

Southern Roots Boxed Set



A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY COLLECTION

DONNA JEFFRIES

SOUTHERN ROOTS BOXED SET

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY COLLECTION,
WHICH INCLUDES JUST HIS SECRETARY,
JUST HIS BOSS, AND JUST HIS ASSISTANT

BY

DONNA JEFFRIES



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BOOK 1: JUST HIS SECRETARY

ABOUT JUST HIS SECRETARY

She's just his secretary...until he needs someone on his arm to convince his mother that he can take over the family business. Then Callie becomes Dawson's girlfriend—but just in his text messages...but maybe she'll start to worm her way into his shriveled heart too.

Callie:

Dawson Houser makes sure everyone who comes into the office knows I'm "just his secretary."

Heck, *I've* even said it to suppliers and CEOs when they smile knowingly at the two of us during business meetings. He scowls and grumps around the office afterward, as if the two of us dating is the most *ridiculous* thing on the planet.

Dawson can handle them. I can handle them—and him too, once they leave. And he's no picnic, let me tell you.

Who can't we handle?

His mother.

When Lila Houser comes to town with her faux furs and fashion sunglasses, she only has one question for her spoiled rotten son: *When are you going to get married, Dawson, darling?*

I expect him to laugh and tell her he's never getting married. I mean, I've heard those exact words come out of his mouth.

Instead, he pulls me to his side and says, "Maybe sooner than you think, Mother."

Oh, that Lila Houser can make a woman feel two inches tall with a simple up-down look. I think I'm a pretty good catch... no matter what my last three boyfriends say.

When Lila says, "I thought Callie was **just your secretary**," I suddenly want to prove her dead wrong...

Get ready to laugh out loud in this hilarious, sweet workplace romantic comedy! The romance is clean, the jokes witty, and the office grump swoon-worthy.

Get all the Southern Roots Sweet RomComs:

1. [Just His Secretary](#)
2. [Just His Boss](#)
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Have you gotten the prequel novella? It's available for FREE on Prolific Works as part of the Sweet and Swoony Romance Giveaway. [Go here to check it out.](#)

CALLIE

My phone chimes, the sound of a high-pitched, toy car engine. My ride has arrived.

I'm not quite ready to leave, but I did call the ride, and I can't keep putting off this conversation. If my boss wasn't quite so grumpy and if he didn't already pay me quite so well, I wouldn't feel so nervous about asking for a raise.

Honestly, Dawson Tightwad Houser should've *offered* me the raise months ago.

The only reason he hasn't been paying me more all this time is because of my own chickenness in asking him to.

"Today," I mutter to myself, reaching for the cup of pink grapefruit segments. I like to start the day out with the intent of eating well. I'll be sorting Skittles by lunchtime, and I remember that I'm down to my last three bags.

I'll have to find someone to drive me to the warehouse store to get another box. I buy the candy in bulk, the way movie theaters do, because I can save thirty-eight cents per bag over buying them at the corner market I can walk to.

The doorbell rings, and I snatch my purse off the kitchen counter and take it with my grapefruit segments toward the door. "Sorry," I say as I open the door. "I'm coming."

"Callie Michaels?" the man standing there asks. He's wearing a ball cap with the NY on it for the Yankees, a gray T-shirt with the same logo, and a pair of navy blue sweat pants that hang on his skinny frame.

He's a few inches taller than me, even in my cute ankle boots with a three-inch heel, and he's just my type. Aloof, sure, but most guys are when meeting a pretty woman.

I smile at him, hoping I'm pretty enough for the likes of him. "Yep, Callie Michaels."

"I'm Chris." He flashes me a smile in return.

I pull my phone out. "I'm sending my girlfriend the info of my ride in case I disappear."

He chuckles and turns to go down my front steps. I love my little blue house. It sits at the end of a dead-end street, and has one of the biggest live oaks in the neighborhood standing guard in the front yard.

"Tara's already responded," I say, stepping out of the house and pulling my front door closed. As I go down the steps, I run through my mental checklist for leaving the house.

Stove, off. That's important too, as I've left it on before, and all those things my mother used to worry about happening if someone would be such a disaster to leave the stove on when they left the house—those happened.

The candle I'd had beside the stove had melted everywhere. The oozing wax had soaked into the bottom of the roll of paper towels, and it had fallen over.

Onto the hot burner. And then that paper had ignited.

My neighbor had seen the smoke and called the fire department. I'd gotten a call at work about my house burning down, and in a surprise move, my boss had driven me home so I could deal with the situation.

Dawson hadn't even fired me for leaving work early. I'd heard he'd let go of plenty of previous secretaries for less.

"Can I practice my pitch on you?" I ask as I slide into the front passenger seat. "Is it okay if I ride up here? I always feel so lame in the back seat."

"Sure," Chris said. "And pitch away."

“Okay.” I smooth down my pencil skirt and settle my bright green briefcase bag near my feet. “Just a sec.”

I glance toward the house and find Claude Monet perched in the windowsill, his frowny cat face clearly showing me his opinion of my departure. He likes to watch the birds from that spot, and he’ll run outside the moment I arrive home from work tonight.

He has no claws, but he sure does like to pretend he can climb a tree and catch one of those blue-black birds that like to torment him.

Feed the cat, check.

Took a pound of ground beef out of the freezer so I can make mini-meatloaves for dinner tonight. Ready.

Texted Tara about my ride, done.

Tucked all the folders for the meeting with the big wigs from Veterans Brew, the coffee company that would fund my raise if everything went well this afternoon, into my bag. Yep.

“All right,” I say. “First off, I’ve been in this job for five years. That’s about four years and eleven months longer than any other secretary who’s worked with my boss.” I glance at Chris, and he’s nodding.

“Second, I’m really good at my job. My boss texts me at home to find out where his blazer is, for crying out loud.”

“Sounds dysfunctional,” he says, peering up at the stoplight to make sure it’s still red. “Is this the pitch?”

“No, just background,” I say. “One more quick point. I have a master’s degree in marketing and human resources.” I wave my hand and resist the urge to tuck my hair behind my ear.

Dawson once commented that whenever I did that, he knew I was nervous, and he didn’t want the men and women we met with to know that too. I work really hard not to do it in front of him anymore.

Just another reason I deserve this raise, I tell myself.

“Okay, here’s the pitch.” I draw a deep breath, hold it, gather my thoughts, and exhale. “I’ve been at Dawson Dials In for over five years now. I’m never late, despite not owning a car. The filing system has never been neater. We’ve increased the business here by four hundred percent since I started here, and your firm had barely been operating in the black when I started. Now, everything runs like a well-oiled machine.”

All true. A lot of that has to do with Dawson, sure. He has the degrees and the training and a creative mind like none I’ve witnessed before.

But he has a strong, smart, organized woman—me—behind the front he puts on for everyone who walks through the door of the marketing firm that employs only the two of us.

“I haven’t had a raise in sixteen months, and I think I deserve one.” I nod, having reached the end of my pitch. I’ve practiced it in front of the mirror, wearing my sexiest set of underwear.

Leopard print. *Pink* leopard print.

I wear the same bra and panties now, because they make me feel powerful. They’re like a naughty little secret only I know, and that makes me feel a step above Dawson, as if I know something he doesn’t.

As if the man cares about what I wear under my clothes. In all the time I’ve known him, the man has never been on a date. Has never even called a woman, except clients and the landlord we pay rent to.

He isn’t a workaholic, because he leaves the office by five p.m. every evening.

He isn’t ugly either. In all honesty, he’s downright hot. Power suits, shiny shoes, thick, wavy hair. The beard. Mylanta, the beard. He runs, he plays basketball, and at first glance, he could definitely get any woman he wants.

The truth is, Dawson Houser is a complete beast. An ogre. The quintessential office grump.

“That’s it?” Chris asks. “That’s the pitch?”

“That’s it,” I say. “My boss loses interest if I talk for more than thirty seconds.”

“And you want to keep this job?” Chris looks at me like I’m nuts.

Sometimes I feel nuts.

I peel back the plastic top on my grapefruit cup. “Yes,” I say. “It’s a good job. I like it. He pays really well.”

And the office is in an old, 1700s house in downtown Charleston, where the second-story window has a killer view of the Atlantic Ocean.

“Then why do you need the raise?” Chris finally leaves the stoplights of Sugar Creek behind and hits the highway.

“I haven’t had one for sixteen months,” I say, annoyance flashing through me. Didn’t he listen to the pitch?

“He’s going to ask that,” Chris says.

“I outlined why I deserve the raise.” I don’t want to point out that Dawson will never find someone who can do what I can *and* who can put up with him.

“Well, I don’t know...” Chris grins at me, but his laid-back, sporty-jock look only irritates me now.

“Okay,” I say, reaching for my bag. “I’ll work on it some more.”

He adjusts the radio, the music set to the pop favorites. I happen to like the newest, poppiest music, but I don’t tell Chris that.

I pretend to go over the notes for the meeting that afternoon, but my mind wanders through my pitch.

No, I tell myself as Chris makes the final turn and eases to a stop in front of the house-office.

“Here you go, Callie Michaels,” he says, clearly flirting with me.

“Thank you, Chris Potter.” I tap to pay him, and his phone *cha-chings* from where he’s attached it to the windshield.

“Hey, before you go,” he says, and I know what comes next. I actually smile, because he’s going to ask me out, and that means I’ve put all the parts of myself together well enough to make other people believe I have my life together.

They don’t know about the house fire. Or the escaped hamsters. The partial nudity in public. Or the Glue Incident.

So.

“Are you seeing anyone?” he asks. “Maybe you’d like to go to dinner with me sometime.”

He has nice eyes, the color of the rich, deep earth that my potted plants sit in. At least until I kill them.

“I’m not seeing anyone at the moment,” I say. “When is ‘sometime,’ Mister Potter?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I think I have a date with another pretty woman I drove to work yesterday...”

I laugh, because he *is* cute, and why shouldn’t I go out with him? He’s clearly not a serial killer.

He could be, I think.

That’s why you date, I hear in my head, in my mother’s voice. *To find out if he’s a serial killer or not.*

“No facial piercings?” I ask, searching that handsome face. “Are you a cat-hater? Wait. Do you only own sweats?” I eye the pants, once again noting how skinny he is.

I need a beefier guy to go with my size twelve body. Fine, size fourteen. But it’ll be a good dinner date, and I won’t have to eat meatloaf for the third or fourth night in a row.

He swipes on his phone for a moment, his chuckle still filling the car. “Looks like I have to work tomorrow, and my mom is going to do our monthly *are-you-dating-anyone* dinner on Wednesday... Thursday?”

He looks up, hopeful.

“Sure,” I say. “Thursday.”

“I’ll text you right now, and then you’ll have my number.”

“Perfect.” I’ve already tucked my phone away, because Dawson doesn’t like it when I walk in, glued to my phone. I feel the device vibrate against my foot, and I add, “I got it. Now, wish me luck with my raise.”

“Good luck with your raise,” he says dutifully, and I giggle again as I get out of the car.

Facing the house, though, I erase all signs of joviality. It’s time for work, and that means I need my best game face securely in place.

“You’ve got this,” I whisper to myself as I walk down the sidewalk. “You’re smart. You’re capable. You’ve taken this company from floundering to thriving. *You*, Callie. It’s Monday morning, and you have meetings with this man specifically to talk about this kind of thing.”

I put my hand on the door handle and take another breath. I’m going to slay this Monday.

I open the door, my cute bag on my shoulder and my leopard underwear concealed beneath adorable, professional attire.

This raise is mine, I think...at least until I hear Dawson yell, “It better be here by ten, or someone’s going to lose their head!”

DAWSON

I cannot believe the guy on the other end of the line. “This is unacceptable,” I say next, taking my bellow down to a mere yell. It might even simply be how I’d call out to Callie, my secretary.

She appears in the doorway, her perfectly sculpted eyebrows raised toward the ceiling. I wave her inside as the guy explains to me about an accident his bike courier experienced that morning.

“Then get another courier,” I say. “And if those renditions are damaged at all, I swear, I’ll make sure no one uses your services again.”

Callie enters the office, her tartly green-apple bag hanging from her forearm. She strides in, which I like. She’s not afraid of me, even when I’m on the edge of rage.

She’s dressed perfectly for this afternoon’s meeting, though she wears a skirt five days a week. I’d told her she could dress down on Fridays, but I never do, and I guess she picked up on my cues.

Today, her blouse reminds me of a field of flowers, and the CEO of Veterans Brew loves poppies.

She’s got those, and some violet blooms, as well as some flower that’s yellow. The greenery flowing over the white, silky fabric makes her the epitome of spring, and I’m male enough to notice her curves.

“Fine,” I bark into the phone as the owner of the courier company tells me he’ll drive over the renditions of the marketing materials we need for that afternoon himself. “By ten o’clock.”

I slam the phone down and run both hands through my hair. “Good morning,” I say with a sigh.

“Is it?” Callie asks.

When I look at her, she tilts her head, her expression open and questioning at the same time.

“No,” I say. “The bike courier got in an accident this morning, and the renditions of the posters won’t be here until ten.”

“Should we postpone the morning meeting until we get them?” She bends to open her bag, taking out several folders and putting them on the edge of my desk.

I’m tired already, and it’s Monday morning. I suppress a sigh and run my fingers down my beard instead. I reach for the glasses I need to see things close up, though I haven’t told anyone that they should be a permanent feature on my face. Callie thinks they’re reading glasses, and since I’ll be reading her notes, I’m fine to wear them.

“No,” I say. “Let’s go over the week.” I reach for the notes she’s extracted, but she doesn’t extend them toward me.

I lift my eyes to hers, and if I still dated women—which I don’t—I’d be looking for a pair of eyes the color of hers. Bright blue, like a perfect summery sky over South Carolina. The kind I experienced as a kid, sitting on the beach at the fancy resort my parents had taken me to.

I swallow, something sparking inside me that had died the day Kim had left me standing at the altar.

“What’s going on?” I growl, a third at her for refusing to give me the notes, a third for the late renditions, and a third at the stupid way my hormones and body have reacted to my secretary.

I've told more people than I can count that she's just my secretary. So many clients and customers have commented on how well we work together and how cute we are as a couple.

"She's just my secretary," has come out of my mouth dozens of times, almost like a parrot.

She's said it too, and she's never once indicated that she'd like to spend any more time with me than she has to.

"I'd like to speak with you about something first," she says, reaching up and tucking her long, sandy-blond hair behind her ear.

She's nervous.

I lean back in my chair, suddenly nervous too. "You're quitting."

"What?" She shakes her head. "No." A light, girlish giggle comes from her mouth, and I glare at her.

She silences it. She's a couple of years younger than me, and some men like giggling. I am not one of them. I barely tolerate the stuffed animals she brings into the office for Valentine's Day, and the fruity candles she's forever lighting to make the office smell more homey drive me to the brink of madness.

Most things do, in all honesty. Including the way my stupid male side wonders what her very female mouth would taste like.

My hormones rear up every few months, and I have to tamp them back down into the box where I keep them. Sometimes I'll chat with someone via a dating app or even go to dinner with Lance, my best friend, and his girlfriend. That reminds me how much I do *not* want to be tied down, and I'm good for a while.

"I want a raise," Callie blurts out. Her eyes widen, and she shakes her shoulders slightly. "I mean, I've been here for over five years now, Mister Houser. You were barely operating in the black then, and now this place is turning customers away."

She has a ton to do with that, and I'm not oblivious to that fact.

"It's been sixteen months since my last raise, and I believe I'm due."

I steeple my fingers in front of my face and consider her request.

She nods, her pitch done. I do like that about her. I have a list of things I'd like to discuss for this week too, and we need to go over our afternoon meeting.

"Fine," I say again, this time with much less animosity in my voice. "Another twelve?"

"That would be wonderful," she says, her smile professional though her eyes now dance with merriment.

I can admit I'm glad she's happy. The rope that is always wound tight inside me releases a little bit. "Now, can we go over the notes?"

"Yes, sir," she says, handing them to me. "We also need to discuss a possible new cleaner, as you mentioned it last week. And I'd like to change the fresh flower delivery to bi-weekly instead of weekly."

"I have a list too." I take the notes from her and hand her the list I've scrawled on a scrap of paper from a pad my mother gave me for Christmas last year.

She takes that and we study what we've been given. "Your mother is coming Thursday?" she asks, plenty of surprise in her voice.

I look up and find her frowning. "Yes," I say. "I just found out."

"You better have," she said, exchanging my list for her phone. "You do know how hard it is to get a housekeeper on such short notice, right?" She lifts her phone to her ear. "You do need me to get someone to clean your house, yes?"

"Yes, please," I say, embarrassed my secretary has to do such a thing for me.

She sighs and looks at my list again. “It’s a good thing I’ve got my power panties on today,” she says. “Or I’d never get all of this done.”

I choke, not used to talking about unmentionables across my desk. At least not with Callie.

Not with anyone, I remind myself.

“Your what?”

Callie gasps and claps one hand over her mouth, her eyes wide as dinner plates and stuck on mine.

The moment between us is almost funny, if I wasn’t now thinking about what she has on beneath her clothes.

She jerks to attention a moment later and says in an ultra-crisp voice, “Yes, hi, I know it’s last-minute, but I need someone to clean an eighteen-hundred square-foot house before Thursday morning.”

CALLIE

I sort the Skittles on my desk, moving a red one over to a yellow and an orange one. I like to eat them in groups of two or three, and there are certain color combinations that make the delicious, fruity flavors I love, right there in my mouth.

Red is my favorite, and if I can pair a red one with a yellow one, it's like eating a strawberry lemonade bite of perfection. I like the red and orange too, and the red-purple combo. Red should never be eaten with green.

In fact, I don't like the green Skittles all that much at all. They're okay if eaten with a yellow, and they're best with purple. I'll eat them in a green-yellow-purple combo too, but sometimes I just put them all in a pile by themselves and throw them away later.

That's another way I trick myself into thinking I've eaten healthy for the day.

Low music plays from Dawson's office, and I glance in that direction. He calmed quickly during our morning meeting, but wow, it had gone on and on. When he'd rubbed his fingers along his forehead and complained of a headache, I'd stood and gone to get him some painkillers.

He'd taken those—complete with a thank you—and turned on the music.

I should be calling the regular office cleaners to go over the request he gave me that morning, but I don't need to. He wants to make sure they're watering the plants, and I didn't

have the heart to tell him that *I'm* the reason all the greenery in the office is almost dead.

See, I took a class on plant care once, and I *know* how to take care of them. It doesn't matter that every living thing I touch ends up dead. At least in the horticulture department. I've kept Claude Monet alive for years, thank you very much.

The problem is, I'm taking care of the plants, *and* so is the cleaning crew. They're getting *overwatered*, not underwatered, and I pick up the phone and dial, just in case Dawson asks if I've called the cleaners.

Tara picks up with, "You never texted to say you made it to work, and I was just about to call in the National Guard."

I laugh and shake my head. "You were not."

"What happened this morning?"

I think about the underwear comment in Dawson's office. "What do you mean?" No way I'm telling Tara about that, though we do confide in each other about almost everything. She's met Dawson Houser, though. She knows what he's like.

"I mean, you didn't just send me the ride info like you usually do. It was a regular text with the guy's name and everything."

"Yeah," I say. "He asked me out." I lean back in my chair, my heeled feet coming up off the floor. I gasp as I try to balance myself so I don't topple backward.

"You're kidding," Tara says just before she starts laughing. "Of course he did."

"I am wearing my black pencil skirt," I say, as if that alone should make every available male fall at my knees, begging for a date. "And he has a car. Oh!" I sit up and glance toward the open office door. "I got my raise. Finally."

"That's amazing, Cal. Now you can buy your own car."

Yeah, I don't know about that. I can drive, legally. I just don't like it. It takes so much time to go from place to place, and if I get a ride, I can answer emails or be on social media.

Then when I arrive somewhere, I can just be there. I don't have to think about all the other things I need to do.

Tara sighs, because she doesn't understand my affinity for paying for rides. But Carry has a monthly fee that is actually about the same price as riding the bus. A car payment, gas, insurance, and maintenance would cost me ten times as much. For me, in my little world that revolves around Charleston and the quaint suburbs that surround it, Carry is perfect.

"Anyway," I say. "I said something to Dawson this morning that I can't get out of my head."

"Ooh, I sense a juicy story."

I glance toward the office again and pick up a red-orange-yellow Skittle combination. "I can't remember exactly what I said," I admit. "But I'm pretty sure the words 'power panties'—in that order—were in there."

Tara does the same thing I'd done in Dawson's office. She sucks in a tight breath. "Your what?"

"You know what?" I ask. "That's exactly what he said." I reach for a purple-red combo and put the candy in my mouth. If you hold it in there for a moment, it warms up, and there's nothing better than a warm Skittle. Sometimes I even put them in the microwave for five or ten seconds.

I twist in my desk chair and sigh. "The weird thing...I don't know."

"Spit it out."

"He was...different afterward." I hunch forward into my shoulders, as if that will keep the words quieter. "Nicer, Tara. He looked at me..." I can't even say it.

"How?" Tara asks.

"I don't know."

"Liar."

I exhale, my mind whirring. "Fine," I whisper. "He looked at me the same way the Carry driver did before he asked me out."

Tara only hesitates for a single moment before she bursts out laughing.

I start to giggle too. “Ridiculous, right?”

“Totally ridiculous,” Tara says between all the ha-ha-ing. “I don’t think that man even knows women exist.”

I keep laughing, but I disagree. I’ve been out with a lot of men—a lot. I can tell when someone is interested and when they’re not. I can see desire in a man’s expression, and I’ve been asked out enough by men I’ve just met to have their looks categorized.

Dawson *was* interested.

“He’s my boss,” I say just as he says, “Callie? Do you have a minute?”

I spin in my chair, but I forget that I’m not on my cell phone. The corded office phone only stretches so far, and I didn’t go back the way I’d turned the first time.

I gag as the cord goes across my neck, cutting off my air. “Yes,” I choke out. “That’s acceptable.” I then toss the phone receiver away from my body and feel it flop against my thigh as I try to stand.

But the cord has me in a real bind, and I have to lunge forward to catch myself against my desk with both palms.

“Uh, the cleaning service says they’ll check on the plant care.” I look up and into his eyes. He’s wearing an expression halfway between horror and amusement, and I’m not sure what to make of it.

“The renditions look good,” he says, lifting up the cardboard tube that was delivered an hour ago. “I want to go over them with you before the meeting.”

“Mm hm.” I step out of the cord, my ankle boot heel almost catching on one loop of it. I can hear Tara horse-laughing on the other end of the line, and I hasten to stoop and pick up the receiver. I practically slam it back into the cradle and then wipe my hand through my hair.

I put my best, most professional smile on my face. “Good idea,” I say. “I can order lunch from Goldie’s, and you can deliver the pitch for me while we eat.”

He smiles too, and wow, the gesture does transform his face from handsome and chiseled to downright gorgeous. Stunning. Mouth-watering.

I clear my throat and shoo the stupid thoughts from my head. Literally, the stupidest thoughts I’ve ever had. I mean, any female with eyes can see how good-looking Dawson Houser is. But his personality has always been so...beastly. He growls and bites and his level of grumpiness about everything covers up that thick hair and the straight white teeth pretty dang fast.

Yet here I stand, thinking about kissing the man.

Not the man, I tell myself. *Your freaking boss*.

“Not Goldie’s,” he said. “While I love their wild mushroom bisque, it has a way of making the office smell for a week.”

I laugh—far too loudly—because he’s right. “So something smell-neutral,” I muse. “What would that be?” I cock my head and give him my half-grin, something I do for men I’m hoping will ask me out.

With horror, I straighten my smile and my head, realizing I’d stuck out one hip too. I pull that back in and smooth down my blouse, feeling the extra weight I carry around my midsection.

“Herb Garden?” he suggests.

“That’s salads,” I say, frowning.

“Yeah.” Dawson clears his throat and knocks his knuckles on the desktop a couple of times. “You like salad.” He turns on his heel as if in the military and marches toward the conference room. “You know what I like there.”

I watch him disappear into the conference room, confusion mingling with hope. Stupid, stupid hope. I sink into my desk chair. “You don’t want to date your boss.”

That would be stupid, stupid, stupid.

You like salad.

I do like salad—it's another trick I use to convince myself that I eat healthy and therefore shouldn't have to work out. I detest exercise.

Dawson knows I like salad, and Dawson wants me to get what I like for lunch. I look toward the conference room again, wondering when I'd started taming the beast.

“THE PARTY HAS ARRIVED,” I CALL INTO MY PARENTS' HOUSE.

“On the patio,” my mom yells, though I'm already headed that direction. She's been playing bunco on her screened-in patio for years. Decades. The little old people she plays with rotate around to different houses, and when it's Mom's turn to host, she pays me to come help her set up, serve her friends, and entertain them with stories of my dating mishaps.

Hey, it could be worse. She could be badgering me about getting married every time I see her. She's only got two daughters, and she's not getting any younger. She claims her funky hairstyle and wardrobe of only sweatsuits keeps her young, but the truth is, she's pushing seventy-five.

“Hey, Momma,” I say as I step down the single stair to the screened-in patio. She's already started to set up, of course. My mother has never waited for anyone or anything in her life.

I set down the cake I'm carrying and step over to hug my mom. “Look at your hair.” I pull back and stare at her new mohawk. “It's...practically glowing.” With purple. She's had an eclectic range of colors for her hair over the years, but never quite this...neon before.

“Oh, Gina got a little heavy-handed with the bleach.” Mom waves away her hair color as if no one can see it if she can't. And since it's so short and sticking up from her head, she can't see it. Mom has always been very feline about some things.

“Get those chairs set up, would you?” She bosses me around for the next hour while we transform the porch into the bunco-playing capital of the South. Her friends start arriving, and I play the butler, opening the door to greet them.

“Melva,” I exclaim when I see the woman who’s lived down the street from my parents for fifty years. “What have you got in that bag?” She carries a huge—I mean, enormous—red corduroy bag that reminds me of Mary Poppins.

Melva glares at me in the way only little old ladies can. “You mind your business, Callie Michaels. Where’s your mother?”

“On the screened-in porch,” I say with a smile, stepping back to let her enter the house. “If that bag has bricks in it, I’m gonna need to examine it. We aren’t allowing weapons to this round of bunco.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she gripes, shuffling past me.

“Well, what’s in there if it’s not bricks?” I tease, following her. The last thing I need is Melva Allen breaking a hip on my parents’ property. I hold her elbow as she takes the single step down into the porch.

The doorbell chimes again, and I say, “That’s me,” and go back the way I came. This time, the twins stand on the doorstep. “Lionel and Louis.” I grip the door and lean into it. “You two take my breath away every time I see you.”

Tonight, they’re wearing identical suits in the most hideous color of brown I’ve ever seen. “Look at those hats. How do you two even have time for bunco? Why don’t you have dates every night?”

“See?” Lionel says to his twin. “I told you we should’ve asked those ladies to dinner instead of coming to this bunco night.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Louis replies as they both step inside. “Only one of them could go.” He looks up at me. “Though maybe this one would like to go out with a super-hunky man on a double date.” He grins at me and pretends to flex.

I laugh, because if it's not Louis trying to get me to go out with him, it's Lionel—and no one would use the word *super-hunky* to describe them. I'm taller than both of them, for one.

"I can't go out with you," I say. "Neither of you have missed bunco night in years."

"That's right," Louis says. "If Carol and Kayla are really interested, they'll keep."

"Oh, they'll keep," I say, though Lionel has already bickered back to his brother. Now that I've refused their romantic advances, they ignore me as if I'm the doorstep, and I let them go through the house to the porch by themselves.

Before I can close the door, another car pulls up to the curb. Another little old lady gets out, and I smile as Bonnie waves to her husband and then makes her way up the sidewalk to the steps. I've gone down them to greet her, and I help her up the few steps to the porch.

"You're such a pretty girl, Callie," she says in her wheezing voice, patting my arm with her papery hand. "What's your latest dating story?"

I could tell her about Chris, who asked me out yesterday morning. Instead, I say, "I mentioned the words 'power panties' to a man the other day, and let me tell you what the conversation was like after that..."

DAWSON

When I can't escape my thoughts, I run. When I can't stand to be with myself for another moment, I run. When I think about having to deal with my mother, I run. When I think about Kim, I run.

Basically, if I have anything upsetting, that makes me uneasy, or that confuses me, I run.

It's no wonder I've been running for an hour on this Wednesday morning, with no end in sight.

I'm still thinking about Mother arriving tomorrow. Callie got the housekeepers to come today, and they'll probably be here before I'm done running.

And blast me all the way to Hades, I'm still thinking about Callie Michaels and her "power panties."

I've never heard such a term, and I find myself fantasizing about what they might look like far too often.

I reach down and tick up the speed on the treadmill, sure pushing myself to the limit will drive my secretary from my mind.

The problem is, Callie's been on my mind a lot—even before she mentioned her unmentionables. She's not really *only* my secretary. She's one of my only friends. She's got the same degree and professional experience I do. She wasn't wrong when she said she'd taken my marketing firm from floundering to thriving.

I've been thinking about offering her a partnership.

Don't be ridiculous, runs through my head, in my mother's voice. She's never shared anything with anyone, and I know that better than most. As her only son, I'm the only heir to the massive hotel conglomerate that has resorts, five-star hotels, and quaint bed & breakfasts from Halifax to Galveston.

Mother has never once suggested she'd pass Fowler International to me, and I went to college, got my degree, and started my own business to make my own way in the world. Fowler does employ me to do the vast majority of their marketing, and I spend seventy percent of my time on that one portfolio.

Callie has picked up the slack and manages almost all of our other clients—and just the fact that I thought “our” instead of “my” has that partnership idea sticking in my head no matter how hard or how fast I run.

And, of course, *partnership* has more than one meaning. There's the professional meaning, and then there's the meaning that includes me getting to see those power panties...

The doorbell rings, and I slap at the red button to get the treadmill to stop. It does instantly, and I'm left reeling, sucking at the air, and thinking about Callie in an entirely inappropriate way.

“Coming,” I yell as I reach for a towel to mop up my face. I run it over my hair as I walk toward the front door, and I open it to find three women standing there, various cleaning supplies in their hands and arms. “Thanks for coming so last minute.” See? I can be nice if the occasion calls for it.

All three of them stare up at me, and I'm aware of what I'm wearing. Or not wearing. I drop my arms to my sides, and one of the women's mouths falls open. I'm aware I'm good-looking—“perfectly symmetrical” is what Kim used to say.

She'd smile and run her hands down the sides of my face as she said it. Then she'd kiss me and tell me how perfectly wonderful I was, and how much she loved me. I'd loved her completely too, and when she left, she'd ruined me completely as well.

“Well, come in,” I say, stepping back and gesturing as if the women don’t know how to walk. Annoyance sings through me. “I’m gonna need the master bath for a few minutes, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

None of them says anything, and I leave them standing on my front porch. I shake my head as I go into my bedroom and lock the door. The bathroom door gets locked too, and I shower, clean up around my beard, and get dressed.

Due to the long running session, I’ll be late for work, but we schedule all meetings for the afternoon, so I won’t miss anything. *Maybe watching Callie sort her Skittles*, I think, and then the sandy-haired woman dominates my thoughts until I walk through the door and see her in the flesh.

“There you are,” she says, standing. Today she’s wearing a maxi dress that falls all the way to the floor. It swells around her hips and her chest, which makes my hormones fire all over again. Stuffing them away has been particularly hard this time.

I nod at her, unable to say anything. The fabric on that dress looks shiny and silky and since it’s all black, I can’t help thinking that she should be on my arm as we go to dinner in a fancy restaurant.

“Did the housekeepers come?” she asks, following me into my office.

“Yes.” I set my briefcase on my desk, the scent of oranges and jasmine or some other frilly junk hanging in the air. “What is that smell?”

Callie stops right where she is. “I’m sure it’s my perfume, sir.” She speaks in a crisp tone that tells me she doesn’t appreciate my attitude. Yeah, well, join the club. I have to put on the beastly air when people get too close to me. Particularly women, and I haven’t had to fight feelings like this for a long time.

I thought Callie was beautiful the moment she walked into my office over five years ago. Her initial interview had gone well, and I’d followed that one up with a phone call. I’d hired her the next day, and she’s been a fixture in my life since.

I sit down, sighing. I don't want to push her away. She really is the best secretary I've ever had. "I'm sorry," I say.

"Rough morning?" She steps closer and puts a paper on my desk. "I need you to sign that. It's the confidentiality agreement with Veterans Brew."

I jerk my head up and search her eyes. "They hired us?"

A smile blooms across her face, making all my cells stand up and take notice. "Yep."

I jump to my feet, laughing. I grab onto her and turn us both around. She laughs too, hers lighter and freer than the sound of mine, as if she has many more occasions to laugh.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I hear the bell jingle. We keep it on the front door in case we're in a meeting or Callie's not at her desk—like right now.

"That's so great," I say. "Those renditions really pushed them over the edge."

"Claudia wants you to call her this morning," Callie says, finding her feet underneath her. My hands linger on her waist, and neither of us move.

Our eyes meet, and I swear lightning strikes. It moves right through my body, sending fire and heat through every part of me.

"Am I interrupting?"

I flinch and turn toward my office doorway. A woman stands there, wearing every inch of her power skirt suit. She also has a smile a mile wide on her face, and the only person who would be worse would be Mother.

"Jillian," Callie says, clearly surprised to see the woman too. She clears her throat and hurries toward Jillian. They hug briefly, and Callie hooks her arm through Jillian's.

"You two are such a cute couple," Jillian says.

"She's just my secretary," I say automatically, though Callie has started to creep out of the box I've kept her in.

“I’m just the secretary,” Callie says too. “Now, come. I’ve got tea on for us, and I’ll get your check cut.”

Ah, yes. Time to pay rent for this luxurious, downtown Charleston location. I move back over to my chair and sink into it. I run my hands through my hair. “What are you doing?”

The paper Callie put on my desk a few minutes ago catches my attention. I straighten and reach for it. I never have a pen when I need one, and I open my desk drawer to find one. Nothing.

I stand and scan my desk. No pens. How is that possible? My mood worsens as I leave my office. “Pen?” I ask Callie, but I’m already moving toward the small bank of cabinets that stand adjacent to my office. I open the one above the sink to find boxes upon boxes of pens.

I take four or five out and return to my office. Callie and Jillian didn’t interrupt their tea party for a single second, and that annoys me too.

I sign the document and get up once more to take it to Callie. She’s got individual hummingbird cakes on her desk, and there’s plenty for me. My stomach growls, as I didn’t eat breakfast in my need to get out of the house full of three staring women.

“...and there’s just so many boxes,” Jillian says.

“I suppose there would be a ton of boxes that come with how much shampoo you order,” Callie says, and their non-business conversation is the sour cherry on my irritation cake.

“Can I have one of those?” I ask, though others may categorize my voice as a bark.

“Sure,” Callie says easily, smiling at Jillian. “I didn’t see you with coffee this morning either, Dawson. There’s some in the conference room.”

“Can I have tea?”

She meets my eye then, and so much more is said between us. The sharpness in her eyes tells me I’m in trouble with her. I

find the idea delicious, and I don't even know why.

"No," she says slowly. "There's coffee in the conference room."

"Can I talk to you in the conference room for a minute?" I glance at Jillian, not truly seeing the other woman's face. "Just for a minute." I don't wait for her to answer before I start in that direction.

Callie will come, because Callie knows me better than anyone else. Probably even better than Lance, which is hard to believe.

The sound of her heels behind me satisfies me, though I have no idea what I need to say to her. *Maybe I should just tell her I can't stop thinking about her.* The moment I think that, I push the thought away. What a joke. Men don't just tell women that kind of stuff, and I remind myself of who Callie is.

She's just your secretary. She's just your secretary. She's just your secretary.

I reach the coffee station and reach for a mug. It's perfectly white and perfectly clean, and I have no idea how it came to be there.

The door closes, sealing me in the room with Callie and that intoxicating perfume. "What is your problem this morning?" she hisses, coming closer. "I'm talking to the woman who owns our building, and you come interrupt me like that?"

"Looked like you were having a tea party to me," I say, calmly pouring my coffee.

She scoffs. "Yes, well, you look like you're having a mental breakdown."

I smile to the brew, not daring to look at her quite yet. "Maybe I am."

"About what? The new contract we signed this morning? The fact that you can literally never find a pen?" She steps over to one of the cabinets in the room and opens it. "I walk

around all day long, picking up your pens, Dawson. There's a bin of them right here."

I look up as she pulls out a basket that is indeed filled to the brim with blue and black pens. I gape at it and then her. She has never been more attractive to me than she is in that moment, standing there with all of the pens I've left lying around the office.

How pathetic is that?

Callie says something else that I can't really hear, because my dang thoughts are so loud. I seize onto one of them and it comes blurting out of my mouth.

"What are you doing tomorrow night?"

CALLIE

I freeze. The world freezes. Heck, the down below has probably frozen over with Dawson's question.

"Tomorrow night?" squeaks out of my mouth. Is he asking me out? Right now? During work hours? Standing here in this conference room? *This* is why he wanted to talk to me in private?

I glance toward the windows and see Jillian standing at my desk, clearly watching us. She's never shied away from a challenge. Except for that one time when she tried to evict the man next door for having a dog in her no-dogs-allowed apartment. They're married now. Her and the man, not her and the dog, though Sausage still runs around the spa whenever Jillian is there.

I blink, trying to figure out what to say next to Dawson.

"My mother will be in town," Dawson says smoothly. "I'm sure she'll be expecting me to show her around town, go to dinner. I thought it would be nice if you came along."

"Nice?" I repeat. "Why?"

"You know a lot about the Charleston area," he says as if he's going to hire me to be his tour guide.

This isn't a date, I tell myself. *It can't be.*

"Are you going to pay me then?" I demand. "Because I have a date I'll have to break." I lift my chin as if daring him to contradict me.

“A date?” he asks, his voice harsh. He glares at me. “With whom? Don’t tell me it’s that blithering boy who brought you those flowers a couple of weeks ago.”

“First off,” I say, taking a step toward him that I hope is menacing. “That was three months ago, not a couple of weeks. Number two, you yelled at him about opening the door and letting in the wind. He wasn’t blithering; he simply didn’t know how to handle the likes of *you*.”

No one does. I seem to be the only one who’s willing to put up with Dawson’s thorns.

“Is there a third point?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say. “I’ll go out with whoever I want, Mister Houser. That is none of your concern, and I don’t have to tell you who my date is with tomorrow night.”

“Which means you don’t have one.”

“How dare you?” I slam the basket of pens on the conference table. We have these come-to-Jesus moments every once in a while. He gets really surly, and I put him back in his place, and everything is fine for a while. Months. A year, once.

At the moment, with the fury and indignation racing through me, I can’t recall the last time I’ve reminded him of who he is and who I am. Of how grateful he should be to have someone like me running his firm.

“I don’t know why you’re acting like this,” I say. “But I’m in an important business meeting at the moment, and you’ve got phone calls to make. If you’d like help with your mother after hours, I expect to be paid *and* asked well in advance, as believe it or not, Mister Houser, I don’t sit home every evening, wishing *you’d* ask me to dinner.”

I nod, knowing I didn’t go over thirty seconds for the lecture. He’s still glaring, but he says nothing as I calmly close the cabinet and indicate the pens. “You’ve got your beloved pens. You’ve got your coffee, just the way you like it, I might add. Come get your blasted cake, and then get to work. You were already late this morning without giving me a heads-up, and I had to field three calls for you wherein I had to fib.”

He knows I hate fibbing, even if the person on the other end of the line doesn't know—or probably even care.

If I stay in this room for another moment, I might say something I'll regret. In fact, I already regret most of what I've said. I'm surprised Dawson-the-Great hasn't fired me on the spot.

I walk toward the door as calmly as I can. My legs shake; my hands shake; my whole body shakes.

"What is goin' on?" Jillian drawls. "Lover's spat?"

"He is *not* my lover," I growl, taking a page from my boss's book. "He's annoying me today, that's all."

"Well, you put him in his place, sugar." Jillian sits back down and smiles at me. "I need you to come show my daughter how to talk to her husband."

I gape at her, sure I've heard her wrong. "You have a daughter who's old enough to be married?"

Jillian trills out a laugh and says, "Of course, honey."

I mean, she's older than me, but I thought by maybe a decade. Maybe mid-forties at the highest. I wasn't a math major, but I can do the stuff if I have to. If Jillian is forty-five, she could've had a baby at twenty-five and that baby would be twenty by now. That's certainly old enough to be married.

I'm thirty-three, and I don't feel old enough to be married, but people are different.

"You've met Susie," Jillian says. "You sent that huge basket of baked goods for the wedding, because you and Dawson were in Dayton Beach and couldn't attend."

"Oh, of course. Her husband is the tall guy who helped with your new sign."

"Joe, yes."

"She could use some of your backbone," Jillian says as Dawson leaves the conference room. He doesn't exactly have his tail tucked between his legs, especially if the death glare he

throws toward my desk is any indication about how he feels regarding the conversation we just had.

He enters his office and closes the door. At least he didn't slam it.

I sigh. My feet hurt. My head hurts. I need more Skittles, as I'm definitely nearing my post-breakfast sleepy time, and the sugar rush will keep me awake until lunch.

"I can sign your check," I say, taking it from the printer. Technically, Dawson should, but he did authorize me on the business account about a year ago. I add my signature to the rent payment check with a flourish and hand it to her.

I plunk my pen back into the holder on my desk, wishing Dawson knew how to do such a thing. If he knew I came over here every Saturday morning to wander through the quiet house, picking up pens, gathering the jackets and slacks he's left behind and taking them to the dry cleaners, and watering—actually *over*-watering—the plants, he'd owe me another twelve thousand-dollar raise.

Knowing him, he'd probably cite the droopy plants as why I can't have the raise.

"You should come to yoga this weekend," Jillian says. "We're doing Picasso-a-goga." Jillian rises to her feet, and I go with her, cursing my choice of footwear today. I'd worn an extra-long dress, which means I needed extra-high heels. These little strappy numbers cut into the flesh on the top of my feet, and I hate them.

Since we don't have any meetings scheduled for today, I thought it would be a low-key day where I catch up on filing, make phone calls, schedule appointments, go over proofs, and enjoy my Skittles, Diet Coke, and Goldie's for lunch.

I figured I'd spray the air freshener on the way out tonight so everything would be pristine for the arrival of Dawson's mother tomorrow. I've only met the woman a handful of times, and only from afar. She doesn't seem like the type of woman I'd get along with very well, that's for sure.

Stuffy, runs through my mind as I walk Jillian out.

“I don’t know about the art-yoga,” I say. “I might have to work.”

Jillian looks through the windows behind me. “I hope it’s the type of weekend work that’s fun.” She kisses both of my cheeks the way good Southerners do, insists I come next door for sweet tea during the slower hours at the spa that afternoon, and leaves.

I wave and watch her walk next door, where she goes inside the retail storefront for her spa. Lots of women—usually the skinny type wearing leggings and tanks—go in there. I’ve been a few times to get a pedicure, but I’m not getting naked and lying on the table for a massage.

Heck, last time I tried to change in a locker room, I tripped over my own feet and hit my head on the dial part of the locker. I gave myself a black eye, and I had to come up with a little white story-lie about how that had happened that didn’t include my own klutziness.

“Callie,” Dawson says, and I sigh. I turn away from the sunshine and the blue sky outside and back toward the interior of the marketing firm.

I love my job.

You love your job. You do.

My stupid heel catches on the long fabric of my skirt, and I trip.

The locker room incident flashes through my mind. The whole world slows down. My arms flail up.

Surprise crosses Dawson’s face.

He lunges forward.

God presses fast forward then, and Dawson and I tumble to the ground in one big heap of a man and a woman.

I’m aware of some sort of groaning coming from my mouth, though I try to stop it.

“Are you okay?” he asks, a measure of genuine concern in his tone. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I manage to sit up, feeling something quite drafty along my legs. I look over to where I'd been standing a moment before. The office door has been caught open by the broken-off heel of my shoe, and the spring breeze wants to come inside and play.

Fine by me. My face is hotter than Hawaii right now.

"It's not your fault," I say, a pulse of pain moving through my back and plenty of humiliation accompanying that. "I tripped on these stupid shoes." I reach down and start unbuckling the broken one. "I'm such a walking disaster."

Sudden tears enter my eyes. I hate that Dawson's seen me like this. At work, I'm put together. I have the exact right shade of lip gloss to go with my skirt. My hair is always done nicely, even if it does frizz a little bit in the summer humidity. Everyone's does that, right?

I have nice clothes that are always clean. I run a tight ship with regards to the calendar, the meeting schedule, the filing, the appointments. I'm highly organized, and I can think quickly on my feet—if they cooperate with me, that is.

"You're fine," Dawson says, standing up. He retrieves the broken heel from the door, and it closes all the way. "I don't think this is, though."

"I hate these shoes anyway," I say, not able to look at him. I get the first one off and think about tossing it straight through the glass window beside me. Instead, I let it drop to the floor and start working on the other one.

I've barely gotten the first buckle undone—the one that goes around my ankle; there's one that runs over the top of my foot too—when Dawson says, "So that's what your power panties look like."

DAWSON

I can't believe what I've just said. Callie gapes at me, so she can't either. She does gather up the fabric of her skirt and cover herself up.

I'll never get those blue-and-purple-striped panties out of my head. Never.

"For your information," she says, reaching her hand toward me.

I extend my hand to her and help her to her feet. Her face burns red, but I can't help teasing her. I have no idea who I am anymore. "What's for my information?"

"These are not my power panties," she said, lifting her chin and removing her hand from mine. She backs up a step and wobbles.

I lunge for her again. "Take off that blasted shoe," I say.

"I was trying," she snaps. She bends to finish the job, and I keep my hand on her lower back as if she needs my support to keep from toppling over. Yeah, that's what I tell myself. I just like the warmth of her body seeping into my palm. The nearness of her. The scent of that perfume I pretended not to like.

I feel like a new man, like someone has cut a hole in my skin and I'm emerging from a long sleep.

Callie finally gets the buckles undone and kicks her shoe off her foot with a sigh. She straightens, and I drop my hand

back to my side. The other one comes up and adjusts my glasses, obviously drawing her attention there.

“You’re wearing your glasses,” she says.

“I need them to see,” I say.

She squints at me, her gaze calculating now. “Only close-up.”

I reach to take them off, tucking them neatly into my pocket. I have led her to believe I only need them to see close-up. “Maybe that’s why I noticed the...underwear. You were hardly showing anything.” My own face heats up, the image of those panties imprinted on the backs of my eyelids with every blink I make.

She takes another one of those menacing steps forward. She did it in the conference room too, and maybe that’s when I lost my mind. “You’re not Clark Kent, you know. You don’t just take off your glasses and become a superhero.”

I grin at her. “Dang. Are you sure? I did just help you get off the floor with only one shoe on.” I gesture to the broken one she’d thrown. “I found the heel to that one. Maybe I can fix it with my laser vision.”

She rolls her eyes. “And then when you put them back on, you’re not this super-hunky, adorably geeky guy in a suit.”

“Adorably geeky?” I ask, wishing I could slide those thick, black-framed glasses right back on.

“Stop it,” she says.

I can’t help the chuckle that comes out of my mouth. “Super-hunky? Who talks like that?”

She takes a step away from me and stoops to collect the broken shoe. “I spent last night with people over seventy.”

“Stop bragging,” I say, still teasing her.

She looks at me again, and the moment between us lengthens. It also holds a charge I haven’t felt in many years.

“I thought my Tuesday night was slow,” I add, actually taking a step toward her like I’ll cradle her face in my hands

and kiss her. I look at her mouth, and yeah, it's kissable. Pink and parted, her lips call to the male side of me I've ignored since Kim left me standing at the altar.

"You're impossible," she says, that mouth moving in such a delicious way. She walks back to her desk, her black dress now dragging on the ground behind her. "Who do you think has been out with more guys in the past decade? Me or you?"

"You, I hope," I say, stifling another laugh. "I'm not really into men at all." I follow her toward the desk, surprised to hear her laughing. I join in as I pause in front of her desk.

She wears a pretty smile as she sits down in front of her computer. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?" She nudges a plastic container of hummingbird cake toward me. "You don't seem to be that into women either." She looks up at me, and this time, lightning cracks right through the roof, the second and third floors above us, and strikes right at my heart.

I'm not sure how long I stand there, mute, but it can't be long. I get myself to reach for one of the plastic forks that came with the cake. "Yeah." I clear my throat. "I sort of had this fiancée once who didn't really want to get married. She didn't tell me. I didn't find out until the wedding day, when I was all dressed up in my tux and standing at the altar."

Her face transforms from open curiosity to utter horror. "Dawson." She gets to her feet and comes around her desk. "I'm so sorry." She takes me right into a hug, and I find myself holding her back. My eyes drift closed in bliss, and I think my heart grows from Grinch-sized to Santa-sized in a single breath.

It definitely explodes out of the box where I've been keeping it. "It was a while ago," I say. "I've just had a hard time getting over her."

"How long?" Callie asks, stepping back and putting the proper professional distance between us.

"Ten years," I say. "Give or take a few months." I shrug as if my decade-long celibacy is no big deal. Looking at her,

though, I feel a hunger I've never experienced before. And not for hummingbird cake, despite its presence in my hand.

I clear my throat again, starting to feel a bit more normal. "I haven't told anyone about Kim in years," I say. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone." I don't make it sound like a request, but a demand.

"Yes, sir," she says with a salute and a smile. "Who am I gonna tell anyway, Dawson? My mother's eighty-year-old bunco partner?" She grins even wider, shakes her hair over her shoulders, and sits back down. "Now go call Claudia. I told her you would before lunchtime, and you know how I hate to be made into a liar."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, falling back a step. I want to talk to her about being partners, but it doesn't feel like the right time. Not after catching a peek at those panties, and not after telling her about Kim. She probably thinks I'm the ultimate loser—some guy who can't get over a woman after ten years.

I walk back into my office, my frown returning to my eyebrows. For a few minutes there, it had fled, and I acknowledge that it felt...*good* to not be the Hulk, teetering on the edge of fury all the time.

I pick up my phone from the edge of my desk, cursing myself for leaving it there in the first place. With Mother coming tomorrow, I should be expecting dozens of texts with her itinerary and requests.

Sure enough, I have eight from her, and two from Lance.

I tap on the ones from my best friend as I take a seat at my desk. *We're still good to play basketball tonight, right?* the first one asks. *I want to talk to you about Hadley.*

His girlfriend.

I sigh and look toward the doorway leading out to the main part of the office. I like Hadley just fine. I think Lance is in love with her, and I think he's going to ask her to marry him. Once that happens...

I won't have my best friend anymore. I'm not sure how I feel about it, though most people grow up, find someone to

love, and get married. All I know is that all of our other college roommates who have done the previous three steps have moved on. I barely talk to them anymore, as they do things with other married couples or each other.

The whole world feels like it's shifting, and if there's one thing I hate more than not being able to find a pen when I need one, it's change.

“OKAY, SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT.” LANCE BOUNCES THE basketball to me to check. I catch it and send it right back. His eyes don't leave mine, and while I don't normally have a problem holding someone's gaze, it feels hard to do it right now.

I watch his body, the tension in his legs, his back. He could go blitzing around me at any moment, using the conversation to distract me.

“You saw your secretary's panties and *told* her?” He bounces the ball. Up and down. Down and up.

“I told her about Kim too.”

Lance catches the ball and holds it. “You're kidding.”

“Callie's worked with me for over five years,” I say, reaching out to take the ball from him. “Double-dribble. My ball.”

“You're kidding,” he says again.

“I never kid in basketball.” I start to bounce the ball and judge how far it is to the hoop.

“You never kid around at work either.” Lance swipes at the ball with his right hand, and I go to my right to get around him. Our shoes squeak against the gym floor as we move, and I put up a jump shot that's going to catch nothing but net as it arcs down.

I grin at the basket as Lance turns to get the ball. “So what's special about this one?”

“Nothing,” I say, the lie thick against my tongue. “She’d just fallen down, and I was trying to show her we’re all human.”

“Except you’re not human,” Lance says, checking the ball with me again. This time, he doesn’t hold it, but goes right past me. I don’t even try to catch him. He’ll just throw an elbow and I’ll end up with a bloody nose. He really is faster than me most of the time, because I have too much bulk while he’s got the marathon-runner body.

“I am too human,” I tell him as he gets his own ball.

He passes it to me. “So, are you going to ask her out?”

“I don’t see why I’d do that.” I check the ball to him, and he passes it back. “I’m going to pay her to take my mother off my hands for a night or two. Hopefully Lila will only be in town through the weekend.”

Lance’s eyes widen, and I take a three-point shot while he stands there on flat feet. “Lila Houser is coming to town?” he asks. “Why?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I say as the ball bounces behind him. “I got a million texts from her today about her flight from New York, the hotel where she’ll be staying, and that she wants to meet with me tomorrow afternoon. Then—and I quote—maybe we can spend some quality mother-son time together at the beach.” I roll my eyes and step past him to retrieve the ball. “Let’s go get something to eat. We’re not even playing.”

“Okay,” Lance says. “I want to talk about Hadley too, so that’s perfect.” He walks toward the bleachers, where he’d dropped his gym bag. “Did you tell Lila that you hate the beach in the summer?”

“I’ve told her that about a thousand times,” I say, frowning. I normally love the beach, but there’s too many people crammed onto it in the summertime.

I tuck the ball into my bag and sit down with a sigh. I don’t want to hypothesize about why Mother is coming to Charleston. She’s made it clear she hates leaving New York

City, and she wasn't happy when I set up my office here instead of in Manhattan.

I'd told her I needed to prove to her—and myself—that I could make it without her money. Without her influence. Without her, period.

And I have. Dawson Dials In is thriving, and I didn't use a penny of Mother's money.

You couldn't have done it without Callie, I think, and that thought has me texting my secretary to ask her to please break her date with whoever she's going out with tomorrow night so we can both go to dinner with my mother.

I'll pay you the overtime rate, I add.

Callie doesn't answer, and anxiety starts to eat a hole in my stomach, only doubling when we reach the sports bar and Lance says, "Hadley and I have been looking at diamond rings."

CALLIE

I see Dawson's text the moment it comes in, but I don't answer it. I'm not going to answer it until morning either. He can sweat it out. I can feel the desperation in his words, and the thought of going to dinner with his mother has my nerves rioting.

So does the fact that he saw my striped underwear earlier that day. They aren't my power panties, but it's a cute set nonetheless. I unhook the matching bra and step into the shower, ready to wash this day down the drain.

First a fight with my boss. Then an embarrassing fall. Then a tender moment, where I actually saw a side of Dawson he hasn't shown me before. In five years, he hasn't shown that soft, I'm-a-real-person side. Not once.

I don't know what to do with it.

His text speaks to that side of him too, because his mother obviously upsets him. Or annoys him. Probably both.

I waste so much time in the shower, thinking about Dawson, that I'm late getting out the door. Who am I kidding? I'm almost always late getting out the door. Just five minutes, usually, and I always give myself a cushion in my prep time, so I'm not actually arriving late anywhere.

This time, when I finally go striding down the hall from my master suite to the kitchen, I find my sister already there.

"Finally," Ariel says, throwing back a handful of the white chocolate popcorn I keep on my countertop. It's stale, but she

doesn't seem to mind.

My eyes go to the clock on the stove. "I'm only five minutes late. How long have you been here?" I reach for my purse to get out my lip gloss.

"Five minutes," Ariel says, her pale blue eyes locked onto mine.

I know that look, and I purposely abandon the idea of putting on lip gloss. "You're going to cancel."

"It's just that Nate asked me out," she says, plenty of whine in her voice.

"Why can't you text me sooner?" I ask, dropping my purse. "I wouldn't have showered and curled my hair."

"Now you're ready for a date." Ariel grins, but I don't return it.

"Yeah, a date with a ghost," I say, though I technically have two dates for tomorrow night. Maybe I can text Chris and see if he's available tonight. "Plus, I don't believe that you just found out Nate wanted to go out. You've been seeing him for two months."

"I know," Ariel said with a sigh. "And I'm in love."

I roll my eyes, because my younger, carefree sister is *always* in love. "I'm sure you are."

"I am," she insists. "I mean it this time. In fact." She hits the T really hard. "I think we're going to go look at rings tonight."

My mind stops whirring around Chris and whether I should go out with him at all. "You have got to be kidding."

"Not kidding," Ariel sing-songs, and she flips her dark brown hair over her shoulder. My hair is lighter, and I've always wished it could actually be classified as brown the way hers can. Mine hovers somewhere between blonde and brown, and if I'd take a leaf from my mother's book on hair color, I could make it one of those.

It sort of has an identity crisis, and I really relate to that, so I let my hair be whatever color it wants to be.

My eyes are vibrant blue, while Ariel has the washed-out version of that. She's lighter in some ways and darker in others, and overall just more relaxed and devil-may-care than I am. I wish I could be like her in a lot of ways, but sometimes I'm really glad I'm more grounded in reality.

"Fine," I say. "I'll text Tara and ask if she wants to go to that cooking class."

"Don't do that," Ariel says with a frown. "Mom's got food at the house."

Yes, Ariel still lives with our parents. "Right," I say. "Because it's less pathetic for me to go to my parents' house for dinner than it is to go learn how to make my own." I pick up my phone, my thoughts moving to Chris.

Sure, he was cute. I liked him well enough. I said yes to a date.

All of that was before I knew Dawson was actually human. Before Dawson looked at me with that edge of male desire in his eyes. Before Dawson saw my underwear—and actually said something about it.

Most men wouldn't have done that.

What are you doing tonight? I type out. *My date with my sister fell through, and I find myself showered, curled, and glossed with nowhere to go. There's a cooking class at seven we could go to...*

I send the text and look up. "Go on, then. Surely Nate's out in the car waiting for you."

Ariel squeals and latches onto me. "You're the best sister in the whole state of Carolina," she drawls. "*Both* Carolinas."

"Hm mm," I say, hugging her back. We both giggle, and she flounces toward the front door to leave.

"Have fun with Tara," Ariel calls back to me just before the door closes.

I lift my hand in a wave she doesn't see and look back at my phone, my chest doing a strange, vibrating dance.

Dawson's said, *I'm in. Tell me where to meet you or if I should come pick you up.*

I'M STANDING AT THE WINDOW CLAUDE MONET FAVORS WHEN a sleek, black SUV pulls into my driveway. Dawson is right on time.

"Okay," I say, wiping my hands down my thighs. I'm wearing my absolute cutest pair of skinny jeans and a pink plaid top that actually has an elastic waist. It sits right at the top of the jeans—high-waisted, of course. I know what size I am and what makes me look like a million bucks—and billows out over the more unsightly parts of myself.

I hadn't been wearing the leopard panty set, but the moment I'd confirmed with Dawson that I needed a ride to the cooking class, I'd boogied down the hall to change.

"You've got the power," I say. "He has no idea what's beneath these jeans." I nod to Claude, as if the orange tabby cat cares about my non-date with my very real boss, and head for the door.

I must've stood too long at the window, talking to myself, or Dawson is like Flash, because the doorbell rings before I reach the door.

My heartbeat trips over itself, which is absolutely stupid. I've seen this man five days a week for the past five years. Most of the time, I wish I *didn't* have to see this man five days a week.

I open the door with a, "Hey," and reach for my card holder. In pants like these, and with a cooking class on the horizon, I'm not taking my purse. This card holder is big enough for a twenty-dollar bill, my credit card, and my driver's license. I figure the State Troopers can identify my body with that much information, or I can get a hotel room

somewhere if I get stuck, or I can even rent a car with my major credit card and driver's license.

"I usually ask the men who come pick me up to take me somewhere if they're serial killers," I say when Dawson stands there mute.

He cracks a smile, and I count that as a victory. "You look nice," I say, noting that the man is wearing jeans too. *Jeans*. "I don't think I've ever seen you in denim."

He looks down at his legs as if he's forgotten what he put on. "Oh."

Oh?

Oh?

What does that mean?

I sigh and step out onto the front porch. "Is this weird? It's not a date. I go to these classes all the time with Tara. You remember Tara?" I lead the way down the steps to the sidewalk.

"Of course I remember Tara," Dawson says behind me, his voice set on grumble.

"Last week, we made this tiramisu that was perfection," I say, heading for the passenger door. "This week, the recipe is lemon meringue pie."

"Is it always a dessert?" he asks.

"For this class I've signed up for, yes," I say. "I go every week, but I get a guest pass because I'm at the Gold Leaf Level." I turn and smile at him, glad to see he hasn't lost his Southern gentleman manners as he steps to open my door for me. "Thank you."

"Gold Leaf Level?" he repeats. "You must be a great cook then."

I laugh as I get into the SUV and reach for the seatbelt. "Well, I've taken a lot of classes." I don't tell him about the ham mishap, or the carrot cake catastrophe. In fact, as he walks around the front of the SUV to get behind the wheel, I

panic that I've invited my boss—who thinks I'm a capable, smart woman—into the messier parts of my life.

"I expect tonight to be full of disaster," I say as he gets in the vehicle. "Last time I tried anything with meringue, I ended up wearing more of it than actually went on the pie."

Dawson turns his head toward me, his expression open and unassuming. "Really?"

"Do you cook?"

"Not even a little bit," he admits, straight-faced.

Another blip of anxiety hits me right behind the lungs. I take a breath to try to quell it. "This should be interesting then."

He puts the SUV in reverse and starts to back out of my driveway. "This is a nice neighborhood," he comments.

"Thanks," I say, though I certainly had no hand in creating it. "I've been here for about five years now." Right around the time I got the job at his firm, but I don't need to spell that out for him.

"Where were you before that?"

This definitely feels like first-date conversation, and I consider using the words, "before I was your secretary," to see how he reacts. If he has any memory at all, he'll know I was with the Walker Marketing Group before coming to his firm. I think about sticking to professional topics like previous jobs, since I don't really know what's going on in his head.

I glance at him, and he looks at me. "Too personal?" he asks.

"I'm trying to decide," I admit. "This is kind of weird, isn't it?" I should've texted Tara. She usually likes coming to the cooking classes with me, though she's a professional chef. I sure like it, because the dishes always turn out right.

"You never said if you'd go to dinner with me and my mother tomorrow," he says instead of answering if this is a weird situation or not.

“Right,” I say. “Let me text Chris.” I start to do that while Dawson navigates us from the more suburban part of Sugar Creek to the downtown area. It’s really only one street that stretches for a few blocks. There are quite a few fun boutiques, though, and I enjoy walking up one side of the street and down the other to find new cat toys for Claude, new ankle boots for me, and plenty of snacks for both of us.

“Right here?” he asks, slowing to a crawl in front of the art gallery.

“Yep,” I say. “See the green flags? We have to go down that alley there. It’s in this great test kitchen behind the gallery.”

“An alley?” he asks. “And you’re worried about me being a serial killer?”

I pretend to size him up while really taking in the beauty of those broad shoulders in that luxury leather jacket. “Hm, I wasn’t...” I smile at him while he pulls into a parallel space right on the street. Lucky guy. “But now that you’ve revealed you know where to hide out to attack unsuspecting victims, I’m having second thoughts.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Everyone knows not to go down dark alleys, Callie.”

My phone vibrates, and I look at it. There’s something magical about tonight, and I can’t pinpoint what it is. “Oh, it’s Chris. He says we can reschedule for Friday.” I look at Dawson. “Or am I going to be working overtime all weekend?”

He shifts in his seat and reaches for his wallet in the console between us. “All weekend,” he mutters. “Sorry, Callie. My mother is...unpredictable at best.”

I don’t like the sound of unpredictable. If anything, my life is built on predictability. Planning. Even the fact that I’m constantly running five minutes behind schedule is scheduled and predictable.

