, looking helpless. "I told you earlier, I'm not going to work for them forever. I just want to make sure you and the baby have everything you need—"

The loose grip I have on my temper evaporates completely. "This baby isn't going to have anything if I have to fork over three million dollars!" I shout.

"You won't have to pay it!" he shouts back then reins in his voice. "They're going to use the suit and the threat of pressing charges to pressure you into giving up your rights to the coffee shop. I'm sure that's the angle. I've seen them do things like this before."

"What's the legal term for that? Blackmail?"

"Look, I know it's hardball, but it's just business. You need to find someone who thinks like they do and fight back."

"Like you? Is this how *you* think? Is this the kind of tactics they're teaching you there? Is this the kind of lawyer you want to be, someone who manipulates innocent people by accusing them of crimes they didn't commit?"

He casts an exasperated look at the ceiling. "No, of course not, but it's how things work."

"Well, it shouldn't be." I tuck the envelope under my arm and pull out my phone. "I'm calling my dad for a ride. I'll have someone pick up Wombat and my things tomorrow."

"Shit, Joyce," Hunter groans. "We can talk this through."

"We just did. I'd like you to leave now."

"I'm not going to leave you alone in the middle of the night!"

"I'm in a police station! Nothing's going to happen to me unless I get arrested again for screaming at you. Just leave. Please."

“I’ll start looking for another job tomorrow. Tonight, even, I swear,” Hunter says again. “But I can’t afford to leave until I have something else lined up. Can’t you understand that?”

“Sure. And you understand that I can’t be with you as long as you’re working for Dade Bristol.”

“For God’s sake, Joyce,” he begs. “I know I should have told you, but please don’t cut me out. I want to be part of your life. And the baby’s.”

“I won’t keep the baby away from you,” I promise. I owe both of them that much at least. I hit my dad’s number. “But for now, you and I are done.”

JOYCE

“Stay as long as you like. I’m just sorry things had to go down like this.”

Blaze has an actual guest room, which is nice because this pregnant lady isn’t up for sleeping on couches, whatever I told Hunter after the fire.

I slept in my old room at my parents’ last night after my dad picked me up from the Sheriff’s office, but I couldn’t face the looks of pity and the unspoken *I told you so’s* so this afternoon, I asked Blaze if I could stay with her for a few days.

“Thanks, Blaze. You’re the best.” I put my small duffle bag on the bed and let Wombat out of his cage. Bailey and her boyfriend Nikko picked him and my stuff up from Hunter’s earlier today and brought it all here.

I guess that’s the silver lining to losing all your worldly possessions in a fire. Everything I own fits my friend’s Acura.

“This is getting kind of ridiculous, always moving from one place to another,” I sigh. “I feel like a nomad. I’m going to have to find a place before the baby’s born.”

“Lady next door is still planning on moving out,” Blaze reminds me. “It would be fun to have you as a neighbor, and I’d love to help with the baby.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, tears stinging the back of my eyes. Hunter and I never talked seriously about what the future looked like, but things were going so well that I’d started to assume we’d just continue living together.

Until it all came crashing down last night. I wipe away a couple of tears.

Blaze puts an arm around me and gives me a squeeze. “I’d offer you a glass of wine, but I guess that’s out. How about I make some of my famous hot chocolate and you tell me exactly what happened?”

I manage a watery smile. “Hot chocolate is exactly what I need right now.”

Good hostess that she is, Blaze not only comes up with a large mug of steaming hot chocolate, but also a platter of cheese and crackers, and we curl up on the couch in her living room. In between bites, I tell her about the lawsuit and Hunter not telling me that the firm was behind Brightside’s actions.

Blaze munches thoughtfully on a cracker. I wait for her to speak, but when she’s done with the cracker, she takes a slow sip of wine.

“This is where you tell me what an asshole he is and how you’re totally on my side?” I prompt.

“Of course I’m on your side,” she answers. “And he totally should have said something about the firm representing Bright-side, assuming her knew—

“Oh, he knew.”

“—but I’m not so sure about the asshole part.”

Blaze can be aggravatingly fair-minded sometimes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what would it have changed? It’s his job. He’s worked crazy hard to get where he is, he’s trying to be all responsible about the baby. Would you really just expect him to quit?”

“If he knew they were going to sue me for three million dollars, yeah!”

“But it sounds like he didn’t know they were going to go to that extreme. And it sounds like he’s willing to look for a new job, but he doesn’t want to be left jobless just months before his baby is born.”

“I hate it when you’re sensible.” I stuff another cracker into my mouth. “Just ... be on my side, okay?”

Blaze takes another sip of her wine. “I’m on your side,” she says again. “I will always be on your side. I just think I can maybe see Hunter’s side, too.”

I take a deep sip of hot chocolate. “Fine,” I grumble. “But it’s not just the fact the firm is representing Brightside, and it’s not even just that he didn’t tell me. I never *see* him, Blaze. He’s working twelve hours a day. He’s so devoted to that stupid law firm that there’s no room for anything else in his life!”

Blaze nods with infuriating calm. “Again, though, don’t you think that might be because he’s worried about supporting you and the baby?”

“He doesn’t *need* to support me. I have a job. Or I will. Again. Eventually.” The thought of the process papers I received last night is almost enough to make the hot chocolate curdle in my stomach. “Ugh, like dealing with Hunter isn’t bad enough! What am I going to do about this lawsuit?”

Blaze sighs. “I think you need a lawyer.”



“I TALKED TO THEIR COUNSEL, and they’re willing to settle.”

I’m sitting across from Warren’s desk at the Babcock Construction’s offices.

I swallow. “Settle how?”

Warren is the same generation as my dad and George and has a similar air of gracious privilege. His gray eyebrows furrow sympathetically. “Basically, you waive your rights to the lease, they drop the suit and agree not to press criminal charges.”

“But it was an accident, not arson!” I protest.

Warren holds his hands up placatingly. “I know, sweetheart, I know. They’re playing hardball with the arson

BS, but Brightside is a big company with deep pockets. Well-developed, that property will be worth a lot of money. They just need to get rid of troublemakers like you.”

I nod slowly. This echoes what Hunter said. Brightside is trying to intimidate me into caving in—and it looks like it’s going to work. I rub my temples.

“So you think I should settle?” I ask, already knowing what he’s going to say.

Warren shrugs expansively. “You could try fighting them. You might even win. But, Joyce, I know Dade, Bristol & McLaren, and I know George. He won’t make this easy. If you push back, at most all you’re going to get is a couple more years in that location, and my guess is that George will find ways to string this out so that you won’t even get that. My advice would be to settle, get it over with, and move on with your life.” He glances at my belly. “You’re going to have your hands full enough pretty soon.”

Warren has worked for Babcock Construction for several years, ever since Dad decided they were big enough to warrant their own general counsel and hired him away from Dade Bristol. He’s done a good job helping Dad and Noah expand the business, and everything he says makes sense. He has experience with litigation cases, and I’ve known him almost as long as I’ve known the McLarens.

I should trust him.

His advice doesn’t sit right, though. It infuriates me that I’m being accused of something I didn’t do and that the accusation is being leveraged against me—that I’m being blackmailed, essentially.

But it’s working. My arrest was in the local paper’s police blotter. When I stopped by the library the other day to say hi to Blaze, a group of patrons stared at me before turning away and whispering. Mark, Cathleen, and Melody haven’t returned the calls I left for them. Noah and my parents tell me to hold my head up high and that this will blow over and be forgotten about, but for now, I’m embarrassed to walk through downtown Welkins Ridge, through my own community.

Warren's advice makes sense, but I want someone to stand up and fight for me, to clear my name, to overcome the injustice of everything that's happened.

I want Hunter. At least he said I should fight this.

Maybe I should have given him a chance to sit down with me and go over the process papers. Maybe he could have come up with a plan.

