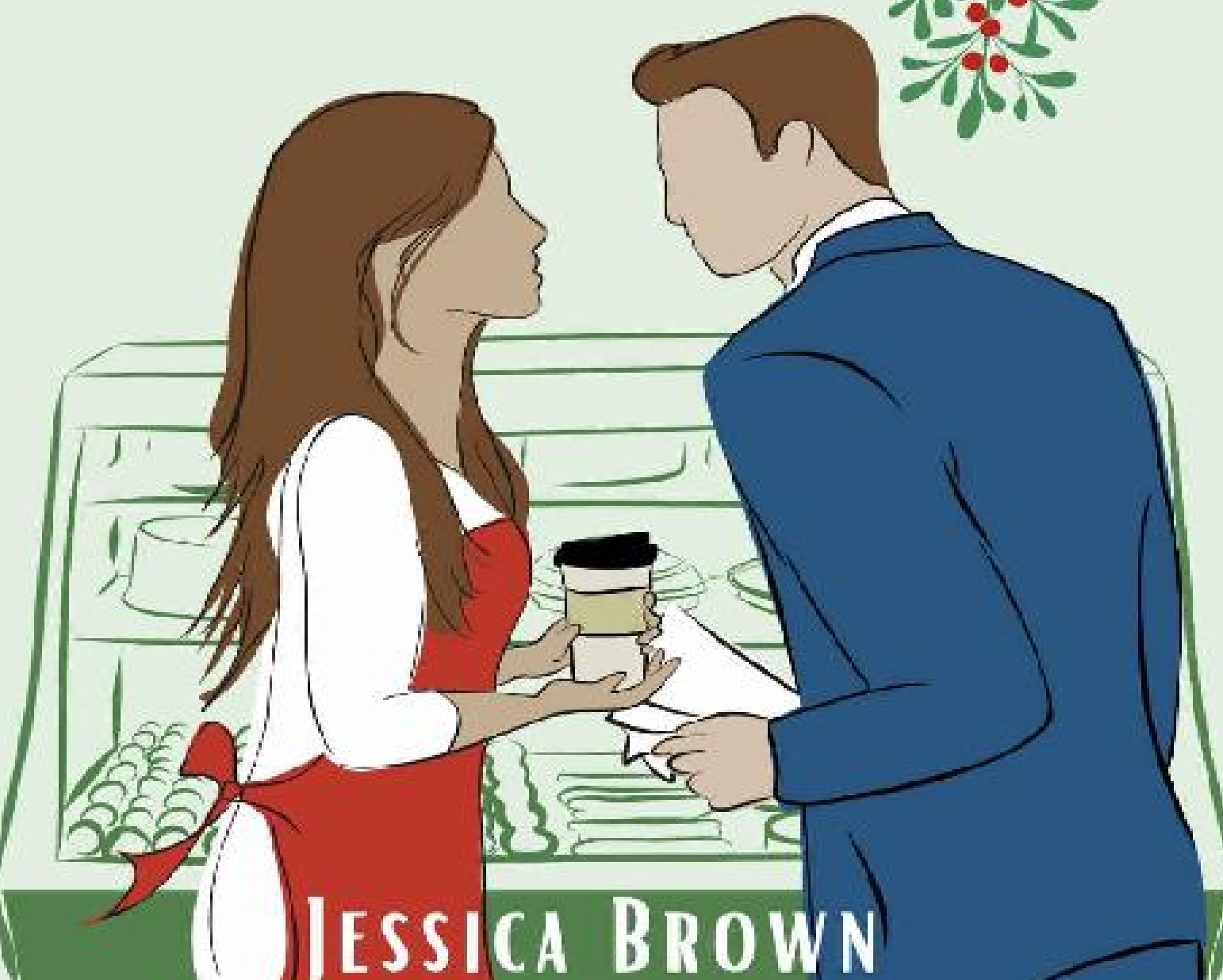
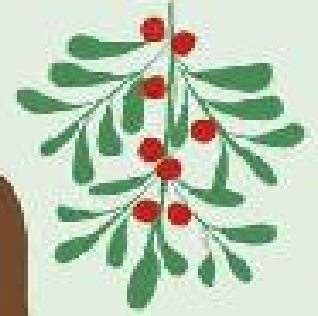


SOMETHING Sweet

A SOMETHING SERIES
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE



JESSICA BROWN

SOMETHING SWEET

A SOMETHING SERIES CHRISTMAS
ROMANCE

JESSICA BROWN

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For my three loves.

The door chime rings from the front.

“Did you forget something, Kelse?” I call out while pulling the loaves from the oven and setting them on a cooling rack. She doesn’t respond.

I turn to see what she needs only to find Mr. Klaus standing in front of the swinging door.

“What are you doing here?” I refuse to hide the annoyance in my voice. The last person I want to see is this man, especially this early in the morning. “Better yet, how’d you get in?”

“The door was unlocked.” He steps in further.

“It wasn’t supposed to be. My assistant just ran out to grab... something.” He doesn’t need to know about the books.

He looks around the kitchen and takes another step forward. Curiosity creases his brow and purses his full lips.

“Why are you here, Mr. Klaus? This is still my bakery. You can’t come waltzing in anytime you’d like. Besides, we had a deal. I won’t be intimidated to back out of it.”

A genuine smile pulls up the corners of his mouth. Leave it to the universe to send me the most handsome executioner. I shouldn't be attracted to the guy helping destroy my livelihood.

"I'm only here for a cup of coffee. You still sell coffee to paying customers, I assume? Besides, you need the money, right?"

I glare at his snark. "I don't like you."

"I don't expect you to."

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MAKING A DEAL WITH KLAUS



-Marley-

The phone rings.

And rings.

And rings.

Hey, it's Henry. Can't answer the phone so leave a message.

“Hey hon. Just calling to see how soon you’ll be here. I guess there was a line at the bank. Anyway, see you soon. Love you.” A quick peek at the clock on the brick wall reminds me of how late he is.

I check his text once more to make sure I’m not crazy.

Henry: Got held up. Running to the bank now to deposit the money, babe. Be there soon.

That was nearly two hours ago. Even in this weather, it shouldn’t take him that long... unless the bank is being held

up in a robbery and what's the likelihood of that?

Slim. And thank goodness for that since Henry's putting the bakery's money into the account so we can pay rent and bills for the month.

Maybe he decided to get some Christmas shopping in while he had the chance.

That would be nice. And a step up from last year when he was running around on Christmas Eve trying to get his shopping done.

After another thirty minutes and no contact from Henry, I glance outside, hoping to see his car pull up. It doesn't. Something drops in my chest. I hope everything is okay.

Snow swirls in unapologetic somersaults across the outside world. As much as I love the season, I'm glad to be sheltered by the warmth of my bakery while cleaning up. The Sweet Spot is open for another half hour, but I rarely get anything more than a straggler at this time of day. People are too busy finishing at work to stop in for a coffee or treat.

I step into the back, taking inventory of what I made for tomorrow morning: resting balls of various doughs destined to become savory breads, pecan and apple pies already cooled on the counter, and assorted holiday cookies waiting to be enjoyed. Dishes done. Counters wiped down. A buzzer interrupts the silence. I take the last batch of sugar cut-outs from the oven and place them on a cooling rack. Their decorations are second on my list for the morning, right after putting the doughs in the oven.

I begin to move the cooled pies to the fridge when a chime comes from the front of the bakery.

Thank goodness.

“I’ll be right out, Hen!” I call from the back. Pulling off my red apron, I throw it on a hook by the door and step into the front. “What took so long?”

A man in a clearly expensive suit stands at the register. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Well-dressed. If I didn’t know better, I’d say his jawline was cut from stone.

I’m pretty sure my heart stopped and all the blood rushed to my cheeks. If Henry put the same kind of effort into his appearance as this man did, we would be in bed more often than we are watching movies on the couch, that’s for sure.

“I didn’t realize I was on a time schedule.” Amusement coats his words. The bass of his voice makes me both excited and nervous, like I’m a teenager on her first date.

“I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else. My fiance is running a little late. He was supposed to be here a while ago but...” I trail off. Leave it to me to overshare with a complete stranger. “I’m sorry. Can I help you?”

“No need to apologize and I hope so.” He smiles. It’s crooked and sexy. Everything the leading man in a movie should have. “Coffee, please.”

“Will that be all?” I ask, pushing a button on the computer.

“I don’t suppose you still have any cakes for the day.”

“Full cakes are only made to order, I’m afraid.”

“That’s too bad.” He hands me a couple bucks for the drink. “I was put in charge of bringing dessert to a family dinner tonight. I suppose I’ll just have to stop by Droman’s on the way home and pick something up from there.”

I peer over my shoulder through the window of the swinging kitchen door as I hand him his coffee.

The splash from the hot beverage is mortifying. Turning around and seeing a dark stain saturating the man’s coat might be what the coroner writes on my death certificate.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so, so sorry.” I grab a towel and with panicked motion, reach over the counter and begin wiping the liquid off his coat. He clears his throat. Only then do I realize exactly where I’m wiping and freeze in place. “Oh my god. Oh my god, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s ok.” How he can smile at a time like this is beyond me. I practically frisked him in my bakery. He gently takes the towel from my hand. “I think I got this from here.”

I grab a rag and sop of the spill on the counter as he finishes drying off. My entire face and ears are warm.

“How about you save yourself a trip to the grocery store,” I offer before going into the back, picking up a pecan and an apple pie, and heading back to the man. “Let me box these up for you.”

There’s that smile again. A man this gorgeous shouldn’t be allowed in public. It’s unfair to the world on so many levels.

A short airy laugh parts his lips, dragging me back to reality.
“Are you out of boxes?”

Crap. I was staring.

“No, uh, sorry. They’re just under here.” *Like he cares where you keep the dang boxes, Marley.* “Sorry.”

“Do you always apologize this much?”

“Oh, sorry! Not usually this much,” I admit. I’m sure my cheeks match the color of my hanging apron at this moment. Thank god I took it off. Unless, maybe it would’ve hidden just how embarrassed I am by comparison.

“How much do I owe you?” He pulls out his wallet.

“No charge. They’re on me.” It’s the least I can do for probably ruining his coat. “Tis the season for giving, right?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. I suppose that means you’re the owner?”

“I am.” I hold out my hand. “Marley Winters.”

“Miss Winters.” He reaches out his arm. The thin, scratchy surface of paper scrapes against my skin as he places a manilla envelope in my grip. “Consider yourself served, Miss Winters.”

“What?”

“You’ve been served.”

“I heard that part. What do you mean by it? What exactly am I being served?”

“Your landlord, Weston Ferrar, claims you have not paid rent on this property for the past three months. According to the documents in your hand, you are being evicted and must leave the premises no later than December 31. He’s also taking you to court.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I assure you it’s not. He has every right to do both.”

“No, I mean, it’s impossible that I’m late on rent. Henry pays it every month. He was putting money in the bank today to pay this month’s. There must be a mistake, Mr...”

“Mr. Klaus.”

“As in Santa?” Mr. Klaus cocks an eyebrow. “Sorry, that’s not... Give me a moment to refocus.” A deep inhale does nothing to relieve my confusion. There really must be a mistake. A clerical error or something. *I’m certain rent has been paid. Henry can confirm it.* “Let me just call my fiance. He’ll be able to straighten this out.”

Mr. Klaus looks at his watch and nods. My phone is already to my ear. It rings, and rings, and rings before Henry’s prerecorded voice answers telling me to leave a message. I hang up and call again. The phone rings once before it goes to voicemail. I hold it out in front of me staring at the screen like soon-to-be roadkill.

“Is something wrong Miss Winters?”

“No.” I shake my head trying to convince myself of the fact. “Let me make one more call.”

“Miss Winters, I really must...”

“Please, let me make one more call. I promise I can clear all of this up.” Pity filters across his face. “Please.”

He nods once more. I search my contacts for Greg, Henry’s best friend, and push his name when I find it.

“Yeah?” he answers.

“Greg, it’s Marley. I don’t suppose Henry’s there with you.”

Cruel laughter courses into my ear. “Oh man. He didn’t tell you, did he?”

“Tell me what?”

“Henry left town.”

“What do you mean he left town?”

“He’s gone. Left with his girlfriend this morning.”

“His... his girlfriend?”

“Yup. I was sure he was going to tell you,” Greg utters before hanging up.

A thump sounds against the counter. My empty hand is still shaped as though holding an imaginary phone. A weight presses against my lungs and suddenly the room is blurry and void of oxygen.

“Miss Winters?” Mr. Klaus asks, his voice distant. Is he leaving? “Miss Winters, are you ok?”

I blink, clearing away the fog. Mr. Klaus is still on the other side of the counter.

“Are you ok?” he asks again.

“Yeah.” *Wait. That answer doesn't seem right.* “I mean no. I can't lose my bakery.” His silence is deafening. “What if I can get the money? The overdue rent? I'll raise it and pay it all. Can I keep my bakery then?”

“That's not really how this works.”

“Why not? I don't get a chance to rectify this situation? Give me until... until December 31.”

He stares at me like I belong in an asylum. Maybe I do, but I can't lose my bakery

“I have a party on Christmas Eve. I need some desserts for it. You donate those desserts and I can give you until December 22.”

“That's only three weeks.”

“It's better than none, isn't it?”

He's right. And what other choice do I have?

“Ok. December 22. It's a deal.

DON'T MIX FAMILY AND BUSINESS



-John-

I'm late when I climb the steps to Cecelia's father's house. The renovated and updated British colonial home screams wealth. Then again, the Ferrars are never shy of showcasing their affluence.

"The sooner you get in, the sooner you get out," I remind myself.

When did these dinners between our families begin to feel like an obligation?

High ceilings and the familiar grand staircase greet me as I step inside the foyer.

"John, dear, you're finally here," Cecelia's mom has a habit for stating the obvious. "Cece didn't realize you were going to be late. You should've called."

She takes the two pies from me and hands them to a young woman dressed in a waiter uniform. A brief flash of Miss Winters' face clouds my memory. I don't know why I agreed to give her extra time.

That's not entirely true. I'm a sucker for puppy dog eyes and Miss Winters' were a brilliant shade of bright blue. And she seemed so earnest and determined. But now I get to explain myself to Weston. I'm not sure what makes it harder: the fact that he's my boss or that he's my future father-in-law.

"My apologies, Susan." I shuck my coat and hand it to another member of their staff. The Ferrars come from old money and it shows. On top of that, Weston owns his own firm and has a sizable portion of commercial real estate in the area. One thing the Ferrars never are is wanting.

"Oh, it's fine, dear. Just don't make a habit of it once you and Cece are married." She chortles. We move through the home toward the living room. Each room is meticulously decorated to a level of perfection only achieved in magazines. "You can't keep us Ferrar women waiting."

"Ah, so that's why we're having such a short engagement." I laugh to disguise any annoyance in my tone. Better they think I'm teasing. Susan flutters out a laugh, too, and waves her hand through the air as through swatting away a gnat.

"You know Cece. The girl has been wanting that ring on her finger since you two were sixteen. You kept her waiting long enough."

We step into the living room where our families and a few family friends have gathered. Red, white and silver decorations adorn the area. Poinsettias line the center of the long dining table. Everything screams Christmas almost as loudly as it screams opulence.

“Johnbear, you’re finally here!” Cecelia wraps an arm around me and kisses my cheek. “I was so worried you wouldn’t make it. I was just telling your brother’s wife Susie -
“

“Sarah,” I correct. “James has been married to her for six years.”

“Right, Sarah.” Cecelia giggles like it’s the first time she got the name wrong. “I was just telling Sarah how I used to hate it when you were late all the time when we were teenagers and that I thought you grew out of that.” She giggles again before brushing off an imaginary lint from my shoulder. “Whatever will I do with you, Johnbear. I guess I have a little more training to do before we get married. God forbid you’re late down the aisle!”

“Don’t listen to her, John.” Weston claps a hand on my shoulder. “She’s her mother’s daughter, but that doesn’t mean you’re not in control.”

“Daddy, please.” She finds imaginary lint on his shoulder, too. “There’s no reason any man should keep your baby girl waiting.”

“Well, she’s got me there,” he concedes. “Cece, dear. Do you mind if I steal your fiance away for a few minutes to talk

business?”

“As long as you bring him back, Daddy.” Without a second glance, Cecelia mingles back through the gathering of people.

Weston leads me into his office, the only room in the home not decorated for the season, and closes the door.

“Have a seat, John,” he instructs. He takes his on the other side of a large wood desk and pulls out a crystal decanter. “Brandy?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer before pouring two fingers worth and slides it to me.

“Thank you, sir.” I bring the glass to my mouth.

“You know, I’ve been thinking of making you a partner at my firm.”

I sputter, and for a moment I’m not sure whether the brandy will be shooting out my mouth or get stuck in my throat.

“Sir?” Being a partner in his firm would be a huge step.

Weston continues, “Tell me how today went.”

“The owner has been served the eviction notice and notified that you’ll be taking her to court.”

“Excellent.”

“She requested an extension on paying her debt at the possibility of keeping the property.”

He laughs and shakes his head.

“There’s always a desperate last ditch effort.”

“I gave her until December 22.”

Weston’s laugh stops abruptly. He levels me with a cold stare. The one thing you don’t want to be on the receiving end of is the icy gaze of the head of the Ferrar family. “Explain.”

“I figured there’s no way she will be able to earn the amount she owes within the next few weeks and saw an opportunity to get something out of it. She’ll be baking the desserts for the Christmas party, free of charge.”

No response, cold stare still freezing me to the chair.

“Cecelia will be happy there is one less thing to worry about for the wedding.” Weston comments. His gaze begins to thaw. His daughter is his weak spot and I can use that to my advantage.”Go on...”

“The short engagement means she’s been running around trying to find available vendors for our wedding around one of the busiest times of the year. I’m sure she knew what she was getting into when she decided she wanted to get married on Christmas Eve, but I also felt this could take away at least one stress for her.”

Weston’s mouth pulls up on one side into a calculated and controlled smile.

“With the excellent work you’ve been doing at my firm, the cases you’ve handled this past year, and the fact that you’re marrying my daughter...” He trails off and stands. I follow suit. “Keep up what you’ve been doing and I’ll make you partner in the new year.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Head back to the party. I’ll be out in a bit.”

I turn, buttoning my suit coat, and move toward the door.

“John,” he calls as my hand touches the doorknob. “If your generosity toward this bakery owner, no matter how rapacious your intentions, backfires in any way, you can count your job and your upcoming marriage over.”

WHY ARE YOU HERE, MR. KLAUS?



-Marley-

Kelsey, my occasional assistant, pours four cups of coffee as Mikey and Leo walk up to the locked door. They're the first ones here every morning. Over the years, their arrival time moved up slowly but surely. Now they're here an hour before the bakery opens for business. It's a morning ritual we've come to love.

We take our seats at a table as Kelsey sets the four mugs in front of us. She's far too familiar with eviction. Only a month ago, her bookstore was forced to close by the very same Mr. Ferrar trying to get rid of me.

"So what are you going to do, Mar?" Kelsey asks. She twirls her blonde ponytail round her hand and brings it over her shoulder.

"I don't know. Everything I have is wrapped up in this place. If I lose it, I'm not sure how I'll survive."

“What about a fundraiser?” Leo suggests. His arm snakes around Mikey’s shoulder, and trails down his bicep. Mikey leans into him, holding his mug in both hands.

“I thought about that, but there are so many this time of year, what would make someone donate to me? I think we need something else. Something different that draws a crowd and increases sales.”

Everyone is silent, lost in thought. Snow flurries fall gently outside, each flake a straggler in the sky.

“Icelandic Christmas,” Kelsey announces, slashing through the silence. Excitement twinkles in her eyes. The three of us watch her with raised brows. “In Iceland, they give each other books on Christmas Eve and spend the night reading. What if we take the books I have left over from my shop and give one to everyone who makes a purchase? I know they’re not new books, but the sentiment is the same.”

“I couldn’t ask you to give away your books for free.” I stand and grab the pot of coffee to kickstart my sleepless mind.

“Why not? I don’t need them now. I’m losing money having to pay for storage.” Kelsey holds her mug up for it to be topped off.

“Free stuff would bring people in, Mar,” Leo says, shaking his head when I offer to pour more morning life into his cup.

“And who doesn’t love a good book?” asks Mikey.

The heat from the mug warms my hands as I mimic Mikey's hold. I bring it to my lips. Kelsey's idea has potential and it's already better than the nothing I've come up with..

"Ok, let's do it!" I smile. "How soon can we get the books here?"

"I can go grab some now before the bakery opens for the day."

"We can help," Mikey offers.

"Thank you, guys, so much. This feels like a step in the right direction!"

They each gulp down the remaining coffee in their mugs and Kelsey grabs her coat. I hand her the key in case they're back before the place opens and they set off into the snowy dawn.

I step into the back of the bakery. The aroma of baking bread infiltrates the air. If anyone asked, I'd say morning in a bakery is the best smell on earth.

My batch of artisan loaves is nearly done in the oven and the babka will be ready to go in within minutes. After that, the French rolls and baguettes.

Kelsey and I already decorated the cutouts, the crackle cookies are dusted with powdered sugar, and an array of other sweets are waiting to be placed in the displays.

The door chime rings from the front.

“Did you forget something, Kelse?” I call out while pulling the loaves from the oven and setting them on a cooling rack. She doesn’t respond.

I turn to see what she needs only to find Mr. Klaus standing in front of the swinging door.

“What are you doing here?” I refuse to hide the annoyance in my voice. The last person I want to see is this man, especially this early in the morning. “Better yet, how’d you get in?”

“The door was unlocked.” He steps in further.

“It wasn’t supposed to be. My assistant just ran out to grab... something.” He doesn’t need to know about the books.

He looks around the kitchen and takes another step forward. Curiosity creases his brow and purses his full lips.

“Why are you here, Mr. Klaus? This is still my bakery. You can’t come waltzing in anytime you’d like. Besides, we had a deal. I won’t be intimidated to back out of it.”

A genuine smile pulls up the corners of his mouth. Leave it to the universe to send me the most handsome executioner. I shouldn’t be attracted to the guy helping destroy my livelihood.

“I’m only here for a cup of coffee. You still sell coffee to paying customers, I assume? Besides, you need the money, right?”

I glare at his snark. “I don’t like you.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

I motion toward the front, and he takes the hint. The door swings twice before I follow.