“Fine,” I say, my fingers flying over the device. I’m not really upset I can’t go out with Chris, if the simmering bubbles

of excitement in my stomach are any indication. “But you’re going to owe me so much more than just extra pay.”

“Oh, yeah?” he asks, tapping the button to turn off the engine. “Like what?”

I meet his gaze again, my mind zipping through the possibilities, trying to find the one that will annoy Dawson the most. I smile when I realize what it is.

“You have to take me shopping at Stock and Save.” Pure delight moves through me at the horrified look on his face. He hates shopping with a passion. Any kind of shopping, especially the kind in a huge store, with warehouse-sized aisles, products, and prices.

“When?” he demands.

“Let’s say...Saturday?” The worst day of the week to go to the warehouse. “They have samples.”

Dawson actually shudders, and it’s all I can do not to laugh. “My mother will be here Saturday,” he says.

“She can come along,” I say airily. “It’ll only take a couple of hours.”

“You’re single,” he gripes. “What could you possibly be buying at Stock and Save?” He unbuckles his seatbelt and opens his door. “Wait for me, Cal. I’ll be right around.”

I do wait for him to come open my door, though I can do it myself, because he is handsome, and he had looked at me with interest a few days ago. I slide from the vehicle after he opens my door, and I take his arm so we can walk down the alley together.

“I need cat food at the Stock and Save,” I say. “My feline is *very* particular.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” he asks.

“And Skittles,” I say as if he hasn’t spoken. “Lots of Skittles.” Especially if I’m to go to dinner with his mother tomorrow and then entertain her all weekend.

One glance at the drop-dead gorgeous man on my arm, though, and I think I might survive.

Even if he is my boss, and I'm just his secretary.

DAWSON

I tie the black apron the instructor gave me around my waist, frowning at how fumbly my fingers are. I finally get the job done and look over at Callie. She's already got her apron snugly around her waist, and hers is a bright white one with plenty of pink and purple flowers on it.

The purple makes me think of her unmentionables, and the way the apron swells over her hips shows me her feminine figure. She catches me looking, and I say, "I think I made a grilled cheese sandwich a couple of years ago." I lift the recipe card from the counter we've been assigned. "You're going to have to boss me around with this."

Her bright blues start to sparkle. "Finally." She plucks the card from my fingers, a she-devil smile on her face. She looks at the instructions. "We need five eggs, and we're going to separate them."

"Separate them?"

"Yep. Fridge is over there." She nods to my left, and I turn that way. "Grab us some butter too."

"Butter," I repeat. "Five eggs." I already feel way out of my league, but I see another man carrying a small carton of eggs with a stick of butter on top of it. I can do that.

"I have the pie crusts over here," the instructor calls. "You'll be partially blind baking these while you make your filling and meringue, so come get them." Her loud voice carries through the hall, where sixteen people have gathered to bake lemon meringue pies.

There are a couple of couples, like Callie and I, though I immediately refuse the thought of us being an actual couple. At the same time, the moment I'd gotten her text, I knew I'd be saying yes. She couldn't have suggested a worse activity for me, but somehow, it didn't matter.

I open the huge, industrial fridge and see several more half-cartons of eggs sitting there. "Will you hand me one, handsome?" a wobbly, gravelly voice asks.

I back out of the fridge and look at the older woman standing there. She grins at me though she's at least twice my age. "Sure thing, ma'am," I say, thinking her good practice for dealing with Mother tomorrow.

After handing her the carton of eggs, I ask, "Do you need some butter too?"

"Yes, please," she says. "And can you escort me back to my station, young man? I'm starting to feel a little weak in the knees."

I smile to myself as I take out a cube of butter and offer her my arm. I take her back to her station, where another woman arrives with a pie pan filled with perfectly crimped crust. "There you are, Shirley. I thought you'd gone off to flirt with Mister Randall." She glares at me. "Who are you?"

"Not Mister Randall," I say, slipping my arm out of Shirley's.

I return to the fridge and get the eggs and butter Callie requested, and when I get back to our station, she's pouring little white balls into the raw crust. It's got this white paper poking up, and I can't help stopping to stare.

"What are you doing?"

"We have to bake this a little bit," she said. "Without the filling. But you have to weigh it down. So I've lined the crust with parchment paper, and these are pie weights." She finishes pouring in the white balls. "Now, it bakes while we work on the filling."

"Okay," I say. "I'm going to separate the eggs, right?"

Her eyebrows go up. “Do you know how to separate eggs?”

“I’m going to put the yolks in one bowl.” I look around for said bowl. “And the whites in another bowl.”

Callie lifts a silver bowl that’s oblong-shaped. “Whites in here, Boss, so we can whip them up later. Yolks can go in that pot. Oh.” She spins away from me. “We need to preheat the oven.” She crosses the space from the counter to the appliances along the wall and twists a dial.

I’ve done nothing when she returns. “Get separating, buddy. No yolks in the silver bowl at all.” She studies the card, leaning her elbows against the countertop to do it.

She’s pretty and...*sexy*, my mind fills in the pause in my thoughts. I turn away from her, my mind misfiring.

Separate the eggs. Eggs. Yolks and whites.

“You can do this,” I mutter to myself. I collect the pot and put it right next to the silver bowl. I tap, tap, tap the first egg against the counter while the instructor yells from the front of the room.

“You can use your hands to separate the eggs if they’re clean,” she says. “Catch the yolk and let the white drip through your fingers. Or, you can use the shell, and send the yolk back and forth, like this.”

She works under a huge mirror that then shows everyone what she’s doing. Since I’ve already cracked the egg, I opt for the hand method, and I hold the egg over the silver bowl and catch the yolk in my fingers.

The instructor is right, and the egg whites just go right through my fingers. The sticky and silky whites make my lip curl in distaste, and I remember why I don’t like cooking. I don’t want to see all the individual ingredients that go into a meal. I just want to eat it.

Cleaning up the dishes isn’t any fun either.

I keep all of those thoughts to myself and keep cracking and separating. A sense of accomplishment moves through

me, and I look up to see if Callie is watching. She's measuring sugar into yet another bowl, and then she sets it aside for something else. Another white powder I don't know the name of.

"Oh, you don't put the egg yolks in the pot yet."

I turn my attention to the instructor now standing in front of me. "All of that—" She points to the bowl where Callie's been putting things. "Goes in there. You have to cook that first, then you temper the eggs."

"I was just doing what she told me to," I say.

Callie glares at me, her hair falling over the side of her face in a super sexy way. I want to push it back, but I just look back at the instructor. "I'll move the yolks."

"Be sure to wipe that out," she says. "You don't want to cook the yolks for that long."

"Yes, ma'am." I finish with the fifth egg, and then I look around for another bowl. "Bowl, bowl, bowl." I locate one on the shelf next to the stove and return to the counter.

"Here's a rubber spatula to help you," Callie says, placing the utensil on the counter next to me. "Sorry about that. I didn't read all the way down."

"It's fine," I say, though she's pushed a button that ignited my irritation. Or rather, a button that *used* to ignite my irritation. With her, I have more patience. "I just move them over to this?"

"Yes, and then I'll wash the pan for us. I have the rest of the stuff ready."

"Okay." I pick up the pot and look at the rubber spatula. I have no idea how to hold both at the same time. I attempt it, and the yolks slide to the side of the pot that dips down. I feel like I've grown four new arms as I scrape the yolks into the bowl while Callie watches.

"Once, when I was eight," she says. "I made this hot dog soufflé for dinner. My parents were the kind that made us kids

help around the house. You know, cleaning bathrooms and taking turns making dinner. All of that.”

I look at her, though it’s dangerous to take my eyes off the yolks still dripping from the pot to the bowl. “Sounds nice.”

“The chores or the hot dog soufflé?” she teases.

“Both,” I say, returning my attention to the yolks. Anything would be better than spilling my childhood woes to this woman.

Your secretary.

She’s not really my secretary, though. I hope she knows that.

“Anyway,” she said. “That was the first fight I had with whipping egg whites.”

“I take it the soufflé didn’t turn out.”

“That it did not.” She grins at me and takes the pot now that it’s mostly egg yolk-free. Satisfied, I look down at the bowl with the yolks, and move it closer to the one she’s put everything else in. I think those go together, so they might as well sit next to each other.

A crack fills my ears, and I look down at my feet. The extra egg that had been in the half-dozen carton sits there, broken now that it’s fallen so far.

“Okay, ready,” Callie says, her voice chipper.

“Wait,” I say, but she’s already arriving. She steps right on the egg—yolk and white and all.

A yelp comes from her mouth, and her arms go flying up. The pot leaves her hand, and I’m not sure if I should catch her or the pot or simply get out of the way.

I opt for a fourth option, and that’s to hunker down over the two bowls where we’ve already measured ingredients, so they don’t get spilled in case Callie hits the table legs connected to the counter.

Which she totally does.

“I’m so sorry,” I say as soon as the bowls are stable. The silver one with all the whites starts to teeter and tip, and I lunge toward it.

My hand closes around the handle on the bowl at the same time my foot catches on her legs in those delicious skinny jeans. When I try to catch myself with the other one, it lands in the yolky mess on the floor.

The next thing I know, I’m on the floor beside Callie, the silver bowl of egg whites held straight up in the air above my head.

My back sends shooting pain down my legs and up to my shoulders, and an involuntary groan slips from between my lips.

Beside me, Callie starts to laugh.

Someone comes over and takes the bowl of egg whites from me, but all I can do is look at Callie. Her face glows with joy, and she groans as she sits up. “I don’t know what I did in my past life to make egg whites hate me so much, but wow.”

I laugh too, and when she joins in with me, it sounds like a beautiful chorus. While we’re chuckling together, I realize I’m in big trouble—with my secretary.

“YOU BETTER GO, OR YOU’LL BE LATE,” CALLIE SAYS, AND I get myself to my feet.

“You’re right.” What she doesn’t understand is that I’d rather be late to pick up my Mother than early. I don’t want to park in the garage and walk in to get her, and the parking monitors in the pick-up zone at the airport literally glare your face off if you come to a complete stop.

“Thanks for getting the flowers,” I say, reaching for my phone and then my wallet.

“Everything is ready,” she says. “Your house is clean. The office looks amazing. The water she requested is chilling in

the fridge.” She gives me a smile that’s halfway professional and halfway friendly.

Callie is incredibly good at making things normal. She’s good with people, and I know my mother will love her.

After our cooking class last night, she’d given me half the lemon meringue pie and told me to impress Mother with it today. I don’t have the heart to tell her I ate most of it for breakfast this morning and gave the rest to Lance on the way to the office.

“We’ll come back here,” I say. “She wants to meet with me about something.” My gut twists, though I have an idea of what Mother has on her mind. I nod and leave the office.

The drive to the airport doesn’t take any time at all, and I pull into the pick-up zone as my phone rings.

“Mother,” I say. “I’m easing past stop two. Where are you?”

She’ll be down by eight, so I’m not surprised when she says that number. “I’ll be right there.”

There seems to be a million people picking up today, but I make it to stop eight, and pull up to the curb. The attendant waves his arms and yells at me not to stop.

I do anyway and get out of the car. “My mother is right there.” I indicate the woman drawing everyone’s attention. She’s wearing a strapless gown—yes, a real freaking ballgown—that goes to her knees and stops. Her heels are at least four inches and bedazzled with jewels. Not the kind kids get at craft stores, but the kind that cost millions.

“Mother,” I say, stepping over to her. She smells expensive as I lean in to kiss her right cheek and then her left. “How was the flight?”

Dreadful, I think as she says it out loud.

“Thankfully, I found these lovely gentlemen to help me with my luggage.” She indicates the two men behind her, and I come to a complete stop.

“Mother,” I say, taking in the two racks of luggage. That’s not even going to fit in my SUV. “How long are you planning on staying?”

Dread fills me as she says, “My schedule is open, darling.” She indicates my SUV. “Right there, boys. Load those in, and please be careful. I have valuables in those bags.”

CALLIE

The moment Dawson's black SUV pulls up to the curb, I see it. Of course, I'm standing at the front windows, watching with my thumbnail in my mouth. I'd have to be blind not to see his SUV.

Now that I know what it smells like inside his car—leather and that musky, crisp cologne I can't seem to get out of my head for some stupid reason—I want to be back inside it. This time, he'll take me to dinner, and we'll sip wine and eat dessert first.

I won't end up on my tailbone, and he won't be flat on his back with a bowl of egg whites held above his head.

The pie hadn't turned out all that bad, if I do say so myself. Claude Monet sure had liked it at least.

"Focus," I say as a tall, thin woman rises from the car. She'd waited for Dawson to come around and open her door, and she screams old Southern money from thirty yards away. I can actually smell it as the two of them approach the doors.

I jump back, realizing that I'm skulking in the windows like a stalker. Do I make a run for my desk or simply pretend to be walking back from the bathroom? I glance around, wishing I had something in my hands. A potted plant or something.

"A potted plant?" I question myself just as Dawson opens the door for his mom.

"Callie?" he calls.

“Right here,” I say, lifting my hand. I wish I wasn’t standing so close to the door, and when his eyebrows go up, I can hear him wondering what the devil I’m doing there. “How was the airport?” I grab the closest thing on the empty desk that stands in front of these windows. Dawson once had two part-time secretaries, and he never got rid of this other desk. We’ve been using it to house samples, and I may or may not have been storing my big boxes of Skittles in the bottom desk drawer.

“Busy,” Dawson says as he holds the door for his mother to enter. She does, and the world moves into slow motion. She’s like this celebrity that walks into the room, and everyone and everything stalls as they all stare at her.

She could flip her hair over her shoulder and men would swoon. I’m staring with my mouth open, my hands wrapped around whatever I picked up.

“Mother,” Dawson says, and she’s definitely a mother, not a mom. “This is Callie Michaels.”

I notice he doesn’t give me a qualifier. Where’s the secretary label now? Why does he look so nervous? Why isn’t his mother turning toward me?

She’s scanning the office in front of her as if she doesn’t want to miss a single inch of the light gray walls. She finally removes her sunglasses in a total movie star way and tucks them up into her dark brown hair.

If the presence of money could make a person dry up, I’d be completely withered by now, and she hasn’t even looked at me yet.

Maybe I’ve gone invisible. I look at Dawson, and I expect him to roll his eyes for some reason. Of course, I’ve never seen the man roll his eyes before, and certainly not in a business setting.

Oh, my word. All of the carefully drawn lines in my life are now blurred. I’ve allowed Dawson to come to my house. Drive me somewhere. Go to a cooking class with me.

What in the world was I thinking?

“Callie,” he says, and I blink. “My mother, Lila Houser.” It’s obviously not the first time he’s said it.

I blink and lurch toward her to shake her hand, though I feel like I should drop into a deep curtsy. “Ma’am,” I say in my best Carolina voice. “It’s so great to meet you.”

I extend my hand toward her, but unfortunately, I’d picked up...an electric toothbrush. I throw it when I realize what I’m holding, and it clatters against the hard, tile floor. The sound of my dignity dying is what that electric toothbrush against the floor sounds like, and I press my eyes closed and take a deep breath.

When I open my eyes again and meet Lila Houser’s, she’s frowning as if she’s smelled something bad. *Can’t be my teeth, I think. For all she knows, I was just using that toothbrush.*

“Sorry,” I say, still reaching toward her.

But she’s pulled her hand back like she’d rather rake her fingers through manure than touch me. I clear my throat and force my hand to my side too. “Come in,” I say. “We’ve got Star Water on ice, and Dawson says you’re a fan of these crumpets.”

For some reason I’ll never know, I giggle. I hate myself in that moment, but I press past Dawson and Lila and head for the conference room. At least my heels click smartly against the floor. I ignore the toothbrush, as me bending over in this radically tight pencil skirt is not happening in front of Lila Houser.

Or Dawson, for that matter. I can barely sit in it, which was why I was standing at the windows while I waited for the two of them to arrive.

“I’ve got you set up in the conference room. Dawson said —”

“The conference room is not necessary,” Lila says, her own heels sounding twice as sharp as mine. “We’ll be in his office, dear. Do bring in some of that water, if you wouldn’t mind. They never give you enough on the plane.”

She goes that way, one of her hands lifted as if she were holding an old-fashioned cigarette, I swear to the heavens above.

I face Dawson fully, my eyes wide and my eyebrows somewhere near the ceiling.

“It’s such a long story,” he says, sighing. “Will you bring in the water, please? And *do bring in* those crumpets, *if you wouldn’t mind*, because she really will eat them.” He grins, and so do I—his impression of his mother was flawless, and I’m starting to learn that Dawson Houser has a sense of humor he’s kept hidden for five long years.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

He follows her into his office, but he doesn’t close the door. I hurry into the conference room and pick up the silver tray with the unopened water bottles and bucket of ice. If this job doesn’t work out for me in the end, I think I have a bright future in buttlng.

I take the heavy tray into Dawson’s office, my arms quivering with the effort. Assembling it piece by piece was easy, but carrying everything steadily is not so much. I manage to slide it onto the edge of Dawson’s desk and only one bottle of water tips over.

It still makes a resounding *crack!* of glass against metal, but no one says anything. I hasten to right the bottle and begin to put ice cubes into the glasses with the delicate pair of tongs that came with the bucket.

Lila is obviously used to having help around, because she doesn’t mind I’m there. She pokes through Dawson’s desk calendar—I’ve been trying to get him to go completely digital, but he’s been, well, a beast about it—as she says, “You look busy, Dawson.”

“We are busy, Mother.” He stands off to the side of his desk, unable to get to his chair because his mother is in the way.

“Are you seeing anyone?” She runs her fingers down the side of his calendar and flips another page. “Who’s this Jillian

woman?”

I keep my eyes on the ice cubes, because they’re suddenly the most fascinating thing in the world. Is Dawson seeing anyone? Does she know her son at all?

My heart tears a little bit for him, especially because I hear the undercurrent of danger in his tone when he says, “Jillian is my landlord, Mother.”

“Mm.” Lila Houser looks like she’s ready to attend an art gala or the mayor’s annual fundraising dinner, and I wonder what tonight’s dress will be like if this silky, silver ballgown is her travel attire.

I finish with the ice while she asks him about his goldfish, and he growls some answer about how it died last year. With the bottle opener in my hand, I reach for a bottle of sparkling water.

I’ve opened a ton of bottles in the past, and I’m the Confident Callie at work. So I fit the opener over the top of the lid and jack it upward. The lid pops off with the tell-tale sign of *pop! fizz!* carbonation.

I love that sound, and I smile—until I see how much that carbonation is overflowing. I immediately hold the bottle further from my body so it won’t splash on my clothes. Unfortunately, that means it’s closer to Lila—and Dawson’s computer.

“Oops,” I say, horrified as the sparkling water continues to foam and bubble over the top of the bottle. I look at Dawson for help, and I even say, “Help,” but he just stands there.

It finally stops erupting, and I pour what’s left of the water into the glass. “Here you go,” I say, but the bottom of the glass is now dripping.

Lila looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, and I want to agree with her. I put the glass back down, turn, and leave the office.

Dawson says something behind me, but his words aren’t for me. I duck back into the conference room and move over to the small sink in the corner. “Calm down,” I tell myself.

“You don’t have to impress this woman. She’s not *your* mother.”

I take a few moments to compose myself by tearing off some paper towels. I wash my hands and take three deep breaths. Then I turn to get the container of crumpets Dawson picked up from the English bakery that morning. They’ve got blackberry and raspberry jam to go with them, and I’m surprised Lila didn’t ask for tea too.

When I re-enter the office, Lila is saying, “...it’s a lot of money, Dawson. A lot of responsibility.”

He’s taken a seat in front of his desk, where I usually sit during our Monday morning meetings. “I’m aware, Mother. You send me the financial reports every month for some unknown reason.”

“Because, dear,” she says, having abandoned her quest to find his lunch dates with his ghostly girlfriend in his planner. “You need to know what you’re going to be taking over one day.”

I slow my steps so I can hear as much of this conversation as possible.

“You’ll never turn Fowler International over to me,” he says. “Honestly, Mother, I’m not sure I want it. I’ve been doing really well with this firm, and—”

“Of course you want it,” Lila says, dismissing him easily. “I just need to know that you’re going to be able to care for all we’ve built over the generations. I need to know you have someone to pass it on to as well.”

Dawson sighs and reaches up to rub his forehead between his long fingers. “Mother.”

“You need to find a nice girl and settle down,” she says.

I put the container of crumpets on the desk and start to mop up the mess I made with the sparkling water.

“I can’t sign Fowler International over to you until I know you’re settled with a wife, and maybe even a family on the way.” Lila sighs like Dawson is the one doing everything

wrong. She sinks into his desk chair, which is notably more comfortable than the seat he's been resigned to. "If I knew you were serious about someone, even that would be enough to get this deal done in the next couple of weeks. Then we can announce it at the Founder's Gala."

"The Fowler Founder's Gala isn't for another month, Mother. Tell me you're not going to be here that long."

"I have a hotel, dear," she says, adding a sophisticated laugh afterward. She must practice by watching YouTube videos of kings and queens and how they laugh. "I own half the hotels in his town."

That gets me to look at her, and then Dawson. Pieces move like one of those slider puzzles, until the picture of the situation is crystal clear. Dawson is a Fowler—his family owns Fowler International, which is by far our largest client and the biggest hotel, resort, and vacation rental enterprise in the world.

I wonder what those financial statements look like. I've probably never seen numbers with that many commas in them.

"So I need a wife in a month," he says.

Lila does the fake, royal laugh again. "Of course not, dear," she says. "A girlfriend—perhaps a serious one, maybe one wearing a diamond ring—would be sufficient."

I finish with the water and decide to take the paper towels with me. Out on my desk, my office phone starts to ring, and I increase my pace to be able to get to it before the machine picks it up.

"Well, I was going to wait until tonight to tell you," Dawson says. "But I guess now's as good of a time as any."

I'm almost out the door, the phone drawing most of my attention, when he says, "Callie and I are dating."

I put one hand up as if I'm about to ram into a solid wall. It lands on the doorjamb, and I turn back to the office.

"We're what?" I ask at the same time Lila rises from her chair and says, "Who's Callie?"

Dawson stands too and turns toward me. The desperation on his face isn't hard to find, and he takes a couple of steps toward me. "*This* is Callie, Mother," he says, erasing his emotions and replacing them with frustration. That's a look I know well, and it comforts me.

He extends his hand toward me, and the natural thing to do is to slide my fingers between his. So I do.

Callie and I are dating.

The words echo in my head, and I realize the full weight of them as he turns back to his mother. "Callie and I are dating," he says again. "And it's quite serious."

Lila's eyes grip me the way I've seen big cats do at the zoo. Like they know I'd be juicy meat. That I'd taste *really* good. That I'm too big and too slow to get away from them.

Like I'm their prey.

"I thought she was just your secretary," Lila says, and I wait for Dawson to confirm it. He's done so countless times in the past, and we've defended ourselves against so many clients. He's even joked that he should record himself saying that I'm just his secretary.

I wait, and wait, and wait.

He doesn't say it.

DAWSON

The tension in my office can kill a man, though my mother doesn't seem to notice. I'm hotter than the South in July, and I need to get out of here.

Callie's hand in mine is like a vice, and I'm not going anywhere without her. I can't believe what I just said, but I can't take it back now.

Mother doesn't understand jokes or sarcasm. The ride from the airport to the office led me to believe she was here on a fishing expedition—if I didn't have a girlfriend to present to her, she'd provide me with a suitable woman.

And *suitable* would be according to her definition of the term.

I have very few options for fake girlfriends, and I wish I'd had time to talk to Callie for even two minutes without Mother. She won't leave the office though; she complained about the heat and humidity here in Charleston for a good ten minutes after her bellhops had loaded her luggage into the back of my SUV.

Mother seems to never have to use the restroom at a convenient time, and I rack my brain for a way to get Callie to myself for just a moment.

Behind us, the phone starts to ring again. Mother fires a question at Callie about how long we've been together, and I say, "Why don't you go get that, sugar? I'll deal with my mother."

Callie throws me a look I imagine a deer caught paralyzed in headlights would wear and marches out of my office. I'm still reeling from using the word *sugar* when addressing my secretary. It probably sounded so fake, and I take a deep breath before facing Mother again.

"Give me a minute with her, would you?" I ask. "I told her we weren't going to tell you until tonight, and she's nervous."

"What's her name again?"

I want to pick up the blasted bottled water Mother requested and toss it at her. "Callie Michaels," I say through clenched teeth.

"Michaels," Mother muses. "That's not a name I'm familiar with."

"She's normal, Mother," I say. "She's not one of your Southern socialites."

Mother frowns, and I can't even imagine who she'd fix me up with. Someone I can't even stand to be around for longer than five minutes, that's for sure. That was why I had to have my own girlfriend, and if I don't want to claim to be dating my sixty-seven-year-old neighbor or my married landlord, Callie's my only choice.

Don't tell her that, I say as I hold up my hand to placate Mother. "Three minutes. Just stay here and eat a crumpet. Lord knows I paid plenty for them."

She sniffs and settles back into my desk chair. That alone irritates me to my limit, but I turn and leave the office, pulling the door closed behind me.

Callie hangs up. "That's Claudia from Veterans Brew," she says. "She'd like to schedule another meeting."

"Great," I say, my mind as far from the Veterans Brew account as it can get. "Listen, I'm sorry. My mother is a special breed of human, and she started into me about who I was dating, and she might know some women who'd love to go out with me the moment she stopped complaining about the weather here."

I reach her desk and take a breath, leaning into my palms and dislodging a container of pens, scissors, and even a tire gauge. “It’s a month, Callie.”

“She said the words ‘diamond ring,’” Callie says. “It’s a lot longer than a month, Dawson.”

“Once she goes, I’ll just say you couldn’t stand the sight of me.” I smile at her as she finally stops flitting her gaze around the room and focuses on me. “I’ll take you to Cayenne’s as many times as you want.”

She cocks one hip and folds her arms. “Fried chicken? Do I look like a woman who can be bought with fried chicken?” She gasps and throws up her hand. “Do *not* answer that.”

My grin widens, though I don’t think I’m anywhere near winning her over. “Of course not,” I say though she told me not to answer the question. “I know what it takes to buy you.”

“Oh, my word,” she says. “You did not just say that.”

I’m digging myself a bigger and bigger hole. “Skittles,” I throw out. “I’ll buy your Skittles for a year. And let you order from Goldie’s at least once a week—on me.”

“You are aware that everything you’re listing is food-related.” She perks up one eyebrow. “You’re basically calling me fat or insinuating that the only thing I like to do is eat.”

My smile slips. “You don’t have a car.”

“You’re not buying me a car.”

With horror, I realize that a boyfriend—a serious one—would know why his girlfriend doesn’t have a car. Especially since that boyfriend knows her salary and that she can afford one.

“Why don’t you have a car?” I ask.

“You’re not buying me a car,” she repeats.

I lean toward her and lower my voice. “We should know this stuff about each other.”

“Why?” she mock whispers back to me. “Because we’re *not* dating, Dawson. We know what we need to know about

one another to get the job done.”

But what if I want more? I swallow, because I don't know how to say those words. “I will pay you overtime for every date or outing or whatever until my mother leaves.”

“Making me a prostitute.”

“You didn't have a problem with it tonight.”

“You didn't say I was going to be your fake girlfriend until five minutes ago!” She gestures wildly toward my office door.

“I didn't know until the drive back from the airport,” I shoot back at her. I sigh and back up a step. “This is insane. I'm sorry.”

I walk toward the exit and right out it, despite Callie calling, “Dawson, wait,” behind me.

I don't wait, but when I hear her burst out of the office and click toward me quickly, I do slow down.

“It's so much easier to breathe out here,” I say, though the sun is high in the sky now, and we're nearing the hottest part of the day. A block over, the water will wave to us, and I head in that direction.

Callie walks alongside me, silent.

When the water comes into view, I say, “I'm sorry,” again. “I—my mother is so hard to deal with. She presses me and presses me, and I feel backed into a corner.”

“You're not good backed into a corner,” she says.

“I am not.” The fact that she knows that isn't lost on me. “The truth is, Callie...I...don't have anyone else I can ask to do this.” Humiliation runs through me, and I tilt my face up to the sun and breathe in the warmth.

That's not exactly what I was going to say, but it is one of the truths that needs to come out of my mouth.

The truth is, Callie, I think you're pretty great.

The truth is, Callie, I had a great time last night at that cooking class.

The truth is, Callie, I haven't stopped thinking about your power panties since you said those striped ones weren't them.

I clear my throat. "We can make rules," I say, my voice only slightly choked.

"Yes, sir," she drawls. "We better, because a man like you with a girlfriend who's 'quite serious' and who might be wearing a diamond ring soon probably kisses you. She might have a toothbrush at your place, and she might have organized your closet by color."

I twist and look at her. "Organized my closet by color?" I burst out laughing, and that alone is a bit out of my character. It feels so dang good that I don't cut it off when I realize Callie hasn't joined in.

I reach over and take her hand in mine, take her across the street and down the steps to the sidewalk that runs along the beach, and sigh. "I love the beach."

"See? Things I don't know about my *very serious* boyfriend." She nudges me with her curvy hip. "I would not have guessed someone as buttoned up as you likes the beach."

"And I wouldn't have guessed that I'd have such a good time making lemon meringue pie last night."

She stills, and I do too. "Dawson?"

I can't look at her, so I watch the wispy clouds get pushed through the sky by the breeze. "I'm just saying, maybe we've already been on a date, even if we didn't think so at the time. I picked you up at your house, and I dropped you off, and I *did* have a good time in between."

She releases my hand and keeps going down the sidewalk. I let her go, and not just because she's curvy and beautiful in that tight pencil skirt and those heels. Her blouse today is pale pink and completely sheer. She's wearing a tank top underneath that has blue butterflies on it, and my mouth turns dry—and not from the walk through the heat.

"Okay," Callie said, partially turning her head back to me. "I'll be your girlfriend for the duration that your mother is in

town.” She faces me. “No payment necessary. No Skittles, and no Goldie’s, and no overtime.”

“You didn’t mention the trips to Cayenne’s.” I tuck my hands into the pockets of my slacks.

“That’s because we’re *so* doing that,” she says with a half-predatory, half-pretty grin on her face. She stops only a couple of inches from me and puts one hand on my chest. I could lie and say her touch doesn’t burn right through my shirt and into my blood, but I don’t. I just stay silent about it.

“That’s because you know I hate that place,” I say.

She laughs lightly and tips up on her toes. “You do not,” she whispers. “You just like to pretend you do.” She settles back onto her feet properly. “I’m going to find out all of the things you’re pretending about, Dawson.”

I swallow, because that sounds like a threat. “Probably,” I say.

“Let’s take a few minutes on the way back to establish some early boundaries,” she says.

“You start.”

“For example,” she says. “Holding hands. Okay with me.”

“Me too,” grinds out of my throat.

“Picking me up for dates. Okay with me.”

“I agree.”

“Kissing me good-night...” She lets the words hang there, and I picture her pink, kissable lips from the other day.

I can’t speak, and I’m certainly not going to say what’s on my mind. It’s not appropriate for a boss to say to his secretary, though the line between us is super fuzzy right now.

“Maybe we decide that on an as-needed basis,” she says. “No decisions right now.”

“Deal,” I say.

She takes a deep breath and blows it out. “All right, Dawson. We’ve got half a block left. Tell me something about

yourself only a girlfriend would know.”

CALLIE

“This one makes my shoulders look like George Washington’s nose at Mount Rushmore.” I take off the pure-as-driven-snow tank and toss it on my bed.

“You’ve never even been to Mount Rushmore,” Tara says as she turns with a garment held up to her body. “This is the one.” She beams at me like so many stars, and I have to admit she’s finally found the gem we both knew was in my closet.

“I forgot about this jumper.” I reach out and touch the flowy, silky fabric. It’s a deep blue, almost black, like midnight in the city. “It’s a few years old. A few sizes ago.”

Tara scoffs and takes it from the hanger. The wide shoulder straps will hide my square, stone-like shoulders, and the neckline goes up high enough to protect my cleavage. If I wasn’t going out with Ms. Lila Houser, I’d want some cleavage in a slinky dress just to make the man I dine with think about me after he drops me off.

My phone chimes out the notification that my boss has texted. Except now he’s my boyfriend. I smile as I dart over to the dresser and pick up my phone. *Just so you know, I rescued that poor electric toothbrush you threw and I’m putting it in my house. If Mother asks, I’m going to tell her it’s yours.*

I’ve started lots of relationships with men, and this warm, gooey, soft feeling running through my veins happens every time. Every single thing they say is so wonderful. I always want to look my best for them. I can’t wait to see them again.

I ignore everyone and everything around me when they text—a fact I should've hidden better as Tara plucks my phone from my fingers mid-text.

“Hey,” I say.

“That was *Dawson*,” she says, tossing the phone onto the pile of rejected clothes on the bed. I almost dive after it but stop myself just in time. “Now, come on. We’re so close to having the outfit done.”

I frown at her. “I’m going out with Dawson tonight.”

Tara’s started to remove the jumpsuit from the hanger, but she freezes. “What?”

“It’s a work thing,” I say, waving my hand. “*His* mother is the big wig from Fowler International.” I reach for the jumpsuit and take it off the hanger myself. “He’ll be there.”

“Yeah, but...” Tara looks to where I was just standing in front of the dresser, then to the bed, where the phone still lays.

Panic shoots through me like a bullet, and I dive for the phone at the same time Tara does. “It’s nothing,” I say, but the way my arms tangle with hers speaks otherwise. “Tara.”

She cries out in triumph when she gets the phone away from me, dancing toward my master bath.

I, of course, flop back on the bed, the lumpy clothes beneath me pressing into my back in odd ways. I stare at the ceiling in defeat. “Don’t lock yourself in there,” I say as the bathroom door begins to squeak. My last boyfriend offered to fix it for me, but I said I didn’t mind it. That way, if a serial killer came in through the bathroom window, I’d hear him when he tried to get into my bedroom.

John had just laughed, told me I was funny and beautiful, and kissed me. We’d dated for almost six months before he’d transferred to Miami for work. That had been that. No attempt for a long-distance relationship was mentioned, and according to his social media, he’d started dating someone else the very next week.

I pretended like I didn't care. That's my default when things don't go my way. If I don't care, then it can't bother me. Right?

"You're *flirting* with him," Tara says. "Why would he need to tell his mother you have a toothbrush at his place?" Her face appears above mine, and I've always wanted big, beautiful brown eyes like hers. She's got gorgeous dark hair too, with an identifiable color.

When I say nothing, she gasps. "Are you dating him for real? Like, for real-for real?"

I want to say yes, but that's not really true. I can't hide from Tara, that's for sure. We've known each other since the moment I moved to Sugar Creek, over nine years ago now. She lived in the house behind mine, half of her yard butting up against half of mine. She was going through a terrible divorce at the time, and I'd overheard her crying in the backyard once.

One thing had led to another, and let me tell you, Southern sweet tea can make two women best friends in an afternoon. She stayed with me for the first couple of weeks after her ex moved out, and we've been going to yoga classes on the weekends, beach houses in the summer, and cooking nights whenever it fits both of our schedules.

She's been there for me through the first few years after college where I was trying to find a job that wouldn't require me to leave the greater Charleston area. I'd wanted to stay close to my parents, as they're getting older, and they add a lot of color to my otherwise dull life.

She's seen me date man after man. She brought over the carton of peanut butter chocolate ice cream after the first week of working for Dawson, who I described as "the surliest man to walk the earth."

Most days, I still think that, especially when I have to smooth things over with couriers or cake deliverers. He's nothing but charming and prepared for clients, and he pays well, offers benefits, and gives me time off whenever I ask for it.

“Your silence, Cal, is not comforting me.”

“I *maybe* have a crush on him,” I admit.

“You do not.” Her voice is made of air as she sits down on the bed beside me.

“He *maybe* asked me to be his fake girlfriend while his mother is in town.” I sit up and push my hands through my hair. “I guess there’s this big gala for Fowler International, and she wants to see him settled down with a family on the way in order to transfer management over to him—and you know, we manage so much of Fowler already. They take seventy-percent of his time at work as it is. He says they have managers for everything else, and he’s not planning to leave Charleston, as their headquarters are here, and—”

“Okay, breathe,” Tara says. She draws in a deep breath to encourage me, and I copy her. “Wow, Dawson Houser. I had no idea the man was the heir to Fowler International.”

“I mean, I knew, but it didn’t compute until his mother walked in wearing a ballgown today.”

Tara meets my eyes, her dark ones shining with delight. “A ballgown?”

“I kid you not, Tara. I got a picture. Look.” I take my phone from her and swipe to get to my photo gallery. “This is what she wore on the plane from New York City.”

Tara ogles the picture, then a giggle spills from her mouth.

“I’ll never be able to unsee that,” she says, handing the phone back to me. Our eyes meet again. “What are you going to do?”

“She’s supposed to be in town for a month or so. I guess the gala is when she’s going to make her announcement.”

Tara blinks, and I can practically see the pieces clicking into place inside her head. “The Founder’s Gala,” she says, jumping to her feet.

“Yes,” I say. “That’s what she called it.”

“I’m catering that event,” Tara says, her eyes made of diamonds now. “I’m meeting with her on Monday morning.”

“Good luck,” I say.

“Maybe you’ll be there?” Tara asks hopefully.

“Why would I be there?” The very thought sends tremors through my arms—though that could be because I pushed myself up from the bed and I haven’t been to yoga for a few weeks.

“I thought you were palling around with her while she’s here.”

“I wish you didn’t look so hopeful,” I say. “I still have a job.” Surely Dawson will still be coming into the office. I can’t run that place without him, at least with some of our clients.

“If it comes up, please come,” Tara says, begging now.

“You didn’t realize she was going to be the Queen of England,” I say, picking up a discarded blouse.

“A hundred bucks says she had a private jet,” Tara says.

I look up, surprised though what she’s said makes so much sense. “My word,” I say. “I bet you’re right.”

Tara hands me the jumpsuit. “Put this on. I think it’s going to be the winner. I’ll start looking for jewelry.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, I’M SO WELL DRESSED, HEELED, bejeweled, and make-upped that I expect someone to roll out the red carpet before I step onto my own front porch.

Lila Houser must feel this amazing all the time. At the same time, the amount of time and energy I’ve spent to look like a million bucks has made me exhausted. So tired, I barely want to leave the house anymore.

But my doorbell chimes, whether I’m ready or not, and I look at Claude Monet’s eyes.

“Well,” I say, quickly putting another bite of my sweet and sticky wing in my mouth. “It’s your lucky night, Claude. My date’s here, and I’m not done with my wings.”

Claude squeezes his feline eyes closed and begins to purr. He knows what to do to butter me up and get me to leave the three wings I haven’t consumed right where they are.

When I get home tonight, all that will be left is bones. If that.

“Keep them in the kitchen,” I say as I step over to the sink to wash my hands.

“Callie?” Dawson calls, and I jerk my head toward the living room. “It’s just me, and I’m coming in.”

“I’m in the kitchen,” I call to him, not really wanting to meet him with sudsy hands. I like opening my front door and seeing a man’s reaction to my efforts to look amazing when we go out.

I’ve just picked up a towel when he enters the kitchen, his eyes sweeping the space and then landing on me.

His mouth drops open a little, and I cock my hip and rise onto one tiptoe. “How amazing do I look?” I ask, grinning at him.

He’s given me the exact reaction I hoped for, but I’m not going to tell him that. I’m not even going to tell Tara that.

His eyes widen, and then he reaches up to wipe his mouth as if he’s started to drool. “You look fantastic,” he says. “Phenomenal. Beautiful.” With each adjective, he takes another step closer to me. “My mother is going to be jealous.”

He puts one hand on my hip, and we both tense. I meet his gaze, so unsure about what we really are. If this is fake, I’d really like to know what real feels like with Dawson Houser.

He drops his hand and steps back. “She’s waiting in the car, but I told her you needed a minute.”

“It’s really you who needs the minute,” I say, indicating the plate with the three wings. “Want one?”

He looks at the food and then back to me. “We’re going to dinner.”

“Oh, honey,” I say with a smile. “I know that.” I put one hand against his chest. “I always eat a little before I go out, especially for high-profile dinners like this one.”

“This is a high-profile dinner?” he asks, reaching for one of the wings.

Claude Monet meows, and Dawson dang near jumps out of his skin. “I did *not* see that cat.”

“Yeah, he’s a real killer,” I tease, laughing at the way my declawed tabby cat has startled Dawson so completely. “That meow is ferocious.”

I can’t stop giggling, and Dawson reaches up and adjusts the collar on his jacket, his smile glorious because it’s so real. “I just didn’t see him.”

“He’s not happy you’re eating his dinner,” I say. “And yes, Dawson, this is dinner with your mother. She wore a ballgown on the plane. I can’t even imagine what she has on right now.”

“There are a lot of diamonds,” he says. “We’re going to The Roof.”

And I’m suddenly not overdressed. I also owe Tara twenty bucks, as she said she thought Lila Houser could get a reservation at The Roof whenever she wanted. I said no way, because The Roof has a six-month waiting list.

Women put their name on the waiting list to have their wedding luncheon there years in advance—before they’ve even met their husbands.

I did that once, but when it came my turn to book the luncheon, I’d been in a state of *I’m-never-getting-married*, and I’d backed out.

The date had come and gone already, so it was for the best.

“Mm,” Dawson says. “This is good.”

“Cayenne’s,” I say, another smile just for him. I wonder if he can sense that I only smile at men like this when I’m

interested in them.

I still can't believe I'm interested in my boss. I've always been just his secretary, and his words from earlier that day run through my mind again.

I wouldn't have guessed that I'd have such a good time making lemon meringue pie last night.

This might be fake...for now. But that doesn't mean I can't flirt a little, hold his hand a little, and even kiss him a little.

It might just be fun for both of us.

DAWSON

I can't believe these sweet, sticky, slightly hot wings are from Cayenne's. Everything there is usually doused in sauce that's come straight from the seventh rung itself. Their logo has the Devil on it, for crying out loud.

"I like these wings," I say, but I don't pick up another one. Her orange tabby cat looks like he might claw through my jugular if I do.

"What did your mother say about the toothbrush?" she asks.

I sigh and take a seat at her bar. Callie's house is clean and comfortable. Her kitchen has built-in shelves where she's put pottery and cookbooks in various shades of red, blue, and yellow.

It's cheery and normal, and I like that about it more than anything else. She leans against the island, her eyes wide and unassuming.

She doesn't ask if Mother went through my whole house, top to bottom. I suppose she met her this afternoon and knows Mother would do that.

"She said it doesn't have a head," I say, lifting my eyebrows. "I had to do some swift thinking on my feet."

Callie giggles and looks down, her sandy blonde locks falling over her shoulders. She's curled her hair, and it's perfectly wavy and touchable. I fist my fingers just to stop myself from reaching out to find out how touchable.

“I said the head probably popped off after you threw it at the office.”

“You threw me under the bus,” she says.

“Hardly.” I shake my head and stand. If I make Mother wait for much longer, her opinion of Callie will suffer. “She thinks you have stellar dental hygiene to be brushing your teeth in the office.” I grin at her and indicate her front door. I can barely see it out of the entrance into the kitchen, but her house has nice flow. “Should we go? I’m afraid to keep her waiting.”

“Definitely,” Callie says. “I just need my cardholder.”

I admire her curves and profile while she opens a drawer and plucks a beaded holder from it. “Ready.”

I take her hand, because she said it would be okay with her, and I lead her through her own house. “How long have you lived here again?” I ask, noting all the personal touches. They scream Callie to me—like the black and white drawings of lighthouses on the walls, and the dark gray couch with more pillows than anyone should ever own.

They too, are red, blue, and yellow, and I wonder if she has a primary color fascination I don’t know about.

“I bought this house just after I started working for you,” she said. “My parents live less than a mile away.”

“Sugar Creek is pretty far from the office.” I open the front door and let her step out in front of me. The wide legs on her pants sways almost like a skirt, and when I drop my hand, I feel the silky texture of the fabric.

“I can’t imagine living anywhere but Sugar Creek,” she says. “It’s like, the best of Carolina, all wrapped into one town.” She reaches the bottom of the steps, her smile genuine and wide. I know, because I’ve seen her professional smile, and it slopes up too quickly. I’ve seen her placating smile—more than I want to admit—when she’s dealing with a difficult customer...or a difficult boss.

I’ve seen her smile when her men come by the office, and those grins look like this one. She’s *flirting* with me.

I haven't flirted with a woman in a long while. I'm not even sure I remember how. I'm so used to keeping everything so tight and so boxed up, and loosening the laces actually hurts.

"Listen," I say, and Callie sobers somewhat. "I want to talk to you about something. On Monday." I clear my throat. "It's a business thing. During our morning meeting."

I reach the bottom of the stairs too and lift our joined hands to my lips. "I've been meaning to talk to you about it for a while."

"What is it?"

"Dawson," Mother says, and I look past Callie to my SUV. Mother has risen from it, and she hovers near the hood. "We're going to be late. I called in a favor to get this reservation, and I can't soil my good name."

"Coming," I say.

"We best not *soil* her good name," Callie says, dropping my hand and striding down the sidewalk now. How she even stands in sandals that high I'll never know. I do know I better get in gear and get her door open for her, or Mother will lecture me for the entire drive to The Roof.

She won't even care that Callie is in the SUV with us.

"Let me," I say, jogging though the late May weather already has me sweating. I manage to open the door before Callie can, and our eyes meet. "You have to let me play the gentleman, or Mother will torment me for years." I lean closer and give her half a smile. Seems to me that I had a girlfriend in college once who told me that was the sexiest smile she'd ever seen.

Whether it works on Callie or not, I have no idea. College was almost fifteen years ago.

"She already thinks me a savage brute, completely without civilization, for not being married."

"I can think of a few other reasons you could be classified that way, and it has nothing to do with your marital status."

She gives me the same half-grin in return. “Thanks for opening my door.” She steps back and slides into the SUV. As I close the door, I hear her say, “Land alive, Lila. You look absolutely *smashing*.”

Mother will like that, and sure enough, when I pull open the driver’s door, she’s smiling. That’s a step up, I suppose, from most of her demeanor from that afternoon.

“What’s on your schedule for tomorrow?” I ask her as I back out of Callie’s driveway.

“I’m meeting with some of my managers,” she says. “You should come along.”

“I can’t,” I say automatically. I literally cannot spend every waking moment with Mother. I can barely tolerate a weekend, and her schedule is “open.”

“Callie and I have a ton to do,” I say. “We had to reschedule our meeting from this afternoon, and I didn’t make half the phone calls today that I needed to.”

“Whyever not?” she asks.

“Whyever not?” I repeat. “Maybe because you said you needed a carry to the hotel, and on the way there, you told me you’d like to see my place.” I don’t look at her, pretending like this sleepy neighborhood in Sugar Creek needs my full attention.

“Oh, isn’t Dawson’s place divine?” Callie asks from the back seat. I do glance at her in the rear view, wondering where this is going.

“It was okay,” Mother says, and I’m not sure I’ve ever gotten an okay from her before. Maybe she really is going to sign over Fowler International, though I’ll believe it when the ink is dry and the papers are filed with the state.

Not a moment sooner, I think.

“What did you think of that *ghastly* painting above his mantle?” Mother asks, twisting to fully look at Callie.

She clears her throat, and maybe I throw her under the bus a little by not saying a single word. My secretary has had no

reason to ever come to my house before, and she has no idea what decorates the wall above my mantle.

I conceal my smile by turning my face toward the window.

“Oh, well, I...think Dawson should put whatever Dawson likes in his house,” Callie says, and I may or may not fall in love with her a little bit right then.

“It’s just so dark,” Mother says. “I mean, who would want a physical representation of mental illness?” She clucks her tongue and shakes her head. “Lord willing, I’ll get that painting off the wall before I leave.”

“You will not touch it,” I say calmly. “I bought it in a hospital fundraiser, Mother. Mental illnesses like depression and anxiety are real things. It’s a beautiful painting from a local artist, and it’s not going anywhere.”

“Oh, that,” Callie says. “I thought you were talking about the picture of himself he keeps on the mantle.”

“Ah-ha!” Mother exclaims. “I told you it was strange to have a picture of yourself on your mantle.”

“Oh, here we go,” I mutter. And how did Callie know I have a picture of myself on the mantle? “It’s normal for people to put up pictures of their families. They’re included. Why can’t I have a picture of myself on the mantle? It’s from my graduation day, and I worked dang hard for that master’s degree.”

“Most people put them in their bedrooms,” Mother says. “Or the office. I noticed your office didn’t have any pictures.” She faces the front again. “Don’t you and Callie have any to put up?”

“Um—”

“Oh, the camera and I aren’t friends,” Callie says, swooping in to save me when I didn’t do the same for her. “They say it adds ten pounds, but it’s more like thirty in my case.” She trills out a light laugh that sounds like tinkling bells. “I’m always working those angles to make myself look a bit smaller, you know?”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’ve got someone big and strapping like Dawson at your side. Makes a woman your size look smaller.”

“Mother,” I practically shout. “Do you have zero tact? I’m so sorry, Callie.” I glare at Mother, afraid to see Callie’s reaction in the rearview mirror. “Plus, I am a normal-sized man. I’m not ‘big and strapping’. Jeez.”

“You’re not a normal-sized man,” Callie says from the back seat.

“Is that a fat joke?” I ask.

She gives me a small smile and shakes her head. She doesn’t have to say anything else, and the moment between us is quiet and quick.

“Lila,” Callie says, drawing in a deep breath. “Tell me more about Fowler International. I know we worked with them a lot, but I don’t know everything.”

“Fowler has been in my family for four generations,” Mother says, puffing her chest out. If there’s something Mother can talk about for hours, it’s business and family. She has the inside scoop on every member of the family, with dirt on many of them too.

“So you’re a Fowler,” Callie says, not really asking.

“Yes,” she says. “I married Dawson’s father and became a Houser, and I’m the first female owner and CEO of Fowler International.” Mother is very proud of who she is and what she’s done in her life, and I don’t begrudge her that.

She continues to talk about the company and her role within it as I drive into downtown Charleston. When we get to The Roof, I say, “I’ll come get doors for everyone.”

I jump from the SUV and gather Callie from the back seat first. “Thank you,” I murmur, taking her hand and tucking it into both of mine. “You’re so good with her.”

“She’s just a person, Dawson,” Callie says.

“I do not think you’re thirty pounds overweight, or that you need a big man to make you look smaller.”

She smiles up at me. “You *are* a big, strapping man,” she says, doing that flirting thing again. She brushes her fingers along my shoulders. “I mean, look at these things.”

“Whatever.” I grin as we round the back of the SUV.

“I can’t wait to go to the beach so I can see what kind of abs you’ve got,” she says.

I pause and look at her. “What?”

“You run, right? Every day?”

I still can’t get the word *abs* in her voice out of my head. “This is like the power panties thing, isn’t it?”

She grins and fists my collar in both of her hands. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” She laughs as she releases me and goes to open Mother’s door. I watch in pure shock as she links arms with Mother and the two of them start for the prestigious high-rise building that houses The Roof on the very top floor.

Mother’s floor of offices for Fowler International sits right below that, and I look up into the Carolina sky to try to see the gold lettering that spells out the six-letter last name I come from.

Until very recently, I didn’t want Fowler International. But the older Mother gets, the more I think it should stay in the family.

Mother had two brothers who’ve both passed away, but they have children who could take over the company. Mother simply doesn’t want them to, because she trusts them less than me.

“Are you coming, darling?” Mother calls, and I tear my eyes from the lettering I can’t see anyway.

“Yes,” I say, taking in the sight of her with Callie. They look like two peas in a pod already. “I’m coming.”

I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.

I swallow as I hurry to catch them, my mind whirring around the idea that maybe she’s wearing those power panties

right now.

CALLIE

“No, no,” I say. “I want to hear more about that.”

Dawson throws up one hand and rolls his eyes as he turns toward the windows. The view from The Roof is *insane*, but the view of the man across the table from me is just as good.

“Mother, I swear, this is why I didn’t introduce you two.”

Lila looks at him, her smile as big as I’ve ever seen it. Of course, I’ve known the woman for a few hours, but she sure doesn’t seem like the type of person who spends much time smiling. Or curving those lips up at all.

“I can’t believe you haven’t told her about your time in Atlanta.”

“Because I hate the time I spent in Atlanta,” Dawson says, the frown between his eyes as sexy as it is sobering.

“It’s okay,” I say, meeting his eyes. His look softens, and while I know I carry at least thirty extra pounds, when he looks at me, I feel like a supermodel. “He’ll tell me when he’s ready.” I shake my hair over my shoulders and lean my arms into the table. “Everyone has secrets they hide from their partners. Right?”

“You do?” Dawson asks, as if we’ve really been dating and have told each other everything.

“Of course,” I say. “Haven’t you ever heard to hide your flaws until after the wedding?”

Lila hooks her eagle eyes into me. “Wedding? Am I hearing bells?”

“Oh, gosh, no,” I say, waving my hand. My heartbeat ripples like a flag in a stiff wind too. “Not yet.”

She looks between the two of us. “But you’ve known each other for a while.”

“Working with him is not the same as dating him,” I say. “He really is two different people, depending on where he is.”

He meets my eyes, that frown appearing between those baby browns. He’s not wearing his glasses tonight, but the purple paisley tie is one I’ve never seen. *Probably a gift from his mother*, I think.

If we were alone, I’d say something flirty and maybe put my hand on his knee. I’d ask about the tie and laugh when he tells me that of course his mother picked out the horrendous pale purple tie, because she still sees him as an eight-year-old who needs to dress in pastels for Easter Sunday.

I smile just thinking about that.

“Oh, I know,” Lila says, interrupting the moment between me and Dawson. “You should see him on the basketball court. It’s like he turns into a killer.”

“A killer, huh?” I glance at her, knowing she doesn’t miss much, if anything. “I know he keeps his basketball practice sessions with Lance pretty private.”

“You don’t want to come hang out in the sweaty gym with me and my buddy.”

“Not if I have to see a killer,” I say. “I work hard to avoid serial killers, that’s for sure.”

“What?” he asks at the same time Lila does.

I glance between the two of them, my stomach swooping though I’ve hardly eaten anything. Without the wings, I’d still be starving, having only had a couple shrimp with cocktail sauce, a small plate of salad that was mostly made of green things and a drip of vinaigrette—not the creamy, rich, blue

cheese dressing I could literally drink—and then two forkfuls of baked penne with the best marinara sauce I’ve ever tasted.

Lila ate even less, and I wonder what she consumes before she goes to dinner with people.

I clear my throat and look at Lila. Somehow, she’s easier to talk to than Dawson right now. “You know, serial killers are real. I make sure to check all my doors, and I always send my best friend the ride I’m using that morning.”

“She doesn’t have a car,” Dawson says, leaning toward his mother. “She uses Carry when she won’t let me drive her to work.”

“It’s out of your way,” I say. “You’re barely on time as it is, Mister Houser.” I give him a smile so he knows I’m teasing.

“It’s all the running,” he says.

“My word, the running,” Lila says. “He does that when he’s trying to work through something that’s bothering him.”

Dawson’s jaw jumps, and I see it. I can be observant too.

“He started when he was about ten,” Lila continues. “When his father wanted to run the Charleston marathon. Remember that, sweetie?” She wears a very fond look now, and I have a half-dozen questions to keep the small talk going now.

“Tell me about your husband,” I say. “Dawson doesn’t talk about him much.” I know his father passed away only a couple of weeks before his master’s degree graduation, and I suddenly understand the picture on the mantle.

My eyes widen, and while Lila starts to talk about her husband and Dawson’s father, I have a silent, meaningful conversation with my boss. Or is he my boyfriend? My boss-boyfriend.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I’M SORTING MY SKITTLES, knowing it’s my last bag and contemplating when I should text

Dawson to interrupt the closed-door meeting he's having with two men from Scorleyse, the running shoe company that has been on our roster of clients for a decade.

They were one of the first clients Dawson signed when he opened Dawson Dials In, and they really liked that he was also a runner and a consumer of their products. Seven or eight years ago, they'd even used him as one of the models in their marketing.

He's been in there for over an hour, and I'm sure his patience is razor-thin by now. I've got filing to do, phone calls to make, and a front desk to clean off so I don't grab any more embarrassing items I have to pretend to use.

But I put a red Skittle next to a yellow one and then pop them both into my mouth. I hold them there and let them warm up, glancing at my personal cell phone when it lights up. Lila's name flashes across the screen, and I choke on my strawberry lemonade combination of candy.

I bump my keyboard as I reach for the phone, and it hits the extra-large soda I made my Carry driver stop to get this morning. It starts to topple, and everything slows into frame-by-frame milliseconds.

Swears move through my head as I try to catch the soda. The door to Dawson's office opens, and the next thing I know, I'm on my feet, the huge forty-four-ounce Styrofoam cup full of Diet Coke, raspberry puree, vanilla, and coconut secure in my hands.

"Ha-ha!" I yell. "I'm like a ninja!" I lift the cup, which has not spilled all over my keyboard, candy, or very important work papers, in triumph.

"Do ninjas wear pink?" Les Scorleyse asks, and my eyes fly to the three men standing just outside Dawson's office. Les grins at me as if he knows ninjas don't wear pink. They probably aren't plus-sized either.

"I don't think ninjas are that loud," Hal Scorleyse says, taking the few steps to my desk. "They're like, well, ninjas, Callie." He grins at me and leans into one palm on my desk.

“When are you gonna go out with my son? He *needs* someone like you.”

I don't dare look at Dawson at all. I haven't told him that Hal always asks me about dating his son—a man about six years younger than me, with shoulders nowhere near as wide as mine. I'd look like a freaking lumberjack next to Liam Scorleyse.

“What Liam needs, Hal,” I say in my best professional-teasing voice. “Is a tanning bed and a set of weights.”

He laughs and says, “I can't argue with you there.”

“We wouldn't look good together,” I say.

“Maybe not,” Hal agrees. “But you'd get him out of my basement.”

“Oh, please.” I set my soda back on the desk in a less precarious spot. “No one in Charleston has a basement.”

He laughs again, the sound rich and throaty, and if his son was anything like him at all, I'd have gone out with him years ago. “Good to see you, Cal,” he says, stepping with his slightly older brother toward the exit.

I come out from behind my desk to say good-bye to them, and once all the salutations are done and the door closes, I exhale out a breath and let the smile slip from my face.

“They love you,” Dawson says from beside me.

“I've known them a long time.” I turn back to my desk, remembering the text from his mother.

“Good thing,” Dawson says. “Language like that would scare away some of our other clients.”

I look at him, the grumble in his tone loud and clear. He shoots me a daggered look and heads right back into his office. Surprise courses through me, and my face heats up.

“You're so stupid,” I mutter to myself. Of course Dawson isn't going to switch from grumpy boss to sweet-as-pie-boyfriend in the office. Especially when his mother isn't around.

Still, after our cooking class and then dinner at The Roof last night, it hurts that he really is going to keep the line between us so harshly. I'd texted him after he dropped me off about the picture on his mantle, and the conversation we'd had seemed meaningful to me.

It had obviously meant nothing to him.

I re-settle at my desk, saying, "You've always known the man's heart is made of coal. Did you really expect that to change?"

If I'm being honest with myself, yes, I had.

Idiot, runs through my head as I swipe to get to his mother's message.

Callie, darling, I have a meeting with the caterer on Monday morning, and I'd love you and Dawson to be there. He says you have a Monday morning meeting that simply can't be missed, but I know everything can be rearranged. Call me, would you? We'll see if we can work something out.

I sigh at the same time my pulse tries to blast my heart toward the moon. It's got more power than it's ever had before, and I actually press one palm against my chest to quiet it.

"We'll see if we can work something out," I repeat, knowing exactly what that means. It means Lila Houser is going to get her way.

Tara would love it if I attended the meeting on Monday. She's already asked me to try to weasel my way into going with Lila.

I look at Dawson's open door, the silence between us normal...but not at the same time. He doesn't like having constant music playing like they do in doctor's and dentist's offices, and he lets me work with one earbud in so I don't go crazy in the silence he craves.

"Callie, darling." I stand and walk toward Dawson's office. I can't simply agree with his mother. He obviously doesn't want to go to the caterer with her, and I'll have to deal with him for a lot longer than Lila Houser.

“Dawson?” I ask, pausing in his doorway. This is standard. I wait to be invited into his office unless we have a meeting or he’s asked me to interrupt him.

He’s got the sexy glasses on again, and he’s peering at the monitor. “Hmm?”

“Talk to me about how to deal with your mother. She’d like me to call her about going to the caterer on Monday.”

That gets him to look at me. It’s not a nice look, but one of his grizzly bear growly ones. “I already told her no.”

“Do I ignore her?”

He stands and advances toward me. “What did she say?” He practically rips the cell phone from my hand and reads the text quickly. “She annoys me so much.”

My heart pounds in my chest, but I can’t decide if it’s because I can now smell that woody cologne or if it’s because I might get fired with the next thing that comes out of Dawson’s mouth.

“What would you like me to do?”

He sighs, shoves my phone back at me, and retreats to his desk. “Handle it, Callie. Isn’t that what I pay you to do?”

My legs take me back a step, as if he’s slapped me or thrown icy water in my face. I even take a breath like I’ve just dived into a lake that looked warm but so wasn’t. As the air shudders out of my lungs, he takes a seat.

The fire of irritation with him has me entering his office uninvited. I don’t care; I don’t have to be treated like that.

“Actually,” I say, throwing some of his ice right back at him. “You’re not paying me to handle your mother and her demands. She is not my client. She’s not even yours. This isn’t a catering meeting for anything to do with our firm.”

He looks up at me about halfway through my speech. I advance all the way to the edge of his desk. “I was asking for your advice on how to deal with a delicate situation, as I don’t imagine you want me throwing you under the bus by calling

her and giving into her demands, and I don't think you'd want me to suddenly blurt out that we're not really dating."

He opens his mouth, but I hold up my hand. "I get ten more seconds, Mister Houser, though I realize this conversation has gone past thirty seconds."

He snaps his mouth shut, which is great, because then I won't have to do it for him. "I don't know why I thought *you'd* have anything reasonable or good to offer for a tough situation. You'd just yell your way to the manager and demand your drawings be here by ten a.m., and then leave me to 'handle it' with the best courier in the city."

"Callie."

"Do *not* interrupt me, Mister Houser." I feel like fire is coming from my eyes, and the way Dawson backs right off testifies that it probably is. "You should know that Carmichael won't even call me back," I say. "And that he's not taking any of my online bookings either."

I turn and start for the door, hoping I make it all the way outside before Dawson can wrap his head around what I've said. "But I'll handle it. You actually *are* paying me to deal with the loss of our courier."

DAWSON

C *allie, wait*, I think. The words don't come out of my mouth though. "Idiot," does, and I take off after my secretary. She's *not* just my secretary anymore, despite the ten miles I punished the treadmill with this morning.

Despite me trying to act like she is.

I hate that Mother has changed everything in the past twenty-four hours. As I follow Callie outside and into the Carolina heat, I know things were shifting between us before Mother even touched down in Charleston. I just don't want to admit it yet.

"Callie," I call, looking right and then left. Her hips sway as she marches away from the historic house where we work. I jog after her. "Wait, would you?"

"I don't want to talk to you," she calls over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Too late," she says back. "Give me half an hour, Mister Houser."

I slow and let her go, though I could reach her easily. She certainly can walk fast in those heels when she wants to, though. She disappears around the corner, and I sigh in heavy frustration as I turn back to the office.

My father taught me a couple of worthwhile lessons before he passed away, and one of them was the value of working hard. Putting in time every single day. That the little things I

did behind the scenes would make all the difference on the day of the big race.