But it would have been a conflict of interest, I remind myself bitterly. He had a choice; he chose his job.

And Warren has a point. I'm already overwhelmed with everything that's happened over the past few months. Once Baby Babcock-Baldwin is born, am I really going to have the energy to fight this lawsuit? Even if I win, all it gives me is the right to rebuild a coffee shop that I'll have to give up sooner or later anyway.

"Okay," I open my eyes. "So if I don't fight it, what happens? How do we settle?"

He gives me a big, toothy smile. "Leave it to me. I'll talk to George and work out the details. I'll call you when we have a deal."

Clumsily, I push myself up to a standing position and reach over the desk to shake his hand, catching a glimpse of the cup-and-saucer tattoos on my arm. *Never mind*, I tell myself. *I'll open another coffee shop, somewhere else.*

But if I do, I'll be in competition with Beans R Us, which will have snagged the best location in town.

Luck is no longer on my side.

HUNTER

The waitress drops off two pints of beer. Anthony hands her a credit card and tells her to start a tab.

It's been more than a week now since Joyce left. I've kept my ear to the ground at work for news of her case, but Phil is being unusually tight-lipped. George must have put the fear of God into him.

I hope Joyce has at least found a good lawyer. She hasn't returned any of my calls—I'm pretty sure she's blocked me—so who knows.

Anthony lifts his glass and clinks it to mine. "I'm driving tonight, so have as much as you like. You look like you could use a few."

I huff a humorless laugh. "That's exactly how this started, you know. I was trying to cheer Joyce up with a few drinks after she broke up with that idiot Brandon, and wham, here we are."

"Well, the good news is that I don't think we have to worry about either of us getting pregnant."

I take a long, morose sip of my beer. "I'm surprised Lucky's letting you talk to me. I'd have thought the girls would close ranks around Joyce."

"She's definitely got Joyce's back, but her best friend back home is a lawyer, and she can kinda see both sides of the story."

“She won’t even return my calls,” I grumble. “Joyce isn’t talking to me. Noah’s not talking to me. I assume their parents aren’t talking to me. I mean, this is *exactly* why I knew that getting involved with her would be a bad idea!” I take a swig of beer. “Nothing good was ever gonna come of it.”

Anthony gives me a pointed look.

“Except for the baby,” I acknowledge. “Some good’s come out of it. I just wish it didn’t have to be like this. I even miss her stupid cat.”

And I do. I’d take Devil Cat anytime over the empty apartment I’ve come home to every night this week.

The two of us sit in silence for a moment, then I slam my hand on the table. “*Fuck!* We were supposed to go to our first prenatal class next week. I don’t want to pay fucking child support! I don’t want to just be some guy who writes checks! I want to be a dad and a partner and involved and all that shit.” I glare at Anthony, trying to make him understand how much I want this. “I want to be better than my dad.”

“You *are* better than your dad.”

I snort. “Only cause I’ll write bigger checks.”

“Bullshit,” Anthony replies evenly. “You’re already a better father than your dad ever was. And it has nothing to do with how much money you’re making.”

I snort into my beer again. “Yeah, well, money helps. Do you have any idea how much Teddy’s preschool costs?”

“Dude, the baby isn’t even born yet,” Anthony says with annoying practicality. “You have a few years to figure out preschool.”

I stare into my pale ale. “It’s crazy, when Joyce first told me she was expecting a baby, I couldn’t get away fast enough. I figured the baby would be better off if I wasn’t anywhere around it. But now...” I swallow, remembering the adorable little pink romper I bought. I forgot to pack it and found it in the bedroom after Nikko and Bailey had picked up her things. I shoved it, still in its bag, into the bottom drawer of my dresser to keep it out of sight.

Then I remember something else. “Hey, did I ever show you the ultrasound?” I pull my wallet out, extract the black-and-white image, and shove it under Anthony’s nose.

“Not quite sure what I’m looking at here...”

“Look, look,” I point at the image. “This is the back of her head, this is her forehead, that’s her nose.”

Anthony’s smile widens as he takes the picture. “Oh yeah—now I see it. Look at that little nose! You didn’t tell me it was a girl.”

“Well, that’s not official. We decided not to find out ahead of time. But I think it’s a girl.”

Anthony laughs. “You sound really excited.” He hands the image back and I put it back in my wallet.

“I am excited, “ I admit. “I *was* excited. I really want a shot at it, you know? I want to be a dad.”

“I don’t think Joyce is the type to try to keep the baby away from you.”

I shudder, thinking of some of the divorce and custody cases that have come through the firm. Seems like the richer people are, the more vicious they get when it comes to splitting up.

“No, I don’t think she’d do that... but I don’t want to just be the guy who gets the kid every other weekend. I want to *be* there, you know? And I want to be with Joyce. Shit, man. I’m in love with her.”

Emotion wells up in my chest, and I take another deep sip of beer to cover it up.

Anthony gives me a crooked grin. “Comes for us when we least expect it.”

“Shit, sorry.” I decide it’s time to change the subject before I have to turn in my man card once and for all. “I’m going on about all my problems. What’s up with you and Lucky? Things going well?”

“Things are going great, but tonight’s about you. Talk it out, drink it out, whatever you want. I got your back.”

“You and Noah saved my ass so many times in high school.” I chuckle at some of the memories, but the laughter fades as I remember that Noah and I haven’t talked since the day we broke the news to Joyce’s family.

“Sorry, I tried to get Noah to come out with us tonight, but he, uh...” Anthony gives up on whatever excuse he’s trying to come up with for Noah. “He’s being a dick, basically.”

Noah Babcock is as close to being Welkins Ridge’s favorite son as anyone will ever get. He’s upstanding, honest, hardworking, and an all-around nice guy.

I huff a short laugh. “No one calls Noah Babcock a dick.”

“I just did,” Anthony replies. “And I called him a dick to his face the other day, too.”

I raise my eyebrows. “How’d he take it?”

“Stoically, like he takes everything. You know Noah.” Anthony’s mouth twists wryly. “Not exactly the heart-on-his-sleeve type.”

“Neither are you.”

“Neither are any of us, but Noah’s got his emotions locked up extra tight. You guys are like brothers, though. He’ll get over it.”

I snort into my beer. “If he was mad that I knocked up his sister, the fact that my company is suing her for three million dollars isn’t going to make things any better.”

“Noah’s smart enough to know that’s the firm, not you. He’ll come round,” Anthony assures me.

“I don’t care about Noah,” I say, even though I do, a little. “I just want Joyce to be happy. I mean, I want her to be happy with *me*,” I add. “But mainly I just want to be happy, and I want to help with this fucking lawsuit she’s facing, and she won’t let me!”

“Noah said that Warren guy who works for them is handling it.”

“He’s not a bad lawyer,” I concede. “He’s done more litigation than I have, anyway. Maybe she’s better off with him.”

I know I should be happy that she’s got a good lawyer, but I’m actually kind of jealous. Hopefully, he’ll figure out a way to fight them.

Anthony takes a slow sip of his beer. “There’s something fishy about this whole thing,” he muses. “I mean, we know Joyce wouldn’t deliberately set the fire, but she’s not the type to leave an oven on. And even if she did, how often do ovens just spontaneously burst into flames?”

I shrug. “I dunno. Kitchen appliances aren’t my strong suit. She doesn’t remember turning it off, and she said she hadn’t cleaned it in a while. Grease build-up or something?” I take another swig of beer. “I dunno. I’ve heard of it happening.”

Anthony narrows his eyes. “Yeah, but how dirty would an oven have to be to catch fire?”

I frown at my pint glass. There *is* something fishy about the whole thing. “You’re right. It is weird. I just don’t have any idea how I’d find out. This isn’t the kind of case I usually deal with, and it’s not like I can ask anyone at work for help.”