“If you’re here to taunt me, you can leave,” I say as I walk around the counter and to the door. Snow falls harder now and there’s no sign of Kelsey, Mikey or Leo. They’ve only been gone for maybe fifteen minutes, so I shouldn’t be worried.

“Like I said, I’m just here for a cup of coffee. It’s early and cold.”

The lock latches with a firm click when I turn it.

“Are you trying to keep me prisoner, Miss Winters?”

“Hardly.” I move back around the counter. “Just coffee?”

“Just coffee.”

“Fine.” I pour it and hold out the filled to go cup for him to take. Our fingers glide against each other, sending a jolt of electricity skittering up my arm. I pull away. His brows furrow but I don’t have to explain myself to him. “That’s \$2.35.”

He places three dollar bills on the counter and heads toward the door.

“Keep the change,” he says. He twists the lock. “You’ll need it.”

Then he’s gone.

•••••

The house is dark when I arrive home after the long day at the bakery. There’s no sign of life in my shadowed windows. I

should remember to leave a light on in the morning before I leave.

I flip a switch as I step into the kitchen. Light floods the area. The place is silent. Henry's not here calling from the other room and asking what's for dinner. There's no echo of screeching tires or gunshots from his video game. In fact, there's no indication that he ever lived here.

I go into the living room and hit the switch there, too. More illumination.

My tree stands in front of the window, decorated with ornaments and a strand of twinkling lights. There's a moment of silence for what I'm about to do but I see no other way.

I grab the crate from the closet, step to the Fraser fir, and begin dismantling. One by one, I pluck each ornament from the tree, wrap them in tissue, and place them in a crate until the evergreen is once again void of Christmas spirit.

I continue until any indication of the holiday is gone from my home, save a single stocking hanging near the faux fireplace.

ICELANDIC CHRISTMAS



-John-

I hear the faint jingle of the bell for the eighteen-hundredth time today, and stress has me gritting my teeth. When I had stopped by the other day, there was no indication Marley Winters had a plan. Yet, through my car's window, I watch person after person step into the bakery. Even foot traffic pauses by Marley's festive stand sign and inevitably goes inside.

I'm parked too far down to see what the sign says. It doesn't help that daylight has faded away and the glare from the lights along the sidewalk gives uneven lights and shadows. Why is the bakery still open? I was sure she closed at 3:30 each day. It's reaching 5:00.

“You still with me, John?” My brother James asks through the phone.

“Yeah, sorry, man. Just distracted for a moment. What were you saying?”

“Sarah and I were wondering if you and Cecelia were available for dinner sometime next week.”

Good ol’ James, always trying to include my fiancé. I don’t have the heart to tell him she hates these intimate family dinners with just the four of us and his kids. It doesn’t help that Cecelia and Sarah never quite got to any level of friendship. They’re too different. Sarah has homemaker DNA in her blood. Cecelia is used to others doing the work for her.

“Sure, I’m sure we can swing something. Let me check with Cee and get back to you.” We say our goodbye and hang up.

Cecelia would hate it if she heard me call her that. It’s either Cecelia or Cece. Any other variation makes her skin crawl.

Three more people stop in front of The Sweet Spot, glance at the sign, say something to each other, and go inside.

“Might as well get this over with,” I say out loud. I turn off the ignition and brace for the chill of winter in the outside air.

Stepping into the crisp evening and pulling my coat closed, I move down the sidewalk toward the bakery door. As I get closer, the sign becomes clear:

**Celebrate an
Icelandic Christmas!**

**Buy a coffee,
get a FREE book!**

Below the wording are well drawn images of a steaming mug and an open book. The storefront is decorated for the holidays. Red, green, and white lights twinkle around the perimeter of the large window, highlighting the shop's name. A wreath hangs on the door. I move into the bakery. The decorations don't stop at the door, either. A tree, trimmed with ornaments and lights, stands in the corner. Red and green garlands drape back and forth along the ceiling. It's a smart move on Marley's part and I'm impressed. The holiday displays, along with the warmth and delicious aromas, bring instant comfort.

Some standing shelves have been placed along the far wall. A tall man in a festive sweater stands near them, helping customers pick out their free book. At the counter, a familiar blond woman is taking an order. She wears a Santa hat and a bright smile.

Where do I know her from?

"Coffee, please," I say when I reach the counter. "Also, I'm looking for Marley. Is she around?"

Without missing a beat, and without even a glance in my direction, the woman steps back and pushes open the swinging door a few inches.

"Hey, Mar! Someone's here to see you!" The cheer in her voice matches the smile on her face. Then she pours some

coffee in a to-go cup, hands it to me, and goes back to work as though the interruption was a fading dream.

The smile on Marley's face radiates across the room as she steps through the door. My cold heart shivers when her joy falls the moment her eyes land on me.

"You're here again. Aren't you getting tired of checking in on the bakery? Every day?"

"Surprisingly, no." If anything, I'm intrigued.

"Well, Mr. Klaus, why are you here this time?" She's dusted in flour and powder, and the bun on her head is nearly in shambles, but none of that detracts from her beauty. There's not a hint of makeup on her face, but she glows brighter than the holiday lights. Her Christmas green eyes are outlined with thick, dark lashes, but it's all natural. You know what you get with Marley Winters.

Cecelia's painted face flashes in my mind. When was the last time I saw her without makeup or products in her hair? When we were twelve, probably. But that's Cecelia. Anything less than what she considers perfection isn't acceptable.

"I don't have all day, Santa."

Her tease takes me by surprise. There's no resentment in it, just joking, and I don't want to take that away.

"I have some shopping to do in the area and thought I'd grab a coffee." I hold up my to-go cup. "And I figured I'd see how you were doing. Are you staying open later?"

“A necessary evil if I want to earn more and pay off my debt.”

“You seem to have a lot of business today.”

“Does that worry you?”

“Not yet.”

She points at the cup in my hand. “Should you really be buying your coffee from me? That seems like a conflict of interest.”

“I’m sure the cost of one cup of coffee won’t affect the outcome.”

“Who knows. It might be all I need to reach my goal one of these days.”

She’s right. I’m only contributing to her potential success. I shouldn’t buy any more coffee from her.

Even as I think it, I know that I will.

“So, what’s going on here?” I ask. “Free books? You honestly believe that will increase your sales?”

“It already has. People love holiday traditions. An Icelandic Christmas at the bakery let’s people celebrate the holiday early, get a free book, and have a hot cup of coffee. If I’m lucky, which I have been so far today,” she motions toward a woman leaving the shop with a coffee in one hand. In the other, she balances her book on top of a boxed dessert. “They’ll end up purchasing more.”

“Won’t the cost of the books cut into your profits?”

“They were donated.” Marley points toward the blonde. “Kelsey was evicted from her used bookstore just over a month ago. Remember her? These books were her remaining stock.”

I remember. I served the eviction notice that time, too. It is all part of Weston’s plan to force out his tenants so he could cheaply renovate the buildings and lease them out for a higher cost. I didn’t think she’d lose her shop completely. I figured she’d be evicted and have to find a new location. Seeing her here, teaming up with Marley, gives me uncomfortably mixed feelings... ones that I’m going to ignore for now.

“People really fall for the gimmick of getting something for free, don’t they?” I ask. I’m not sure what kind of response I expect. Marley stares at me, contemplation in her eyes. Then she steps around me and moves toward the bookshelves. It takes only a second before she pulls one off the shelf and returns to me.

“Your free book with your coffee purchase.” She holds it out in front of her for me to take.

“A Christmas Carol.”

“Have you read it?”

“No,” I admit, “but everyone knows the story. Bah humbug.”

“Well, it’s yours now. You should read it.”

“Are you telling me I’m Scrooge?” Because sometimes I feel like I am. Here is a woman giving me a gift when the only

thing I've given her are essentially her walking papers.

“I hate to break the bad news, but you can't be both Santa and Scrooge at the same time. So you better figure out which one you want to be.” She winks.

My phone vibrates inside my pocket.

“Thank you for the book,” I say, sliding it into my coat pocket and pulling out my phone.

“You're welcome.” The phone in my hand keeps vibrating. Marley looks at me expectantly. “Well, I need to get back to work. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Mr. Klaus.”

“You, too, Miss Winters.”

A RIDE HOME



-Marley-

I flip the open-close sign to let those still shopping in the area know we are closed for the evening. The door is locked for good measure. Kelsey wipes counters and tabletops while Mikey reorganizes the remaining books. If tomorrow is as successful as today was, we'll run out of books and have to come up with our next plan.

"I can't believe how successful the day was," Kelsey mentions, tossing the towel she was using into the kitchen.

"All thanks to you." I pour us coffee and grab some leftover treats. Those left in the glass case have been divided into boxes and will be sent home between Kelsey and Mikey, save a muffin for me for morning. Everything is baked fresh at The Sweet Spot. "Your generosity got me a little closer to my goal."

“How much closer?” Mikey asks. He sets one final book on the shelf and joins us at the counter.

“There’s still a ways to go, but if we can keep coming up with ideas like Kelsey’s, I’m confident I can earn enough to pay off the debt.” I hand them the boxes. “Thank you for today but it’s late and you both deserve to go home.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Mikey jokes. “Running a bakery is exhausting, Mar. Have you considered remote work? Or finding a sugar daddy?”

I laugh. Leave it to Mikey to consider finding a sugar daddy to be a reasonable source of income. “If this all fails, I’ll keep those in mind.”

We move toward the door as they put on their coats, scarves and other winter accessories.

“The wind’s really starting to pick up.” Kelsey comments as she pulls her scarf closer to her body. “Look at the snow whipping around.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride, Mar?” Mikey asks.

“I’ll be ok. I still have a few things to do but the two of you should get home. The snowfall is still light. I’ll just bundle up against the wind.”

I unlock the door and shoo them out quickly before they can protest. My efforts were in vain and a gust chills the front of the bakery.

As soon as they’re out of sight, I go into the kitchen to check inventory. Like every other end of the day in this

bakery, I go through my checklist. Cookies made and cooling. Doughs resting. Fillings made and ready for their desserts.

Satisfied everything is as it should be, I throw on my scarf, bundle into my coat, and grab my to-go cup of hot coffee.

The hateful wind flings the door wide as I open it. Somehow I manage to keep hold of my coffee. Right now, its heat is a lifeline for this walk home.

The wind whistles. Snow distorts the world around me. And I can't get the darn door closed. Between the wind and clumps of snow stuck behind it, the thing won't budge. I'm just about to sever my lifeline when a pair of gloved hands grip the door frame around me.

"Let me help with that, Miss Winters." Mr Klaus towers behind me. We pull the door shut and I lock it. I turn toward him. He stands close, blocking the wind.

"Thank you, Mr - "

"I think we've interacted enough where you can call me John." He smiles as though letting me in on an inside joke.

"John." I expect it to feel strange coming out of my mouth. The formality of using surnames keeps him at an appropriate distance considering he's the one who started this mess. First name basis is reserved for friends or acquaintances. Then again. I suppose I've seen him enough these past days where some might consider us acquaintances. At the same time, he did serve me the eviction papers. Can I really be friends with someone who did that? "I think I'll stick to Mr. Klaus."

“The weather is getting nasty,” he says. “And the ground is getting a bit icy in areas. Can I walk you to your car?”

He wants to walk me to my car? This man is an anomaly. How can someone do something so awful one moment and be so kind the next? I suppose the serving of papers weren't his fault, specifically. He was just doing his job. He really doesn't have as much blame as Mr. Ferrar or Henry.

“Marley?” My name on his lips sounds foreign but not wrong.

“Sorry.”

The air in front of him crystallizes from the warmth of his laugh.

“You should stop apologizing all the time.”

“Maybe you don't apologize enough.”

“I guess I never thought of it like that. Perhaps I don't.” He steps back, putting enough distance between us that the wind makes me shiver again. “Where's your car? I'll walk you to it and then we can be on our way.”

“I don't have a car anymore. I've been walking to and from work.”

“Why not take the bus?”

I smirk. “That would negate the cup of coffee you bought today and I rather like the idea of you contributing to my success.”

“Then I'll give you a ride home.”

“Oh, I couldn’t - “

“I’m not that much of a Scrooge that I’d force a woman to walk home in a snowstorm. The weather is only going to get worse. Let me give you a lift. It’s the least I can do.”

I nod.

He offers me his arm and leads me to his car, opening the door for me.

“Thank you,” I say.

He leans down so we are face to face. “That’s the second time you’ve thanked me in under ten minutes.”

“So?”

“I’m starting to think you don’t actually dislike me.”

I watch him for a moment. His dark eyes shimmer and when he smiles I can’t help but smile, too.

“No, I suppose I don’t, John.”

WINTER WONDERLAND



-John-

I sidle into the driver's seat. Marley holds one hand in front of the heaters and sips from the coffee cup in the other. The snowflakes caught in her chestnut hair have melted, giving her locks a natural just-out-of-the-shower appearance. My mouth dries at the image my mind creates. Swallowing is nearly impossible.

When I had seen her struggling with the door, she looked like an incredibly determined damsel in distress. Marley was going to get that door closed if it was the last thing she did. Her hair had glistened with snow under the streetlights. Her cheeks tinted rose from the cold and wind. Despite struggling and freezing, she was beautiful.

Is beautiful.

The lack of those elements doesn't erase that fact. She turns her head and catches me staring. A softer pink colors her cheeks this time.

"I live off Evergreen Boulevard." She tucks her hair behind her ear. "Do you know where that is?"

"I do. You were really going to walk that far in this?" On a temperate day, the walk would be easy. Twenty minutes tops. In a near blizzard, it would be a miserable death trap.

"I don't have much of a choice. Henry took my car when he left." She glances out the window as I start the car. Thankfully the plows have kept up with the roads.

"Henry is your fiancé?"

"*Was.*" Marley turns back toward me. "I'm not pathetic enough to still want a cheater and a thief."

"Thief?"

"He's the reason I'm behind on rent," she says. "I thought he'd been paying it each month. Turns out he's been putting it in his personal account so he could skip town with his secret girlfriend."

"Ouch." Guilt creeps through me. She's being evicted and it isn't even her fault. Weston won't give a damn, but it doesn't seem right.

"Yeah." Marley huffs out a laugh. "Lesson learned, I guess."

"What lesson is that?"

"I don't actually know. Don't mix business with pleasure?"

“Don’t date jerks?” I offer.

She laughs. “That’s a good one, too.”

“Something I don’t understand, though, is why not just borrow the money to pay it back?”

“From who?”

“Family? Friends?”

“What kind of world do you live in where your family and friends have three months worth of rent to just hand out freely?”

“What do you mean?”

We pull up to a stoplight and I look at her. Her eyebrows are high on her forehead in incredulity.

“My friends don’t have that kind of money. And my family lives overseas,” she answers. “Light’s green.”

I drive forward. Snow is coming down faster than before, collecting on the roads.

“We live in modern days, Marley. Money can be transferred easily from overseas.”

“Yes but my parents look more fondly onto their children when we can survive on our own. They already think I’m crazy for opening a bakery instead of getting a degree in engineering or computer science or something that might make me rich. If I asked for the money, they’d use it as an opportunity to tell me to give up.” The catch in her voice pulls my attention back toward her for a moment. I expect to see

tears. Instead, Marley holds her head high, gives a slight shake of the head, and seems to brush off any hurt she might feel. “Turn right up here.”

I follow her direction and my eyes widen with surprise. Most houses on the street are lit up with lights. They reflect off the snow in a dazzling effect. Oversized candy canes, snowmen, and fake Santas with reindeer decorate the yards. Christmas bulbs and wreaths hang from windows and doors.

“It’s a mini winter wonderland.”

“The people on my street like to go all out for holidays. I love this place around Christmas. There’s something about lights and holiday decor that make everything right with the world.” She points to a dark plot beyond a row of her neighbor’s lights. “I’m up here on the left.”

Contrasting the bright and extravagant decorations of her neighbors, Marley’s house is bare. There’s nothing to indicate celebration or holiday enjoyment. It’s as though the winter wonderland deemed her property unworthy of its celebration.

I pull into her driveway and park.

“You haven’t had time to decorate?”

“I did. And then I took it all down.” She must see the confusion on my face. “The bakery needed it more.”

“You brought all your Christmas decorations to the bakery? Why?”

She shrugs. “I still get the holiday cheer each day and now so do my customers.”

I can't pinpoint it, but something about that small sacrifice is equally tragic as it is admirable.

"If you didn't need to increase profits, would you have still done that?" I don't know why that's so important for me to know.

"Probably not," she admits. "But that seems a little selfish now." Silence temporarily engulfs the car. "Well, I should get inside. Thank you for the ride, John. I'd be a snowman by now had I walked home."

She gets out of the car and goes inside. A light flicks on somewhere in the house.

Guilt again crawls through me. Marley brought her personal holiday cheer to share with the bakery's customers. That only happened because she's being evicted, which only happened because someone she trusted stole her hard earned money. If she's telling the truth, none of this was her fault.

"You're just the messenger, John," I whisper to myself .
"None of this is your fault, either."

Little comfort comes from my assertion, so I keep repeating it in my head the whole way home.

ON THE CUTTING BOARD



-John-

I stand at my eleventh-floor office window looking out across a world covered in a couple of feet of snow. Thankfully, the roads are completely cleared from the other night's blizzard and business is back to normal for the city.

I turn back to my computer and sit down. An array of wreaths is showcased on the screen. I scroll through them, trying to find one that fits what I need. The green leafy wreaths are typical, boring. I need something different.

Opening a new tab, I type *unique wreaths* into the search engine. I don't expect much to come of such a generic search. Once again, green leafy wreaths pop up on the screen.

Boring.

But as I scroll down, a colorful circle catches my attention. I click the link.

Ornament wreaths. In all sizes and themes. Each wreath is formed from delicate glass bulbs and distinctive embellishments. A blue and silver wreath is carefully accessorized with shimmering snowflakes. Another wreath includes bronze and brown bulbs with gingerbread men placed around the circumference as though they're dancing.

These are exactly what I was hoping to find. Scrolling through the options, I find one that's classically Christmas and add it to the cart.

Before I have a chance to check out, Weston parades into my office and sits himself down on the couch. He crosses his legs, ankle to knee, and entwines his fingers on his lap. With quiet self-assurance, he stares at me.

This is Weston's intimidation tactic. Most people don't last more than five seconds in the silence. I manage to make it to ten.

"How can I help you, Weston?" I ask, closing the tabs on the computer. I'm not dumb enough to let the intimidation work and rattle off a bunch of details. That's exactly what he wants. He finds out most of his information that way, and it's the quickest route to losing your job.

"Update me on the bakery situation." That's exactly what I didn't want him to say. Not to mention his stern demeanor emphasizes his annoyance toward me for making the deal with Marley.

“The situation is under control. The owner has tried a few tactics but nothing that will generate enough money to pay the debt.”

“You’re sure about that?”

No. Marley is smart. She knows what customers want.

“Yes, sir. I’m sure.” The lie comes out easily enough. Weston lifts his head and tilts it the slightest degree to the side. His eyes narrow, inspecting me. He’s trying to figure out if I’m lying.

Unexpectedly, he stands and buttons his suit coat. He moves toward the door.

“I hope you’re right, son,” he says as he gets closer to the exit. Weston never calls me son. “I’d hate for you to be wrong.”

There’s the threat.

“I’m not, but what would happen if I were?” I ask, shuffling some papers into a pile on my desk. Part of me even hopes I’m wrong.

Weston turns back.

“You’re a great lawyer, John, and have done a lot for this firm. You also have a lot of leeway around here simply because you’re marrying Cecelia. However, if I lose money because of this bakery deal, you can kiss the partnership goodbye and your standing with this firm won’t be as...” he pauses as though looking for the right word, “stable... as it is now. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Completely.

If Marley earns enough to keep her bakery, I’m out of a job. It’s her or me on the cutting board.

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After the conversation with Weston, I find myself sitting in my car staring at the bakery. It’s busy again today. Perhaps even busier than the other day.

Two men stand out front handing classic red Christmas stockings to customers walking into the store and intercepting others who might pass the bakery by. From what I’ve seen during the last ten minutes, they’ve been successful at convincing the would-be-passers-by to stop. A line of people starts forming along the window of the bakery.

A customer exits the bakery carrying their red stocking, now full, and another customer is permitted inside.

With a sigh, I get out of the car and walk up to The Sweet Spot. As I reach the door, one of the men steps in front of me, blocking me from going inside.

“Sorry, but I have to ask you to move to the back of the line.” He points down the sidewalk. The tip of his nose is reddened from the cold. If he weren’t clearly over six feet tall, he could easily be one of Santa’s helpers in his bright red peacoat and green scarf with a matching hat.

“I’m here to see Marley Winters,” I assert. I’m not sure why I think that will do the trick. The man stares at me through

thick, black-rimmed glasses with a knowing look.

“Ah, so you’re the Scrooge,” he says. “Go on in. Though I doubt she’ll be happy that you’re here again.” He smirks. “Then again, maybe she will be.”

Inside is bustling. The same blonde woman from the other day, I believe Marley said her name was Kelsey, serves customers from behind the counter as they point to various baked goods in the glass showcase. Each dessert is wrapped in parchment and placed in a stocking.

The kitchen door swings open. Marley walks out balancing two trays in her hands with the poise and grace of any career dancer. Strands of hair have fallen from the loose bun on her head, framing her rosy cheeks.

Like any well-oiled machine, Kelsey opens the case and Marley sets the trays on the shelves. She then spins back through the door, disappearing from view. The customers descend on the newly placed desserts like starved vultures, calling out to Kelsey as they leave fingerprints on the glass from pointing.

Using their distraction to my benefit, I sneak past the counter and through the swinging door. Marley continues her dance in the kitchen. She moves seamlessly from the ovens to the racks and back, humming Christmas carols as she works. Each turn from the ovens produces more cookies and desserts. Despite the craziness out front, Marley is flawless in the kitchen. She’s so engrossed in taking a tray of cutouts off the

cooling rack and placing them on the island that she hasn't noticed me.

"Were you ever a dancer?" I ask. Marley startles with a quick breath but keeps moving.

"Oh my... you scared me, John." A flush of pink washes over her cheeks. "I took lessons as a kid. Why?"

I knew it.

"No reason." Watching her move around her kitchen is like watching the ballet.

"You're handsome when you smile." It's said so casually, I almost miss it.