No one sees the miles of training, the diet regimen, or the Charlie horses in the middle of the night during the marathon. They see the body working in perfect tandem, and they see the joy when a runner crosses the finish line after twenty-six miles.

There's so much non-joy before that, though, and the finish line always makes me tear up a little bit, because I do know all the miles behind the end goal.

But hard work won't fix this.

That's another thing my dad taught me—*fix the mistakes you make, Dawson. No one cares how much money you have if you're not fun to be around.*

And he hadn't even seen me at my grumpiest.

I get back to my office, trying to decide which phone to pick up first. I opt for my cell phone and tap out another apology to Callie. *I'm so sorry. Tell me where you went, and I'll come get you and take you to lunch.*

Then I pick up my office phone and find the number for Carmichael Courier Services. The line rings and rings, finally with a woman picking up and saying, "This is Carmichaels, can you hold?"

"Sure," I say, though the word sort of grounds through my throat. I hate being put on hold with the heat of a thousand fires.

A few minutes later, Callie hasn't responded, but the woman comes back on with, "Sorry about that. We had a dozen bicycles stolen overnight. How can I help you?"

"It's Dawson Houser," I say. "Can I talk to Ryan?"

"Oh, Mister Houser."

"I don't even have an order," I say quickly. "I just wanted to apologize. To you too." I clear my throat. "I'm sorry, Susan. I shouldn't have yelled at you earlier this week."

“It’s okay,” she says.

“No, it’s really not,” I say back. “I was...” I can’t even make an excuse for myself, so I just let the sentence hang there. “I’m not going to yell at him again.”

“I’ll transfer you.” The line clicks, and that saccharine sweet elevator music comes on the line. Normally, I’d roll my eyes and look to my task list for the next thing I need to work on. Today, I perch on the edge of my seat, like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

“Dawson,” Ryan says a few moments later. “What can I do for you, sir?”

I press my eyes closed, a bitter taste in my mouth. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier this week. How’s your courier that got into the accident?”

“Ah.” Ryan blows out his breath. “He came home from the hospital yesterday. Broken leg. You’re not looking for a new job, are you?” He laughs, and I manage to force a chuckle out of my narrow throat. I hate apologizing, because I’m so bad at it. At the same time, if I did it more often, it wouldn’t be so hard to swallow right now.

“How did your presentation go?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say, not wanting to talk about me at all. “I really am sorry. Things were chaotic that day, but that’s no excuse for me acting like a beast. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course,” Ryan says, and another phone rings on his end of the line.

“Susan mentioned you guys had some thefts,” I say, standing and taking a single step, the only distance I can go with the corded phone.

“Yes.” He sighs again. “One of my guys forgot to lock up the bikes. I’d fire him too, except I need him too badly.”

“I’d love to replace the bicycles,” I say, the idea forming as I speak it. “All of them.”

“Oh, uh, Dawson, I can’t let you do that.”

“Of course you can. Besides, my mother is in town, and she’s looking for a business to support. It’s not like I would be funding them personally.” A smile spreads across my face. “They’d be a gift from Fowler International.”

Silence pours through the line, and I hate it at the same time I like it. I’ve told no one about my heritage or my mother, not really.

“Are you Fowler International?” Ryan asks.

“My mother is,” I say. “If she ever decides to turn the company over to me, then yes, I’ll be the head of Fowler International.” The hint of dread in my voice tells me so much.

A shadow ripples along the wall, and I spin toward my office door. Sure enough, the bells chime, and that means someone’s entered.

“Listen,” I say as I try to round my desk and keep the phone at my ear. I need to see if it’s Callie or someone else. “Give me half an hour to draw up some paperwork, and you’ll have a check by this evening.”

“Dawson...are you serious?”

Callie’s voluptuous frame fills my doorway. Everything inside me starts tap dancing, especially because she’s carrying a bag from Byrd’s, and that means their famous Scotch Oatmeal cookies.

She lifts the bag, and I say, “I’m dead serious. Hey, someone important just walked into my office. Give me thirty minutes?”

“Sure,” Ryan says, and I sort of drop the phone, forgetting that it needs to be reset into its cradle.

“Who was that?” she asks as I make a beeline for her. “I brought cookies.”

“I see that.” I bypass the bag of cookies and take her right into my arms. Awkwardness rains down on us, because I’ve never hugged my secretary before. “I’m sorry,” I say again.

She relaxes into my embrace, and I could really get used to holding her. Telling her I’m sorry is so much easier than

anyone else, and I realize it's because I do not want Callie Michaels to be upset with me.

I didn't used to care what anyone thought of me, or if anyone didn't like me. I didn't used to care if I upset people.

But now, I do.

"So am I," she says, her arms tight around my shoulders. "I shouldn't just walk away from you. I know you don't like it."

"You didn't do anything wrong."

She steps delicately away from me. "Are we going to talk about why you went Beast on me?"

I sigh and rub my hand up the back of my neck. "I'm not sure where the boundaries are between us anymore."

"Mm." She enters my office and takes the bag of cookies with her. "I got the Georgia Peach ones for me and the oatmeal for you. Come sit down and let's talk for a minute."

"I called Ryan Hess at Carmichaels," I say, hoping that will win me some points. "A bunch of their bikes got stolen, and I said I'd replace them."

Callie's eyebrows shoot sky-high when I sit down. She hands me a bag of oatmeal cookies. "You did? Why?"

"I apologized to him for yelling at him on Monday." I untwist the tie on the bag, my mouth already watering. "So I need to get that proposal over to Bill, and he'll get them a check tonight."

"You apologized." She's not asking, but she's clearly stunned.

"I'm capable," I say, giving her a sharp look. "I've apologized to you about ten times today alone."

"And you're just getting started, Clark," she says, grinning and lifting her chin to indicate my glasses.

I don't sweep them off my face. I kinda like her thinking about me as a superhero. "Okay, so Monday," I say. "I suppose we can see if Mother can push her appointment back. We can

still do our meeting—I really want to talk to you about something—and then go to that.”

“We don’t normally have presentations on Monday, and the ladies from Veterans Brew aren’t in town anymore,” she says just as the phone on her desk starts ringing. She stands and replaces my receiver, then picks it up again. She pushes some combination of buttons I don’t understand, and says, “This is Callie at Dawson Dials In. How can I help you?”

Her fingers drift toward her peach cookies, her head down. She stills and jerks her head up. “Oh, hi, Susan. Yes, yes, I do need to schedule some deliveries with you.”

CALLIE

Saturday morning arrives, and I breathe in the scent of sunshine and Lysol, the latter what the weekend cleaning crew has sprayed around the office. Tara dropped me off fifteen minutes ago, and I've already collected half a dozen pens into the basket.

I love working in the office in the soft morning hours, knowing no one is going to come in and interrupt me. I slide the basket of pens into the closet and eye the watering can.

"Nope," I say and close the cupboard door. I've committed my last planticide by overwatering, and while I normally find joy in going around with the watering can and giving the foliage a little love, I'm not willing to take the wrath of Dawson for it.

I wander into his office and pause for a moment, seeing him behind the desk. When I picture him in my mind now, he's always wearing those perfect glasses, as they give his already-handsome face so much more personality.

Today, in my fantasies, he's wearing board shorts and carrying a backpack as we walk toward the beach. I honestly had no idea he liked going to the beach. He seems like the kind of man who would curl his lip up at the idea of getting sandy and seaweedy.

I open the closet where he keeps his spare clothes and return to my desk to collect the dry cleaning I picked up last night. I swap out the jackets and shirts and even a pair of

slacks he's been wearing for the past couple of weeks and replace them with the fresh garments.

I drape those over one of the chairs in front of his desk and straighten them, then shuffle around a couple of his folders and make everything line up at perfect ninety-degree angles.

With his clothes accompanying me back out to the main part of the firm, I hang them on the hat rack near the door and return to my desk. I love my Saturday morning cleaning routine, and I get everything filed from the past week. I pull out the next week's files. I go over my desk with disinfectant wipes, straighten my pictures and the pen holder, and then finally tuck my chair under my desk.

Dawson said he'd take me to Stock and Save to get more Skittles, but no official plans were made. I think about calling him—I've thought about calling him since I left work last night—but in the end, I don't.

Tara will be done with her weekend training in another half-hour, and she'll take me. She loves to hit the huge warehouse-type store so she can buy ultra-large boxes of wet dog food for her spoiled pups. She's got two of them, and I swear they eat better than I do most of the time.

After that, we have afternoon plans to hit the beach.

For now, I start going through the products on the front desk no one uses, tucking them away into drawers or throwing them in the trashcan. With everything spic and span, I lock up behind me and enjoy the May sunshine beating down from the pristine, blue sky above.

Music pulsing to my right tells me there's something going on at Oceanfront Park, and I turn that way. The distance between here and there is deceiving though. I've walked it before, but I don't feel like doing it today. Not in this heat and humidity.

I think briefly of trying to get over to Byrd's to get some more peach cookies, but Tara pulls up to the curb before I even take a single step. "Ready, lady?" she calls through the open passenger window.

“So ready.” I slide into the front seat and grin at her. Something’s not right in her expression, and the smile immediately drops. “What? What’s going on?” I actually look behind me to the back seat, just to make sure one of her dogs isn’t there. “Is it Tommy?”

Her oldest dog has been having some health problems recently, and while I don’t love the yapping he does, I don’t want him to die. Tara would be *devastated*.

“I just lost another chef,” she says, shaking her head. Her bottom lip trembles too, and I wish she wasn’t driving so I could hug her. She eases away from the curb and adds, “Jasper was good too. Really good.”

“Jasper?” I ask. “The one you thought was so hot?”

“For like a day,” Tara said.

“Yeah, but his ability in the kitchen would only enhance his good looks,” I say. I know what makes Tara tick, and a man who can slice an onion so thin she can barely see it gets her pulse pounding in a way I simply don’t understand. To each her own, I always say.

“He was good with risotto,” she says. “The best. No wonder he quit. I put him on every risotto dish that came in.” She looks at me with wide eyes.

“He didn’t give you notice or anything?”

“He did,” she said. “This morning. He’s got a job at The Wild Bikini, of all places.”

“Oh, I love The Wild Bikini,” I say a moment too soon. I catch her roll her eyes and quickly continue with, “But it’s gone to the dogs, especially if Jasper is there now. I will literally never eat there again.”

Tara grips the wheel at ten and two for a couple of seconds and then bursts out laughing. I join her, glad I’ve been able to cheer her up a little bit. “So, Stock and Save?” she asks. “Since I’m having a terrible day already, you have to buy me that humongous tub of butter pecan ice cream.”

I gasp, really laying the sound on loud. “The Texas Ten Gallon?” I press one hand to my heart as if reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. “Where are you even going to put a container of ice cream that large?”

“I’m going to eat half of it today while I go through the pathetic applications I have, list a new job on the board, and start to gather my chi for interviews.”

I suddenly know what this means. “So no beach.”

“I’ll take you,” she says, glancing at me. I nod, because I don’t want her to feel worse than she already does.

“I could help you with job board listings. We could go tonight.” The sun doesn’t set until really late now that summer’s almost here. My phone chimes, and we both look at it.

“Or, you could ask your hot new boyfriend to take you,” Tara says, catching Dawson’s name on my phone.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you that both he and I will be at the catering meeting on Monday.”

Tara looks at me and blinks, her eyes opening wider every time she does. “You’re kidding. Is that why Lila moved the time of it?”

“Mm hm,” I say. “Dawson wanted to keep our morning meeting, but also be able to go with his mother.” That makes him sound so altruistic, when really, it was a compromise I’d suggested to keep the peace with both Lila and Dawson.

I’d then orchestrated the whole thing. The only thing Lila had done was contact Tara, and Dawson had...agreed to take me shopping for Skittles.

“He asked if I was at home and when I’d like to go to Stock and Save.”

“Ooh, tell him to meet us there. They have all those samples on the weekends. It would be like a lunch date.”

I look up from my phone, sure I haven’t heard things right. “A lunch date?” I repeat. “Tara, are we really to the point

where we're counting walking around a huge warehouse, eating samples, as a date?"

Tara reaches up and tucks her hair behind her ear. "I sound so pathetic, don't I?" She doesn't look at me, which is how I know she feels exactly the way she's just described.

"I mean—"

"At this point, I would so count that as a date," Tara says, making a left-hand turn.

I know it's been a while since she's had a date or a boyfriend, but I didn't realize she's gotten to this juncture. "Maybe Dawson has some friends," I say.

We look at each other, and both burst out laughing again. While still giggling, I say, "I know he has friends, but I'm pretty sure Lance is dating someone pretty seriously right now."

"It takes a special person to get along with Dawson," Tara says.

We both seem to realize what she's said at the same time, and the least of my giggles vanish. "I didn't mean..."

"I get along with everyone," I say, putting a smile on my face. "So that does make me pretty special." I return my attention to my phone and tap out a message to Dawson. "I told him to meet us there." I slide my phone under my thigh so I can check it a little more privately. "He's not only a grump. He's got a lot of different sides."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sure he does," Tara says, her voice placating and a bit too high. She reaches over and pats my knee.

Since I know Tara would never hurt me on purpose, I cover her hand with mine and squeeze her fingers. "I'll see if I can get a beach date from this faux lunch date."

"If anyone can, it's you," Tara tells me, instilling in me the same confidence she's been pouring into me for the past ten years.

“ALL RIGHT.” I GATHER MY HAIR OFF MY NECK AND INTO A ponytail. “Wow, it’s hot in there.”

“They need about ten times that many fans,” Dawson agrees. “But hey, you got your Skittles *and* those jelly beans you like.”

“Uh, you’re the one who scarfed the jelly beans over Easter,” I tease him. With the air conditioning out inside Stock and Save, stepping outside is about the same as wandering the aisles, holding up vats of mayonnaise and a box of cornbread mix the size of my torso.

Dawson had purchased one thing—a huge container of chocolate-covered raisins—and there’s no way we can go straight to the beach with those in his hand. I haven’t brought it up yet at all, because walking around the big warehouse and sampling the sausages, peanuts, cream cheese spreads, and lemon ice bars was actually fun.

“You were right,” I say to Tara, who walks on my other side. “This was an amazing date.” I loop my arm through hers and lean my head against her shoulder. “Thanks for being my escort today.”

“What’s Dawson if I was your escort?” Tara asks, looking past me to him.

“He’s my ride home,” I say. “You’ve got so much to do this afternoon, and I don’t want to keep you any longer.”

“I can give her a ride home,” he says to Tara, as if I’m their child and need to be looked after.

“All right,” Tara says, pausing near the trunk of her car to give me a hug. “Have a good weekend, Cal. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okie dokie,” I say. She goes to get in her car and I look at Dawson, the candy I’ve purchased starting to weigh more than I like. “How far to your car?”

“It’s just over there,” he says, nodding in the opposite direction from which we’re walking. “Listen, thanks again for getting me out of the house.”

“I thought your mom was at a hotel.”

“She is,” he says. “But she called, and I didn’t answer. I knew she’d ask me what I was doing today, and I’m terrible at lying to her.”

“You’re not a great liar all around,” I say.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.” He slides me a smile as he clicks open the back of his SUV. “Here, let me take that.” He removes the burden of my box of candy from my arms and sets it in the back.

“What are your plans the rest of the day then?”

“I was hoping your house had air conditioning and cable TV,” he says.

I grin, because he’s as good as mine with a comment like that. “I was thinking about the beach this morning...” I let the words hang there while Dawson reaches up to press the button to close the back.

“You were, huh?” He takes a step closer to me, but I don’t back up. “I think someone was thinking about my abs.” His dark eyes glitter down at me, his confidence supreme in this moment. He’s rarely the alpha male around me, but I kinda like this playful, powerful man in front of me. He’s wearing jeans and a casual T-shirt, clothes I rarely see him in.

“And someone else hasn’t stopped thinking about my power panties.” I meet his gaze with a playful, sparkling one of my own. “If you take me home, I’ll change into my suit and get my things. Then we can buzz by your place and grab your board shorts.”

“Folly Beach?” he suggests.

I tiptoe my fingers up the front of his shirt. “Does Lila like the beach?”

“Not even a little bit,” he says, his voice made mostly of air.

I step away while I still have the advantage, though I'm close to melting into his arms or kissing him, I'm not sure which. I don't want to be the one to initiate the first kiss, and the fact that I'm even *considering* kissing my grumpy boss would've had me checking into a psychiatric unit only a few days ago.

Now, today, those thoughts feel like a world of possibilities have opened right before my eyes.

DAWSON

Callie's brought the spray sunscreen to the beach with her, and I can't really rub her down with it. Not only that, but her swimming suit isn't a power bikini, but a very sensible one-piece in all black. It rides high over her chest and around her shoulders, and there's very little skin she can't spray herself.

She looks like an heiress in the all-black suit, the all-black cover-up billowing in the breeze, and the bejeweled sandals on her feet. Mother would be very proud.

She brought the beach chairs we sit in, and I feel way out of my league with this woman. I know she's detailed and organized at the firm, both qualities I really admire in a secretary. In my potential girlfriend, though, how put together she is makes me feel inadequate in ways I haven't in a long time.

Mother isn't here today, and yet I find myself reaching across the space between Callie and I and taking her hand in mine. She says nothing, and I let my eyes drift closed. The scent of sunscreen and sunshine, the salty sea, and something getting broiled at the hamburger stand down the beach fills my nose.

The call of birds, kids, and the roar of the ocean waves fills my ears.

The warmth of Callie's fingers between mine overcome all other senses, and I focus on that single point of contact between us.

“Dawson?” she asks.

“Hmm?”

“Do you want to swim or nap?”

“I ran ten miles this morning,” I say. “Can we nap for a minute and swim when my skin feels like it’s about to blister?” I turn my head toward her and crack one eye open to find her nodding.

“All right,” she drawls out in her Carolina accent. “You didn’t put on any sunscreen.”

“I’ll be okay until I take off my shirt,” I say.

“Are you sure you aren’t wearing a super-suit under your clothes?” Her fingers slip away from mine, and I open my eyes to watch her adjust her celebrity-style sunglasses.

“Oh, I see. You just want me to take off my shirt.”

“I didn’t bring you to the beach to sit here without a view,” she says.

A wave of self-consciousness hits me. I do run a lot. I know I have muscles. But I’m not the bodybuilder type with a lot of ridges and veins everywhere. I also don’t spend a ton of time on the beach perfecting my tan, and I suddenly want to glue my T-shirt to my body.

“What would you do if I said that to you?” I ask, my voice quiet.

She pulls in a breath but stops. I open my eyes and look at her. “It’s a bit of a double-standard, don’t you think? What if I asked you to take off your shirt just so I could ogle you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she says, horror creeping through her big, blue eyes. “It was a lame attempt at flirting.”

“I know,” I say, and I turn my head to face the water.

“I can’t believe I’m even attempting to flirt with you.” She stands and bends to roll up her towel. She tosses it in her bag and looks at me. “I’m going to go home. I can call Carry if you’re not ready.”

“Wait, why are you leaving?” I peer up at her, her distress obvious.

“I...I’m flirting with you. You’re my boss.” She glances around like FBI agents will appear and demand she get down on the sand, hands behind her head. “This is so very odd, don’t you think?”

“I’m actually enjoying the idea of us,” I say. “So I’m just rolling with it.”

“The idea of us,” she says, sitting down again. She doesn’t lean back in the beach chair, though it’s almost impossible to sit up straight in these things.

“Tell me you haven’t thought about it,” I say. “And I’ll stop thinking about it too.”

“Define ‘it’,” she says.

“A real relationship,” I say simply. I’ve gone too far now to back out. “The holding hands because I want to, not because my mother is watching.” I lean toward her and lower my voice. “In case you aren’t aware, Lila Houser isn’t here right now.”

“I’m aware,” she says, but her voice sounds dry, rusty. She doesn’t add anything else, and Callie Michaels never runs out of things to say.

Seconds gather together and form minutes, and still she remains silent. “I’ll take you home,” I say, getting to my feet too.

“I didn’t mean to ruin anything,” she says.

“You didn’t,” I say. “Maybe we both just need more time to think through things.”

She nods, and I pack the beach chairs back to the SUV. I drive her back to Sugar Creek with only the radio playing to fill the silence between us.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I pull into her driveway. The SUV rolls to a stop, and I tell myself to start keeping track of how many times I apologize to this woman.

“I’m the one who needs to apologize,” she says. “I shouldn’t have objectified you like that.” She turns toward me, her anxiety plain on her face. I hate it and wish I hadn’t been so in her face about her likely-innocent desire to see my abs.

For some reason, though, I want it to be this big moment when I take my shirt off in front of her. Doing it on the beach while she gazes at me feels...cheap.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’m just a big jerk for calling you out.” I sigh and run my hands through my hair.

“You are not,” she says. “Thanks for the ride home.” She starts to get out of the SUV, and I really want to follow her inside. I haven’t heard from Mother in a while, but she could be at my house, waiting for me to return.

I tell myself to stay in my seat, as Callie’s already out of the car, and she doesn’t need my help. I stuff the admission that I don’t need more time to think through things down my throat, and I wave to her when she turns back at the top of the porch.

Then I get out of there before I can make a bigger fool out of myself.

“MOTHER, I CAN’T,” I SAY ON MONDAY MORNING. “WE agreed to have the meeting at eleven. We rearranged things specifically for you to do this.”

I can’t believe Mother is doing this. I should’ve known she’d get what she wanted, despite her concession on the time from last week.

“Tara had an emergency,” Mother says. “If we don’t meet first thing, I have to push it back a week. I can’t let the food go that long. I’ll have to find another caterer, which will be impossible at this late hour.” She continues to talk, but I tune her out.

I can’t cause Tara to lose the business, as this Founder’s Gala is a pretty huge deal. Food for hundreds of people. Her

business in every program.

I sigh and say, “Mother,” in a way that sounds very much like a whine.

“I’ll call Callie and explain everything,” Mother says. “All you have to do is show up.”

“Fine,” I clip out. I end the call before Mother can say anything else to annoy me. I finish knotting my tie, muttering to myself about having a morning meeting on a different day. It doesn’t have to be Monday just because of the alliteration.

All of the distractions and things that have prevented me from talking to Callie about being my partner in the firm are starting to make me think I should hold off on approaching her. Maybe the idea is a bad one, and I shouldn’t pursue it.

I push my hair to the right, seeing and feeling the length in it that indicates I need a haircut. After grabbing my phone, I stride into the kitchen. The coffee is ready, and I pour myself enough to sustain me through this Monday morning catering session, tuck my phone in my breast pocket, and head for my SUV.

Once there, I give my device a moment to connect via Bluetooth, and then I say, “Text Karly: I’m getting overdue for a haircut. What’s your schedule like?”

I pull out of my driveway and say, “Send.”

“Sending text to Callie.”

“Wait,” I say, but the car’s smart technology isn’t that smart. “Callie? No, *Karly*. Karly Morgan.”

The SUV says nothing, and this is just the second thing to irritate me before eight a.m.

“Message from Callie Michaels,” the SUV says, the female voice driving me toward the brink of madness.

“Read it,” I say.

“I’m busy with my boss and his mother this morning, but my afternoon is free.”

I smile despite my blunder, because I know her afternoon is not free. “Text Callie: Sorry, I meant to send that to my stylist. Send.”

“Sending text to Callie,” the SUV parrots back to me. Hardly a moment passes before she responds and the car alerts me.

“Read it,” I say.

“Just the fact that you use words like *stylist* is impressive.”

I’m not sure what to think. I haven’t spoken to her—via phone, in person, or text—since dropping her off after only a few minutes on the beach on Saturday. She’s been stuck in my head like a song I can’t get rid of, the kind that’s running through my mind when I wake up and stays there for hours throughout the day.

I might forget about it for a few minutes, but the moment the quiet creeps back in, so does the song—in this case, Callie.

She’s been prevalent there, and I don’t know how to get rid of her. The last woman I felt like this about I proposed to—for real, with a real diamond and real roses and everything.

I don’t say anything else while driving to Saucebilities, Tara Finch’s catering company that’s making a big name for itself around Charleston. I’ve been to several events for clients where Saucebilities is responsible for the food, and I know Tara is Callie’s best friend.

The parking lot holds a few cars, but there are plenty of spaces. I pull into one, grab my phone from the console, and button my suit coat as I stride toward the building. Her air conditioning is working just fine, and it’s clear I’m the last one there, despite being the only one who actually owns a car and drives it.

“Mister Houser.” A woman rises from a desk that’s mostly concealed behind a tall counter. “They’re waiting for you in the conference room. I’ll take you back if you follow me.”

“Thank you,” I say, getting a whiff of pure sugar. My stomach grumbles at my lack of attention to it, and I hope Tara will have samples. She had mentioned the possibility of

serving Mother the items they'd have at the gala, and I think that maybe switching our meeting times to come here first isn't such a bad idea after all.

The building isn't big, but it is new, and the secretary leads me past a wall made only of windows. A long table sits on the other side of it, with Tara, Callie, and Mother all seated in chairs. Great. I *am* the last one to arrive, and I immediately search for a clock to find out how late I am.

There isn't one to be found, though a pleasing robin's-egg blue looks back at me from the walls.

"Mister Houser," the secretary says, announcing me to the group of women, as if they didn't just watch me complete the walk of shame along the wall of windows.

Mother doesn't look up from her phone. Tara does glance at me from the stack of folders in front of her.

Callie jumps to her feet, sending her wheeled office chair skidding behind her. It crashes straight into the windows, and I have time to watch her cringe before the glass shatters.

All three women yelp and cover their heads. I do the same, hoping my cry isn't as girly as theirs, especially since I'm not anywhere near as close to the shard carnage as they are.

"Ohhh, I'm so sorry," Callie says once the crashing and tinkling has stopped.

"It's happened before," Tara says, though she's a bit breathless. I'm still taking in the huge hole in the conference room wall. Callie's over-eagerness in getting out of her seat has ruined an entire panel of glass, from floor to ceiling.

"Don't worry about it, Cal," Tara says, getting all the way back to her feet. I realize she'd dived under the table, and I wish in that moment that I was Superman. Then I could've flown in to protect them all.

Feet crunch over the broken glass as others come to see what's happened. Callie picks a piece from her hair, and I find the whole thing so comical.

I start to laugh, which draws every eye to me. I'm aware of how manic it sounds, but I can't make it stop.

When Mother says, "For land sakes, Dawson, stop laughing, and help me out of this mess," I do cut off my laughter. I'm really off my game today.

The glass has gotten everywhere, and instead of going to Mother's side of the table, I head for Callie. "Are you okay?" I ask, picking another piece of glass from her hair. It has a green tint, an odd fact for me to notice in this moment.

"I think so," she says.

Our eyes meet, and I can't help smiling at her. "Just so excited to see me, huh? You just *had* to throw your chair through a glass wall." I bend my head a little closer. "I'm wearing my shirt, honey. Nothing to be so excited about."

I expect her to scoff and shake her head at my fairly lame attempt at flirting. She's much better at it than I am.

Instead, she smiles, ducks her head, and says, "You better go help your mother before she has a meltdown."

CALLIE

The week passes in much the same fashion as other weeks have. I get up. I feed Claude Monet. I get a ride to work—oh, wait. That’s changed completely, because I’m not using Carry to get to the office.

Dawson shows up every morning about eight-thirty, sits in my driveway until I come out, and then we drive to work together.

It’s a change I’m willing to live with, as just thinking about him now makes my heart do fluttery things. I know I’m in the early stages of a relationship—the honeymoon phase, people call it—because everything he does makes me feel ooey and gooey.

He seems to have a better week than normal, with hardly any yelling or slamming. There’s still a little, because he is dealing with a lot of clients, each with specific needs, and Lila is still in town.

As I walk around the office and pick up pens, I note there are about twice as many lying around as usual. That indicates that Dawson is definitely in some kind of turmoil. I picture him wandering around, a pen in his hand, trying to find a way to get his mother to go home for a few weeks until the gala.

She won’t, and we both know it. I’m fine with it, because I don’t mind playing his girlfriend. In fact, it doesn’t even feel pretend anymore. I shake my head at myself and murmur, “Better make sure he feels the same before you really start falling.”

But the truth is, I've already started falling.

I pull my phone from the back pocket of my black shorts and text him. *I have something to add to our agenda for Monday morning.*

Big thing or little thing? he asks. *We have that call-in webinar with Paper Pizazz, remember?*

Of course I remember. I'm the one who told him about it just last night as we were leaving the office. We'd then gone to dinner with his mother, but I'm really good at leaving work at work, and when Dawson and I go out, we don't talk about the office.

The status of our relationship... *Big thing*, I text back.

I can practically hear him sighing as he types. *Okay*, he says. *My thing is big too.*

The webinar isn't until noon, I tell him. *There's time.*

If you say so.

"I do say so," I say to the empty office. The large peace lily in our foyer looks a bit droopy, and I can't help myself. I fill the watering can and deliver some water to the thirsty plant, then go around and water all of them. I'll have to take the heat from Dawson if they die.

My phone rings and it's Dawson. I slide the call on. "Hey."

"Hey, where are you? It's so gorgeous today, and I thought you might want to get out."

"Get out?" I repeat. "Get out where?"

"We can bike along the Ravenel Bridge."

"Mister Houser," I tease. "Think about what I look like for just two seconds. Do you think I'm a biker?"

He chuckles. "We can walk then. Or we can go to a RiverDogs game. They're playing at one."

"Ah, now you're talking. Sitting, shade, and hot dogs."

"There's that new restaurant in Sugar Creek too," he says. "The Lady Gala. It's all farm-to-table, and you love that."

I do love that. I love that he *knows* I love that. “Uh, okay,” I say. “My vote is for baseball at one, and dinner at The Lady Gala after that.”

“You’ve got yourself a date.”

“Perfect.”

“Where are you?” he asks.

“Oh, um, I ran out for a minute.” I’ve never told him I come to the office on the weekends. If he checked the security feeds, he’d know. If he looked at the keyless entry records, he’d know. If he thought for a moment about where his clean clothes come from, he’d probably know.

“So you’ll be home soon?”

“I’ll be back in time for the game,” I say. “Why?”

“I think Claude Monet is outside,” he says, his voice getting a bit fainter. “You said you don’t leave him out for long, because he doesn’t have claws, so I wondered.”

My heart flips over. “You’re at my house?”

“I brought breakfast by,” he says. “Surprise.”

Oh, how I wish I were there. “Could you—?”

“Yep, there he is again,” Dawson interrupts. “It’s definitely Claude Monet. He’s got a magpie chasing him.”

Panic strikes me straight in the chest. “Can you help him?” I ask. “I’m on my way home right now.” But I have to call a Carry, and I’m still a good twenty minutes away after they arrive. “That stupid magpie loves to taunt Claude. I can’t believe I left him out.”

I don’t even remember putting Claude out, though of course he goes outside in the mornings. My thoughts that morning had centered on Dawson, as they have been for the past ten or eleven days.

“I’ll get him,” Dawson says, and I hear the tell-tale dinging of his SUV now that the door is open. “Can I get in your house?”

“Um, maybe not. But the garage code is two-two-two-two. Enter.”

“Really? Four twos? That doesn’t seem very anti-serial-killer.”

As upset as I am about Claude, I start to laugh.

“In fact,” he says, clearly teasing me. “That code is practically begging someone to come in and get you.”

“I have other defenses in place if they do,” I say.

“You do? What do I need to beware of?” Something scuffs on his end of the line. “Come on, Claude. C’mere.”

“I obviously don’t use my garage,” I say. “No car. So there are tools and—” I cut off when Dawson yelps.

“Land sakes,” he exclaims. “That magpie dive-bombed at my head.”

I don’t want to laugh, but it is kind of funny. “I’ll call a ride right now,” I say, barely containing my giggles. “Thank you, Dawson.”

“You want to play dirty, huh?” he asks, and he’s clearly talking to the bird. “I’ll show you who’s got the bigger brain.”

“I’m hanging up,” I call into the phone, and then I do just that. He’s got a magpie crisis to deal with, and I need a Carry home.

When I get there, there are no magpies, no orange tabby cats outside, and only Dawson’s SUV parked serenely in the driveway to indicate that anything is different about my house. I swipe my Carry card, say, “Thank you,” and get out.

I text Tara that I made it home safely, and when I look up at my house again, that’s when I notice how...slanted the rain gutter is. Almost like someone Dawson’s size has tried to hang off of it and it couldn’t hold his weight.

I hurry into the house, calling, “Dawson? Claude?”

“Right here,” the man says from my left. He’s sitting on the couch, Claude curled up on his lap. I blink and stare, because Claude Monet is a cat. That right there speaks of what

he should be doing, and it's not purring up a storm on my boss's lap.

He's also anthropophobic and usually hides when people are here—sometimes even from me. But he and Dawson are obviously now soul mates.

I recover from stepping into this weird portal where nothing makes sense and turn to hang my purse on the hook near the door. “What happened to the rain gutter out front?”

“Oh, right, that. I've called someone already. They'll come fix it next week. The, uh, magpie got a little...nasty.”

I face him again and start to laugh. “What does that mean?”

He pats the couch and says, “Come sit by me, and let me tell you a story.”

I do, and he puts his arm around me. The two of us in my house, just sitting on my couch, with my cat on his lap, feels like I've entered the Bermuda Triangle. At any moment, all of this is going to poof into nothing, and I'll be left on a deserted island by myself.

Dawson weaves a tale that involves rocks, the magpie calling for backup, and then him and Claude Monet calling an audible and retreating into the house while swarms of birds descend on my house.

I laugh through most of it, because it once again shows me a different side of Dawson. A softer side. A humorous side. A scared side, all of which make him more human. More real. More lovable.

My insides seize at that last thought, but I can't push it away.

“Anyway,” he says. “I'm starving, and they open the gates at noon. We can go to the game now, get those hot dogs you mentioned, and eat before it starts.” He nudges Claude off his lap, and the grumpy cat gives him a glare before stalking into the kitchen. “Well, I guess he's done with me.”

“He really only likes you if you have food,” I say, getting to my feet with him. “Don’t take it personally.”

He smiles at me and reaches up to run the tips of two fingers down the side of my face. “You look...beautiful today.”

I’m not even wearing makeup, and I suddenly feel naked in front of him. I duck my head. “Thank you. Let me go change before we go.”

“Why? You look fine.” He slides his eyes down my body and back. “Shorts and a T-shirt. It’s perfect baseball attire.”

“These shorts are black,” I say. “I’ll be melting by the end of the first inning.” I smile and pat his chest. “Five minutes. I swear I won’t let you starve.” I walk away from him, the solidness of his muscles burned into my palm and fingers from where I touched his chest. I still haven’t seen him shirtless, and it’s not going to happen today, as it’s not a beach day.

“But there’s always tomorrow,” I whisper to myself, a smile filling my soul and spreading across my face as I enter my bedroom to get changed.



“No,” I SAY, STARING AT ALL THE THINGS HE’S PILING ON TOP of his hot dog. “No, no, no. You don’t put on onions *and* sauerkraut.”

“Yes, you do,” he says, grinning as he then moves down to the spicy brown mustard. “And a lot of this.”

“Okay, ew,” I say, having doctored up my dog with a few squirts of ketchup and regular mustard. The end. “That shouldn’t be consumed on anything, ever.”

“It’s delicious,” he says, reaching for extra napkins. He’s gonna need them with how much garbage he put on that hot dog.

“Your ratio is all off now,” I say.

He scoffs and chuckles. “What does that mean?” He starts to lead us toward the tables, and thankfully, there’s one in the shade. I’ve brought along my big straw hat to keep my face out of the sun, but I’m not wearing it yet.

“There’s a ratio of hot dog to bun to toppings that must not be compromised,” I say as we sit down. “The hot dog to bun ratio is pretty even when you get the dog. The toppings can’t overwhelm that.” I glance at his monstrosity, which includes relish, bacon bits, the onions and sauerkraut, and all that sick mustard. “Your toppings are out of control.”

“Noted.” He leans down and tucks into a great big bite of his hot dog. An exaggerated moan comes from his throat, and he closes his eyes as if this minor league baseball stadium hot dog is the best thing he’s ever eaten.

“Stop it,” I say with a giggle.

He swallows his food and says, “Yours is just so...plain. It’s boring.”

I reach for my napkin and wipe the bit of ketchup from the corner of my mouth. “Yes, well, you know me. Plain and boring.” I smile at him, but his slips.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I *am* a little plain and boring,” I say. “I know that.”

“You do?” He leans down again, asking, “Why are you plain and boring?” before he takes another bite.

I shrug and cross my legs under the table. “I mean, I don’t know. I like routine. I like to do the same things in the same order every day. I don’t like extravagant meals, though The Roof was fun last weekend.” I pause for a moment, trying to see myself clearly. “I don’t know,” I say again. “I’m...content? I guess. I like my life. It doesn’t need to be this big, grandiose thing. I don’t need the onions *and* the sauerkraut.”

“They taste good, though,” he says.

“My palette is a bit more refined, I guess,” I tease.

“Oh-ho.” He chuckles, shakes his head, and takes another bite of his hot dog.

While he chews, I ask, “What’s your favorite food?”

He finishes his bite and says, “Fried chicken.”

“How very Southern of you,” I tease.

“You?”

“Definitely pasta,” I say.

“What kind of pasta?”

“All pasta.” I grin at him. Today feels casual. Nice. Easy. It feels like two people who know each other well already, moving to a deeper, more personal level of knowledge about one another. It feels like Dawson and I have moved from co-workers, to friends, to...more.

I swallow, this time out of nerves. Maybe I can just ask him what our relationship status is today. I don’t have to wait for a work meeting.

“Dawson—” I say at the same time someone else does.

He looks from me to the man approaching our table. “Lance.” Dawson abandons his half-eaten hot dog and stands to clap his friend on the back in a man-hug. I notice the brunette at his side, and the way Lance slides his hand back into hers the moment he and Dawson part.

“Hey, Hadley,” he says, giving her a smile.

“Hey.”

Dawson indicates me. “You remember Callie, right Lance?”

“He’s come into the office several times.” I dust my hands and stand to shake Lance’s. “Good to see you again.”

Open curiosity sits on Lance’s face, and he looks from me to Dawson and back. “You too, Callie. What are you two doing here?”

“It’s game day,” Dawson says lightly. He gestures toward Hadley. “Cal, this is Hadley Brown, Lance’s girlfriend. Hadley, this is Callie Michaels, my girlfriend.”

“It’s—” I cut off, realizing what he’s said.

Lance starts to laugh, and Hadley turns her porcelain face toward him. She has big, brown eyes too, and she's perfectly put together with a cornflower blue blouse and short denim shorts. She's at least sixty pounds lighter than me, and about six inches shorter too. I feel like a complete giant next to her.

"Nice to meet you," she says, her voice sugar-sticky-sweet and a little too high-pitched for my taste. I think of a Munchkin from *The Wizard of Oz*, but I smile politely.

"It's great to meet you too," I say, completing what I'd started to say a moment ago.

Dawson grumbles something and grabs onto Lance's arm. "Can I talk to you for a sec?" he asks, already towing his best friend away from us. "Be right back," he calls over his shoulder.

I watch them go, then face Hadley. "What's that about?" I ask.

"How long have y'all been goin' out?" she asks, plenty of Carolina in her voice. "I didn't know Dawson dated." She pulls out one of the chairs at the table and sits down. "I can't tell you how many times the three of us have gone to dinner. He even refused to let me bring a friend so we could have a proper double-date."

I sit down too, interested in these behind-the-scenes stories about Dawson. "So it would just be the three of you?"

She gives me a dry, sarcastic look. "Yes. I can't tell you how many people asked if I was dating them both." She shakes her head. "As if anyone could stand Dawson for longer than a couple of hours."

I shift in my seat and clear my throat, the hot dog I've already consumed writhing in my gut.

"Oh, goodness," Hadley says, clapping her hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry. Of course, you can...someone can... stand him."

"He's actually very sweet," I say, lifting my chin and aware my voice sounds pinched. "He just has some tough

exterior layers to get through.” I now know he’s grown those layers to protect himself, and I don’t begrudge him that.

“I’m sure he is,” Hadley says. “Please don’t tell him I said that.”

I glance over to where Lance and Dawson are talking. Dawson has his back to me, but he gestures largely with his hands. I smile, because he always talks with his hands. I’ve learned to stay out of the way during our presentations, at least if I don’t want bruises all over my body.

I look back at Hadley, the smile still in place. “It’ll be our little secret.”

She says something mundane in her cute little Munchkin voice, and I can’t wait for Dawson to return so I don’t have to talk to her anymore.

DAWSON

“I ’m gonna go get a drink,” I say, releasing Callie’s hand. She turns her hatted head toward me, and with those large, dark celebrity sunglasses on, I find her so attractive. My heart bumps out an extra beat, and my blood runs hotter as I stand. “Do you want those ice cream bites now?”

“Absolutely,” she says, going back to fanning herself with the program I bought just for that purpose. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“If you’d like.” I look past her to Lance and Hadley. “Anyone want anything? We’re going to get drinks and snacks.” I frown slightly at Lance, though he apologized for laughing when I introduced Callie as my girlfriend. He then proceeded to text me over a dozen times while I finished my lunch.

It was especially annoying, because he sat only two feet from me while he did it. I read all the texts when we finally got to our seats, and he really does feel bad.

He should, I think. He knows I don’t date. He’s met Callie plenty of times. So I didn’t tell him we were seeing each other. I barely know if that’s true myself.

Callie didn’t correct me when I called her my girlfriend, though she did look a little shocked. Cut off her sentence and everything. I was more than a little surprised when the words came out of my mouth.

Now, though, they fit just fine in my mouth. Sure, maybe the relationship is new. Maybe it started out a little disingenuous.

The way I feel, though, seems very real. I have to acknowledge that at some point, and I decided that point was last night, when I dropped off Callie after dinner.

“Popcorn for me, brother,” Lance says, bringing me back to this present moment at the RiverDogs game.

“You got it. Hadley?”

“Nothing for me,” she says, and I wonder if she’s eaten today. Even when we go out, she doesn’t eat a whole lot. Maybe she front-loads like Callie, and eats before Lance takes her to dinner.

We edge out of the row, and I take Callie’s hand in mine as we climb the steps back up to the concessions. “You okay?” I ask, glancing at her.

“Yeah,” she says, her smile appearing easily. “I haven’t been to a game in a long time.” She clasps her other hand around mine, and I bask in the warmth of her touch. “My dad used to bring us sometimes when he wasn’t working.”

“Who’s us?” I ask, joining the line in front of the concessions stand.

“Me and my sister,” she says. “Ariel. She’s younger than me by three years. Thinks every guy she meets is her soul mate.” She trills out a light laugh that makes me chuckle too.

“What does your dad do?” I ask.

“He was a truck driver,” Callie says, swallowing. Her eyes grow nervous, and I wonder why. “Did the long hauls from here to Miami, and sometimes to New Orleans.”

“Wow.” I step forward, wondering what life on the road would be like. Part of me thinks it would be so freeing. Like growing wings, setting my sights west, and just flying. “He must’ve been gone a lot.”

“For weeks at a time,” she says, glancing at me and back to the menu board. “I want popcorn too, Dawson. Is that

allowed?”

I lean closer to her and touch my lips to her temple, getting a shot of orange and honey from her hair. She presses into the kiss, and a wave of happiness I haven't felt in a decade fills me. “You can have whatever you want, sweetheart,” I murmur.

“How about an answer?” she asks as we step forward again. We're almost to the front of the line, and then things will get chaotic.

“To what question?” I ask.

She disentangles her hands from around mine and edges away from me. “Us,” she says. “I want to know what you're thinking about us.” She meets my eye for a moment, for as long as it takes a hummingbird wing to flap. There, then gone.

Callie gestures between the two of us, almost like she's using her hand to fan herself now. “Is this real to you? Or are we pretending?”

My answer chokes in my throat, though I want to call to the world that of course it's real to me.

“Next in line,” a woman calls.

I look at her and back to Callie. “This is real for me, Callie.” I take her hand again. “Now come on, it's our turn, and I suddenly really want a pretzel with nacho cheese.”

I catch sight of her smile before I turn fully to go order. As the woman and a couple of others gather up all the junk food we've bought, Callie links her arm through mine and snuggles into my upper arm. “It's real for me too, Dawson.”

“Glad we got that out of the way,” I say. “So the girlfriend comment...?”

“Just a surprise,” she says. “I've been wanting to ask you what this past week meant to you; that was my thing for our Monday morning meeting.”

I grin and take the giant cup of soda I just purchased. “So I can cross that off the agenda?”

“Cross it all off,” she says, smiling widely at me too. We take everything back to our seats and pass Lance his popcorn. I’m definitely going to have to explain more than I did in the sixty-second conversation we had standing only ten feet from Callie and Hadley.

Later, I think. Right now, I’m going to enjoy the game, the sunshine, and my new, *real* girlfriend’s presence in my life.

I can’t help thinking that I’ve never had a girlfriend who I haven’t kissed before.

Just something to look forward to, I tell myself as the innings switch over and the home team jogs onto the field.

“WOW, THIS PLACE HASN’T CHANGED AT ALL.” I PEER through the windshield at the huge pillars marking the entrance to the Fowler Plantation. The road ahead is perfectly straight and long, with a one-way entrance on the right, and the one-way exit on the left. Between the two roads sits a wide strip of emerald green grass that certainly takes a whole crew to water, clip, and maintain.

Live oaks line both sides of both roads, most of them over a hundred years old and towering as high as live oaks can. The moss in the branches drifts in the slight wind, and I wish South Carolina had a bit more breezes this far inland, because it’s so dang hot today.

Maybe I’m just hot under the collar because I wasn’t able to kiss Callie last night.

“Augustus makes sure of that,” Mother says from the passenger seat beside me. “He keeps all the outbuildings in good repair. He lives in the home.”

“I’m aware,” I murmur, my thoughts on my older cousin. He’s fifty where I’m thirty-six, and we were never that close growing up. I’ve been out to my great-great-grandfather’s land plenty of times, as Mother made sure we knew her brothers, her parents, and all the other Fowlers, no matter how distant.

I haven't kept up with any of them since she moved to New York City right after my graduation. I think of the picture sitting on my mantle, and what it represents to me. It's so much more than just me earning my Master's degree.

It's my father's belief in me that I could. It's the miles we ran together. It's the two of us achieving hard things, no matter how old we are.

He passed away only fifteen days before that graduation ceremony, and I display the picture specifically for him. To remind myself of him, so I don't forget.

Mother left Carolina only two days after I graduated, and I'd never felt so lost. I was suddenly alone in the city where I'd been raised, and I knew no one despite all the Fowlers so close by.

I put my head down, and I worked. Lance didn't leave my side for long, and he was the only constant I had.

At least until I met Kim. Then, we were inseparable.

But, just like everyone else, she left too.

I wonder when Callie will leave.

I push the thought away as I park at the end of the lane, the grand 1800s house standing tall and proud before us. "He's painted the shutters."

"Union blue," Mother says as if she knows the name of the paint.

I roll my eyes as I turn away from her to get out of the SUV. She waits properly in the passenger seat as I come around to let her out, and I notice her grip on my arm is a little tighter today than other times. I glance at her, but she seems as strong and formidable as ever.

We go up the wide, sweeping staircase, past the six pillars keeping guard—three on each side of the porch—and to the front door. Mother rings the doorbell and indicates the knocker. "Give that a rap too."

"You seriously don't think he heard that?" I don't reach for the knocker. It'll probably fall off in my hand, but knowing

Augustus, it won't. He's obviously proud of this place, and it certainly costs a lot more to keep up than my house on the outskirts of Charleston.

I'm almost in Sugar Creek, actually, though my house technically sits within the borders of Cottonhill. All the little towns out there are part of the North Charleston Municipal, and we share a swimming pool, some police force manpower, and even some utilities.

We've come south today to the Fowler Plantation, and that is made one-hundred percent obvious when Augustus opens the door. I swear the stale air the house spews out has been kept inside since the Civil War, if the dusty, mothy quality of it is any indication.

It sticks in my lungs and makes me cough. Mother looks at me crossly and releases my arm to step into Augustus. "How are you, dear?" she asks. "Oh, you look so much like your father."

I sometimes forget that Mother is alone in her family too. She's the last one alive out of her core unit, and the only person she has left is me. My heart softens, and I manage to put a smile on my face as she embraces her nephew.

"You brought Dawson," Augustus says, his nearly non-existent chin becoming more prominent as he sticks his neck out a little further.

"Good to see you, Augustus," I say. "How long has it been?"

"At least since Christmas," he says.

"Right." I do try to show up to family events around major holidays. Weddings would count. That type of thing. Augustus has a twenty-year-old daughter and a sixteen-year-old son, and I can't even fathom what it would be like to live here full time as a teenager.

I step into the house, following Mother, who's already talking about the butter cookies her grandmother used to keep in the house.

“I had some delivered,” Augustus says, right at her side. “Just for you. I put them in the drawing room with a pot of herbal tea.” He certainly knows how to buddy up to Mother, something I should probably do better at. Still, he comes across as so...greasy. So oily, like he’s trying to sell me something I don’t want.

He’s nearly bald and has been for a while now, and his wife is a woman who doesn’t even do what I do and show up for family events at holidays. So when Emilia comes marching down the huge staircase that leads up to the wings of the house, I stop and stare.

She’s wearing a ballgown too, and I think she and Augustus have certainly brainstormed about how to get on Mother’s good side.

Of course they have, I tell myself, all sorts of realizations dropping like bombs in my head. They know the Founder’s Gala is coming up.

They know Mother is almost seventy-five years old.

They know she needs to name an heir for Fowler International or the company goes to the next oldest living relative of hers.

Who is Augustus.

I spin toward the drawing room, aghast this house even has one. I need to stay with Mother at all times, as she mentioned on the drive here that Augustus likes to corner her and shoot probing questions at her.

So even though Emilia calls my name as she descends the stairs, I stride away and follow Mother and Augustus into the drawing room.

“Oh, here he is,” Mother says, her eyes sharp as knives. “Do come sit down, Dawson.” She pats the loveseat cushion next to her. “And let’s catch up with Emilia and Augustus.”

I do what she says, but I feel like I’ve entered one of those royal movies where the Duke and Duchess are trying to steal the crown from its rightful owner.

All I can think as I make small talk, smile, drink tea that tastes like the bottom of my foot, and allow my skin to crawl at how Emilia and Augustus fawn over Mother is how proud Callie would be of me.

In fact, I'm pretty sure I channel some of her personality that's so charming, gets along with everyone, and always knows exactly what to say.

By the time we leave, I feel like I need to step into a hot shower and get all their slime off of me. Mother air kisses and waves, gets in the SUV, and settles in. I shake Augustus's hand with great difficulty, saying, "Thanks so much for having us. It does her good to get out here like this."

That part's true. Mother loves the land in the Lowcountry, and she loves where she's come from. I don't hate it either; I just don't have quite the emotional attachment to it that Mother does, or even that Augustus does.

"Thanks for everything," I say to Emilia, though she didn't feed us or do much of anything but perch on the edge of her chair and make backhanded comments about the upcoming gala.

Two weeks, I think. This will all be over in two weeks.

I get behind the wheel of my SUV and ease back and then around to go down the exit side of the road. Mother says nothing, the hard-blowing air conditioning making all the chatter in the car.

The moment I turn onto the road and leave Fowler Plantation behind, Mother says, "The two of them will get Fowler International over my dead body."

I look at her, marveling at the level of vehemence in her voice. "Yes, Mother," I say calmly. "Unless you name an heir and update your will, that's exactly how they'll get Fowler International."

She meets my eye, and I smile at her. "Oh, you," she says, swatting at my arm and very nearly making me swerve us into the ditch on the side of the road.

“Me?” I ask, laughing. “I should be given an Academy Award for my performance back there.”

“Callie’s the one who gives out the medals,” Mother says, and that gets us both laughing, something we both need after such a tension-filled afternoon at Fowler Plantation.

“What’s Callie doing tonight?” Mother asks. “Are you going to see her?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, still chortling a bit. “I’ll call her when we get back.” I glance at her, and Mother nods her approval. “Do you...like her, Mother?”

“I like everyone,” Mother says, reaching up to pat her hair.

I laugh again, this time with a bit less happiness in it. “Sure, you do.”

“I do like Callie,” Mother insists. “She seems very...nice.”

“She is nice,” I say. “And smart. And pretty. And witty. She’s quick on her feet. She thinks outside the box. And she loves those Georgia peach cookies from Byrd’s, just like you.” I smile at her, thinking we should take a detour through downtown Charleston and get some cookies to salvage our Sunday afternoon.

But that’ll make the trip longer, and I won’t be able to call Callie as soon, so I just keep the SUV on the road back to Mother’s hotel, a prayer in my heart that she’ll be so tired after that visit that she’ll just want to be left alone.

I know I do...so I can be alone with Callie.

CALLIE

Something is up. I examine the windows at the office, wondering who lifted the blinds already this morning. The parking for the building is behind the house, and since I don't drive, I don't know if Dawson is here yet this morning or not.

"He can't be," I murmur. I'm always the first one to arrive in the office, and I'm the one who raises the blinds, adjusts the temperature, and sets up for any meetings or presentations we have that day.

Today is our Monday morning meeting, and I even left home early to have my Carry driver take me through a bakery drive-through to get Dawson's favorite pastries. I got mine too, and I think morning treats might be the one thing we have in common.

I dismiss that thought as I pull on the door, and it doesn't open. Definitely Dawson then, as he would come in the back entrance from the parking lot. I open that door for him when I get here too. The least he can do is open the front door for me if he's here already.

Could be a serial killer, I think.

My feet freeze, and I lean toward the glass to try to see inside. I've already texted Tara to let her know I arrived at work safely, and I see my future disappear before my eyes. I pull out my phone, juggling my oversized purse and the box of doughnuts, and dial Dawson.

“Hey, baby,” he drawls out, as if we’ve spent years of our lives as lovers and not ten days.

“Are you here?” I ask. “At the office? The blinds are up, but the front door is still locked.”

“Oh, right,” he says. “I’m here.” A few seconds later, he appears behind the glass, his smile so wonderful and vibrant.

I lower my phone, and he opens the door. He takes the box of doughnuts from me and backs up. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I just thought there might be someone in here draining all the blood from someone’s body.”

“And they first made sure all the blinds were up,” he says.

I giggle and stride past him, my purse starting to weigh me down. “To give the impression that anyone could come look inside. Don’t you know you don’t even look at a house with the blinds up? It’s the ones that are all shuttered where we pause, look, and take a moment to wonder what they’re hiding.”

“Oh, my word,” he says, laughing as he follows me. “I think only you wonder what someone with their blinds shut is hiding.”

I turn around to find him right behind me, only the width of the doughnut box between us. “How was your dinner with Lance last night?” I smile as I take the pastries from him. “I got your favorites for the meeting.”

He sighs as he backs up. “Good enough. He’s going to ask Hadley to marry him.”

I glance at Dawson. “Why aren’t you happy about that? Is that good news?”

“I mean, yes?” He runs his hands through his hair and follows me like a puppy into the conference room. I open the cupboard by the sink and pull out a small stack of paper plates and napkins, layering them on top of the other. Everything gets put on top of the doughnut box, and I nudge him back when I turn again.

“I just don’t think she likes me very much,” he admits, not going very far from me. “And he’s going to marry her, and then I don’t know. We won’t be friends anymore.”

“At all?” I ask.

“We will,” he concedes. “It’ll just be different. It’s always different when someone gets married, especially if the wife doesn’t like someone.”

“Mm,” I say. “I understand. Sorry I couldn’t come over for dinner. My sister was in crisis mode. Remember I told you a little about how she falls in love at first sight?”

“Yeah,” he says, following me again, this time into his office.

“Well, apparently this guy she’s been seeing for a couple of months—Nate, right?—he broke up with her over brunch. So she spent the rest of the day crying at my house. She slept over and everything.” I put the doughnuts and plates on his desk and turn to go get my notes for this morning’s meeting.

I practically run straight into Dawson. I put both hands on his chest and press him back. “What is with you today? You’re right on top of me.”

He winds his hands along my waist. “Should I not be happy to see you today?”

“Can you be happy to see me after we have doughnuts?” I giggle and step by him. “I just need to grab my notes and we can start.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t follow me back to my desk, thankfully, and when I return he has my maple-frosted long John on a plate for me. His cream cheese Danish sits in front of him, and he’s clicking on his computer.

I sigh as I sit down. “Okay, I’ve got our notes from last week.” We had a rushed meeting after the catering fiasco at Tara’s, and I’ve followed up on several of the items he asked me to.

“Great.” He’s donned his glasses, and he looks at me and then away again in less time than it takes to blink.

I pick up my doughnut, suddenly as nervous as he's acting. I can now feel the pulsing vibes he's putting off, and I pinch off the corner of the Long John and put it in my mouth.

"Okay," he says again, this time clearing his throat afterward. "I want to bring you on as a partner."

I look up, the half-chewed doughnut stuck between my upper and lower teeth. "What?" I ask around the food. I can't have heard him right. A partner?

Dawson folds his arms onto the desk in front of him. "I think we work great together, and you've worked just as hard as I have here." He doesn't waver now, and I see in him a strong, confident businessman. "Just like you said a couple of weeks ago—you've taken Dawson Dials In to the next level. I think you should be rewarded for that."

I finish the bite of doughnut, and it slides down my throat like a lump of steel. I have no idea what to say.

"I've put together all the paperwork," he says, half-standing and reaching for the papers on his printer. "I think it's a fair offer, but I'm willing to negotiate."

"Why?" I ask.

He settles back into his seat and doesn't look at me. "Why what?"

"Why are you offering me this?" I have an idea of why, but I want to hear him say it.

"Because you're a vital part of this firm," he says.

Wrong answer.

I fold my arms and cross my legs, and the body language experts would go nuts about now. "This has nothing to do with your mother naming you the new CEO of Fowler International?"

"She hasn't said she's going to do that."

"But you spent an hour on the phone with me last night, telling me how insufferable your cousin and his wife were."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

I see the irritation flash through his eyes. If anything, those sexy, thick-framed glasses amplify it.

“You’re going to be the CEO of your family company, but you don’t want to let go of this marketing firm.”

“We handle a ton of Fowler business,” he says. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yes, you are,” I say. “You’re going to that high-rise downtown, and you’re going to leave me here to take on the work both of us now do.” I can’t run this place alone. I don’t even want to. If I don’t take the partnership offer, will he fire me? Find someone else to run his precious firm while he goes on to bigger and better things?

I’m not sure why I’m so bitter about this, only that he’s never mentioned his mother or Fowler International until the past few weeks. Maybe I feel a little duped. And a whole lot stupid.

“This is a huge offer,” he says. “Look.” He puts one of the papers in front of me, but I don’t look at it. “I left the salary line blank. You tell me what you think a partner in a successful but still growing marketing firm deserves. I’ll probably agree.”

“This is insane,” I say, getting to my feet. “*You’re* insane.”

“Why?” he challenges as I pace away from his desk. His office isn’t ginormous or anything, but it affords me enough space to get far enough from him to take a deep breath.

“Because,” I say, facing him from across the office. My back is almost against the cupboards where he keeps his spare clothes. “You’ve worked on building this firm for over a decade. Who does that, and then walks away when it’s booming, thriving, and still growing?”

He stands too, looking down at something on his desk. “Most of our business is with Fowler International companies.”

I raise my hand, one finger up. “Ah, now see, I’ve heard you say that before. It’s not true.”

He frowns and growls out a sigh. “Of course it’s true. I work here, you know.”

“I looked it up,” I say, ignoring his attitude. “After you said it a couple of weeks ago. Most of who you work with is involved with Fowler International, but we have other clients.”

“Not that many.”

“Only thirty-five percent of our business is with Fowler.”

He opens his mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. “That can’t be right.”

“It’s right.”

“You don’t handle clients on your own.”

“You’re a workaholic,” I say. “And some stuff is so easy for you, you don’t even realize how much you do.”

“I can’t do this without you.”

“I don’t think you should walk away from everything you’ve built, especially not for a company you don’t want.”

He comes around his desk and strides toward me. “You have no idea what I want.”

“I know you don’t want to be your mother.” I look up as he approaches to maintain eye contact. “I know I don’t want to run this place myself. It’s not mine.”

He stops a single pace from me, his fingers curling into fists. “I want you to be my partner.”

“You want me to run this place after you abandon it.” I can’t even imagine that. “Can you even see yourself in that high-rise? You hate buildings like that.”

“Don’t tell me what I like and what I don’t.”

I scoff, my heart pounding in the back of my throat. I feel like I’m going to throw up. I can’t believe what I’m about to say. “No,” I say.

“No?”

I shake my head. “No, I won’t be your partner. In fact, I quit.” I try to step past him, but he blocks me. “Excuse me,” I

say icily.

“You can’t quit,” he says.

“I can do whatever I want, Mister Houser. You don’t own me.”

His frown is so deep, it almost makes him more handsome. The next thing I know, he’s closed the distance between us. I back up against the cupboard, and he puts one palm there. “I’m offering you a partnership.”

“I’m telling you I don’t want it, not if you’re going to move to the Fowler high-rise in two weeks.”

“You’re being impossible,” he says. “This is an amazing opportunity for you.”

“Can you back up?”

“No.”

I can scarcely breathe, and not because I’m scared of him. I’m scared I’ll walk out of here having never kissed him. My eyes drop to his mouth, which rises slightly into a smile. Oh, the devil. He knows exactly what he does to me, and that only ignites my blood with fury in addition to the attraction flowing through me.

“This is *not* an amazing opportunity for me,” I say, pressing one palm against his muscled chest. I still haven’t seen him with his shirt off, and my mind screams that today might be the day. I *am* wearing the right underclothes.

That thought gives me a dose of power.

“How do you figure?” he asks.

“You just want to pawn this place off on me, so you won’t lose it. Then you’ll run off and do your big-wig job and leave me here to run your company.”

His feet shuffle a little, one of them somehow getting between mine. “You’re the most stubborn woman alive.” He glares down at me, and then he lowers his head and kisses me. I fight him for control at first, just so he knows I can, and then I give in to the powerful stroke of his mouth against mine.

Every sense is on high alert, screaming through my body. The sweet, pastry taste of him in my mouth. The clean, pine-tree scent of his skin in my nose. The silky, thick feel of his hair between my fingers. The sound of him pulling in another breath through his nose.

Warmth slides through my body, and I can't get close enough to him. I can't hold onto his broad shoulders well enough. I swear the earth shifts in space, and suddenly there's not enough gravity. My legs feel weak and I turn floaty, the only thing anchoring me to the ground is him, and this life-changing kiss.

His hands move along my head, lighting each individual scalp cell on fire as he pushes my hair off my face. One hand moves down my back to my waist and the other comes to cradle my jaw.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs as he moves his mouth to my neck. I lean my head back and suck at the air, the resulting sound more of a gasp than anything else.

"About what?" I manage to ask.

"Saying you're stubborn." He moves his mouth back to mine for another kiss, and it's the second-best kiss of my life, his first one taking the top spot, as I swear the first one was so hot, the spots on my leopard power panties have melted right off.

I've never been kissed the way Dawson kisses me. Never, ever, ever.

DAWSON

I can kiss Callie forever. I can't believe this woman has been sitting at the desk twenty feet from mine all these years, and I haven't been kissing her like this. Such a missed opportunity.

Her fingers flutter along my neck, curl around my ears, and send shivers through my whole body.

She starts to work at the knot on my tie, and my pulse accelerates. I've kept my hand securely on her hip, but I move it lower now. She moans and breaks the kiss again to get a better breath.