Anthony taps the table thoughtfully. “I think I might know someone who could help.”



“THANKS FOR MEETING WITH ME.”

It’s Monday now, and I’m at the Welkin’s Ridge fire station on my lunch hour, shaking hands with Jeremy Wainwright, the fire chief. Anthony met him during the Taste of Heaven Festival, when he was performing and the Chief was doing some fire safety demo thing. Anthony pointed out

that if anyone could shed some light on the situation, it would probably be him.

I remember him from the night of the fire, the guy who told me to check the ambulance. He's gracious enough not to remind me that the last time we met, I was panicked and screaming.

Wainwright is a large man, taller and broader than me, probably in his mid-thirties, with a genial, bearded face. His handshake is firm and his smile is friendly. Under other circumstances, I can see us downing some beers and watching a game at the Cantina.

"Sure thing, Mr. Baldwin. Come into my office."

"Call me Hunter." I follow him into a small office, barely big enough for a desk, a filing cabinet, and two chairs where we both sit down.

"So how can I help you, Hunter?"

"I'm trying to find out more about the cause of the fire at 2432 Main on behalf of Joyce Babcock. She lived there and also owned one of the businesses there."

I mentioned when I called him that I was a lawyer. I didn't specifically say I was representing Joyce, but I figure there's no harm in letting Chief Wainwright assume it.

The chief nods. "I remember the fire. How's she doing? Crappy luck losing a business and your home at the same time."

"Well, I don't know if you heard, but she's being sued by the building's owners.

Wainwright frowns. "They're suing her? Because of the fire?"

"She was embroiled in a dispute over the property, and they're accusing her of setting the fire deliberately out of spite. I wanted to talk to you to see if there was any evidence that could contradict that."

Chief Wainwright's face darkens. "They're accusing her of *arson*?"

The look of sheer disbelief on his face gives me hope. For the first time since I left Joyce at the police station, my spirits start to lift. “Yeah.”

The chief’s expression turns perplexed. “You got a copy of the insurance investigation report, right?”

“Insurance investigation?” I ask stupidly. “Uh, no,” I admit. “Is that something you can share with me?”

The skeptical look on his face tells me I’ve gone down a few notches in his estimation. “No. You’d have to get that from the insurance company.” His eyes narrow. “I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job, but if they’re not willing to just give it to you, I’m pretty sure you can subpoena them.”

“Ah.” Now I’m kicking myself for not thinking of that sooner. I should at least get in touch with Warren and make sure he gets it.

Wainwright’s eyes narrow. “Are you representing Ms. Babcock?”

Just as I’m trying to figure out how to answer that, my phone rings. I take it out to silence it then see that it’s April. “Sorry,” I mutter to Jeremy. “I need to get this. April, what’s up?”

“Hey,” her voice is low, “you remember how you asked me to let you know if there was any movement on that situation we talked about?”

I sit up straighter. “Yeah?”

“They’ve got the litigant coming in this afternoon to sign something. They must have just booked the meeting. It wasn’t even on the calendar before I went to lunch.”

“Shit, do you know what she’s signing?”

“I got it out of Phil. They’re dropping the lawsuit, and she’s giving up her rights to the property.”

“When is she coming in?”

“At one.”

I look at my watch. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Wainwright gives me a level stare. I don't think he's the type to be flustered by some swearing, but he doesn't look like the type to suffer fools and crazy people either.

"April, look, when she comes in, do you think you can tell her not to sign anything until I get there?"

"I dunno, Baldwin...I can't afford to lose my job."

"Well, if there's anything you can do to delay things without getting fired, please do it. I'm in Welkins Ridge right now, it'll take me twenty minutes to get back to the office." *And that's if I break all the speed limits on the way.*

"What the hell's going on, Baldwin?" she hisses. "I'm starting to think like I'm in a John Grisham novel."

"I'll be back in the office as soon as I can. I just need to try one more thing before she signs those papers, okay, so just try to get her to wait until I get back, okay?"

I hang up and tap Joyce's number. Chief Wainwright clears his throat meaningfully.

"Sorry," I hold up a hand. "It's an emergency—" The call goes straight to voicemail, of course. "Listen, Joyce, I know you're on the way to Dade, Bristol & McLaren. Do not sign anything, you understand? Call me back as soon as you get this. Please!"

I text her essentially the same message but it doesn't deliver, confirming my fears that she's blocked me.

I think about calling Warren, but Chief Wainwright has the look of someone who's not happy about having his time wasted, and I decide to call Warren from the car.

I decide to throw myself on his mercy. "Okay, I'm not exactly Joyce Babcock's lawyer. I *am* a lawyer, but this is outside my specialty. Joyce is my, uh, girlfriend? I guess? She's having my baby in a couple of months, for what that's worth. Anyway, even before the fire, she was involved in a lease dispute with Brightside, the property owner. She still technically has a claim on part of the building, but they're suing her for three million in damages and threatening to press

charges of arson unless she signs over her claims as a tenant, and if she does, she loses her business and her livelihood.”

Wainwright just frowns.

I break out in a light sweat. “I don’t have a lot of time. She’s supposed to sign those papers in fifteen minutes. If you have *anything*, anything at all, that could point us toward proof that she didn’t deliberately start the fire, I would be so, *so* grateful.”

He regards me for a long moment during which I can literally feel the seconds ticking by. Finally, he speaks. “Look, my job is to put fires out, not figure out who started them or why, but in this case, it was pretty obvious if you knew what to look for. It was in my report to the city. I would have expected the insurance investigation to pick it up, and I definitely would expect a lawyer representing someone to look into it.”

“But no one else has talked to you about it?” I confirm, wondering if Warren has really done everything he can to help Joyce.

“Hang on.” Chief Wainwright clicks a few keys on this keyboard, and behind him, a printer whirrs and spits out a sheaf of papers, which he hands to me.

“I saw a case last year when I was working in Hartford that was almost identical to this one,” he tells me.

I scan the papers he’s just handed me. “Are you serious?” I look up at him. “Are you *sure*?”

“I’m sure,” he says.

I grab a pen and a Post-it off his desk and scribble down my personal email as quickly as I can, then stand up. “Can you email me anything related to this?”

I wait long enough to see him nod, then I take off, shouting my thanks over my shoulder.

Time to go save the day—and lose my job.

JOYCE

I arrive at the law office a few minutes before one.

The first thing I do is scan the parking lot for Hunter's car, but it's not here. Which means he probably isn't either.

It's both a disappointment and a relief.

I force myself gracelessly out of the car—it's like I've gone from chubby to ginormous just in the past week or two—and head into the building. It's cold, and patches of icy snow line the edges of the parking lot, but I spot a few crocuses pushing their way up through the dark ground.

They're the one bright spot in this otherwise miserable day.

Warren assures me that the terms of the agreement mean I'm not admitting to any wrongdoing, but I still feel like I'm being forced to take the blame for a crime I didn't commit. On top of that, I'm giving up the Flying Saucer and making way for chain stores to begin taking over downtown Welkins Ridge.

It doesn't help that I've been raw and fragile ever since I ordered Hunter out of the sheriff's office. I'm still angry at him for his secret-keeping, but I also feel guilty for turning my back on him after everything he did for me.

And I know we need to talk. Maybe once I've gotten this afternoon behind me, I'll call him.

I hesitate on the threshold, then push open the door to Dade, Bristol & McLaren.

The firm is based in an old brick building that's been completely gutted and modernized. I bypass the elevator and begin to huff my way up the staircase that curves from the lobby to a sunny reception area on the second floor. The walls and carpet are cream with splashes of color provided by vases of fresh flowers and modern art and set off with chrome fixtures. It's sleek and elegant, designed to impress and intimidate.