"Was I smiling?" I ask.

"You usually are when you're here." She grabs a bag of green icing and begins piping on to the cookies. With smooth, seamless movements, Marley outlines the edges and then fills in the middle. She goes from one cookie to the next, repeating her actions. When she gets to the final cookie, she grabs another bag of icing. Red lines begin to appear on each cutout.

I move closer, fascinated by her ease and precision. The tray is filled with tiny, identical Christmas trees, each decorated with garland, ornaments, and a shining star at the top.

"Impressive." The compliment seems lacking compared to what I'm watching.

"Thank you," she says. Marley turns away and grabs another set of undecorated cookies. Bare ornaments line the

tray and I find myself excited to see what she turns them into. She pools every other one in red and green icing.

A buzzer sounds in the room. Marley grabs two potholders and shoves them in my hands. She points at the ovens. “Take out the tarts and set them over there on the rack.”

Wait, what?

As I try to make sense of what just happened, I find myself moving toward the stove, taking out the tray of bite-sized tarts, and placing them to cool. I return to Marley, who is still decorating the cookies. With white icing, she draws dots and lines over each one until there are sixteen unique and intricate ornaments sitting in front of her. Then, with a pair of tweezers, she takes a small piece of gold foil and places it on the ornament cap.

“Aren’t you going to ask why I’m here?” I ask.

“Nah. I’ve given up on that. I’m sure you’ll have a coffee in your hand at some point.” Her lips lift in a teasing smile. I’m suddenly hopeful.

I return the grin. “Ah, yes. I knew something was missing. Your assistant looked busy. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“She is. We are. Here.” She hands me the trays of trees and ornaments, spins me around, and nudges me out the door before I can ask what I’m supposed to do with them.

A line of people twists through the bakery, out the door, and down the sidewalk. Kelsey keeps her composure as customers wait patiently.

“Excuse me,” I say. “Where should I put these?”

Kelsey takes the trays from me. “Don’t just stand there. Start helping.”

“Uh, what?”

“It’s Stuff a Stocking Day.”

“I saw the sign, but what am I supposed to do?”

“People buy a stocking for \$12. They’ll tell you what they want to put in them - anything from the case. Wrap each treat in parchment then put it in the stocking. When the stocking is full, hand it to the customer.”

“How is this cost-effective? It seems that the amount of food going into the stocking is worth more than \$12.”

“You’ll see.” Kelsey steps over to the register where a silver-haired woman stands with her stocking.

“How can I help you?” Kelsey asks.

“I’ll have a peppermint tea to go, please,” the woman responds. A smile lands on her face. “Oh, and I’d like to place an order for a carrot cake for Saturday. Festive decorations. It’s for an early holiday party.”

Kelsey shoots me a knowing glance. “Can I have a name for the order, ma’am?”

“Edith Taylor.”

“Would you like anything else today?” Kelsey asks.

Mrs. Taylor glances across the menu board. Her eyes land on something that makes them sparkle like Christmas lights. “I

suppose I should grab some of those delicious blueberry muffins to bring to lunch with the ladies. I'll take six of those, please.”

“Sounds wonderful, Mrs. Taylor.” Kelsey hands me a box from under the counter and points at the muffins. I take the cue and put six muffins in the box. When I set it on the counter, Kelsey turns back to Mrs. Taylor. “We'll have the carrot cake ready for pick up at 10 on Saturday morning.” She presses some buttons on the computer. “And your total for the stocking, tea, muffins, and cake comes to \$63.24.”

Mrs. Taylor hands Kelsey some cash and digs the exact change from her purse. She leaves with a bounce in her step.

“That's ingenious.”

“That's Marley.”

Marley. From the moment she found out she was being evicted, Marley Winters has proven she doesn't go down without a fight. I have never met anyone with quite her level of determination and self-preservation.

I skim and gaze across the bakery. A red stocking is grasped in every hand. Part of me wants to go back into the kitchen, pick up more trays, and bring them out to the case. The other part wants to run. Marley's creativity and knack for business could be exactly what will save her bakery.

If I lose money because of this bakery deal, you can kiss the partnership goodbye.

Weston's words ring through my head, a reminder of what is at stake. If she succeeds, where does that leave me? The crowd in the bakery has become stifling. Heat radiates through my body. I undo the top button of my coat. The door opens as one customer exits and another comes in. The frigid air is a respite from the sweltering indoors.

I need to leave.

Without another word, I veer toward the door, swing it open, and rush out into the cold reprieve.

I'D HATE TO BE THE MAN GOING UP AGAINST YOU



-Marley-

Lights twinkle across the bakery and winter decals stick to the windows. More garland and ornaments hang along the counters than before. Christmas music plays quietly in the background. Mikey even added more decoration to the tree.

The Sweet Spot is officially the most festive business on the block.

“The place looks amazing, Mar,” he says as we sit back and enjoy the view.

“It does, doesn’t it?” I sip the coffee in my hand. “Thank you for your help, Mikey. I’m not sure what I would’ve done without you and Leo and Kelsey.”

“You would’ve still done what needed to be done. The Marley Winters I know doesn’t give up without a fight.”

A gentle rat-a-tat-tat on the door draws our attention. Leo stands beyond the glass. Falling snow catches on his black coat and hat. He rubs his gloved hands together. Mikey goes to the door, unlocking it and letting Leo in.

“Did you two see the advertisement in today’s paper? If that doesn’t get the bakery some attention, I don’t know what will,” Leo says. He shucks off his winter layers and peers around the bakery. “Wow! This place looks amazing! What else needs to happen before we open?”

We. My friends are incredible. They’ve taken on my fight as their own even though they didn’t have to, and I’m sure they’re busy with life outside of the bakery. Their selflessness keeps me going.

“The trays in the back on the island need to go in the case. Other than that, I think we’re good for now.”

Without another word, Leo walks into the kitchen. It isn’t long before he’s in and out of the back, grabbing the trays and stocking the case for the day. Mikey puts on another pot of coffee in the few minutes before we unlock the door for customers. I grab the standing sign to put out front.

“Are you sure you should be giving something away for free this time?” Mikey asks. “The books were one thing because they didn’t cost you anything to start. Not to mention the Stock a Stuffing event was only a couple of days ago. I know that it generated a good profit thanks to people buying more things, but can you afford to keep giving away freebies?”

“It’s not about the money today, Mikey.”

I lean the sign against the wall for us to look at. Colorful drawings of presents and toys outline the perimeter of the chalkboard. Red and green playful letters dance in the middle of the sign.

Toys for Tots

**Give a toy,
get a FREE coffee!**

“Giving brings goodness,” I say. “I can spare some extra bags of coffee if it means bringing smiles and happiness to the lives of children.”

Mikey puts his arm around my shoulders and leans his head against mine.

“Then let’s get these kids some gifts,” he says. He lets go and grabs the sign. When he opens the door to place it on the sidewalk, hope drifts into the bakery with the breeze.

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Ninety minutes after opening, a pit grows in my stomach. We’ve had a small handful of customers, far fewer than most days. Each one bought a single coffee and left. There’s no pile of toys under the tree for charity and today’s event seems to be disappearing like it was only ever a passing dream.

“Maybe we advertised it too late,” I say.

Mikey leans against the back counter, arms crossed over his impeccably ugly Christmas sweater. “Maybe the world has turned into one big community of Scrooges.”

“Be patient,” Leo says. He pours himself a cup of coffee. “The ad only went out this morning. People need time to get a gift for the drive before they rush on over here. Remember that stores don’t open as early as you do, Mar.”

“I just hope people see the ad.” I wipe the counter, counting the lines in the grain.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.” I look up as Leo points out the window. A group of five people walks toward the bakery, unwrapped toys in hand. The chime sounds when one of the men in the group holds the door open for the others.

“Where should we put the toys?” an auburn-haired woman asks. She lightly stomps the snow off her boots as she walks over the entry mat. Mikey points toward a large wrapped box by the tree. She prances toward the bin and places her donation in the bottom of it. “Are we the first ones here? I was sure there’d be a crowd already.”

“I think we just beat it.” The man who held the door open says. The rest of us follow his gaze out the window. A dozen more people walk toward the shop. Others are getting out of their cars. Even a few of the early morning customers have come back with gifts for the drive.

“That’s my cue,” Leo says. He throws on his coat and winter accessories and steps into the frosty day.

“Let me get your coffees,” Mikey offers. The five customers move toward the counter and eye the goodies in the case. As they get their coffees, each asks for a baked good to go.

Like a pro, Leo assembles people in a line outside the bakery window and lets them inside one by one. More presents are placed in the box, more customers get their free coffee, and more treats are purchased.

Mikey and I stand behind the counter serving customers. An elderly gentleman points to a series of cookies as I place them in a box.

“He just can’t stay away, can he?” Mikey asks. Confusion furrows my brows. He gestures toward the parking lot. John leans against his car staring toward the bakery. A flutter twists through my stomach and my skin prickles with giddiness. “And by the looks of it, you don’t want him to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you smile so big.”

“Oh, stop it,” I reprimand. “I just appreciate his occasional business even if he’s on the side of the enemy.”

“Keep kidding yourself, hon. He may have handed you the notice but that man is not on the side of the enemy, Mar.”

I watch as John continues to lean against his car. His eyes catch mine. A small flutter of movement shifts his body but his gaze doesn’t break.

I smile.

He doesn’t.

A tremor flits through my gut.

“I wonder why he’s not coming in.”

Mikey shrugs and hands another customer a coffee and banana walnut muffin.

John rushed out quickly the other day without saying goodbye. Maybe he was offended when I put him to work. He hadn't seemed to mind at the time, but it's also not his job to do mine.

He works for your landlord, Marley. The same landlord who is evicting you from your business. Helping out at the bakery would be a conflict of interest.

The reminder doesn't help ease the ache forming in my chest.

A line has already formed outside from those donating gifts, bringing more customers inside and pulling my focus away from John to my work. The toys are piling up in the bin and not a single person leaves with only the free coffee. By the time I get a second to glance outside again a half an hour later, John is gone.

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“Thank god, you're here,” I call out to Kelsey as she squeezes through the door. She weaves her way through the people to get to the counter. “I'm sorry I had to call you in on your day off, but...” I wave my hand in the air toward the sea of customers. Every table is full with people. Customers wait in line for their free coffees while others wait in line to put a toy in the donation bin. Leo continues to manage the queue outside.

“Don’t worry about it, Mar.” Kelsey throws on her apron and takes my place at the counter so I can take care of baking and prepping in the kitchen. When I step in the back, the clamor of conversation out front dulls to a muffle. I press the radio on. Christmas music overtakes the murmur of customers and I fall into my pattern.

Muffins and tarts are pulled from the ovens and set on cooling racks. Icing is carefully drizzled over cookies. Pies are cut into slices and placed in individual containers.

I bring an assortment of goodies out front and put them in the case before heading back into the kitchen. I toss a batch of cutouts into the oven and then crush sandwich cookies for no-bake cheesecake tarts.

Just as I’m finishing pouring the filling in the tarts, Kelsey pushes the door open.

“We need you out here, Mar!” she calls before quickly pivoting back out. I wipe my hands on my apron and step out front, expecting another onslaught of business.

Surprisingly, business has tamed. There are still several people in the bakery, but the scramble to keep up has subsided. Kelsey and Mikey manage the front with ease.

“What’s up Kelse? Something wrong?”

“Not at all.” She nods behind me. “You have a visitor.”

I turn. John stands near the corner behind the counter and case. He balances a LEGO kit and Nerf blaster in one hand

while holding a packaged baseball bat, glove and ball set in the other.

“You brought toys.” The obviousness of my statement makes me want to facepalm and run into the kitchen.

“I wasn’t sure what ages to get for, so I went with what I’d get my nephews.”

“These are great, thank you,” I say. My cheeks are starting to ache. Mikey’s words come to mind and I tone down my smile from overzealous to appreciative. I move closer to John and take the baseball set from him. “We can put them over here.”

The bin is overflowing with toys. Donations are leaning against the bin and scattered under the tree.

“It looks like today was a success,” he mentions. We set the toys down and turn toward each other. “Did you make a good profit?”

“You know, I’m not sure,” I admit. Not only have I had no time to check but I hadn’t been thinking about it. “I’m just glad the toy drive went as well as it did. I was worried at first.”

“You shouldn’t worry, Marley.” He steps closer. The air in the bakery changes, sparks to life. “Your event pinpoints everything people are looking for at this time of year: a way to feel good about themselves and free stuff.”

“True.” I let out a light laugh. “Maybe I shouldn’t have been worried then.”

“Besides, from what I’ve seen, you are too determined to fail.” His hand reaches my cheek and gently swipes across it. The touch burns my skin and staggers my heart. *Can he feel it, too?* “Flour,” he explains.

“I’ve been baking,” I whisper. His deep brown eyes glisten by the lights on the tree.

“Don’t worry about things going wrong.” His hand drops. “You achieve everything you set out to do. It’s impressive. I’d hate to be the man going up against you.”

Is he talking about Mr. Ferrar or himself?

I clear my throat and swallow. “I didn’t think you’d be coming in today.”

“And miss out on my daily coffee.”

“Coffee. Right.” He brought donations and now wants his free coffee. I step back a couple of inches. His expression falls a fraction. “Let me get that for you. I should technically give you three free coffees since you brought all those toys.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he says. “I’m going to pay for the coffee.”

“Don’t be silly, John.” He follows me behind the counter to the brewer. “Are you staying or going?”

“I have to get going, unfortunately.”

I grab a to-go cup and a shaker, sprinkle a little powder on the bottom. Then I pour the coffee into the mug and sprinkle a

little more on top before placing the lid on the cup and handing it to John.

He takes a sip. “Cinnamon?”

“It enhances the flavor. Plus it’s good for you.”

“Thank you.” Dimples dip into his cheeks with his smile. “I should be going.”

“Have a good day, John,” I say.

He turns and starts walking away, but pauses. Looking back toward me, he lifts his cup and says, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it,” I admit. I step back into the kitchen to finish baking. The ache in my cheeks intensifies, but this time I don’t try to stop smiling.

MARLEY'S FAVORITE CHRISTMAS STORY



-John-

White linens drape over every table. A black carpet covers the floor to muffle scraping chairs. Dim lighting disguises the flaws of the patrons.

Cecelia sits across from me, her eyes glued to her phone that sits on the table next to her silverware and napkin. It has been seven minutes and thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty seconds since I last said anything to her.

She booked this dinner for us months ago. According to her, The Vineyard is the place to eat and be seen.

The waiter comes. He sets a plate of food in front of each of us. The aroma of shallots and garlic wafts up from my filet mignon. The side of glazed carrots and purple mashed potatoes adds color to an otherwise neutral meal. Why purple

potatoes? Beats me. I'm sure it has something to do with the pretension of the place.

“Can I get you anything else, sir?” he asks, stepping back. He folds one arm in front of him and one behind his lower back.

“A refill on the wine, please,” I say. We both look at Cecelia. She has yet to remove her stare from the screen. The waiter pauses for a moment before turning back to me. “That will be all, thank you.”

The waiter leaves with the confirmation.

Cecelia lifts her phone and holds it out away from her. The camera click is punctuated in our silence. She then turns her phone around, adjusts the plating in front of her, and snaps another picture. After that, her thumbs go a thousand miles per hour over her screen as she posts to whatever social media accounts she currently obsesses over.

“Daddy said I can have the ice sculptures for the wedding.” She says it like we've been in conversation this entire time.

“Ice sculptures?” I didn't agree to ice sculptures. Then again, I'm not exactly sure what I have agreed to when it comes to the wedding. Or the last time I was asked my opinion.

“Mm hmm. At first he wasn't going to spend the money on it but I reminded him that it's my special day and he gave in.” Her childlike entitlement doesn't quite match the satin tones of her voice. “Everyone is making sure everything is in place by

Christmas Eve. Mother even hired extra staff to make sure the house is perfect and the party runs smoothly. She told me to just tell her and Daddy what I want, and she'll make it happen. In her own words: 'God forbid we don't go all out for the wedding of the century. We'll put the Beaumonts' daughter's wedding to shame!' You know how she is when it comes to beating the Beaumonts."

Cecelia giggles and pokes her fork into her salad.

"I don't think we need to go out of our way on our wedding plans just to beat the Beaumonts, do you?"

"Of course, we do, Johnbear. If we don't have the best wedding, what will others think? That's why we're having it on Christmas Eve. Everyone who RSVP'd to the holiday party will attend, and that's practically everyone. No one can say they missed my wedding, and the Beaumonts can't say that about Veronica's wedding. Do you know how many people didn't go to hers?"

"Should I?" I ask. The waiter returns and refills my wine glass.

"Anyway, I think we'll have to redecorate the house for the wedding. Or at the very least add more to what is already there. It's not Christmasy enough, you know? I'm thinking poinsettias and wreaths in the corridor as people walk in on a red carpet."

The indulgence and narcissism of this conversation are wearing. A bothersome weight rests on my chest. Bringing those toys to the bakery today felt good. Like I was doing

something right for once. It was such a simple act and yet I knew it would make a few children happy for a holiday that might otherwise be disappointing.

Marley must have gotten over a hundred donations by the end of the day. Her kindness will help spread holiday cheer and for some reason, that seems important. I want to do more of that.

“I was thinking,” I start. “We should give back to the community this year. It’s the holidays and there are people who we could help.”

“Daddy already donates thousands to charities. It’s good for tax write-offs, you know.”

“I don’t know if you remember this, but my mom always took James and me to the shelter around the holidays to help serve food to the hungry before she got sick. We could take a day to do that. Or we could start our own tradition. Read to the residents of a nursing home or at the children’s ward in the hospital.”

Excitement simmers inside me at the prospect of helping others. Maybe Marley would like to make some treats to give out. I’d be willing to front the cost so she wouldn’t have to take it from the bakery’s revenue.

“I don’t have time for that, Johnbear. There’s too much to do for the wedding to be bothered with extra things. And you have to be busy at work with Daddy. I doubt he’d be happy with you taking a day off to do any of those things.” She takes a bite of her salad then points her fork at her plate. “This is

delicious. Anyone who hasn't had the chance to try this place is truly unfortunate."

The silence from before seems welcoming now. I glance at my watch. The bakery has been closed for a couple hours now, but I want nothing more than to get a cup of coffee.

I settle for a gulp of wine.

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I arrive back at my condo after dropping Cecelia off at home. It's reminiscent of Marley's house, dark and without decorations. But not for the same reasons. Unlike Marley, I never put up a tree, or lights, or even a wreath to begin with.

At this point, I'm not sure why. If I had the items, I'd put them up now until I gave Marley's neighborhood a run for its money. Decorating seems like a lifeline that I can't grab on to at this time .

I walk through my door into the living room and flip on the lights. The place brightens like a department store, though it is far more sterile. Sleep is still far off despite the late hour, but the couch calls for me. I take a seat and reach for the remote, but my finger skims the pages of the book Marley gave me.

I forgot I had tossed in on the table when I came home that night. Picking it up, I examine the simple cover. The book is used. Loved. On the inside cover, a handwritten inscription reads "To Georgianna, my dearest. Enjoy all you can from the season and never doubt your generosity. Yours forever, Albert. 1964."

And so, I turn to the first page of Marley's favorite Christmas story and begin.

LET'S GET LUNCH



-Marley-

Thankfully, Kelsey picks up after the first ring.

“The Sweet Spot. How can I help you?”

“Kelse, it’s me,” I spit out. I glance around. The street I’m on is relatively empty save a passing car or two and the guy in a trenchcoat standing in the alley I just passed. I peek behind me to make sure he hasn’t followed. “I’m, um, just... just checking in. How’s everything going there? Do you need me to come back?”

Please need me to come back.

Kelsey’s melodic laugh travels through the phone. “Mar, stop calling. Mikey and I have everything under control. There’s no event going on today, so business is only slightly more busy than normal.”

Most of the buildings around me are boarded up. Those that don't have plywood over the windows and doors have security bars giving them a cell-like vibe.

“Do you have enough - ”

“Baked goods?” she asks. “Yes, Mar. We have more than enough. I doubt you slept last night based on how much we have.”

She's not far off. I went overboard yesterday knowing I'd be gone a good portion of the day today.

In a last ditch effort to get back to the bakery, I say, “Ok, but if you run out -”

“We won't. Now stop hesitating and go look at more places,” she says. Last night I crunched some numbers. Despite having great success with the events, earning what I owe to Mr. Ferrar is looking unlikely. I need to be realistic and realize that I might end up losing the property. “Your bakery will be safe and intact when you get back.”

Kelsey hangs up, leaving me staring at what might become my new place of business.

I stop in front of a brick building with a blue door. The number above the door says 13_9. If the missing number is 8 then I've arrived at my next destination. Litter lines the sidewalks with the muddy snow and there is a bullet-sized hole in the window. Just like the other buildings on the block, this one is adorned with metal bars.

My heart sinks.

Is this really a place I want to move my bakery? No, but it was one of the few on the realty website that actually showed rent costs, so I know I can at least afford it.

The last two places I looked at were nicer. Safer. But when I asked the prices during my tours, the landlords basically put the dream of renting from them on the chopping block. Each place was over \$800 more a month than I'm paying now. With the debt I already owe, there is no way I could pay it off and afford one of those locations.

The door opens and a bearded man steps out wearing a faded and torn football varsity jacket. His stomach protrudes just beyond his belt.

He looks me up and down. "You Marcy Winters?"

"Marley, yes. It's nice to meet you, Mr.-"

"Name's Bart. Com'in. I'll show you 'round the place."

Beyond him is dark. A mix of cigarette, sweat, and putrid meat hovers from the opening. I take a step toward the doorway just as a car horn blasts in three short successions.

"Marley!" John's voice grabs my attention more than the honks. I peer over my shoulder. His window is rolled down and he's leaning over the passenger seat. Confusion blankets his face. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, um, hey, John." I step toward his car. "I'm checking out other properties. Just in case."

The admittance curdles my stomach. John's expression molds from confusion into pity. His eyes bounce from me to

the building and back.

“Even if you need to find a new place, you can’t be serious about this one, Mar. I mean, look at this place. Look at the neighborhood. You’ll get mugged just leaving your shop at night.”

“I ain’t got all day, lady. You wanna see the place or not?”
Bart barks out.

I glance back toward my potential landlord. “Yes, sorry. Just one minute.” Annoyance begins to push through my skin as I turn back to John. “Not everyone has the luxury to be choosy.”