I can admit I'm having a hard time breathing myself. I keep my head low as we breathe in together. She gets my tie undone and starts working on the buttons on my shirt. I'm very aware I'm standing in my office, the door open, and we've just been fighting about the future of our company.

I don't care what she says; she's as much of a part of this company as I am.

"You can't quit," I say.

"I take it back," she says, panting. She touches her mouth to mine again, her hands moving inside my shirt that's almost all the way undone now. It's not untucked, and I pull on it to get it out of my belt. Her hands are cool and as they kiss my skin, I only want more, more, more.

I growl somewhere in the back of my throat and press as close to her as I can. "Dawson," she gasps as I release her

mouth and touch my lips to her neck again. The woman has really fantastic curves and the softest skin known to man right along the top of her shoulder, where her body slants into her neck.

The bell on the front door chimes, and I freeze.

Callie instantly pushes against my chest. “It’s got to be your mother.”

My brain misfires. “Mother?”

“Button your shirt,” she hisses at me, and the world—the real world, not the fantasy land where I get to only touch and kiss Callie—comes back into view. Horror strikes me in the chest, and I quickly spin away from the door and tuck in my shirt in the same movement.

“I’ll go see who it is,” she says. Her heels click away professionally, and she actually brings my office door closed behind her as she says, “Oh, hello, Marla. What brings—?”

My brain is so addled, it takes me a moment to remember who Marla is. She’s the director of a long-term care facility where we design their pamphlets and marketing materials for their website. She’s one of our higher-maintenance clients.

I swear under my breath as I finish buttoning my shirt. Going all the way to the collar is hard, because I’m still so hot from making out with my secretary.

“Your partner,” I remind myself, re-knotting my tie. “Actually, she’s your girlfriend.” I turn back to the cupboard that will never just be a cupboard again and open it. A small mirror shows me that my face looks two shades too red.

I quickly run my hands down my beard, putting all the hairs back where they belong. The tie is a bit crooked, and I yank it into place. I take a deep breath and exhale it out. Close the cupboard. Return to my desk.

If Callie needs me, she’ll come get me. If not, I’m fine here. I wouldn’t go greet clients anyway.

She doesn’t come back in for a while, and when I realize I’m just staring at nothing on my computer screen, my cream

cheese Danish long gone, I finally get up and make my way to the door.

I open it, and say, “Callie?” but she’s gone. I approach her desk, searching for her purse. It’s also gone.

I see a note stuck to her monitor that says, *Marla Henderson wanted to take me out to talk about the next phase in the retirement community. I couldn’t get out of it. I’m soooo sorry. Be back by noon.*

My fingers ball up the note, and my irritation spikes. I really hate my scheduled Monday morning meeting getting disrupted. As I return to the office and look at that cupboard, I know what I’m really upset about is being interrupted while kissing Callie.

“SHE DIDN’T MAKE IT BACK BY NOON,” I TELL LANCE.

“Wow,” he says, his soda pop almost gone he’s been drinking so much while I talk. “And the kiss? It was good?”

“I told you what happened,” I say, even if he got the Cliff Notes version. Normally, I don’t kiss and tell, but since I haven’t dated in a decade, I figure I owe Lance something. “I’m not going into how I feel about it too.”

I signal to the waitress that I want another round of bottomless French fries. I lift my glass to let the waitress know I need a fresh drink too, though I’ve hardly consumed any of my soda pop.

“And you haven’t kissed her again,” he says, not framing it as a question.

“No.”

“In three days.”

“No,” I growl. “My mother is in town, and I had to attend some insane board meeting yesterday that went for four hours.” Things like that drive me bonkers, and when I’d returned to the office, Callie had not been happy.

“Why are you so unhappy about this?” he asks, reaching for one of my fries as the waitress sets the fresh basket on the table. “It’s not like the two of you have to go disclose to the human resources department.”

I dunk a couple of fries into Grub Pub’s signature sauce and stuff them in my mouth. After I finish them, I say, “She thinks I only offered her the partnership so she could run the company while I deal with Fowler International.”

Lance’s eyebrows rise. “And then you had a four-hour board meeting for Fowler International.”

I tap my finger in mid-air as if ringing a bell. “The thing is, I don’t even *want* Fowler. But I can’t stand the thought of it going to Augustus.”

“There’s no way you can tell your mom any of this.”

“Not a chance.”

Lance shakes his head, because he’s aware of my mother, having met her plenty of times to get a complete picture. “I’m sorry, bro. I wish I had an answer for you.” He lets an adequate amount of time to pass before he says, “Friday is the big day.”

I look up from the fried food. “You’re proposing *this* Friday?”

“I’ve had the ring for several days,” he says. “I’m not sure what I’m waiting for.”

“Women want you to do a whole production these days,” I say. “Did you hire a videographer?”

“Absolutely not.” Lance leans back in the booth and folds his arms. “I’m not doing that.”

I grin at him, because if there’s someone who hates social media more than I do, it’s him. I participate out of obligation to my business, but I can’t remember the last time I posted something personal. “What does Hadley say about that?”

“She doesn’t know it’s happening, so she doesn’t have anything to say.”

“Yeah, but you guys must’ve been talking about marriage,” I press. “She hasn’t given you any idea of what she’d like to have?”

“We looked at rings online,” he says. “That’s it. She mentioned she’d rather move into my place after we’re married.”

“So, what do you have planned?”

“Dinner and dancing.”

I roll my eyes. “Lance, that’s not very romantic.”

“I’m not going to change who I am just to get the woman to say yes.”

“I feel that on a soulular level,” I say, reaching out my knuckles for him to tap. He does, and we grin at each other.

“I can’t *believe* you have a girlfriend, and that it’s Callie,” he says again, bringing us back to the beginning of our night together. “Tell me how it happened again.”

“I’d rather not,” I say, because I haven’t told him the full story about how Mother’s mention that I be serious with a woman would influence her decision to pass Fowler International to me. “It’s a boring story, but we had a great first date.”

“Yeah?” he asks. “What did you do?”

“We made lemon meringue pie,” I say, my back twinging with pain at the reminder of my fall from that night.

“Oh, the pie you brought to me?” His eyes take on a sharp edge. The man is razor-smart, and I shouldn’t have mentioned the pie.

“Yes.” I reach for my refilled drink.

“That was like two weeks ago,” Lance says.

“So?” I ask.

“I guess I thought it was newer.” His phone rings, and I catch Hadley’s name on the screen. He scoops the phone right

up and silences it. “She knows I’m with you. I’ll call her back in a minute.”

“We’re done here,” I say. “Thanks for listening to me vent tonight.”

“I’ve got one more thing,” he says. “Henry hired a new assistant, and she is terrible. Like, a legit tornado around the office. Would you lend me Callie for an afternoon to train her up?”

CALLIE

“Do you realize this door’s lock is broken?” I ask, standing at Dawson’s back door. “Anyone could walk in here, day or night.” I look over to him and find him grinning.

“Yeah,” he says. “I busted it coming in from mowing the lawn last weekend. Maybe two weekends ago.” He starts to chuckle. “Maybe even three.”

I flip the useless lock, and the lever doesn’t come out. “And you sleep here?”

“Every night,” he says. “Like a baby.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Lila says, shuffling into the kitchen with her designer bag over her forearm. She’s wearing a pale pink pantsuit that looks like the upholstery my parents once had on their couch. “The man snores like a giant.”

“How do giants snore, Mother?” Dawson asks, finishing with the sandwiches. He slides the last one into the plastic zipper bag and faces his mom. “I made you a roast beef with avocado. Is that sufficient?”

“Did I get one of those little bags of chips?”

I feel like I’ve entered an alternate reality. Never in the real world would Lila Houser eat something as simple as sandwiches and chips.

“Barbecue or sour cream and onion?” Dawson lifts up both mini-bags of chips, and I want them both.

“Don’t you just have plain?” Lila peers into his pantry. “Yes, those.” She turns toward me while Dawson gets the chips she wants. She looks me down and up, something flickering in her expression. “Callie, dear, do you have any nail clippers here? Dawson’s are so...manly.”

I shoot him a glance, and he looks at me without raising his head from where he’s packing our lunches into a backpack. We’re going to Sullivan Island today, walking along the easy trail, and eating lunch together.

This past week in the office was hard in dozens of ways, and our evenings had been dominated by other activities. I feel disconnected from Dawson, despite our texting fests at night. I haven’t kissed him again, and I barely got a glimpse of those abs.

Today, he’s wearing a lightweight pair of shorts, and a shirt that looks like it repels water. It’s one of those running things to wick away the moisture from his skin, and it actually looks like a second skin it’s so tight. He’s got trail runners on his feet, and I glance down at my regular tennis shoes, wondering what Lila thinks of those.

“She doesn’t have nail clippers here,” Dawson says, swooping in to save me. “We don’t live that far apart, Mother.”

“She has a toothbrush here.”

“Without a head,” he says.

“I’ve noticed she doesn’t have anything else here,” Lila says, and my throat turns to sand. “She must not come here all that often at all.”

“I don’t,” I say, stepping all the way into the house. I’d been admiring his back yard, because he’d texted me last night to say he liked to spend time back there, and the pride he had for the yard had come through in the messages.

“Have you seen this door? The *lock* is *broken*. A serial killer could literally walk in at any moment.”

Lila frowns, and Dawson says, “I’ll fix it tonight.”

“I could fix it in ten minutes,” I say. “All you have to do is take the deadbolt out and figure out what’s making it stick.”

Dawson looks up from the backpack of supplies he’s bringing. I told him I’d only go if he brought everything we needed and carried it the whole time. When his mom had asked what his weekend plans were, his guilt had kicked in, and he’d told her.

She claimed to have “outdoor clothes,” and I scan her pale pink outfit from the shoulder pads to the ankle cuffs. At least the trail is flat.

“*You* could fix my deadbolt?” he asks, putting one hand on the counter next to him and leaning into it.

“Of course,” I say, lifting my chin. “I take good care of my own house, I’ll have you know.”

“Where will you two live once you get married?” Lila asks.

I choke, and Dawson turns a shade of white no human ever should. The doorbell rings, and I lock eyes with Dawson. “I’ll get it,” I say, practically jogging past Lila.

“It’s *my* house,” Dawson says, stepping in front of me and nearly knocking me down.

“It’s probably my Carry driver,” I say. “Remember I said I forgot my purse in his car?”

“He could’ve put a bomb in it,” Dawson says. “I’ll need to inspect it.” He has much longer legs than I do, and he knows the layout of his furniture better than I do, so he reaches the door first.

Sure enough, the man standing on the front stoop is Bentley, and he’s holding my black purse. “Thank you so much,” I gush at him, muscling my way past Dawson to take the bag. “I’m so sorry you had to come all the way back here.”

Bentley looks from me to Dawson and back. “It’s no problem, ma’am,” he says, and that’s quite the change from the flirting he did in the car on the way here. At least he thinks Dawson and I are together.

That's because you are together, I tell myself. I smile at him and back up. Dawson pushes the door closed with a couple of fingers, but he doesn't back up.

I don't turn, and I don't move. I simply breathe in the cottony scent of his shirt, and the lingering smell of lemon from the housekeepers. The warmth of his body seeps into mine, and his hand lands on my hip.

"I wish my mother hadn't packed her outdoor clothes."

I start to giggle. "I think she might need to look in the dictionary for a new definition of such things."

"I like your shorts," he says, his mouth dropping to touch my neck. My heartbeat accelerates, and I can't actually remember what my shorts look like. "They're very outdoorsy."

I look down as he runs his fingers through my ponytail. "Oh, these. I bought these this morning at the outdoor outfitters."

"This morning?"

"They open quite early," I say, admiring the dark green fabric. It clings to my legs and it too should wick the moisture away from my skin. I'm hoping not to sweat too terribly today, but if I do, I certainly don't want it to stain my shorts in unsightly places.

"And this tank top?"

I look at the bright white tank top with neon yellow, pink, and orange mountain shapes across the front of it. "Oh, I owned this," I say, finally turning into him. I may have only worn it to clean out my garage, but at least I didn't buy it specifically for this island trail walk.

He actually steps closer to me, and he doesn't say anything or waste another moment. He simply slides his hand up my arm to my face, his strong, slender fingers curling around the back of my neck at the same time his mouth touches mine.

This time, the same electricity and heat buzz between us, but the movement isn't nearly as rushed or frantic. It's like he's taking his time to really experience me this time, and I'm

sure glad for that. Kissing Dawson has as many sides as the man himself, and I can't wait to experience them all.

"Dawson, darling," Lila says. "I put a piece of bread in the toaster, and now it's smoking."

Dawson pulls away and turns toward his mother in the same movement. "Smoking?" he says, and I lean against his front door, my body warm and soft like it's turned to a bag of marshmallows someone left out in the sun.

I watch Lila's disapproval roll across her face, the emotion melting into a smile as her son approaches. "I'm sorry, darling. Your toaster isn't the same as mine."

I don't believe for a moment that she doesn't know how to use a toaster. They're all the same. Slots. Lever. Wait for it to pop up.

As soon as Dawson passes her, her gaze switches back to mine. Now it holds a predatory edge, and I'm fairly certain she jammed a fork into the toaster to make it malfunction.

She turns away and follows her son back into the kitchen, and I sigh. I'm suddenly tired and just want to go home. I don't get much time off, and I interrupted my Saturday schedule to go to the outdoor outfitters to get a pair of shorts for a mock hiking date with my boyfriend...and his mother.

I just want to grab a Carry and go to the office. Water the plants. Pick up pens. Switch out Dawson's clothes. I wonder if he even knows what I do behind the scenes, and a sense of melancholy descends upon me.

Somewhere in the kitchen, my phone rings. I move in that direction as Dawson calls, "Cal, your phone is ringing."

"Who is it?" I ask.

"Tara."

"Answer, would you, please?" I make it into the kitchen, which is one-hundred percent smoke-free. Lila sits at the dining room table by the door-that-doesn't-lock, eating a piece of toast with plenty of orange marmalade on it.

Dawson says, “Yes, just a moment, please. Let me transfer you,” in a voice that sounds very much like he’s mocking me.

I grin at him and shake my head. “How did you answer that?”

“Callie’s phone,” he says, passing me the device.

“Hey, Tara,” I say. “What’s up?”

“You will not *believe* this new guy at work,” she says, bypassing the hellos and going straight to the story. “He’s a genius with dicing and slicing, and even I can’t cook a scallop as well as he can.” She’s whispering by the end of the sentence, and I turn my back on Dawson and his mother as they start to talk about something.

With Tara speed-talking in whispers, I’m going to need all of my wits about me. “I thought you liked him.”

“I like what he can do in the kitchen,” Tara says. “And no jokes about that. His cooking skills, but my word, his tact is at zero. Maybe below zero. His Southern charm? Non-existent. And he can put out amazing food on clean plates, but his station looks like someone dropped a watermelon from fifty feet up, then walked away.”

“Like a crime scene,” I say.

“Exactly!” Tara exhales heavily. “It’s ridiculous. When I said something to him about it, he literally glared at me. A legit glare, Callie. As if I—as his boss—have no right to ask him to do anything different than he already does. It’s ridiculous.”

“So fire him.”

“I can’t,” Tara says. “Number one, I’m terrible at firing people. Number two, he’s a better chef than I am.”

“And he’s hot,” I supply, because she did send me a picture of the man when she hired him a few days ago.

“Oh, he is *not* that hot in person,” Tara says, but her voice is a bit false. “His personality ruins all the symmetry in his face.”

“You and the stupid symmetrical face thing,” I tease.

“Anyway.” She sighs. “Where are you? Do you want to go to Stress Breakfast with me?”

“I would actually love to,” I say, twisting back toward the kitchen. Neither Dawson nor Lila are there, toe-tapping as they wait for me. “Dawson had the bright idea to go to Sullivan Island this morning. He’s packing a lunch as we speak.” I too lower my voice. “I’m at his house, and his mother is coming. She’s wearing a pale pink suit made of the thickest fabric I’ve ever seen. She’s going to *melt* out there.”

I giggle, and guilt cuts the sound short. “She doesn’t like me much.”

“Of course she does,” Tara says. “Everyone loves you, and you love everyone.”

I sigh, because normally, she’s right. “She literally just faked a toaster fire in the kitchen to interrupt me and Dawson.” I glance over my shoulder; still no one there. “I think she knows we aren’t really together.”

“But you are dating,” she says. “Right?”

“Right.”

“Try to get me a picture of the pink suit.”

“Oh, that’s happening.” I turn, my mind spinning for how I can make that happen. “Watch for it.” I end the call and go into the kitchen. “All right. How close are we to leaving?”

“Are you eating breakfast?” Dawson asks. “It’s hot out there today, sweetie. You should eat something.” He stands up and approaches.

“Wait, wait,” I say. “This is the perfect photo op. You go stand by your mother.” I shoo him back as Lila stands. She steadies herself against the chair for an extra moment, and then she leans into Dawson as he puts his arm around her.

“Smile,” I say. “Oh, yes, this is perfect.” The pink suit makes Dawson’s skin look orange, but I’m not editing that out. Tara deserves to see the catastrophe that this super-rich, super-fancy woman is going to wear out in public.

My mom taught me that it takes all types to make the world turn round, and Lila Houser is the perfect example of that.

She was so nice to me in the beginning, but I don't think Dawson and I are fooling her very well anymore. Which is strange, because my romantic feelings for him grow stronger every day.

The truth is, our relationship is new, and she's expecting it to be close-to-marriage. There's definitely a difference there, and I make a mental note to tell Dawson we should just come clean about where we are on the romantic scale.

Then I'm disgusted with myself for even thinking the words "romantic scale."

"Done?" Dawson asks, and I pull myself out of my own head and lower my phone.

"Yep," I say. "Got it. Are we ready to go?"

"I really think you should eat, sweetie," he says. "You don't want to get out in the sun and heat on an empty stomach."

"I don't know if I can eat much," I say, glancing to Lila before Dawson blocks her as he approaches. He runs his hands up both of my arms, causing goosebumps to erupt along my skin. "The smoke smell in here has killed my appetite."

Dawson grins and shakes his head. "You're impossible," he whispers.

"I remember what happened last time you said that."

"Mm, me too." He kisses me chastely on the forehead and reaches for his backpack. "All right, Mother. Callie's just going to bring a protein shake with us. Let's hit the road." He looks at me meaningfully, and I dutifully step over to the fridge and get out a protein shake.

I've never liked them, but that's irrelevant at this point. Lila approaches, and we have a silent battle of wills. "How was your toast?" I ask in the sweetest voice I can muster at the moment.

“Delicious,” she says. “I spent far too long monitoring what I eat. A bit of advice for you, dear. Skip the protein shakes and go for the butter.” She seems perfectly pleasant now, and I wonder how she flips from naughty to nice so quickly.

“Oh, Lila,” I say with a smile that feels mostly genuine on my face. “Do I look like the type of woman who’s ever said no to butter?”

DAWSON

I poke through the files on my computer, looking for the one Callie needs. She keeps talking, which is normal for us and our Monday morning meetings. Finally, we've managed to have one during our regularly scheduled time, and I feel like my life might get back to routined and orderly.

Of course it will. Mother will leave after the Founder's Gala, which is this Friday night.

Five more days, I think just as I locate the file. "It's right here," I say, interrupting Callie. I double-click to open the file and turn my monitor so she can see it. "See? Linus did send over the sketches. And I did forward them to Bower that same day."

Callie frowns at the screen and then looks down at her clipboard. "Okay, I'll let him know. He's not going to be happy to have lost the time."

"There's no lost time," I say. "And I can call him. Or I'll resend them right now on the same email." That way, he'll see that I did send them, and he simply missed the email.

"Tons of companies take weeks to get back to us on prelims," I add. "There's no lost time."

"He wants the campaign to launch before the new fiscal year rolls over," she says.

"Then he'll have to approve some things quickly," I say, adding, "It's been six days," when I see that I sent along the

digital sketches last Tuesday. “I’m sending them again now, and I’ll call over there when we’re finished.”

I do that while she moves on to the next topic. I like the normalcy of this meeting. It is dragging on a little, mostly because we haven’t had our usual business chats for a few weeks, and there’s a lot to catch up on.

I’m glad there’s no tension between us because we’ve been kissing. I like the idea of pressing her against that cupboard along my back wall and kissing her before the meeting ends. I can’t wait to see what her dress looks like for the gala.

She couldn’t get together yesterday, because she and Tara had gone shopping for “something appropriate for a gala,” whatever that means. I’ve seen plenty of Callie’s clothes and any of them would work for the gala.

When I’d said that, she’d just laughed and kissed me quickly. “The very word *gala* suggests I need sequins,” she’d said, and I didn’t know how to argue with that.

We haven’t talked about my partnership offer again, not on the clock or off of it. I think she’s waiting to see what will happen at the gala, which I suppose I can’t blame her for doing. She’s smart and savvy, and she deserves the partnership. I can see why she doesn’t want the whole firm, though. We can barely keep up with the workload when we’re both putting in full-time hours.

I hate the way my future rocks as a boat on angry water. I wish I had more answers right now, so Callie could make a plan for us. She’s so very good at plans.

“All right,” I say after she asks all her questions about the updates the website needs. She handles that too, and while she once said I don’t realize how much I do because it’s so easy for me, I hope she realizes the same holds true for her.

“I have one more thing,” I say, shifting some papers on my desk. “It’s a personal favor, but Lance said he’ll pay you.”

“Oh, boy,” Callie says, crossing her legs and setting her clipboard on the edge of my desk. She’s clipped back the sides of her hair this morning, and she looks good enough to eat.

Her makeup isn't overpowering, as usual, and she's wearing one of my favorite colors—blue. The solid blouse makes her eyes shine and her hair take on more blonde hues. I feel like I can almost see through it, but when I look hard enough to know, I can't.

I clear my throat and clear my mind of the fantastical thoughts brewing there. “His partner just hired a new assistant for the agency. Lance says she's terrible, and he wants to hire you to come do some quote—training seminars—unquote. To you know, teach her how to be as awesome as you.”

“Training seminars?”

“You know, on office organization. Filing. Even simple stuff like answering the phone. He said he walked by her desk on Friday, and when she picked up the phone, she gave the wrong business name.”

Callie looks at me with shrewdness in her eyes. “There are some things you can't teach,” she says.

“What would you do if you didn't know the name of the real estate agency where you worked?”

“I'd learn it,” she says, rolling her eyes. “And if I'm too... not smart enough to remember it, I'd write it on a sticky note and tape it to the desk in front of the phone.”

I gesture toward her and up to the ceiling. “There you go. You have a solution I would've never thought of.” I grin at her. “I'm with you. When he told me that, I was like, why doesn't she just learn it?”

Callie reaches for her clipboard. “I don't see how I'll have time to do that, Dawson. I work here during the day. Are they going to make their assistants work evenings?”

“There's a lot of evening work in real estate,” I say. “Lance works all kinds of crazy hours.”

“Right, but he's the owner of the agency. Of course *he's* going to do that. His assistant doesn't.”

“I think they do a lot of weekend work,” I say. “Open houses and whatnot. I know Lance doesn't do those anymore.”

His assistants do.”

Callie nods, pressing the clipboard against her chest. “So he’ll pay me.”

“And it’s fine if you go during work hours here,” I say, clearing my throat. “As a partner, you don’t need my permission to leave the office when you have something else to do. I know you’ll get your work done here.”

Her eyebrows go up, but at least she doesn’t snap back at me. I study her for a moment and then drop my gaze to the desktop. “Have you even looked at the packet I gave you last week?”

“Yes,” she says quietly.

I lift my gaze back to meet hers. “And?”

She glances away, her frustration so evident in those pretty eyes. “And I don’t know, Dawson.”

“Tell me what you don’t know.”

“I don’t know,” she repeats with a sigh. “You do all the financial work, so I don’t know what you can afford to pay me. Then I feel like a schmuck for thinking I should name a really high salary, because what if you can’t afford it? Then I just look like a gold-digger and like I’ll only stay for the money. Then I think, well, money’s important, and he did use the word ‘partner,’ which carries a higher salary automatically.”

When she starts talking in circles like this, I usually just let her do it. Sometimes she just needs to get it all out. The fact that I know that about her makes me smile, and she cocks her head to the side. “What?”

“Nothing,” I say, straightening my lips. “Go on.”

She considers me for an extra moment—long enough to make me reach up and adjust my tie to make sure it’s straight. I run my fingers through my hair, and Callie tracks that movement too. “What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she says. “I really don’t want you to make me partner and then abandon everything we’ve built here.”

“I don’t want to do that either,” I say, glad this conversation is more civil than our previous one. Although, the heated kiss that followed...I could stand to do that again.

“Has your mother said *anything*?” she asks, the level of desperation in her voice off the charts.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t think we’ll know anything until the gala.”

She hisses a sigh through her teeth. “All right, well. I can’t make a decision until I know what’s going to happen with you. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine,” I say, though it’s not really. I feel like I’m casting my fishing line out into shark-infested waters, willingly pulling in the beast that will snap off my arm.

“Tell me the truth,” she says quietly. “Do you want Fowler International or Dawson Dials In?”

I hesitate, because that’s a loaded question without an easy answer. I think of all the work I’ve done right here in this small retail space in this old, historic home near the waterfront, dozens of restaurants, and Rainbow Row, where all the historic rowhouses are. I love it here, and I’ve always loved it here.

“I don’t know,” I finally say.

Callie gets to her feet and lets the clipboard drop to her side. “I think we feel the same way, Dawson. I think we just have to wait and see.”

I stand too and start around the desk. “I hate waiting and seeing.”

She smiles at me, a half-playful smile and a half-understanding smile. “I know you do.” She slides one hand up my chest as I invade her personal space.

“Dinner tonight?” I ask, my voice low as I dip it closer to her ear. I can’t believe the way she makes me feel. I thought I’d sewn all these soft emotions into a pouch, swallowed it, and then buried it deep enough to never see it again.

But she makes me want to shower twice in one day, get all dressed up, cologned and picture-perfect, just to see her again tonight. She makes me want to be strong and sure. She makes me want to be a better man, and I suppose she always has.

She's stood up to me when others haven't. She's worked just as hard as me on this business, something I didn't think anyone could do. She's forgiven me more times than I can count.

I've been in love before, and the soft, swirly feelings I have as I breathe in the scent of Callie's honeyed hair and powdery, floral skin feel a lot like that. My heart pounds in my chest, and I pause to experience the feel of the curve of her hip in my palm, the heat of her body as it mingles with mine, and the slow way she inhales with me on my next breath.

"I don't think I can tonight," she says. "I've got a family thing at my parents' house." She tips her head back and looks at me. "Unless you want to come...?"

Surprise darts through me, but I nod anyway. "Yeah, I could come."

A slow smile fills her face. "Okay," she says. "You can come pick me up at six-thirty."

"What time are we supposed to be there?"

"Seven," she says. "They live less than a mile from me." Her grin takes on more meaning, and she tips up onto her toes to kiss me. Oh, I like the way she initiates the intimacy, and the way she threads her fingers through my hair as she does.

The office phone rings, interrupting us, and I sigh when she pulls away. "Let the machine get it," I say, putting both hands on her waist and keeping her close. "I hate that we're interrupted all the time by some phone or device or stupid bell ringing."

"It's an office," she whispers, pressing her cheek to my heartbeat and starting to sway. This woman has me doing things I thought I'd never do again. Like dancing. Or even kissing.

I smile and close my eyes, wanting to experience this moment with multiple senses.

Callie stays for a few seconds—long enough for the phone to stop ringing—and then steps back. “Come at six-thirty, and we’ll silence our phones.” She walks backward, her eyes wide and sparkling with desire. “No interruptions.”

Every cell in my body heats up. “All right,” I say, the words scratching through my throat.

“All right,” she drawls back to me, and when the phone starts ringing again, she giggles, turns, and hurries to her desk to answer it.

CALLIE

“**M**m, we should go,” I whisper, my hands bumping down the ridges of Dawson’s abs. He’s still fully clothed, as am I, because let’s face it. We’ve been fake-dating for five days, then real dating for seven, and he’s my boss.

I’m not going to advance things too fast, that’s for sure. I never do, because I know I’m easy to talk to and moderately pretty. A lot of men feel comfortable around me. That doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep with them after a few dates and some amazing kissing.

Oh, how I love kissing. I think it’s better than the actual act, but I’ve never told anyone that.

“We’re fine,” Dawson says, moving his mouth back to mine. I knew the man was powerful behind a marketing presentation. The power suits around the office back up his claim to have out-of-the-box ideas and solutions for any advertising need—a slogan we came up with for the firm together.

He’s got big hands that know exactly where to touch a woman, and lips made of honey and sweet tea that I can’t get enough of.

I just didn’t know he had a heart to match all of the other strong things about him. One could call his personality abrasive, and that’s certainly a facet of him I’ve seen loads of times. But he has so many other surfaces too; some of them just haven’t been shined up yet.

“I mean it,” I say, breaking the amazing kiss and pressing one hand against his chest, almost at his throat. “My sister will be there already, and she’ll want to know why we’re late.”

“Guess I better wash off this lipstick then,” he says, not backing up a single inch. “You’re just so...tasty.”

I giggle at the same time I roll my eyes. “Ew. No woman wants to be described as tasty.”

“Mm.” He kisses me again, though I have to be cutting off his airway for how hard I’m pushing against his windpipe. Sure enough, the kiss doesn’t last long, and he steps back with a sigh. “All right,” he says. “Next time I’m coming at six, though.”

“I barely got home by six,” I say, reaching up to run my hands through my hair. I hadn’t had time to shower, but I work in an air conditioned office and get transported by air conditioned vehicles.

I’d swiped on some new deodorant after I’d shed my office clothes. Now, I wear a pair of skinny jeans that make my legs look amazing, if I do say so myself. When I add the ankle boots, the muscles in my calves will be even more defined.

I’ve paired the jeans with a bright red tank top with tons of tiny black flowers on it. Some of them are shaped like Mickey Mouse’s head, and the last time I wore this blouse, my dad kept commenting on it. “I can’t tell if it’s flowers or Mickey,” he’d said at least four times.

Dawson had touched the top while still standing on my porch. “You look amazing,” he’d said. Moments later, I’d fisted my fingers in the collar of his polo and pulled him into the house for a kiss.

“Holy swamps,” I say, jumping to my feet. “It’s seven already.” I glance around, my mind still on the amazing make-out session that had somehow moved to my couch. “Do you see my phone?”

Dawson looks around too. “No...”

It rings, and I dart into the kitchen after it. “It’s Ariel,” I call to him. I hate this part. I don’t want to lie to her, but I

can't really say what I was doing. I swipe on the call. "Hey," I say with plenty of breath in my voice. "I can't find my shoes, but I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Okay," she says, obviously not upset. "Do you need a ride?"

"No," I say, frowning as I return to the living room. Dawson holds up my ankle boots, and I give him a grateful smile. "Didn't Mom tell you? Dawson's coming with me."

"Dawson?" Ariel asks. "Why?"

"Because we're dating," I say, taking the shoes from him. I sigh as I collapse back onto the couch. "I wanted him to meet y'all."

Ariel says nothing, and that's not a good sign. "I'll be there in ten minutes," I say. "I have to go let Claude out."

I hang up and toss the phone on the couch. "Could you let Claude out?" I ask Dawson.

"On it, peaches," he says, and I smile at my shoe as I pull it on my foot. Finally dressed all the way, I hurry into the guest bathroom to check my hair and makeup. Not too bad. I quickly arrange the strands of hair he dislodged back into place and press my lips together.

I wasn't wearing lipstick when he arrived. Number one, I hate the stuff. Number two, I'd asked him to come early and insinuated we could pass the extra time by kissing, so I wasn't going to make it harder for us to cover that up.

"Cal?" he calls, and I cut the lights and rejoin him in the living room. "He's been out and he's back in."

I reach out and tuck his collar down the right way. I brush my hands along those delicious shoulders and look into his eyes. "Ready?"

"Let's do this," he says as if we're going into a battle we might not come out of alive.

I grin and take his hand. He's a proper Southern gentleman who opens my door for me, follows my directions to my

parents' house, and then runs around to get my door for me again.

I like being taken care of, I can admit that. Dawson is very good at taking care of things, and I'm realizing he's also very good at extending that care to people.

"You've told me nothing about them," he says, a dose of panic in his voice as we approach the steps.

"That's because I don't want to color your opinions." Before my foot even touches the first step, the front door of the house opens, and Ariel steps out.

"I didn't know we could bring dates to family night," she says, folding her arms.

"Oh, come on," I say, releasing Dawson's hand and flying up the steps. I smile at her. "You've brought so many men to family night I've lost count."

"So have you," she grumbles.

I laugh as I take her into a hug. "That's not true. I've brought two or three men before."

"He's the best-looking," Ariel says right out loud.

I pull out of the hug, shocked. "Ariel." A quick glance to Dawson shows him smiling. He reaches the top of the step and then for my hand. "This is Dawson Houser."

"Wait, wait." Ariel holds up one hand, her light eyes widening with plenty of surprise. "Dawson Houser? *The Dawson Houser?*"

"I don't think anyone's ever put a *thee* in front of my name," he says, his voice guarded. The smile has vanished from his face, and all of his defenses are up. I can feel them marching around him, creating a protective barrier.

"Ariel," I say again, all three syllables laced with warning. "Whatever you're about to say, don't." *Please*, I think.

Of course she knows who Dawson Houser is. I've worked with the man—beast. Man-beast—for five years. I've shared

quite a few stories about his...escapades with my family on nights just like these.

“We’re seeing each other,” I say into the silence. “It’s pretty new, and I don’t need you ruining it with your mouth.”

Ariel moves her gaze from Dawson’s face to mine. She snaps her mouth shut and turns to go into the house. I sigh as the screen door slams behind her, flinching with the noise as well as the punctuation mark it put on the conversation.

“Sorry,” I say.

“What was that?” he whispers. “Is that going to be repeated twice more when I meet your parents?”

I step in front of him, needing to come clean. If not, the guilt will eat me alive by morning, and I can’t lock it out the way I can a serial killer. “Okay, listen.” I reach up and fiddle with his collar again, wishing he had a tie on so I could straighten it. “You know how we’ve worked together for a while?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know how you’re kind of...grumpy? I may have told them a few stories about you, that’s all.”

He looks like I’ve hit him with a frying pan. That melts quickly from his face, and he shakes his shoulders like he’s shedding one skin and growing another. “Fair enough,” he says.

“I just didn’t know you had other personalities,” I say. “For a while there, it was just Mister Grumps-Alot, or Mister Shout-It-Out, or Mister Slammy.”

He stares at me, and I can’t tell if he’s confused or dumbfounded. “Slammy?”

I shift my cute ankle boots along the porch and drop my gaze to study them. “Uh, you went through a phase a year or two ago where you slammed every door you touched.”

Dawson puts one hand gently on the side of my face and lifts my chin to look at him again. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “I bet I can guess when that was.”

“April,” we say together.

“I was supposed to marry Kim in April,” he says quietly. “It’s not a great month for me, even now.”

I nod, because there’s so much about him I didn’t know. There’s still a lot more to learn, but at least I know it’s worth pursuing now. “I’m sorry. I didn’t say anything out of spite or anything too mean. I was just...venting off steam after some hard days at work.”

“Yeah, days *I* made hard for you.”

“I didn’t quit,” I say.

“Yet,” he adds, looking away.

“Hey.” I guide his face back to mine and touch my forehead to his. “People are people. There’s a lot of layers to get through.”

“People change,” he whispers.

“Yes, they do.” I smile at him and touch my mouth to his quickly. “It’s going to be fine. Come on. It’s dinner and cards. Can’t be as hard as that hike through hundred-degree heat we did on Saturday.”

His mask breaks, and he smiles. “It wasn’t that hot.”

“Your mother almost passed out.”

“Her outdoor clothes weren’t so outdoorsy.” We laugh together, and I lace my arm through his.

“Okay,” I say, opening the screen door and letting him hold it. “Now, my mother is quite a bit different than yours.”

She appears at the end of the hall that leads back into the kitchen and living room, and her hair isn’t the neon violet it was a couple of weeks ago. Now, it spikes up in black, with a definite blue-purple hue if the light touches it just right.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, stepping in front of Dawson. I grin at her and hug her tight. We face my boyfriend together. “This is Dawson Houser, my boyfriend and my boss. My boyfriend-boss.”

He chuckles and shakes his head before meeting my mother's eye. "It's so nice to meet you, ma'am. I see where Callie gets her energy from."

"Do you?" I ask at the same time Mom does. She adds, "Because I feel like I could use a nap, and I just took one." She does smile at Dawson, and he asks about the painting hanging in the hallway where we stand.

"Oh, Mom did that," I say. "She's an artist."

"Is that so?" he asks, admiring the abstract painting made of all straight lines. It reminds me of a big city, with a lot of tall buildings, all of them shooting straight up into the sky, piercing it and draining the life from it.

"I had to do something to keep from killing these girls growing up," she quips.

"Mom," I say, mildly horrified. "Come on. I was the best teenager a mother could ask for." I grin at her and then Dawson. "I only snuck out the one time. Fine, maybe two times."

"I almost chained this one to her bed," Mom says. "Two times, my left eye." She smiles at me and says, "Come on. Daddy's on the back porch with the big green egg."

"He better have brisket in that thing," I say. "And he better have been smoking it since breakfast." I follow her into the kitchen, and the house really opens up back here. Light pours in the south-facing windows and fills the screened-in porch where Mom hosts her bunco nights.

The same table is set up tonight, and three decks of cards and the huge bowl of poker chips sits there. "Twenty-one tonight?" I ask.

"Whatever you want," Mom says. "Earnest, they're here." After calling to Dad, she turns back to Dawson, who's just slipped one hand along my hip to my waist. She says something, but I don't compute, because he's leaned down and is asking, "What's her name? You didn't tell me her name."

Dad enters the screened-in area, all grins. Of course. Dad never lets his bad mood show, even if he has one. "Well, well,"

he says. “It’s been a while since Callie brought someone home.”

“Okay, Dad,” I say, even if he is right.

“She dates a lot, but it’s usually not this serious.”

“O-*kay*, Dad.” I glance at Dawson, realizing what a horrible idea this was. I’d wanted to see him tonight, though. “This is Dawson Houser. Dawson, my father, Earnest. My mother is Erin.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Dawson says. He steps over to Dad to shake his hand, and the two of them seamlessly flow right on out of the screened-in porch as he continues with, “I’d *love* to hear more about Callie’s other boyfriends. She hasn’t told me hardly anything.”

“You have got to be kidding,” I call after the pair of them. My heart does a wild dance in my chest, but I don’t follow. What would be the point? Daddy’s gonna say what he wants, and Dawson’s, well, Dawson.

“He’s much nicer than you led me to believe,” Mom says.

“Yes, well, most men are when they’re trying to impress someone,” I say, which isn’t entirely fair. I don’t qualify what I’ve said, though, and I don’t add anything to it.

Ariel comes out into the porch carrying a huge bowl of pasta salad, and everything female inside me sighs. “Oh, bless you,” I say. Bringing him here is more stressful than I thought, and I could eat that whole bowl if given enough time and a big enough spoon.

“So you and your boss, huh?” Ariel puts the bowl down. “Come help me bring out the rest of the stuff.”

I follow her back into the house, where she hands me a stack of plates piled with silverware. “Who are you seeing now?” I ask, because I don’t really want to talk about me.

“I just broke up with Nate.”

I notice that she says she broke up with him, when I know he ended things with her. “Okay,” I say, not quite getting it. “You always have someone waiting in the wings.”

“I do not.” Ariel throws me a death glare and grabs the cookie sheet holding all the condiment bottles and stomps out of the kitchen.

I sigh and wipe my hand down my face. “What am I doing here?” The night has just begun too. I’ve put up with more awkward situations than this, and I should’ve known bringing home a boyfriend when Ariel didn’t have one was a bad idea. If she was still with Nate, it wouldn’t be an issue at all.

I pick up the cornbread sitting on the stovetop and take it outside just as Dawson jogs back into the screened-in porch. “Good news,” he says, smiling at me. “Lance finally proposed to Hadley, and she said yes.”

I set down the cornbread, my smile instant. “Oh, that’s great. Good for him.” I accept Dawson’s hug, because I know the engagement of his best friend is hard for him. He’s happy for Lance, of course, but it’s still hard for him, because things are going to change.

“Yeah,” he whispers into my neck, his grip on my body so tight. “Good for him.”

DAWSON

I look from my best friend's glowing, grinning face to his new fiancée's. "It's just so great," I say, everything about me just right. I've just eaten dinner with them, the way the three of us used to before Hadley wore Lance's ring, listening to their engagement story.

I've never seen Hadley so animated, truth be told. Maybe they really will make it.

In that moment, I realize how jaded I am. Lance and Hadley have been together for a couple of years now. Years. He didn't rush into anything, and neither did she. *Of course* they're going to "make it." What does that even mean, anyway?

"It's too bad Callie couldn't make it," Hadley says, reaching for her water. I've never seen her drink anything but water, and I wonder how she and Lance celebrated a few nights ago when he finally popped the question. There'd been no mention of that during the story.

It was all about the food for Lance, as he'd reserved a table at Heath, one of the most exclusive restaurants in the Charleston area. They'd eaten on the patio, because the gardens surrounding the restaurant are gorgeous, with fireflies and the scent of honeysuckle in the air. Not only that, but the farm-to-table restaurant actually grew a lot of what people ate right there on the property.

Yes, if you wanted to impress Lance, start with the food. I suppose most men are that way.

For Hadley, she'd come alive during the part of the story where Lance had taken her onto the dance floor. I'd seriously thought his idea for dinner and dancing wouldn't work, but Hadley said it was the most romantic thing in the world to have him down on one knee, that ring box popped open, a spotlight shining on him, and all the fireflies out in the darkness beyond.

I can still hear her blissful sigh after she'd said, "Of course I said yes."

I look from her back to Lance. "Yes," I say, getting back to the conversation about Callie not being able to come tonight. "It's too bad." I reach for my drink but find it empty. I'm not drinking tonight, as I drove, but I find I really want to stop by the bar before I go home.

"Why couldn't she make it again?" Lance asks.

I clear my throat, wishing my conscience would ease just as easily. "Mother asked her to do a few things for tomorrow's gala." I practically mumble the words, and I glance around the place we've come tonight. It's Thursday, but plenty busy, and I reach back for my wallet. "Come on," I say. "We're taking up a table."

"Wait," Hadley says. "You're out with us." She speaks slowly, deliberately, her voice shocked. "While your girlfriend works on something for your Mother, for a gala for which she is not affiliated."

I glare at her and then work on pulling out my credit card. "Callie gets paid."

"By you," Lance says, piling on me.

I look at him, a bit stunned. And so it begins. He's been with Hadley for a while, but I still felt like he chose me over her sometimes. Now that they're engaged, and definitely when they get married, he won't do that.

"No," I clip out, though I did offer to pay her. "They were things she's very good at." Like that matters. I should be at the Rosewood Center with her, and I know it. "You know, details and organizational crap."

“I hope you’re going over there right now,” Hadley said, sliding out of the booth and standing. “I’d be livid if my boyfriend’s mother gave me a job to do and that was why I couldn’t go to dinner with him and his best friends.” She pierces me with a look and turns away. “I’m going to use the ladies’ room.”

She walks away just as the waitress arrives. “You guys finished here?”

I thrust my credit card at her with a growled, “Yes, and in a hurry to leave.”

She acts like my beastly nature doesn’t bother her, takes my card, and says, “Be right back, gentlemen.” She’s got eyes for Lance, and he doesn’t even see it. I do though, and all it does is annoy me further.

“I didn’t make Callie go do those things for my mom,” I tell him.

“Yeah, I know,” he says, hooking his thumb in the direction Hadley’s gone. “You think she’s happy, right?”

I blink, not sure what he means by that question. “Yes,” I say firmly. “She’s happier than I’ve ever seen her before.” That honestly wouldn’t be that hard, because Hadley’s never liked me that much. Of course, I’m not that nice, and she’s said a few times that if she doesn’t have to date me, she’s fine.

Lance nods, but there’s something uneasy in his eyes. “So, the gala. Are you guys ready for that?”

“Apparently,” I say. “We will be after tonight.” Do I really need to go over to the center? “Let me call Callie real quick. Maybe I do need to stop by Rosewood and see if they need any help.”

I dial her, and the line starts to ring. And ring. And ring. She finally says, “Hi, Dawson, I just need four seconds to pay my Carry and get out.”

“Oh, you’re home,” I say, relieved. There couldn’t have been that much to do if she’s done and home already. It’s barely eight o’clock. She sounds upbeat too, and my pulse relaxes slightly.

“Yes,” she says. “Thank you.” A loud beep fills the air, and that must be her confirmation of payment for her ride. A door slams, and she says, “I’m so glad you called. Since I didn’t know I’d be working this late, I didn’t leave any lights on in my house.”

“It’s eight-ten,” I say, chuckling. “It’s still light out.”

“It can be very dark inside,” she says. “So I’m just going to keep you on the line, and you’re going to make sure I don’t die.”

“You lock your house to the gills every time you leave it.” I lean back in the booth, grinning. “But okay. Where are you now?”

“Going up my front steps. I see Claude in the window, so the killer didn’t get him.”

“Yes, that’s encouraging,” I say. “However, I don’t see how a ten-pound cat—a declawed cat—would pose any threat to a man with a knife or a gun.”

She sucks in a breath through her teeth. “I’ll have you know that Claude is at least fifteen pounds. I hear about it every time I take that fluffball to the vet. ‘He’s overweight, Callie. Is he getting enough exercise?’” She scoffs and adds, “I’m putting the key in the lock.”

“How do you exercise a cat?” I ask. “Do you have a little leash for him?”

“That’s what I say,” she says. “How can I make him do anything he doesn’t want to do? He’s a *cat*.”

“Hey, I’ve seen him jump pretty high to get on the counter. His weight must not be that big of a deal.”

“He’ll chase birds for a few minutes,” she says. “Okay, I’m in the house. The door is closed behind me. I’ve locked it again.”

“Maybe you just locked yourself in the house with the killer.” I chuckle as Lance raises his eyebrows. I just shake my head, having way too much fun with Callie.

“Oh, you,” she says crossly. “No one’s rushed me. There’s nothing out of place. I think I’m going to survive.”

“Good news,” I say. “Hey, did you get something to eat? I can bring you something. Maybe stay and inspect all the closets and under the beds to make sure you’ll be all right.”

“Your mother had food brought in,” Callie says.

“How did it go over there? I’m surprised you’re done already.”

Hadley returns to the table, looks at Lance, and then me, her eyebrows raised. Callie starts to detail the last-minute staging and checks Mother wanted to go through while Lance gets out of the booth.

I pull the phone away from my mouth. “You guys are going?”

“Yep,” Hadley says. “It was good to see you, Dawson.” She backs up while Lance steps in front of her.

“Cal,” I say, interrupting her. “I’m saying good-bye to Lance and Hadley. Give me two seconds.”

She agrees, and I jump to my feet too. “Congrats again, brother,” I say to Lance, pulling him into a hug and pounding him on the back. He does the same for me, and when we part, he’s grinning.

He’s glowing he’s so happy, and I can’t be anything but happy for him too.

I feel like I should shake Hadley’s hand, but I don’t. I’ve never hugged her either. She’s not the huggy, giggly type of woman, and not who I pictured Lance ending up with at all. But he loves her, and I’m not the one who has to spend the rest of my life with her.

He puts his arm around her, and they start for the exit. The waitress returns with my card and the receipt, so I quickly sign that, stuff my card in my wallet, and head for the exit too.

“All right,” I say, once I’m free from the noise, the music, and the scent of the restaurant. “I’m out of there. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she says with a sigh. “I don’t need you to come over, Dawson.”

“I know you don’t *need* me to. I want to.”

“It’s been a long day, and I’m just going to put a lot of lavender and oats in my bathwater and go to bed.”

I nod, though I’m disappointed. “All right,” I say again, hoping my voice is as upbeat as it can be. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“We’ve never closed the office early before,” she said. “Well, besides that one time there was a hurricane. It’s kind of exciting.”

“More exciting than a hurricane?” I laugh and pull my keys from my pocket. “I suppose so.”

“Your mother still hasn’t said anything?”

I shake my head, the negative emotions I keep at bay arriving so quickly. “Nothing.”

“Well, she can’t stay silent much longer.”

I don’t tell Callie that she can. Of course she can. Lila Houser has done whatever she’s wanted for almost seventy-five years. One more day to her is nothing.

“I’m going to let you go,” she says. “I’m pouring my bath salts in now, and I don’t want my phone to get wet.”

“Mm, okay,” I say, thinking of her in her bathroom, getting ready to take a bath. My pulse ricochets around my body as I get behind the wheel. “You sure you don’t want me to come sit with you?” I make no mention of her panties, though they’re on my mind. I have shown her my abs, a fact I’ve never pulled out and used—yet.

“No,” she says. “You go home. We both have a big day tomorrow.”

TOMORROW ARRIVES, AS TOMORROW ALWAYS DOES, AND I FIND myself searching for my navy blue blazer with the palm tree over the breast. It's one of my favorite jackets, and I can't believe I've misplaced it. I distinctly remember wearing it a week or two ago, but I flip through the hangers in my closet for the third time, and it's not there.

Frustrated, I select a different jacket and take it to the garment bag on my bed. I'm meticulous about my clothes, which was another lesson I learned from my dad. He wasn't a Fowler, but he knew how to play the game. He knew how important it was to look good at Mother's side, and he loved a good pair of pressed slacks—and shoes.

I smile as I go back into my closet, where dozens of pairs of shoes look up at me, practically begging to be chosen that day. Several pairs of them belonged to my father once, and I've never worn them. I haven't been able to get rid of them either.

Today, I bend and pick up a pair of shiny, brown leather Oxfords. My father loved these, and I remember sitting beside him, his shoe polishing kit between us, as he taught me how to take care of things.

“What did I do with that jacket?” I grumble to myself, replacing the shoes in their spot. I pick up a black pair of Oxfords, though I really like the ones I have in oxblood too. The reddish tint makes me feel powerful, especially if they don't quite match the suit I'm wearing. They become a fashion piece and a fashion statement at that point.

Men have very few ways to make such statements, and for my father—and now me—we do it through shoes.

I pack the oxblood Oxfords too, because I honestly don't know what I'm going to need tonight. Mother wasn't happy she couldn't come over last night to approve my wardrobe, but she'd been busy, and I'd been steadfast in not postponing the celebratory dinner with Lance and Hadley.

Finally ready as I'm ever going to be, I pack all my clothes and toiletries out to my car and head to the office. I wonder how Callie's going to get everything she needs to our

downtown hotspot, but she hasn't asked for help. I don't call her and offer, because Callie's a strong, independent, capable woman, and if she needed my help, she'd ask for it.

She's already in the office, seated behind her desk, when I arrive.

"Land sakes," she says, getting to her feet. "What's all that?"

"I don't know what Mother wants me to wear tonight," I say, rounding the corner from the back hall and moving toward my office. "Say, have you seen my navy blazer with the palm tree?"

"Yes," she says. She walks out from behind her desk and lifts a bag of dry cleaning from the coat rack. "It's right here."

Relief floods me. "Perfect. Bring it in here, would you? I don't remember sending it out to be cleaned." I hurry into my office, thinking how hectic the past couple of weeks have been, in all aspects of my life.

Callie follows me into my office, and I start unpacking the things I've brought. "I think it'll be perfect for the pre-party," I say. "What are you wearing?"

"Mm, nice try," she says with a grin. "I'm not telling you a single thing. You'll see me tonight when I descend the steps like Cinderella." She laughs and plucks the charcoal jacket from my repertoire. "Not this one."

"No?"

She shakes her head and sticks the jacket in my cupboard. I advance toward her and arrive just as she closes it and turns back to me. "Oh," she says, another smile touching her mouth as her hands slide up my chest.

"I'm sorry about last night," I say. "I should've told Mother you weren't her minion, and you should've been able to come to dinner with me and Lance."

"Dawson, it's okay," she says. "I'm a grown woman. I know how to get what I want."

My eyes drop to her mouth, my blood heating. "Do you?"

“Mm.” She tracks her fingers down the sides of my face. “Your beard is seriously so sexy,” she says just before she kisses me.

Today is jam-packed with things that need to be done, both here at the office and down the street at the Rosewood Center, where the gala will take place. I have leagues to go before I’ll be done smiling and charming people, both things I’m not that great at.

But right now, I have a moment to kiss my girlfriend and the fleeting thought that right here, this morning, might be when I finally get to see those power panties runs through my mind.

Then Callie breaks the kiss and presses her cheek to mine, her lips right against my ear. “The alarm on my phone is going off,” she whispers, and how she can hear that, I have no idea. All I can hear is the pounding of my pulse through my whole body.

“So?” I whisper back, working my hands down her sides.

“So, your mother will be here in five minutes.”

“That soon?” I ask.

“Mm.” She kisses me again, and I lose all track of time and space. There’s just me and her, and we could be floating twenty thousand feet above the earth for all I know.

I’ve felt like this before, and I know these emotions have a name. Some call it adoration, and some call it intimacy. Passion. Devotion. Deep affection.

I call it love.

CALLIE

I smooth my hands down over my chest, liking the way the bra in this dress puts things right where they're supposed to be. Since my chest is lifted a bit higher than it usually is, my stomach looks flatter, and I'm not complaining about that.

The emerald green dress flatters me in every way possible, and I feel like the luckiest woman in the world wearing it. With all the tummy tuckers and Spandex on the backside of the sequins and glitter, I feel tight from head to toe.

I'm not wearing pantyhose, despite Lila's lecture from last night. She's not my mother, and I don't have to do what she says. What's she going to do? Throw me out of the gala?

I shake my head, and my hair barely moves. I've used a lot of hairspray and pins to get the curls to lay exactly where I want them. A couple of tendrils fall down the sides of my face, and I brush one back to examine my makeup.

Tara did it, so it's flawless, of course. She then hurried off to Sauceabilities, because she's catering this whole shindig tonight, and everything must be perfect for Queen Lila.

I almost asked the woman last night what she was planning to do with Fowler International. Dawson has a right to know—heck, I have a right to know. There are decisions hanging in the balance, and I can't have them over my head for much longer. I hate feeling unsettled and inadequate, and not being able to decide what to do about Dawson's offered partnership makes me feel both of those things keenly, hour after hour.

Claude Monet meows as he walks into the bathroom. “Is it time?” I ask. “Is he here?”

I turn away from my full-length mirror after giving my diamond teardrop earrings one final glance of approval. I’m ready. I look fantastic, and while the steps I’m going to descend into Dawson’s waiting arms aren’t the grand, spiral kind from fairy tales, they’re still stairs.

In the living room, I make my way over to the window Claude loves so much and peer out. Dawson’s car isn’t in the driveway.

I turn back to the cat and frown. “He’s not here.” He should be though, and I face the window again, expecting to see him turn into my driveway at any moment.

His mother wanted to send a limousine for him, and he’d refused. He said he owned a perfectly good car, and he’d pick me up in time to get to the Rosewood Center with plenty of time to spare.

As the minutes continue to tick by, my anxiety grows. Even a quick snack can’t hold it at bay. I shouldn’t even be eating in this dress, because I already feel like I’m about to burst its seams.

When he’s a full fifteen minutes late, I call him. His line rings and rings, and he doesn’t pick up.

Staring at my phone, I consider my options. This device can do so much, and I like wielding power with it. I could call his mother and ask if she’s heard from him. “And what if she hasn’t?” I ask myself. “Then you’ll be causing a panic.”

But maybe a panic needs to be caused. Maybe Dawson was ambushed when he got home from the office. To my knowledge, that back door lock still hasn’t been fixed.

“He wasn’t going home,” I murmur, pacing the length of my kitchen island. We’d gone through his clothes three times with Lila before she’d been satisfied about what he’d be wearing that night.

I remember exchanging a glance with him, entire stories being told in that moment. When we’d gotten two minutes

Lila-free just before leaving the office, he'd held me tight, thanked me, and said, "Growing up with her was a challenge."

"I'll bet," I'd said.

Dealing with her now was a huge challenge.

"I'm not calling her," I decide. I try Dawson again, with the same result: No answer.

Since I'm supposed to be at the gala, and I know how to get around Charleston despite my lack of reliable transportation, my next best option is calling a Carry. That happens right from my phone too, and within ten minutes, I'm holding onto the railing as I descend my front steps, imagining a grand audience before me. They all pause to see who this mystery woman in the green dress is, and I catch the eye of the prince.

"Callie Michaels?" a man easily in his fifties asks.

"Yes, sir," I say, taking the last step to my sidewalk.

He's chewing gum in the most obnoxious way, and I bet it's nicotine gum. "Where you goin' lookin' like that?"

I've already put the address into the Carry app, but I say, "The Rosewood Center, please. There's a gala there tonight."

I pause by the back door, and he jumps to open it for me. My suspicions about his smoking habit are confirmed as I slide into the back seat. He's tried to cover up the odor with something frilly and sweet, but that only starts a headache behind my eyes.

I've brought along a tiny clutch, which is big enough to carry my card holder, a tube of lip gloss, and a small container of painkillers. I swallow one dry as he makes the drive down into the peninsula of Carolina.

"Here you are, ma'am," he says, and at least he didn't try to make conversation.

"Thank you." I pay for the carry and get out of the car. Alone.

I shouldn't be here alone, and every cell in my body pinches. Lights glare around the Rosewood Center, and someone's laid out a legitimate red carpet. All the guests walk down it, but none of them are by themselves. All the women are half my size, with higher heels, and gowns that range from black, to silver, to rose gold. They're all these muted, metallic colors, and I've somehow missed another memo.

"Would you give me the great honor of walking in with you?" a low, gravelly voice asks.

I turn to find an older gentleman standing there, wearing one of the most pristine tuxedos I've ever seen. He offers me a kind smile and his arm, and I latch onto him instantly. "Yes, please," I say, my voice sounding more amphibian than human.

"You looked a bit lost," he says.

"My boyfriend is late," I say, putting a smile on my face as my foot touches the edge of the red carpet. "I've never been to this before, and I wasn't sure if I just walk in or what."

"You just walk in, darling," he says. "I wish I'd never been to this thing before."

"Oh, wow." I giggle. "What's your name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Charles Winchester," he says. "And you?"

"Callie Michaels." His name means nothing to me, but if he's been coming to this gala in the past, he must be somebody important. "Are you a Founder?"

"Unfortunately." He gives me a smile that perches perfectly on his lips. This man has had plenty of practice in the spotlight, that's for dang sure. "Your boyfriend must not be much of a catch if he's late to this and making you walk in alone."

I press my lips together, because I'm not about to speak ill of Dawson. "Do you know Lila Houser, then?" I ask.

"Everyone knows Lila," Charles says. "How do you know her?"

“She runs this thing, doesn’t she?”

“Yes,” Charles says, his lips pursed. “She does.” He oozes money and Southern aristocracy, and I certainly don’t mind walking through the grand double doors, which two men hold open for us, on his arm.

“You should meet my son,” Charles says once we’ve entered the building. “He’s never late.” He gives me a wide smile, and I laugh.

“Yes, but does he have a car?” I ask. “See, I do not, and I sometimes require a ride to things like this.”

“My dear, if that’s how you’ve been picking your boyfriends—on whether they own a vehicle or not—it’s no wonder this boyfriend of yours isn’t here.”

I laugh again, letting my head tip back and everything. “Well, Sir Charles,” I say, really laying on my Southern accent and charm. “Lead the way to thy son.”

He chuckles too, and while I have no intention of really going out with his son, I know how to work a party.

“Mister Winchester,” someone calls, but Charles doesn’t miss a step.

“This way, Charles,” another man yells. I look to my right and find half a dozen photographers.

“It’s best if you don’t look,” Charles says. “They manage to get the most unflattering pictures if you look.”

I turn back to him, and he’s facing forward, gliding along as if the floor beneath his feet is moving for him. Perhaps it does that for the rich and famous, while the rest of us have to propel ourselves with our own feet.

The press continue to call out to Charles, hurling questions at him about the status of everything from his holdings to his wife. “Who are you escorting?” more than one of them asks.

He says nothing, neither does he look left or right, and I do my very best to copy him.

Through another set of doors, and the pre-party expands before me. I breathe a sigh of relief, and I'm fairly certain Charles does too.

A waiter approaches with a tray of champagne flutes, and we both take one. I'm not going to drink tonight, because my heels are already too tall to comfortably walk in. But I know the subtle art of holding a drink and looking like I'm enjoying myself.

"Wow," I say, taking in the completely transformed space in front of me. Lila had wanted to bring the outside in, and she'd done it. Trees, vines, leaves, flowers, and foliage went on throughout the whole room, with lights shining from the branches and blooms to make a magical fairy land. "This is beautiful."

"The decorating committee always does a fine job," Charles says.

I don't tell him I was on that committee last night, for men like Charles don't honestly know what goes on behind the scenes of events like this. *Or behind the scenes in their own lives*, I tell myself, thinking of Dawson's off-hand comment about where his navy blazer was.

Of course he doesn't remember sending it to the cleaner, because I do that. I swallow away the pinch of resentment, because it doesn't belong at a party like this.

"Hello, Father," a man says, and I turn my attention to him.

I nearly choke at the tall, dark-haired, gorgeous god who leans down and kisses both of his father's cheeks. He trains those delicious eyes on me, and when his gaze slides down the length of my body, every female cell lights up.

His eyes meet mine again, plenty of attraction there. "Who is this gorgeous woman?"

DAWSON

I don't normally drink in public, especially with so many lights shining on me, but I throw back my fourth shot as Carlton Winchester puts his hands on my girlfriend.

I'm going to make a scene. I can feel it brewing way down deep in my gut. Fine, maybe not that deep.

This afternoon sucked, and I can't believe I'm here at all. I shouldn't be here, and all I want to do is leave.

Lance needs me, and I'm stuck here.

I pull my phone out when all I want to do is order another drink. Lance has texted four more times, each over a paragraph long. I can't read them right now, because I'm already lit up with fury.

Hadley broke off the engagement, had been his first text.

The second was, *She's keeping the ring, but she's already left Charleston*.

Keeping the ring? I'd asked. *That's insane*.

Everything about what had happened that afternoon was insane. Watching Callie tip her head back and laugh at something stupid Carlton Winchester said is insane. She's pulled her hair up, revealing that long, slender, very kissable neck. Even from a distance, I can see Carlton's desire to touch his lips to her neck as plain as day.

The way Callie's *letting* him touch her, dance with her, lean in close to whisper to her sure makes it seem like she'll

let him do whatever he wants.

Fire burns through me, and not the kind that speaks to my male desire for her. The angry, furious inferno kind that tells me I'm about to blow.

“Dawson, darling,” Mother says, and I wrench my eyes away from Callie. The traitorous woman. I can't believe I let myself start to fall for her charms. I can't believe I've opened the door to my heart again, only to get it stomped on by some curvy female who has a great smile and knows exactly how to get what she wants.

Didn't she even say that this very morning? *I know how to get what I want.*

She's been *playing* me, and I didn't even see it. She hasn't accepted my offer for partner yet, and I've never been more relieved. I thought she was waiting to see if Mother will name me the next CEO of Fowler International, so we can make some decisions about the marketing firm together.

Now, I realize, she's been waiting because she wants to climb the ladder *out* of the marketing firm and *into* Fowler.

No way that's happening, I think. In fact, I'm going to fire her tonight. I don't need her at the office, and I don't need her playing with my heart and preying on my emotions.

“Dawson, come on,” Mother says. “I want you to meet Francesca.”

“Sure, Mother,” I say woodenly, because what do I care? Introduce me to a Founder. I'll smile and make Southern small talk about family genealogy and stuffy societies, get another drink, fire my secretary, and go to Lance's.