And it's working. I feel small and out of place. Dad offered to come with me, but he's so angry at George right now that I was afraid he'd just make a scene. Noah had to work.

Anyway, I'm an adult, and I'm here in a professional capacity. I don't need my father or my big brother holding my hand.

I walk up to the reception desk. "Hi. Joyce Babcock. I'm meeting my lawyer, Warren Smythe. We're here to sign some papers."

Just saying the words makes me almost as queasy as I was back in my morning-sick days.

The receptionist, who looks like she's about my age, is dressed in a pale green suit and looks very put-together. "Hello, Miss Babcock. Why don't you have a seat? Can I get you anything?" She offers as she stands up. "Coffee? Water?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

She disappears somewhere into the back of the office, and I sit.

And sit.

Five minutes go by, then ten. I'm starting to think it's odd that she A, didn't say whether Warren was here yet or not, and B, seems to have left the building.

I'm fishing my phone out of my purse to text Warren when George walks into the reception area.

"April, would you mind calling—" George begins, then stops short when he sees me. "Joyce, I didn't realize you were here."

“I’m waiting for my lawyer,” I tell him.

George frowns. “Warren got here twenty minutes ago. We’re all in the conference room, waiting for you.” He frowns at the empty desk. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure what happened to April. It’s not like her...” He shakes off the receptionist’s disappearance with a kindly smile. “But no matter. I’m glad we were able to come to an agreement. Come on through.”

I follow him down the hall to a conference room with a large oak table where Warren is waiting with another man.

“Ah, there you are, Joyce. Joyce, this is Robert Landsman, general counsel for Brightside.”

Landsman is a tall, thin, middle-aged man. “We meet at last, Ms. Babcock,” Landsman says as he shakes my hand. “So sorry things had to turn out like this.” The triumphant grin on his face says he’s not sorry about anything.

I grit my teeth, remembering our last conversation, and take a seat.

George, at the head of the table, has a folder on the table in front of him. He greets everyone with his typical avuncular charm and explains the terms of the deal: Brightside drops their suit. I drop my claims to the building’s storefront. End of story.

End of the Flying Saucer.

Thin end of the wedge.

And maybe the end of downtown Welkins Ridge as we know it.

George passes a thick sheaf of papers and a pen to me. I pick up the pen and stare at the first page, unable to focus on the words.

Beside me, Warren is explaining exactly what I’m signing, but I’m barely listening.

Then he stops talking. I realize I’m supposed to sign on the line he’s pointing to but I can’t quite make myself do it. I didn’t set the damn fire, not on purpose, and it’s all so incredibly unfair.

George clears his throat. “Joyce, I know this is difficult for you, but the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can all move on. We just need your signature in four places.”

I snap back into focus and put the pen to the paper. I’m about to sign it when I become aware of the sound of footsteps running down the hall.

I look up as Hunter bursts into the room.

“Joyce, stop!” he pants. “Don’t sign anything!”

My heart flips over at the sight of him. I haven’t seen him since the night I walked out of his apartment. I’ve missed him. but seeing him in person again reminds me of how much. His hair is disheveled, as if he’s run his hands through it several times, and there’s a sheen of sweat on his brow, but otherwise, he looks as handsome as ever.

“Hunter, what’s going on?”

He pauses to catch his breath. “As your legal counsel, I advise you not to sign those papers. I have reason to believe that you are not fully informed of all the facts pertinent to this case.”

Beside me, Warren reacts. “Excuse me, sir! *I* am her legal counsel.”

“You’re fired. I’ll be representing Ms. Babcock.”

My mouth falls open.

“I just told you—” Warren begins, but George cuts him off, fixing Hunter with a stern gaze.

“Hunter, I’m sure you’re aware that as an employee of this firm, it would be a conflict of interest for you to represent Ms. Babcock.” He puts just enough emphasis on the word *employee* to make me think Hunter’s status is already questionable.

“Not anymore, sir,” Hunter replies. “April is printing out my resignation letter right now.”

“Hunter, what are you doing?” I ask, aghast.

Yes, I wanted him to quit, but now that he actually is quitting, I'm seized with guilt. I think about what Blaze said, how hard he's worked to get here, how responsible he's trying to be, and I don't want him to resign just on my account.

George cuts me off, his face dark. "You're still technically an employee, and you cannot represent Ms. Babcock."

"Fine." Hunter muscles in between George and Robert Landsman, who reluctantly shift their chairs to make room for him, and reaches across the table to put some papers in front of me. "Even if I'm not representing her, I can tell Ms. Babcock and her counsel about the fire that was caused by the oven in her apartment—"

"We know about that," snaps Landsman. "We're being very generous in not pressing charges against Ms. Babcock for deliberately trying to burn down the entire building in a fit of spite."

Hunter continues. "The technical term for that, sir, if you'll excuse me, is bullshit."

There's a sharp intake of breath from everyone around the table.

"What you also know," Hunter continues, "but perhaps forgot to mention to Ms. Babcock, is that her oven was recalled by the manufacturers several months ago for a faulty heating element that was a known fire risk."

Dead silence greets his pronouncement.

I finally collect my wits enough to speak. "Recalled? Do you mean the fire wasn't my fault?"

Hunter's aquamarine gaze locks with mine and his voice grows gentler. "Not only was the fire not your fault, Joyce, but it was your landlord's responsibility to replace the oven once the recall was made public." His tone becomes stern. "By failing to do so, they jeopardized your life, and the lives of anyone else in the building, subjected your business to serious financial losses, and caused you significant emotional and mental anguish."

I put a hand over my heart, almost dizzy with relief. “It wasn’t my fault.” Then I realize the full implications. “Are you saying they hid this information from me *deliberately*?”

“I’ll be filing subpoenas for the fire inspection reports from all the insurance companies involved,” Hunter replies. “Since the Welkins Ridge fire chief’s report made it clear that the oven was a known risk, it seems like it’s a good bet that Brightside did indeed withhold this information deliberately.”

Open-mouthed, I turn to look at Landsman, but he avoids my gaze.

“Of course, you’ll be suing them for damages to your reputation and business,” Hunter adds as if this is almost an afterthought. “I’m thinking ten million ought to cover it.”

Stunned silence greets this pronouncement, then Warren collects his wits.

“Ms. Babcock is *my* client!” he snaps. “We’ll need time to go over everything.” He reaches for Hunter’s papers, but I snatch them away.

“Warren, wait. I need to figure out what’s going on.” I scan the papers quickly, then look at him. “Did you really not ask to see a copy of the fire inspection report? Maybe I should have asked more questions, but that’s what I hired you for.”

His lips thin. “You hired me to look after your best interests, and that is exactly what I’m doing. Do you really want *this person*—” he gestures contemptuously at Hunter, “taking over your case?”

Before I can answer, George lurches to his feet. “*Mister Baldwin*,” he growls, “you’ve interrupted a private meeting, *and* you’re acting against the best interests of our client.” He gestures at Landsman. “This behavior is highly unprofessional.”

Suddenly, the receptionist reappears, the front of her suit now soaking wet for some reason. She slips into the room, hands Hunter a sheet of paper, and makes her escape.

Hunter pulls a pen out of my breast pocket, signs the paper, and hands it to George. “My resignation, sir.” He looks

over at me. “I’ll be taking over Ms. Babcock’s representation.” He looks at me. “If she’ll let me.”

Our gazes lock and I know he’s not just talking about being my lawyer. “I guess we should at least talk.”

“Joyce, dear, listen to me and please sit down,” George lowers his voice to something approaching friendly. “I suspect Mr. Baldwin isn’t thinking clearly at the moment, and I’d advise against taking his advice. I’ve known your family for years— “

All the stress and tension and sadness and guilt that I’ve been living under for the past few weeks, along with my mixed feeling at seeing Hunter resign, come to a boil with the word *dear*.