“It’s not a safe neighborhood.”

He’s right. I hate that he’s right. More than that, I hate that he’s seen me here, but I also don’t have many other options.

“I’ll be fine, John.” I spin around and start to head inside. A thump from the closing of a car door has me spinning again, this time on a patch of ice. The world blurs. My arms flail out in a desperate attempt to brace my fall.

Before my body slams into the ground, a strong hand wraps around my bicep pulling me up and into a firm body. The hand releases as an arm wraps around my waist, steadying me. My fingers grasp the lapels of his coat, hanging on as though I’m about to fall off the edge of a cliff.

“Are you ok?” John asks. His minty breath caresses my winter-chilled cheek.

With a nod and swallow, I manage to get out, “Yes. Yeah, I’m good. Thanks for catching me.”

Now that my feet are firmly on the ground, I release my grip and take a careful step back, smoothing my coat and my ego.

I move toward the door.

John follows.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not.” I turn to face him, placing my fists on my hips.

“I might be an ass, but I’m not letting you go in there alone with that guy in this neighborhood. We can get in the car or we can see what this place has to offer, which is probably only tetanus and e coli.” He looks at the barred window. “And a bullet hole.” Exasperation leaks out in a sigh. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “There’s a damn bullet hole in the window, Marley.”

“I know that.”

“She knows that,” he mutters to nobody, throwing his arms in the air. I move toward the door. John’s gloved hand grabs mine and I want nothing more than to feel the heat of his skin. “Listen to me, Marley. This isn’t the place for you. I’d be doing you a disservice if I let you walk in there right now thinking it’s your only option.”

“Right now, this very well could be my only option.”

“Despite how desperate you think you are, you deserve better than this. You’re better than this.” He leads me a few

steps away from the building. “Tell you what. Let’s go to lunch. My treat. We can figure out other possibilities in neighborhoods that aren’t as chilling.”

“John, I-”

“If at the end of lunch you still want to check this place out, I’ll bring you back and we can take a look.”

I glance around me. I can afford this place. It might be the only place I can afford at this point. The area sucks. The landlord is, well, he isn’t exactly personable. And then there’s the damn bullethole.

But I might lose my bakery.

I swear, John must see my thoughts scrambling around in my head.

“Please, Marley,” he urges. He squeezes my hand a little tighter.

“Ok.” My breath freezes in the air as I exhale. “Let’s get lunch.”

'FRIEND' DOESN'T QUITE DESCRIBE MARLEY WINTERS



-John-

We sit across from each other in a modernized version of the classic 1950s diner booth. Marley suggested the place. I've never been here before. I can't remember a time I've ever been to a diner. Upscale. Pretentious. Those are the usual vibes of restaurants I frequent.

“Hey, sug, you're here early today.” A plump woman sidles up to the table, pen and paper in one hand and coffee pot in the other. Her salt and pepper low bun is wrapped in a hair net at the base of her neck. The apron hugging her body is covered in various stains. A nametag she wears reads *Winona*.

“Kelsey and Mikey are watching over the diner. I had some business to take care of this morning.”

“Ah, I’m surprised you left your bakery in the hands of others. That place is your baby.”

“Yeah, well...” Marley trails off without finishing the thought.

“Who’s your friend?” The waitress leans in toward Marley. “He’s cute,” she whispers as though I’m not in earshot.

“This is John. John, meet Frankie, waitress extraordinaire.”

I lift a brow. Both women seem to know what I’m asking.

“It’s a long story, sugar. One that we ain’t gonna get into right now.” Frankie pours coffee into our mugs and sets the pot on the table. “John, eh? New beau?”

“No, John is just a...” Marley pauses and glances toward me. Her cheeks flush pink. “Well, I don’t really know what John is. I guess a business associate?”

Business associate? We’re more than that, aren’t we?

“Acquaintance?” I offer, but that doesn’t sit right on my tongue either.

“Devoted coffee customer?” Marley’s rosy cheeks round with her smile. I do enjoy being her devoted coffee customer, but that still feels inadequate.

“I’m a friend,” I say, matching Marley’s expression. Then I add, “Kind of.”

Are we friends?

Marley gives an affirming nod to my unspoken question.

The new label has my guts churning. If Cecelia knew I was out to lunch with such a beautiful woman, she'd lose her mind... even if that woman is just a friend. At the same time, *friend* doesn't quite describe Marley Winters.

"Ok, then." Frankie squints a skeptical eye. She presses the tip of her pen to the pad of order slips. "I assume you're havin' your reg'lar?"

"You know it," Marley says, handing back the menu without having glanced at it.

"And what about you, John, 'kind of friend'? What can I getchu today?"

"Turkey club on rye, please."

"You got it. I'll get your orders in and leave you two..." She points a finger back and forth between Marley and me. "... to figure out what you are or aren't to each other."

Silence overtakes once Frankie leaves. Marley sits with her hands wrapped around her mug. Her eyes look anywhere but at me. I take a sip of coffee and force myself to swallow.

"This stuff is awful," I blurt.

"Diner coffee. It's either dirt water or sewage sludge. There's no in between."

"It makes me miss my daily to-go from this little bakery I frequent," I admit. "You should try it sometime. Best coffee in town."

"Well, I guess we'll have to go get a cup after lunch."

Marley's sapphire eyes lighten to a sparkling Carolina blue in her amusement. Her laugh is short and musical, and her face brightens. I want to make her laugh more often.

It's been months since Cecelia and I shared a joke. It's been just as long since we've shared anything beyond the requisite expectations of a relationship.

Sharing a laugh with Marley feels like I'm walking on a wire. I should tread lightly, or not at all. But instead of throwing this conversation in reverse and backing up to a safer zone, I find myself taking that step into a precarious situation.

"It's a date." The words come out before my brain can stop them. Marley's mug is halfway to her lips when she freezes, her mouth gaped open a sliver.

"A date?" she asks. The shock in her tone mirrors the stupor in my head.

"I mean, not a date. It's a..." I scramble for another word. "... plan. It's a plan to get coffee. As friends."

I've become a rambling idiot.

I mentally facepalm myself and search my memory for a time I've ever acted so ridiculous in front of a woman. Nothing comes to mind.

"Ok. It's a plan, then." She tilts her head with a smirk and takes a sip of coffee.

Frankie drops the food off at the table and leaves after she hears we don't need anything else.

Despite all the reasons I should stop talking, my mouth keeps going.

“I know you love to bake. You like cinnamon in your coffee. That your favorite book is *A Christmas Carol*, and you seem to have an affinity for giving, but I feel like I don’t know much else.”

“What else do you want to know?”

Good question. I’m not really sure. I shouldn’t be as involved as I am with Marley and her bakery. My one job was to deliver the eviction notice, but since meeting her, I’ve found myself buying coffee from her, helping out at the bakery, driving her home, and now taking her to lunch. I’m getting too close.

And still, I want to know more about her.

“Where’d you grow up?” I ask.

“Lexington, Massachusetts. What about you?” She takes a bite of her sandwich and waits for my response.

“I was born and raised here. Grew up in the Crest Harbor district.”

“Ritzy.”

“That’s an understatement. Any siblings?”

“Two. Brother and sister.”

“Do they live around here?”

“Not even close. My entire family moved to London around the same time I came here.”

“You chose to move here instead of London? Did you hit your head or something?”

“Something like that.” She pauses and stares into her coffee like it will give her any answer she needs. “I met Henry a few months before the move. Love makes you do stupid things sometime.”

“So why not go to London now?”

“I enjoy my life here. Every time I talk to my parents, they always have a complaint. The weather’s too rainy. The Underground is too crowded. The separate taps are confusing.”

“Separate taps?”

“Yeah. Mom hates that the hot and cold taps are separated. You’d think after all this time that she’d be used to it or have found a way to change them for a single tap, but nope. I’m beginning to think she likes complaining. I don’t want to spend my time around people who are constantly unsatisfied. That doesn’t seem like a pleasant way to live.”

“It’s not.” That’s exactly how the Ferrars act, unhappy and unsatisfied unless they get exactly what they want. Cecelia wasn’t happy with my mother’s vintage solitaire engagement ring. A week after I proposed, she begged me to go to New York. Apparently, she would ‘simply die without the Tiffany Soleste Oval Halo Engagement Ring with a Diamond Band in Platinum. What would the Beaumonts think?’

Those were her words.

“You ok?” Marley startles me back to the moment.

“Yeah, of course,” I say. “So, why were you at that property today?” I ask, refocusing the conversation on the business aspect of our relationship.

“You know why. I’m worried I won’t make enough to save my bakery. I’m planning ahead.” She pushes a French fry around on her plate. “It’s important to be prepared for what could be inevitable.”

“I thought your events were going well.” I have been worried I’ll lose my job, that’s how well Marley seems to be doing.

“They are, but Henry stole *a lot* of money from me. It’s not easy making three months worth of rent plus the current month’s expenses in three weeks. It’s damn near impossible.”

Stress and sadness flash across her face. I shift in my seat. The urge to move to the other side of the table has my muscles tensing in an attempt to prevent me from wrapping a comforting arm around Marley.

I clear my throat. “So why’d you suggest the deal in the first place?”

“Desperation?”

“I don’t buy that. One word that never comes to mind when I think of you is desperate.”

“How often do you think of me?” Her gaze holds mine.

Too often.

“Don’t answer that,” she blurts out before sighing. “I wasn’t about to give up. I’ve worked too hard for my business. So, if I do end up evicted, which is looking more likely by the day, I want to make sure I can keep my bakery. Unfortunately, the debt also means I can’t afford anything more than what I’m currently paying. The other places I looked at were too expensive.”

“They probably didn’t have bullet holes in the window, though.”

“It was one hole.”

“That’s what you want to focus on?” She shrugs in response. “How many other places did you look at?”

“Two. And I have another appointment set up for 1 pm, but based on my experiences today, that one will be out of my price range, too. I might as well cancel.”

“But you don’t know for sure if it is.”

She shakes her head. I look at my watch. It’s 12:35. I’m not ready for the afternoon to end just yet. “Let’s pack up and go check it out.”

Marley’s puzzlement pouts her full lips the slightest bit. Her head shakes again. “No, I should really be getting back to the bakery.”

“You already said Kelsey and Mikey are looking over the place for you. I’m sure you can spare another hour.”

“I feel like I’d be setting myself up for disappointment.”

“You’ll regret it if you don’t at least check it out.”

Marley scrutinizes something in my expression. A beaming smile overtakes the puzzlement. “Ok. Ok! Let’s avoid regret!”

HOPES — DASHED



-Marley-

The property is stunning.

Wide plank flooring. White cabinets with dark wood accents. Matching woodblock running the length of the counters. Behind them, waist to ceiling built-in shelving apart from a thick strip of bare wall between the shelves.

“The front area is twice the size of my current place,” I comment, not hiding my disappointment. The place is exactly what I dream of and I can’t afford it. “We should just go.”

I twist on my feet, trying to make a quick exit before anyone comes out to greet us.

“Not so fast.” John grabs ahold of my hand and pulls me toward him. He doesn’t let go. Neither do I. “Just imagine this is yours for a moment. What would you do?”

I glance around the place again. The corner lot brings in a lot of light thanks to large windows facing both North Avenue and Granger Boulevard. A door is wedged between them at an angle.

“I’d line the window facing Granger with a high counter and stools that match the woodblock. The Sweet Spot would be written in an arc on the pane since it’s the busier street.” I walk over to the other window, regrettably dropping John’s hand. He follows close enough behind that I can feel the charge between our bodies. “Against these windows, I’d set up tables and chairs. Then out about two feet, another row.”

“The more seating you can offer, the more likely people will stay a while, the more likely you’ll make additional sales,” John says. “What else?”

I pirouette around toward the counters.

“Obviously the menu would go there.” I point at the bare wall between the shelves. “The shelves on this side would be used for breads. I’d line them with baskets labeled for each type.”

“And the other side?”

“The extra space gives me an excuse to start making bagels.”

“You have time to make more baked goods?” he presses.

“Don’t spoil the dream, Johnny,” I tease. “You’re the one who brought me here, remember?”

“Johnny? I haven’t been called that since I was ten years old.” His rich, low voice steals my attention. He glances toward me, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smirk. Tingles radiate over my skin like it’s waking up from the deepest sleep. “I don’t mind you calling me Johnny.”

I wet my suddenly dry lips with the tip of my tongue. “Noted. But don’t get used to it,” I say. “I’ll only use it in special circumstances.”

“Oh, really? Care to go into detail about any of those?”

“You’d be so lucky.” I wink at him. The light flirtation has my heart skipping in my chest. Last time I felt this way was at the start of my relationship with Henry. The reminder has my brain sending warning signals to my heart. It’s more than I can handle right now. “Back to my dream bakery, hm?”

“Good afternoon!” A blonde woman steps through the swinging door leading to the kitchen. “You must be Marley. I’m Rosanna Humphrey. I own the property.”

She reaches out her hand for me to take.

“Mrs. Humphrey, nice to meet you.”

“Please, call me Rosanna.” She extends her hand toward John. “And you are?”

John shakes her hand. “John Klaus. I’m a friend of Marley’s.”

“Klaus? I don’t suppose your grandfather was Franklin.”

“He was. How did you know him?”

“Franklin gave me my first job as a teenager when nobody else would. Then he was generous enough to pay for my college all those years ago,” she explains. “He always told me I was the daughter he never had.”

“That sounds like my grandfather.” A fond smile grows on John’s face. “He was a charitable man.”

“Yes, he was.” Rosanna takes a moment of silence before saying, “Let me show you around the place.” She steps toward the center of the room. “The entire building is 600 square feet. The front offers 400 of that space. Everything was updated three years ago. Floors, windows, counters... it’s all new.” She walks toward the swinging door, holding it open for us. We step through. The kitchen is just as brilliant as the front. “The kitchen was also updated. New, top of the line appliances with space for adding more depending on your needs. The island countertop matches the woodblock out front. There’s also a walk-in cooler at the back of the room.”

I move toward the island and graze my hand along the wood. Without too much difficulty, I can see myself working here, rolling out my doughs and decorating batches of cookies. My chest aches with hollowness knowing this is too good to be true and so completely out of reach.

“How much?” I ask.

“Rent is \$4000 a month.”

Hopes — dashed.

That's almost twice the amount I pay now. There is no way in any level of reality that I'll ever be able to afford this place. John eyes me with understanding and a chagrin wince.

"The place is lovely," I state. The expression plastered on my face must show my disappointment because Rosanna's previously wide smile wanes. "It would be wonderful to have my bakery here. Regrettably, the rent is out of my current price range."

"Of course. Unfortunately, there's little leeway I can give on the rent." Rosanna walks out back out front. I follow at a dulled pace. "Thank you for coming by and good luck in your search."

"Thank you very much for the tour. I am sure whoever ends up here will love it." I take a final look at the dream.

John and I saunter into the winter air. The cold is a good motive not to let the tears escape. No one needs icicles cascading down their cheeks.

"I should head back to the bakery now," I say.

"I can drop you off." John's hand presses against my lower back. I move out of reach and peer up at him.

"I appreciate it, truly, but I think I'll walk."

THERE ARE ONLY TWO THINGS THAT KEEP A MAN FROM FOOD



-John-

When Marley walked away earlier, I had to will myself not to follow. The look on her face emptied my chest. At the time, I couldn't pinpoint the feeling.

I've been sitting in my car in my brother's driveway for thirty minutes, and I still can't. It's more than guilt, I think, though that is certainly part of it. The moment I handed her the eviction notice, my life was unimaginably tethered to Marley's. I never should have made the deal. We never should have gotten lunch and I shouldn't have convinced her to view the property. And I definitely shouldn't keep going by the bakery for coffee, though I'm aware that's just a flimsy excuse at this point.

All I know is I never want to see that look on Marley's face again.

A tap on my window pulls me from my thoughts. James hovers outside, his breath visible in the cold. He tucks his hands in his pockets and bounces in place.

I roll down the window. "You should put a coat on. It's freezing."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't be out here in the first place if you'd just come in," he retorts. "What's taking you so long?"

I roll up the window, turn off the ignition, and step out of the car. "Got lost in thought. I haven't delayed dinner, have I?"

"Not yet. Sarah's still cooking. She sent me to fetch you."

James shuts the car door and we hustle inside. A thundering of small feet echoes down the hallway. Before I know it, two squealing blobs plow into me, knocking my balance. As I resteady myself, I pick up the smaller blob and spin him around. The other grabs hold of my waist.

"Uncle John!" Alexander shouts in my ear. His pure, unadulterated joy begins to mend the emptiness in my chest.

The soft patter of Sarah's steps contrasts the previous explosion from the kids. She wipes her hands on a red towel she holds. Her hair is up in a loose bun. A vision of Marley comes to mind, walking through the swinging door and brushing her palms down her apron.

Sarah smiles and points to her children. "I'd give you a hug, but it looks like your arms are full."

“We’ve been watching you out the window!” Ben’s eight-year-old honesty earns a laugh from his father and me. “Mommy said there’s only two things that keep a man from food.”

“Did she? And what would those be?”

“Work and love,” Alexander pipes in.

“Well, I’m not one to contradict your mother.” If there is one thing to know about this Klaus household, it’s that Sarah is the boss. I set Alexander on the ground and muss Ben’s hair.

“Well, which is it, Uncle John?” Ben asks as he squirms out of the way, shielding his head with his hand.

“Which is what?” I ask.

“Why weren’t you coming in to eat? Work or love?”

“Neither, but don’t tell your mom she was wrong.” I wink at Sarah. She rolls her eyes.

“Is Aunt Cece coming over tonight?” There’s a disappointed whine in Ben’s voice. He crosses his arms and a pout forms on his face. Alexander copies his older brother. Cecelia hadn’t even crossed my mind since this afternoon. It’s not that I’d forgotten about her. She just hadn’t been a focus of my thoughts. I should probably call her when I leave here.

Does she even know I’m at my brother’s for dinner?

“She’s not.” A smirk replaces the frown on Ben’s face. I glance up at Sarah. “What’s for dinner? It smells delicious.”

“Chicken parm,” she responds. “It’ll be ready in about thirty.” A buzzer sounds in the kitchen. “Excuse me. Come on boys!” Sarah leans in and kisses James on the cheek before she heads back into the kitchen with the kids scampering behind her. It’s the quintessential family life.

“Let’s head into the den,” James suggests. We move in the opposite direction as Sarah and the boys. When he closes the door to his study, he gives me a knowing look.

“What?” I ask. James has always been good at knowing what I’m thinking before I do. It’s unsettling. He calls it his ‘older brother intuition’. I’m constantly reminding him that’s not a thing.

“Everything ok at work?”

Oh boy, where to even begin.

“You know, I’m not sure,” I respond. James pours each of us a couple fingers of scotch and hands one glass to me. The leather chairs are calling our names as they always do. Even after he takes a sip of his drink, James remains mute. “Just under a couple weeks ago, Weston had me deliver an eviction notice to this bakery.”

“Is that unusual?”

“No. I’ve delivered several eviction notices for him.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know. The owner, Marley, she asked to make a deal.” James squints as I explain the agreement between Marley and me. To his credit, his expression remains stoic. “I

must have lost my mind temporarily because I agreed without even checking with Weston.”

“Why did you do that?”

I shrug. “Marley Winters is an anomaly. I’ve never had someone beg me to make a deal with them in an attempt to fight back. And it’s not like her situation was her fault. Some ass of a fiance stole the money from her, not that Weston would care about that.” *I don’t know what angers me more.* “It just felt wrong to not give her a chance, you know?”

He nods but continues to say nothing.

“And she’s smart, James. She’s come up with all these events to bring business into the bakery. Icelandic Christmas and stocking stuffing, and she held a toy drive to help underprivileged children. She’s generous and kind. And...”

“Beautiful?”

“Gorgeous,” I respond before I realize what’s happening. My brother’s trapped me into revealing too much.

James stares in lieu of commenting. His eyes scrutinize my face, my movements. He watches as I take a defeated sip of scotch.

“Stop analyzing me,” I plead, though my tone lacks any kind of energy. I should’ve known not to step inside his den. The moment he saw me sitting in my car instead of coming inside, he knew something was on my mind. I didn’t want him to know that something was Marley.

He sets his glass down. “There’s more that you’re not telling me.”

Of course there is. I contemplate not disclosing any more than I already have, but my mouth has other plans.

“If Marley succeeds in earning her debt, thereby keeping the building, Weston’s more or less guaranteed I’m out of a job,” I explain. “And I don’t know if I care anymore. I keep going. I’ve gone into the bakery nearly every day since that night.” I down the rest of the scotch. The warmth does little to fix my problems. If anything, it just makes it easier to talk. “I’m always buying coffee from her, and I helped out at one of the events for a few minutes. Hell, today I even took her to lunch and then to see a different property in case she loses the one she’s in.”

I can’t stay away.

“Why?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you do, John.”

“Really, I don’t.” Even as I argue it, the pesky tingle at the back of my head suggests otherwise.

John stands and pours himself another finger of scotch. He lifts the decanter. I shake my head. He sets it down and sits back in his chair.

“Everything ok between you and Cecelia?” James asks.

“Sure.” He quirks an eyebrow. I sigh. “It’s as ok as it has been for a while.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I guess... I guess I look at you and Sarah and the boys and see something I want,” I admit. Every time I see John with his family, I think of our childhood. Mom and dad did everything to raise us right, and it’s clear John and Sarah are continuing to do that with their sons. And here I am on the sidelines like I’m missing out on something big. “When I look at Cecelia, I’m not sure she wants the same thing.”

“Have you asked her?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should.” He pauses a moment. The contemplation in his expression has me bracing myself for his next words. “You know, it’s ok to change, John. People aren’t stagnant. They switch careers, they develop a different sense of right and wrong, they grow apart. That’s all part of life and figuring out who you are.”

“So, who am I?”

“That’s not something I can answer for you,” he says. “But you’ll figure it out.”

AUNT MARLEY



-John-

I nearly bypass the line outside and step into the warmth of the bakery until the same two little blobs from the other night shout my name and wave me over. James, Ben, and Alexander wait in the chill to go inside.

“What are you doing here?”

“The bakery’s letting kids decorate cookies today. I decided to take the day off and bring the boys. A good father-son bonding experience.”

“Why are you really here?”