He needs me, and I can't believe I'm here instead of in his apartment, helping him box up everything Hadley's brought into his life and didn't take with her when she left.

I still can't believe she left.

His news had sent me into a tailspin, as I'd gone to dinner with them just last night. They'd seemed so happy, even Hadley, and that was saying something for her.

Lance's question runs through my mind. *You think she's happy, right?*

He'd known. Deep down, something had told him Hadley wasn't happy, but he'd pushed it aside, because he's in love with her.

That's a tactic I'm quite familiar with, as I did the same thing with Kim. I'd known she wasn't one-hundred percent happy to be marrying me. But she'd never said anything. She'd never given a blatant, outward indication that our relationship wasn't going to work.

I thought she'd been happy, because *I* was so dang happy.

I am not going through that again. I can't believe I've let Callie in this far.

"Say hello, Dawson." Mother hooks her arm through mine, putting plenty of pressure on my elbow.

I focus on the situation, because I must. "Hello, Miss Bannington," I say in my most diplomatic voice. I'm surprised it still works, but Francesca Bannington nearly swoons at my feet. She's a few years older than me, but not many, and I realize why Mother is introducing us.

Part of me wants to latch right on to her and escort her around for the rest of the night. We'll laugh and dance and drink, and Callie will run from the party in tears.

I don't take a single step toward her though. She holds out her hand, her smile suggestive, and I take it and lift it to my lips. "How are you enjoying the party?" I ask, a question I've heard Mother ask countless times before.

As the insipid woman starts to gush about the live plants in the grand hall, I nod and smile like I agree. I literally couldn't care less about the greenery here, or the fact that Mother has transformed a conference center into an oasis.

I'd seen the sketches, and I know that Mother didn't actually do anything. She'd paid someone to do something. Big deal. I can do it too.

We move on from Francesca, and Mother introduces me to a man and his wife I've met plenty of times before. Around the inner circle of Founders we go, and I feel like a pony on parade. Mother's puppet, saying what she wants and smiling at who she wants.

I hate this, I think. I hate this, I hate this, I hate this.

"There's Callie," Mother says. "Oh, she's good, Dawson. Look at Mister Rochumbeau. He's glowing."

I'd rather not look, but I do. Holling Rochumbeau *is* glowing like the North Star under Callie's devoted attention, and both of them burst out laughing a moment later. Mother tows me in that direction, but I dig in my heels.

"I need to use the restroom," I say.

"Nonsense," Mother says, as if physical needs can simply be ignored. "This is Holling." She takes another couple of steps and says, "Holling, how delightful to see you."

"Oh, Lila," he says, still at the tail end of his laughter. "Have you met this charming young woman? Callie Michaels." He brings her to his side, and she too looks like she's having the time of her life.

I notice that her champagne glass is still full, so she's not as stupid as I am.

I notice the swells in her dress, my mouth turning dry.

I notice the accusation in her eyes, my shame blooming.

I notice the precise way she covers it up, takes Holling's arm as if she has any right to touch him, my fury doubling.

"Yes, we know Callie," Mother says with a frown. "How are you, dear?"

"Wonderful," Callie says, sweeping into Mother's embrace as if she grew up a Southern socialite. With a truck driver father, that's certainly not the case. Callie is just so dang good with people.

Men, especially, I think, my humiliation that she duped me overflowing.

I notice Carlton lingering a few steps behind her, and I hate the interest in his eyes. Our gazes meet, and a silent challenge is laid down.

“Callie,” I say smoothly. “Can I steal you away for a moment?”

“Of course.” She unloops her arm from Holling’s and steps to my side.

“Don’t be long,” Mother warns. “We’re moving into the next room in only ten minutes.”

“Yes, Mother,” I say automatically, and I leave her to talk to her prize.

I take Callie in the opposite direction of Carlton, my grip on her arm pythonic.

“What is wrong with you?” she hisses at me as we near the edge of the party.

“What is wrong with *me*?” I hiss back. “What is wrong with *you*?” I turn and take her into my arms as if we’re just going to cheerfully dance the night away. “Fawning all over Carlton Winchester like that. You looked ridiculous.”

She blinks, her perfectly mascaraed eyelashes fluttering with the movement. She looks like something straight out of a fairytale, and I’d have really liked to have picked her up. I’m not sure we’d be here if I had, because wow. A dress like that is just begging a man to take it off.

“Someone wouldn’t answer their phone,” she says, her grip on my shoulder almost painful. “I had to get a Carry here, and then I just stood outside like a loser.”

I don’t apologize. “Mother needed me.”

“And you can’t send a text?” she fires at me, leaning closer. “You’ve been drinking.”

“So what?” I challenge, finally looking straight at her. “So freaking what, Callie? I’m thirty-six years old, and I can drink if I want to.”

She takes a step away from me. “What’s wrong?”

Now that we're not dancing, everything is wrong. People have already started to look at us. "I think one of us has to leave," I say quietly.

"Why?"

"I don't want to see you anymore," I say.

"Dawson," she says, but I can't take her saying my name.

I look away, my heartbeat rioting as my chest storms. "I don't want to see you in the office. I don't want to see you outside the office."

"You're firing me?"

"Yes."

"Right here?"

"Yes."

"And we're breaking up."

"Yes."

"What in the world is going on?" she asks, as if *she's* the victim here.

What a joke.

I take her hand and move her off the dance floor. I think she only goes with me because she's so surprised. She stumbles as if she's the one who's had four shots that night.

We make it out of the hall and into a quiet hallway. "You've been playing me," I say. "And I don't appreciate it. I saw you with Carlton, and I just have this feeling...I can't explain it. But I've felt it before with Kim, and I'm not going to get duped again. I'm not going to be the chump standing at the altar, waiting for the woman he loves to walk toward him. I'm not. So I'm walking away first this time."

"You're not making any sense," Callie says. "I'm not interested in Carlton Winchester."

"Wait until the pictures come out tomorrow," I say. "Heck, they're probably online right now. *Carlton and Callie.*" I

spread my hands above my head, as if indicating a headline. “I’m not going to be the pathetic second-best in the story.”

Not again. *Never* again.

I glare at her, but she glares right back.

“You’re drunk, and you have no idea what you’re talking about.” She moves to step past me. “I’m leaving.”

“Good,” I say, turning to watch her stride away. “I already said one of us should, and you’re the one who clearly doesn’t belong here.”

She doesn’t turn back. She doesn’t say anything. As she disappears around the corner, I mutter, “And I’m not drunk,” to an empty hallway.

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, I’M DEFINITELY MORE SOBER than I was when I’d spoken to Callie. Regret sings through me, and the need to leave the party increases with every breath I take.

We’ve moved from the grand hall, with its dancing, drinks, and dinner, to the Lowcountry auditorium, where various founders have been talking for the past thirty minutes. My impatience makes me squirm in my seat as if I’m five years old on a church bench.

Mother sits beside me, and she hasn’t asked once where Callie is. I wouldn’t even know what to tell her, and I’m glad she hasn’t said anything. She has everything timed down to the minute, and as Mavis Bonshire goes over her time, Mother clears her throat and frowns.

Somehow, Mavis gets Mother’s message, and she wraps up her talk rather untidily. Mother puts both hands on her armrests and starts to push herself to her feet. I jump up to help her, my brain slamming against my skull.

I haven’t had anything to drink in a long time, and wow, the resulting headache from those shots is intense and

powerful. I steady Mother and then release her when she's on her feet. She walks toward the steps that go up to the stage, where a man waits to escort her. I sit back down, hoping she's the last speaker at this gala.

There will be more food and more drinking following the speeches, but I plan to leave following this. The hour is already late, and I feel like enough of a terrible person for abandoning Lance tonight in favor of this.

My phone vibrates as Mother makes slow progress up the steps, and I hurry to take it out of my pocket to check it. Lance has said, *I just left. I'll be there in twenty.*

Mother's just getting up to talk now, I send back.

I can wait.

I shove my phone under my leg, as Mother's now at the microphone, which she reaches up to pull down to her height.

"What a lovely evening," she says brightly, her voice the perfect timbre and the perfect volume. Every piece of her is perfect, and it's no wonder I like my slacks pressed and my socks ironed. "Thank you all so much for joining us for our annual Fowler Founder's Gala."

People start to applaud, as if she's said something so worthy of clapping.

Smiling, Mother looks down at the podium. "I shan't bore you with any of our thrilling legacy, nor the fact that I took over Fowler International when I was only thirty-four years old. I rather felt like Queen Elizabeth, trying to steer a ship without knowing how to sail."

A few people twitter, but the energy in the room has shifted. Mother's eyes sparkle like dark diamonds. "After forty years at the helm, I finally feel like I know what to do, when to do it, and who to talk to in order to make it happen. But alas, every good journey must reach its destination. So tonight, I'm going to announce some changes in our administrative positions."

Murmurs and the squeaking of seats fills the air. Mother starts with some managerial positions in their corporate office,

right here in downtown Charleston. With each person she names, they join her on the stage. With eight or ten people standing in a line beside her, she shuffles her paper.

“And that leaves only the Chief Executive Officer,” she says, as if discussing her favorite flavor of ice cream. “I’m stepping down from the role, though I hope to be able to consult if necessary. In my place will be—”

I don’t move, though I feel several pairs of eyes on me. I know Augustus and Emilia are here, and I know they spent a great deal of time with Mother during dinner.

“My son, Dawson Houser,” Mother finishes. “Please come up here, darling.”

Amidst the applause, I stand and button my suit coat. I opted out of the tuxedo, because every time I put one of those on, bad things happen.

No, I tell myself, a smile stuck to my face as I go up the steps and into the spotlights. Every time you get involved with a woman, bad things happen.

I reach Mother and kiss both of her cheeks. I haven’t prepared a speech, and no one else had to give one, so I don’t move behind the microphone.

“The paperwork is ready to sign,” she says. “Right down the hall.”

“Here?” I ask, surprised by that. I think of Lance, and I hate that I’m in this position.

Mother nods and faces the crowd again. “Thank you all for coming. There are deserts back in the grand hall. Here’s to another year of success at Fowler International!”

The crowd, who’ve barely stopped applauding, picks up again. Everyone on stage wants to shake my hand, and by the time I step out of the lights and into the cool darkness backstage, I need to wash up.

Mother leads me smartly out of the auditorium through a side door, makes a right turn, and ushers me into a room where two security guards are waiting. I glance at them as I enter the

small conference room, and no less than five people are waiting inside.

“Dawson,” Mother says. “You remember our lead legal team.”

“Of course,” I say, shaking more hands and offering more smiles. Lisa Harrison, the lawyer in charge, begins to go through the paperwork. I sign and initial where she says, but I’m not paying attention to anything—until she says, “This one states that Dawson Dials In will become a Fowler property,” and puts a paper in front of me.

My pen freezes. “What?”

Lisa looks at Mother. I look between the two of them. “No,” I say. “I’m not signing that. My advertising firm is going to remain separate from Fowler International.”

“You can’t really do both,” Mother says gently, with that river of clay right underneath the surface. “This way, Dawson Dials In will remain open. You can keep working there a little bit. But—”

“Not a little bit,” I say. “I’m going to keep doing what I do. Fowler is the part I’m going to do a little bit.”

“Darling, be reasonable. You won’t have time.”

“You don’t even live here, Mother. You’ve had time to...” I wave my pen through the air and stand. “Do whatever it is you’re doing in New York.”

“That was after many years here,” she says, all the gentleness gone now.

“No,” I say. “I’m not letting Fowler International absorb my firm. It’s mine. It’s separate.” And that’s final. “You never mentioned this when we’ve talked about me taking over.”

“I assumed you knew.”

“How would I know?”

“Sit down,” she says quietly, and I do as she wants. The paper still lays there on the table, waiting for my signature. I think of Lance, waiting outside for me to come out. I think of

Callie, and all the terrible things I said to her. I gave her reassurances that this CEO position wouldn't change much of what we did at Dawson Dials In.

I could bring her over to Fowler. There's plenty of places where her expertise would be useful. The salary would probably be better. She could still do what she does now.

Mother turns over the paper. "Keep going, Lisa. This can be something Dawson comes back to in the future."

I meet her eye, and she nods, a small amount of compassion residing in her gaze.

Lisa finishes the paperwork quickly, and armed with all the documents she needs, she leads the rest of the lawyers out of the room.

I sigh as I get to my feet. "Lance is waiting for me," I say. "Thank you for the party, Mother."

"Dawson," she says, remaining at the table. When I walk out, she'll be alone. She'll go back to her hotel alone. She'll eventually fly back to New York City alone. She'll wake up alone, and go grocery shopping alone.

Sadness fills me as I turn back to her. "Yes, Mother?"

"Are you happy?"

In my mind, I see Callie in that green dress. This should've been our night. I should've picked her up the way we'd planned. We should've been the talk of the town; we should've danced the night away. She should be the one I can't wait to go see and celebrate with.

No, I'm not happy. But I say, "Of course, Mother." I return to her and bend down to kiss her forehead. "You can get back to the hotel okay?"

"Yes," she says.

"Okay." I watch her for another moment, wondering what's going through her mind. In my pocket, my phone vibrates, and I turn to leave.

I find Lance in his luxury SUV easily enough, and I climb into the passenger seat. “Sorry,” I say, reaching to buckle my seatbelt. I can’t look at him, because the pain he’s in has already filled the car, filled my whole body, filled my heart.

“It’s fine,” he says. “How did things go?” He backs out of the space and starts for the exit.

“Fine,” I say, not wanting to talk about anything to do with work or Fowler International. “Tell me what happened.” I do look at him then and find him strangling the steering wheel. “She’s not really keeping the ring, is she?”

“I think she will, yes,” Lance says. “She says she needs more time to think through things.”

“What could she possibly need to think through?” I ask. “You two have been together for two years.”

Lance hangs a right coming out of the parking garage. “She went home.”

“So go to Georgia and get her. Talk to her. She’s just running.” It sounds so easy when I say it, but I only have to go to Sugar Creek to make things right with Callie, and I know I won’t do that.

“She’s in Louisiana,” he says softly, pulling up to an all-night diner. “This okay? I feel like I need something to eat.”

“Louisiana?” I repeat. “Why is she there?”

Lance parks the SUV and sighs. “Apparently, Dawson, a lot of what she told me about herself isn’t true. We’ve never gone to visit her folks. I thought it was because they didn’t get along—that’s what she told me. But really, she’s been lying to me. I’m not sure I want to go get her and talk to her.”

“She took your diamond ring.” At least Kim had mailed mine back to me. Of course, I’d then walked across the Ravenel Bridge and tossed it into the river. I didn’t need that ring as a reminder in my life, that was for sure.

“Yes,” he says. “And I think that’s a sacrifice I can make. I don’t want to marry someone who doesn’t love me. I don’t want to be with someone who lies to me. Come on.” He gets

out of the SUV, and I realize in that moment what I should've realized ten years ago.

After I found out Kim didn't love me, I should've been grateful she didn't walk down the aisle and say yes to becoming my wife. I don't want to marry someone who doesn't love me either. I don't want to be with someone who lies to me.

When I think about who I do want to be with, it's Callie. She's always told me exactly what she thinks of me, she's never held back, and she delivers the truth even though it hurts.

Lance opens my door, grinning. "Is this a date, Dawson? Come *on*."

I get out of the vehicle and start walking toward the diner with him.

"Hey, where's Callie tonight? Maybe I can start having threesome dinners with the two of you." He grins at me, but I simply feel like throwing up.

"Yeah, probably not," I say. "I don't want to talk about it, but I broke up with her."

Lance spins around and walks backward, his eyes wide. "What? Why? What happened?"

"I just said I don't want to talk about it. We're here for you, not me."

"I'm done talking about Hadley," Lance says.

"Great," I say, the bell on the diner door ringing as someone opens it. "How about this weather we're having?"

CALLIE

“Thank you, Fran.” I reach for the clothes she’s put on the rod. The plastic crinkles under my touch, and I feel as fragile this morning. I haven’t cried yet, and I’m determined not to spend today in tears. There were plenty of those last night, thank you very much.

“Have a good day, honey,” Fran says, oblivious to my distress. I hide things very well, I will say that. I’d managed to make it out of the Rosewood Center, into a cab, and all the way home without shedding a single tear.

The moment I stepped through my front door, though, everything had started to shed. When I left this morning, I’d walked right past my heels and dress, still puddled on the floor in the living room.

I shouldn’t even be picking up Dawson’s dry cleaning. I shouldn’t be hurrying back to my Carry and saying, “Okay, I’m ready.” I shouldn’t give him the address for the converted historical home that houses Dawson Dials In.

I can’t help my Saturday routine, and I do need to clean out my desk. I’d really rather do it when Dawson isn’t around, so the job has to get done in the next two days.

Surely he’ll be busy in the high-rise several streets over. I saw all the newspapers this morning, and none of them had mentioned our little tiff on the dance floor or in the hallway. None of them had any pictures of me, not with him and not with Carlton Winchester.

Maybe I flirted with him a little bit. He's extremely handsome and extremely rich, and my feelings had been hurt by Dawson's silence. He hadn't even apologized for not picking me up.

Regret streams through me, and I pay the Carry driver and head inside the office. It feels different now, and I pause just inside the door, the sunlight coming through the big front windows and filling the space with heat and light.

I do love this office. I love the big chair Dawson bought for me when I complained the other one was too straight up-and-down. I love my huge, corner desk that doesn't sit in the corner. I need the space for my computer, the files, the phone, and all my Skittles.

I'm about to take Dawson's clothes into his office when someone raps on the door behind me. Startled, I turn that way, my heart pounding in the back of my throat.

A woman stands outside, her hands cupped around her face as she tries to see in. "Jillian?" I hang the clothes on the hat rack as I pass it, hurrying to open the door now. "Hey," I say when I get it open.

"When I saw you get out of the car, I tried to get your attention," she says, holding Sausage's leash tighter as the little schnauzer starts to sniff my legs.

"Mm." I'm kind of in my own world, even now.

"They're turning off the water in an hour," she says. "Since you guys don't normally come into the office on the weekend, I didn't tell you."

"Okay," I say. "I won't stay long."

Jillian smiles at me, and I think I return it. She turns to leave, and my brain fires at me. Just then, an earsplitting clatter behind me causes me to yelp and leap away from the sound. Surely it's someone who's been hiding in the coat closet for the precise moment to end my life.

But it's just the hat rack on the ground, Dawson's fresh clothes spilling away from it in a shirt-splatter pattern. "Oops,"

I say, realizing I'd hung all the clothes on one side of the rack, unbalancing it.

I go to pick it up, and Jillian helps me gather the shirts and get them all neatly put back together in their plastic sleeves. "Thank you," I say, my throat closing. I'm going to miss working here. I'm not going to see her anymore, and we won't have tea and hummingbird cakes. I won't get to hear stories about Sausage and how her husband, Tom, once got into an altercation with a ficus at a ritzy brunch hotel. I won't get a discount on my massages or facials, and everything in the world is just so knotted.

"Hey," I say anyway. "Do you have any of those boxes you're always complaining about? I need to pack up a few files today."

"Sure," Jillian says. "I break them down and put them in the bin behind the house. You're welcome to whatever you want back there."

"Thank you," I say again. I lift the clothes. "I'm going to go hang these in his office."

"You're too good for him," Jillian says with a bright smile. "I'll see you later, Cal."

"Bye." I watch her leave through the front door, which locks again behind her. I sigh, wondering if she's right. At the very least, I have a lot of experience now, and getting another job shouldn't be too terribly hard.

I hang Dawson's clothes in the closet. I wander the office, picking up pens. I open my desk drawers and start to pull out my personal items. In the front closet, where I thought the serial killer had been waiting, I get out my jackets, sweatshirts, and coats. I even have an umbrella in there, and the weight of the world descends upon me as I realize how many boxes I'm going to need.

"Get the job done," I mutter to myself. I'm not coming back here a second time.

Behind the house, I get as many boxes as I can carry. I make them up and start packing. Everything gets labeled,

because I'm not going to go through these for a while. My brain travels to Mexico, and I think I need a vacation before I dive back into the employment pool.

With my desk packed, my clothes packed, and all the cupboards gone through, I take out my corporate credit card and put it on Dawson's desk. The key to the building goes beside it, and I stand there and stare down at those two items, trying to decide if I should write him a note.

Any future employer is going to want references, and he's the only boss I've had for five years. He'll have to take calls about me from the places I apply to. A note could make things easier for both of us.

I reach to open his desk drawer, where I know he keeps a pad of sticky notes. "What are you doing here?"

I yelp for the second time that morning and look toward the doorway. Dawson himself stands there, blocking most of the light from pouring in from the front of the house. Haloed as he is from behind, it's hard to see his face.

The tone of his voice tells me he's not in a good mood, and I'll find a deep frown between his eyes.

"Packing," I say icily. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I own this company," he says.

"Do you?" I challenge. "Dear Mother didn't roll it into Fowler International?"

Dawson enters the office, and instant guilt hits me. "I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have said that." I lift my chin and walk toward the back of the office in a straight line, avoiding him by a wide berth. "I put my credit card on your desk there. The key is with it. I was simply going to write you a note, wishing you well in all your future endeavors."

"Callie," he says, and he sounds exhausted. I haven't looked him fully in the face to see, but I wouldn't doubt it. Probably out partying all night long, it's a wonder he's here before noon at all.

“I’m calling a Carry now,” I say. “I’m packed and ready to go.” I walk out of his office. “Oh, and Jillian said the water to the house is off for a little bit right now. So you’re aware.” I wish I’d asked if her husband could come help me with my packing, but I’m not quite myself right now.

I hate how nice I am to Dawson. I kick myself for telling him about the water as I practically punch at my phone screen to request a ride.

He doesn’t call me back into his office, and I tell myself I wouldn’t go anyway. I haul my nine boxes out to the curb, one by one, my opinion of Dawson and his Southern gentleman qualities drying up with each trip.

I’m sweaty and hot, and now annoyed that my Carry isn’t here yet. When I check my phone, it says I don’t have one coming. “What in the world?” I stab at the app, trying to bend it to my will.

A shiny, black SUV pulls up to the curb. I know this car, and when Dawson gets out of the driver’s seat, I back up. “No,” I say.

“I can give you a ride,” he says.

“No.” I shake my head, so many other things inside me shaking. I want to rage at him. I want to tell him that every moment between us was authentic for me.

“Callie, I didn’t mean what I said last night,” he says.

“Stop talking,” I bark at him. “You fired me. I’m leaving. Leave me alone.” I turn and stride away from him, my focus on my phone. I call Tara as Dawson says my name behind me. “I need you,” I say when she answers. Tears flow down my face. “I’m about to crack, and I need you.”

“Where are you?” she asks. “I’m on my way right now.”

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I SLIDE INTO TARA’S CAR. “GO.”

She pulls away from the busy downtown Charleston City Market without even checking her blind spot. I don't care, because I don't have emotional room for more than I'm already carrying.

"What's going on?" she asks as the traffic loosens and she picks up speed.

"Can you play hooky today?" I ask. "Let's just keep going. Take any road we want, and make random turns until we run out of gas."

Tara looks at me, surprise on her face. "Who are you? Where's Callie Michaels, the woman who literally had a minute-by-minute itinerary of our trip to Brussels?"

I smile, because that was an amazing trip, and we'd both needed it. "There was so much to see and do," I say, defending myself. "You had fun on that trip, admit it."

"I did," Tara says. "What is going on, Cal?"

"Do you have a big event tonight?" I ask, though she won't, because Tara doesn't book huge things back-to-back, and she catered the Founder's Gala last night.

"Just an anniversary party," she says. "For two. Their fortieth."

"Disgusting," I say, and she laughs. I want to join in with her on our inside joke, but I can't. If I laugh, it'll turn into a sob. "Take me to Saucebilities with you. I'll chop onions all day if you want."

"Okay," Tara says dubiously. "But the price to get through the door is the story about why you were about to crack a few minutes ago." She starts across the bridge, because her catering kitchen isn't on the downtown peninsula. "And fair warning, my new salty chef is in today."

"I can handle him," I say. "It'll be good experience to tell my new potential employers about."

Tara sucks in a breath. "You finally quit?"

"No," I say, all the fissuring I'd been worried about starting to creep through me. "Dawson fired me."

TARA

“I mean it,” I say. “I will fillet him alive. I could do it too, Callie. I could. I’m so good with a boning knife.” I look at my best friend, so distraught and so beautiful. It’s not fair that her beast of a boss has treated her like this.

She lifts her hot chicken sandwich to her mouth and takes a bite. Once the story started spilling from her, I couldn’t keep driving. There was too much red in my vision.

I can’t take more heat, so I’ve opted for a bag of French fries and a salad to go with my Arnold Palmer mix of lemonade and iced tea. I tell myself the calories I’m saving from not having a hamburger will allow me to eat more.

I don’t mind the extra weight I carry, because no one trusts a skinny chef. I love food, everything about it. I love planting it, watching it grow, and harvesting it. I love preparing it, tasting it, and serving it.

I love eating, and I stab another cucumber and pop it into my mouth.

“You can’t debone him,” Callie says, and I huff.

“I could though.”

“Of course you *could*,” she says. Our eyes meet again, and she giggles. It’s a little forced, but it’s better than the crying she’d done while telling the story of what had happened last night.

“I can’t believe he didn’t come pick you up, said nothing about it, and then didn’t apologize.”

“I can’t believe you think that’s the worst thing he did,” she says.

“He didn’t give any indication as to why he went from raging hot to icy cold in an afternoon?”

She shakes her head. “He said I was a huge flirt. He said I didn’t belong there. He said I was playing him.”

“He’s such an idiot,” I say.

Callie says nothing, and that alone speaks to how she feels about Dawson.

I pull in another breath and stab a cherry tomato this time. “You fell in love with him.”

“No,” she says quickly. “I *was falling* in love with him. There’s a difference.”

“Is there, though?” I ask. “It’s like chicken, Cal. I can have roasted chicken or fried chicken, but in the end, it’s all chicken.”

“You and your food metaphors.” She smiles at me and holds up her sandwich. “Besides, it’s not all chicken. There’s some that’s better than others, like this one.”

“Yes, well, he’s like a little...scrawny...chickeny bird, and I could just wring his neck.”

“Chickeny bird?” she repeats, laughing hard now.

I join in, because laughing is always better than stewing in loathing for someone. In fact, the only thing I like to stew is tomatoes, or lamb. Stewed lamb is *delicious*, and my mind whirs around a new recipe I need to start outlining.

I finish laughing, sigh, and mix up my salad. “I’m throwing out the cookbook and starting over.”

“What?” she asks. “No, Tara. You can’t. What you have is amazing. You can’t throw it all out.”

“It’s not right,” I say.

“Yes, it is,” she says. “I’m not even a good cook, and I can make the recipes in your book. It’s perfect. You just need to

stop dragging your feet and finish it.”

“It would be easier if my chefs didn’t keep quitting,” I say sourly. “I don’t get why they think restaurant work is more revered than catering. I make a good living. Saucebilites is well-respected.”

“They’re all morons,” Callie says, laughing again.

I lean my head back against the rest, knowing I’ve been gone for too long. “I ran out on Alec,” I say, but I don’t move to put the car in gear. “We should get back.”

“He’s the new salty chef?”

“Yes,” I say, frowning again. “He has this super annoying habit of calling me ‘boss.’ It’s ‘yes, boss,’ or ‘you got it, boss,’ every other second. I think he’s making a fool of me.”

“Well, you are the boss,” Callie says.

“Yes, but most people call each other *chef* in the kitchen. Not *boss*.”

“There’s always my idea,” she says, glancing at my dashboard. “You’ve got three-quarters of a tank of gas. I bet we could get to Atlanta on that.”

“Why Atlanta?” I ask. “If we’re going to go on a spontaneous road trip, let’s stick to the coast. Jacksonville.”

“Daytona Beach,” she says. “I have a credit card, and we can buy new bikinis and stay in the nicest hotel.” She actually looks hopeful, like we’ll actually do this.

“Yes,” I say, because I know we won’t do this. She has Claude Monet to take care of, for one, and she’d never do anything to jeopardize my catering company. She’s too darn nice to do anything to hurt anyone, ever.

I reach over and tuck her hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry about your job. What are you going to do?”

“Find somewhere else,” she says. “There are a billion firms in Charleston. I have tons of experience. I’m good at what I do. I’ll find something.”

I nod, because she's right. "I wish I could do something for you," I say.

"Tara, you are," she says. "You rescued me, and you're going to let me spend the day with you and Mister Salty Chef, and then we're going to order as much Chinese take-out as we can. Claude and I will sleep at your place tonight, and everything will look better in the morning."

I smile at her. "You're so positive." I don't know how she does that. I find myself more on the negative side of things most of the time.

"Well, as my mom always said: I can be happy here with you girls while your father is gone, or I can be mad all the time. I choose to be happy."

"I choose to be happy," I repeat. "I like that." I straighten and reach for the gear shift. "All right." I breathe in deep and blow the air back out. "Let's go see how worked up Alec is that I've left him this long in the kitchen by himself."

WHEN WE WALK INTO THE KITCHEN, THE SCENT OF THE RED wine reduction tells me it's gone too far. "That's burning," I say, still holding the door for Callie to enter behind me.

"I'm aware," Alec Ward snaps. "But I'm elbow deep in this custard. It's such a blessing you've decided to return to your job."

"Oh, my," Callie says, and instant embarrassment pulls through me.

"Alec," I say, striding toward the stove where the reduction is turning black. "This is Callie Michaels. She's going to redo this reduction for you, but she'll do it right."

"You have got to be kidding me," he says, growling afterward. "You ran out of here without two words to me, and stay out for an hour. What am I supposed to do?"

“You’re not supposed to burn the reduction.” I put the ruined pan in the sink and flip on the water. “Life happens, Alec. We have plenty of time to get things perfect for the dinner tonight.”

He rolls his eyes and goes back to whipping the custard in the giant pot in front of him. I try not to notice the bulging muscles that surely come from more than just whisking. The man does some serious workouts, and I’ve been tempted to ask him what he can bench press a time or two.

I haven’t, of course. I’m professional with all of my employees, even if Alec is the best-looking man I’ve met in my lifetime, chef or not. Just the fact that he is a talented chef adds to his attractiveness.

“Plenty of time, boss,” he says, and oh, that tongue. The man’s handsomeness is definitely marred by his personality. He doesn’t seem to have a social life, because he’s available all the time. I certainly have no boyfriend to speak of, and I like a chef who doesn’t ask for tons of time off or complain about late nights, early mornings, or weekend work.

“All right,” Callie says, drawing my attention away from my poisoned relationship with Alec. He’s been at Saucebilities for a week, and he’s already out-cooked everyone else I employ. I knew from the moment he started separating eggs to make a raspberry soufflé that I’d hire him. No one has ever chosen to make such a hard dessert for their interview demo before, and his soufflé had been immaculate. Light, fluffy, tall, and full of tart, sweet raspberry flavor.

The glaze he’d whipped up while the soufflé baked still makes my mouth water, and I’d never thought something as simple as vanilla and orange could do that.

I’d hired him after the first bite, and I should’ve known by his cocky, arrogant smile as he’d accepted that he would be trouble.

I survey the ingredients on the stainless steel table, where I’d been working when Callie had called. I almost hadn’t answered, and I press my eyes closed and thank the Lord I did.

Callie steps to my side. “Where do you want me, *chef*?”

I glance at her, a silent giggle moving between us. “I’m putting together a pasta salad,” I say. “I only need to get the noodles from the fridge, and you can mix it all up.”

“Do you have a recipe for the sauce?”

“In my head,” I say, knowing what she’ll ask next. I glance over to Alec, working about fifteen feet away, his concentration on the custard exquisite. “Not a word about the cookbook. But it’s the recipe on page sixty-four.”

She nods and pulls out her phone. “I’ve still got that PDF you sent me.” She leans even closer to me. “His picture doesn’t do him justice. He’s *one-step-away-from-the-sun* hot.”

“Hm.” She knows better than anyone that good looks can’t make up for a rotten personality. She worked with Dawson for five years, and I tell myself I can put up with Alec’s black-cloud attitude and backhanded boss comments if he keeps putting up the delicious dishes he has in the past week.

Callie nudges me with her shoulder, but I don’t look at her. “I’m too tall for him,” I say, picking up my knife and slicing open the bag of organic, dried pasta that has red, green, and white noodles.

“Nonsense,” Callie whispers. “He’s got to be six-two, at least, and that means he’s four inches taller than you. At least.”

“I’m really focused on growing Saucebilities,” I say, turning away from her to drop the pasta into the pot of boiling water on the stove. I repeat that with several more bags of noodles, stirring them all together, and setting a timer so I don’t have to hold so much in my brain.

“Do you want to taste this, boss?” Alec asks, and both Callie and I look toward him.

He’s poured the custard into individual ramekins, each one precisely as full as the next. I don’t need to taste his custard, because it looks creamy and delicious, but I am the boss, and I want him to know it.

“Sure.” I step over and swipe my finger along the edge of the pot. I work hard not to moan and roll my eyes back in my head, which is my default when I taste something as good as this. It’s sweet, buttery, with just the right hint of vanilla. It’s whipped perfectly, not too thick, and will be a brilliant crème brûlée in about three hours.

“Fantastic,” I say, because while I want him to know I’m in charge, I’ve never held back the praise from the chefs who deserve it. I give him a smile, and he salutes me instead of returning the grin.

I turn away as he reaches for the teapot full of hot water, which he’ll carefully pour around the ramekins before sliding the trays into the oven.

“He is seriously the most arrogant human male alive,” I mutter to Callie. She looks up from where she’s measuring brown mustard into a bowl, gives me a sloppy salute, and the two of us burst out laughing.

DAWSON

I kick the door open, sure my foot is going to go through the glass the next time I do it. Callie has nine boxes to bring back into the office, and I'm only on the third trip from the curb to her desk. "Nine boxes," I mutter. "What in the world is in all these things?" I drop the two I'm carrying next to the other four I've already brought in.

Black marker spells out exactly what's in this box—*jackets / umbrella*.

I sigh, because of course Callie had hung some of her things in the front closet. It could get cold here in Charleston, and Callie had once brought in a space heater during an icy snap that had lasted six days. She'd claimed that the "flimsy" shoes she wore didn't provide much protection against drafts.

She'd put the space heater under her desk and sighed in bliss as the warm air blew on her bare legs and feet.

I wipe the sweat from my brow and exhale heavily as I turn back to the front entrance. I can't leave her stuff on the sidewalk, and she ran off without a backward glance. Part of me wants to load everything she left into my car and throw it off the bridge too. I'd be within my legal rights, because she abandoned her property in my place of business.

"Don't be stupid," I tell myself, walking to get the rest of the boxes. I'm not going to destroy them. I'm not going to let someone take them. In fact, for the next hour, I unpack the boxes she's put her things in, hanging her jackets and sweatshirts right back on the hangers she'd taken them from

earlier. I break down the boxes, noticing the shampoo labels on them, and put them back in the bin behind the house where Jillian had likely put them to begin with.

The last thing I do is open Callie's bottom drawer and put her giant box of Skittles back where she's always kept them. I honestly don't know what I'm doing. She'll be livid when she has to pack everything back up again, but I say, "She's not leaving," out loud, as if I can just will that to be true.

Guilt fills me from top to bottom, over and over again, and I can't stand being so close to her desk.

I go into the conference room, where a basket of pens sits benignly on the table. I freeze, my heart suddenly pounding in the back of my throat. "She was here cleaning up," I say, pieces I've missed for so long falling right into place.

I spin and march into my office, moving right to the spot where I'd first kissed her. I yank open the cupboard door, and sure enough, no less than four dress shirts hang there. Two jackets as well, all of them still in the plastic protectors from the dry cleaners.

One of them has a tag, and I reach up, praying with all the energy of my soul that this is old. That she didn't pick these up this morning.

The date on the receipt tells me I'm wrong, and I step back and pull my hand away as if the tag on my clothes has caught fire.

"You're the biggest idiot in the world," I tell myself, my stomach flipping over with every labored breath I take.

She's been the best employee I've ever had, but more than that, she took care of me. I look around my office, noticing her precise touch in everything, from the slant of the chairs in front of my desk to the way the credit card and building key are lined up with my desk planner.

I step over to them, my heart pumping blood through my body too fast. My brain doesn't get enough oxygen, and I'm not thinking clearly. I pick up her card and key and take them right back to her desk. She's going to need them.

I look up, wondering how to fix what I've broken. How does one take back words they've said? Cruel words, too.

My phone rings, breaking the silence in the office, and I flinch at the sound of my mother's assigned melody. I answer the call with, "Mother, hello."

"Dawson, darling," she says. "I'd love to have a good-bye dinner with you and Callie tonight. I'm leaving for Manhattan in the morning."

"Really?" I ask. "You're not going to stay to make sure things transition well?"

"I don't need to," she says. "You've got everything you need to take Fowler into the future."

I'd received a packet at my house that morning, and the first page had made me grab my keys and drive here, to the office. It had listed me as the CEO of Fowler International, with my team of people neatly below me.

Names, phone numbers, office locations, job titles.

In truth, I could have as big or as small of a role in Fowler International that I wanted. I'd dropped the packet on my kitchen table and come here, to Dawson Dials In, because I need to figure out what to do.

I thought being here in the building would give me an indication of which way to go, but being here only confuses me more.

"I don't think Callie can make it," I say, the words thick in my throat. "She's...helping Tara with something tonight."

"Oh, Tara," Mother says, obviously delighted. "Wasn't the food divine last night? She did such an amazing job. We should be sure to leave a review for her."

"Yes," I say automatically. "I'll put that on my to-do list." I walk to the doorway of my office and look at Callie's desk. It's neat and clean, much more so than usual. I have so many things to get done before Monday morning, but I suppose dinner with my mother before she leaves town has to be one of them.

“I’ll pick you up at seven?” I ask. “Lance could come with us. I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

“Yes, darling. That sounds wonderful.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I’M THE ONE ROLLING MOTHER’S luggage tower through the airport to her check-in counter. If she’d fly commercially, it wouldn’t be such a long walk, but Mother has never done anything conventionally.

Dinner last night had gone as well as any of our dinners have, with loads of talk of forthcoming engagements, business meetings, and when the best time for her would be for me and Callie to get married.

I’d kept my mouth shut about the fiasco that was my relationship with Callie. I’ve learned that not saying something is usually better than letting my tongue wag.

I know how to apologize to Callie. I know what language she speaks, and I just need to find my courage to start talking.

After waiting while all of Mother’s bags get checked and tagged, I finally step into her and hug her tight. “Thanks for coming,” I say. “You should come to Charleston more often.”

She trills out a laugh. “Oh, you’d be eating those words soon enough.”

I don’t argue with her, because she’s probably right. In this moment, though, I don’t want her to go. Once she walks away, I’ll be left alone in Carolina again. For such a long time, I thought that was how I wanted my life to be: Me alone, doing whatever I want, day in and day out.

I can run in the mornings. Work on projects I’m passionate about during the day. Mow my lawn at night. Put on some TV or attend the theater. A movie. A concert. There’s plenty to keep me busy.

Plus, I have Lance, and he needs me right now.

Mother steps back and cradles my face in her hands. “Be good to that woman, Dawson,” she says. “I daresay she’s the best thing that’s happened to you in a while.”

“Yes, Mother,” I say automatically, my heart sinking to the soles of my feet.

With that, she turns and walks away, disappearing from my sight sooner than I’d like. I stand in the airport, feeling insignificant and horribly, utterly alone.

Loneliness is such a strong feeling, and it pins me to the ground, presses against my lungs, and pulses through my whole body.

“Sir?” someone asks, and I blink. “Do you need some help finding something?”

“No, thank you,” I say, turning and striding away from the woman. At least I think it had been a woman. I’m not sure of so much right now.

I sit in my car, breathing in and out, for what feels like a long time. Every idea I have that leads me to Callie is terrible, and I end up growing more and more irritated with myself. I wonder if she’s been back to the office yet. If she has, she didn’t call or text me about unpacking her boxes.

I drive that way, pulling into one of the few stalls behind the house and hurrying inside. Everything seems as I left it yesterday afternoon, but I pull open the bottom drawer in Callie’s desk. The Skittles stare back at me, and I know she’d never leave them behind.

I snatch the whole lot of them from the desk and go back to my car. My courage wanes with every mile I draw closer to Sugar Creek, but I have to do something. I’ll drown in this guilt and loneliness otherwise, and I should be taking Callie to breakfast right now instead of wallowing in my own rottenness.

I pull into her driveway and spot Claude Monet sitting in the window. The sight of him there gives me another dose of bravery for some reason. With the Skittles in my hand, I head for the front door.

The bell rings through the house, but no footsteps approach. I back up and look toward the window, but Claude is gone. I wish the feline had opposable thumbs and could open the door. I try the knob, but I'm not the least bit surprised to find the door locked.

My mind races with what to do next.

My stomach roars with the want of food.

I only have one idea, and it's probably not going to work. I set the Skittles on the top step and tap out a text for Callie. A note. I open the box that holds bags and bags of Skittles and set my phone right on top.

Then I hurry to my SUV and head to Cayenne's. All I can do now is wait, and pray she'll come once she's read my note.

CALLIE

Something's not right at my house. I can tell the moment Tara turns into my driveway. She's been a Godsend the past couple of days, letting me crash her kitchen, sleep in her spare bedroom, and driving me all over Carolina.

We'd gone by Dawson Dials In only an hour ago, but my boxes hadn't been sitting on the sidewalk. I didn't truly think they would be.

"Maybe Dawson brought the boxes here," I say out loud. Maybe that's why something isn't quite right at my house.

"Look at Claude in the window," Tara says.

"He's going to be so mad at me," I say. "He's probably starving to death." I get out of the car, glad we haven't come at night. I scan the yard, making sure to look up into the trees. People don't look up when assessing for danger, but I do. I know it can lurk anywhere, even across the hall in your boss's office.

I don't want to see Dawson again, but I'm going to have to. I don't have a key to the office anymore, and he probably took my boxes back inside there instead of lugging them here.

"There's something on your porch," Tara says, and I stop looking for serial killers in the trees to focus on the house.

Sure enough, a box of Skittles sits benignly on the porch. My skin prickles, and I look to the garage. I gave Dawson the code once. He could easily have gotten in, stacked my boxes inside, and left.

I pray that's what's happened as I take slow steps toward the Skittles.

My brain whirs, because something's not right about that box of candy either. When I reach the bottom step, I know what it is. "I packed the Skittles," I say, pausing and looking at Tara.

"Maybe he bought you a new box." She looks over her shoulder, I'm assuming so we don't get sneak-attacked from behind while we're distracted with the rainbow of deliciousness on the porch.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "It's open. You can tell, because the lid bows up." I hesitate for one more second, and then I commit to climbing the steps. "This is silly. It's a box of Skittles, not a box of snakes."

I pick up the box, and it's definitely been opened and some bags of candy removed. I pull back the lid and stare.

Dawson's phone sits there. I know it's his, because I've worked with the man for five years. He always has the latest and greatest electronics, and when he'd shown me this new phone only a month or so ago, I'd commented on the steel blue color of it.

A light flashes at the top of it, indicating he has some notifications or messages.

"It's his phone," I say when I hear Tara climbing the steps. "He's been here."

She takes the box of candy from me, and I reach in and pluck out Dawson's phone. "I don't get it," she says. "Why didn't he just text you?"

I swipe on the screen without answering her. His phone has a passcode, but I know it. I know everything about Dawson—but not why he left this box of candy to melt in the sun, his phone tucked inside the box.

Flummoxed, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do next. Read his texts? Try to call Lance? Maybe Dawson's phone fell out of his pocket while he bent over to set the candy on the porch.

And landed perfectly in the Skittles without him knowing, I think. Then the lid just tucked itself back in, and he left without the phone.

No way. Sometimes this thing was Dawson's third hand. He wouldn't leave it behind accidentally, and that means there's something here for me to see.

My heart pounds, because Dawson is very good at apologizing. Tara and I have been over it and over it, and I still haven't decided what I'll do if he comes groveling to me, begging me not to quit.

I went on a tirade last night after the anniversary party, ranting about how much of a raise it would take me to walk back into that office to face him every single day. "There's no amount of money worth that," I distinctly remember saying.

My heart wails at me now, because while working for Dawson has its ups and downs, kissing him was all an up.

I tap on his texting icon, and he has a few texts. One from Lance, one from his mother, and one from...himself.

I tap on that one, white noise starting to stream through my head. Tara asks me what I'm seeing on the phone, but I can't answer her.

Dawson's text to himself starts off with, *Hey, Callie.*

Wow, I don't even know where to start. First, I'm such an idiot. A huge, colossal moron. So much has happened in the past couple of days, and I reacted badly to all of them. You'd think I'd have learned how to control my emotions by now. Or at least my temper.

Second, I'm so sorry for not coming to pick you up for the gala. There's really no excuse, but I'd love to explain why that happened.

Third, I unpacked all of your boxes back at the office. You're probably going to hate me for that, but I can't stand the thought of going there and not seeing you. There is no one like you, and I need you there.

More than that, I need you in my life, and not just as my secretary. I want you to be my partner at the firm. I want you to be my partner for my life. I simply want you.

A sob wrenches its way up my throat. Dawson really is spectacular at saying all the right things. I think of him standing where I'm currently standing, his thumbs tapping out this message to himself.

Fourth, I'm terrified of this one, but I love you, Callie Michaels. I don't know how it happened so fast, and I think that's one of the reasons I tried to push you away this weekend. Please forgive me.

I'm going to Cayenne's. I'll be there until you bring my phone back to me. Sorry it's going to cost you another Carry. I'll pay for it. I'll pay for anything and everything—name the salary on the partnership papers, Cal. Just come.

Please come.

I love you,

Dawson

My hands shake, and when Tara reaches for the phone, I let her slide it out of my fingers. I stare at my front door, my mind racing. Part of me wants to go to Cayenne's right now. He loves me. He's sorry. He has explanations I want to hear.

Another part of me wants to make him wait. I didn't have the wherewithal to check the timestamp on the text the first time I read it, so I have no idea how long he's been waiting already.

I blink and focus on Tara. "Well?" I ask. Maybe she'll drive me back downtown. I don't want to ask her, and I can call for a ride.

"Well," she says slowly. "You said he knew how to apologize." She looks up from the phone. "This is about as perfect as it gets."

"Do you think he means it?"

"I think a rational, sober Dawson always means what he says, yes."

I take the phone from her and check the text again. “This was sent this morning,” I say. “Ten-fifty-four.”

“He’s been at Cayenne’s for six hours.” Tara flips her keys around her pointer finger. “Well, let’s go.”

“Should I go?” I ask, turning to watch her go down the steps.

She laughs, the sound flying up into the sky. “Honey, of course you’re going to go. I can see the hope written all over your face. Now stash that candy in the shade, bring that phone, and let’s go.”

“What about Claude?” I glance back to the house, wondering if Dawson’s even at Cayenne’s anymore.

“I’ll come back here and feed him and let him out,” Tara promises, taking my arm. “Come on.”

I do what she says and put the Skittles in the shade, because I do need to preserve them. Back in Tara’s car, properly buckled and on our way, I can’t stop shaking. “This is crazy. There’s no way what he said in that text is true.”

“I guess you’ll find out when we get to Cayenne’s,” Tara says.

I love you, Callie Michaels.

Please forgive me.

Please come.

The words loop through my head on the drive back toward the peninsula and Cayenne’s. Before I know it, Tara’s pulled up to the restaurant, double-parking beside the cars already lining the curb.

It’s Sunday evening at Cayenne’s, and that’s one of their busiest times, as they do a fish fry as their special on Sundays.

“Go on,” Tara says. “I have stuff to do tonight to prep for tomorrow, Cal. You’ll be fine in there.”

“At the very least, I can get some spicy chicken nuggets,” I say.

She giggles. “I think you’re going to get a lot more than that.”

I get out of the car, Dawson’s phone gripped in my hand like a sword. Like I’m entering a battle and will need this phone, this very device, to win the war.

The door to Cayenne’s stands open, letting in fresh air and letting out chatter and laughter. I feed off the energy here, hoping I’m brave enough to survive the next few minutes. I realize in that moment, that’s all I need. Enough courage to get through the next two minutes.

“You can do anything for two minutes,” I mutter to myself. “You worked for him for five years. Two minutes is nothing.”

I step inside the restaurant, scanning for Dawson.

He’s certainly not hard to find.

He sits at a table only ten feet from the door. Flowers, balloons, gifts, boxes of Skittles, one that looks suspiciously like shoes, one of Byrd’s cookies, and more fills the table in front of him.

He looks toward me, the conversation he’s having with the gentleman on his left ceasing. He stands as our eyes meet.

“Is that her?” the man asks.

Everything narrows to just me and him. Him and me. Someone bumps into me as they try to enter Cayenne’s too, and I take a step out of the doorway.

“It’s her,” Dawson says, and the man yells it to the restaurant.

Everyone explodes into cheering and applause, breaking the tunnel-vision I have for my ex-boss-boyfriend. I glance around and take in their smiling faces, the way a couple of women wipe their eyes, and the energy they’re putting off.

They give me courage.

The table full of gifts gives me hope.

The man walking toward me makes my heartbeat flutter like wings before a baby bird takes flight. I hold up his phone

and say, “You left my Skittles to melt in direct sunlight?”

DAWSON

I don't miss a beat, and I don't stumble for a single step. Sweeping the phone out of her hand, I say, "I bought you all new ones, sweetie." I take her into my arms and breathe in the scent of her. She smells different today, and it's probably because she didn't shower at home.

I don't care. She's still Callie Michaels, and I'm still in love with her.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, hoping she can hear me above the noise in the restaurant. Everyone knows my story, and why I'm taking up a table covered in everything except food from Cayenne's.

"I love you," I say next. "Please, you must forgive me. Please don't quit. I didn't mean anything I said on Friday night."

She holds onto me, which encourages me. A moment later, though, she steps back, her eyes filled with tears as they meet mine. "Are you even going to be at the firm for much longer?"

"Yes," I say with plenty of conviction. "Come sit down. No, wait, first, let's order your favorites." I glance over my shoulder, and Gus is gone. "I bet Gus went to put them in, actually. Come sit down."

Every eye is on us as we move back to the table. I indicate the spread I've gathered. "First, so you know not everything is a food, I got you this set of padlocks for the house." I pick up the bulky multi-pack of heavy, metal locks. "I'm sure they're serial-killer proof."

She half-laughs and half-sobs, but I forge onward. “This is that pair of shoes I heard you telling Jillian about. The girl had to call over to the north store for your size, and then Tom drove through traffic to get them. But we got them. They’ve only been here about fifteen minutes, actually, so that’s a bit of good luck.”

Her hand finds mine, and she laces her fingers through mine and squeezes.

My heartbeat stutters in my chest, and I have a hard time breathing. I’m used to making presentations for important clients, and this is by far my most crucial one, so I keep going. “We have the Skittles, of course. A fresh box, so you can throw away the melted ones.” I glance at her, but she keeps her eyes on the table.

“A box of Georgia peach cookies from Byrd’s. All those shiny balloons you like, and Claude will like them too, if I remember right. You said once he loves to chase the helium balloons as they start to lose their lift.”

She snuffles, and I reach for the huge vase of red roses. “Flowers,” I say. “We always have them in the office, and you act like I’m the fussy one about it. But really, you love them.”

She leans over and smells the roses, and a smile touches my face at how pure she is. How good. How beautiful, and kind, and forgiving.

“Hot chicken nuggets,” Gus says, arriving at precisely the right moment. “Cajun fries, with our signature ranch sauce.”

Callie looks from the huge basket of food, to Gus, to me.

“I love you,” I say again. “If you can find any way to forgive me, we can sit down and eat, and I’ll try to explain a few things.”

She releases my hand and steps over to Gus, taking him into a tight hug. He grins, closes his eyes, and pats her on the back. She obviously asks him something, because Gus nods and says something I can’t make out amidst the chaos in the restaurant. He pulls away and holds her by the shoulders for

another moment, saying one final thing before she turns back to me.

Her eyes are bright, and my hope starts to shine. “Any number you want on the partnership papers,” I say. “I can’t run that firm without you. I can’t *live* without you in my life.” I’ve said it all now. The ball’s in her court.

I glance over to Lance, who’s been sitting in the corner of the restaurant this whole time. He’s wearing a smile, though I know this is probably torture for him. He came when I called though, because he’s my very best friend in the whole world, and we’d do anything for each other.

“What do you say?” I ask. “Will you sit down and eat with me?” I forgot about the pens and the dry cleaning, but I swallow back the urge to tell her I’ll pick up my own dang pens from now on. I had no idea she did all of that around the office.

This isn’t about her performance as my secretary. This is about having the woman I love at my side for the rest of my life.

She steps back to me, her hands coming up to cradle my face. She searches my eyes with hers, finally saying, “I love you too, Dawson.”

Joy bursts through me, as does a smile across my face. I lean toward her at the same time she pulls me forward, and I kiss her.

The restaurant goes wild, and I don’t even care that there are dozens of people watching. I kiss her, and kiss her, and kiss her, only stopping when she laughs and pulls away. I still want more. I want her forever.

“All right,” she says, wrapping one arm around my waist and leaning into my side. “I guess we better eat some of this stuff to make some room on the table.”

“AND THAT’S WHY I DIDN’T COME PICK YOU UP,” I SAY, almost finished. My throat is drier than a desert in summer, because I’ve been talking so much. Explaining everything. “I was just so shocked that Hadley would do that to Lance after they’d been together for so long. I reverted to this...this man standing at the altar, waiting for his fiancée to show up.” I hang my head. “I put all of that on you, as if all women are the same.”

In that moment—heck, for a couple of days there—they had been.

“You weren’t thinking rationally,” she says.

“Whether I was or not, I don’t know,” I admit. “What I know is I felt betrayed. I felt like you were playing me, and I felt like I’d end up just like Lance if we kept dating. I watched you flirt—what I considered flirting—with Carlton Winchester, and yes, I’d been drinking.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. Those are just excuses. I did the wrong thing. I said the wrong things.” I put my free hand over my heart and face the ocean as the sun continues to slide into night. “It’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing,” she says.

“But I do,” I say. “There’s so much to apologize for.” I sigh and let the wind push its warm fingers through my hair. “It’s amazing how many mistakes a single man can make in a matter of seconds.”

She reaches over and takes my forearm in her far hand. We’ve been walking along the beach for a while now, and I’m sure she wants to go back. She said she hasn’t been home since Friday, and Claude Monet is probably spitting mad at her for not going in to feed him when she found my phone and the Skittles on her porch.

“Let’s head back,” I say. “Get you home.”

We piled all of the gifts and balloons into my car when we left Cayenne’s, and it’s roasting hot when we get back to it. “I guess you’ll need a third box of Skittles now,” I say, reaching to turn up the air conditioning.

“I like them warm,” she says. “Sometimes I pop them in the microwave for five or six seconds.”

I glance at her. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.” She grins at me. “Of course, you have to only do it for a few seconds, otherwise they mash all together, and then you can’t sort them into the perfect flavor combinations.”

I grin and shake my head. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Callie.”

“Thank you,” she says, smiling right on back at me. She leans across the console in my SUV, and I meet her halfway to kiss her. I thread my fingers through her hair and hold her in place, enjoying this slow, passionate kiss almost as much as the more frantic one back at Cayenne’s.

“Mm,” she says when I pull back. She wears a soft look on her face, and I know I’ve hit the jackpot with this woman and her forgiving heart. “All right.” She sits up straight in her seat. “Take me home so I can feed my grumpy cat. While I deal with him, you can put one of those padlocks on my back gate. I’ve been thinking about getting a set for that, as serial killers are less likely to try to enter somewhere that’s hard to get into. You know?”

I laugh, because no, I did not know. But I’ll do anything this woman wants me to do, and if that’s put a padlock on her back gate, that’s just fine with me.

CALLIE

“I just don’t see how it’s going to work,” I say, frowning at the schedule Dawson’s put in front of me. “You’re not a superhero.” I lift the single sheet of paper, the items it holds ridiculously heavy. “No one can work like this.”

He wears a dark look on his face, but I know it will pass. I’ve been back in the office for a week, and today’s Monday morning meeting has already gone past Dawson’s usual tolerance. I don’t care. We can’t go another week of him working fifteen-hour days. It’s why he looks like Lance beat him up last night, and why he’s been a growly bear since he walked in this morning.

I lean back in my chair. “We need more help.” I raise my hand as he opens his mouth. “As a managing partner in this firm,” I continue slowly, my pitch perfect. At least my Carry driver this morning said it was. “I can hire people. I think we should put out a notice on the job board. We already have the desk. We just need the right body to fill it. Then, they can do a lot of what I used to, and I can do a lot of what you’re leaving on the table while you’re at Fowler.”

Dawson sighs and pushes both hands through his hair. If he knew how adorable that made him, he’d probably do it all the time just to drive me wild. He looks so tired when he meets my eye again. “I promised I wouldn’t abandon you here.”

“Yes, you did,” I say. “Perhaps this is just the beginning of you making sure you know everything at Fowler International, and it’ll all calm down in a few weeks.” He’s said that a dozen

times. Once he gets his footing, he won't be needed there. He might be right, but we just don't know.

"Our workload is large enough to handle a third person anyway," I say. "Whether you're here full-time or not."

"I don't like this."

"Another option is to move Dawson Dials In to the high-rise. We can work out of the offices there, and you'll be on-site for both jobs more readily." I reach for the top paper in the folder on my lap. "I asked Stan to pull up the map of offices and rooms for me." I put the marked paper on his desk and slide it toward Dawson. "There's a couple of options over at Fowler."

I continue to outline them, saying, "In both cases, I have my own office, which I have to admit, sounds better than a desk in the lobby."

He studies the paper and then lowers it. "I love this building."

"I do too," I say. "I love talking to Jillian and hearing her stories about her and her husband." I smile at him, thinking how Jillian's only been remarried for a few years now. Dawson and I attended their wedding together. "Things change, though, Dawson."

He turns the paper over. "It's not going to be for much longer, I just know it. Then I'll be here like I normally am, and there will just be seasons where things are intense and crazy."

I knew he'd say that. He's not ready to leave this building and move his advertising firm to Fowler International. He told me he absolutely refused to let Fowler absorb Dawson Dials In, and moving the firm there would be a step in the wrong direction, in his opinion.

It's a good fifteen minutes between this building and the office he has in the high-rise with the big, shiny letters that spell FOWLER on it. Every time he goes back and forth, he's losing a half-hour.

"What do you think of my idea to hire someone?" I ask, glancing down at my lap. I've already got the job notice

written and ready to post. “We could get someone who works on the advertising side with us, and someone to run the office. An office manager and an advertising executive.”

He nods, his face taking on some new measure of relief. “I like that idea much more than moving to the Fowler building or continuing as we are.”

“I do too,” I agree. “I like the idea of an office manager so much. Someone to answer the phones and make the schedule. It would free me up tremendously.”

He leans back in his chair and grins at me. “Are you going to put in the job description that they have to come in on Saturdays and pick up my pens?”

I freeze, my eyes widening as I look at him.

The smile slips from his face as it darkens again. “Or get my dry cleaning?”

“I did those things, because they needed to be done,” I say.

“No,” he argues back. “You did them so I wouldn’t be a beast to you.”

“Doing them made my life easier too,” I say.

“Because *I’d* made it so hard.”

“What are you saying?” I finally ask. “Have you been beating yourself up about this all this time?”

“First,” he says, holding up one finger. “It’s been a week. Second, yes, I have. I meant to tell you last weekend that I’d pick up my own dang pens and get my own stupid laundry if you’d just come back.”

“Well, I already came back.” I stand, closing my folder. The rest of this can wait. It’s nothing anyway. Just me being over-organized, as usual.

“Callie,” he says, standing too as I start for the exit from his office. “Wait.”

I sigh and turn back to him. “I never minded doing things around here,” I say. “I’m a big girl, Dawson. If I don’t want to pick up your pens, I won’t.”

“I know that.” He reaches out and traces his fingers down the side of my face. “You’re wonderful. I just wanted to apologize for making you...feel however you felt that you had to pick up my pens and take my clothes to be cleaned.”

He takes a step toward me, and my body heat rises, reacting to his. I glance to my left a few feet, where his office closet stands. “I didn’t know you were coming in on Saturdays to do that.”

“It was calming for me,” I say. “Not everything is about you, Mister Big Head.”

He laughs, and I smile too. He leans his forehead against mine and says, “I don’t care what you do, Cal. I just want you to be happy.”

“Hiring two people would make me happy,” I say.

“Then do it.” He kisses me, and while it’s not the wild, heated kiss that we shared the first time here in this office, it’s just as good. Better, maybe, because he hasn’t just called me impossible and stubborn—both adjectives that fit him to a T, thank you very much—and I know it won’t be the last time I get to kiss him.

“You know,” he whispers, moving his mouth to my earlobe. “By my count, you’ve seen my abs a couple of times now.”

I smile and hold onto his shoulders. “Yes, the beach was very...enlightening yesterday.”

“You said you’d show me yours if I showed you mine.”

“I wore a bikini yesterday,” I say, my words mostly made of air as his lips travel down the length of my neck.

“Not the same,” he says. “Plus, you never went in the water. I had to try to see it through that gauzy coverup.”

“Mm.” I guide his mouth back to mine and kiss him again, hoping he can feel how much I love him in the touch. I say, “I love you, Dawson,” just in case he can’t.

“I love you too, Cal.” He kisses me again and then tucks me into his chest. “Mother asked me about setting a date.”

“I’m sure she did.” Lila Houser knows how to get what she wants, and she certainly knows how to kill the mood between me and Dawson, even if she’s not even physically here. “What did you tell her?” I disentangle myself from him and head toward my desk.

He follows me, saying, “I told her I’d ask you.”

“Well.” I sigh as I toss my folder of prepared notes on my desk. “I don’t know, Dawson. I think we have to deal with one fire at a time.” I look out the windows. “You don’t want a traditional wedding, and your mother won’t have it any other way. I think we need a plan before you tell her much of anything else.”

I turn toward him, asking, “Right?”

He’s down on one knee, holding something up toward me.

A gasp flies from my mouth, and my eyes lock onto that impressive diamond.

“I know this is fast,” he says. “I’m not doing this for her. I’m not even doing it for you. I’m doing it for me. I’m ready, Callie. I’m ready to have a fiancée again, but only if it’s you. I don’t care if we’re engaged for a year or five. I’ll do whatever you want with the date. You can serve Skittles in little paper cups for all I care. I don’t want a traditional wedding, where I have to stand at the altar and wait for you. But Callie, I *could* do it. I want you to know that. Because it’s you, I *could* stand there again and wait for you to come to me. I *could*.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I nod. “Of course you could.” The man can do anything. Maybe he is a superhero. Even superheroes have bad days, right? Nights they can’t sleep? Days they yell at their secretaries?

Except I’m not just his secretary anymore.

“I love you to the stars and the moon and the next galaxy,” he says. “Will you do me the great honor of being my fiancée?”

My neck turns to rubber, and I start to bobble-nod like a crazy person. “Yes,” I say, the word bursting from my mouth.

“Yes, yes, I’ll marry you.” I half-laugh and half-cry, so glad I now have an engagement story to tell Jillian.

But it’s far more than a story to tell my girlfriends. This is true love, and I let my tears slip down my face as Dawson slides the ring onto my finger. He stands and embraces me, whispering, “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Callie. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I whisper, and when he kisses me, it’s once again a brand-new experience, because this time, I’m kissing my fiancé, and there’s nothing better than that.

Except maybe the two-red, one-yellow Skittle combination—which I just might serve at the wedding. Oh, his mother would die...