I wheel on him. “Which is why, George *dear*, it’s extra appalling that you tried to blackmail me into signing over my rights!” I snatch up my purse and my coat. “Hunter, you’re hired. Let’s go.”

Side by side, we walk down the cream-colored hallway. As we pass the front desk, the receptionist stands up and pushes a banker’s box over her desk toward Hunter.

“I cleared out your office. Gonna miss you, Baldwin.” She glances at me and then at my belly and then back at Hunter. “You owe me lunch.”

“I owe you a lot more than that,” he replies. “Why are you all wet?”

“Craziest thing,” she shakes her head. “Just after Ms. Babcock here arrived, the sink in the kitchen sprang a terrible leak. I got all distracted trying to fix it and completely forgot to let George know she was here.” She looks at me. “I am so sorry.”

I give her a tentative smile. “That’s quite all right.”

Hunter picks up the box. “By the way, April, Joyce. Joyce, April. I think you two will like each other.” He lowers his voice. “Thanks for everything, April.”

“Get outta here, Baldwin,” April says. She winks at me. “Congrats. You got yourself a good one.”

I’m not sure if she’s talking about Hunter as a lawyer or Hunter as a boyfriend, but either way, she has a point. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

“Thanks, April. I’ll call you about lunch.” Hunter says.

“Gonna miss you, Hunter. Good luck.”

We walk down the stairs and out of the building in silence.

“Hunter, everything you said back there, did you mean it?” I ask as we head toward his Lexus. “Was the stove recalled? Were they actually lying about it?”

He pops the trunk and drops the box in. “Yeah. I just talked to the fire chief over in Welkins Ridge. At the very least, Warren should have subpoenaed the insurance company for a copy of their fire investigation report. My guess is that Brightside, and probably George, just ignored it because they realized it would open them up to a lawsuit from you and all the other tenants.”

He slams the trunk shut. “Don’t get your hopes up about that ten million, by the way. I just wanted to scare them. We’ll probably have to come down some, but we should be able to get you something after all the crap they pulled. Might even be able to get the other tenants involved in a class-action suit. If I don’t have enough experience, we’ll find someone who does.”

Relief bubbles up. Despite my enormous belly, I feel lighter than air. “I just want my coffee shop back. Do you think that’s a possibility?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He winks. “Negotiation is my strong suit.” Then he turns to look at the Dade, Bristol & McLaren building, and his cocky smile fades.

Heaviness starts to set back in. “What about your job? It meant so much to you. I’m sorry—”

He holds up one hand to stop me. “Don’t. It’s not your fault. I don’t have all the details yet, but if George knew the oven had been recalled and didn’t say anything about it, that’s

some shady shit, and I feel terrible that you got caught up in it.”

I stare back at the building. “I can’t believe George would cover something like that up,” I murmur. “He’s known me my entire life.”

“Well, it’s possible he didn’t know,” Hunter replies, but he doesn’t sound convinced. “Maybe now’s the time to think about going off on my own like you suggested.” He gives me a wry grin. “I don’t think I’m going to get a great reference from George.”

“Hunter, I am so sorry. I—”

I’m about to say that I never would have asked him to quit his job just for me, then I remember that I did and we broke up over it.

“I owe you a huge apology,” I say instead. “Of all people, I should have known how hard it is to give up a job you love, and I should have been more understanding.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, you had every right to be mad. I should have told you about Brightside as soon as I suspected they owned your building.”

“Based on how badly I reacted, I can’t really blame you.”

“Well, being sued for three million dollars would put anyone in a mood, so I guess I can’t blame you, either.”

I laugh. “No blame all around. Guess we settled that.”

“Guess we did.”

We stand there, next to his car, smiling at each other like idiots.

“Babcock-Baldwin’s getting big.” He strokes my stomach and then raises his eyes to mine. “I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too. I’ve got a prenatal class tomorrow,” I tell him. “Want to be my plus-one?”

His smile widens and for once, I don’t see anything wolfish about it. He just looks like a big, happy kid. “I’d kind

of like to see about being your plus-one for everything from here on out if you'll have me."

"You mean it?"

He takes my hands in his and looks deeply into my eyes. "I mean it, Joyce. I hate not having you to come home to. I want you in my life as long as you're willing to have me."

I don't quite trust myself to speak, so I step closer, and then we're kissing, a sweet, sensual, tender-yet-sexy kiss in the parking lot where anyone at Dade, Bristol & McLaren could see us.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear, "and I don't ever want to be apart from you for this long again."

My breath catches. "I love you, too, Hunter. Let's never have another fight, ever."

He chuckles. "Where's the fun in that?"

"I see your point." I cock my head hopefully. "You know, an epic fight calls for some epic make-up sex."

He grins, and this time I catch a glimpse of the wolf. "I like the way you think." Then his gaze drops to my belly. "All for it in theory. May need some help with the logistics, though."

I step closer and stand on tiptoe to whisper in his ear. "Why don't we go back to your place and figure it out?"

HUNTER

“Still think boys are assholes?” Joyce asks.

My tiny son is curled up against her chest, snuggled in a flannel blanket. As gently as I can, I touch the palm of his tiny hand, and his miniature fingers wrap around mine.

“Well, *he's* not,” I concede. “Obviously. But I think that’s mainly because he takes after his mother.”

Joyce went into labor yesterday evening right around dinner time. It was a long night that ended at 3:42 a.m. with the birth of Baby Boy Babcock-Baldwin, seven pounds, three ounces, of healthy, squirming perfection.

We’re naming him Trevor, after Joyce’s dad.

I waited until it was a decent hour, then texted everyone we knew with the news, along with a picture of Joyce holding Trevor. She’s never looked happier.

Noah texted to say he was picking up his parents and would be here soon. Lucky, Anthony, Blaze, and Bailey all promised to visit later this morning.

Now I’m enjoying the last few minutes of quiet time before the hordes descend.

Joyce gives me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry we can’t use that cute romper you bought.”

I shrug. “We’ll save it for the next one.”

She snorts. “You’re getting a little ahead of yourself there, buddy. One miracle at a time.”

I think of the bond that Noah has with Joyce, that Teddy will have with Lanie. I think we can probably make room for Miracle #2 sooner or later. But I’ll save my negotiating skills for later. For now, I’m happy to just curl up next to Joyce and Trevor.

The coziness is short-lived.

“Knock, knock!”

Mrs. Babcock rushes in, Mr. Babcock trailing behind her with a clutch of blue and silver mylar balloons. It’s barely 8 a.m., but she looks as put-together as she always does.

I step aside to make room for her.

“How are my darlings? Oh, my goodness! How precious! Noah’s parking the car, he’ll be here in just a moment. Sweetheart, how are you doing? Was it very difficult?”

“It wasn’t fun, but Hunter was amazing.” Joyce casts a meaningful look in my direction.

“Well, of course he was!” Mrs. Babcock turns to me and to my surprise, gives me a warm hug. “Of course you were! Congratulations, Hunter. We know you’re going to make a wonderful father!”

“Thanks, Mrs. Babcock,” I say, feeling oddly shy.

“I think at this point you can call me Helen.” She turns back to the baby. “Now, do you think this little wonder will let me hold him?”

While she fusses with the baby, Mr. Babcock shakes my hand. “Congratulations, son.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He hands me the balloons and turns to his wife. “Helen, get out of the way so I can kiss my daughter.”

Noah appears a moment later to find his parents clustered around Joyce and the baby and me standing in the corner, holding a half dozen balloons.

He gives me a wry smile. “Welcome to fatherhood.” He holds out his hand and I shake it. “Congratulations, man.”