“I wanted to meet that bakery owner I’ve heard so much about.” James smirks.

I should’ve kept my mouth shut last night.

A family leaves the bakery and the line moves as a mother and three kids in front of us go inside.

“Don’t embarrass me,” I warn.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Another mother and her kid exit.

“John?” a male voice calls. I look up. Brandon Drey, another lawyer at Weston’s firm, walks toward the bakery. The guy is a bit of a dufus, but he’s one of the nicer coworkers I have. “Hey, man! What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Brandon.” I motion toward James and the boys. “I took the day off to spend time with my brother and his kids.” It’s not a complete lie. I did take the day off. James and the boys just give me an excuse in case Brandon mentions to anyone that he saw me out, and more specifically, saw me here.

“Sweet.” He motions toward the bakery. “Wes asked me to pick up some coffee from this place.”

Did he, now? What are you up to, Weston?

“Oh? This place specifically?”

“Yeah, man. Specifically this place. Otherwise I’d have gone to the coffee shop near the office. This was a bit of a drive.” Brandon eyes the line and then us. “Do you think I could -” he waves his finger in a circle as though lassoing my family and me. “-cut in with you guys? The line’s long and you know Wes.”

I do know Wes, which is why I don't like him sending Brandon here.

“Sure, hop on in.” I offer a cordial grin.

Brandon pats me on the shoulder in thanks and stands in front of the boys. Another family leaves and we head in.

“Man, it’s crowded in here,” Brandon says before splitting off and heading toward the counter.

Parents and children cluster in small groups around tables throughout the bakery. In front of each kid are three cookies in various states of decoration. Christmas songs play loudly from the speakers, and there’s a smile on every face. Mikey stands behind the counter wearing a sweater with a dozen tiny ornaments hanging from it. He catches my eye, waves, and points toward the back of the bakery. I follow his finger.

Squatting down next to a table, Marley helps a young blonde girl who is decorating a cutout cookie with icing. The little girl huffs and tosses the bag of icing on the table, crossing her arms. A pout forms on her face.

Marley places a gentle hand on the girl’s shoulder and smiles. She says something and the little girl’s expression lifts. She nods vigorously as a wide-mouth grin replaces her frown. Marley picks up the icing bag and helps the little girl squeeze cherry-red frosting onto the cookie. When they’re done, Marley takes the bag from the girls’ hand and sets it down. She then picks up a bag of green icing and hands it to the girl. Marley stands up, patting her on the head, and turns around.

I always laugh at movies where the girl turns around and time slows to an antagonizing and drawn-out pace because it's ridiculous. That doesn't happen in real life. At least, it had never happened to me.

Until now.

"That her?" James asks.

"That's her."

Marley glances around the bakery. The moment she sees me, her eyes shine a little brighter and her cheeks become rosier

"Yeah, you're screwed, little brother."

"Thanks for the confidence." But he's right. I'm screwed.

She walks over to us, weaving through the throng of customers.

"You must really like the coffee if you're willing to endure this craziness."

"Like I told you yesterday, yours is the best in town. But I'm here for the event."

"Are you now?" James asks. The smirk on his face lets me know he won't actually make this easy for me. I elbow him in the ribs.

"I'd like you to meet my brother, James."

"Nice to meet you," Marley says.

"Likewise. I've heard a lot about y-" I nudge James in the ribs again. "-this place."

“And these are my nephews, Alexander and Ben.” I say. Marley immediately turns her attention to the boys, crouching down to their level.

“Hi, Alexander and Ben! I’m so glad you two could come today. Are you ready to decorate some cookies?” Both boys light up with excitement and simultaneously nod their heads. Marley lifts herself up.

“My brother tells me you’ve been having a lot of great events lately,” James notes.

“Yes, well, honestly it was out of necessity at first.” Remorse and shame squeeze my chest. She gives a knowing look, but instead of anger and annoyance, it’s filled with understanding and forgiveness. “But should everything go well, I intend to continue with them next year. It’s been a lot of fun watching people enjoy the holidays in this way and giving back to the community. In some ways, the eviction has been a positive experience. I have your brother to thank for that.”

“I’m sure that’s more generous than John deserves.” James laughs and claps me on the shoulder.

“Hey, man, it was good seeing you!” Brandon calls out from a few feet away balancing two drink trays of coffee in front of him. “See you at work tomorrow, yeah?”

“I’ll be there,” I reply. Brandon lifts the trays a fraction and bows his head in goodbye. With all the care and grace of a T-Rex doing ballet, he worms through the throng of people and leaves out the door.

Marley turns back to us with a smile. “Let me help you guys find a table.”

“That sounds wonderful, thank you,” James says.

She shows us to a spot in the back of the bakery with four seats before going into the kitchen. The boys climb onto opposite chairs, their eyes wide with anticipation as they peer over the icings, sprinkles, and edible cookie paints.

Marley pushes back through the swinging door with a small tray of cookies in her hands. She slides it between the boys. They wiggle in their seats. A dozen plain snowmen, candy canes, ornaments and more sit on the tray waiting for decoration.

“Can we start? Please, please?” Alexander begs.

“Go right ahead,” Marley answers. The boys each snatch a cookie and a bag of icing. There is little care in their technique. Some squirts and lines of red and green frosting end up on the cutouts, quickly sprinkled and set aside, but most of the colorful glaze ends up on the table. Marley giggles at the scene. “Perhaps I could help you boys with a couple cookies?”

The boys each shout an enthusiastic “Yeah!”

Marley pulls a chair up between Alexander and me. Her leg briefly brushes against mine.

“Sorry,” she whispers. Marley shifts away from me.

The boys each select another cookie and icing bag. Marley grabs hold of a third bag and walks them through how to twist

the tops and squeeze with just enough pressure to let the frosting flow from the tips.

“Remember, move slower than you expect,” she says.

Ben practices the new skill on a napkin. “Like this?” he asks. A wiggly line streaks the napkin. It’s not perfect, but it’s far better than his initial attempt.

“That’s perfect.” Her kindness gives her a glow. Sparkling eyes watch the boys each attempt lines on their napkins.

“Did John ever tell you about the first time he baked a cake on his own?” James asks.

“Don’t tell that story,” I groan. The memory of the disaster, my mother’s shocked face, and smoke flash in my mind. Leave it to James to forget he said he wouldn’t embarrass me.

“No, but please, tell it.” Marley’s laughter fills the area. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t deny her hearing the story now. I give James a nod and requisite eye roll.

“Well, it was our mother’s birthday and John didn’t have a gift. Instead of rushing to the store, he thought baking for her would add that extra special touch and be more meaningful than anything store-bought.”

“To be fair, I had the best intentions. Just remember that.”

“He spent the entire afternoon making the cake. Anytime I tried to go in the kitchen, he’d push me out. So, I ended up leaving the house for an hour.”

“I couldn’t have you messing up my gift.” I chuckle and lean back in my chair.

“Anyway, by the time I get back, mom’s arriving home from work, the fire alarm is screeching, and smoke is billowing out from the kitchen.”

“Oh, no!” Marley’s laughter continues. Her hand lands on my forearm when she turns toward me. “What happened? No one was hurt, were they?”

“Even I know not to cook without a parent, Uncle John,” Ben pipes in. He shakes his head, though his attention remains solidly on the cookie he’s currently decorating.

“No one was hurt. But the kitchen was destroyed,” James says.

“It was not,” I retort. James loves to exaggerate the event anytime he tells this story. “I burned the cake. Other than the smoke, the kitchen was spotless and intact.”

“I guess that’s a best-case scenario when young kids are in the kitchen alone,” Marley states. I groan at the exact moment James chortles. Tears are practically coming out of his eyes.

“He was seventeen!” James announces without remorse.

“Seventeen!?” Marley exclaims, joining James in hysterics. Her hand lifts away. My arm feels too cold in its absence.

“Seventeen? Wow, you must be a very bad cook!” Ben’s addition to the conversation leads to an explosion of laughter between Marley and James.

“Can you help me?” Alexander huffs. A glower overtakes his expression. “I can’t do this.” He puts the bag on the table and crosses his arms.

“Sure, you can, Alex,” Marley says. “Sometimes it just takes a little practice. I struggled when I first started decorating cookies, too. You’ll get the hang of it.”

Marley lifts the green icing and offers it to Alexander. Her hand wraps around his tiny one. Together, they twist the plastic tightly. Marley steadies Alexander’s hand as they draw a line of frosting down a napkin. Alexander’s line is straighter than his brother’s due to the help.

“See, I knew you could do it!” Marley exclaims.

“Look at that!” I say, leaning over the table to take a closer peek at Alexander’s decoration. “You did a great job, buddy!”

“That’s because Aunt Marley helped me.” He reaches for another cutout and confidently proceeds to ice it with red and green frosting.

Aunt Marley.

Why do I like that so much?

“Well, Aunt Marley is a wonderful teacher, isn’t she?” I ask. Alexander moves his head ecstatically in agreement. I lean back and look up. A blush stains Marley’s skin.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “I, um, I should probably go help other customers, too.” She turns but hesitates. Marley glances over her shoulder. “Don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

Marley begins to mingle with customers at other tables, bringing joy and fun to every child. Every so often, she glances back toward us, her lips lifted at the corners. Realizing I've been staring at her for several minutes, I turn back to my brother.

I want nothing more than to wipe that stupid smile off his face.

MISS WINTERS' LAWYER



-Marley-

What is wrong with me?

I keep peeking over at John's table, and I can't help but focus on how obvious I'm being. No one looks at another person *that* much. But here I am, stalking the guy in my own bakery while he's here with family.

Mikey has been giving me ridiculous looks for the past half hour every time he catches me staring at John.

Mind your business, Mikey

But seeing him with his family is a whole new experience.

John motions animatedly with his hands. James laughs and nods, agreeing with whatever his brother said. Lively. Energetic. Until today, John's been reserved. There's nothing wrong with being reserved. I just wasn't expecting to see this side of him.

I'd be fooling myself if I said I hadn't already been attracted to him. Tall, dark, handsome - all those typical romance hero characteristics are rolled into a single man. And he's always there. His presence has become a constant support. I must be crazy. No one in their right mind wants someone who has a hand in destroying their livelihood. No one.

But here I am, itching to go back over and spend more time with him. To feel the electricity when our arms brush against each other. To hear more stories from his past.

“Excuse me?”

Two fingers tap me on the shoulder. I turn to find a large, bald and bearded man standing before me. He must be over six and a half feet tall. Next to him is a petite redhead with stern composure. Even in heels, she can't be more than five foot two. The contrast between man and woman conjures up memories of a traveling carnival my parents brought me to as a child.

“Are you Miss Winters?” The tenor of the man's voice doesn't match the imposing magnitude of his physical size. Despite that, he still has my nerves shaking, not that I let them see that.

“I am. And you are?” I offer a hand that neither takes.

“I'm Fire Marshal Brady Iverson. This is Jennifer Werner. She's a health inspector for the city. We received some complaints today about your business.”

Complaints?

“What exactly were the complaints, Marshal?”

“I was informed that your place of business might be accommodating more people than it’s allotted for. Looking around, it’s clear that it is.”

Impossible. The place is busier than normal, that’s true. But Leo’s been counting people coming in and out. He wouldn’t make that kind of mistake.

“With all due respect, we’ve been very careful to maintain the appropriate number of customers within the building.” I motion toward the line outside. “That’s why so many people are waiting to enter.”

“Are you arguing with me, Miss Winters?” He raises his voice enough for the closest customers to hear. Curious eyes watch in anticipation of something dramatic happening. Some whisper to each other. The bakery sounds far less noisy than it was a few minutes ago. I want to avoid a scene at all costs. The last thing I or this bakery needs is negative attention.

“No, sir.” I clear my throat and offer a polite, if emotionless, smile. “Of course, not. Would you mind if we step into the kitchen to discuss this?”

Both the marshal and inspector offer a singular dip of their heads. I escort the knock-off carnies through the bakery like I’m the grand marshal of the worst parade in town. Despite them being a few steps behind, I know Iverson and Werner are scrutinizing every inch of the place. I can feel it in my bones.

I pass John's table and can't bring myself to look at him. Look straight forward. Don't veer off course.

I push open the swinging door and allow the marshal and inspector to enter the kitchen first. As I step through the threshold, a chair squawks against the wood floor behind me and the bakery comes alive again with commotion. As the door sways, Iverson bulldozes me with his scowl. I stop dead in my tracks and swallow.

Jennifer Werner glides around the kitchen. Her finger trails on every surface she passes. She is smooth in her movements, almost like her feet never touch the ground. She hovers everywhere she goes. An apparition coming to haunt me. My own Christmas ghost.

"Is there a problem?" John's commanding voice takes me by surprise. I glance behind me. Unlike every other time I've glanced at him over the past half hour, his expression is sober and humorless. He eyes the giant on the opposite side of me.

"It's ok, John," I start to explain. "This is Fire Marshal Iverson and Ms. Werner from the health department."

John's gaze flits toward me in question. I lift my shoulders as imperceptibly as possible.

"Who are you?" Iverson's scratchy tenor pulls John's attention back. John stands straighter, taller. He walks forward and reaches out a hand. Iverson takes his.

"John Klaus. I'm Miss Winters' lawyer." *My what?* Did I even know John is a lawyer? It never came up in conversation.

And I never asked. “What seems to be the problem?”

Werner sidles up next to her counterpart and offers her hand to John.

“We received some calls earlier today that Miss Winters’ bakery was violating several health and safety codes, including excessive occupants, cross-contamination guidelines, and proper hygiene protocols,” Werner rattles off.

I sigh. I haven’t violated any codes.

“Who called in these concerns?” John asks.

“We’re not at liberty to say,” Iverson replies. John’s jaw pulses with tension.

“What proof is there that these violations have occurred?”

“At first glance, it’s obvious that the bakery is overflowing with occu-.”

John throws his hands up. “How many occupants are currently in the building?”

“I don’t have an exact number, but-”

“And how many occupants are allowed in the building?” John continues.

“Well, I’ll have to check that num-”

“So, you are simply speculating that a violation of the fire code has occurred because someone called and told you it was busy here? And then, rather than counting the number of occupants within the bakery to determine that it is over its limit - a limit that you admit to not knowing - you take one

look around the shop and decide without evidence that it is, in fact, violating the fire code?”

Iverson deflates in his spot. His six-and-a-half-plus frame slumps as he shifts back on his feet, and his mouth hangs gaped like a fish.

“I, uh...”

“Check the occupancy code and count the number of people in this building,” John instructs. “When you find out that Miss Winters is not in violation of the occupancy code, you can leave.”

“Right.” Iverson clears his throat. “I will do that.” He navigates his way around us and reaches the door.

“Oh, and Mr. Iverson.” The fire marshal turns back when John says his name. “The commissioner will be hearing about your lack of professionalism on the job.”

“I understand.” The marshal nods and exits the kitchen.

A hush fills the room as we turn back toward Werner, the hum from the walk-in freezer the only sound. In the silence, I peer around my kitchen. It’s clean. Everything is up to code. There is not a single fault I can find that would have someone calling in a complaint.

“Before we continue this conversation, can I see some identification that you are an employee of the health department?”

Werner stiffens. “My ID? “Why do you need to do that?”

“It doesn’t matter why. I am in my right to do so.”

“Sure.” She reaches into her back pocket and pulls out an ID, handing it to John. He examines it and hands it back. “Satisfied?”

“Not exactly,” he says. “I suppose you won’t tell me who called in to the health department, either.”

“Of course, not.”

“That’s fine. I already know who did.” My attention is dragged away from the petite inspector to John. *He does?*

“How can you be so sure, Mr. Klaus?”

“There is only one person with an investment in this property that would be desperate enough to call in a false claim.” *Weston Ferrar?* Does John really think my landlord called the fire and health departments?

“I am still required by law to do an inspection of the property when a customer files a complaint.”

“Were you aware that person hasn’t been on this property in years? He isn’t a customer. There is no way for the complainant to know whether or not Miss Winters is in violation of any codes.”

Silence. Werner glances awkwardly between John and me. She purses her lips and crosses her arms. “I was not aware, no.”

“Feel free to do an inspection, Ms. Werner. I am confident you won’t find any violations. You can start in the front and

work your way back to the kitchen,” John states. “Give me two minutes and I’ll stay with you while you do the inspection so Miss Winters can get back to work.”

Werner nods and makes her way back out front. John’s hand wraps gently around my arm. The warmth and tenderness calm my nerves.

“Are you ok?” His tone has softened now that he’s not in lawyer mode.

“I am,” I answer. “You think Mr. Ferrar is responsible for the complaints.”

“I do.”

“Because he hired you to give me the eviction notice?”

“Hired me?” Confusion coats his features.

“Yeah, I mean, I didn’t know you were a lawyer but it makes sense, I guess. I don’t know what I thought you did, but-”

“Marley,” John cuts me off. “Weston Ferrar didn’t hire me. I work with him. For him, technically. He’s my boss.”

“He’s a lawyer? I thought he just owned properties.” I press my hand to my forehead. Why didn’t I know that my landlord is also an attorney? I pace back and forth. “I’m fighting an eviction notice given to me by a lawyer? Why didn’t you tell me that to begin with? This just got far less manageable.”

“It’s going to be ok, Marley.”

“No, John. It might not be ok. I might lose my bakery. I can’t afford another one unless I want to get shot at. You saw what’s in my price range.”

“Look.” He sighs. “You’ve been working your butt off to earn the money owed to Weston. And you’re doing a freakin’ amazing job. I’ve never seen someone so driven or determined. Keep doing that. Even if you think you’re behind, keep going because you might surprise yourself.”

I wave a hand toward the door. “What about the fire marshal and health inspector?”

“If either come back with any kind of violation - which I doubt they will - then we’ll fight it in court.”

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms. “Why are you being so nice when you’re the one who served the eviction?”

He flinches and steps back. “I was just doing my job.”

“Maybe, but-” I stop. It wouldn’t be fair to say what’s going through my head.

“But what?” John asks.

“Is a job like that worth having when it attacks innocent people in the community?”

He stares at me for a moment. At least, I assume it’s only for a moment. It could have been any amount of time since the world paused when our eyes locked.

“I’m sorry, Marley,” he whispers. “I’ll go keep the health inspector company so you can get back to work.”

He turns his back to me and walks out the door. The kitchen feels much smaller now that he's gone. A clean, violation-free kitchen, but still smaller than seconds before.

With a deep breath, I reset my composure.

After all, I have to keep going.

Just in case I surprise myself.

THERE'S FREE COFFEE IN IT FOR YOU



-Marley-

The day is done. The customers have left. The health inspector is gone - she didn't find any health code violations.

John left quickly after her. The only other words we exchanged were in relation to Werner giving me her report and apologizing for the inconvenience.

Kelsey came by after her shift at the grocery store to help Mikey, Leo, and I bake and assemble gingerbread house parts. I designed ten styles. They'll each go on display tomorrow for families to order and get during the week before Christmas. It will be a lot of work, but hopefully it pays off. Between that, holiday cakes, and Christmas baskets filled with goodies, maybe I can bring in enough profit to pay off the debt and keep my bakery.

"Are you going anywhere for the holiday, Kelsey?" Leo asks. An elaborate gingerbread castle decked out in snow

frosting, red and green gumdrops, and crushed candy cane sits neatly in front of him. It's a work of art.

"Heading to California to see family," Kelsey responds. "It's the first time they're hosting since moving there. While the warmth will be lovely, I'll miss having a white Christmas."

Kelsey sprinkles sugar crystals along the edges of her frosted gingerbread roof, giving it a shine as though it is reflecting in the sunlight.

"Jealous," Mikey groans. "I'll take the heat over snow any day of the week."

His gingerbread cottage looks like one of his ugly holiday sweaters. It's what he calls the 'Mikey aesthetic'.

"Don't you usually head to Florida this time of year?"

"Usually." Mikey rolls his eyes toward Leo and offers an exasperated sigh. "But this year, *someone's* parents insisted we visit them in Maine. I'm pretty sure I'll freeze to death in my sleep up there."

"You won't freeze to death in your sleep," Leo replies. A cheeky grin lifts his lips. "I'll be sure to keep you warm at night."

"You better," Mikey says. He shoves more nonpareil chocolates on the roof of his cottage before sitting back and admiring his eclectic work. "Perfect. What's next?"

"That's it! This was the last task for the day." I leave out the fact that I still have a few batches of cookies to bake and bread doughs to make. They've done enough. "I truly appreciate

everything you three are doing. I don't know how I would've gotten through all this without you."

"We weren't about to leave you high and dry, Mar." Kelsey reaches her arms around me and squeezes until I have to tap out before I pass out. "Hey, you didn't say what you were doing for the holiday."

There's a reason for that.

Three pairs of eyes stare at me. The expectation behind each of them is more than I anticipated considering this should be a benign question. But they know it's not just as much as I know it's not.

"Well..." I turn around and wipe the counter with a nearby towel. "I was supposed to go to Henry's family's house for Christmas but that's obviously not happening anymore."

"So now what?" Mikey asks. "Could you go to London to visit your parents?"

Yes, but I won't.

Even if my parents offered to buy my flight, do I want to spend the holiday sitting around two people who constantly complain about their life? Or siblings who always seem to find a way to remind me how much more successful they are?

Nope.

"That's out of the question this year."

"You could come to California with me. My parents love entertaining, so the more the merrier." Kelsey's hopeful

expression reminds me why I love the woman. “And you’d make a great buffer for me. Apparently Hanna’s bringing her boyfriend.”

“What’s wrong with your sister’s boyfriend?” I ask.

“Nothing at all. He’s practically perfect. Which is why I dated him for all of high school until he dumped me for...” She drum rolls on the counter. “My equally perfect younger sister.”

“Ouch,” Mikey blurts.

“Yeah, well. They’re simply *perfect* for each other.” Kelsey’s voice squeaks on the word *perfect* and her polite smile mismatches her mocking eyes. “At least, that’s what my mom tells me every time she calls. Anyway, I didn’t mean to bring this down. Come to California with me. We leave on the twenty-third.”

“As much as I’d love to be a buffer for you, I can’t go. Part of the deal with John was that I bake desserts for his family’s Christmas Eve party. That means the twenty-third is all booked for me.” As though they all have the same stage direction, they each give me exaggerated frowns. “I’ll be fine, guys.”

“I’m sure you will be.” Mikey winks.