I laugh, breaking our kiss, and hold his face in my hands. Our eyes meet, and while I’ve looked at Dawson plenty of times, it’s different now. More magical. Simply amazing.

“I love you,” we say together, and I kiss him again, ready to take our firm into the future the same way we’re going to take our relationship to the next level.

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BOOK 2: JUST HIS BOSS

ABOUT JUST HIS BOSS

She's just his boss, especially since Tara just barely hired Alec. But when things heat up in the kitchen, Tara will have to decide where Alec is needed more—on her arm or behind the stove.

Tara:

Alec Ward makes sure everyone knows I'm the boss. He thinks it's some sort of homage to me or something. I find it as sarcastic and annoying as he is drop-dead gorgeous.

I'd have fired him on his first day for his Grumpy-Cat attitude, but he's the best thing to happen to Saucebilities since I opened the doors a decade ago. He acts like dating is beneath him, and I'm happy to feed that opinion for him by telling him all about my dating disasters while we whip up delicacies for the rich and famous around Charleston.

I know just how to handle men like Alec.

Until an article comes out that could devastate me. The headline?

No one trusts a skinny chef, but can the plump cooks in this town find love?

I'm the headliner in the article, thanks to an ex who's looking for revenge. "Plump?" I rage to Alec, a knife in my hand. "I'll show him plump."

I expect him to laugh, pluck the knife away before I hurt myself, and tell me to get over it. Instead, he says, "You should show him that women of all sizes can find love."

So he's deeper than I thought. Big deal. Doesn't mean I'm going to fall for his knife skills or the muscles it takes to lift all those pounds of potatoes. I do take his advice and leave a comment on my ex's article.

When my ex walks into my kitchen, uninvited I might add, and demands to know who I'm dating, Alec steps right to my side with, "Is this the guy, baby?"

Oh, he's the guy, and I suddenly want to show him—and myself—that I'm a good catch, curves and all...

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TARA

I glance up at the television playing in my kitchen, hearing the words “Fowler International” and then “Dawson Houser.”

My knife doesn't slow as I move it through the onions I'm chopping, though my gaze is now trained on the screen showing my best friend's fiancé. I expect to see Callie appear on-screen too, but the media doesn't seem as enamored with her as they do Dawson.

Of course, Dawson's the one with all the power and prestige. The one with the huge bank account. The one with the handsome face, the straight-teeth smile, and the Carolina charm.

I scoff and scoop up the onions with the blade of my knife. They go in the pan behind me, where half a cube of butter has been melting gently.

I know the truth behind Dawson Houser, and that's that Callie's his backbone. Callie puts together his speeches and his outfits, and Callie's the one who reminds him to smile, coaches him on what to say, and cares for him before and after all of the publicity surrounding their upcoming wedding.

They should be here in about an hour, and I'll get to see the real Dawson Houser. I've met the man loads of times, and I can admit that he's changed a ton since he and Callie started dating.

I season the onions with salt and pepper, something I've done so often I don't have to think about it. That allows my

mind to wander down a semi-dangerous path toward dating.

I haven't been out with anyone in a while, because when a chef has a business, that's the intimate relationship in their life. At least for me, I've had a hard time devoting myself to anything but Saucebilities.

Since I catered the Fowler Founder's Gala a couple of months ago, my business has exploded. I can't keep up with the requests coming in through my online form, and I've hired someone part-time to tackle that job for me.

Callie keeps telling me to hire new chefs, because then I'd be able to keep up. But I'm not sure I want to. A new chef eats into my profits, so while I might be able to do more events, I'd have to pay those chefs.

Most of them think restaurant work is more prestigious than catering, and I'll train them up, give them great experience, and then they leave to go do "bigger and better" things. I've actually had a few of them say those exact words to my face.

Familiar bitterness creeps through me as I add several cloves of chopped garlic to the pan. Celery and carrots go in next, and the mirepoix really starts to scent my house.

I shouldn't even be cooking today. One of my goals this summer was to only work six days a week. No one can go, go, go all the time, though I've been tempted. Plus, I hate cooking at home. Sure, everyone sees those celebrity chefs on TV, talking about all these dishes they make at home for their loved ones.

I think they're all liars. I work so much in the kitchen at Saucebilities, there's no way I'm slaving over the stove when I get home too. Nope. I call for take-out almost every day, and the food from someone else's restaurant is a treat for me.

Not only that, but I've been really trying to cut down on how much I work. Six days a week, twelve hours a day, should be enough.

"This isn't work, Tara," I tell myself. I'm making soup for Callie and Dawson. They've hired me to cater their wedding,

which will be a small, private affair at an undisclosed location. Dawson's had some nuptial issues in the past, and he doesn't want a traditional wedding.

That's why he and Callie are performing for the press so often these days. They've made it very clear everything surrounding their forthcoming I-do is off-limits.

Even I don't know where the wedding will be yet, and it's in only another month. They've had a short engagement—one of the shortest I've ever heard of—and I need to ask Callie about the kitchen at this place again.

She's assured me it'll be fine, but my nerves seethe at me.

Maybe that's because I lost another chef a few days ago. I've told myself I'm not going to hire another one. I've got four working with me now, and the four of us will have to handle whatever we've got.

I push all thoughts of work from my mind. I'm not working today—I'm making lunch for my friends. This could be the soup they choose for their wedding dinner. That's it.

I've just added tomato paste and a dash of oregano to the pan to start to draw out the deep, rich flavors of it when my chef-cell rings. It's a low-pitched tune that steadily moves up an octave, and I know to ignore that call.

"Someone from work," I say. "And I'm *not* working today."

Anxiety eats at me, because I am the boss, and it's my catering company. I assign all my employees the same ringtone on the chef-cell, so it could've been any of them.

My mind moves through who's working today—Jared, Barley, and Alec.

Oh, Alec. My thoughts freeze on him, and it's a good thing I know how to put together a sausage and orzo stew without thinking too hard.

Alec Ward is like six chefs in the kitchen. He works faster than anyone I've watched cook before, and his palette is incredible. We went to the Food and Wine Festival in Florida a

couple of weeks ago, and he could identify the minute spices and tangs in the dishes we sampled even when I couldn't.

He's been a real Grumpy Cat to have in my kitchen, but I'm terrible at firing people, and he's really the best chef in the South. I'm lucky to have him.

You just want to get lucky with him, I think, shocked the moment the thought fills my mind. Once it's there, I can't get it to leave, and I actually start to fantasize that he was the one to call me, but only to ask me to dinner.

A private dinner he'll have cooked himself, with all of my favorite things. Eggplant parmesan, with homemade spaghetti noodles, and a deep, rich meaty sauce he's labored over for hours. Food really is the way to my heart, though I'm not male, and the extra weight I carry on my tall frame testifies of that.

"No one trusts a skinny chef," I tell myself as I lift a spoon to my lips to taste the broth I've put together. It's rich, hearty, salty, and perfect. I'll add the orzo, and that'll take some of the salt out of it, giving me a final product that will leave bellies full and mouths happy.

With the small, oblong pasta boiling away in the soup broth, I brown up the sausage and get out my fancy, only-for-important-company bowls. I hardly ever use my nice dishes, though I own a ton of them.

When it's just me eating, I don't need a gold-rimmed plate to put my chicken Caprese sandwich on, even if it is a fancier sandwich than most people would eat for dinner.

I finish the soup and flip off the TV. Outside, it's time to let out the chickens. I breathe in the hot air that covers Carolina in the summer as I go down the steps to the yard. The coop sits right up against the corner of my house, and I worked hard to put up the fence between the chicken run and my yard.

Most people would've used that space for their dogs, but canines require too much human interaction. Chickens don't care if I work all day and all night.

“Cluckles,” I say as I open the coop door. “Time to get some fresh air. Come on, guys.” Cluckles comes bopping out, her head thrusting forward and pulling back. Just the way chickens walk makes me smile. “Go on, now. Get some good exercise in the yard.”

I’m like a chicken warden, letting the bird inmates out for their one hour of exercise. I smile at myself and watch as Nog, Nuggets, and Fluffers follow Cluckles. All of my chickens have names, as they’re good friends.

They know all about Alec and his attitude, all about how Gene quit last week to go work at a premier steakhouse in the city, and all about my pathetic, non-existent love life. Only Hennifer has ever given me any judgment at all, and my smile straightens as the black and white hen bobs on past me.

“You stay in the strip this time,” I tell them as they continue to come out of the coop. I own thirteen chickens—a baker’s dozen—and their eggs go with me to my catering kitchen every day.

Between my house and my neighbor’s, there’s a strip of pasture. The Reynolds used to put a calf on it every year, but Mr. Reynolds didn’t do that this spring. I look across the wild strip of grasses and weeds to his house. His wife died last year, and I try to take over all of my new recipes for him to taste. It gives us both someone to talk to—for me, someone who I don’t employ, and for him, just someone.

“Getting Puffles out?” Callie’s voice sounds above me and to my left, and I look up to the deck.

“Puffles?” I ask in a disgusted voice. “Don’t be ridiculous. Who would name their chicken Puffles?”

She grins at me and leans against the railing. She always looks like a million bucks, and today is no different. She’s wearing a pair of shorts that do amazing things for her legs, a silk, peach-colored blouse, and her hair all wavy as it cascades over her shoulders. She’s stunningly beautiful, and I smile at her. I wish I wasn’t quite so tall, because I feel like I loom over people, especially some men, and it’s awkward.

“Who—besides you—names their chickens at all?”

“A lot of people,” I shoot back at her.

“Yeah, people who are ten years old,” she says with a grin.

While she’s been heckling me, Alfredo and Omeletto have exited the coop. Of course, there’s still one stubborn chicken inside. “Come on, Benedict,” I say to her. “Get out of there.” I bend to pull the farm animal out, and she warbles at me.

“You need some fresh air,” I tell her. Plus, I need to gather the eggs. “Grab that basket,” I tell Callie. “And come help me with the eggs.”

Callie joins me, and she holds the basket while I fill it with eggs. “You’re all fancy,” I say, putting the last egg on top of the others. “I love this blouse.” I grin at her and give her a hug, the basket off to the side of us.

“Thanks.” She sighs and laughs lightly. “It’s nice to be here,” she says. She’s always liked my house; she says she feels safe here. We’ve known each other for over ten years, and she’s my safe place too. She’s been there through another near-engagement, through the opening of Saucebilities, through everything. She was the one who picked me up and dusted me off after my husband, Otis, left.

I swallow against those still-raw feelings, wondering how much time has to pass before they’ll go away. A decade seems like long enough, but perhaps not. The Good Lord doesn’t think so, at least, because my heart still quivers a bit in my chest.

That might be from the disastrous relationships I’ve tried since my marriage ended. Or the way I eat butter pecan ice cream for breakfast each morning. I’ve heard all that sugar and cream isn’t great for hearts, but I can’t stop myself.

“There you are,” Dawson says, coming outside. “It smells great in there, Tara.”

“Thanks.” I put a grin on my face for him too. “Howdy, Dawson.” I start for the deck, Callie in tow. “You guys must’ve had a press event. I saw you on TV this morning.”

He looks down at the blue blazer-white polo-with jeans combination he's wearing. "Yeah, we had breakfast at the country club."

My heart taps out an extra beat. "You're surely not hungry for lunch then." I glance at Callie as she reaches the top of the steps.

"Sure we are," Callie says with a smile. "When have I ever not wanted to eat your food?" She hands me the basket of eggs, her blue eyes dazzling at me. "Plus, I know you ate breakfast. I saw that empty ice cream container in the trashcan."

"You're rifling through my trash again?" I tease as I follow her and Dawson into the house. "After that doughnut incident, I thought you were going to stop doing that."

Callie bursts out laughing, and I join her. We'd literally seen someone fish a doughnut out of the trashcan at the coffee shop last week. It really was too bad it had turned out to be the guy Callie was trying to set me up with. She'd had to think fast on her feet then, and I'd ducked into the bathroom to save us both some humiliation.

Inside, I set the eggs on the kitchen table and step over to Dawson to give him a light hug. He squeezes me back, but his expression is more nervous than I've seen him in a while.

"What's going on?" I look between him and Callie, as I'm now standing in the middle of them.

"Nothing," Callie says, her voice as false as my granddaddy's teeth.

"Nothing," Dawson mimics in the same, fake tone, and every hair on my arms stands up.

"Someone better tell me," I say. "Or I'm not serving the soup." I fold my arms and glare from one of them to the other.

"Tara," Callie says in a soothing voice. She links her arm through mine and starts to tug me further into the kitchen. I don't want to go with her, but my feet move anyway. My chef-cell sings out another chefy ringtone, and I have most of a

mind to answer it. I have a feeling I'm not going to like what Callie says next.

"What's going on?" I whisper as I reach for the bowls I've gotten out. I hand them to her, and we go into the dining room. I hardly ever use it, because I can eat my midnight sandwiches at the regular kitchen table. Or my bed. "You two are still getting married, right?"

"Yes," she says in a voice only a few decibels louder than mine. "Here's the thing."

"Oh, boy," I say, sliding my arm out of hers. My mind fires through things, as if I've forgotten something. The soup is ready to eat, sitting benignly on the stove, the lid keeping everything hot. The chickens... "I left the coop door open. Come with me, because I have a feeling I'm going to need the wide Carolina sky to help me comprehend what you're about to say."

Dawson's at the kitchen table, his attention on his phone as I step out my back door and walk across the small deck, Callie right on my heels. She's wearing some immaculate ankle boot things, because she's a petite, beautiful woman who works in an office. I'm the lumbering, tall oaf wearing orthopedics because I stand all day long.

We go down the steps and back to the coop, where sure enough, I've left it open. The birds could've come into the yard, and I wouldn't have been happy about that.

"Your back yard is so wonderful," Callie says, and I turn to find her with her face turned into the sun, the slight breeze kissing her cheeks as it flows by.

I close the door to the yard, trapping the chickens in their prison pasture strip, watch Callie. "Yes, Morris has done a great job this summer."

Callie faces me as I settle my weight on my right foot. "Dawson and I want to get married here."

I blink at her, taking in the nerves in her eyes and the way her hands rotate around each other. "What? Why here?" I look past her to my yard, which is nice. I pay for it to be lush,

green, and landscaped, so it should be beautiful. I never let Chick Fillet and her buddies back here. For all accounts, there should be coils of razor wire between the chicken pasture and my emerald green grass.

I have a lot of trees along the east-side fence that I suppose act like the razor wire in a neighborhood-friendly way, and no neighbor on the west. It faces south, so I get a lot of great sun in the winter months, and not so much in the summer ones. Since we're moving into autumn in a couple of months, the sun is nearly overhead about now.

Roses bloom along the other side of the deck, and I have raised flowerbeds with dwarf trees, more bushes, and big, flowering plants around the side. As I look at the yard, I can see precisely where an arch would go to make a beautiful wedding scene. I can see trellises and tea lights, jarred fireflies and small tables and chairs for the few guests the wedding will bring.

"We don't want somewhere commercial," Callie says, bringing my attention back to her. "We can't do it in one of our yards, because the press will expect that."

"What about the beach?" I ask. "You'd like that."

"It's public," Callie says. "Your place is perfect, and there's not going to be more than thirty people here. Maybe only twenty. You can cook right in your own kitchen, and serve from the deck, and you won't even have to move your chickens."

I glance at them, their little heads bobbing as they peck at the ground in their prison-pen. I have no reason to say no, so I say, "Okay, sure."

"Tara?" Dawson asks from up on the deck, and I turn toward him. "Uh, there's someone here to see you, and he doesn't look too happy."

"Who?" I ask, already going around the corner of the deck to get back to the stairs.

Alec muscles his way out onto the deck, nearly shoving Dawson out of the way. "Isn't it your job to answer your

phone when one of your chefs call?” he growls at me. “Boss?”

ALEC

There's nothing that annoys me more than someone who won't answer their phone. Just because Tara Finch is my boss doesn't mean I have to put up with that. Saucebilities is her company; doesn't she care?

Calm down, I tell myself as the gorgeous brunette reaches the top of the stairs. She glares at me with the heat of the sun, and dang if that look doesn't get my blood moving a little faster.

Something switched for me on our trip to Florida, but I can't quite identify what it is. I also can't tell her, and I've resorted to being surlier than ever just to keep the walls up around myself.

She certainly doesn't make things any easier on me by wearing such delicious jeans and a tank top that shows off the muscles in her arms and the curves of her female body.

"What are you doing here?" she demands, striding across the small space toward me. "How do you even know where I live?"

"He didn't know where you lived?" the woman she was with down on the grass asks. Her name is Callie Michaels, and I've met her plenty of times. She actually makes me smile, and I can see why she and Tara are friends. "How did he figure that out?"

Tara ignores her, so I do too. "I called you," I growl out. "Twice." I gesture toward her house as if it's the commercial kitchen in the retail space she rents. "I can't work with Barley.

The man barely has any personal hygiene, and he shouldn't be allowed in a kitchen. He's going to get us in trouble with the Health Department."

I expect Tara's eyes to widen, and then she'll rush over to Sauceabilities with me. Maybe we can go to dinner after we finish feeding the mayor and his office staff at their quarterly meetings.

Instead, she starts to laugh. "Us, Alec?" She tips her head back and laughs. The sound infuses me with a sense of joy I haven't felt in a while—and plenty of annoyance that I have. "Barley's fine. Besides, he's the very best at the grilled oysters Mayor Fielding likes."

"That is so not true," I say. "I can grill *lines* around that guy." Double lines. The kind that create perfect diamonds on perfectly cooked meat—which Tara knows.

She *knows*.

I've seen the way she looks at me, and she's not light on the praise either. I'll give her credit for that. Tara Finch compliments her cooks when they deserve it.

"Maybe you can," she says, taking an extra step toward me, as if she's really going to go chest-to-chest with me. She's tall, but not as tall as me.

She's scrumptious, and as I get a whiff of the scent of her skin, I get fresh air, something fowly, fully of sausage, and the deep, rich smell of that stew I saw on her stovetop. She's got pretty-boy Dawson Houser here, along with his fiancée, both of whom have been dominating the social headlines in Carolina for a couple of months now.

I knew she was friends with them, and I'm not surprised to see them here on her day off. I am a bit surprised I left my post in the kitchen and drove over here to confront her. Barley just makes me see red.

Crimson red.

"But he does have a way he seasons and grills them that the mayor likes," Tara says, bringing me back to the argument at hand. "It's not always about being the best, Alec."

“Don’t patronize me,” I say.

“I’m not.” She sighs. “Listen, you’re a great chef. The best I’ve had, and you know it.”

“That’s the problem,” Callie says, and Tara shoots her a glare. She blinks and says, “Sorry, Tara. Come on, Dawson. Let’s go inhale that soup Tara made and let her handle this.” She takes her fiancé inside, leaving me and Tara alone on the deck.

“I’m sorry,” I say, the words thick in my mouth. I don’t say them often, but with Tara, I find it easier than with anyone else. Especially my dad or my brother, and a sting of regret starts low in my gut.

“You are an amazing chef,” she says again, falling back that extra step she took. “You need to figure out how to get along with Barley, number one. And number two, you need to understand that in catering, it’s not about being the best. It’s about—”

“Delivering what the client wants,” we say together. This isn’t the first time she’s given me this lecture.

I sigh and run my hand through my hair. “Okay, Boss.”

“What did Barley do?” she asks, cocking one hip and folding her arms.

She is downright lethal to a man’s defenses, that’s for sure. I force myself to keep my eyes on hers, so she won’t discover these soft feelings I’ve been developing for her. It simply won’t do, as she’s my boss.

My *boss*.

I’ve gotten involved romantically with a boss before, and let me just say, that had ended badly. I see smoke and fire, and not just because we broke up. But actual smoke and fire from an accident in the kitchen that had left me humiliated and her in trouble with her financier daddy...and her *other* boyfriend.

I smile at Tara, because she runs Saucebilities herself. No rich daddy in sight. “He answers his personal cell while he’s

cooking, Boss. It's gross. That thing could've been anywhere, and I just..." I shiver.

"Maybe you're a germophobe," she says, grinning at me.

"That's not a maybe, sweetheart," I drawl, pulling on my strong Southern roots.

Tara rolls her eyes, but I think her face turns a bit pinker. A man can hope, at least. I can't believe I let the hope in, actually. I know what a relationship with my boss looks like, and I know how it ends.

I actually like this job, because Tara is a professional. She plays by the book, has all the right permits, and puts out delicious food.

My eyes drop to her lips, and I wonder how delectable they'd taste. I yank my thoughts back to something more appropriate and move my gaze back to hers. "You better get back to the kitchen," she says. "Or..." Her eyes flicker over my shoulder. "Maybe you have time to stay for lunch? I tried a new spin on my sausage stew recipe, and I'd love your opinion on it."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

She shrugs as if she doesn't really care, but I suspect she does. She changed while we wandered the Food and Wine Festival a few weeks ago. Things are different between us now, and as a flush creeps up her neck and into her face, I see a more vulnerable version of her. It makes me wonder if I can be more laid-back, more open, and more...myself with her too.

Maybe I don't have to be the tough-as-nails chef with fifteen knives flying every which way. Not with her.

"Really," she says. "I put you on the mayoral dinner for a reason."

"I thought it was because of my knife jokes," I say.

Tara rolls her eyes, and even that accelerates my pulse. "The one about them being *cutting-edge* technology?" She scoffs. "You're no stand-up comedian."

No, but there's a great comedy club on the waterfront, and I wonder if she'd go with me. Instead of asking, I say, "I can call Jared right now. The cakes just have to come out and cool. Then I'll head back and decorate them."

"If you have time."

"I have time," I say, liking how she keeps up with the conversation as it moves from knife jokes to me staying for lunch. "You're a great chef too, Tara." My voice grinds through my throat, and I drop my chin toward my chest. I'm not great at giving praise, and that's only one reason I'm not the boss of my own kitchen anymore.

"Thank you," she says diplomatically. She steps past me and opens the door to re-enter her house. "I think that's the first time you've called me Tara and not 'Boss.'" She gives me a smile and another whiff of her scent before stepping inside. "Guys," she says. "I just need two more minutes, and then we'll taste what could very well be the soup course for your wedding."

I take a moment and take a deep breath. Tara has a beautiful back yard, and it seems to match everything else in her life. The cleanliness of her kitchen, the stark white chef jackets she wears, and the way nothing on her face, body, or head is ever a hair out of place.

I wonder what it will take to stir her up a bit. Make her stumble. Really light her fire, though I've seen her mad plenty of times. She has a shorter fuse in the kitchen than she does here at home, and I think about asking her to come sample some of my cooking, in my apartment.

Then I think of the giant bird cage in the living room. Yeah, having Tara over—or any woman—for anything other than a quick pit stop isn't the best idea I've had.

Not only that, but I have to go back quite a few years to recall the last woman I cooked for, and the memories are... nice. The relationship had turned sour, as most of mine do, but for some reason, I think maybe Tara and I could figure out how to get along.

She hasn't fired you yet, I think, and I also find it kind of pathetic that that's what I'm using as a measuring stick for my relationships now.

I sigh and turn back to the house, catching a glimpse of Tara's skin along the waistband of her jeans as she stretches to reach into a high cabinet. She pulls down a bowl and says, "C'mon in, Alec. We're not providing air conditioning for the chickens."

I smile and close the door behind me, then follow her into the dining room. "Can I help?"

"Nope. Sit." She sets the bowl in the newly made fourth place setting and brushes by me again.

I look at Callie, who's wearing a daggered look on her face, and Dawson, who offers me a semi-smile. I've dined with worse, and I pull out the chair across from Dawson. "When's the big day for you two?" I ask.

I can be nice if required. Besides, I'm not in a competition with either of these two people.

"September fifth," Dawson says, glancing at Callie. There's something going on there, but I'm not sure what.

Of course there's something going on there, I think. *They're engaged, duh*. But I think there's something more. Something's not quite right. But what that might be, I have no idea. My momma tells me every chance she gets that I have no tact, but I bite my tongue. I'll be sure to tell her next time I go see her. She'll be so proud I haven't pressed these two people I barely know for more information.

"So, Alec," Callie says, leaning her elbows up onto the table. "How are things going for you at Saucebilities?"

"Great," I say truthfully. "I really like it there."

"Do you?" she challenges. "You might could stand to be a bit nicer to Tara then."

"Callie," Tara says behind me, entering with a gorgeous serving bowl of soup. "Alec's fine." She shoots me a glance that sends electricity through my blood, and I offer her a smile.

I do remember how to make the gesture, and she sends it back to me.

“Okay,” Tara says, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead, dislodging some bangs I didn’t even know she had. “Oh, wait. I forgot the parmesan.”

She turns to leave the dining room again, but her foot catches on the leg of my chair. We grunt at the same time, and then my whole world gets upended.

Literally.

My legs bang against something hard, and a horrendously loud crash fills my ears. They ring, and I hear people clamoring about me. The delicious scent of sausage soup fills my nose, so it makes no sense that I’m in so much pain.

Dawson’s face appears above mine. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I say, realizing I’m on my back. I roll to my right, only to find Tara there, Callie rushing around the other end of the table to get to her.

“Sorry,” I say, steamrolling her and taking her into my arms as I do.

“I tripped,” she says, her eyes meeting mine. Her arms come around me too, and the whole world freezes.

“I think I fell too,” I say, still not sure now that happened. I’m not sure what I mean by that either. I’m not falling for my boss. I’m *not*.

“She tipped you right over, man,” Dawson says, extending his hand toward me at the same time Callie asks, “Tara, honey, are you all right?” She shoots me a glare as if I’m the one who lunged at Tara and knocked her down.

I start to disentangle myself from her, and I finally get to my feet with Dawson’s help, sweat beading along my brow. My stomach growls, and my chest feels like someone’s wrapped me in a tight rubber band and is twisting, twisting, *twisting* it.

Tara makes it to her feet too, refuses to look at me, and mumbles something about getting the parmesan. Callie goes

with her, her arm around Tara's shoulders like a mother hen protecting her chick.

"Well," Dawson says, clapping his hands today. "I'm glad I'm not the only one who's ended up on the floor with his girlfriend."

"She's just my boss," I say quickly. "We're not seeing each other."

"Mm hm." His grin is as wide as the Mississippi. He leans closer, his dark eyes sparkling like diamonds. "I've said something *very* similar to that before too." With that, he rights my chair and moves back to his spot.

I don't know if I should take the seat or pick up the chair and throw it through the window. A storm rages inside me, because if Dawson can see how I feel about my boss, surely Tara can too.

She's smart. She's observant. She'll *know*.

"Sit, sit," Tara says, coming up behind me. "I promise not to take you out again."

I reach for the chair and sit down, my movement heavy and the back of my head sending an ache through my body. I realize I probably hit it against the floor when I fell backward. Or got dragged backward by the most beautiful woman in the world. Whatever.

She puts a lovely dish of freshly curled parmesan cheese on the table. "Okay." She draws a deep breath. "This is a spin on my sausage gumbo, and I've made it sausage orzo stew, since I know Callie doesn't particularly like gumbo."

Callie grins at her best friend, and Tara smiles back. They have a tight bond, and I know if I want to win over Tara, I'm going to have to get Callie to like me first.

I can't even believe I'm thinking such things, as if Tara and I are anything but boss-employee. Still, my mind wanders along that forbidden path, and maybe the fall addled my brain, because I can see myself with Tara.

Tara starts to serve the stew, and I've missed the last bit of her presentation. It doesn't matter. A chef's food should speak for itself.

She places a bowl in front of me and offers me the parmesan curls. I take a few and let them float on the stew, wilting from the heat. It smells great, and looks great, and she's ticking every box so far.

The first bite makes my mouth rejoice, with spices, salt, and something rich and nuanced. I try to hold back the groan of pleasure from how delicious the stew is, but I can't.

I even close my eyes, something I don't realize until I open them and look straight into Tara's. "I'd marry you for this," I say, which is literally the first thing that comes to my mind. Also the stupidest thing.

Her eyes widen then as I'd imagined they would earlier, and both she and Callie gasp. Dawson, the devil, just starts to laugh.

TARA

I haven't frozen the way I am now since Callie caught me crying in my back yard, over ten years ago. Fine, *almost* ten years ago. No matter the date—though I know exactly when it was—she found me sobbing in my back yard, as hers butted up against it.

My husband had just left, and I'd fallen apart with the divorce papers in my hands. I'd tossed them somewhere and escaped the house that had been closing in on me.

Very much like this dining room. I stare at Alec. Dawson's laughter bounces around the room. Callie blinks, and if Callie can't say something, that's serious.

I finally get control of myself, and I spin and walk out of the dining room. The rug nearly takes me down again, but I avoid its traps and make it out of the near vicinity of Alec Ward.

What in the world is happening? I wonder. The kitchen isn't safe, because I want to grab a spoon and taste my own soup.

I'd marry you for this.

He'd marry me for this soup?

It's *soup*, for crying out loud. People don't propose over soup.

Alec's love language is clearly food, and surprise, surprise, the extra thirty-five pounds I carry says mine is too.

I bypass the pot of soup on my stove as I hear Callie's voice say something. She's probably excusing herself to come find me, but right now, I just need a minute to breathe.

Since Callie wears some sort of heel everywhere she goes, and she's scared of spiders, bugs, and other things that go bump in the night, I open the door that leads to the basement and hurry down the rickety, wooden steps.

The cellar is not really a basement, and I only store extra potatoes and onions down here if I've ordered too many for Sauceabilities.

Once, I'd ordered enough spuds to kill a small army with all the eyes staring at them, and I'd brought them home during the first week I'd lived in this house.

I'd forgotten about them, of course. If I don't set an alarm or have one of my phones ringing in my face about what I need to do, the task sort of flies out of my mind.

The next time I came down into the cellar, the potatoes had burrowed themselves into the earth with all these spindly, long, white tendrils.

The smell can't be described, but let's just say that it took me a couple of weeks to clean it all out, dig it all up, and then convince Callie that I had not, indeed, buried a body in my cellar. That's certainly how it had smelled.

She definitely won't come down here.

She thinks there could be dead bodies everywhere, and her constant habit of locking doors and windows and setting traps for serial killers is my best friend right now.

I reach the bottom of the steps without tripping—another miracle—and pause, taking in a deep breath. I run my hands through my hair and brace my palms on my back.

“What just happened?”

People say stupid stuff all the time. Heck, I've probably said a dozen stupid things today. I talk to my chickens, whom I've named things like Cordon Bleu, Pot Pie, and Curry, for

crying out loud. The truth is, Alec gave me the perfect reaction to my food.

He likes it, and he's the best chef I've come across in my career.

"Why are you standing down here?" I ask. "Get up there and thank him."

"Tara," Callie calls from the top of the steps. "You did *not* go down into that creepy cellar." She doesn't sound happy about it. To her eternal credit, and a testimony for how close we are, her ankle boot lands on the first step. "I'm coming down, so get ready to have my death on your conscience."

I turn back to the steps and put my clogged foot on the bottom one. "Don't come down," I say. "I'm coming up."

She ignores me in usual Callie fashion, and we meet somewhere near the top of the steps.

"Dawson stopped laughing," she says.

"Miracle of miracles," I say dryly.

"Alec just likes the stew."

"I know that." I can't really look down at my hands, and there's not a lot of light here for examining nails anyway. "I just...who is so...elephantenous that they can trip over a chair and topple the man twice their size sitting in it?"

Callie puts her hands on my shoulder, and I'm usually taller than her by a head or two. But standing down a stair, we're eye to eye.

"First off, elephantenous is a great word. I'm stealing that. Second, you're *not* elephantenous. You're gorgeous and talented. Third, it's that disastrous rug. I've told you to throw that thing away no less than four times. Fourth, he is not twice as big as you."

I look into her eyes, trying to believe her. We're roughly the same size. I'm taller so I look thinner, but really, my weight is just distributed in a more feminine way. I have little chicken legs that seriously can't hold up my body—at least if my boyfriend two ago is to be believed.

The man ran marathons, for the love of all things buttery, and just because I don't have muscled legs doesn't mean they're not functional. That was what I'd told him, at least. They manage to keep me working all day long in the kitchen.

It had been my idiotic feet who'd betrayed me today. Or maybe the rug.

"Come on," Callie says. "Chin up. It's no big deal. Dawson says the soup is *fantastic*."

"Glad he stayed to eat it," I say. "I feel so stupid."

Callie takes my hand and teeters as she tries to turn in her ridiculous shoes. She manages it and goes back up the steps. After leading me all the way into the dining room, she clears her throat.

"Tara would like to apologize for rushing away. She had a major emergency down in the cellar. She thought there might be a serial killer waiting in there, so she shooed him away." She grins at me and then the men still seated at the table.

I just smile and shake my head, noting that Alec has not eaten a whole lot of soup while I've been gone.

"She knows how much I can't stand the thought of any doors or windows being unlocked, and she's always watching out for me. So." Callie releases my arm and goes around the table to her seat.

"This soup should be bottled and sold," Dawson says. "Callie and I could put together the perfect marketing program for it." He flashes me a smile, and I appreciate his effort.

The man has changed drastically in the past few months, and I attribute most of that to Callie.

"Thank you," I say, being careful to check the placement of my feet as I move to take my seat next to Alec. That rug is going in the trash as soon as I can heft it out of the house. "So I guess you like the soup?"

"It's amazing, Tara," he says, a smile I've literally never seen appearing on his face. "Really."

The use of my first name isn't lost on me. He said it a couple of times in Florida, but since we've been back, it's *Yes, Boss*, or *You got it, Boss*. Or like earlier, *Isn't it your job to answer your phone when one of your chefs call? Boss?*

Callie once said Dawson had a lot of facets, like a diamond. Some of them just hadn't been shined up yet. I wonder if Alec is the same, and the insane part of me really wants to find out.

"Okay, thanks." I pick up my spoon and dip it into the sausage orzo soup. My parmesan has wilted, but I don't care. "Now, tell me what you really think."

Alec looks nervously at Callie. "I did."

"Right." I roll my eyes. "You think I don't know when I'm being flattered? This is for their *wedding*. Tell me what you really think."

"It is a big wedding," Callie says, her eyes wide and oh-so-serious. "There will probably be a dozen articles just on my dress."

His gaze flitters back to mine. "It's seriously the best *winter* soup I've ever put in my mouth."

I catch the adjective and look down into my bowl. Even the color is wintery. Dark red, as it's tomato-based. It's a hearty soup, almost a meal by itself.

My mind starts to move through something lighter that would still be tasty and elegant. "Maybe we don't need a soup course," I say, looking at Callie.

She's dipping bread in her stew—buttered biscuits, I've prepared a *stew* for their *summer* wedding—and doesn't even seem to know I've spoken.

I meet Alec's eye again, and I know he's thinking the same thing I am. "Unless it's cold," I say, and he nods, his grin widening by the second.

"A cold soup?" Dawson asks, and Callie chimes in with, "Why would you serve this soup cold? It's *so* good as-is."

A FEW DAYS LATER, MID-MORNING FINDS ME IN THE KITCHEN alone. It's Wednesday, and we don't book a lot of parties and events on Hump Day. I usually give all my chefs the midweek days off, though Thursday can be busy with prep for the weekends. But Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday are usually quiet.

I finish grating the lemon peel for the chicken marinade I'm making and turn toward the stove when a timer goes off. Some chefs claim they don't use timers and anyone who does needs to go back to culinary school.

I say I need the reminder that I put something in the oven, thank you very much. My star ratings and comments will tell people what kind of chef I am, and what kind of food they'll get from Saucebilities.

Sometimes, I still find myself hung up on what some chef-slash-boyfriend said to me years ago, and I have to push against those negative messages.

The lava cakes look absolutely divine, and they jiggle just the right amount. There are some things I can do just by looking. Knowing when a fried egg is done, for example. But knowing when a soft-boiled egg is done requires a timer, no matter what anyone says. Maybe Superman can see through eggshells with his laser-vision, but normal people should use timers.

Since I haven't met any superhuman chefs yet, I put myself and other chefs in the "normal people" category.

I made my glaze for the cakes the moment I slid the cakes in the oven, and it's been waiting for me to pour it over the desserts for a while now. I whisk the thin chocolate ganache all back together, getting a whiff of the mint I've put in there, and set the pot on the stainless steel counter down a couple of feet from where I'm working.

One of the hardest things about lava cakes is getting them out of the mold. It has to be done while the cakes are hot, but

not too hot. An extremely well-greased, preferably silicon, mold is essential. A wire rack is a must-have.

I reach for my rack and turn it upside down over my molds. With a hot pad to protect me from the just-from-the-oven sheet pan, I press one palm to the rack and the other on the bottom of the rack.

Then I flip.

The silicon slips, and I know I'm going to be tasting broken chocolate lava cakes even as I say, "Peanut butter bars," as a form of swearing.

The rack clatters onto the counter as I try to catch the cakes. I get three of the four, and the last one slips to the floor with a wet *glop!* and chocolate immediately oozes out.

At least it's rich and dark and delicious-looking. See? I can be positive too.

"Peanut butter bars?" someone repeats, followed by a hearty laugh in a voice that has followed me into my fantasies every night since Sunday.

I'd marry you for this soup.

I spin toward the door to find Alec standing there, his bag of knives and tools with him. "Something smells amazing," he says, coming closer and still using that sultry, sexy voice against me. How have I never noticed it before?

Maybe because listening to him gripe about his co-workers and call you "boss" is ultra-annoying.

"My momma is very averse to swearing," I say.

"Mm," he says, putting down his knives. "At least it's not a mid-*knife* crisis."

I blink and take in his glorious grin. I want to laugh, but I really can't encourage his jokes.

"Come on," he says. "That was a good one."

"It felt like you've been waiting to use it." I turn away before he can see my smile. "What are you doing here?" I look back at him, still teetering on the edge of laughing. And

flirting. And about ten other inappropriate things—like thinking about what his lips would taste like right now.

“You said I could come work on the Cornish hens.” He takes in the glaze and the cakes. “Working on the Southern Ball dessert?”

“Yes,” I say, looking down at the mess. Chocolate spreads across the counter beneath the rack, as I’d missed getting it onto the second tray I’d set out.

I reach for the glaze and dump it over the sunken cakes. “Well, the look of these would make a preacher cuss on Sunday, but don’t just stand there. Pick up a fork and help me taste them.”

ALEC

“**B**acon bacon bacon bacon,” chirps from the kitchen, and I grin as I ruffle my towel through my hair and go toward the sound.

“You want some bacon, Peaches?” I ask.

“Bacon Peaches,” the bird says, and I laugh.

“They don’t really go together, baby,” I say to the bird. She’s perched up high, as birds like to do, and I hold out my hand for her. She’s just taken a shower with me, where she likes to sing and tell me all about a “red motor-bike, motor-motor-motor-bike” while she stands in the spray. She doesn’t take any time to get dressed, and she always beats me back to the kitchen.

She flies over, and I give her a little peck on her face. “Tonight, I’m making bacon-wrapped chestnuts,” I say. “See, there’s this big lodge that’s having a party, and it’s Christmas-themed though it’s only August. Don’t ask me why we have to celebrate the holidays already.”

The idea of sitting down to a family meal makes my smile dry right up.

“Don’t ask me why,” Peaches repeats back to me. She takes flight, and I let her go. I reach for one of the T-shirts I’ve left on the back of the couch, having folded them a few hours ago and left them there.

Sometimes I can only get my household chores done halfway. It’s not the end of the world, and since I wear a T-

shirt under my chef's jacket every single day, I can drop it in the laundry room on the way by at night, and pick one up from the couch on the way out to work in the morning. I don't wear a shirt in between all of that anyway.

Thinking about laundry makes my mind travel back to the inn where I'd worked last year. They had an amazing guest laundry facility that would've surely rivaled the royal family's. The Blackbriar Inn had the best of everything. The best rooms. The best rates. The best decorations. The best grounds.

The best chef.

I know, because I'd opened and operated The Blackbriar all by myself. At least until my father and brother had gotten involved.

"It's just a shirt," I mutter, and Peaches says, "Don't ask me why," again.

I grin in her direction, tug the shirt over my head, and enter the kitchen. I selected this apartment solely for the kitchen. I can sleep on the couch for all I care, but the kitchen must be the best it can be.

This one has gray quartz countertops, with a double oven next to the refrigerator. The stovetop is in the island, leaving the back counter as a long, beautiful prep area. The sink sits in the corner, and it looks out over six stories of the peninsula of Charleston.

I can always see the ocean over the tops of the dogwoods and live oaks, and as I go to wash my hands—chefy rule number one—I take a long look out the window.

My thoughts roam, as they often do while I cook. I don't need all my mental energy to chop onions and mix eggs and flour.

I do need all my wits about me to keep the tall, curvy, sexy Tara Finch out of my mind. My tall, curvy, sexy *boss*.

Tara is no-nonsense in the kitchen, despite the fiasco with the lava cakes a couple of days ago. Watching her pour that glaze and then dig right in had seriously boiled my blood. In a good way. In the way that had me wondering how I could feed

her the cake off my fork. Then maybe taste the slightly minty glaze in her mouth with mine.

Yeah, I'm in trouble with her already. I know it, and it's only a matter of time before she does. I glance at Peaches, wondering where we can run to next.

But, see, I'm tired of all the running. I just settled here, and I kinda want to stay. Tara definitely has something to do with that.

The worst part isn't that she's my boss, and I'm never going there again. It's that I don't even know *why* she affects me the way she does.

I'm usually more into blondes. I'm usually more into someone who likes what she sees on the outside and doesn't worry too much about the inside.

In fact, Tara Finch is dangerous to my health, because the woman will want details. She'll want to *know* me.

And I don't do details, and no one in Charleston knows me. That's just how I like it and just how it's going to stay.

I shut off the water, as if I can punctuate my thoughts the same way and get them to stop.

They don't, of course, and all I'm doing is slicing chestnuts in half length-wise and then toothpicking the bacon into place.

The best part of any dish is always the sauce, which was what drew me to Tara's job listing in the first place.

Saucebilities is such a great play on words, and I enjoy that wit in a name. "In a woman," I mutter, still stuck on Tara.

I get the chestnuts roasting and turn to make the sweet and sour glaze that goes on them. Anyone can pour barbecue sauce out of a bottle and then add some vinegar and mustard to make some sauce.

I don't take shortcuts like that. I chop onions and start to sweat them to start the base for the barbecue sauce. I can take the sauce anywhere from there, making it as sweet or as spicy or as sour as I want.

I don't need a recipe card, and I listen to Peaches babble on to herself about *bacon, bacon, bacon* in her cute birdie voice.

The chestnuts come out beautifully, and I coat them in the sauce from top to bottom, side to side, and in all of the cuts and crevices.

Something thunks against the door, and I look up from my tasting. "What in the world?"

"What in the world?" Peaches says. "World, world, world. Bacon, bacon, bacon, bacon-motor-bike!"

"Enough Peaches," I tell her as I pass. It sounds like someone chucked something at my door, and I swear, if those twins from down the hall are fighting again, I'm calling their momma at work. Then I'll make them come clean my kitchen until she gets home.

I open the door and expect to see those rascally ten-year-olds.

Instead, the hallway is empty. I look down at my feet and find the newspaper. "Oh, of course."

I bend to get the paper and head back inside. Call me antiquated or geriatric, but I like reading the newspaper. Southern Roots does regional and local stories about the art, culture, and restaurants in the city, and I love it.

I love going to the restaurants and clubs and checking out the vibe. I love a good sports bar, with wings and club soda and a game on in the background.

I like walking the unknown paths around the city, and I like checking out the bands that set up in the parks.

Since moving here, I don't like spending time at home all that much. I don't like spending time with myself without much to do.

The newspaper gives me something to focus on that's not Tara Finch or listening to my parrot prattle to herself about bacon and motorcycles. I do love Peaches, and she's honestly the reason I'm not still in the Rocky Mountains. I try not to

dwell on the fact that the living thing I talk to the most weighs less than four ounces and only knows fifty English words.

I unfold the newspaper and flop it down on the counter. Peaches flies over, chirping for all she's worth.

"No," I say, letting her climb up on my hand so I can put her on my shoulder. "I'm reading this one. You'll have to wait your turn."

That's another reason I like the newspaper; I need it for Peaches. She's got a giant cage in the middle of the living room, and I spread newspaper out all over the carpet to protect it. If my landlord knew...well, I'd probably have to give up this gorgeous kitchen, that's for sure.

Birds are messy, to say the least. I can't give up Peaches, though, because she's the only thing in the world that hasn't abandoned me. Well, her and Turner, one of my only human friends and the veterinarian here in Charleston who kept Peaches for me while I did a little running without her.

I've just popped a water chestnut into my mouth when I see a headline that makes me spit it right back out.

No one trusts a skinny chef, but can the plump cooks in this town find love?

I can't read fast enough. I suck in a breath when I see Tara's name.

"No," I say. "No, no, no."

I read on, thinking the reporter—Brett Daniels—will focus on someone else. He doesn't.

He *never* does. The whole thing is about Tara, and wow, it's written in a cruel, spiteful, sarcastic tone that makes me wince.

I abandon the water chestnuts and reach for the phone. I call Tara, saying, "Pick up. Pick up, Tara."

I know she's got two phones, and she screens all of her chefs calls through the one device. I wish I had her personal cell, but my wishes rarely come true. I've actually given up on stars and eyelashes and dandelions and all of it.

Life and disappointment have a way of snuffing out things like wishes.

“Hey, Alec,” Tara says, and just the sound of her voice sets my cells a’vibrating.

“Uh, I’m reading something about you.”

She pauses for a moment. “You are?”

Suddenly, my mind takes a sharp turn, and I can’t stop myself from saying, “Maybe you better get over here.”

THE NEXT TIME THERE’S A KNOCK AT THE DOOR, I JUMP FROM the couch and side-step Peaches’ toy rope. She yelps like the doorbell, and I don’t know how she learns the sounds so fast. Besides her bird-sitter, no one ever comes over, and we’ve only been here for four months.

I nearly yank the door off the hinges and stand there, staring at my boss.

She holds up her phone, a pure hurricane in her eyes. “I read it online at the stoplight.”

“How long were you at the stoplight?” I ask. I’m glad she doesn’t have anything but her device in her hand, or she probably would’ve thrown it at me.

She glares my face off as she pushes past me, old, familiar darkness emanating from her eyes. Oh, I know what that feels like. I’ve been there. I’ve been steeped in rage and hurt like that, and as I close the door behind me and follow her, I hope I’m strong enough to corral this wind.

The newspaper rustles, and I say, “If you’ve already read it, you didn’t need to come over.” Not that I want her to leave, especially now that she’s here. Having another human being in my apartment lights up the whole place, and I tell myself that anyone would’ve done that. That Tara’s not the reason everything in my life is suddenly better.

Heck, sometimes Jessie, my best human friend and bird-sitter, is still in the apartment when I get back from Saucebilities, and it's nice to talk to her before she heads out.

"It's nothing," I say, though that article is something. "It's a *stabloid*. Get it?"

Tara spins back to me, clearly not amused if the fire shooting from her eyes is any indications. "Yes, so funny." She shakes the paper in her hand. "I just can't believe this."

"It's drivel," I say. I want to tell her that she's gorgeous as-is, *and* she's the best chef in the city. "Whoever that guy is, he's extremely jealous."

She looks at me with pure hope in her eyes. "Really?"

"Absolutely," I say with authority. "He's probably got a brother starting up a catering company, and he's trying to smear Saucebilities."

"He called me fat."

"This isn't about you being big," I tell her. "At all."

"Then why did he say that?"

"Because he's threatened by you," I say. "Because you're so amazing, and he had to pick something." I look at the paper in her hand and nod to it. "Do you know him?"

Before she can answer, Peaches launches from the top of her cage. I expect her to flap a couple of times, because my apartment's not that big, and land on my shoulder. Instead, Peaches flies in a straight line toward Tara.

"Watch out," I say, trying to step between Tara and the incoming parrot.

Tara flaps the rolled up newspaper, yelling, "This is *unbelievable*," and whacks me in the face with the hard tube.

This woman, I think right before my hands jerk up to cradle my now-bleeding nose. She already threw me to the floor a few days ago.

"Bacon, bacon, bacon," Peaches says, her feet out and aimed right at Tara's head.

Oh, this is gonna be bad.

Peaches lands, screeching, “What in the world?” and Tara screams as she tries to get the bird out of her hair.

Literally.

TARA

I wave my arms wildly, dancing away from whatever has just attacked me. “Get it off!” I screech before realizing it’s gone. My chest heaves and I reach up to gingerly touch my head where the claws just were.

Claws...

I turn around and face Alec. He’s holding a cloth to his nose, which is bleeding, and he’s got a green and yellow bird sitting on his shoulder. The bird has black and white features, and those freaky, keen eyes all birds have.

A legit bird. On his shoulder. *Creepy*. “What is that?” I ask, as if I’ve never seen a bird before. I own thirteen chickens, for crying out loud.

“This is a Quaker parrot,” he says, looking from me to the bird. “Tell her your name.”

“Peaches,” the bird says, her voice almost as human as mine. Well, mine if I’ve been inhaling helium for eight straight hours.

“Wow,” I say, not quite sure if I’m talking to the bird or Alec.

He grins, and that is so not fair. He’s already wearing a T-shirt that’s two sizes too small, if the bulging pecs are any indication. I get a woman trying to squeeze into a pair of skinny jeans, but does he seriously not know he needs a large and not a small?

I lick my lips and lower my hand, not finding any scratches or blood on my scalp. “Did I hit you?” I ask, sure I’m going to die of humiliation at any moment. I can’t believe Brett has written this article. My whole body shakes, and I can’t get it to stop.

“A little,” Alec says. “I’m learning to stay ten feet from you at all times.” He gives me a bloody grin and walks into the kitchen. I watch him, taking in the food on the counter now between us.

I start to calm at the sight of the bacon-wrapped chestnuts. That only makes my blood boil harder, because isn’t that what Brett just said?

She soothes herself with food, and that’s fine. Chefs need to taste what they’re making, try new recipes, and impress their clients. I just wonder if it means chefs like Tara won’t be able to find the true source of happiness...which doesn’t come wrapped in bacon.

“How did these turn out?” I say, glancing at the knife still lying on the cutting board. The toothpicks splayed all over. The leftover cuts of bacon. At least he’s just as messy at home as he is in my kitchen.

“Good,” he says, his back still to me as he cleans up his face. “You can have one if you’d like.” His voice is maybe a little nasally, but I can’t have hit him that hard. I barely remember doing it.

“Bacon, bacon, bacon,” the bird starts to sing, bopping her head along with the semi-music.

“Peaches,” Alec says, and the bird goes quiet. He turns toward where she was bee-bopping on the counter and lowers the towel. “How do I look?”

“What in the world?” she chirps next.

I can’t stifle the giggle that flies from my mouth, and when I look at Alec, I burst out laughing.

“What?” he asks, smiling at me. “I don’t make the *cut*?”

“Bacon, bacon, bacon,” the bird chirps.

I laugh until I cry, because it's literally that or start sobbing into my newest chef's now-bloodstained, two-sizes-too-small T-shirt.

Alec grins and finishes wiping his face. His dark hair stands at weird angles, and he wets his fingers and runs them through it, getting it to settle down again.

His movement is so graceful, just like when he's got a knife in his hand. I glance at the knife still on the cutting board, remnants of onion there too.

"Let's make something," I say, reaching for the knife.

"What do you want to make?"

"I don't know," I say. "I just need to cook. Cooking calms me down."

He eyes the knife. "I don't know if I trust you with that knife in your hand."

"Why?" I ask. "Because I'm *plump*?" Disgust fills me, though what Alec said about Brett being jealous is probably true. "Who even uses the word *plump* anymore? What gives him the right to body shame me?"

Alec's eyes fill with fire, but he wisely says nothing. He turns and opens the fridge. "I've got stuff for grilled apple and cheese sandwiches?"

"Hit me with the Granny Smith," I say, and he tosses me a green apple. Surprise pulls through me, because I wasn't expecting him to have one, though everyone knows the Granny Smith is the best kind of apple to put in your grilled apple and cheese sandwich, and he probably wouldn't have suggested it if he didn't have the right variety of apple.

I wash the cutting board, because I don't want raw onion flavor in my apples, and then I start slicing. "I just can't even process what he said."

"Do you know the guy who wrote the article?" Alec moves next to me and starts laying out slices of bread.

"Yes," I growl. "He's my ex-boyfriend." I wave the knife through the air, coming a bit close to his ear. Maybe. Probably

not. It's fine. "Fiancé. You know, it's all just semantics?" I look at Alec for confirmation, but he just stares back at me.

I go back to the apple, imagining it to be Brett's head. *Slice, slice, slice.*

"He thought I was already *married to my job*." I say the last four words in a mocking tone. "He just doesn't know what it takes to open a business." I look at him, desperate for someone to understand.

"I'm sorry," Alec says, his voice quiet in a way I've not heard from him. He keeps his head down as he layers cheese over the bread. Who is this guy? He reminds me so much of the man I wandered around the Food and Wine Festival with, but he looks like the guy who glares at my other chefs like he's imagining slicing off their fingers and feeding them to his bird—which I didn't even know he owned.

I shake my head. I have *got* to stop fantasizing about him. A relationship with him is never going to happen. *Even if it did*, I think. *It would end badly.*

My mind recalls all the more horrible parts of that maddening article.

"Can you believe he named me by name?" I bring the knife up and hold it in front of me like a shield. "Like, what a jerky thing to do. What editor on this planet would let that go through?"

"A pretty lame one. I'm telling you, this is about Saucebilities. They're just trying to discredit you."

"I mean, *plump*?" I rage, waving the knife a little. Maybe I start to spell the ridiculous word. "I'll show him plump."

P-L-U-M-P goes the knife tip.

"Okay, Boss," he says, and that only makes fury shoot to the top of my head. He takes the knife from my hand and backs up. "I'm just going to relieve you of this before you take off one of my limbs."

"Oh, you're fine," I snap at him. "And I'd really appreciate it if you'd stop calling me *boss*."

He faces me, and I face him, and I will not blink first. Part of me wants to punch him in that pretty-boy nose for a second time tonight. Another part wants to know what his mouth against mine will feel like. And the biggest part of me is about to break down into horrible sobs.

I turn away and walk around the island, stopping by the table to grab my purse. “I have to go.”

“What about the sandwiches?” he asks.

“I have to go,” I say again, my voice breaking on the last word.

“Beep, beep,” Peaches says, and she sounds like a toy car. “Motor-motor-motor-bike.”

“Tara,” Alec says, and he hustles in front of me, blocking my escape.

I really don’t want to cry in front of him. I can’t believe I drove all the way over here. I could’ve read the article online—as I did in the car. I could be raging at home, with seven take-out meals on the table. Callie would’ve listened to me. I could’ve called Jason, my cousin, and he’d have come over. Even Macie, my friend down the street, would be rage-eating with me right now.

Why am I standing in Alec Ward’s apartment?

No, I hadn’t been able to read the whole article at one stoplight. Well, I’d tried, but I’d gotten honked at once the light turned green.

I’m his boss, and I will not break down in front of him. Not over some stupid article written by a jealous ex who’s made it his life’s mission to make sure I stay beneath him.

“Why don’t you show him that women of all sizes can find love?” he asks, those dark eyes of his challenging me. I think it’s in a good way, but I have so much racing through my mind right now. “Because you’re amazing, Tara, just how you are. You’re smart, and you’re savvy, and he’s stooped to the lowest level to get you to think you’re not.”

He sighs and waves the knife himself. “Leave a comment on that article or something. Tell him you have a boyfriend and he’s dead wrong. Or not. You don’t *need* a boyfriend for him to be dead wrong.”

I blink, sure I haven’t heard him right. He can’t be this sensitive, even if his voice was a bit on the aggressive side. *You’re amazing, Tara.*

Does he really think so?

“It’s not like you walk down to the grocery store and pluck a boyfriend off the shelf anyway,” I say.

“Just stay for sandwiches,” he says.

“I can’t,” I say, the change in conversation whipping me around a little. I’m used to fast-moving parts in the kitchen. Sizzling meats and bubbling sauces. People yelling for this dish or that one.

But somehow I can’t keep up with this conversation. Maybe his one-step-away-from-the-sun hotness has melted my brain. Callie will no doubt ask me all about it.

And when she sees this article...I actually want to call her right now and read it out loud to her. She’ll have a few choice words for Brett Daniels, the loser I dated a couple of years ago.

“Why can’t you stay?” he asks, putting one hand on my arm. I think he’s asked more than once, and his skin against mine unfreezes my thoughts this time.

“Because, Alec, if I stay for sandwiches, then he’s right. I *do* soothe myself and my loneliness and my anger and every other emotion with food.” I wave toward the kitchen, and at least I don’t have that knife in my hand anymore. “I’m not even hungry. I ate an hour ago.”

“I’m not hungry either,” he says. “But I’m going to have a sandwich.”

“You’re also not plump,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You’re not the one whose name was just dragged through barbecue sauce and skewered on a kabob.”

Alec looks at me for a moment, a cough coming out of his mouth. “Kabob?” he repeated, his smile appearing.

For some reason, I can’t look away from his mouth, and I loathe myself a little bit more.

“Bacon, bacon, bacon,” Peaches chirps.

“Come on, baby,” Alec says in that sexy, Southern voice that is seriously going to undo me, slipping his fingers away from my arm and lifting his hand for his bird. Peaches flies over to him, settling easily on his shoulder. “Eating a sandwich is probably better than confessing your feelings to a Quaker parrot.”

“Motor-bike,” Peaches says. “Bacon, bacon, bacon.”

“She likes bacon,” I say, smiling at the bird. I think we’d be great friends, because there are few foods better than bacon for soothing one’s ego after reading a hate-article about plump chefs named Tara.

“It’s an easy word for her,” he says, taking her over to the giant birdcage that literally fills the entire living room. He turns back to me, and I see a level of vulnerability in his eyes I haven’t before.

“Just stay for a minute,” he says. “You don’t even have to eat the sandwich. I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think you should drive when you’re so upset.”

Probably not. I once hit a stop sign I was backing up so fast. I keep that to myself for now and turn back to the kitchen. Alec steps to my side, and it takes everything I have not to lean into him and steal some of his strength.

I sigh and say, “Fine, I’ll stay for a sandwich. But if I do, you have to tell me what you confess to Peaches.”

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye, and it’s not a flirtatious or teasing look. More like a death glare.

“Pass,” he says.

“Fine,” I say. “Tell me how you got Peaches. Tell me something about that blasted bird that attacked me. You owe me that much.”

“So I have to cook for you *and* talk? Doesn’t seem like a fair trade.”

“Okay,” I say in a sing-song. “My death will be on your hands.” I pretend to turn toward the door.

His full hand comes down on my arm, and I expect his touch to be heavy-handed and demanding, just like he is in the kitchen.

Instead, the feather-light touch sends a ripple of fireworks through my whole body and causes me to freeze.

Again. What is it with this guy and his frostbite touch?

“Stay,” he says. “I’ll cook for you, and I’ll talk.”

No woman would walk away when Alec Ward says, “Stay,” in that voice.

So I do what most women would: I stay.

ALEC

I've just finished Peaches' repertoire of words when Tara says, "I think there's something getting a little too crisp."

I smell the char the moment she says it, and I leap to my feet. "No," I say, pure embarrassment pulling through me. What kind of chef burns a blasted grilled cheese sandwich?

The kind flirting with his boss, I think, though there's hardly room inside my head for such a thought.

I yank the pan off the low burner where it had been hanging out. Burning. I flip the sandwich, and it's not salvageable.

"Maybe it's okay," Tara says from the tiny, two-person kitchen table on the other side of the island.

"It's nowhere near okay," I grumble, my face heating past comfortable. I can't face her with this catastrophe on my record. Determined that she won't see how completely black these sandwiches are, I pick up the pan and open the trashcan with my foot. In the sandwiches go, and I exhale as I practically throw the pan back onto the stovetop.

The loud clatter makes Peaches start squawking, and while I love that stupid bird with the only heart cells I have that know how to do that, I just want her to be quiet.

"My word, Alec," Tara says, frowning those dark eyebrows at me. "It's fine. Remember how I'm not hungry?"

Yeah, but I want her to stay. If I don't have a reason she should, she'll leave. I try to think through what else would get

her to stay. I brace my palms against the countertop and ask, “Coffee?”

Tara looks undecided, and I sense her moving away from me. I start to make coffee anyway, knowing what will get her to stay. Talking.

“I mostly tell Peaches about where I was and what I was doing while she stayed with a friend of mine here in the city.” I open the freezer, another idea in mind. “Ice cream?”

“Oh, now you’re talking my language,” Tara says, the smile clear in her tone. “If you have butter pecan, I might marry you for it.”

I jerk my head up and face her, more heat filling my neck and cheeks than is humanly healthy. “I didn’t mean to say that, by the way.”

She simply grins at me, and while I haven’t dated in a while, I know what interest looks like on a woman’s face. She’s *flirting* with me.

Dear Lord in Heaven, help me not be a jerk to this woman.

My momma instilled praying in her sons, that’s for sure. Most of the time, I think it’s a waste of time, but right now, the few seconds are worth taking just to get God on my side.

“Do you have butter pecan?”

I turn back to the freezer. “No,” I say, but I think I’ll buy a couple gallons and keep it here from now on. “I’ve got blueberry cheesecake and mint chocolate chip.”

“Blueberry,” she says, and I get it out. “Peaches didn’t go with you when you traveled?”

“No,” I say, taking her a spoon and a bowl. She bypasses the bowl and goes straight into the container of ice cream with the spoon.

“You have friends?” Tara asks, her voice so full of surprise that annoyance sings through me.

I return to the kitchen and pour the water into the coffee maker and start measuring grounds. “Funny,” I say, tossing her

a glare.

“I mean, of course you have friends.” She actually shakes her head as if trying to dislodge thoughts there. “I just...you seem like the solitary kind.”

“I am the solitary kind,” I say, and that helps me put up a couple of bricks between us that she’s knocked down. Somehow, and I don’t even know how.

“What made you that way?” she asks.

“The Marines,” I say.

“You served in the Marines?”

With nothing left to do with the coffee maker, I turn to get down mugs. I take one over to her, our eyes meeting. “For a few years,” I say.

“Is that where you learned to cook?”

“No, ma’am,” I say, wondering if she’ll hate that as much as me calling her *boss*. I should probably apologize for that, especially since it’s not her fault I’m salty toward head chefs. “I trained in the culinary institute in Paris. That was on my résumé.” I cock my head, seeing instantly that she didn’t even look at it.

I start to laugh and return to the island for spoons, milk, and sugar. “You didn’t read my résumé? I’m shocked by that.”

“Why?”

“Number one, you label everything. Literally everything. There’s a spot on the shelves for persimmons, and you’ve used them one time.” I look at her, daring her to contradict me.

“Labeling is not a crime,” she says, sticking a bite of blueberry cheesecake ice cream into her mouth.

“I disagree,” I tease as Peaches starts to imitate the doorbell again. “Come on, you.” I scoop her off the counter and put her in her cage. I reach for the blanket I throw over her cage while she hops to the top perch.

“What in the world?” she asks as I toss the blanket over the cage. She falls silent, and I turn back to Tara, catching

sight of my T-shirts laying over the back of the couch. Another wave of humiliation tugs through me, but I don't reach for the shirts. Maybe she won't notice them.

"She'll be quiet now," I say.

"Who was keeping her here?" Tara asks.

"My friend Turner," I say. "He's a vet."

Her eyebrows go up now, and I like how expressive she is with them. I wonder what will happen to those perfectly sculpted eyebrows if I kiss her.

"Turner Winn?" she asks, sending my heart plummeting to the floor

"Yes," I say. "You know him?"

"I have thirteen chickens." She smiles. "He's great, because he's one of the only vets in the city who'll see a chicken."