Mr. and Mrs. Babcock have been warming up since Joyce told them about me finding out about the faulty oven. I haven’t seen Noah, though, since Thanksgiving. Joyce assures me he’s not still angry, just busy, but I’m not convinced he isn’t deliberately avoiding me. I’m still not, entirely, but I think with the handshake, he’s making an effort.

“Excuse me, I’d better go admire my nephew.”

Noah pushes between his parents to congratulate Joyce and make appropriate noises. Everyone loves that we’re naming the baby Trevor, Mr. Babcock especially. Joyce catches my eye. We both liked the name, but I also figured a little flattery wouldn’t be out of place, and it seems to be working.

There’s no way I’m going to break through the small crowd that’s surrounding Joyce and Trevor. Feeling like a fifth wheel and wanting to be useful, I’m about to offer to go get everyone coffee when Noah breaks away.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a moment?” Noah says in a low voice. The happy-uncle smile is gone and his expression is serious.

“Sure.”

With no idea what to expect, I follow Noah out into the hallway and wait for him to speak.

“I heard about what you did for Joyce,” he says. “About the oven and everything. Thank you.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“And I heard you lost your job over it.”

“Collateral damage,” I say, trying to sound unconcerned.

“Joyce says you guys are suing Brightside.”

“Yeah. The other tenants joined us in a class-action suit. I don’t want to drag it out to a trial, just working on getting a quick, fair resolution for everyone.”

“Good. You always were a good negotiator.” Noah doesn’t say anything else for a long moment. Just as it’s starting to get uncomfortable, he speaks again. “I owe you an apology.”

“It’s fine,” I say quickly.

“No, it’s not. I was a jerk to you about Joyce and the baby. I mean, I never would have pictured you two together, but I know you’re a good guy. I should have trusted that you wouldn’t screw her over.”

“Well, I guess I didn’t have the best reputation when it came to relationships,” I admit.

“That’s still no excuse for me not giving you more of a chance,” Noah replies. “The truth is—” His jaw tightens. “The truth is that things are not great between me and Katie right now. We’ve been trying to make it work—well, *I’ve* been trying to make it work—for the kids. And it sucks. I think I was projecting a lot of that onto you guys, assuming you’d either leave Joyce in the lurch or try to stick it out for the baby and make each other miserable. I’m sorry for taking all that out on you.”

It’s no great surprise—it’s even a relief since I never thought Katie was the right one for Noah—but I hate to see him looking so unhappy.

“Thanks, Noah. That means a lot. I’m sorry about Katie,” I add.

“We’re dealing.” Noah brushes off my concern. “Okay, back to you. Does this lawsuit mean you’re going off on your own?”

“Starting to look that way,” I say honestly. “Word’s gotten around about what went down with Dade Bristol, and other firms aren’t exactly knocking down my door to hire me. I probably won’t make as much—well, definitely won’t make as much, but I can be pickier about the kind of cases I take on, work human hours, all that good stuff.”

“Got any clients yet, besides Joyce and the other tenants?”

“Not yet.”

It's starting to make me nervous, to be honest. I've been so wrapped up in Joyce's lawsuit that I haven't had much time to market myself. Joyce insists on helping with the bills out of her insurance money, but my savings are dwindling faster than I'd like.

Noah rubs his chin. "Well, if you're interested, Babcock Construction could use a new general counsel."

I blink, only half-comprehending his words. "What about Warren?"

"Dad fired him. Turns out he'd been communicating with Dade Bristol ever since he agreed to represent Joyce. We think maybe he was throwing her case as a favor to George."

I let out a low whistle.

"Now Dad's trying to get him and George kicked out of the country club, and I'm stuck needing to hire a new general counsel," Noah continues. "So what do you say? You know the business. You did a great job negotiating that property for the Bald Ridge subdivision. There's no one we'd rather work with."

Babcock Construction may not be in Brightside's league, but it's still one of the bigger companies in the area. Noah is offering me a lifeline and an olive branch at the same time.

"Yeah ... thank you. But are you sure it would be okay with your dad? And your mom?"

"It was Dad's idea." Noah winks. "Smart move, naming the baby Trevor. But seriously," he continues, "you're a good lawyer, you already know the company. Besides," he pauses, "it's a family business ... and you're family."

For a moment I can't speak. "Thanks." I clear my throat. "Thanks, man."

"Congrats again on being a dad." Noah smiles again, but his blue eyes are serious. "You'll never be the same."

"I don't want to be," I tell him.

He gives me a hug then steps back. "Tell my parents I need to be at a meeting at nine, and I'll meet them downstairs in

five minutes.” His eyes twinkle. “That’ll get them out of your hair for a while, but I can’t promise they won’t be back.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else,” I say with a laugh. Still, I’m exhausted from being up most of the night, and Joyce is probably ten times more tired, so some downtime before the next rush of visitors will be a nice break.

“Let’s set up a time next week to talk shop. Meantime, try to get some sleep.” He gives me a final pat on the shoulder and walks down the hallway toward the elevator.

I watch him go then turn back into the hospital room to be with my family.

EPILOGUE

JOYCE

One year later

“Come to Daddy!”

I’m crouched behind Trevor, a few yards away from where Hunter is kneeling in the sand.

We’re celebrating Trevor’s birthday today with some just-us time at the lake before we head over to my parents’ for a party. It’s a gorgeous spring day, finally warm enough for us all to be in bathing suits. Our dog, Daisy, who is mostly a mutt with maybe a little golden retriever in her, sits nearby, panting and waiting for someone to throw her a ball.

Trevor takes a wobbly step and lands on his well-padded bottom on the muddy sand.

“Come on, buddy,” Hunter encourages him. “Try again.”

Trevor rolls over onto all fours, pushes himself up into an unsteady standing position, and promptly falls again. He contemplates one sandy hand and raises it to his mouth.

“Don’t eat that!” I beg.

Getting this kid to not eat everything he finds is practically a full-time job. Grass, dirt, a fistful of dog hair—it’s all fair game as far as he’s concerned. I fished an unfortunate cricket out of his mouth earlier today. I brush the sand off his chubby fingers and help him up to his feet again.

“Come on, buddy!” Hunter calls to him. “Show us those steps!”

Trevor takes a lurching step toward his father and starts to teeter. His sunhat falls off, but he steadies himself at the last minute. I hold my breath.

Trevor takes another, slightly steadier step, then another, gaining confidence and momentum with each one. Daisy dances in the sand, making anxious whiny noises. She’s very protective of Trevor and gets worried when one of us isn’t right next to him.

“Shh, he’s fine, girl. Don’t worry,” I try to assure her.

With a few more plodding, determined steps, Trevor reaches Hunter, who swoops him up into a big hug, holding him against his bare chest. “Good job, buddy! You’re walking!”

I run over to them. “You did it, little man!” I kiss Trevor then Hunter for good measure. “Your grandparents are going to be so proud of you.”

Trevor squeals with delight as Hunter tosses him into the air and catches him. Holding Trevor against his bare chest, Hunter smiles down at me. “Can you believe it’s been a whole year?”

I shake my head. So much has happened, and it’s all gone by in a flash.

The lawsuit never went to trial. Instead, Hunter negotiated a creative settlement with Brightside: he got them to sign over the building, along with a million dollars in cash for “emotional suffering.”

2432 Main is now a cooperative owned by me, Melody, Cathleen, and Mark. We’ve all got our businesses up and running again, and no one can ever kick us out. We remodeled the top floor into four apartments and installed an elevator and other amenities. Trevor, Hunter, and I live in one of the apartments, and we earn extra income for the co-op by renting out the others.

Hunter is now working full-time for Babcock Construction, and the Flying Saucer is thriving since we reopened last summer.

“Can you believe that a year ago, he was just a few hours old, and now he’s walking?” I dust off Trevor’s sun hat and put it on his head. He promptly takes it off.

“You know, this little guy’s gonna get spoiled if it’s just him. We should think about having another,” Hunter says, a little too casually.