“What’s with the wink?”

“You know John’s going to invite you to the party, Mar.” Mikey leans his elbows on the table, holds his head in his hands, and sighs like Cupid struck him with an arrow.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” I shake my head to prevent the idea from settling in. The last thing I need is to encourage my attraction to him by thinking it’s mutual. I’m baking desserts as part of an agreement. Nothing more.

“Oh, please!” Kelsey chimes. “We all see the way he looks at you.”

“John doesn’t look at me in any way, Kelse.”

“You’re oblivious if you haven’t seen it.” Leo adds. I prefer his silence. At least when he isn’t agreeing with them, I can pretend he’s on my side.

“You, too, Leo?” He holds his hands up in surrender, though the slight tip of his head suggests he’s not really relenting. “Fine. How do you all think he looks at me?”

“Like you’re the dessert,” Mikey teases. Kelsey giggles and nods.

“Anyway, I better get going,” Kelsey says.

She grabs her puffy jacket off a hook by the door and swings it onto her in one smooth motion.

“We better head out, too. I have a meeting with a disgruntled client in the morning.” Leo stands from the stool he’s been stooped on for the past hour. He grabs his and Mikey’s coats and comes back to the counter. After throwing on the black classic winter coat, he helps Mikey into his school bus yellow jacket. The hood, lined with a puff of faux purple fur, bulges from his back. “You need a ride home?”

“Nah, I’ll take the bus. Thanks though.” I follow the three of them out front as they leave, locking the door behind them. Grabbing one final cup of coffee, I head back into the kitchen to finish my baking and prepping.

Flashes of John sprint through my mind.

We all see the way he looks at you.

Damn them. But they weren’t wrong. When John looks at me, his eyes darken to the deepest mahogany possible before becoming black. His dimples pull into his cheeks even if he’s not fully smiling. And every time this afternoon when I couldn’t help but glance over at him, his head was always turning away like he had just been staring at me.

Then there was the look in the kitchen when I questioned his work, his choices. That moment of hurt broadcast in his features before drifting away, replaced with indifference.

I saw it, though. Instant regret and too much hesitation from earlier force me to pull my phone from my pocket and tap his name.

My thumbs are traveling over the letters before I know what I’m doing.

Hey, I’m sorry about earlier. Can we talk? I’ll be at the bakery late if you want to come by.

I hit send and look at what I wrote. Then I type one more message.

There’s free coffee in it for you.

DINNER WITH THE BEAUMONTS



-John-

How many family dinners does one family need?

For the Ferrars, the answer is “three a week.” It’s baffling that they don’t get tired of each other. At least they don’t show any exhaustion from their constant, melodramatic gatherings.

I’ll be ready for a long winter’s nap after this.

My pocket vibrates. I slide out my phone and keep it under the table after seeing James’ name.

You and Cecelia free Friday? Sarah wants to do a stay-at-home double date night.

I quickly thumb over the keyboard.

We should be. I’ll call later.

I pack my phone back in my pocket and return my attention to the table.

“All we need is the cake!” Cecelia brags to Daphne Beaumont. The wedding is the only topic they’ve discussed since we’ve arrived at the restaurant. It’s at the top of the hierarchy in terms of conversation.

“Oh, I know that seems wonderful, darling, but be careful,” Daphne warns. Her shrill voice boils with condescension. She takes another petite bite of her salad before continuing, scraping the fork against her front teeth. “I know the cake was *the* most important part for Veronica when she was planning *her* wedding this past spring. She was careful to give herself the right amount of time to make sure it was perfect. My Veronica doesn’t like to rush things like some people, isn’t that right, darling?”

“You’re absolutely right, mother.” Veronica holds her empty wine glass in the air over her shoulder and taps her pink claw-like nail against it. The plink, plink, plink grabs a waiter’s attention. He steps forward, refills the glass, and steps back. When you have money to spend like these two families, you get unnecessary perks in places like these. “God forbid I was hasty. Could you imagine how many small flaws can be born into existence from the carelessness that comes from rushing? Not me. I wanted the best for my Pooky, which is why we had an extended engagement, isn’t that right, Pooky?”

“That’s right, dear.” Aaron pats his wife on the hand without a glance over at her.

“Not to worry, Daphne. You know quite well that I have an eye for detail and perfection, and I have the perfect place planned for ordering my cake.” She takes a sip of her wine. “Besides, as we saw at your wedding, Veronica, even the longest set plans can fall short. But at least you had excellent entertainment.” Cecelia bats her eyelashes as a smile grows on her face.

Veronica’s teeth clamp shut and Daphne huffs before shoving more salad in her mouth. For her choice of insults, Cecelia hit the motherload. Aaron’s ex-girlfriend, and most likely current mistress, objected during their vows. Even after being escorted from the church, the ex showed up at the reception, had too many tequila shots, and made out with Veronica’s brother in the middle of the dance floor.

“Where did you say you were getting the cake from again?” Susan Ferrar asks her daughter.

The vibration in my pocket drags me from the conversation. I pull the phone out of my pocket and hold it by my leg to see what James has to say.

Hey, I’m sorry about earlier. Can we talk? I’ll be at the bakery late if you want to come by.

Not James.

I do a double-take of the screen again to make sure I’m not hallucinating. Marley’s name sits at the top. The phone trembles in my hand.

There’s free coffee in it for you.

I wrangle in the smile creeping onto my face. My thumb hovers over the keyboard

“Put the phone away, Johnbear.” Cecelia’s sugar-coated voice bites through my haze. “We’re in company.”

“I was just about to ask your fiance whether the two of you will be having children,” Daphne asks. Her expression has lost some of the hostility it holds. “I know your brother has two. Your mother was always big on family. I assume you want one of your own.”

I smile. When she isn’t vying with the Ferrar women, Daphne Beaumont can at least come off as normal. Almost attentive.

Memories from earlier today flood my mind. Spending time with James and his kids is always a joy, but seeing Marley interact with the boys reminded me how much I long for a family, kids. Maybe a dog.

“Well, I don’t see-”

“Why we would have any at all!” Cecelia chimes in. Disgust dirties her features. “Crying. Diapers. Dripping snot.” She scoffs at the idea. “Nope! Not for us!”

Not for her, maybe. The lump in my throat plunges to my gut when I swallow. It anchors there, weighing me down.

“Really?” Daphne asks, her eyebrows close to her hairline. “Family seemed so important to you growing up.”

“Sure, but then I grew up, Daph.” Cecelia laughs and takes a sip of wine. “Why trade the luxuries of life for screaming

monsters with sticky hands? I'd rather travel, be able to go places without dragging a million different toys and bags around, and keep my body intact."

How is it possible to be in a relationship with someone for so long and not realize you're on completely different pages when it comes to something so important? Sure, we never discussed this particular topic, but I assumed we would inevitably have kids.

"By the look on your fiance's face, dear, he seems to disagree. Please tell me you two have discussed this." Veronica's snickering observation halts all conversation at the table.

I smooth my expression from whatever Veronica saw to a neutral indifference, but it's too late. Everyone is waiting for a response.

The endless silence is suffocating until laughter breaks through. All of our heads turn toward Susan, the exaggerated smiles on her face almost clown-like with her bright red lipstick.

"Of course, they've discussed it, haven't you, darling?" Susan asks her daughter.

The horrified contortion of Cecelia's face eases into amusement before she joins in with her mother's laughter. "Of course, we have. Haven't we Johnbear?"

Susan and Cecelia stare at me with insistence. Their message is clear: agree so we can move past this.

“Yes, we’ve certainly discussed it. I was just imagining a life without the freedom Cecelia and I currently have, that’s all.” The lie tastes bitter. Susan and Cecelia smile and ease back into their seats with a little less rigidity than seconds ago. Aaron, Roger Beaumont, and Weston turn back toward each other, continuing whatever discussion they were having in low, muffled tones. But by the looks on Daphne’s and Veronica’s faces, they aren’t buying it at all.

“Will you excuse me?” I say to anyone at the table listening. “I’ll be right back.”

I stand, dragging the chair across the floor. No one’s paying attention now. I wander toward the restrooms. Once out of sight from the table and any possible glances from those at it, I make a beeline for the door.

I need some fresh air.

SOMEWHERE ELSE TO BE



-John-

I walk away from the restaurant, flipping the collar on my coat and pulling it closer to my neck. A whoosh of snow-filled wind encircles me, but I keep moving. I could sit in my car for a few minutes, find some peace after that conversation, but my legs ache to move. And anywhere, even in the biting cold, is better than inside at that table.

The world is quieter this evening, almost as if it's hibernating. The soft glow from street lamps hazes the sidewalks. If I didn't know any better, I might believe I'm walking through a dream.

I turn the corner and keep strolling. As the restaurant gets farther away, the image of Cecelia's contorted face fades with it. It's a temporary reprieve. My phone chimes. I pull it from

my pocket. A picture of her crowds the screen in the same in-your-face fashion that epitomizes Cecelia. When the remaining sound stops completely, I tap a finger across the screen.

Something came up. I'll call you later.

I shove the cell back in my pocket.

Not ten seconds later, a muffled ring nags at me through my pants. I ignore that call, too. I'm not ready to have this conversation - or argument - with her, and I'm not about to explain that I left dinner without even a goodbye. Maybe that makes me a coward. Or maybe it simply makes me tired.

Over the past years, I've accepted the role I've played in the Ferrar family because I quite literally grew up with Cecelia. All those major moments in a child's life, a teenager's life, I experienced with her. We were high school sweethearts who reconnected after college. Isn't that the stuff that makes those made-for-TV movies? Then I began working for Weston. When our parents died, I had James and the Ferrars to lean on. That trajectory of my life needed no more decisions. Everything fell into place and was decided for me. They were my family.

Were.

Shouldn't I say they *are* my family? That word no longer seems to fit. And, so, here I am, wandering the winter night, avoiding them.

My footsteps crunch in the snow building on the sidewalks. A few shops on this street have closed for the evening, though

many still have their lights on.

“Excuse me, mister.” The deep drawl reaches out from the shadows of an alcove I’m passing. I stop, peering into the black void. A figure moves into the light. “Could you spare some change?”

The man can’t be much older than I am. He’s layered in clothing, a clear attempt to keep warm from the frigid air. A hat on his head hides straggly dark hair, and the beard on his face has become unruly.

I pull out my wallet and grab some bills without looking, placing them in the man’s gloved hands.

“Thank you, sir.”

“It’s supposed to get colder. You should find a shelter to sleep in,” I suggest as I look around the area. We aren’t far from a homeless shelter my mother and I volunteered at when she was still alive. I stopped helping out there after her death, though that seems selfish now. “There’s a place a couple blocks from here. If you take a left on Kellerman.” I point toward the end of the street. “Walk two blocks and take another left on Bay, it’s right there. Last I knew, they usually have spare beds.”

The man stands and looks down the street to where I pointed. He nods. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, still wishing I could do more.

He sets off and soon disappears into the snowy night. Though I should turn around and head back toward the

restaurant, my body continues drifting away from there. The wind picks up and the snow falls heavier. At least a half-inch has collected in the time I've been walking.

My phone buzzes a third time. I swipe the answer call bar, knowing I can't avoid her much longer.

"Hey, Cecelia."

"Where the hell are you, John?" Her whispered tones are harsh and heavy. The lack of a bear at the end of my name is unusual for Cecelia, even when she's angry.

"I went for a walk."

"You went for... what do you mean you went for a walk?. Get back here right now. We're about to leave. This is ridiculous." She's right. This is ridiculous.

I turn another corner and pause. The lane is familiar. A few businesses have lights emanating from their windows. I glance down the sidewalk.

"John?" She huffs into the phone.

"You'll have to get a ride back to your place with your parents," I say. "I'm not coming back right now."

"Why not?" There's a whine in her tone, the one she uses to get dear ol' daddy to give her what she wants. It doesn't work on me.

"I have somewhere else I need to be."

CAN YOU OPEN THE DOOR?



-Marley-

I glance at my phone, sigh, and set it back on the island, screen down, for the hundredth time. I need to stop looking at it before I go crazy.

In the time since I sent the second text to John, I've made dough for baguettes, which is now resting in a bowl and covered for overnight proofing. Before I start the next batch of bread dough, I need to fill my body with a gallon of caffeine.

The rattling of my cell on the woodblock of the island makes me jump. My heartbeat mimics the vibrating phone as excitement courses through me.

I flip it over. John's name pops on the screen.

Hey.

Is it possible to both savor and despise a text?

Hey? The lackluster response to my previous text has me biting my lip. Maybe I stepped over bounds. I mean, it is after hours, and I don't typically invite him anywhere. Maybe he's just being nice returning the message but letting me know I've been reading things wrong between us.

I type out a feeler response. Put the ball in his court before I say anything stupid.

Hi.

With my phone in hand, I step toward the front of the bakery. As I walk through the swinging door, my phone vibrates again.

Can you open the door?

Open the...

My gaze flicks toward the door. John stands in a swirl of falling snow, his breath misting in the cold, and he smiles like he's perfection incarnate. I smile back and hurry to unlock the door.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"You invited me." His smooth, confident voice hints at his amusement.

"Right, I meant, well," I stumble over my words. *Slick, Marley*. I glance past him trying to get my thoughts and mouth to work together. Behind him, the parking area is relatively empty. Drifts of snow huddle against the few vehicles still in it, but his is missing. "Where's your car?"

He follows my confused look before turning back to me. “I walked here.”

“You walked here.” I mimic his isn’t-that-obvious tone. I quirk a brow. “From where?”

“A restaurant a few blocks away,” he replies. He steps inside, separating us by only a half foot. I should move back to give him room, but I don’t want to. “It was a family dinner of sorts.”

“And you just up and left?” I ask.

His dark eyes glisten as they meet mine. The intimacy tingles over my skin.

“I realized there was somewhere else I’d rather be.”

My brain hazes, intoxicated by his admission. Thankfully, no one can see when your ego is doing somersaults inside you. The trick is appearing cool and collected on the outside even when your inner self is trying to break free.

“Well, then...” I smile. “How about that coffee I promise?”

“I won’t say no to that,” he says. We move behind the counter. He leans against it casually, his arms crossing over his chest. I empty the old coffee and prep the brewer for a new pot. When I turn around, he’s watching me. “Why are you here so late?”

“I have a lot of prep for tomorrow. Kelsey, Mikey, and Leo were here earlier helping me decorate examples for gingerbread houses.” I point around the bakery to where I set

each one. “I’ll be selling kits for people to buy, but getting that ready put me behind on the everyday stuff.”

“Your friends didn’t stay and help?”

“They didn’t know I had more to do,” I admit with a shrug. The buzzer on the coffee sounds. “I sent them home to enjoy the evening. They’ve helped so much, and I can’t take away all their time.”

I grab two mugs off the shelf and set them on the counter by the brewer, sprinkling a little cinnamon at the bottom of each one.

“Well, I guess it’s good I came by. How can I help?” John asks. I peer over my shoulder at him, surprised by the offer.

“Oh, no,” I say with a shake of my head. “You don’t need to do that. I honestly just wanted to apologize for earlier today. I shouldn’t have said what I said about your job.”

I pour coffee into each mug and spin back around, stretching one arm out toward John.

“You were right, Marley. And you got me thinking. I’m beginning to think a job that hurts innocent people isn’t a job worth having.” He stands away from the counter and takes the mug. I wrap both hands around mine, taking a sip and peering over the edge of the gray stoneware to look at him. The warmth radiates through my body. I don’t know if it is from the coffee or from being so close to this man. “But let’s not talk about that now. How can I help you prep for tomorrow? Just tell me what to do. I am your willing servant.”

“You might regret saying that.” I wink at him. “I’m going to get your hands dirty,”

“Why do I like the sound of that?”

KNEADING PASSION



-John-

For the next two hours, Marley walks me through the basics of bread-making. The amount of work and passion this woman puts into this bakery on a daily basis has me questioning what I've done with my life.

I have no doubt people hear "lawyer" and think I have an admirable job, or at the very least that I've worked hard for my position. And I have worked hard. Between schooling and each rung of the ladder one has to climb on their way to the top, I've put a lot of effort into my work. At the same time, though, I've had a lot of breaks along the way. Too many breaks. Sometimes it feels like my role was handed to me because of who I know.

But it's my lack of passion that's itching at me now.

Marley stands across from me on the opposite side of the island, kneading a glob of dough with hypnotic flow. Subtle outlines appear in her biceps as she pushes the dough back and forth.

“Don’t just stare at me while I do all the work.” She smiles and nods toward another glob in a bowl. “Grab that dough and start kneading.”

I grab the bowl, dump out the dough, and start pushing it around without taking my eyes off Marley.

“When did you realize you wanted to open your own bakery?” I ask.

“Oh, gosh. I think when I was five, probably.” The tacky dough under Marley’s hands begins to firm with her movements, forming a ball. “Every Thursday, my mom would drop me off at my grandma’s so she could go shopping or something. My grandma let me help out in the kitchen a lot. I loved baking with her.” She laughs and gives a slight shake of her head. “My mother hated me in the kitchen. I’d always come out of it covered in flour or batter or some substance she could never determine. She constantly complained to her mother and kept threatening to not let me go over.”

“Did that ever happen?” I ask.

“No, my mom needed my grandma. She was the only person around to watch me, so she had no other choice unless my mom wanted to drag me around with her, which she didn’t.” Marley stops moving for a second. Her lips purse as though debating something with herself. “So, we’re having a

small holiday party at the bakery on Saturday. Kelsey, Mikey, Leo, me, and a few people you don't know." She glances up at me. "You should come by. Your brother and his family are welcome, too."

"I'd love to." Marley goes back to kneading, seemingly satisfied with my response. My hands are sticky with dough and I'm covered in an unnecessary amount of flour, but there is nowhere else I'd rather be. Marley's passion for her baking is obvious and it radiates off her. I can only imagine she got it from her grandmother. "What would your grandma do?"

"What would my grandma do when?"

"When your mom complained to her."

Marley lifts a shoulder but doesn't stop manipulating the dough. "Nothing. She'd just tell my mother that children aren't meant to be pristine and perfect, and to let me get dirty once in a while."

Marley's grandmother sounds a lot like my mom. Despite my father's best efforts to turn us into proper gentlemen at such a young age, my mother let James and me enjoy the messiness of childhood. As we got older, she involved us in the volunteering she did, which inevitably turned us into the men my father wanted us to be.

My thoughts wander to the homeless man I passed earlier. When my mother died, I stopped doing everything that reminded me of her. Now that time has passed, I'm ready to refresh those memories.

“I have an idea for your next bakery event.”

Marley’s eyes widen as her head lifts away from her kneading. There’s a slight tilt up at the corners of her mouth. “What’s your idea?”

She gives the dough a final turn, places it in a proofing basket, and covers it with a towel.

“A food drive but with your baked goods. People can order a variety of items to donate to the homeless.”

“That’s a great idea!” Marley’s face lights up, her smile growing wider. Excitement flows out of her as she moves to my side of the island. She leans her lower back against the woodblock counter next to me, her hands wrapping around the overhang of the counter. “We could have a set menu for customers to pick from. Muffins, cakes, bagels, breads. I mean, it would require a lot of baking but I’m sure I can get Kelsey, Mikey, and Leo to help.”

I stop kneading, wipe my hands on a towel, and turn toward her. “I can help, too. And then we can bring them around to the shelters and soup kitchens in the city on a weekend,” I offer.

“We?”

“I thought I already mentioned that I’m your willing servant.”

“There may come a day you regret that,” she warns, humor radiating in her tone.

I move closer. Our faces are inches apart and that still seems too far away. The air between us becomes heavy. Her overflowing excitement sobers, changes. Her gaze lingers on my chest, seemingly reluctant to dare look at anything more. A dusting of flour sits over her brow. I brush it away with my thumb. A rose blush shades her flawless skin and her spellbinding blue eyes dart toward mine.

I smile. "I don't ever see that happening."

FIGURE IT OUT FOR YOURSELF



-John-

“Where’s Cecelia?” James asks.

“She’s not coming.”

“Why not?” James steps aside to let me in the house. He looks at me with the curiosity of a cat in its last life. I shed my coat and the snow that came with it.

“She went out of town with some friends.” The house is a sauna compared to the outside. Scents of cinnamon and pine invade the entryway from a bowl of potpourri sitting on a table. I follow James down the hall toward the kitchen. Garlic wafts through the air the closer we get, erasing any memory of the previous aroma. “What’s for dinner?”

“Roast and potatoes,” Sarah says. She stands at the chopping board dicing an array of foods.

“Smells delicious. I apologize for the late notice, but Cecelia can’t make it,” I say. Sarah shrugs, just as unbothered as I am. I half suspect she doesn’t like Cecelia and only invites her along because she’s my fiancée. Cecelia being out of town is more of a relief than a burden. She always gets cranky when we have to do things with James and Sarah. This just saved us all a headache.

“You don’t seem too broken up about it.” James inspects my face as though I’ll suddenly reveal some deep down hidden emotion.

“I’m not.” I pick a chopped carrot off the cutting board. Sarah swats my hand away. “You got something to drink?”

“When don’t I?” He gives his wife a kiss and we leave the kitchen, down another hallway to the den. When the door closes, James asks, “You sure you’re ok?”

“I never said I was ok. I only said I wasn’t broken up about Cecelia being out of town.”

He pours a couple fingers worth of scotch for both of us and hands one to me. I down it, accepting the burn as some sort of punishment. Something is bothering me but it’s not that. I haven’t quite figured out what yet.

I hold the tumbler out for more amber liquid.

“You know this is expensive shit, right? It’s meant to be savored.” I lift the glass. James pours another two fingers worth in it. We take seats in the leather chairs by the built-in bookshelf. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing.” At least nothing I can put into words.

“It’s that baker, isn’t it? Marley? You’re falling for her.” I nearly spit out my drink.

“What are you talking about? I’ve got a fiance.” I raise a brow at James. “I’ve only known Marley for a matter of weeks.”

He shrugs. “I knew I loved Sarah the moment I saw her.”

“That’s different, man.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah.” The chair becomes uncomfortable beneath me. A pang in my lower back spasms. I shift, trying to regain the pleasure from moments ago. “I mean... sure, I like spending time with her.” The seat feels stiffer, more restrictive. I stand in search of reprieve from the twinge of discomfort. “I’ve been helping out at the bakery - she invited you, Sarah, and the kids to the holiday party this weekend - but that’s it. We’re friends.”