"He is great," I say. "He kept Peaches after I—while I was gone." I clear my throat and look away from Tara. She has a powerful gaze though, and wow, I feel it pulling me back to her.

"Where did you go?"

"Here and there," I say, and Tara sighs.

She reaches for her purse and stands. "Okay, I'm going to go."

"Why?"

"Because you're a big, fat liar, Mister Ward." She glares at me and strides toward the front door.

"I'm a liar?" I follow her, not pleased with how fast this conversation turned.

"Yes," she says over her shoulder. "You said you'd feed me and tell me what you confide in Peaches about, neither of which you have done." She opens the door and faces me, plenty of fire in those eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow at work. I would appreciate it if you'd keep the article to yourself."

I don't even know how to respond to that. Does she think I'm going to post it on my social media? Well, she'll be sorely disappointed, because after I lost *The Blackbriar*, I closed all my social media accounts.

She sighs again as if I'm the most insufferable man alive, turns, and leaves. The door drifts closed, and I get control of myself in enough time to get my foot between it and the jamb before it achieves the job.

Tara's walking away from my apartment, her hips swaying for all she's worth. A male growl starts in the back of my throat, because she really is a gorgeous woman. I have literally never thought the word *plump* when thinking of adjectives for her, and my chest tightens at the article her ex wrote.

I want that whole story, but I'm not going to get it today. She steps on the elevator without looking back to me, though I'm sure she can feel me watching her. My brother always says he can. Heck, Byron says he knows when I'm thinking about him, and he used to call me to find out what was on my mind.

Before.

I sigh as the naughty twins step off the elevator, both of them turning straight in my direction. "Oh, no," I say, realizing they've got their loud friend from downstairs with them.

"Alec," one of them calls. "Can we talk to Peaches?" They run toward me, and it's all I can do to get the door closed a little bit before they arrive.

"No," I say, trying to use my former military voice on them as the trio arrives at my door. "Peaches is tired."

She makes the sound of the doorbell, and my neck suddenly can't hold up my head. "Fine," I say to Frederick, Finn, and their friend, Johnny. "Ten minutes, boys. Then you have to go, or I'll tell your mothers you were out back with those snakes."

Their eyes all round, and Frederick glances at his twin. "How does he know?"

"Don't ask me why," Peaches chirps from behind me, and I step back to let the boys into my apartment.

I SWEAR TO YOU, I TYPE, SMILING AT MY PHONE. I WENT ALL THE way to the top of the Grand Tetons. It felt like the top of the world.

I've been texting Tara for an hour, and it's so much easier to talk to her via my device. I frown at that thought, wondering if it's easier for her too. She doesn't seem to have a problem talking to other people, and I'm sure it's my saltiness that's kept her at bay.

Something about her sweetens me up, and when she sends, *Sounds like a pick-up line, Alec. A bad one*, I grin.

Do you think that impresses me? she asks next.

"Yeah," I say to myself. I've left Peaches in her cage down the hall. I left the T-shirts too. After the boys left—their bellies full of grilled apple and cheese sandwiches that were not burnt, thank you so very much—I'd retreated to my bedroom to read more of the newspaper I'd gotten that afternoon.

It should, I send to her. *Hiking is hard. The air is all thin, and you can't breathe.*

I'll be sure to join the Marines and go through basic training before I take a walk.

I smile, wondering what makes her tick. *Why do you label things?* I ask, changing the topic. She's told me when and how she started Saucebilities. I've been telling her where I've been for the eight months before coming to Charleston to retake my role as Peaches's father.

I hadn't left the country, but there's so much to do and see in the US that it feels like I did.

I like things to be where they're supposed to be, she says. *Then I don't lose things.*

Is that a habit of yours? Losing things?

Yes, she says.

What's the worst thing you've lost?

My husband.

I suck in a breath, the conversation moving from light-hearted and fun to somber and serious with just two words.

I'm sorry, I tap out, and those two words are so easy to type and yet so hard to say out loud. *I once lost my business.*

I swallow and stare at the words. They're unsent, and I'm not sure I should send them. "It probably cost her something to send what she did to you," I tell myself.

I look up, the city beyond my window still lit up and thriving. I haven't left the apartment tonight the way I normally do. The scent of Tara is still here, and I want to hold onto it.

I tap to send the text, hoping I haven't made the biggest mistake of my life.

You did? she asks.

She doesn't ask more, but my fingers fly across the keyboard. *Yeah*, I type. *I conceptualized, built, and opened The Blackbriar Inn down in the Atlanta area.* I clear my throat, though we aren't talking face-to-face.

Maybe I shouldn't tell her the name of it. Then she'll look it up and see some Wards still own it. I'll have more to tell her then.

"You want to," I say. "Do it." I send the text, and the next thing I know, Tara's calling me. I stare at the incoming call, my heartbeat hammering in my chest.

I answer the call, and say, "Calm down," my mind still rotating through what I need to do to converse with this beautiful woman.

"Calm down?" Tara repeats. "Wow, Alec, what a way to answer the phone."

TARA

I grin to myself, realizing I'm flirting with the ex-Marine on the other end of the line.

"Sorry," Alec says. There's no chirping of his bird in the background, and I wonder if he covers her every night. Maybe he sleeps with her in the same bed as him.

I glance at Tommy and Goose, my two dogs who *do* sleep with me every night. There has to be another breathing body in the room with me, and I've had Tommy since the day my ex walked out.

Alec grinds his voice through his throat, and I glance at the TV flickering in the room. "So," he says. "You called me."

I flinch, realizing he's right. "Your text surprised me," I say.

"Which part?"

"You owning an inn," I say.

"Because I'm a man?" he asks, his voice turning hard. "Men can own inns too, you know."

I blink, because that's not what I was thinking. "Did you run all of it, or just the kitchen?"

"Primarily the kitchen," he says. "But I had my hand in all of it."

There are so many questions now. "And?" I prompt.

"And we were talking about losing things."

“I’ve lost so many things,” I say. “I once had to go get a new social security card after I misplaced mine. I never did find it.” I smile, because it’s easy to talk about what a loser I am after the fact. “I don’t even look for things anymore. If I can’t find something, I just replace it.”

Alec chuckles, and such a sound is so not fair. “Sounds like you have a system for it,” he says. “But it’s completely opposite of labeling everything so nothing gets lost.”

“Well, I’m an enigma, Mister Ward.” I reach for my laptop, which is like a third appendage when I don’t have a knife in my hand. “The Blackbriar Inn?”

“You don’t need to look it up,” he says.

“Oh, I’m looking it up,” I tease.

“My father and brother still own it,” he says, and it sounds like he blurted it out.

I pause though I have opened the laptop. I knit together some of the things he’s said that day.

He kept Peaches while I was gone.

I went all the way to the top of the Grand Tetons.

I used to own an inn.

I swallow, the tension as thick as ever between us. “I’m sorry you lost it,” I say. “Knowing you, I’m sure it was perfect.”

“I worked hard on it at least.”

“I won’t look at it.” I snap the laptop closed. “What made you want to open an inn?”

“I know what women want,” he says.

I blink, sure we’ve changed topics rapidly, the way he did while we were texting. I start to giggle, and I can’t stop.

“That’s not what I meant,” Alec says, clearly frustrated. That only makes me laugh harder. “I’m hanging up now.”

He does, and I’m still giggling. I’m also seriously considering giving him my personal cell phone number so I

don't have to flirt with him on the chef-cell. I have the two phones to keep the parts of my life separate that need to be that way.

Alec has blurred all those lines, especially with the way he said to show Brett that women of all sizes can find love, and that I'm amazing and smart, and that I should leave a comment on his biased, ridiculous article.

I open my laptop again, but this time, I go to the newspaper website and start typing.

THE NEXT MORNING, I LEAVE MY HOUSE WITH MY PURSE SLUNG over my shoulder, the same way I have loads of times. Across the street, I see a van I've never seen before.

It looks like a TV van, and when a sharply dressed woman emerges from the driver's seat, I nearly trip over my stupid feet. Again. Whoever makes orthopedics really needs to up their game in the steadiness department.

"Miss Finch," she calls, and I increase my pace to my own car.

A reporter. My worst nightmare.

If I don't say anything, she won't have anything to write. I still feel like I need a huge pair of sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat to get out of this disaster.

"Why did you comment on Brett Daniels's article? Do you two have a history?"

Humiliation strikes me straight in the chest. Leaving that revenge comment was a bad idea, though it had seemed like a good one at midnight, with all those Thai noodles in my belly.

I hold my head high as I go around the front of my car. I duck my head as I reach to open the door. A man has gotten out of the van too, and he's recording me. Legit recording.

I get in the car, feeling a little safer, which makes no sense. It's not like the video camera can't see through glass.

I reach up and smooth my hair back, my heart pounding. The cameraman stands right behind my car and Miss Classy is at the passenger window.

I'll run this guy over if I have to. I'm not the one who wrote a 1500-word article on chefs in the city, but only named one of them. Focused on her love life—or lack thereof. Hypothesized that chefs are only in love with themselves and their food, and therefore have a hard time finding a human being to love.

My face burns, and I put the car in reverse and honk the horn. As I'm pulling out of my driveway, I see Mr. Reynolds coming down his sidewalk. He's waving his hand and yelling. Relief fills me at the older gentleman's help. He lives right next door to me, and I'll need to bring him some of the strawberry shortcake cupcakes tonight after all of our prep work for tomorrow's luncheon.

I make it to the stop sign at the end of the street and turn right. A car pulls out from the curb behind me. My heart races the whole way to work, and I see another TV van parked in front of my building as I go around to the back.

“What have you done?” I ask myself. I haven't hit any stoplights, and I couldn't delete the comment on the way over. In the back, a couple of cars and a truck sit there. Jared, Henry, and Alec are already here, though I'm not late.

Maybe I should call one of them to help me get inside. “Don't be stupid,” I say to myself. I made it to my car just fine, and there are no camera crews back here. It's ten steps to the door, and my guys will have it unlocked.

I grab my purse and step from the car. I rush toward the door and reach for the handle. It's one of those that lifts up to open, but my fingers miss it. The handle flaps and clangs as my fingers slide out from underneath it.

Frowning, I try again, this time getting the heavy metal door open. I step inside, my foot landing right in a puddle of water. It splashes up my leg, making me cringe and my mood to turn fouler.

“What’s going on?” I ask, scenting something on the air that’s not quite right either.

“The dishwasher is on the fritz,” Jared says. “Alec’s working on it.” He reaches for my hand, and I take it. There’s nothing between us at all but camaraderie and friendship. No sparks. No fireworks. No electricity the way there is with Alec.

I hate that as much as I like it.

I don’t quite clear the pond still enlarging on the floor, because I really can’t jump very far. More water flies up, splashing everyone within ten feet and making me feel like I just bellyflopped in the pool and lost the top of my bikini.

“Oh,” I say. “I need to lock the door.”

“Lock the door?” Jared asks. “Why?”

“Because this whole place is crawling with press,” Alec says, appearing with a dishtowel in his hands. He glares at me like it’s my fault the dishwasher malfunctioned. “They followed me to work too.”

I stare at him. “Really?” Why would they follow him?

He steps past me and without even having to hop or jump at all and clears the puddle to the door in a single step. He twists the lock and turns back to meet my eye. “I think we need to have a staff meeting.”

I hate his use of “we,” though he’s right. I turn away from him and head for my office. “Give me a minute.”

“Tara,” he says after me, but I don’t turn back to him. I just need one freaking second to find a full breath, and I just know it’s going to be in my office.

I step inside and dump my purse on my desk. I’ve sat here and typed out my recipes dozens and dozens of times. I’ve been writing a cookbook for over a year, and the only reason I haven’t thrown it away is because Callie won’t let me.

My pulse has started to settle when someone pounds on my door, and I jump out of my skin, sure it’s one of my best friend’s serial killers, come to make mincemeat out of me.

Then Alec opens the door and says, “They’re coming in the building. We need you out here, Boss.”

I brace myself against my desk and glare at him. “If you call me *boss* one more time...”

Alec gives me a sexy smile and ducks out of the office as Jared calls for him.

I’ve got to get myself and my kitchen together. But first, I need to delete my comment from Brett’s article online and hope I can control the damage from there.



ALEC DOESN’T GET VERY FAR FROM ME AS WE WALK THROUGH the building and make sure all the doors are locked. I pull down every blind, though I’m one of those that likes the sunshine streaming through the glass the moment the day awakens.

I’ve had my meeting, explaining the article in as few words as possible to Alec, Jared, and Henry in person. Jared had put me on video for Barley, and now all the chefs at Saucebilities know about the article. I saw Henry shaking his head with a frown as he read something on his phone, and my face burns hot even now.

Alec is like a hulking shadow behind me, and I nearly run into him a time or two, my annoyance with him and the whole situation growing with every second. I finally turn toward him and say, “I don’t need a bodyguard.” I’m eternally grateful I didn’t call him to come escort me the ten feet into the building. How embarrassing would that have been?

“Maybe I do,” he says.

I’m not sure what to say to that, and the twinkle in Alec’s eye says he knows as much. I need something to hold over his head, and I seize onto his inn. “You know what? I’m going to look up Blackbriar the moment I get home.”

He rolls those beautiful eyes and says, “You do what you have to do.” At least he doesn’t tack a “boss” on the end of the

sentence. If he had, I have no idea what I would've done. Claws would've come out, I'm fairly certain of that.

He cocks his head and folds his arms. "I saw your comment on the online version of the article."

I suck in a breath, my eyes going wide. "It was a moment of weakness."

"I found it articulate," he says. "Well-written."

I gesture toward the blinded windows. "And now the press is all over me. Us." I take a deep breath and sigh. "I'm not going to give them another comment, and I deleted the first one."

"Oh, they've all seen it already," he says. "I wouldn't be surprised if Brett whips out another inflammatory article in next week's edition."

My irritation grows at the same rate as my horror. "My word," I say. "I gave him fodder."

Alec smiles, a half-laugh coming out of his mouth, as if he hasn't done such a thing in so long. It almost sounded rusty. "Fodder. Good word. I'm surprised you didn't go into journalism yourself."

"Please," I say. "They're slime balls, parking outside of my house and yelling at me in my neighborhood."

His smile slips. "Did they come onto your property?"

"Yes," I say, and I wipe my hand through my hair. It's come out of its normally tight ponytail, which is so abnormal. Everything in my life is always so lined up. Buttoned close. Labeled.

Sure, I lose a few things, because there are so many moving parts to keeping chickens, raising two dogs, and running a catering company. But I've never lost my sanity before. Standing in front of Alec, especially as his hand drifts toward my face and brushes that loose lock of hair back from my cheek, I feel completely crazy.

"I'll go home with you," he says.

A grin pops onto my face, cementing how completely loony this all is. “Is that a promise?” I ask, cocking my head. I scan him to his feet and back to those glittering eyes. Something flashes there, and I saw it in Florida too. I saw it in his apartment last night.

Oh, boy. I suck in a breath.

That’s desire, I think, and I feel it coursing through my body at twice the speed it was a moment ago. I haven’t had a man look at me like this in a long time.

Too long.

Doesn’t mean I don’t recognize it when I see it.

“Yes,” Alec says, and then he turns and heads back down the hallway. “We better get this prep done if we want to get out of here before dark.”

I don’t tell him I wasn’t planning on leaving once we get the prep done for tomorrow’s banquet at one of Charleston’s premier garden centers.

I have a strawberry shortcake cupcake recipe to perfect so it can go in my cookbook. “I also don’t need him to make sure I get home safe,” I mutter to myself. I can want something and not need it, something my momma instilled in me from a young age.

You need food and water, Tara. Not high heels. You just want those.

And now I want a dreamy ex-Marine who can cook circles around everyone else...but I don’t *need* him, and I certainly can’t have him.

Can I?

ALEC

I finish wiping down all the counters, glancing over to where Tara is boxing up the last of the shelled edamame. We'll be back here in the morning to finish the dishes and get everything in the two vans she owns for transport to the garden center.

I don't mind working weekends, because I don't have anything better to do. My phone zings at me, and I pull it from my pocket now that I'm done cooking and cleaning. Jessie's texted that she has to go, and I quickly tap out a message that she can. Peaches will be fine for a while without anyone there.

Yes, I pay someone to come sit with my parrot and keep her company. Birds are really social, and I work a lot. I don't think Tara would be thrilled to have the bird here, and paying Jessie eases my conscious.

I look up as Tara sets the stand mixer on the newly-polished stainless steel countertop. "What are you making?" I ask.

"You don't need to stay," she says instead of answering. "I don't need help getting home." She glances at me, but she doesn't truly *look* at me. My heart pounds a little harder, as I was actually really looking forward to going home with her.

Not with her, I tell myself. I'd just drive behind her and make sure she got inside her house okay. That's it.

"I'm working on a new recipe," she says. "I'm not leaving for a while."

I look down at my phone as she goes into the pantry to get her ingredients. Jessie's leaving. She's been with Peaches all day. The bird will be fine alone for a couple of hours. Sometimes I leave the TV on for her, and she's learned how to say some words from it.

I almost always leave her after checking in to go sit in the hot tub in the clubhouse too. She'll be okay.

"Can I help?" I ask Tara as she returns with sugar, flour, baking soda, and freeze-dried strawberries. "Looks like you're baking."

She nearly drops the canisters, and they go clanging across the metal countertop. Honestly, the woman is somewhat of a klutz, but the moment she picks up a knife, she's like a ballerina. All grace and fine lines.

Her face shines a bit pinker as she says, "If you want. It's just cupcakes, but I want to take some to my neighbor. He tests all of my recipes."

Immediately, my shackles go up. "*He* does?"

"Yes," she says without looking at me as she rights the box of soda. "Luther Reynolds. He lost his wife a few years ago, and I'll show up with cupcakes and he'll make tea, and we'll have a little party." She smiles as she says it, and the softness of it makes me relax.

"So he's like your grandfather."

"Not quite that old," she says. "Maybe twenty or twenty-five years older than me."

"How old are you?" I ask, realizing a moment too late that I shouldn't have asked. "I mean—never mind."

"Thirty-three," she says easily. "You?"

"Thirty-five."

She does look at me then, and time suspends right then and there. She has to see how interested I am in her, because I can't hold it back. I can see something sparking in her eyes, but I fight against it.

She's my boss. I can't let my emotions get in the way again. "Tara," I say slowly, determined to tell her about Heidi. "Uh, the last time I got involved with my boss, I lost the inn."

"That makes no sense," she says. "You owned the inn."

I clear my throat. "Right, yeah, I know."

She starts measuring flour into a sieve. "So what do you mean? And who says we're going to get involved? We've worked together just fine for months." She focuses on her task, and I just want her to look at me. Be present for five minutes while we work through this.

Confusion riddles my mind, and I'm not sure which question to answer first. "I mean...I'm...not interested in losing this job."

"Great," she says. "Because you're the best chef I've had in a long time."

I sigh, this conversation not going the way I want it to at all. I don't even know what I want. "What kind of cupcakes are you making?"

"Nice try," she says, giving me a half smile as she sifts the flour, sugar, and soda together. "What do you mean about you losing the inn?"

"My brother stepped in to finance the inn," I say slowly, picturing Byron's face in my mind. He's even more stern than I am, but it doesn't matter, because he's married with a baby on the way. "Technically, he was my boss, though my name was on the ownership papers too."

"You had an affair with your brother?" she asks, finally stopping to look up at me. Those long eyelashes frame her eyes, which sparkle with a teasing glint.

"Funny," I say, rolling my eyes. "No, of course not."

"His girlfriend then," she teases, reaching for the clotted cream. I've never seen anyone make cupcakes with clotted cream instead of butter, and Tara fascinates me to the very core. Clotted cream isn't even something available in the United States, which means Tara's made it herself.

I fold my arms and say, “Well, she’s his wife now.”

Tara throws the clotted cream several inches, her wide, shocked eyes coming up to meet mine. “Alec...” She lets her voice trail off. “That’s why you lost the inn?”

“Well, I couldn’t stay,” I say. “Not when I found out she was kissing me in the refrigeration unit and him in the manager’s office.” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. I made a decision to leave when I could’ve stayed. I signed everything over to them, and I...left.”

I’m not even sure which order things went in after that. I remember calling Turner here in Charleston. I had to stop here and drop off Peaches. I’ve always loved South Carolina and the Lowcountry, as I grew up not far from here. This feels like a good place for me to be, but I don’t say any of that.

Tara has walked toward me, and I didn’t even know it. “I’m so sorry,” she says softly, and then she takes me right into her arms. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been hugged, and I’m fairly certain I melt right into her. Every defense against her that I’ve been building and then rebuilding when she knocks it down disappears.

She could order me to do a jig, and I’d do it.

I take a deep breath of her, getting sugar, sweat, and strawberries. I want to hold her for a lot longer, but I force myself to pull away. As I clear my throat, I take a step back.

“Okay,” she says. “You can stay and help me with the cupcakes.” She smiles, breaking all the tension between us. How she does that, I’ll never know. “And if you’re lucky, you can come eat one with me and Mister Reynolds tonight too.”

“Oh, I can’t,” I say. “My bird-sitter has gone home, and I can’t be out late. It sends Peaches into a frenzy.”

Tara’s eyes widen again. “A frenzy? Is that what happened last night when she attacked me?”

I laugh. “She did not attack you. Birds like to perch on the highest object, and that happened to be your head.”

“My *giant* head,” she says, moving back over to the mixer. “Great. I knew I was twice as big as you.”

“Whoa, whoa,” I say. “That’s not what I said.”

“It’s fine, Alec.” She doesn’t look at me now though.

“Listen,” I say. “I just wanted you to know that I like you. I like this job.” I’m talking so fast, but I better get it out before she throws me out of the kitchen. “If I didn’t work here, and you weren’t the boss, I’d probably ask you out. There’s this great place down on the water where they serve these tiny mousse cakes, and every Tuesday, they do all their flavors for a flat fee. So every fifteen minutes you can get another one. The lights shine on the water and—” I cut off, horrified at what I’ve said.

Tara’s staring at me, an egg held in her hands that she’s already cracked. The white leaks through the shell and onto the counter, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

I barely notice, because when Tara’s in the room, she lights me up. “I’m sorry,” I blurt out again. “Forget everything I’ve said. I have to go. Peaches needs me.” I practically rip the apron off my waist and hang it on the wall near the front entrance to the kitchen.

Tara’s gaze weighs a thousand pounds, and it sticks to me as I walk through the kitchen to the back door. It’s locked, and I have to fight with it to get it open.

When I do, I simply walk out, telling myself I’ve said way too much as it is. It would’ve been nice had Tara said *something*, but I don’t wish for things. *Remember, Alec? Don’t wish. Just work hard.*

“Alec,” someone says the moment the door closes behind me. “Tara Finch was seen leaving your apartment last night. Did you talk to her about the article written by Brett Daniels? Can we get a comment?”

“No,” I growl out, wishing Tara knew what waited for her out here. Perhaps I really shouldn’t leave. I muscle past the man and his held-up cellphone and get in my SUV. I take a

moment while the air conditioner gets nice and cold to send a text to Tara.

Reporters in the back alley. You sure you don't want me to stay?

I recognize the significance of what I've texted. Last night, I asked her to stay. She had. I've never really stuck it out and stayed anywhere, especially when things get hard.

The Marines wasn't hard for me. Culinary school wasn't either. Seeing Heidi with Byron...was. Astronomically hard. Letting go of The Blackbriar Inn had also nearly taken everything from me.

The only thing I had left was my ability to run away.

Maybe you better, she texts. I promise these cupcakes are going to be worth it, and maybe we can call a Carry and sneak out the front.

With Tara, there are an infinite amount of maybes, and I find myself wanting to explore them all. My heart wails at me as I kill the ignition and get out of my SUV. I can't promise it that Tara won't shred it up again, but at the same time, I want to find out if she'll handle it with care.

The reporter yells another question at me as I walk to the back door, and then Tara's there, opening it for me. I meet her eye, step past her, and do something completely reckless.

I slide my hand along her waist as I turn, whisper, "Smile," and give the reporter only a few feet in front of me my best grin.

TARA

I laugh like I never have before. “You’re lying,” I say through the giggles. Alec throws the empty container of strawberry ice cream in the trashcan, and he’s laughing too.

“I swear, I’m not,” he says. “I screamed like a little girl and reached for the nearest object. I had no idea it was Chef Florence’s favorite ladle.”

I pile the strawberry buttercream into the piping bag, still laughing.

“It wasn’t a ladle when I finished slamming it on the countertops,” he says, and he’s a different person when he’s not cooking for work. He’d layered all the cookies in the liners, as well as the topped the berries and put them in too. By then I’d had the batter put together, and I’d piped it around the fruit.

While the ice cream melted for this buttercream and the cupcakes baked, I’d called Mr. Reynolds and told him I’d be by in a little bit with dessert. He’d told me there had been people by my house all day long, but he was keeping an eye on everything for me.

I squeeze down the frosting and twist the bag, gearing up to put a dollop on every cupcake. “You can dip these in those strawberries you chopped up.” I start icing the cupcakes as Alec steps to my side.

“I’ve been talking for an hour,” he says. “Are you going to tell me what this recipe is really for?”

I glance at him, my usually steady hand with a piping bag trembling a little bit. “I don’t want you to laugh at me.”

“Why would I laugh at you?”

“For starters, I tried to serve a winter soup at my best friend’s summer wedding,” I say. “I’m thirty pounds overweight, without a boyfriend, and the entire city knows it. I threw you to the ground with my enormous feet, and I splashed water from here to the door when I got here today.” I lift one of my orthopedic-clad shoes. “Oh, and your bird flew right at my head last night, causing me to pretty much freak out. Pick one.”

“Peaches has a mind of her own,” Alec says. “We don’t get many visitors.”

“Oh,” I say, hurrying to finish the piping now. “My cousin is going to meet us at Mr. Reynolds’s.”

“She is?”

“He,” I say. “I’m an only child, but I have four cousins in the area. I’m closest to Jason, and he texted earlier today to make sure I was okay.”

“Are you okay?” Alec asks, once again showing me his softer side.

“Yes,” I say, not wanting to get into more detail than that. I’m still reeling a little bit from him admitting that he’d ask me out if I wasn’t his boss. He obviously isn’t going to act on that, and the familiar need vs. want debate runs through my mind.

“So who babysits your bird?” I ask.

Alec clears his throat, and that’s his tell. He doesn’t want me to know, but he doesn’t want to lie either. “A friend of mine.”

“Does this friend have a name?”

“Jessie,” he says, and I force myself to finish piping before I look up at him. He picks up the last cupcake I’ve just iced, and he dunks it in the freeze-dried strawberries. “We grew up together. Neighbors.”

They might as well have come straight out of a romance novel. Best friends. Grew up together. Lived next door to one another.

“Is Jessie a boy or a girl?” I ask.

“Girl.”

I do my best not to wince, and I actually achieve it. Points for me. And I’ll reward myself with three scoops of ice cream for breakfast tomorrow instead of two. Or maybe I’ll order three number sevens from China Dream tonight. Whatever. It’s fine. His best friend is a female who clearly Peaches already adores. No problem.

“Where did you two grow up?” I ask, surprised at my level of professionalism. My voice didn’t even sound sarcastic or hurt.

“Beaufort,” he says. “Have you heard of it?”

“Everyone’s heard of Beaufort,” I say, impressed. “You must have old money.”

“Not me specifically,” he says, doing that throat clearing again.

“Does your family still live there?”

“Just my mama and my younger brother,” he says. “Dad and Byron are down in Atlanta.”

“Are your parents divorced?”

“Yes,” he says. “Yours?”

“No,” I say. “They moved to Miami after my dad retired.” My voice gets quieter and quieter with each word. We’ve finished the cupcakes, but I don’t want to leave quite yet. “I miss them.”

“I’ll bet,” he says. “It’s hard to be alone in the city.”

“Jason is still here,” I say. “We get along well, so that helps. And I have Callie—and now Dawson too.” I have Mr. Reynolds next door, and Macie, my friend down the street who owns the coffee shop. I have the dogs and all the chickens. I’m not alone, even if it feels like it sometimes.

“Hm.”

“Maybe we should go to Port Royal Island,” I say. “See the sights.”

He glances at me, but we’re done with the cupcakes. “It’s the beach. You get the same view just down the street.”

“Sure,” I say, smiling at him. “Don’t worry, Alec, I won’t make you take me to the most beautiful town in the Lowcountry if you don’t want to.”

“Actually,” he says, shaking his shoulders as if he’s a dignitary. “It was named the best small Southern town, not the most beautiful town.”

“Semantics,” I say, remembering I’d said the same thing about Brett and him being my fiancé. He had technically asked me to marry him. I’d technically said yes. When he broke up with me, he said he wouldn’t play second fiddle to a catering company, and that I was already married to Saucebilities.

“Words are powerful.” Our eyes meet, and my pulse zaps through my body. He clears his throat again. “I really don’t think you needed to take your comment down.”

I straighten and start to put the cupcakes back into the cooled tin. It’s really the best way to transport cupcakes, as they don’t slide around. “You don’t know Brett the way I do.”

“Next time we bake,” he says. “You’ll have to talk for the whole hour, and then maybe I will.” He gives me a smile, and I find myself wanting him to know.

“You know where I live?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“I remember,” he says.

I pick up the cupcake tin and face him. “I’ve been working on a cookbook. This is the last recipe for the cupcake section.”

He picks up the two empty wrappers from the treats he’s consumed. He doesn’t raise his eyebrows. His eyes don’t get wider. He simply smiles at me as he puts the liners in the trashcan. “That’s great, Tara,” he says, and I sure do hear the absence of the word “boss” as my whole body heats from the Southern way he uses my proper name.

I CLOSE THE DOOR, AWARE I'M GOING TO HAVE TO ANSWER TO Jason and Mr. Reynolds. I should've followed Alec out the door, but the tea hasn't even been served yet.

"He's handsome," Jason says, and I turn toward him.

"Don't make a big deal out of this," I say. "He just works for me, and we were bombarded at the kitchen with the press, and he wanted to make sure I got back home okay, especially after I told him there was a TV crew here this morning."

"Those people have no respect," Mr. Reynolds says, bringing a tray out into the living room. "I chased three of them off my property today." He smiles down at Goose as the little dog jumps up onto the couch as if eager for some of the herbal tea Mr. Reynolds is so good at making. "They rang your doorbell all day long."

"Not the sharpest tools in the shed," I say.

"I finally brought the boys over here," he says, sitting down and letting Goose sit on his lap. I once suggested he should get a dog of his own, but he says they're like grandchildren—he likes it when they're around, but then he gets to send them home for someone else to take care of permanently.

"Where's Tommy?" I ask.

As if on cue, the little black and white dog comes trotting into the living room. He's got a sock in his mouth, and I reach for it. "You devil," I say. "You stay out of Mr. Reynolds's room." I put the sock on the side table. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Mr. Reynolds leans forward, his longer hair flopping forward onto his forehead. He's completely silver now, though when I'd moved into this house after I'd sold the one Otis and I had shared, his hair had just started to turn gray. "Come sit down, Tara. I want to hear about this new chef."

"You've heard of him," I say. "He's Alec."

Mr. Reynolds hands me a cup of tea, and I wrap my fingers around the warming ceramic. “Alec? The rude one?”

“I don’t think I ever said rude,” I say. “Grouchy, yes. Grumpy, sure. Salty. I think I’ve used salty the most.”

“She conveniently forgot to mention how good-looking he was,” Jason says, and I throw him a death glare, hoping that will be enough for him to shut his mouth.

“Maybe his good looks have been overshadowed by his forked tongue,” I say.

“You two looked plenty cozy tonight,” Jason says, accepting a cup of tea from Mr. Reynolds.

“He’s...growing on me,” I admit.

My cousin grins, and his mama would be so glad all the money she spent on braces has paid off. He’s got straight, white teeth, and with his dark beard, hair, and eyes, I’m pretty surprised he hasn’t been able to find someone to settle down with.

He’s told me plenty of times that he doesn’t want to settle down. If he did, he would’ve done it by now. I think it’s just so convenient that he thinks he can do whatever he wants, when he wants to do it.

Jason has lived a somewhat charmed life, so he probably could get a woman and make her his wife if he wanted to. I wish I could do what I’d said to Alec before—go down to the grocery store and just pluck a boyfriend off the shelf.

It would be easier than trying to meet someone after working in the kitchen for twelve straight hours. A night at Mimi’s, with all their mousse cakes coming every fifteen minutes sounds about perfect, and I sip my tea while my mind circles around Alec.

“Tara,” Jason says, and I blink my way out of my thoughts. “There you are.” He grins at me knowingly.

“What?” I ask.

“Tommy’s licking your cupcake.”

I glance at the coffee table and push the little dog back. “Stop it.” I pick up the cupcake and wipe my finger through the frosting where his tongue was. I put it in a paper towel and glare at my pup. “Naughty thing.”

“I think you’re the naughty thing,” Jason says. “Bringing that muscley man here with those cupcakes.”

“Muscley?” I laugh, though I have seen him in a two-sizes-too-small shirt. Still, his chef jacket is the right size, and he hadn’t loosened it on the drive from Saucebilities to my neighborhood.

“Oh, come on,” Jason says. “Give us something.”

“There’s nothing to give,” I say. “He has a bird who attacked me. He fixed my dishwasher today. He’s a fantastic chef.” I shrug. “So he’s a little grumpy sometimes, but you know...I think he has his reasons.”

I think about what he told me about his brother and his ex-girlfriend. That can’t have been easy, watching the two of them get married.

“We always do,” Mr. Reynolds says. “Right after Karen died, I found myself yelling at a hostess in the restaurant where we used to celebrate our anniversary.”

I put my cupcake on a small plate and look at Mr. Reynolds. “You never told me that.”

“I try to keep the embarrassing things to myself.”

“Hey,” I say, smiling as I pick up my knife and fork. “You never let me do that.”

“Yeah, like eating a cupcake with a steak knife,” Jason quips as I cut into the dessert.

“I like seeing it,” I say, nudging the two halves apart. The strawberry is juicy and some of the redness has stained the vanilla cookie. It’s perfectly baked, if I do say so myself, and I can’t wait to taste that strawberry buttercream.

I take a bite of one half of the cupcake, and a party starts in my mouth. “I sent some home with Alec so he can tell me if they’re good or not.”

“Sure,” Jason says. “You sent some home with Alec so you have an easy reason to call him.”

“Your point?” I ask, grinning at my cousin.

“The point, Legs, is that if he’s just some guy who works for you, why are you finding innocent-seeming reasons to call him?”

“Don’t call me Legs,” I say around all the delectable strawberry flavor. No one’s called me that for years, and since it’s not a nickname that comes because I have good legs, I hate it.

My chef-cell chimes, and I raise my chin and pretend not to hear it. My fingers itch to check it though, and Jason knows it.

He grins at me and grins at me, while a second chime and then a third joins the first.

“Oh, answer it already,” he says. “I’m dying to know what handsome-hot-stuff has to say about the cupcakes you sent home with him.”

I choke-scoff on “handsome-hot-stuff” and roll my eyes. My real phone rings, and I recognize the *boom-chicka-pop* of Callie’s ringtone.

“Oh, there’s your girlfriend,” Jason says. “Who are you going to answer first?” He bites into his own cupcake, and his eyes roll back in his head. “Can I take a dozen of these home?”

“Forget it,” I say, pulling out my friend-phone.

“I take back everything I said about Alec,” Jason says. “Marry him for all I care. Just let me have one cupcake for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I say as I swipe on Callie’s call. “Hey, Cal. What’s up?”

“I just turned to come down your street, and I saw Alec leaving. You tell me, and you tell me right now: What’s going on with him?”

Jason starts to chuckle, his dark eyes dancing with delight. “Go on, Tara. Tell her what’s going on with that really ugly man.”

“I thought he was very symmetrical,” Mr. Reynolds says. “I know how Tara likes that.”

“You two are going to be the death of me,” I say, getting up.

“I’m pulling into your driveway right now,” Callie says. “You better have the door open for me, because there’s a lot of sketchy vans and trucks parked here I’ve never seen before.”

I go to Mr. Reynolds’s front door and open it. “I’m not home. I’m next door having cupcakes and tea with Mr. Reynolds.” I walk outside and down the front step. “I’m coming to get you.”

Callie emerges from her car, and while it’s not quite dark yet, she says twilight is a terrible time because one can’t really see if someone’s lurking in the shadows.

She marches toward me in a pair of platform sandals. “How are you after that awful article?” She takes me into a hug right there on the sidewalk, and I have to admit it’s good to see her.

“I’m hanging in there,” I say. “Come taste the cupcakes I want to serve at your wedding.” I link my arm through hers and start back to Mr. Reynolds’s. “Jason’s over, and he will not let up about Alec.”

“You better start talking fast then,” she says as we turn to go down the sidewalk.

“Nothing to talk about,” I say. “I’m just his boss; he’s just my chef.”

“Okay,” Callie says, and even if she doesn’t believe me, she doesn’t press it.

“Where’s Dawson tonight?” I ask.

“He and Lance are out getting a new doorknob for his back door. Finally.”

I grin, because Callie has a thing for locks, and she's been badgering her boyfriend to get his fixed for months.

We reach the top of the steps, and Callie pauses. "Tell the truth. You and Alec?"

"Nothing," I confirm, deciding that if he can ignore the chemistry between us, so can I.

I can. I will. I absolutely can and will.

ALEC

I groan as I look at the Sunday newspaper. The Local section has the picture of me and Tara, framed by the back door of the kitchen, grinning at the camera. It's grainy and not even all that focused, because that guy used his cellphone in bad lighting.

Definitely *stabloid* material.

"She's going to fire you," I mutter to myself.

In the living room, Peaches is chattering to herself, mixing her name in with motorbikes and bacon and now peekaboo. I have to leave for work in a few minutes, and I debate over calling Tara now or waiting to find out if she's seen the new article.

This one doesn't have a by-line with Brett's name on it, but Stephen Fyfe. I don't know him from Adam, and I wonder if Tara does. It's doubtful, but she has lived here for a while. Plus, if she did date Brett, maybe she knew other reporters too.

"What in the world?" Peaches asks, but I don't even look at her.

The article has us both listed by name, and I glare at it as if I can burn the letters right off the page with just my eyes.

Tara texted me a lot over the past week, mostly to get my opinion on the strawberry shortcake cupcakes, as well as whether or not she should hire another chef. I couldn't think of a single thing to tell her about the cupcakes, and we've been talking about our families a little bit more.

I know she's been asking Henry, Jared, and Barley about their schedules too, and yes, we all work a whole lot. If she's going to keep taking on events and parties the way she does, then she should hire someone else.

I'd thought about flirting with her every time my phone buzzed and her name came up, but in the end, I'd deleted all of those texts unsent. I can't stand in the kitchen and tell her I'd ask her out if she wasn't my boss and then flirt with her at night. How unfair is that?

"Peekaboo, boo," Peaches says, flying toward me. I brace myself for her birdie feet to grip my shoulder. She squawks and slips, because I'm not wearing a shirt yet. They're still on the back of the couch, as I can't seem to get them put away even when I think about it.

The past week has seen the reporters backing down quite a bit. They've stopped hanging out around my building at least, and Tara says she only had one at her house yesterday. With this new article, though, I'm sure the vultures will be out in force again soon enough.

She shouldn't have left her comment, and I feel like a schmuck for suggesting she should. I shouldn't have put my arm around her and smiled at that blasted camera. "Stupid," I mutter to myself even as I pull up my phone and navigate to the screenshot of her comment.

Peaches chirps and digs her claws into my skin. "Ouch," I say, and the bird repeats it back to me.

I find it disgusting that an editor and a supposed journalist would be so detailed as to name me and not use a single other example from the multiple restaurants and catering companies in Charleston.

Something wet lands on my chest at the same time someone rings my doorbell. Peaches mimics the sound, and I look down to see she's relieved herself on my chest.

"Come on," I say, already in a bad mood. "Really?"

"Alec," Tara calls from the hallway. "Open this door!"

“She’s not happy,” I say to Peaches. “Can you try not to poop on her?” I cross the room and open the door. Sure enough, an unhappy Tara stands there, a newspaper fistful in her hand.

“They printed that picture.”

I lift my paper too. “I’m aware.” I rip the picture out of the paper and fold it in half before using it to scrape Peaches’s waste off my skin.

“This is a nightmare,” Tara says. “Just when I thought the press would move on to find someone else to harass.” She slaps her paper against my abs, and I grunt out of reflex. “Why did you smile for that guy?” Her dark eyes flash with annoyance, and she stomps into my house.

I start to close the door when I hear, “Mister Ward, did Tara Finch just walk into your apartment? Are you two dating?”

“Dear Lord,” I say, quickly closing the door. “What else are You going to send to us?”

Locusts? Drought? Rivers of blood?

I turn toward Tara. “You shouldn’t have come here. They followed you, and now they think we’re together.”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“Yes, you do,” I shoot back at her, giving her an identical glare. “If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be here chewing me out.” Plus, she’d just called this situation a nightmare. If she didn’t care what they thought—what the whole city thought—it wouldn’t be a nightmare.

“I feel like a fool,” she says.

“This isn’t the end of the world,” I say. “You haven’t lost any clients, and—”

“Yet,” she interrupts me. She pulls open my fridge and then slams it. “What am I doing here?”

“I have no idea what you’re doing here. You weren’t even going to be in the kitchen today.”

“I should be feeding my chickens.” She strides toward me, and I wisely get out of the way. She stumbles but manages to catch herself.

“Whoa,” I say, reaching for her.

“That’s what you say to a horse,” she says. “I’m not a horse.”

“I was just going to help.”

“I don’t need your help.” She pauses in front of me.

“I’m not the one who dated Brett Daniels,” I say. “Nor am I the one who left an inflammatory comment on a stabloid.”

She ignores my pun, and while I’ve used it before, it’s so stellar, I can’t help myself.

“You said my comment was worthwhile.”

“I said it was well-written.” I’m not sure why I’m arguing with her, but wow, my blood feels like lava. She’s wearing a pair of black shorts that hug her legs and a tank top with black stars on a pink background. I start to wish on every one.

I lick my lips, not sure why I haven’t found a shirt and put it on yet. I clench my fingers, and every muscle in my body feels tight.

Peaches chirps along merrily, and Tara swats at her. “Peekaboo.” Peaches bobs her head and whistles as if they’re playing a fun game.

“She pooped on you,” she says.

“Again, I’m aware.” Humiliation fills me. I’m not sure how or why this woman makes me feel so small, but she does. “You should go.” If she doesn’t, I might grab onto her and kiss her. This past week since I admitted I’d ask her out if she wasn’t my boss has driven me mad.

“You’re standing in front of the door,” she says.

I edge out of the way and she reaches for the doorknob. The moment she opens the door, a barrage of questions get yelled from more than one voice. She slams the door and takes a couple of steps back.

One more, and she'll hit Peaches's cage. "Tara—" I say, but I'm too late. She bumps into the cage and it starts to tip.

I can only watch in horror as she stumbles and tries to grab onto the cage to steady herself. But while it's big, it's already tipping, and it's not going to hold her up. Everything happens in slow-motion, and all I can think about is the huge mess I'm going to have on my hands once the birdseed settles.

She yelps, and I lunge forward to grab onto her hand. I grip her fingers, but I can't save her as she's already falling. "I got you," I say anyway as the cage clatters onto its side, the doors banging together.

Tara lands on the cage and rolls, dragging me with her. I manage to catch myself just before the bulk of my weight would've landed on her, and I grunt as I plant one hand next to her head while the other arm bends, and I balance on my elbow, my chest pressed into hers.

We're both breathing hard, and the metal cage settles as we look at one another. The power in the city has to have just gone out, because every bit of available electricity is now zapping between the two of us.

Tara starts to laugh, though she has tears in her eyes. I do too, because it's better than the other thought in my head, which is to lean down and kiss her while she lays there on my living room floor, newspaper under her and a toppled birdcage beside her.

"Peekaboo, boo," Peaches chirps, and I realize something is dripping onto my floor. The bird's water. I refuse to think it might be anything but that.

"I'm sorry," Tara says, and together, we get to our feet, set up the cage, and start cleaning everything up. "I was so angry about the article, I didn't even get my butter pecan breakfast."

"I got you covered," I say, meeting her eyes again. That's it. Another power surge.

"Peekaboo, boo," Peaches chirps.

"There's butter pecan in the freezer, boo," I say, and Tara tips that gorgeous head of hers back and laughs again.

Satisfaction fills my chest, but I know it's not going to be enough for long. I'm going to have to kiss this woman to be truly satisfied, and I distract myself from the thought by wadding up all the old and wet newspaper on the floor and laying out new sheets.

"NO COMMENT," I SAY AN HOUR LATER AS I PRESS MY WAY through the half-dozen or so reporters to the back entrance of Saucebilities. I keep one hand on Tara's lower back, having had to do the same thing at my apartment building. We'd driven over together, the silence between us tense and thick after she'd eaten a bowl of butter pecan while I continued to clean up and re-feed and re-water Peaches.

I'd gotten all the feces off my chest before finding a shirt and pulling it over my head. We'd both said, "No comment," a bunch of times on the way to my SUV, but now Tara stays silent.

Since she's in front, she opens the door, and we escape into the kitchen. Someone tries to follow me, and I growl at him, "Not a chance," and make sure the door closes and latches before I lock it.

I breathe a sigh of relief, though I'm late and surely Jared is going to be up to his eyeballs in prep for that night's family party we're catering.

"I'll get the pasta going," she says, and she walks away from me. I'm not sure I can read this woman's signals, because I thought she liked me the way I like her, but she's been reserved and professional this past week too. Maybe she's been deleting flirty texts the way I have been.

I only have myself to blame for the relationship confusion, because I don't know how to relate to women. I don't know how to relate to other people at all. At least that's what Heidi told me.

I step over to the sink and wash my hands, then reach for a new apron.

“I could really use you out here,” Jared says, bringing back a load of dishes. He gives me a dirty look, and I don’t blame him for the blue fire in his eyes.

“Yep,” I say. “Sorry. Where am I today?”

“You’re on bread pudding,” he says, and I go out into the kitchen. He’s pulled a lot of the ingredients already, and Tara’s standing next to Barley as he stirs something in a big pot.

I start cubing bread, determined to make up for the lost time, when the interior door opens. Tara’s best friend, Callie, walks through it. “One week?” she screeches, holding up what looks like a printout. “He gives you one week?”

She strides toward Tara, slipping on the floor in her girly shoes. Callie grabs onto the counter to steady herself and keeps going.

“What are you doing here?” Tara asks, though she’s brought this woman into her kitchen before.

“That monster says he gives you and Alec one week before you break up.” Callie slaps the paper down on the table, and I exchange a glance with Jared.

“What a joke,” Tara says as she bends over the paper with Callie. Her ponytail is slicked back as usual, not a hair out of place. I’d felt that hair last week as it had drifted near her cheek, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.

She doesn’t wear much makeup, and now that she’s buttoned herself into her chef’s jacket, she looks like exactly the kind of woman I want to be with.

After scanning the paper, she says, “We’re not even dating.”

I pretend like her words don’t knife me through the heart, though she’s right. We’re *not* dating.

The door opens again, and this time an unfamiliar man walks in. I turn to look at him too, as does everyone else.

Silence fills the kitchen, despite the few hissing pans and the bubbling of boiling water on a stove somewhere.

“Get out,” Tara says, biting the words out through her teeth.

The man looks at her, and as he’s frowning, I take in his features. He’s got dark hair, like me. Dark eyes, like me. Broad shoulders, like me.

His gaze slides to mine, and I can tell he recognizes me. I think I know who he is.

“Brett, I mean it,” Tara says, striding toward him. “If you don’t leave right now, I’ll call the police.”

“I’m already dialing,” Callie says, her fingers flying over her phone.

He looks from me to her, and I realize she’s stopped right next to me. I’ve definitely lost my ever-loving mind, because I put my hand on her hip and tuck her into my side. “Is this the guy who wrote that article, baby?”

She looks at me, her eyes widening by the second.

I look back at Brett, my male protective streak rearing right up. How could a man like him—he’s dressed well, with shiny shoes and pressed slacks—do something as despicable as he has?

“The lady asked you to leave.”

“So you two are dating, is that it?”

“Yes,” I say, my voice strong. Beside me, Tara sucks in a breath, and I’m aware of all of the other chefs staring at us, not to mention Callie’s gaping mouth. “And it’s going to last longer than a week. You’ll have to print a freaking correction.” I take a step toward him, satisfied when he falls back, swallowing.

“In fact,” I say. “I’ll make sure you do.”

“Alec,” Tara says, and I return to her side. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay, sugar,” I say, drawing out the endearment in my Southern accent. “I have half a mind to file a slander lawsuit too. His completely-not-true article has cost you business.”

Brett scoffs, but he doesn't fire anything at me. He's definitely the type to hide behind his pen and his computer.

"All right," Jared says, stepping between us. "Time to go, Brett. You got to say what you wanted, which was really untrue and completely cruel, by the way."

I wonder how long ago Tara dated him, and if Jared knew him. He has been working with her for a while.

"A week," Brett says. "That's all anyone ever gets with the mighty Tara Finch. Then her attention will be somewhere else."

"Get out," Barley says, moving next to Jared, making a protective wall between Tara and Brett. "Tara's an amazing chef, and you had no right to make it personal."

"You're a jerk for making this about her weight," Callie adds. "Is Lyon trying to get his Southern pizza oven off the ground again or something?" She cocks her hip and glares at him.

"Oh, he's worried about the competition," I say, putting a smile on my face. "Tara's pizza is the best in the city."

Brett waves his hand in dismissal, his eyes glaring holes in me, then turns on his heel and strides out.

I breathe a sigh of relief for the second time that morning and slide my hand away from Tara's waist. I let it linger along her lower back, because I like the way my blood fizzes as if someone's poured that popping candy in it when I'm touching her.

By the time I get my hand away from her body, everyone is facing us.

"Surprise," I say, and Callie latches onto Tara's arm and pulls her from my side.

"We need to talk," she says, and they head for Tara's office.

"Can someone find out how he got in, and lock us down?" Tara calls as she stumbles after her best friend.

With everyone still staring at me, I say, “I’ll do it,” and get the heck out of the kitchen. It’s too dang hot in there anyway.

And only going to get hotter, I think as I start lowering blinds and checking doors.

TARA

“I’m coming with you,” I say, trying to shake off Callie’s vice grip. “Can you ease up?” My friend-phone rings, and it’s the *sizzle-sizzle-plink* of dripping coffee for Macie. “That’s Macie.”

“Great,” Callie says, finally letting go of me. “Put her on speaker so she can talk some sense into you too.” She pushes open my office door and folds her arms as I pass. She steps into the office too and locks the door behind her.

I swipe on the call and say, “Hey, Mace. I’m going to put you on speaker, so I only have to explain this once.”

“Oh, you’re explaining,” Macie says, her voice full of exuberance. She’s probably drunk six cups of coffee by now. She runs a coffee shop as the morning manager at a shop on a very popular downtown corner. “You better start fast; my break is only ten minutes, and I’ve seen your smiling face a hundred times this morning already. Girl, who is that guy?”

“That guy,” Callie says with plenty of bite. “Is her newest, saltiest chef.”

“Hoo, boy,” Macie says, and I can just see her fanning herself. “I better take up cooking to meet a man like him.”

“You don’t even know him,” I say, flopping into my desk chair. I need a cold washcloth to press to my forehead. That’s what my mama always did when I started getting upset about something. My back aches, and I’m fairly positive I bruised my tailbone when I fell backward onto a frigging bird cage.

I close my eyes while Macie says something else, imagining Alec hovering only a couple of inches above me. My skin crackles with energy now, the same way it had then. I wish I'd been brave enough to stretch up and kiss him. It's all I can think about, and it actually makes me frown.

"She's not dating him," Callie says, and I snap my eyes open.

"Hey," I say, sitting up and leaning forward. I've put my phone on the edge of my desk, and Callie's taken the seat in front of it. "This has to be a secret. We *are* dating."

"Fake dating," Macie says with a sigh. "That's almost as romantic as real dating."

Callie meets my eye, hers wide. "Is she kidding?"

I shake my head with a smile. Macie's had a worse time meeting someone than I have. I bend down and open the mini-fridge under my desk. I need ice cream for this conversation, despite the bowl I consumed at Alec's earlier.

"It is fake," I say. "He just sprung it on me, just now." I glance toward the door. "I need to talk to him." I open my desk drawer and pull out a spoon, offering it to Callie. She takes it, and I get one of my own. We only have a pint to share, but one cannot live on butter pecan alone, so it should be enough. "But Callie just whisked me away, as if that's the solution." I fix her with a cocked-eyebrow look.

"Her ex-fiancé showed up," Callie says, reaching for the pint I set on the desk between us. "He commented on Fisk's article that he only gives any relationship of hers a week." She scoffs and shakes her head, lifting the lid on the ice cream container. "He's just trying to paint her in a bad light so his stupid brother can launch his pizza oven."

"Well, I think his plan backfired," Macie says. "You should see the comments on both articles. The whole city is up in arms about his fat-phobia."

My heart warms. The whole city is behind me?

My phone chimes, and I glance at the notification that slips down from the top. Jason. He's seen the article too. The sense

of being completely overwhelmed rams into my chest, and even the first spoonful of ice cream I put in my mouth can't quench that feeling.

"So what are you going to do?" Macie asks. "Prove him wrong? Not that you need to. You don't need a boyfriend to be a worthwhile woman or chef."

"I know," I say. "But yes." The idea starts to grow in my mind. "Yes, I'm going to prove him wrong. Number one, Alec and I have been working together for months now." I knocked him to the ground two weeks ago, and that's when the fireworks between us really started. I'm already past the first week.

"Number two?" Callie prompts, and I focus on the conversation.

"Number two, I need a date to Callie's wedding, and that's still two weeks away."

"Oh, Lordy," Macie gushes. "Can you imagine that man in a tuxedo? I'm fanning myself."

Callie smiles, but I actually frown. I have imagined him in a tuxedo. And a suit. And a Marines uniform. If someone had been watching my Internet searches, they'd probably be concerned about me committing a crime and then trying to dress myself up to hide from the authorities.

"Number three, she likes this guy for real," Callie says, and I once again have to pull myself out of my fantasies.

"No," I say. "He works for me."

"She'll never fire him," Callie says, leaning closer to me. "So she might as well kiss him."

"No," I say again, my voice inching up in volume. I really hate the glinting light in Callie's eye. "It's just fake, Mace. I'll come by later today, okay?"

"Okay," Macie says. "I have that new blend you wanted to try. Bring something sweet with it, and we'll gossip some more."

“Sure.” I hang up just as another text comes in, this one from Mr. Reynolds.

“Gossip some more?” Callie asks.

“Yeah, about me,” I say with a bite to my tone. “She’ll just want all the details.”

“Well, honey,” Callie drawls, and I look up from my neighbor’s message. “I want that too.”

“There are no details, Cal,” I say. “Literally none. He stayed with me the other night to make the strawberry shortcake cupcakes. Remember, you came over? Anyway, he was going to leave, and he did leave, but there were reporters in the alley. So he came back in, and we just smiled at the camera for...funsies.”

“Funsies,” she repeats. “And now you’re in a fake relationship with a man you *do* have a crush on, whether he’s your chef or not.”

“I’m just his boss,” I say, though the words fall flat on their faces.

Callie giggles and says, “Honey, you’ve got to get up pretty early in the morning to fool me.”

“And maybe not tell you everything,” I grumble.

“That too,” she says, shaking her hair over her shoulders. “Okay, so what are you going to do?” She scoops up another bite of butter pecan.

“Do?” I copy her and put my ice cream in my mouth.

“Yes, do,” she says. “You need rules for a fake relationship. For example, Dawson and I agreed that holding hands was appropriate. Kissing was...not.”

“But you obviously kissed him,” I say. “You’re marrying the man in two weeks.”

“Yeah, we worked up to that,” she says, looking away. “What is Mr. Reynolds saying?”

I know this tactic. Callie is very good at getting the spotlight off her, and I normally call her on that. Today, I

don't. I don't have the energy. I still have a huge meal to cater for a family party tonight, and Jared was already upset Alec and I were so late.

I groan, thinking Jared probably thinks Alec and I were late because we had a late night. Or an early morning. Or were sneaking around, kissing.

"What?" Callie asks.

"Nothing." I blink and look at my texts. "Mr. Reynolds went to get the boys. He says the reporters are ringing the doorbell every other second, and the dogs keep barking. He's got them at his place."

"He's so thoughtful," Callie says. "I'll get him some Bryd's cookies. Dawson and I are going to get our order in there today."

"Oh, for the wedding?" I look up from thanking Mr. Reynolds.

"Yes," Callie says. "They'll be okay on the dessert bar, right? You're doing the cupcakes and a salted caramel ice cream still?"

"Yes," I say. "The cookies will be perfect for the dessert bar."

Callie smiles and gets to her feet. "Okay, you need to talk to Alec."

"I need to get the asparagus roasting for tonight's party," I say. But I *want* to talk to Alec. *Needs and wants*, I think. I wish they lined up more often.

Callie waits for me to put the ice cream back in the tiny freezer, and she walks with me to the door. "You and Alec should come out with me and Dawson."

"Why?" I ask. "So we can have double the camera crews recording our every move?" I slide my eyes down to her feet. "You're always so cute and perfect. Can you imagine the headlines? Frumpy chef-girl out with Charleston's rich and famous." I shake my head. "No, thank you."

“You are not frumpy,” Callie says firmly. “You’re gorgeous.” She eyes my shoes. “Maybe not in that exact pair of footwear, but they don’t take pictures of your feet.” She grins at me. “I’ll let you borrow my little black dress.”

I pull in a breath. “And the body shaper so I can be tall *and* curvy?”

“And the body shaper,” Callie says with a grin. “You already have the perfect pair of heels for the dress. Those bright green ones you wore a couple of St. Patrick’s Day’s ago? Those.”

“Okay, those have a pinpoint heel,” I say.

“Just a reason for us to go shopping then.” Callie opens the office door and turns back to hug me. “Rules, Tara. Just tell him the rules, and then don’t be afraid to break them.”

“I’m not breaking any rules.”

“Oh, baby, that’s just a shame.” She pulls away and grins at me. “It’s breaking them that’s so fun.” She precedes me through the door, and I think about which rules I’d like to break with Alec.

All of them.

I’m in so much trouble.

Especially when he nearly collides with Callie as she leaves the kitchen and he tries to come in. He says something I can’t catch from where I stand, and his eyes fly straight to mine after Callie gets by him.

He freezes, and my heart beats against the icy cage I’ve put it in. Luckily, ice breaks, because as he heaves a sigh that *can* be heard throughout the kitchen and comes my way, my heartbeat pulses heavily through my whole body.

“We should talk,” he says, and I exit my office.

“Fine,” I say, glancing at Jared, Barley, and Henry. They all shoot a look in my direction, and I honestly don’t know what to tell them. I take a few steps toward the long, stainless steel counters that run down the center of the kitchen. “We’ll be right back.”

“Take your time,” Jared says, his attention on the cabbage he’s running over the mandolin. I’d be super focused on that too, because chefs lose fingers when working with the slicing tool. He’s got the shredding blade on, because he’s making cole slaw for tonight’s party.

I turn back to Alec, meet his eye, and head for the same door Callie went through. He follows me, asking, “Where are we going?” the moment we’re free from the kitchen.

“I can’t breathe back there,” I say, my goal the conference room. I meet with clients and give presentations in here, and one entire wall is windows. Someone’s closed the blinds, and I’m grateful for that as I step inside the dark room.

I take a breath, and it finally feels cool enough to hold in my lungs for longer than two seconds. I face him, my fingers automatically curling into fists. “Surprise?”

He frowns and folds his arms. “It *was* a surprise.”

“Now everyone thinks we’re dating.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, though he doesn’t sound apologetic at all. “Did you *want* Brett to come into your kitchen, insult you, and then watch him walk away?”

“No,” I bite out.

“I improvised. You praise me for it in a recipe.”

“My life is not a recipe.”

“Now this is my life too.”

I take a step toward him, telling myself not to look at his mouth. “I didn’t ask you to be my fake boyfriend.”

“Yet here we are,” he says, his eyes dropping to my lips. An insane amount of pleasure dives through me. When his gaze rebounds to mine, there’s plenty of desire there. Plenty.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, more gently this time. “Posing for the picture was reckless and hot-headed of me. But we’re kind of in the bed now.”

My eyebrows fly up. “We are?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” I ask, grinning at him. He’s so easy to tease with all the stuff he says.

“We just have to make the best of it. We made the bed, even if it was reckless, and now we have to lie in it.”

All this talk about beds. My goodness. I can’t breathe out here either. “I need some rules,” I say, seizing onto what Callie said. “First, I’d love for this...thing—whatever it is—to last longer than a week.”

“That’s a given, Tara.”

“I’d like a date to Callie’s wedding. It’s in sixteen days.”

Alec’s eyebrows go up for a moment and then right back down. “I suppose a boyfriend would go to your best friend’s wedding with you.”

“You’re going to be there anyway,” I say. “You said you’d help in the kitchen.”

He nods, and I take another step toward him, this one much less menacing. He drops his hands to his sides, and I reach out and touch the collar of his chef’s jacket. He sucks in a breath that makes me roll my eyes.

“I...think we should be able to touch each other without the gasp of the century being heard.”

“The gasp of the century?”

“I’m surprised there’s any air left in this room,” I tease. “For how hard you just sucked it all in.” I drop my hand and laugh. “Seriously, Alec. You acted like I’d just stabbed you with a knife and all I did was touch your collar.” I hold up my hand. “Do *not* tell me a knife joke.”

“Is that a rule?” he asks, reaching out to run his fingers down the side of my face.

I pull in a breath too, because his touch sends zings and zangs all through my body.

“I thought we weren’t gasping,” he murmurs, those dark, deep, delicious eyes locked on mine. Oh, this man knows how

much I like him, and he's using it against me.

"No," I say, but my voice sounds like his parrot's.

"So I can hold your hand." He lets his fingers drip down my arm to mine.

I don't make a single noise. I also can't breathe, but it's fine. I can hold my breath for a really long time. My head only feels fuzzy because of the way he holds my hand, as if he really wants to make sure as much of his skin is touching mine as possible.

"Yes," I say.

"Put my arm around you," he says, doing just that.

"Yes."

He steps closer to me and tucks my hair behind my ear before letting his other arm envelop me in an embrace. "This is okay?"

"This is great," I say, giving away so much.

"Mm." He ducks his head and traces the tip of his nose down the side of my face. "Kissing?"

"I...don't see why we'd need to do that in public," I say.

"When are we going to go out?" he asks. "Have you seen this week's schedule?"

"Yes," I say, because I make the schedule. "We don't have to go out. They already think we're together."

"So Tuesday night?" he asks, somehow getting his feet between mine as we sway right there in the conference room. "Mimi's? Mousse tasting?"

"All right," I say, my brain misfiring at me.

"Great." Alec steps back, half a smile sitting on that perfect symmetrical face. It would be easier to punch him if he wasn't so perfect already. "So no kissing in public. Holding hands and touching is okay. This has to last through the wedding, which we're attending together as a couple, and

we're taking off on Tuesday night for a mousse tasting." His eyebrows go up. "Did I get it right?"

I frown, because he's not touching me anymore, and I can think more clearly. "Did I say yes to a date on Tuesday night?"

"Yep." Alec steps back and turns around. "I better get back to work. If you need a minute, feel free to take one." He leaves the conference room right about the time my brain catches up to what he's said.

"I don't need your permission to take a minute," I grumble to myself, sinking into the nearest chair. Every cell in my body feels cold, because he's not holding me anymore. I also realize that he didn't say no kissing ever, he said *no kissing in public*.