Hunter’s not shy about wanting another baby. “Listen to you. Remember how you ran away screaming the first time I told you I was pregnant?”

“I didn’t realize how freakin’ adorable babies were.” Hunter holds Trevor up and blows a raspberry on his round tummy. Trevor squeals with glee.

“They are pretty cute.” I lean my head against Hunter’s bare shoulder.

“I left room here, just in case.” Hunter touches his chest where he had Trevor’s newborn footprint tattooed over his heart. “And I’d hate for that pink romper to go to waste.” He gives me a playfully imploring look.

“I’ll take it under consideration,” I concede.

I’m not ready for another baby quite yet, but I like the idea of a baby brother or sister for Trevor. Master negotiator that he is, Hunter will get his way sooner or later.

But I’m not a terrible negotiator myself.

“In the meantime, don’t you think you should be making an honest woman of me?”

Hunter had hinted several times now that he’s planning to propose, he’s just “waiting for the right moment.”

Hunter snorts. “Is that all you’re waiting for? Well, hell yeah. Joyce Babcock, will you marry me?”

“This is your idea of a proposal? When Nikko proposed to Bailey, he planned out a whole romantic picnic, and Anthony

threw a party to propose to Lucky.”

“Those bastards,” he sighs. “They don’t make it easy on a guy. Here, can you hold Trev for a sec?” I take Trevor and Hunter claps his hands at the dog. “Hey, Daisy, go get it!” He waves at the collection of towels and bags a few yards away. “Daisy,” he repeats, “Get. The. *Thing*.”

Daisy lopes away toward the towels and stops halfway, looking back at us with an expression of comical confusion.

“What thing?” I ask Hunter.

“A thing.” He’s focused on the dog. “Daisy, go get it, girl!”

Daisy snaps back into action, snatches something up, starts to run to Hunter, then stops and sits down again.

“Daisy! Dumb dog,” Hunter adds in a mutter.

Daisy gets up again and trots over to us, and I finally get to see what she has in her mouth: a small, black bag, which she drops at Hunter’s feet.

“Well, that didn’t go exactly like we rehearsed,” Hunter grumbles, but he leans down to pet Daisy and call her a good dog before he picks up the bag... and kneels at my feet.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Seriously?”

He opens the drawstring bag and pulls out a small velvet box. “Yes, seriously. Daisy and I have been practicing that move for weeks.” He opens the box and flashes a very fetching ring at me. “Joyce Babcock, light of my life and mother of my child, will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

I look down at him at the beautiful man in front of me, shift Trevor to my right arm, and hold out my left hand.

Hunter takes the ring out of his box and gives holds it up with a warning look. “Once this goes on, it has to stay on, or you know Trevor will eat it.”

I laugh as he slides the ring onto my finger. “This is the most ridiculous proposal, Hunter.”

He wraps both hands around mine and looks up at me. “But you’re happy about it, right?”

I smile fondly down at him. “I’ll take it.”

Hunter kisses my hand and stands up. “Good. Because your parents are keeping Trevor for the next three days, and you and I are heading up for a long weekend in Montreal.”

My mouth drops open. “Wait, really?”

“Of course. You didn’t think I was just going to pop a ring on your finger and call it a day? No way, babe. We’re celebrating.”

“You mean you actually planned this?”

“Joyce, I’m a lawyer. You think I’d leave out any details? We’ve got a double celebration at your parents for Trevor’s birthday and our engagement, then we’ll go home and pack, and we should have plenty of time to drive to Albany and catch our flight at six. Blaze offered to look after Daisy and Wombat.” He grins triumphantly.

I nod slowly. “Well done, I’m impressed. What are we going to do in Montreal?”

“Go sightseeing, eat out, practice making babies.” He winks. “And with any luck, we’ll find something to fight about.”

THE END



THANK YOU FOR READING *PRIDE & JOYCE*. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave a review. I’d really appreciate it!

Then when you’re done, check out the first chapter of [*Hearts A’Blaze*](#), in which Blaze goes head-to-head with Chief Wainwright.

“YEAH, HERE’S THE THING, BLAZE...”

On the other side of his desk, my step-brother, a.k.a. the mayor of Welkins Ridge, steeples his hands and tries to look important.

I grew up with Walden's dirty socks, loud friends, and mediocre table manners, so sometimes it's hard to take him seriously, but maybe I need to work on that. The problem is, he actually *is* important, at least as far as the town library is concerned, and I have a feeling bad news is on the way.

"Spit it out, Walden." I try for a cross between friendly and professional and land somewhere between resigned and exasperated.

"The fire department wants the Addison building."

I press my lips together to repress any errant swear words. Walden and I had plenty of fights growing up, but we're both adults now, and we both have respectable jobs working for our town. I'm not going to revert to being twelve years old and screaming at him for reading my diary (or more likely pretending to have read it just to aggravate me—reading was never really Walden's thing).

But I *am* going to fight for what's mine.

"The council said the library could have the Addison as soon as the records department moved into the new wing of city hall," I reply as calmly as I can.

The library is currently in a beautiful, old, depressingly decrepit building that hasn't been adequately funded in decades and is in danger of falling apart—literally, if the leaks are any indication.

The Addison, on the other hand, is a block away, also in the main part of town, so it's in a great location. It lacks the character of the old library, but it's newer and bigger and cleaner and more accessible to handicapped people and strollers ... and it has a *much* nicer carpet. I suffer from carpet envy every time I look at the threadbare green felt that covers the library floor.

And I took it on faith that the Addison would be the library's new home. Damn it, I should have made someone

sign something. If I've learned nothing else from my stepfather, it's to always get something in writing.

Walden scrunches his face up in an expression that looks like a first-year acting student's idea of what empathy is supposed to look like. "Well, I don't know if you realize this, Blaze, but it's right next to the fire station—"

"I know exactly where it is, Walden."

It's getting harder to keep the growl out of my voice. I've been scoping out that building for months. I know the square footage, the elevation, how much the monthly utility bills are, and how old the HVAC system is. And yes, I noted who the next-door neighbors are.

Walden ignores me. "The new fire chief, he's got all kinds of ideas for improving the fire station and response time and all that stuff, and he made a compelling case for annexing the Addison and turning it into dorms for his men."

"Doesn't the fire station have a dorm?"

Walden shrugs. "Yeah, but I guess it's kinda small. Chief thinks he can recruit better men if he can offer them better digs, and with the fires around here getting worse every year —"

"Walden, the *library* is getting worse every year. We desperately need a new roof. The study space is cramped. The elevator makes such horrible noises that parents are afraid to take their kids up to the children's room in it. It's sucking up most of my budget—a budget which, I might remind you, has actually been cut already once to help pay for a new hook and ladder for the—" I bite back a swear word, "—fire station!"

Walden nods. "I hear you, Blaze. The library needs a new roof, you need more space, the elevator makes noises, the whole thing costs too much—"

"I *literally* just said that."

He ignores me and continues. "Operations are taking up too much of your budget and you're upset because some of that money has already gone to the fire station."

Walden read some management book once that said that parroting back what someone said shows that you're listening to them and builds empathy, but right now he just sounds mansplainy and childish, like any moment he'll revert to imitating everything I say just to get under my skin the way he did when we were kids.

And okay, I did it to him too.

But that was *when we were kids*. Now we're adults, and there's a very real building at stake, and I do not feel like I am being taken seriously enough.

I feel like no one ever takes the library seriously enough.

"Yes, I'm upset!" I reply. "I should have made a bigger fuss about the budget cut when it happened, but the council basically promised me the Addison, and now the fire chief wants that, too?"

"The whole hook and ladder thing was before he even moved to town," Walden reminds me, using his calm-and-condescending voice. "You can't blame him—"

"But I can blame *you*, and the rest of the city council for not sticking up for me, can't I?"