“Are you going to the party?” The ache in my lower back throbs. I begin moving around the room, loosening the muscles. James watches, waiting for my response.

“I plan to, yeah.”

“With Cecelia?” He pauses and cocks his head. His eyes let me know he’s got me in a trap. My body clenches. I feel like an animal in a cage. Why does his question bother me so much? “I’m sure your friend is eager to meet your fiance.”

“I haven’t told Marley I’m engaged.”

“I wonder why that is.” He looks down at his glass and takes a swig.

Why haven't I told Marley? Why haven't I mentioned Marley or the bakery to Cecelia? The answer should be easier than this.

“I guess it just hasn’t come up.”

“Bullshit.” James places his glass on a nearby side table and lifts off the chair. He walks over to me where I stand at the window. We look out across the snow-covered yard. He claps a hand on my shoulder. “You haven’t told her because you’re falling for her and you don’t know how to have your cake and eat it, too.”

“It’s not like that. I just haven’t told Marley because it hasn’t seemed important. When I’m with her, Cecelia rarely comes to mind.” James pins me with a glance. I rub my hand over my face and sigh. “Shit.”

“Now he gets it,” he announces to no one.

“I have to call off the engagement.” I can only imagine the deer-in-headlights look on my face. James shrugs, his lips thinned in a you-gotta-do-what-you-gotta-do kind of way. “You don’t seem shocked by my assertion.”

“You and Cecelia have always been on-again-off-again. You’d break up with her and she’d find a way to weasel herself back in. She’s never been good enough for you, brother.”

The blatant truth in his statement hits me like a semi on the thruway.

“You’re just telling me this now?” I ask. James shrugs again. “Stop shrugging, asshole.”

“You’re stubborn.” He lifts his shoulders with a smirk. “You had to figure it out for yourself.”

MISTLETOE



-Marley-

“You ready to head back?” John asks. He places the last empty containers into the back of Mikey’s baby blue SUV. Mikey had been generous enough to let us borrow it as he and Kelsey got the bakery ready for the party.

I watch John as he organizes the containers. For the first time since I’ve met him, he’s wearing something other than a suit. With his back to me, my eyes peruse his lean, muscular frame.

In the words of Mikey, *‘That man’s ass looks damn fine covered in denim.’*

The back door of the SUV slams closed. John turns and I swiftly adjust where I’m looking, adding a polite smile. “Ready.”

“Were you staring at my butt?”

“Uh...” *Absolutely, yes, mm-hm. All day.* “No?”

“Yes you were.” His laugh is light-hearted but still rumbles through him. “You were staring at my butt.”

“Was not.” I hang onto the fib a little longer. “But even if I was, it’s not like you’ve never stared at mine.”

I have no idea if that’s true. His stares at me, eyes narrowed in speculation. A smile grows on his face.

“Touche.” He nods his head toward the front of the vehicle with a smile. “Let’s go.”

We hop in the car and drive away from the soup kitchen. The entire food drive was a success. More people purchased bakery items for this than they brought in toys for our Toys for Tots drive.

“You never told me how you came up with the idea for the food drive.”

“My mom. She always gave back to the community. For years, I’d go with her once a week to serve food at the soup kitchen.” He pauses, swallows, and shakes his head. “When she died, that died with her.”

“What made you want to do something now?”

“A few things,” he says with a shrug. “Mostly you.”

“Me?” Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t hide my astonishment.

“You,” he confirms. I glance over at him as he stares forward. A smirk lifts the corner of his mouth and he shakes

his head. “Watching you over the past - What? Two? Two and a half weeks? - made me realize how little I give back to the community. Whether or not this all started as a way for you to earn enough money to pay off a debt, it didn’t stay that way for long. Even if it meant less profit for you, you gave freely of yourself and brought people so much joy. It made me realize I could be so much better.”

Wow.

“I - I don’t know what to say.” *It’s not every day you’re told you make someone want to be a better person.* “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiles as he pulls into a parking spot by the bakery. Kelsey and Mikey have already set out the sign: *‘Closed for company holiday party. We will open again in the morning.’*

The snow crunches beneath my feet as I get out of the SUV.

“We can bring in the containers later,” I say, heading toward the bakery. John’s footsteps rustle behind me as he follows closely.

When we get to the door, I rap on it lightly, grabbing Kelsey’s attention. Her face lights up and she flounces over to unlock the door.

“Welcome back!”

We step out of the cold and into the warmth of the building. Somehow, Kelsey and Mikey made the place even more festive. Lights twinkle in elegant swoops from the ceiling and ornaments dangle from garland across the top of the front

window. A varied spread of desserts cover the counter and tables.

“The place looks amazing, guys!” I shimmy out of my coat and drape it over the nearest chair. I haven’t stepped too far into the bakery, still close to the door. John’s arm presses against mine. Warmth intoxicates my body. I stay where I am, pretending to still take in the additional decor.

“How soon before everyone else arrives?” Kelsey asks.

“Leo will be here in five,” Mikey says as he steps out of the kitchen.

“And everyone else was told three.” I peek at the clock on the wall. “So about a half hour.”

Mikey and Kelsey stand next to each other, both on the verge of giggling. Mikey’s eyebrows lift twice, his smile ridiculously expectant. Kelsey touches her fingers to her lips like she’s trying to suppress her excitement.

“What’s going on with you two?” I glance up at John and then back at the other two.

“Nothing, it’s just...” Kelsey trails off, pointing above John and me. We follow her motion and look up. Hanging above our heads dangles a green bundle of mistletoe tied with a bright red ribbon.

Those sneaks.

“I really don’t think-” I begin to move away from the spot I stand, but Kelsey and Mikey both throw their palms out in protest.

“It’s tradition!” Kelsey exclaims.

“Go on now,” Mikey insists.

I roll my eyes but turn so my body faces John.

“We might as well get it over with, otherwise they won’t leave us alone,” I say. I replay the words in my head to make sure my voice was steady and carefree. Did I sound too excited? My body jitters with anticipation and pleasure.

John continues to stare up at the mistletoe. It feels like an eternity before he looks at me, a hint of regret behind his eyes.

“I... I have to go,” he blurts.

He just walks out, leaving the three of us with stunned expressions and me with an aching heart.

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-John-

I rushed out of the bakery, got into my car, and drove away.

The entire time, I could feel Marley’s confused and disappointed eyes on my back. I *wanted* to kiss her. I’ve never wanted to kiss someone more, but that wouldn’t be fair to her. Or to Cecelia.

Damn it. My hands clench the steering wheel as I turn onto the main road. I pick up my phone, press Cecelia’s name, and hit the speaker button.

The call rings once and then goes to voicemail.

You’ve got to be kidding me. This is exactly like Cecelia.

“Hey, Cecelia. Give me a call back when you get this. I know you’re out of town with your friends but we really need to talk. Maybe I can stop by after you get back tomorrow. I have to go out of town on Monday - some job for your dad - I won’t be back for a few days and really need to talk to you before then, so tomorrow is the only option. Call me, please.”

I hang up and toss the phone into the passenger seat.

Marley’s hurt expression flashes in my mind and I want to rip my wrung out heart from my chest.

THE WEDDING CAKE



-Marley-

Late morning on Monday is slow. The absence of customers means less to focus on, and that means my mind is allowed to wander. Unfortunately.

With elbows on the counter and my head cradled in my hands, my mind drifts away with the falling snow and replays Saturday. We had been having a great day helping others, enjoying each other's company... flirting.

And then he completely freaked out. I haven't heard from him since. I've picked up my phone at least a hundred times since Saturday to text him or call, but I always put it back down. Part of me doesn't want to hear that he's just not into me.

The door chimes as someone walks in. I look up. A statuesque redhead stands at the counter staring down at me.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“I think so. At least, you can if this is the bakery I’ve heard so much about in the news.” She peers around the empty room. “I expected it to be busier here.”

“Oh, this is usually our slow hour. You missed the morning rush and it isn’t quite time for the afternoon crowd.”

“Well, then, I guess I lucked out!” She claps her fingers together. “I need a wedding cake. Can you make those?”

“Wedding cakes? I can, yes.” I don’t admit it’s not something people usually come to my bakery for, though I’ve done a few in the past that have turned out quite good.

“Wonderful! My fiance and I are getting married on Christmas Eve and we’ll need a showpiece for the reception. Something spectacular.”

“That’s less than a week away.” People typically order wedding cakes months in advance.

“Mm-hm.” She nods and smiles. “It needs to be perfect. Cost is no object. Daddy will pay for everything. You can bill everything to Weston Ferrar.”

Holy crap. “Weston Ferrar?”

Her father is the man kicking me out of my bakery?

“Yep! Daddy’s a lawyer. He’s very good at getting what he wants and he always wants the best.”

I should turn down her request. I definitely shouldn’t be making a wedding cake for my landlord’s daughter and

sending him the bill.

And yet, I find myself holding out my hand and saying, “I’m Marley Winters. How about I grab some slices of the cakes I have made so you can do a taste test.”

“Cecelia Ferrar, and that sounds perfect.” Cecelia takes a seat at one of the tables as I grab pieces from the four already-sliced cakes in the glass case. I place each on a separate plate and bring them over the table, lining them up next to each other in front of her. She eyes each one.

“This first one is our classic decadent red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting. Currently, each of the cakes has buttercream separating the layers, but that can be substituted with a pudding, ganache, or a berry filling.”

Cecelia picks up her fork and pierces off the smallest bit of cake, bringing it to her mouth and sliding it off with her teeth.

She squeals as she savors the bite. “Oh, this is to die for!”

“I’m glad you like it,” I say. I slide the next slice forward. “This is our white cake with a citrus twist covered in vanilla buttercream.”

The same series of events occur. She forks off the tiniest piece, scrapes it into her mouth, and squeals.

“This...” she points to the cake with the fork. “... is so good!”

The next two flavors follow the same routine. When she’s done trying them all, she places the fork down and puts her hands in her lap.

“These aren’t all of the flavors I offer, and if you’d like to try something else, I can make them tomorrow if you’re able to come back.”

“Nonsense, any one of these will be perfect.” She glances over each slice once more before looking up with twinkling eyes. “Let’s go with the red velvet. That seems perfect for a Christmas Eve wedding, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. Let me grab a sheet to fill out so I can get the order processed.” I hustle into the back kitchen, grab a pre-printed sheet from a folder on the wall and hurry back out. When I sit down, I write down red velvet with cream cheese frosting on the line for flavors. “I’ll need to get some basic information about the wedding and then we can discuss decoration. How many people will be attending the event?”

“Oh, just our closest family and friends. I believe the headcount is only around 300.”

Only. This will add a lot to my lineup this week, but the extra cash will be worth it if it means I meet my goal and save the bakery. Especially if it’s on Weston Ferrar’s dime.

“That should be quite doable,” I say. We discuss cost, which is of ‘no concern’ according to her, and I sketch out a design based on her wants that Cecelia greenlights. By the time we are done, an hour has passed. Business is picking back up and Kelsey comes in to help with the afternoon shift. Before I let her leave, I peruse the sheet once more. “Oh my goodness, I completely forgot your fiance’s name.”

Cecelia giggles and beams from ear to ear. “John Klaus.”

A fog fills my brain. *That can't be right.*

“I’m sorry, I must have misheard you,” I say, pushing away the haze. “Did you say John Klaus?”

“Mm-hm. My Johnbear and I have been together for ages. Do you know him?”

I swallow and shake my head, forcing a smile. “No, not at all.”

I only thought I did.

DAMAGE CONTROL



-John-

Hey Johnbear! I've got the best news! I ordered our wedding cake! Eee! Isn't that exciting? I got it from the cutest little bakery - the one that's been in the news lately. The owner is a doll. Mollie or Marcy... I can't remember her name. Anyway, I'm busy with the girls tonight so I'll see you tomorrow, probably, unless they want to do something else! Bye, Bear!

I listened to the message five times to make sure I wasn't having a stroke. Now I'm hightailing it to the bakery. Vomit has been trying to make its way up my esophagus as I try to figure out how to explain this to Marley.

I park in the lot in front of the bakery, hop out of my car, and run to the shop. The door slams against the wall when I

push it open. Kelsey stands at the register. Marley is nowhere in sight.

“Where is she?” I ask Kelsey as I near the counter.

She looks at me, her stoic expression revealing nothing. “You know where she is.”

I move around the counter and press my hand against the swinging door. Before pushing it up, I ask, “Is she mad?”

“Nope.” Kelsey shakes her head. “She’s not mad.”

“Really?” Maybe she knows there’s more to the story. Hope surges through me like a bolt of lightning slicing through a storm.

“She’s disappointed.” Kelsey pins me with a stare.

Ouch.

Why does disappointment always feel worse than anger?

I nod and silently push my way through the door. Marley’s back is to me when I enter. She’s shoving loaves of bread in the oven.

“Here to do damage control?” She doesn’t look at me. She rotates some other loaves in the oven. “Because you might as well save your breath.”

She glides over to the island, grabs a rolling pin, and begins rolling out dough. Her cutouts lay next to her, each waiting its turn to be used.

I take a tentative step toward her. She doesn’t say anything, so I take another. And another. She keeps working.

Spread out on one end of the island are several sketches of cakes. Deep reds and greens adorn each design with sophistication and beauty.

“These are amazing.”

Marley stops moving. A sad smile crosses her lips and she swallows.

“One of them will be your wedding cake.” She clears her throat. “Your fiance will be stopping by later today to confirm the design she wants.” Marley sets the roller down and picks up a cutout, stamping it through the thinned-out dough. “I think you need to leave.”

“I came here to explain.”

“There’s nothing to explain, John. I assumed something and turned out to be wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time I was wrong about a man.”

“You weren’t wrong about me, Mar.”

The clanging of the cutout against the counter punctuates her head snapping up. She levels me with a stare. “Do you have a fiance?”

“Yes, but-” I step toward her. She steps back.

“And the desserts that were part of the deal, those are for your wedding?”

“Yes, but that’s-”

Marley throws a hand up and shakes her head. “You need to leave. I have a lot of work to do and a bakery to save.”

She turns her back on me and heads to the oven, rotating the loaves again. My chest squeezes and I'm tempted to rip my heart from it to ease the ache.

Instead, I walk away.

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I leave the door to Weston's office open as I exit. Imaginary daggers stab into my back from his glower, but the weight that had been holding me down is floating away. I drag out my cell and hit James' name. He answers on the first ring.

"What's up?" he asks.

"I need you to do me a favor. There's been a change in venue for the wedding. Can you make calls to the vendors and let them know?"

"You can't do that?"

"I've got something more important to take care of."

"Got it. What's the new venue?" I rattle off the address, thank my brother, and hang up.

This better work.

TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH, MR. KLAUS



-Marley-

I finish packing the rented SUV with a dozen desserts and five cake tiers ready to be assembled once I get to the Ferrars' home. Their daughter's Christmas Eve wedding will go off without a hitch, thanks, in part, to me.

The kicker? Not even the cost of the cake helped me reach my goal. Come the new year, I'll be without a bakery and still in debt to Weston Ferrar.

The back door of the SUV closes with a gentle snick, and I turn to look at my bakery. Snow drifts lazily in the crisp air, catching in my hair. It's too beautiful out to feel this lonely. I should've agreed to go freeze in Maine with Mikey and Leo or be Kelsey's buffer in California.

Hindsight.

With a sigh, I round the SUV and get in, pushing the on button and making sure the heat is off. I can't have my desserts getting too warm. Just as I'm about to shift into drive, my phone rings. I pull it from my pocket and glance at the unknown number. It's probably a scammer. One of those "your warranty is almost up" crap calls. Newsflash: my warranty can't almost be up when I don't own a car.

I decline the call and begin driving. My phone pings again.

Strange. Scammers don't usually leave scamming voicemails.

At the first red light, I listen to the message.

Hi, Marley. It's James. Klaus. John's brother. I was asked to call all of the vendors and let them know there is a change of venue for today's, uh, party. I didn't realize you were one until this morning, so I apologize for the late notice. Anyway, the address of the new venue is 831 Granger Boulevard. So, uh, I guess I'll see you there.

There's a pause but the message hasn't ended.

Sorry my brother is stupid.

And then he hangs up.

A horn honks behind me and I throw my hand up in a wave. Instead of driving straight, I make a right turn and pull into the nearest parking lot to set the GPS on my phone for 831 Granger.

That sounds so familiar.

It isn't until I pull up in front of it that I realize why. *Sorry my brother is stupid.* James' final message in the voicemail rings far truer than he probably realized at the time.

I swallow back the lump in my throat, the one threatening my composure, and blink rapidly to stave off the moisture forming behind my eyes. The gorgeous, unattainable bakery of my dreams taunts me from the corner of North and Granger.

Why would John do this?

I might have been wrong about where things were going between us, but I couldn't have been so wrong to completely misread his character, could I? The knot in my stomach dips at the same moment the prickling behind my eyes begins. He must know what this would do to me. And if he didn't, I'm more of a fool than I ever thought.

I wish Kelsey, Mikey or Leo were here with me. Or all three. Anyone to cushion the ache. But they're not here, and I have to face this alone. Brave face and all that crap.

I take a deep, soul-settling breath before exiting the SUV. Without heat, the car wasn't warm, but the chill in the air and my heart when I step out make me want to hop back in and drive away.

But I don't. I round to the back of the vehicle, open the hatch, and grab two pies, a caramel apple and a triple berry. Before I can take two steps toward the door, James comes out.

"Hey, Marley!" His spirited smile is disarming, and though the dread still sits low in my stomach, seeing a kind face gives

me some hope of making it through the next thirty minutes with my sanity intact. “Let me help you with these.”

“Hi, James. Thanks!” I wait while he grabs two other desserts from the back of the vehicle. My brain flips through potential conversation starters for this situation. “I’m sure you’re excited today. It’s not every day a sibling gets married.”

Amusement flicks across his expression. It pricks like a needle over my skin and I swear the tiny holes are releasing air from my body, deflating me by the second.

Thirty minutes. That’s it.

“I am excited. For the celebration. I’m not sure anyone was really expecting it to happen, but I bet my brother will be happy.”

My brows furrow, but I quickly smooth my expression to neutral. Weren’t John and his fiance together for quite some time?

“Where am I putting this stuff once inside?” I turn back toward the building.

“I’ll show you,” James says. He begins to move and I follow. When we get to the building, he balances the desserts on his arm and holds the door open. I step inside, my head down, not wanting to catch a glimpse of anything that could cause more pain. I gently stomp my feet on the mat to remove any slush leeching on my boots from outside.

“Let me help you with those.” John’s voice melts me like snow on a sunny day. He reaches out to take the pies. His

fingers graze the bare skin of my hands, and my body flares to life. I haven't dared look up, but I can already see he's dressed in an expensive black suit. "I was worried you wouldn't come."

My eyes flash toward his gaze. He's closer than I realized. The desire to step forward vies with the urge to run away. His proximity blocks my view from the rest of the room and I'm thankful for that at least. The less I see of this event, the better.

"I can get those," James whispers as he comes up and takes the pies from John's hands. Then he winks at his brother and moves away.

"You were worried I wouldn't come," I restate. My bafflement wants to turn into indignation, but I reel it back. "We had a deal, Mr. Klaus. I don't back out of deals."

"Mr. Klaus? We're back to formalities?"

It's safer that way.

"Of course we are. This is simply a business transaction, so let's treat it as such for both our sakes."

"Marley..." John steps to the side revealing the room. White lights twinkle against the dark wood ceiling. Bright white tablecloths adorn several tables. Dark merlot and hunter green place settings grace the cloths. A tree, decorated with the same deep reds and greens, towers in the corner by the far window.

Standing by the tree with ridiculous grins on their faces are Kelsey, Mikey, and Leo. Each holds a glass of champagne.

“What’s going on?” I turn toward John then back to my friends. “I thought you were all away. Maine and California. You all left.”

“Except we didn’t. John called me a few days ago.” Kelsey steps forward and hands me one of the champagne glasses she holds. Mikey and Leo sidle up next to her. “He called, explained a few things, told us his plan. This was more important. Our families can wait to see us.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

Fingers trail down my arm, pulling my attention away from my friends.

“I called off the wedding.” His voice is calm and even. “I was going to do it last week, but with having gone out of town and the timing... and when I got back, Cecelia had been by your bakery, and you rightfully didn’t want anything to do with me at that point, but I swear, I was calling off the wedding.”

He was calling off his wedding.

I want to jump for joy.

No, focus. He lied by omission. “That doesn’t explain why you never told me you were engaged.”

“I don’t have a good reason for that.” He shakes his head and his lips press in a thin line. “I wasn’t trying to keep it from you or deceive you. The fact that I was engaged never occurred to me when we were together. It was like it wasn’t real in the first place.”

Hope surges in my chest, warring with the hurt. “You still should have told me.”

“Yes. I should have.” He takes a tentative step closer. “I also should have ended the engagement well before I met you. You helped me realize that. You helped me realize that the kind of person I want to be with, the kind of person I want to be, is someone with drive and determination, who fights for what they believe in.”

My drive and determination didn’t get me far. Will he still be interested when he learns I’m a failure?

“I lost the bakery.”

“I know. I had a final phone call with Weston today regarding clearing out my office. He mentioned it.”

My eyes narrow to a quizzical squint. “You were fired?”

“I quit.” A crooked smirk pulls up one side of his mouth, revealing the dimple in his cheek. “You had asked if a job like mine was worth having when it attacks innocent people. I decided it wasn’t.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll start my own firm focusing on helping small businesses.” He pauses and glances around the room. “And I recently bought some real estate.”

I quirk a brow. “You bought this place? I thought it was only for rent.”

“The realtor knew my grandfather and pulled some strings with the previous owner. It’s amazing what connections can get you.”

“What are you going to do with it?” I glance around and begin to glide through the space toward the main counter. The woodblock is smooth against my fingers as they graze over it. The wall behind the counter is a blank slate. There is so much potential. Anything John uses it for will be a success. Or rather, whoever he rents it out to will thrive.

“I was hoping you’d move The Sweet Spot here,” John says.

Shock spins me around, and I bump into John’s warm, broad chest. His hands brace my arms while mine plant against him. I nestle a little closer, tipping my head back to look into his dark eyes.

“You know I can’t afford the rent on this place.”

He shrugs. “I was going to let you rent it for free.”