"Blaze, fires—"

"Walden, literacy!" I snap in response. "Look, I get that the fire department is very important, but it shouldn't be an either-or thing. The library does important things too. Tax revenue for the town is going up, not down—"

"Expenses are going up, too—"

"And the need for library services is going up. If you can't give me the Addison, at least give me the budget to fix the building we're in now!"

Walden presses his lips together like he's sorry he has to deliver bad news. "That's a big ask, Blaze. The fact is, the library really should be under the county system."

Calming breath, calming breath ... "I'd like that too, for so many reasons, but we're a money pit right now, and the county library system doesn't want us. If we can either fix the

building or get a new one, the county will take us on, and the town won't have to worry about us ever again."

Walden makes that face like he's thinking deeply about how to solve the issue but I know that whatever he says is something he came up with days ago. "Honestly, Blaze, isn't part of your job finding money? Getting grants? Talking rich people into making donations? Maybe your friend Joyce could do one of those fundraiser days at the cafe?"

I resist the urge to bang my head against Walden's cherry wood desk. I'm so furious that for a moment, I literally can't speak, then I unglue my jaw just enough to be able to reply.

"I've gotten grants, *Wally*." He winces; he hates being called Wally. "They're the only reason we've kept the lights on as long as we have, but you can only use grants for the purpose they're intended, and there aren't that many grants out there for helping tiny local libraries replace their fifty-year-old roofs and elevators. And we get donations, but in case you hadn't noticed, Welkins Ridge is mostly working class, except for the tourists. There just aren't that many people or businesses in the area who can make big donations. And a Flying Saucer fundraiser is not going to pay for a new roof!"

"What about Bailey's fiancé, the chef? He's gotta be rich —"

Now I actually do hit my head on the desk. Not very professional of me, but it beats whacking Walden with a vase. Hitting up my friends for cash is not part of my job description.

Voice muffled, because my head is still on the desk, I interrupt. "Cut to the chase, Walden. Is this a done deal? Or do I still have a chance?"

"You have a chance," he says, using his conciliatory voice now. "The council will take feedback from the public over the next couple of months and then vote on it. But, I mean, the chief himself pointed out that you guys don't really need a whole new building—"

I snap back up and lean forward. The steam that's been building up between my ears suddenly comes to a head. "The *fire chief* said *we* don't need it?"

Walden recognizes my dangerous voice. Normally, I'd get some satisfaction from the expression of worry that flits across his face, but right now, I barely notice.

"My budget helped pay for his hook and ladder, and he thinks he can make assumptions about what *I* need to run my library?" My voice is building now.

What does the fire chief know about the library? He's never even set foot in it as far as I know. He only moved to town something like six months ago, and here he is, going around and making assumptions about what other departments need to do their jobs?

Me, I grew up here. I know the community and what it needs, and I know how important the library is, and that idiot has no right to my building!

"We're done here." I stand up and grab my purse. "I'll talk to you later, *Wally*," I say over my shoulder as I head for the door.

"You coming to Mom and Dad's for bunch?" he calls after me. "I'll see you on Sunday!"

I reply with something that sounds like, "Gaghrr!" and stomp down the hall to the semi-circular stairway that leads to the ground floor of the city hall building, my heels echoing on the worn marble.

By the time I push open the front door into the bright spring sunlight downstairs, I'm absolutely furious. Over and over again, I've been promised more staff, a bigger operations budget, and a new building, and over and over again, I've had the rug pulled out from under me.

I storm down the front steps of city hall. The smart thing would be to head over to Flying Saucer, grab a latte, bitch about the situation with Joyce, then go back to the library, think carefully about my next steps, and wait until I am calm before doing anything I might regret later.

I do not do the smart thing.

I STORM DOWN MAIN STREET, past the library, past the Addison building, and step into the cavernous fire station. Men in blue uniforms are standing around different parts of a large, open room. A handful of them are polishing the hook and ladder. I give it a dirty look before turning to face the room.

“I’m looking for Jeremy Wainwright,” I announce loudly.

On the far side of the room, a man turns from where he’s talking to another firefighter and walks over to me with a slow, measured pace that feels like he’s deliberately trying to waste my time.

He stops a couple of feet away from me, and for a moment I forget why I’m there.

He is stupidly handsome. He has wavy dark brown hair, dark brown eyes, a jaw that looks like it came off the cover of one of the romance novels we keep in the paperback section, and the lightly tanned skin of someone who spends a lot of time outside.

Instead of the standard dark blue firefighter uniform, he’s wearing a button-down shirt with a tie and jeans. He’s a big guy, a good four inches taller than me, even in my heels, with a broad chest, wide shoulders, and enormous biceps. He looks like he might have played football in college or even in the pros—that kind of body. My gaze slides over that chest and the way his shirt stretches across it and I wonder tangentially if he has to have his shirts custom-made.

I’m suddenly keenly aware of my very not-athletic figure. I make a point of dressing well, but no amount of polish can hide my plus-sized hips or my cantaloupe-sized breasts. Self-consciously, I cross my arms over my too-ample chest.

His ridiculously attractive face breaks out into a broad grin, emphasizing the smile lines around his eyes. When he speaks, his voice is as deep and rumbly as a movie star’s. “How can I help you?”

I snap back to myself. He's a jock. A jock with a fire engine, but still just a jock. I got over guys like him in high school. However handsome he is, I'm not going to let him intimidate me.

I put out one hand. "Blaze Wilder. Head librarian at the Welkins Ridge Library."

He takes my hand in his, and I regret to say that the sensation of his large, strong, slightly calloused hand wrapping around mine sends a distinctly unprofessional warmth through me.

"Jeremy Wainwright, fire chief of the Welkins Ridge Fire Station," he replies. To my chagrin, he looks faintly amused. "Did you say your name was *Blaze Wilder*?"

My name is what comes of having a mother like mine.

To my further chagrin, I miss the feeling of his hand when he pulls it away. I ignore the question and let the chagrin feed my anger.

"Chief Wainwright, I'm sure you're busy, so I'll cut to the chase," I tell him. "I understand the fire department has requested the Addison building next door, and I'd like to ask you if you'd withdraw."

The look of amusement on his face fades, and he leans back almost imperceptibly. "Huh. Mind if I ask why I should do that?"

"Because I need it for the library."

"Well, I need it for my men."

"From what I understand, you're planning to use it for living space, but don't you already have that?"

"Yes, but it's crowded and uncomfortable. If I'm going to recruit more men for the job, I need to be able to offer them a decent place to sleep and eat while they're on duty."

My jaw tightens. I know I'm not handling this as well as I could, but I'm just too angry to think it through at the moment. "Look, I don't know if you realize this, but the fire station is far and away the best-funded department in town. In fact, over

the past couple of years, a large amount of the library's operating budget has been redirected to fire safety—which, of course, is *very* important—but the fact of the matter is that the library's budget has been cut to the bone, and the building we're currently in just needs too much in terms of repair. You, on the other hand, have more money than you know what to do with. The fact is, I need the Addison more than you do.”

The chief's expression grows grimmer as I talk, and by the time I stop for breath, it's turned into a dark frown.

“Well, I don't know if *you* realize this, Miss Wilder,” he says, “but the fires around here are getting bigger and more dangerous every summer. And winter, for that matter. I need experienced firefighters who know what they're doing. If I'm going to recruit more men, *good* men, I need a place to put them, and the building next door is perfect for us.”

He crosses his arms over his broad, muscular chest (*Why are you noticing his chest? Stop noticing his chest, Blaze!*) and frowns down at me, all traces of friendliness now gone.

“So, no, I'm not going to withdraw my request for the Addison.”

Hearts A'Blaze will out Summer 2023.

Pre-order today!