I’m in disbelief, eyes bulging from my head, and my mouth pops open. I push back an inch, but don’t drop my hands from his chest. I’ve waited too long to be this close to him to give it all up now. “You can’t... that isn’t logical. You barely know me.”

John pulls me closer. “I know you, Marley. Just like you know me.”

My mind scans through all possible arguments against his statements, but none of them hold up. He’s right. We know

each other. But it's all so new, that I can't let him give me a bakery.

"I can't accept this for free. I need to pay some sort of rent," I insist.

"We can come up with any agreement you want as long as you agree you'll move the bakery here." Unable to speak, I simply nod. He lifts a hand, twisting a strand of my hair loosely around his finger before tucking it behind my ear. His smile widens. "Since that first day I walked into The Sweet Spot, I haven't been able to get you out of my head. The thought of you kept pulling me back to the bakery. And I should have stayed away, but I couldn't. Every day, I ordered coffee just to see you. And somewhere in all of that, as crazy as it sounds, I fell in love, Marley Winters."

Emotion catches in my throat. Despite trying to swallow it down, my voice is still a whisper. "I love you, too. I don't know when it happened or how it happened so quickly, but I love you."

He points above us. Mistletoe hangs from the ceiling over our heads. "I'm ready for that kiss now."

"Took you long enough, Mr. Klaus," I hum. He leans forward, cupping my cheek for a brief moment as our lips touch with the tease of a faint breeze on a scorching afternoon.

Before I remember to breathe, the room erupts with the wild cheers of my friends. I can't help but grin, but John doesn't pull away. My arms wind around his neck, and it feels right, surrounded by everyone I love in my new bakery.

NEARLY A YEAR LATER



-Marley-

Even in the currently dimmed lighting, the red and green dashes of decoration pop against the white walls of the bakery. It's hard to believe we've been in this place nearly a year.

We went all out for the Christmas party this year. More decoration. Bigger tree. A pile of presents to exchange among friends.

“Are you sure you two don't need help cleaning up?” Mikey asks as Leo helps him into his attention-grabbing silver puffy coat.

I glance around the bakery. Torn wrapping paper is scattered across the floor and leftover treats sit on the counter, but really, there isn't much more work to do. I even have everything prepped for the next morning.

“We’re good,” John says before I can. He looks at me and smiles. How is it possible I still get butterflies in my stomach when I’m with him? “You two enjoy the rest of your night.”

The holiday season has been a success this year. We continued with last year’s traditions: Icelandic Christmas, stuff-a-stocking, cookie decorating for the kids, and the toy drive. This morning, John and I spent some time at the soup kitchen, dropping off the baked goods people bought and donated. Everything is perfect, if that’s possible.

“Then we’re off! Thank you for the gifts, and we’ll see you tomorrow bright and early for coffee,” Leo says. I follow them to the door. A burst of icy wind ambushes the front of the bakery as they leave into the night. I lock up, pulling the shade on the door window.

An arm wraps around my waist from behind, tugging me into firm muscle. John’s lips graze the area where my neck and shoulder meet, sending breathtaking shivers through my body.

“Did you have a good day?” he asks. I turn in his arms.

“The best. But I’m looking forward to winding down for the night. Maybe we can throw on a movie when we get home.” *Home*. John moved into my house a few months ago. It’s ours now. Maybe we’re moving too fast, but it doesn’t feel like it.

“What would you say to a cup of coffee before heading out.”

“That’s not exactly winding down,” I tease. “But since we have a little bit left to do here, one cup won’t hurt.”

With a quick kiss to his cheek, I head behind the counter and begin the brew. John moves around the bakery, picking up wrapping paper and pushing in chairs as I wipe down the counters and wrap up the few remaining treats from the party. *Merry Christmas Darling* plays quietly over the speakers.

The buzzer for the coffee sounds and I spin toward the machine. “Coffee’s ready.”

Grabbing two egg shell blue stoneware mugs and setting them on the counter, I sprinkle cinnamon at the bottom of each and pour the steamy brew. The aroma of hazelnut and caramel perks me up. John’s soft footsteps get closer as he comes up behind me.

I turn to hand him a mug and he stands on the opposite side of the counter, the dimple in his cheek more pronounced with his smile. In front of him sitting on the dark wood is a small, black box.

I stare at it as my brain and heart work together to make the connection. John takes both mugs from my hands and sets them on the counter. My gaze flits to him. I don’t dare say a word, because what if I’m just dreaming? Or if it’s not what I think it is? Silence is best until he speaks.

He presses the tiny silver button on the front of the box and it pops open, dragging my attention back down. A tiny gasp leaves my lips. Nesting in black velvet, a gorgeous, vintage round diamond set in white gold. Traveling from the center jewel, the band delicately braids around smaller diamonds as it narrows.

“It all started with coffee.” His voice is low, sultry. I look up at him again. I dare not breathe. “From that very first to-go cup, you had me captivated. When you refused to go down without a fight, I knew I’d just met someone special. I quite literally couldn’t stay away. Every day, I was drawn to your bakery, to you. In those few short weeks, you’d made me a better man, one reminiscent of who I had been before.” He swallows, his eyes glistening. A bead of moisture cascades down my cheek as a smile grows on my face. “Determined, motivated, kind, generous. I don’t think there are enough words to quite describe you, Marley, but the one I can’t wait to use is ‘wife’.” I’m already nodding before he can ask the question, forcing his dimple to deepen and his smile to widen. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” My head hasn’t stopped moving up and down. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He picks up the box and takes out the ring as I rush over to the same side of the counter as him. He turns toward me and I throw my arms around his neck as he lifts me and spins me around. When my feet touch the floor again, his hands cradle my face and he kisses me. As he pulls away, he reaches for my left hand and slips the ring on my finger.

“I love you,” he says.

“And I love you.” I glance at the ring and admire it sparkling in the light. “It’s beautiful.”

“It was my mother’s.” His thumb skims over the diamond. “And now it’s yours.”

Our eyes meet. My soul feels full and loved, and I want to shout from the rooftops to let everyone know, but now is not the time for that.

“What do we do now? Do we tell people? Set a date?”
Excitement roils through me. *Just enjoy the moment, Marley.*

John smiles down at me. His lips brush over mine. When he pulls away, he lifts my hand , kissing the inside of my wrist.
“Now, we live happily ever after.”

The End

Sneak PEEK

at

SOMETHING *Secret*

A SOMETHING SERIES ROMANCE

SOMETHING SECRET

Heart-Shaped Bagels and Other Stupid Things

Chapter 1

-Kelsey-

All of the New Year's decorations came down from the new bakery's windows and walls, replaced with hearts, cupids, and other stupid things. I wish Marley didn't find it necessary to decorate for each holiday, but according to her, "Customers love this shit."

Honestly, I think *she* loves this shit. I don't find it necessary. People know what day is around the corner, but do we need to shove it in their faces every second?

It's bad enough that all of Marley's cookies are in the shapes of love letters or teddy bears or rings. The muffins all have little paper kisses sticking out from the tops. She even reshaped the bagels. No longer can you come to The Sweet Spot and order a normal circular bagel because they've all been transformed into damn hearts.

Who wants to eat a heart-shaped bagel, anyway?

“Smile Kelse.” Summer pokes my side. “You’re scaring away the customers. What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” I mumble before pasting a fake, exaggerated smile on my face. “Better?”

“Hardly. Now you’re scaring customers because they’re afraid the psychopath working the counter is going to murder them.” Summer laughs. “You’ve been in a mood all week.”

“Yeah, well, you would be, too, had you gone home for the holidays to have your younger sister gush all over your ex - her current - boyfriend only to have him propose to her on Christmas in front of your whole family and exclaim that there’s never been a better woman than the love of his life, Hanna.”

“That’s gotta sting.” Summer says. A customer sidles up to the counter. “What can I get you today?”

“Just a smidge.” I hold my fingers a fraction apart.

“Three large coffees and a half dozen blueberry muffins,” the customer responds.

“You got it.” Summer smiles at the customer. She turns and begins filling to-go cups with brew. I sludge over to the glass case of baked goods and shove six muffins into a box, tape the bottom and slide them across the counter to the customer. She barely catches them, staring at me wide-eyed. I offer her the psychotic smile and she shuffles away a few inches, averting her eyes toward Summer.

“Sorry about her.” Summer hands her the coffees. “She’s still learning how to be part of society. Have a nice day!” The woman hurries off and Summer turns back to me. “You could at least try to tone it down, Kelse.”

I ignore her pleas. “On top of that, Mom and Dad raved about how Hanna and Flynn have always been the perfect couple and they can’t imagine anyone more suited for each other.”

“In front of you?”

I nod. “Oh, and it gets worse.”

Summer’s eyes turn into huge circles. “How can it possibly get worse?”

“This past weekend, Hanna called up and insisted I be her maid of honor. We aren’t best friends. We’re barely friends! The term “sister” is used as basically as it can be between us.”

“So what did you say?”

“I said ‘no’. She just wants to shove this whole shitshow in my face as much as possible.”

“That certainly explains this pisspoor mood you’ve been in.”

“You think?” I look around the bakery at the red and pink reminders of my loneliness. “And all of these ridiculous decorations are just rubbing it in. I should adopt a minimum of ten cats and update my wardrobe to include only bathrobes and fuzzy slippers.”

“I mean, at least you’d be comfy!” Summer wiped down the counter, freeing it from crumb and dark splashes of coffee.

“You’re encouraging.” I open the brewers. A damp pile of coffee in a now-stained filter drips as I pull them out. One edge of the filter slips from between my fingers and the pile of sludge plops to the tile.

“That’s what friends are for.” Summer grabs the dustpan and a paper towel. She scoops up the muck onto the pan and dumps it in the garbage. She turns to me as I finish putting new coffee in the brewer. “You should do something for yourself, Kelse. Something that will make you happy.”

“I think the thing that would make me happy right now is having my bookshop still.” As much as I love working for Marley at the bakery, I miss my store.

“You already know how to run one and what it takes to get one up and going.” *Yeah, if only my asshole landlord at the time hadn’t evicted me.* “So why not work toward that again?”

“Expense. I’d need a minimum of ten grand just to open and stock it. Then I’d have to have some sort of back up savings until I’m able to make an income from it. The two part time jobs I have barely pay the bills.”

I slump over the counter, burying my head in my folded arms. A bell rings, accompanied by the winter chill as someone walks into the bakery. I should lift my head and look at least somewhat accommodating, but I’m weighed down by misery.

Casanova

Chapter 2

-Beau-

The sun wakes me up before my alarm. Blonde hair engulfs my pillow from the woman lying in bed with me. I brush it away. She turns onto her stomach, her leg bent at the knee, pushing her bare ass a bit in the air.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed, planting my feet on the lush carpet, and lift off the bed, stretching. As I round the foot of the California king, my hand meets the blonde's ass. The stinging, playful smack is to let her know it's time to get up and get out.

She squeaks, groans, and begins to crawl out of the bed. Two copies of her signed NDA and two of her video consent form sit on the nightstand under my black masquerade mask. Shoving the disguise in the drawer, I grab one of each form. The others she can keep for her own records. Can't be too careful when it comes to keeping your identity a secret, especially when your father has expressed his distaste for all of your life choices. At least the ones he knows about. Imagine what the press would say if they found out the mayor's son is ForFans' Casanova.

My father would kill me. Well, technically he'd hire someone else to do it and make sure there wasn't a paper trail

to connect back to him. Can't get your hands *too* dirty when you're a public official.

I take a seat at my office area in the corner of the room to make sure last night's activities were recorded and saved. Several monitors span the length of three desks. Cords and wires, though neatly grouped and arranged, protrude from the computers to various cameras around the room.

"When will my episode air?" The blonde comes up behind me, her voice scratchy with morning drowsiness. Her hand rubs my shoulder. I shrug it off. The key to maintaining my business is not letting the girls get too attached.

"About three weeks, give or take a couple days." I have a backlog of videos to ensure I always have something to post in case there is an unexpected dry spell in women.

I breathe out a silent laugh.

Like I could have a dry spell.

Numerous apps on my phone make this way of life easy to sustain. The moment they see Casanova requesting their services, they practically cream their jeans. Or skirts. Or whatever they might be wearing when the invitation reaches them.

"That long?" she whines. Disappointment scatters across her features.

They never get it. They think all it takes is recording a video and uploading it to ForFans. But there's a skill to delivering top quality videos that require extensive editing and

manipulating of images. I wear a mask, but I also need to make sure there's nothing identifiable that would reveal who I am. Plus I want the chick to look good. Not all positions are suitable for the public eye. No one wants their ass looking dimpled on camera, even if it's their natural image and it doesn't mean they're any less sexy.

“That long.” I confirm. “There's a process.”

She stands next to me, shifting on her feet. Her eyes wander around the room before landing back on the bed. She points toward it. “Do you wanna-”

“Sorry, babe. I've got things to do today.” Not exactly true, but it's all part of the persona. Sometimes I'll go another round with a chick, but this one was a little too tame last night to take that bait today. My phone pings. Eric's name pops up on the screen in view of the blonde. “See? Busy day. You know how it is.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. So, should I...” she trails off.

“Yep.” I nod toward the nightstand. “Don't forget your copies of the forms. I take the NDA seriously. You mention anything about who I am, and I'll take you to court without a second thought.”

Her eyes become slits at the same time an anger-filled pout pushes out her thin lips. She crosses her arms over her chest, shoving her breasts together. Those babies were the reasons I requested her. Extra visual appeal for my subscribers.

I swivel in my chair, raising my brows and crossing my arms. If this chick wants to get in a huff over something she agreed to, that's not my problem. The consent form outlines exactly what is expected of them. Item 3B: *'You agree to leave promptly after Casanova wakes you up.'*

She rolls her eyes, throws her arms down and puffs out a breath, but she does get moving and picks up her scattered clothes.

"I can't find my bra." I shrug. How am I supposed to know where it is? "Ugh, whatever."

She drops to the floor and drags a hand under the bed, pulling out her baby blue, lacey bra. After draping her shirt over her and shimmying into her pants, she grabs her purse and coat, and she leaves.

Finally.

I pick up my cell to glance at Eric's text.

Coffee at The Sweet Spot, then gym. 30 minutes.

I send a quick text back confirming I'll be there. Turning on my monitors, I begin transferring footage from the saved file to the editing program before logging in to my ForFans account to check the views on the last video.

4,396.

Not bad for being up for less than thirty-six hours.

I turn the monitors back off and stand. My back cracks with a stretch. The rumpled bed is a reminder of last night and

everything I need to do for the video. I grab the sheets off of it, leave the room, and lock the door.

Dragging my ass down the hall toward the washing machine, I pass my open bedroom, the one only for me. I stop at the door. Women aren't allowed in this sanctuary.

Another California king covered with a black faux down comforter teases me from the opposite wall.

I pull the phone from my pocket.

Give me an hour.

I send the text to Eric, drop the sheets in the hall outside the door and crawl under the warmth of the covers on my bed.

Time for some actual sleep.

Hartless

Chapter 3

-Kelsey-

The chime from the door rings, followed by deep boisterous laughter.

“Holy mother of goddesses everywhere, get your head up now or regret it forever, Kelse” Summer whispers. She squeezes my side, forcing me to giggle and making me jump

up. I glare at her, but she doesn't notice. She's ogling whoever just walked into the shop.

With an audible sigh just so she knows I'm annoyed, I turn my head to see who she's looking at.

"Shit," I whisper. I drop to the floor, back against the counter, hands palming the tile, knees to chest. The smaller I can make myself, the better this will be. "Shit, shit, shit."

Each *shit* becomes an increasingly louder hush.

I glance up at Summer who looks at me like I need a straightjacket. "What the hell has gotten into you, Kelse?"

"Shhhh!" I place a finger to my lips then wave my hands erratically at her. "Don't say my name. Don't look at me. Pretend I'm not here."

"Well, I'd love to do that, except we have a handful of customers who look like they could eat the entire bakery in one fell swoop." She focuses her attention on the group of guys I assume are now standing on the other side of the counter. Summer gives them an award-winning smile and a wink. A few low laughs follow. "So, if you don't mind picking your cute butt up off the floor and giving me a hand, that would be great."

Rubbing my face with my hands, I apply extra pressure over the eyes until tiny colorful dots appear on the black canvas behind them. *This year is just going to suck.*

I lift off the ground with a silent groan and turn to face the group of men just as Summer asks them, "What can we get for

you?”

“Coffee, black. And an almond croissant.” Beau Valentine’s rumbling voice still sends shivers down my spine even after all these years. Though the clench between my thighs is new.

Run and hide.

The fight or flight reaction is obviously stuck on flight with him. And why shouldn’t it be? Beau did nothing but torment me between our freshman and senior years. Our quintessential high school could have been the template for any teenage movie. Cliques, circles, and stereotypes ran rampant during those four long, drawn out years. My quiet, literature-loving nature was prime target material for the jocks and assholes.

I gawk at him like the stupid school girl I used to be before the teasing and torture began. Beau’s always been tall, looming over others, and he’s put on at least a truckload more muscle than he had in high school. He’s the most breathtaking monster of my nightmares.

And his smile can still stop women in their tracks. Case in point, Summer’s been eye-fucking him without an ounce of shame for the past few minutes. Luckily for me, he’s been eating it up and returning the favor to her, leaving me unnoticed.

“Do you mind getting that started while I finish taking their orders?” Summer asks without removing her gaze from Beau. He, however, glances over at me.

I offer a non-psychotic smile. *Please don’t notice it’s me.*

He stares for a second before his eyebrows lift. “Kelsey Hart?”

Crap. I muster up all the courage and energy left inside me to respond.

“The one and only!” My eyes squeeze closed and I shake my head. When I open them again, only one of his eyebrows is cocked. “I mean, probably not actually the one and only. There must be at least another Kelsey Hart somewhere in this world, right?” *Shut up, shut up, shut up.* “I can’t be the only one. Just like you can’t be the only Beau Valentine. Then again...” *What is wrong with you? You’re just giving him ammo. Stop it now.* I swallow. “So, that was a black coffee?”

He flashes me a crooked smirk. “Yeah, black.”

I nod and spin on my toes. At least with my back to him, I can’t see the sickening joy he gets from my embarrassment.

Laughter resonates behind me. I fill the to-go mug, hoping the drizzle of liquid drowns out the chuckling.

“Still the same ol’ Kelsey Hart.” Beau pauses. I can feel his eyes burrowing into the back of my head. “Mostly.”

I snap my head around. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Beau’s eyes widen and his hands go up in surrender.

“Whoa, there, Hartless.” The old nickname feels like a hundred cockroaches crawling under my skin. “I simply meant that you’re a fuckin’ hottie now. Though clearly still as crazy as ever.”

My cheeks warming at his compliment prove his final statement.

“I guess the real question is, are you the same Beau Valentine?” I hand him his coffee. He takes it, the smirk no longer present on his face. He studies me for a moment. Not long, but enough to make my legs ache for movement. I refuse their pleas and stand still, finally gaining the courage to stare him in the eye. Then the damn smirk reappears. “Maybe you’ll be lucky enough to find out one of these days.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “Hopefully not.”

“But you admit you’d be lucky if you did.” He takes a sip of coffee, winks, and turns to his friends. “I’ll be outside.”

Beau walks out of the bakery and stands in front of the window, looking in. He watches me while drinking from his cup, his eyes never wavering the entire time Summer and I finish serving his friends. By the time they all leave and pull Beau away, I want to rip my skin off.

“What’s up with you and Sexy McGiveMeSomeOfThat?” Summer asks as she begins recounting stock in the glass case that holds most of the baked goods.

“Nothing,” I mumble.

“That wasn’t nothing.” She jots some numbers and words down on the pad of paper she holds.

“Just someone from high school sent my way to torment me. I clearly pissed off the universe or something.” I roll my eyes and sigh. “So, it was nothing and let’s drop it.”

“It’s dropped.” Summer playfully smacks my shoulder. “But it did give me an idea on how you can make money and reopen your book shop.”

“I’m listening.”

Summer surveys the bakery. She sidles up next to me and whispers, “Have you ever heard of The Network?”

“No,” I whisper back. Then, because this is ridiculous, I return my voice back to normal volume. “Is that like a computer company or something?”

“Hardly.” Summer gets even closer to me. Her voice is practically inaudible when she says, “It’s an escort service. For the rich and famous of the city.”

This time I glance around to make sure no one’s heard her whispers. The few customers at tables are engrossed in their books, phones, and laptops. I lean into the faux sanctuary Summer has created with our close proximity.

“I’m not having sex for money.” My hushed tones are not nearly as quiet as Summer’s, and we snap our heads up. A man clears his throat, takes a sip of coffee, and continues typing away on his laptop.

“You don’t-” Summer sighs and grasps my arm. She drags me through the kitchen door. “You don’t have to have sex with them if you don’t want to. Most are just looking for attractive dates to parade around at dinners and other events.”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like something I could do.” I begin pushing back through the door, but Summer still holds

my arm. She tightens her grip firmly and pulls me toward her. Her implorative and insistent gray eyes give me pause.

“I escort one night a week and make anywhere between two-fifty and five hundred for a few hours of my time.” Summer’s skin tints pink with her sly smile. “On occasion, I made even more.”

A few hundred for a few hours? That doesn't seem so bad.

“You really make that much?” I ask. Summer’s head bobs up and down with confirmation. “The sooner I make money, the sooner I can get my bookstore up and running again.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” She finally drops my arm like she’s confident I won’t run away. “You’re hot. You’re single. And you need money. No other job is going to give you that as quickly as this one.”

She’s right. And I don’t have to have sex with anyone. And getting my bookstore up and running will definitely make this year suck less.

I take a deep breath and push it out.

“What do I have to do?”

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ALSO BY AUTHOR

Something Series

Something Secret

(COMING SOON to KU and Paperback)

Something Spicy

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Depths of Hell

[Purgatory](#)

(Currently on Vella)

Love Locked Down

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(Currently on Vella)

ABOUT AUTHOR

Jessica Brown is a writer and SAHM based in Upstate New York where she lives with her husband, son, and tabby, Cutey. She started writing in 2017 and hasn't covered even a fraction of the stories floating in her head. She can't help but create the drama you hate to love and HEAs with the heroes you want in your bed. When she isn't writing, you can find her posting on Instagram, playing with her son, and drinking tea. All the tea.

And maybe some coffee, too.