Dear Lord, I'm as bad at making rules with my fake boyfriend as I am at firing people.

ALEC

“Hey, Alec,” Dawson says as I slide into the booth next to him. We tap knuckles and he indicates the blond man across the table from him. “This is Lance Byers, my best friend. Lance, this is Alec, Tara’s new boyfriend.”

I almost jump in to say I’m not her boyfriend. She’s just my boss. I manage to clamp my mouth shut just in time.

“Good to meet you, man.” Lance shakes my hand over the table, and I glance around The Ruby.

“This place is great,” I say, noting all the red on the walls, the floors, even in the wood.

“Something to drink?” a waitress asks, pausing at our table.

“Just water,” I say.

“More coffee for me,” Dawson says.

“Another.” Lance lifts his beer bottle, and the woman leaves. “You don’t drink?” he asks me.

“Not anymore,” I say with a smile. “I had, uh, a thing go bad in Colorado while I was there this past fall. Plus, I’m driving tonight.” I’ve learned that drinking and Alec Ward don’t really go together, and since that’s something I can control, I do.

Lance nods and looks out toward the main area of the club. It’s full of couches, chairs, and other plush things for people to

sit on. Small tables linger nearby for people to put their drinks on, but since it's not very late, the club isn't very full.

I don't know Lance's whole story yet, but he's putting off a very distasteful vibe. No one will dare approach our table with such a sour look on his face. I try to copy it to really keep people away, which isn't hard this early on a Monday night.

"How long have you and Tara been dating?" Lance asks, and I stare at him.

Dawson clears his throat, and I look at him. "This shouldn't be a hard question," he says with a smile. "Haven't you answered it a ton of times?"

"No," I growl. "I just bark at everyone that I have no comment and keep walking."

"You gotta work out this part of your story," Dawson says. "It has to be rock solid, because you tell it so many times."

"She's my boss," I say.

"Right, uh huh," Dawson says, fluttering his eyelashes at me. "So when did you start having feelings for her?" He talks in this fake, female reporter voice, and it actually loosens me up.

"In Florida," I say, immediately wishing I could suck the words right back down my throat.

"Whoa, man," Dawson says, reaching for his coffee as the waitress puts it down. He whacks a packet of sugar against the table while we all get our beverages, and I reach for my water and gulp it.

"Florida, huh?" he asks. "When'd you guys go there? Over a month ago, right?"

I nod, because the cat's out of the bag now. At least between the three of us. "I, uh..." Need something a lot stronger than water.

"You didn't tell her," Dawson says, smiling in a way that makes me feel comforted in his presence.

"Of course not," I say under my breath. "She's my boss."

Lance pops the top on his bottle and watches us. “I feel like I’ve been inside this conversation before.” He smiles at Dawson. “I told him the same thing I’m gonna tell you: It’s not like you have to report to an HR rep. If you like her, go for it.”

“Mm, no,” I say, though I’m kind of already up to my neck into a relationship with Tara. “I just got out of a bad relationship with my last boss. I like this job. I *need* this job.”

I like my apartment on the north side of the peninsula. I like the double-ovens, and all the space for Peaches’s birdcage. I like the vibe in Charleston, and I really like that it’s not Beaufort.

You really like Tara, I think, but thankfully, I know how to keep my mouth shut when sensitive things try to come spilling out. Usually. That Florida comment befuddles me a little.

“You can have the job and the girlfriend,” Dawson says with a shrug. “Right?”

“I don’t honestly know,” I say. “Didn’t work out that way last time.” In my pocket, my phone dings, and I dig it out. Jessie’s name sits on the screen. “This is my bird-sitter.”

“You’ve got a bird?” Lance asks.

“Yes.” I read Jessie’s text real quick.

I have to go, Alec. And we need to talk.

“Uh oh,” I say, showing Dawson the text. “I think she’s going to quit.”

“Sounds like it,” he says.

“I’m going to go call her,” I say, sliding to the end of the booth. “Excuse me a minute.” I tap on Jessie’s name as Dawson and Lance tell me to take my time, and she picks up at the end of the first ring.

“Alec,” she says breathlessly. She’s always had a cute little voice, and I’d once entertained a crush on her. I’d been ten, and she’d been nine, and I thought she was the coolest girl ever when she swung out on a rope swing over a pond and dropped right into it.

“Why do we need to talk?” I ask her, aiming for the exit and less smoky air.

“I can’t keep bird-sitting for you,” she says, her voice pitching up. “I’m sorry, but you don’t pay enough, and I can’t keep living with my uncle.” She blows out her breath, and I realize she’s not upset, she’s furious.

“Why?” I ask. “What did he do?” I push past a couple of guys coming in so I can get out. Finally free, I keep walking down the sidewalk. I have so much nervous energy, and I can’t wait to get out of here and go lift weights.

Dawson had invited me for drinks tonight to “get to know me.” What he didn’t—and doesn’t—get is that I’m not going to open up to anyone. I can hold Tara’s hand and laugh with her and nuzzle her neck for the next fifteen days. Heck, I could do it a lot longer than that. But I’m not going to let myself fall in love with her.

“He’s just as bad as Mama and Daddy,” Jessie says. “He tried to set me up with James Birmingham last night. James. *Birmingham, Alec.*”

“Well,” I say, trying to conceal my smile though Jessie’s not here with me. “The Birmingham’s have a ton of money, Jess. All that land on that plantation. Why, I daresay you’ll never have to leave for anything ever again.”

“Sounds like pure bliss,” she quips, and I hear her take in a breath.

I’m fast enough to pull the phone away from my ear as she screams, and I say, “Get it all out, girl.”

“I hate this,” she says, and there’s the high-pitched voice filled with tears I expect. “I hate not being able to do anything but baby-sit my dumb friend’s dumb bird. No offense.”

“Peaches is not dumb,” I tease, hoping Jess can hear it. “She knows almost fifty English words, and she never stops using them.”

Jessie half-laughs and half-cries. “I need a job, Alec. A real job, that pays real money. One where I can afford my own house or apartment or whatever. I have to get away from

everyone, or they're seriously going to marry me off to the youngest and wealthiest land-owner they can find."

"Oh, come on," I chide. "That's not true. The Collins boy is what? Four? Five?"

Jessie bursts out laughing, and I chuckle with her. "James is forty-seven, Alec." The moment sobers, and I stop at the corner.

"What are you thinking, Jess? You're not going to go back to Beaufort, are you?"

"No." She sighs. "I can't. I won't."

My mind races along all the things I know about Jess and her family. "Okay, so you want to move out of your uncle's house. That's easy. Move in with me."

"I need a real job, Alec."

"Okay, so move in with me, and then start looking for jobs."

Silence pours through the line, and I can tell she's thinking about it. "What will your new girlfriend say?" she asks, and I spin around as if Tara will be standing right there, accusing me of cheating on her.

"Uh..."

"You do have a new girlfriend, right?" Jessie asks, her voice lilting and teasing now. "I've seen your picture in the paper and online. I'm honestly surprised Nell hasn't called."

"I am too," I say, thinking of my mother. It's been her greatest desire the last ten years to get me married and settled. I keep telling her a person can be settled without a band on the left ring finger, but she doesn't believe me.

Running away for nine months hadn't helped my case. I start back toward the club, still trying to think of a solution for Jessie.

"Maybe I better talk to Tara first," I say, because if she really was my girlfriend, I'd definitely talk to her before I

allowed a female friend—no matter how platonic our relationship is—to move into my apartment.

“Mm hm, yeah,” Jessie teases. “When did you start dating anyway? And why am I finding out about it online?”

“It’s new,” I say, thinking about the Florida trip, over a month ago. “And you know I don’t call you up and tell you everything.” I scoff as The Ruby approaches. “I’m not a woman.”

“Does she have any single friends? Family members? Maybe we could double, and maybe I could get Uncle Jack and Mama and Daddy off my back if I had a boyfriend.”

“She has a single cousin,” I say, pieces falling neatly into place.

“Set up a double date,” Jessie says. “I’ll keep sitting with Peaches until I find a job, but I’m going to start looking, Alec. Just so you know.”

“Okay,” I tell her. “I understand. Sorry about Uncle Jack.”

“Yeah, I thought he’d be different.” She sighs, says good-bye, and I let her hang up as I return to the booth.

“Sorry,” I say. “She watches my bird for me during the day.” I throw back another swig of water as if it’s whiskey. “I should get going.”

“Wait,” Dawson says. “I’m supposed to get to know you.” He wears panic in his eyes. “I can’t go back to Callie with, ‘he owns a bird, and his bird-sitter is quitting.’”

“Who has a bird-sitter?” Lance asks, grinning.

“It’s a unique situation,” I say. “Birds are...particular.”

“Yeah, we had one once that plucked out all of her feathers every time we left the house,” Lance says. “My mom got rid of it, and she moved on to potted plants. Less maintenance.”

I laugh with him, but I’m not going to give up Peaches. She didn’t give up on me.

“So what did you do before you came to Charleston?” Dawson asks, and I guess he’s really going to do this.

I sigh and decide to give them the Cliff Notes. “I joined the Marines when I was nineteen, after a year of...doing nothing, trying to figure out what to do with my life.” Some people think having a ton of money is oh-so-much fun, but it’s not. It’s a lot of sitting around in stuffy clothes, holding drinks you can’t actually swallow, and talking about how humid it is that day.

“Did that for five or six years, then went to Paris to the culinary institute there. Did that for a few years. Came back to Carolina and started a restaurant in an inn. That didn’t work out, and I took a few months to travel before landing here.”

Lance and Dawson nod. “Your family has money,” Dawson says as if he knows.

“So does yours,” I say coolly, lifting my almost-empty water glass to my mouth.

“So does mine,” Lance says. “If anyone cares. I mean, I don’t know if it matters, but I thought I’d throw that out there.” He grins again, and I do like him. He seems down-to-earth and like a decent human being.

I grin back at him. “I do care, Lance. Thanks for chiming in.”

“Just don’t let your girlfriend become your wife if you’re not sure she really likes you, and not your money.” Lance throws back the last of his second bottle of beer while Dawson shakes his head.

I look at him, and our eyes meet. So much is explained in that single moment of time, and my heart goes out to Lance.

“Well, she’s not my real girlfriend.” I clear my throat, because I wish what I’ve just said wasn’t true. “So I think I’m in the clear there.”

“Yeah, he’s said that before.” Lance throws a look at Dawson, who gazes steadily back at him. “I should go. I’m buzzed, and I have to do all those stupid interviews in the morning.”

“Interviews?” I ask, seizing onto this vital piece of information. “For what?”

“Lance is the managing partner of Finley and Frank Realty,” Dawson says. “He’s been burning through assistants the way I used to go through secretaries.”

“Callie won’t come work for me,” Lance says with a frown. “And it’s really not that hard to answer phones and emails. I have no idea why Amber quit.” He tosses some money on the table and slides out of the booth. “Give me a ride home?”

“Sure,” Dawson says, and we both get to our feet. “And dude, Amber quit because you’re Mister Growly Bear all the time. At least that’s what Callie told me.”

“Mister Growly Bear?” Lance repeats, and I manage to wait to burst out laughing until the two of them walk away.

Back at my apartment, I change and head toward the clubhouse. The gym closes at ten, as do all of the amenities. I get through my weight-lifting routine before the witching hour, but it’s past ten by the time I strip down to only a tight pair of bicycle shorts and ease myself into the hot tub.

I can get fined for using the hot tub after hours, but I’m quiet as a mouse, and Miss Opal’s given me permission. She runs the HOA board in my apartment complex with a semi-iron fist...which I know how to soften.

Oatmeal chocolate chip cookies, and I happen to be a pro at making those. Miss Opal said I could use the hot tub as long as I laundered my own towels, brought by a fresh dozen cookies every week, and never breathed a word about it to anyone.

Thankfully, even though I grew up in a rich neighborhood, in a house four times too large for my family, with maids, I know how to start a washing machine.

I let the water hold me up and cover my ears and start to lap at my forehead as I lay in it. I love how the world disappears when I close my eyes. It’s dark in the pool area, despite the street lamps outside and the moon doing her best to throw silver everywhere.

With my eyes closed, I only see blackness, and with my head almost underwater, I only hear the rushing jets and bursting of bubbles. Everything else fades away, and I just exist in this hot water as it unknots the muscles I just worked.

Lifting the fifty-pound weights didn't drive Tara from my mind. I don't think anything will, and I should probably tell her I don't want this relationship to be fake. I don't want to ask permission to touch her, and I don't want to worry about breaking her rules.

When I finally feel relaxed enough that I can go home and go to bed, I pull myself from the hot water. I've just reached for a towel when someone whispers, "*Psst!* Alec, is that you?" in a voice that sounds very much like my fake girlfriend's.

I spin toward the noise, and sure enough, Tara's standing next to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows that's been left open. It's not bright like daytime, but definitely enough light shines in from outside to illuminate me in my very tight pair of shorts.

"Wow," she says, her eyes sliding down the length of my body. "I've never seen a man wear a swimming suit like that."

TARA

“**W**hat in the world are you doing here?” Alec asks, reaching for his towel again. But he’s not looking at it, and his hand simply claws at empty air over and over. And over.

I can’t look away from that body. Wowsers. I mean, I knew he was hiding some serious muscles under that chef’s jacket, and I knew he didn’t have an ounce of extra fat on him. But seeing it so plainly... I can’t even breathe properly.

“Tara?” he asks, giving up on the towel. “Are you okay? Why are you here?” He comes toward me, but there’s no door here. Just a window.

In that moment, I realize what a creeper I am. I’ve lost my ever-loving mind, because I say, “I looked up your pin on Maps, and saw you were here.”

He actually takes a step back, horror crossing his face.

“I mean—”

“Ma’am,” someone says through an intercom system. I spin around to find a cop car easing up to the curb, the reds and blues starting to flash. “Step away from the building, ma’am.”

When I don’t move instantly, the cop makes his car go *whoop-whoop!* and I see my freedom flash before my eyes. At least the last thing I’ll see before I’m hauled off to jail is Alec in a near-Speedo, his torso and chest rippled with muscles.

When my eyes land on his face, I see that trademarked frown, and for some odd reason, it comforts me.

“I’ll be right out,” he says, turning and striding back toward the hot tub.

I do my citizenly duty and turn around, putting both hands high above my head. “I was just talking to my friend—boy—boyfriend.” The words trip out of my mouth, and I pray that’ll be all the tripping that happens tonight. With my luck, though, I’ll fall flat on my face as Alec stands over me in those tight booty shorts.

“Do you live here?” the police officer asks. He stands as tall as me, and we probably wear the same size. If I could knock him out, I could switch clothes with him and go on a joyride.

His partner emerges from the car, and all thoughts of that fly out of my head. I don’t like driving that much anyway. I bet I could get a lot of butter pecan ice cream for free though.

“No,” I say. “My boyfriend lives here. Apartment 6D-39. He was in the hot tub. I was just talking to him.”

The officer looks past me to the dark building. In that few seconds, I see every decision that brought me here, and I wonder what in the world I was thinking. Just because I can see Alec’s pin on a map doesn’t mean I should leave my house and follow him.

He’d told me about drinks with Dawson anyway, and he’d actually capped it in the text he’d sent me, as if it were an event.

Drinks With Dawson.

I hadn’t heard from him since, but because we’re not actually dating, that’s not unusual. What is unusual is how I want to tell him that I’d like to be his real girlfriend. That maybe we could just try it for a couple of weeks. I’m not sure I can prove Brett wrong about a relationship lasting longer than a week, and I’d like to see if he’s right or not.

“There’s no one here, ma’am.” The officer focuses on me again. “Have you been drinking tonight?”

“No,” I say, turning back to the building. “He is here. I just talked to him.”

“Do you take medication?”

I spin back to the police officers, both of them standing shoulder-to-shoulder now. “No,” I say, frustrated.

“*Should* you be taking medicine?” the second one asks.

“This is ridiculous. He was right there.” I can’t believe Alec has abandoned me. Panic claws at my gut, because perhaps I’ve ruined everything already, and it’s only been forty-eight hours.

But not for the reason Brett said I would, I think, and that gives me some vindication.

“Honestly,” I say when they remain silent. “I have all these chickens, right? Well, one of them has been acting kind of sick lately. Won’t come out of the coop and stuff, right? So my boyfriend—again, his name is Alec Ward, and he lives in apartment 6D-39—has this Quaker parrot, and he knows a lot about birds. So I thought I’d ask him if there’s anything we can do for Pot Pie.”

One of the officers turns back to the car, while the other one lifts his eyebrows. “You have a chicken named Pot Pie?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, swallowing. “I have thirteen chickens.” Why am I telling him this? I command myself to stop talking, and I press my lips together to achieve the feat.

“You do know that chickens and parrots aren’t the same at all, right?”

Relief fills me at the sound of Alec’s voice. He emerges from the shadows, fully clothed, unfortunately, and carrying a gym bag in his hand. “Sorry, beautiful.” He slings one arm around my waist and presses a kiss to my temple. “I had to change.” He glances at the cops, both facing us now. “What’s goin’ on?”

His drawl is slow and spectacular, and I bask in the honeyed quality of it. The man oozes Southern charm, and

he's been hiding it behind crusty layers of salt for months. I almost want to stomp on his foot and ask him why.

Then I remember his ex-girlfriend, now sister-in-law, and I know why. Still, I don't see how she was his boss, and the two situations are totally different.

For one, I'm not kissing his brother.

You're not kissing him either, I tell myself.

"Do you know this woman?" the first officer asks.

"Are you Alec Ward?" the second one does.

"Yes," he says. "And yes."

"Apartment 6D-39?"

"Yes, sir," he drawls. "I was just relaxing in the hot tub after working out."

"You do know this hot tub closes at ten p.m.," the first officer says.

"Do you work for the HOA?" he asks. "This is private property, sir, and I happen to have permission from the HOA president to use the hot tub after hours."

I want to tack on a "So there," but I'm in my thirties and beyond such juvenile behavior. I'm still wearing my orthopedics, so the cops probably think I'm in my fifties, as my hair's a bit wild from my fray with thirteen chickens not long ago.

They look from me to him. "It's time to go home," the second officer says. "Let's go, Jer." They both nod, and I actually lift my hand and wiggle my fingers.

My word. I've gone insane. I drop my hand to my side and step away from Alec at the same time he moves away from me. "Thanks," I say.

"I'm still not sure what you're doing here," he says.

"You heard the chicken ramble," I say. "I need help with Pot Pie." I gesture toward the parking lot down the way a little bit. "She's in the car."

“Wait, wait. You legit brought your chicken for me to examine?”

“You know birds,” I say, enunciating each word. “What am I supposed to do? Turner costs an arm and a leg for an after-hours consult, and he’ll probably just tell me to butcher her and enjoy a feast.”

Alec looks like he’s going to agree with the vet. I must put out some powerful don’t-you-dare vibes, because he doesn’t. “All right,” he says with a sigh. “But I hope you realize I take Peaches to Turner when there’s something wrong with her.” He starts down the sidewalk toward his building.

I fall into step with him, his stride a little longer than mine but not much. “I only looked at the pin after I went to your apartment, knocked, and you didn’t answer.”

He gives me the side-eye. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” I say. “There was a woman down the hall, and she said you sometimes work out late at night.” My voice trails into a whisper by the end.

“Who did you talk to?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I didn’t ask her. She was wrestling with one twin and yelling at the other to go back to bed.”

“Hannah,” he says.

“She didn’t look happy to see me.” I watch him for his reaction.

“She’s never happy,” he says nonchalantly. “Would you be if you were a single mom of twin ten-year-old terrors?” He gives me a small smile. “She does the best she can, I know that.”

I nod. “I’m sure she does.”

“I think that’s all any of us are doing,” he says. “The best we can.”

I edge a little closer to him, my car only about a hundred yards away now. I want to hold his hand, and if I don’t grab it

soon, I'll lose my chance. On the next swing, I extend my arm a little, and our fingers brush.

It takes all of my concentration not to pull in a breath. I hear nothing from Alec either, and on the next step, he settles his fingers right between mine. "Okay?" he asks.

"Okay," I murmur, the soft quality of my voice in complete contrast to the loud rejoicing singing through my body.

At my car, I have to let go of his hand to open the back door and take out Pot Pie. She's warbling, and she never does that. My worry for her increases, and I should've just called Turner and paid the after-hours fee.

I say as much, but Alec says, "Let me see her. Was she out of the coop today?"

"Yes," I say. "I let them out once I got home tonight so I could get the eggs and feed them. She seemed okay; maybe a little slower than normal. She's not as stubborn as Benedict."

He quirks one eyebrow at me. "You have interesting names for your chickens."

I grin at him, and surprisingly, he returns the gesture. I see a completely different side of him standing in the orange lamplight, holding my wounded chicken and flirting with me.

For the love of all butter pecan ice creams around the world, he's *flirting* with me. I put my best smile on my face. "So, Doctor Ward. What do you think?" I nod to Pot Pie, who I swear has curled up in Alec's arms and gone to sleep.

"I think she needs to rest," he says. "She just seems tired."

"Maybe I could stay and watch an hour of TV with you?" I suggest.

He looks down at the chicken in his arms, to me, and then up to the sixth floor where his apartment is. "I'm not even supposed to have Peaches," he says.

"How in the world do your neighbors not hear her?" I ask. "They must be bacon crazy by breakfast."

Something dark crosses his face, and he slides Pot Pie into my arms. “I’m tired and hungry, and I don’t even have cable.”

Uh oh. I said something wrong. “Wait,” I say. “I know that’s not true, because you told me once you leave the TV on for Peaches sometimes.”

“Fine, then I’m tired and hungry, and I can’t keep your chicken in my apartment.” He turns away from me and opens the back passenger door. “You should take her home. Back to the brood. She probably just needs to rest. If she’s not better soon, you should take her to a real vet.”

“I can order Thai food,” I say. “I have them on speed dial, and I know all the best meals.”

His eyebrows go up. “You order take-out?”

“Every night,” I say, putting Pot Pie back into the cardboard box I’d brought her over in. “I mean, almost every night.” I straighten and look at him. “I don’t like cooking at home.”

“You don’t like cooking at home.” He says it like it’s a foreign concept. The darkness hasn’t left his face. “That’s weird.”

My irritation with him spikes. “You know what? You’re right. I’m tired and hungry and worried about Pot Pie. I’ll see you later.” I round the car and open my door.

“Whoa,” he says. “Wait a second.”

“I told you once I’m not a horse,” I growl at him.

“You’re the one who showed up at my apartment in the middle of the night and insulted my bird,” he says, plenty of fire in those eyes. “You have no right to be angry with me.”

“You just told me to leave you alone,” I say, glancing around like reporters might be hiding in the bushes. For all I know, they are. “When we’re supposed to be dating.”

“I—You said Peaches was noisy.”

“She *is* noisy!” I say, flapping my arm. “And I’m not weird because I don’t want to cook a gourmet meal for myself after

being on my feet, cooking for others, for twelve hours. But thanks for saying so.” I get behind the wheel and reach to close my door. I slam it closed and jam the key in the ignition, but before I can pull out, Alec is sitting in the passenger seat.

“What are you doing?” I ask. I just want to get out of these shoes, shed this bra, and taste four or five—or eight—Thai combination meals. *Please, God, I think. Get this man out of my car.*

“I didn’t let you leave when you were this angry before,” he says. “I believe you said something about hitting a stop sign once?”

I blink at him, sure he’s not bringing that up right now. “You know what?” I ask. “I did hit a stop sign once, but it was right after my husband asked me for a divorce, so I deserve some leeway.”

My chest heaves. I’d mentioned Otis once before, and Alec hadn’t brought him up again. “I also tripped into a couple of rose bushes right after he left, and I had to stay with Callie for a few weeks, because my life suddenly had no purpose.” I can’t believe what I’m saying. No one gets to know these things about me. No one.

Certainly not Mister Grumpy-Cat, take-your-chicken-and-leave, Alec Ward.

“Tara,” he says softly, and that is so not fair. “I’m sorry.” He sighs. “There’s a reason why I said you should go, and it’s only an excuse, really.” He looks at me, and I have no idea which Alec Ward I’m dealing with. The one who lets a four-ounce bird dictate his life? The one who gives a job to a friend because she needs it? The alpha-male, in-charge chef in the kitchen? The ex-Marine? Or the one who burns grilled apple and cheese sandwiches at home?

“Come inside,” he says. “I have a mantra specifically for you, and it’s ‘don’t drive angry.’” He grins, and he’s so handsome, and so symmetrical, and I don’t really want to leave.

“Mister Reynolds has the dogs,” I say quietly, as if that has anything to do with the situation at hand.

“If you can smuggle Pot Pie into the apartment, she can stay while you order Thai.”

My eyes light up. “Really?”

“I generally hate the TV on at night,” he says, yawning. “And it’s already late. You might have to fill the time with... talking.”

I swallow, though there’s plenty to talk about. “Okay,” I say.

“Okay.” He gets out of the car, collects my chicken-in-a-box, and leads me upstairs to his apartment. As I close the door behind us, I think we survived our first fight as a couple, and the thought warms me from head to toe.

“Bacon motor-bike!” Peaches screeches the moment we enter the apartment, and I need to have a heart-to-heart with her about using an indoor voice.

ALEC

“This is amazing,” I say, chopsticking up another bite of noodles. “Really takes the *edge* off.”

“Okay, enough already.” Tara smiles at me though. She called for Thai take-out, and twenty minutes later, no less than nine Styrofoam containers arrived at my apartment. I can admit that such delivery is faster than I could’ve done here, even in the gourmet kitchen.

I moved Peaches’s cage all the way against the wall and covered her with a blanket, despite her squawking protests. Jessie’s been gone for a few hours, but Peaches will be fine. I’ll take her into the shower with me once Tara leaves, and she’ll forgive me.

That gave us a bit more room in the living room, and we’re sitting on the couch to eat our Thai food.

“What?” I ask. “It’s really good. I’ve never eaten at Thai Jungle.”

“You’ve been missing one of Charleston’s best kept secrets then,” she says, grinning at me. She checks on Pot Pie, but the chicken doesn’t seem keen to leave the cardboard box. Thankfully.

“So after Otis left, you went on a male fast,” I say, bringing her back to her original topic of conversation.

“Mm, yes,” she says, twirling up some noodles with a piece of broccoli. “For a few years. I started dating again, but it hasn’t gone well.”

“Define that,” I say.

“Uh, let’s see.” She blows out her breath. “The first guy I went out with we dubbed Wally the Walrus. He had these huge teeth, which is totally fine,” she hastens to add. “But he had this weird obsession with sea creatures. He like, loved them.” She starts to giggle, and I do like the sound of that.

I grin at her as she continues with, “Then I went out with this really tall guy. He played basketball in college. I obviously like a tall man.” She sweeps her hand up and down her body, though she’s sitting. I take it as an invitation to check her out, which I totally do.

If she notices, she doesn’t act like it. “Callie called us the Twin Towers, and...let’s just say there’s an incident we’ve labeled The Envelope, and leave it at that.”

“Oh-ho,” I say, chortling. “No way. That could be anything.”

She shakes her head, her dark eyes sparkling like stars in the sky. Land sakes, she’s gorgeous, and it’s all I can do not to lunge across the few feet between us and kiss her.

“Fine, he slid this envelope under my door one day. I was home and everything, but he didn’t ring the doorbell or knock. I picked it up and opened, and let’s just say—”

“No, just *say* it,” I interrupt, grinning.

“It was full of nude pictures. Of him. He had this whole secret life as a male model, and he didn’t want to tell me.” She giggles and covers her mouth. “There are some things you can’t unsee, Alec.”

I blink at her. “So he wasn’t coming on to you.”

“No, he was,” she says. “I broke up with him immediately.” She shakes her head and sobers slightly. “I can’t be with someone who won’t talk to me. I mean, if you’re going to be a nude male model, *be* the nude male model.”

“Strut it,” I say, smiling for all I’m worth.

“Exactly!” She punctuates the word with both of her chopsticks in the air.

I can't remember the last time I've had this much fun with a woman. Maybe I never have. "So where does Brett play into all of this?"

"Brett's next," she says, finally closing the lid on her container. She stabs the chopsticks through the top of it as if she's done so many times in the past. Which, of course, she has. "We dated for a long time. Two years before he asked me to marry him. I was just starting Saucebilities at the time."

I nod, deciding that a verbal utterance will slow her down.

"We set a date for a year out, which is totally normal, by the way."

"Totally," I say, because my mother would be mortified by anything less than a year when it comes to an engagement. Byron really freaked her out by proposing to Heidi and then marrying her three months later. Of course, they have that baby coming already, and anyone who can do math knows she was pregnant before the I-do.

At least I'd stopped kissing her before then.

"So it's getting closer and closer, and he's acting weirder and weirder." Tara reaches up and removes the elastic band from her hair, letting her ponytail spill down over her shoulders. My mouth heats up, and not from the spicy peanut sauce on my noodles.

"He finally comes to the kitchen one day and tells me I'm already married. To Saucebilities, and he's not going to live his life while I 'cheat on him' for the next thirty years." She uses air quotes around "cheat on him."

She shakes her head. "I honestly wasn't even working that much."

I want to argue with her, but I keep my mouth shut. Chefs don't even know how much they work, and Tara's definitely a chef inside her own head.

"And no one since?" I ask.

She shrugs, though this is no shrugging matter. "It's been a few years, and...I don't know. It hurt, what he said to me."

“I’m sure it did.” I close my Styrofoam container and cover her hand with mine. I like that the physical barrier between us is flimsy and paper-thin, easy to break.

“I am really busy at Saucebilities,” she admits.

“You’ve *cut* to the chase there,” I say, smiling. “Get it? *Cut* to the chase?”

“You’re literally the worst with jokes,” she says, but she’s grinning at me. The moment stills again, and I have the urge to do that lunging thing again. My couch is big and soft, and I could easily see myself making out with her right then and there.

An alarm goes off on her phone, making us both jump. Peaches starts dinging and donging like the doorbell, and Tara fumbles to find her friend-phone. I get up, clearing my throat, and take our food containers into the kitchen.

The clock hands near midnight, and I still need to shower. I pause at the sink and look out toward the ocean. I can see where the lights stop and the darkness takes over, but that’s it. It’s almost like looking out into a black hole, and I feel the vastness of the universe overcome me.

“I should go,” Tara says from behind me, and I turn away from my thoughts.

“Okay,” I say, approaching her. “Thanks for the food and the stories.” I push her hair back off her face, enjoying the soft, silky quality of it. “I’m off tomorrow, but I’ll see you for Mimi’s?”

She smiles up at me, and it sure looks like a real, genuine smile. “Okay.”

“Good luck with Pot Pie.” I fall back a step, suddenly realizing I’m not ready to kiss this woman. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. It’s a fantasy that plays on repeat in my head, but I’ve got some baggage to unpack first.

Tara’s expression flashes with an emotion I can’t name before it disappears. She bends to get her chicken-in-a-cardboard-box, and I open the door for her. There’s no way

we'll kiss over a chicken, and she ducks her head and practically runs out of the apartment. "Bye," she says.

"Good night," I say, and I bring the door closed. I press my back into it and sigh. Then I straighten, uncover Peaches, and say, "Who wants to shower?"

"Peekaboo," Peaches says.

"No." I shake my head at her and chuckle. "I said, who wants to shower? *Peaches?*"

"Peaches, peekaboo," she says, and I laugh. "Peaches, peaches, peaches."

I put her on the perch in the shower and turn it on, then go discard my clothes in the laundry room. I normally like my late-night showers, but tonight's is filled with thoughts of Atlanta, a five-hour drive inland, while Peaches chatters to herself, plays peekaboo with herself, and tells me she loves me.

If I got up early, I could be there before lunchtime. Get my reunion with my father and brother over with, and be home in time for my solitary ten p.m. weight-lifting and hot tubbing.

If I go, I'll miss the Tuesday night mousse tasting with Tara

I know I need to make things right with Byron and my father, and I know I won't truly move on until I do.

"If you want to kiss Tara, you better drive to Atlanta tomorrow," I mutter into the spray.

"What in the world?" Peaches asks.

I chuckle and stroke one finger down her head and back. "Exactly," I murmur. "What do you think? Will you be okay if I leave early and come home late?" Jessie hasn't quit yet, and Peaches should be okay if I leave the TV on when I go in the morning.

Her only answer is, "Bacon motorbike!" and I figure she'll be fine. It's me who needs to get his head on straight, and I know if I don't, I'll lose a lot more than an inn.

I'll run again, which means I'll lose my job...and Tara.

I TELL MYSELF IN EVERY MILE I DRIVE AWAY FROM Charleston that I'm going to return. I am. I have no desire to stay in Atlanta, that's for dang sure, and I didn't bring anything with me except my phone and my wallet.

I have forgotten how amazing it is to be behind the wheel, the open road in front of me, and nothing holding me back.

Nothing's holding me back in Charleston either, and by the time I roll into Atlanta, I'm already ready to return. I've kept my phone on silent, because I find the constant notifications drive me batty. I feel all this pressure to check them instantly, whereas if I don't hear them, I don't know they're there.

Tara's texted me a couple of times about Pot Pie, that silly golden hen she'd brought over last night. I smile, because Tara and her chickens simply make me happy. *I'm glad she's doing better this morning*, I send back to her. *Listen, I went to Atlanta for the day. I'm going to have to cancel at Mimi's for tonight. Rain check?*

My phone rings, and Tara's name comes up with *(Boss)* behind it. I should probably change that, as I certainly don't need to be reminded of who she is. I can't stop thinking about her for longer than ten seconds as it is.

"Hey," I say.

"Atlanta?" she asks.

"Yeah." I exhale slowly, in a controlled manner. It helps me keep my thoughts centered. "I need to tie up the whole situation with my dad and brother."

"Oh, okay," she says, and I press my eyes closed, praying she won't ask why. "Why?"

Because I want to move on sounds lame inside my head.

Because I want to kiss you is worse.

“I just need to,” I say out loud, my eyes coming open again. “It’s time, and I feel like they’re holding me back in... some way.” I shake my head and open the door of my SUV. “I’m here, and I’m sorry about tonight at Mimi’s. We can go next week.”

“Sure,” she says.

“And so you don’t stop by tonight with any chickens named Piccata or something.” I grin as I face The Blackbriar Inn, something I thought would never happen again. The last time I was here, I’d told my father he’d always chosen Byron over me, and I shouldn’t have expected anything different. The problem was, I *had* expected something different. I’d been disappointed.

But I’d also been disrespectful and childish.

“Piccata?” Tara giggles over the line, and I can just see those dark eyes sparkling at me. Flirting with me. I can’t even imagine what they’ll look like full of heat and desire after I kiss her. My cells sing with want, and I turn away from the inn as Tara says, “I don’t have a chicken named Piccata, but I’m noting that. It’s a great name.”

“What are their names?”

“My favorite is Hennifer,” she says, a happy little sigh coming out of her mouth and over the line. “But I like Nog and Alfredo too. Oh! Benedict is great. Chick Fillet. They’re all good hens.”

“Do they answer to their names?” I ask.

“Not really,” she says. “But I like calling them by name. It’s better than, ‘hey you, get out of the coop for your one hour of pasturecize, you lazy hen!’”

I tip my head back and laugh, the wide-open sky above the inn taking it all and absorbing it. “Okay,” I say, still chuckling. “Well, I’m here, and check-out has to almost be over. Check-in won’t start for a while, so I just need to bite the bullet and go talk to them.” I turn to look at the front entrance of the inn again. There are hardly any cars in the lot, which isn’t all that surprising, since it’s between departure and arrival times.

“Okay,” Tara says. “Good luck, Alec.”

“Hey, Tara?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“What are the chances of me moving from your chef-cell to your friend-phone?”

She says nothing, and the silence doesn't comfort me. Shoot. Maybe I'm the only one who feels like he's walking through a lightning storm when Tara's nearby. I could've sworn I'd seen interest in her eyes. I could've sworn—

“I think the chances of that are high,” she finally says.

I breathe a sigh of relief, mostly because that means my female radar isn't as broken as I'd started thinking. “Great,” I say.

“I'll text you from my friend-phone right now.”

“All right.” I want to tell her I want to be more than friends. I want to ask if she has a lover-line, but by the stars in heaven, that sounds creepstastic and sort of gross, so I keep my mouth shut.

“Bye, Alec,” she says in that sultry voice, and I actually say, “Yep,” before the call ends.

Yep?

“For the love,” I mutter under my breath. This woman has addled my brain.

I get a text from her from a new number, quickly label it, and tuck my phone into my back pocket.

I look up...and take the first step toward the inn. Everything seems just as I left it, and I'm not sure if that annoys me or makes me happy. Byron had begged me not to go, but then, he hadn't known about me and Heidi. I certainly hadn't told him, and I doubt she ever did.

He'd said the on-site restaurant would fail without me, and I'd tossed something rude over my shoulder about having his girlfriend run it. She was *so* smart, after all.

No, it was not my finest moment. In fact, it was a moment I don't want to live inside again.

I open the door and glance around. Light pours in from the front windows, and the check-in desk stands straight ahead. No one waits for me there, and I sweep the lobby to my right and then the restaurant to my left.

My feet have grown roots, and I can't move. The restaurant is closed.

"Closed until further notice," I read on the colorful sign hanging from a velvet rope that bars anyone from entering the restaurant. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Alec?"

I turn toward the sound of my older brother's voice, and our eyes meet. I can't get my voice to work, and I can't even raise my hand in a wave. Nothing.

"It is you," he says, coming toward me now. "I could just feel it. I knew you were thinking about me." He grins, runs the last few steps, and engulfs me in a hug. That thaws me completely, and I embrace him back. "I've wanted to call you so many times," he whispers, and while he's wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and tie, his voice is choked with emotion.

He steps back and grips my shoulders. "Look at you. You look so good." He grins at me, and it's like nothing bad has ever happened between us.

"Thanks," I say, clearing my throat. I'm not sure exactly how I wanted this to go, but it's not talking about how I look. "You look great too. The inn is still amazing."

Byron drops his hands, a cloud shuttering over his face for a moment. "She's still open," he says, and his voice is so much like mine. His drawl is the same, and his eyes are just as dark. His hair is a touch or two lighter than mine, but his teeth are just as straight and just as white. If I had to spend my days in a suit, though, I might go ballistic.

I can button myself up and wear a uniform. I can follow directions. But I prefer the freedom to spread my wings and

fly. Maybe that's why the rules in my relationship with Tara are choking me.

I don't want rules. I want to hold her, talk to her about how I really feel, and kiss her.

That's why you're here, I tell myself. It's time to move on.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. "Come into my office. Let's talk."

"I just came to apologize," I say, going with him as he turns and starts walking. "Where's Dad?" I clear my throat. "And Heidi?"

"Heidi had the baby last week," Byron says, throwing a grin over his shoulder. Nope, he doesn't know about me and his wife. I'm not going to tell him either. I'd ended things with her before their relationship was public, and before they got engaged, and before all of it. He doesn't need to know.

"Dad's around somewhere," he adds. "Probably the housekeeping department. He likes to hang out there and inventory things." He chuckles as he goes around his desk. He sits, a great sigh coming from him. "We miss you here. The restaurant closed. I couldn't keep it staffed with someone who knew how to make a medium-well steak. No one wants to drive out this far."

"Hm." I nod, but I'm not here to talk about cooking. "Listen," I say. "I want us to be okay." I shift as I sit down, taking an extra moment or two to align my thoughts. "I've sort of got this woman in Charleston, and I want to move forward with her. I feel...I don't know." I reach up and push my hand through my hair, trying to find the right words.

"You feel chained here," Byron says, because he's always known me so well.

I seize onto the words. "Yes," I say.

"Because of Heidi." He leans back in his chair, his fingers steepling.

"Heidi?"

“She told me about you guys.” He puts a sympathetic smile on his face. “I didn’t know, Alec. I honestly didn’t. I wouldn’t... If I’d known what she was doing, I would’ve broken up with her and let you have her.”

My eyebrows go up. “Really? But you married her. She has your kid.” I find a smile slipping across my face. “By the way, is it a boy or a girl?”

“Boy,” Byron says, his smile coming at me with the wattage of the sun. “We named him Lars Winters Ward.”

Everything dark in my life lifts. Rays of sunshine fill me, and I nod. “That’s a great name, Byron.”

“Yeah?” He chuckles softly. “I guess so. Heidi really wanted her maiden name in there.”

“So you’re happy with her.”

“Yes,” Byron says, his eyes casting down to his desk.

“I’m happy for you,” I say. “I just want that happiness too.”

“Who’s this woman in Charleston?” Byron asks. “And what in the world are you *doing* in Charleston?”

“Tara,” I say, her name and the image of her that flashes through my mind making me smile. “Her name is Tara, and she’s my boss. I work for her catering company.”

Byron’s eyebrows go up, but I don’t care. I don’t really have to explain anything to him, and as Lance said a couple of days ago, it’s not like I have to meet with an HR rep to go over anything and get my relationship approved.

I just need to make sure I’m good with my family, and then I need to get back to Charleston so I can kiss Tara.

TARA

Macie sets a steaming cup in front of me and takes the seat across from me. “One vanilla chai latte,” she says.

I smile at the beverage, the scent of it wafting up and making my mouth water. “You’re the only one I’d drink coffee for in the afternoon,” I say, wrapping my fingers around the warm mug.

She grins at me, and I think about dying my hair red like hers. With my dark brunette locks already, it would come out a sexy, deep auburn. At least I think it would. Her light green eyes sparkle as she sips her own coffee.

“Oh, please,” she says as she sets the cup down. “If your hot boyfriend asked you to have breakfast with him, are you telling me you wouldn’t?”

“First off,” I say. “He’s not really my boyfriend.” I glance around, because we are in a public place—Legacy Brew, where Macie works—and while the reporters have backed off a little, I know they’re not gone completely.

Macie trills out a laugh. “Oh, please,” she says again. “You can’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Honey,” she drawls out. “I’ve known you since you moved in down the street from me. You bought me with those cinnamon rolls, remember?” Her personality sparkles like a disco ball, and it’s no wonder she gets asked out almost every

day by a customer. Too bad her rules of not dating anyone who drinks coffee are so firm.

“How can I forget?” I ask dryly. “You text me on the weekly to make them again for you.”

“You never do,” she says with a grin. “So stop acting like I put you out or somethin’.” She glances over to the door as the little bell on it chimes. A couple of businessmen walk in, but Macie doesn’t move. She’s got two girls behind the counter, and they can handle two people.

The after-lunch rush will start soon, as Macie said, but we still have a few minutes. She claims people need a mid-afternoon pick-me-up, but I don’t see how they can drink hot liquids when it’s so fiery outside.

“You want him to be your real boyfriend,” Macie says, that smile oh-so-knowing.

“So what if I do?” I ask, lifting my chin. “Would that be the worst crime on the planet?”

“No,” Macie says. “Wearing those shoes is the worst crime on the planet.”

I look down, but the table blocks my view of my shoes. I know what I’m wearing though, and I roll my eyes. “I work on my feet all day.”

“So do I, honey,” she says. “Trust me, you’d get more dates if you upgraded your footwear just a little.”

“I’m not looking for a date to come out of my catering kitchen,” I say. “Or from a client.”

“And yet,” she says, hitting the T hard on the last word. “You’re dating your super-hot, super-skilled chef.”

I can’t argue with either adjective, so I just lift my latte to my lips. “I wish,” I mutter, and Macie laughs. I can’t help smiling too, but familiar frustration fills me. “How do I... I mean, we set rules.”

The door chimes again, and no less than six men and women in confining skirts and suits walk in. None of them are wearing orthopedics.

“Honey,” Macie drawls as she stands. “Rules are meant to be broken.” She throws back the last of her coffee and heads for the counter. “Bring me some cinnamon rolls,” she calls. “They’re the only lovin’ I need.”

I grin at her back and startle as my phone rings. I dang near fall out of the teensy chair in the café when I see Lila Houser’s name on the screen.

Dawson’s mother.

I catered the Fowler Founder’s Gala a few months ago, but I have no reason to chit-chat with the woman.

My brain screams at me to answer the call; maybe she has more business for me. “Hello?” I say, getting to my feet. “Lila?”

“Tara, dear,” she says in an ultra-smooth, I’m-rich-so-everyone-does-what-I-want voice. “How are you?”

“Just fine, ma’am,” I say. I pick up my napkin and my cup to take them to the disposal area. “How are you?”

“Good, great,” she says, and I imagine her patting her hair as she does. I smile my way out of the coffee shop and onto the bustling downtown street. The afternoon air is heavy with humidity, and it’s terribly hot so I turn east and start walking. I’ll hit the rowhouses in a couple of blocks, and then the water. The breeze will cool me off, and I actually consider wasting a few hours on the beach that afternoon too.

“I understand you’re catering the wedding,” Lila says, and my feet trip over themselves.

I immediately throw my hand out to catch myself, grabbing onto the first thing I come in contact with. Unfortunately, that’s another human being, and the man grunts as he braces himself and saves us both from falling flat on our faces.

“Sorry,” I say. “So sorry.” I remove my hand from him and brush down the collar of his suit coat. I offer him a smile, but he’s all frowns. I get the heck away from him before he can take my personal information and send me a dry cleaning bill for touching him.

“Are you still there, dear?” Lila asks.

“Yes.” I decide talking to this woman and walking is not a combination I can handle at the moment. I stop next to a parking meter and take a deep breath. “Yes, I’m here, and yes, I’m the caterer for Dawson and Callie’s wedding.”

“Oh, good,” she says, as if she’s really pleased by this. “I was thinking we should go over the menu...”

Disbelief runs through me. “Ma’am,” I say as politely as I can. My momma would be so proud. Being a proper Southerner, she did teach me to mind my manners and respect my elders. “The menu is set.”

“Anything can be changed,” Lila says.

I scoff, though she’s right. Not only is she right, she’s used to getting her way. Used to changing things last-minute and having her wishes obeyed.

“Have you talked to Callie about this?” I ask.

Her silence says no for her.

“I’m sorry,” I say, deciding to be firm. I’m really not great with contention though. I’d rather hole up in my office and let someone else deal with the unhappy customer or the chef who wants to quit to move on to “bigger and better things.”

“The wedding is in less than two weeks, and the menu is set,” I say. “I’ve already ordered from my suppliers, and we have the timing down to only seconds.” It doesn’t really matter if none of that is true—for example, I haven’t timed out how long it will take to make and serve dinner at the wedding.

I *have* ordered all the groceries I need for it. The best meat and produce suppliers in Charleston will take overnight orders, but they prefer a longer lead-time. Especially for things like premium cuts of beef—which Callie and Dawson are serving at their wedding—and seafood. Again, Callie and Dawson are going with an upscale, surf and turf buffet menu for the wedding.

“I just think—” she starts.

“Didn’t you request the oysters?” I ask. “I’m almost sure that’s what I saw your name next to. Dawson said you love them.” I smile, hoping I can talk and talk and she’ll grow weary of me. Lila usually doesn’t tolerate conversations that last longer than she wants them to. “There’s going to be so many amazing options on the buffet besides those too. One of my chefs came up with this divine recipe for a chicken and steak kabob, and it’s unlike anything you’ve ever tasted. Then, we’re going to have Brussels sprouts and asparagus in a creamy Dijon sauce, and I came up with that recipe. And the desserts. Do not even get me started on the strawberry lemonade cupcakes. That recipe is going in my cookbook even.”

I talk right over her sighs and attempts to interrupt me. But even I have to breathe, and in that pause, she asks, “Cookbook?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say. “I’ve been working on a cookbook for over a year now. I’m getting very close to finished.”

“What kind of cookbook?” she asks, more interest than exasperation in her voice now. “What are you going to do with it?”

“It’s a Charleston-inspired cookbook,” I say. “I don’t know what I’ll do with it. My cousin said he knew someone who publishes stuff like that, so I’ll probably talk to him.”

“You do know I live in Manhattan, right?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“There is a plethora of publishers here.”

I can practically hear her brain ticking, though it’s hard above the sudden hammering of my heart. “Oh? Do you know any?”

“As a matter of fact...” Lila pauses for a moment, and I blink into the brightening day. This can’t be happening. How would Lila know any publishers? I don’t even know what I need to do to get the book published.

Panic suddenly rears, and I spin in a circle, forgetting about the parking meter. I hit it with my clumsy knee, which

buckles. I start to fall and try to catch myself, but there's a curb, and my ankle folds when my foot doesn't reach the solid ground it thought it would.

I grunt as I end up on my knees, my shoulder pressed into the pole of the parking meter. My phone flies out of my hand and skids into the parking spot with Lila Houser still talking on the other end of the line.

Before I can move, a car pulls off the street and into the spot, the tires going *crunch, crackle, crispity-crinkle* over my device.

"No," I moan, because that was my chef-cell, and I need that. I don't have all my business contacts in my other phone, and my thoughts fly to Alec.

Wait. I have his number in my friend-phone, and that thought relaxes me enough for me to get to my feet. I hurry around the now-parked car to where my device lays in pieces on the ground. I sigh and start to pick them up.

"What are you doing, honey?" someone asks, and I barely glance up at them.

"This car just drove over my phone," I say. "I'm picking up the pieces so I'm not a litterer." I get the last one and stand, using the car for support, wondering how Pot Pie walks around on her chicken legs all day. Mine seem to have betrayed me just now.

A woman stands there, and she looks from my broken phone in my hand to my face. "Did I run over that?"

"If you just parked this car, you did," I say. "It's fine. You couldn't have known."

She wears a pair of celebrity-style sunglasses, a ton of bright pink lipstick, and a flowery summer dress on her slim frame. The dress seems a little young for her, but I'm not going to tell her that. I'm certainly not one who should be offering fashion advice, what with my orthopedics and bland wardrobe.

She seems horrified at the cellulide she's just committed. "I'm so sorry," she drawls. "I'll pay for the phone."

“That’s not necessary,” I say. “Really. It’s a business phone. My company will pay for it.”

Her eyebrows go up, and she lifts her sunglasses to show a pair of baby blue eyes that probably haven’t seen a day of hardship in her life. They have seen plenty of collagen treatments, as she doesn’t have a wrinkle anywhere but on her neck. They always forget about the neck. Her face doesn’t move as she smiles. “If you’re sure,” she drawls.

“I’m sure,” I say, starting to edge away from her. “Thanks, though.” I start toward the beach, getting as far from the Southern socialite as quickly as possible, but I really can’t stride that fast for very long. I slow down and decide my beach afternoon has just turned into a trip-to-the-cell-phone-store afternoon.

And anyone who’s ever gone to get a new phone knows doing that is like consigning oneself to go to the DMV. We’re talking seventh-rung stuff here.

I sigh, because I do like having my work life separate from my personal life. I like knowing who I’m going to get on the other end of the line just by which phone chimes.

My mind flows to Alec, as it often does, and I realize with a stumble-step that I’ve blended him into both halves of my life. Luckily, there’s no parking meters and no man in front of me to manhandle this time.

I right myself, hold my head high, and continue toward my cell phone provider. It’s fine if Alec is in both halves of my life. I want him in the one, and I need him in the other. Maybe my momma’s been wrong all this time, and you can have what you want *and* what you need. Maybe they’re the same thing. Maybe they come in a tall, broad-shouldered frame, with a neat beard and dark hair, with gorgeous eyes and the lamest knife jokes known to mankind.

Just maybe...

LATER THAT NIGHT, I'VE JUST FINISHED SETTING UP MY PHONE when the doorbell rings. I look down at Tommy and Goose, both of whom are sitting so perfectly at my feet. They just want all the chicken from my chicken and green bean stir-fry, and I have to admit they've gotten quite a few pieces each.

"Who could that be?" I wonder, glancing at the clock. It's almost ten p.m. Normal dinner time for me, but certainly bedtime for most people. Callie's voice screams through my head about opening the door at night for strangers, and how I'm just waiting to get shanked if I do so.

I look at my two phones on the table in front of me. No one has texted.

I stay stubbornly in my seat. If it's not a serial killer, it's likely a reporter. I don't want to come face-to-face with either of those. The people who know me know what I'm dealing with right now, and they'd have texted or called or told me they were stopping by.

I pick up another green bean with my chopsticks and eat it.

The doorbell chimes again, and this time, so does my friend-phone. Alec's name flashes on the screen with *Are you home? I didn't think you were working tonight, but maybe you're doing a cookbook recipe.*

I lunge for the phone, a little shocked by how much I've missed him today. He's been present in my mind since he can't be present physically, and I keep thinking about what Macie said at the coffee shop earlier today. I need to tell him how I really feel. Or ask him if he's pretending or not. Maybe if he doesn't want to pretend, and I don't want to pretend, we can make this relationship into something real.

Is that you at the door?

Yes.

Coming.

I jump to my feet and leave the kitchen, forgetting that both dogs can get on the table and eat my food. Somehow, Alec makes the important things fly from my brain.

I unlock the doorknob, unbolt the deadbolt, and unchain the door before opening it.

The sexiest man on the planet stands in front of me, wearing a pair of jeans and a two-sizes-too-small T-shirt with the outline of a taco on it. I pull in a breath, because somehow, going twenty-four hours without seeing him has made him more handsome.

“I missed you today,” I blurt out, not quite sure why my brain has let my mouth take over. I rein it in and clear my throat. “I mean, how was Atlanta?”

“I don’t want to talk about Atlanta,” he says, advancing toward me. He’s wearing a dark, almost dangerous look, laced with what I can only describe as desire. One hand slides along my hip while the other comes up and pushes through my hair.

“What do you want to talk about?” I whisper.

“Us,” he says. “And I actually don’t want to talk at all.” He lowers his head toward mine, and my whole body lights up. My eyes drift closed, because I’ve kissed men before, and my body seems to remember how to do it.

He pauses, and his lips have to only be millimeters from mine. My heart booms through my chest and into my ears, making hearing impossible.

“I don’t want this to be fake,” he whispers, and I do hear him. “I want to kiss you now, unless you have some major objection to that.”

No objection! my brain yells, but I don’t think anything comes out of my mouth. This man makes me freeze in so many ways, and I hate that.

“No?” he asks, teasing me now. He’s probably got his eyes open, watching me while I’m this frozen lump of a fish in his arms, her eyes closed.

I manage to shake my head slightly, and he growls as he touches his mouth to mine. Explosions go off, and while his touch started out as exactly that—a touch—within the blink of an eye, we’re fighting each other for control of the kiss.

I give it to him after a couple of strokes, because holy whipped cream and strawberries, the man can kiss.

He kisses me and kisses me, and I'm no longer a frozen lump in his hands. I'm warm and melty and gooey, and he can shape me however he wants.

As long as he doesn't stop kissing me.

ALEC

The cool air rushing around me tells me I'm still standing on Tara's porch. There are probably a hundred flashbulbs going off. Or maybe those popping lights in my brain are from the way Tara kisses me back.

No matter what, I don't want to stand out on her porch for the world to see. I break the kiss and whisper, "Can I come in?" before claiming her mouth again.

She grips my shirt collar at the throat and backs up, taking me with her. This woman... This woman makes me think and feel things I haven't thought or felt in a long time. Maybe ever.

I cross the threshold of her house and kick the door closed, then pull away again, breathing heavily. "What are you thinking? Fake or not fake?"

"Not fake," she says, her breath moving quickly out of her mouth too.

I turn her around and press her into the now-closed door. "Not fake for me either." I grin at her and push her hair back off her face again. "I think you're stunningly beautiful," I whisper as I bend my head toward her again, this time slower than before. I lean into my hand, which is against the door where she's pressed too and touch my lips to her neck. She shudders slightly, and that makes me smile.

"I think you broke all the rules," she says, her voice made mostly of air.

“I don’t care.” I take a breath of her creamy, powdery scent and pull back. “Unless you care.”

She smiles up at me, those sparkling, dazzling eyes exactly what sustained me through a ten-hour round-trip today. “Rules are made to be broken,” she says. She reaches up and cradles my face in her hands. “I think you’re a great guy, Alec. You’re smart, you’re hard-working, and you’re... nice.”

I have no idea what to say to that. “I haven’t been all that nice.”

“But deep down, you’re just the man who came to Charleston so his bird would have a dad.”

I smile at her and try to get closer, though we’re plenty close already. “So I’m a birdy daddy? Is that it?”

“Mm, yeah.” She pulls me closer and kisses me again. She takes her time now, and I let her set the pace. I could kiss her for hours, but a loud, eardrum-splitting clatter comes from behind me, and I pull away, my heartbeat suddenly ricocheting through my whole body.

“What is that?” I ask, taking a step toward her kitchen.

“Could be a serial killer,” she says. “That’s what Callie would say.” She comes to my side. “My guess? It’s my two ravenous dogs, whom I haven’t fed in weeks.”

I glance at her, the level of sarcasm in her tone not hard to hear. “Pizza tonight?”

“Chinese,” she says with a sigh. “Come on. Let’s see if they’ve scarfed it all or if there’s any left for us.”

SOMEONE KNOCKS ON MY DOOR, AND MY PULSE SHOOTS TO THE top of my skull. Peaches ding-dongs in her parrot voice and adds, “Motorbike,” which I hurry to finish wiping the counter. I turn toward the sink and toss in the washrag. The oven clicks as I go by, and the casserole is in there humming away.

Everything is set.

By some miracle of miracles, there's no event this Friday night, and I've invited Tara, her cousin, and Jessie for dinner. I figure it's time they met, and Tara's been asking me a *lot* about Jessie over the past few days since we kissed. Jessie wanted me to set up a double-date, and Tara said Jason was game.

I tried telling Tara there's nothing to worry about when it comes to me and Jess. I've kissed her in the refrigeration unit, her office, my hallway, and anywhere else I could so she'd know she didn't need to worry.

I still think she's worried.

I pull open the door to find my best friend standing there. "Jess."

"Howdy, stranger," she says, her face lighting up with a smile. She's Southern born-and-bred, with plenty of money, power, and prestige. She doesn't want any of it, though it took her a long time to realize that.

She only left Beaufort a year or so ago, and she's lived with her uncle since. Her parents have tried to marry her off to a half-dozen proper Southern gentlemen, who own stables, land, and vast fortunes. Some women would probably really like that.

Jess is not some woman.

"Did I get here first?" she asks, peering past me.

"Yep." I step back. "Come in. You look nice tonight."

"So do you." She scans me from head to toe, and I try not to squirm in my black polo and jeans. "You must like this woman."

"I do like this woman," I say with a smile.

Jess tips up onto her toes to kiss my cheek, and I kiss hers back. "How's the job hunt going?"

"Terrible," she sighs and wipes her hand through her blonde hair. It's wavy today, so she hasn't spent an hour with the flat iron to get it straight. Since I've known her for three decades, I know a lot about her. "Turns out no one really has a job for someone who can't do anything."

“You can take people’s money for coffee,” I say, closing the door behind her.

“Come on, Peachy,” she says, and Peaches flies over to her.

She lands on Jess’s arm, and says, “Peachy, peachy.”

“So that’s where she learned that.” I shake my head at the pair of them. “I wish I could pay you more, but I can’t.” Not if I want to keep the apartment, which I do. Not if I want to eat, which I do.

“It’s okay.” Jess collapses onto the couch. “I’ve thought about getting a night job, so I can keep doing this. Even the supermarket won’t hire me.”

“It’s been five days,” I say. “How many places have you applied to?”

“Just three,” she says. “They all say they’ll call you back, but then they don’t. I don’t know how to get a job.” She sinks onto the couch, as I’ve pushed Peaches’s cage as far out of the way as I can.

“I talked to someone this week,” I say. “He was looking for an assistant. He runs a real estate office.”

Jess’s bright blue eyes perk right up. “He does? What’s his name?”

“Lance Byers,” I say. “I have his number. You should text him.”

“Yeah, I will,” Jess says with a smile. “Thanks, Alec.”

“We can ask Tara if she’s hiring too,” I say. “She was talking about getting another administrative assistant or even a prep cook.”

“I can’t cook,” Jess says, frowning at me as I walk into the kitchen to check on the casserole. It’s bubbling away in the oven, the rich cheese sauce over the chicken and ham making my mouth water. With the crispy, golden breadcrumbs, it’ll be the perfect dinner.

“But it’s a prep cook job,” I say. “You don’t cook. You cut up veggies and de-vein shrimp and stuff like that.” I lean into the counter and look at Jess. She’s wearing a cute red, yellow, and white sundress with a pair of Converse.

As part of her rebellion from the Dunaway family, Jessie stopped starving herself when she left Beaufort. Probably even before then. I’d been in Atlanta at the time, but I can remember the texts about how she’d finally eaten a piece of toast, and did I know how amazingly crispy and buttery bread could be?

I smile now, just thinking about it.

She cut her blonde hair into a bob when she came to Charleston, but it’s grown out a little bit. She still has a lot of clothes and shoes she brought with her, but her actual cash flow is quite slow.

“I don’t even know what it means to de-vein a shrimp,” she says, a look of mild horror on her face. “Maybe I should take some cooking classes.”

“Maybe you should go apply at every retail store you see. It really doesn’t take a college degree to be a cashier,” I say. “It’ll give you some confidence and bring in a little money while you look for something else.”

I turn to pull down some champagne flutes and open the fridge to get out the salad I put together an hour ago. The clock on the stove tells me Tara should’ve been here by now, but she did say her cousin always runs a bit late.

“Plus, can you imagine what Cornelia Dunaway would say about her daughter being a cashier?” Jessie giggles, the sound increasing into full laughter after a few seconds.

“What in the world?” Peaches asks, and that only makes Jessie laugh harder.

I grin at the two of them, silently hoping she gets a night job. I don’t know what I’d do without her to come stay with Peaches during the day.

Something thuds against my door, and I turn that way. “What in the world?” I say, and that only sets Peaches into a

frenzy. She barely finishes the saying before starting it again.

Scraping noises come from the other side of the door, and I hear a man's voice. I'm not sure if I should open the door or not, but I do, only to find a man with dark hair on his knees, picking up what looks like little gems.

"I'm so clumsy," he says, grinning at me. "I dropped this stupid basket Tara gave me, because she had to run back downstairs for something." He gets to his feet, and while he's not Tara's brother, he shares enough of her features for them to look related.

"You must be Jason," I say, reaching for the basket of disheveled items. "What is this?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, bro."

I meet his eye, not sure if I should laugh or not. I smile as a compromise and shake his hand. "Come in. You're not bird-adverse, are you?"

"Tara told me about the killer parrot," Jason says, walking into the apartment completely at ease.

"This is my friend," I say, indicating Jessie. She stands and looks at Jason, her eyes really zeroing in on him. "Jessica Dunaway. Jessie. This is Jason Finch."

"So nice to meet you," he says, all smiles and manners. Jess should like that.

Instead, she folds her arms and glares at him. "You cut me in line yesterday."

Jason tosses me a worried look. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," he says airily. "Where?"

"Double Dutch." Her eyebrows go up, clearly challenging him to argue with her. "I remember, because you had that scar by your eye, and I remember thinking, 'I bet he thinks he's so good looking with that. So rough. Like, I bet he flirts with women and gets them to guess where he got that ridiculous scar.'"

Jason blinks and starts to laugh. I'm going back and forth between them like they're a fascinating tennis match, and I

don't want to miss a moment of play.

He's laughing, but I've seen Jess mad, and it's not pretty. I try to mime to him to cut it out, but he doesn't even look my way. "Well, now the whole date is thrown off," he says, still chuckling. "I was going to try to get you to guess where I got this scar. Shoot."

To my great surprise, Jessie smiles and unclenches her arms. "You're such a liar. Just like how you weren't in a rush to get that hot chocolate for your nana yesterday."

"Oh, now, that was true," Jason says, and wow, he is smooth. Tara said he was, that he knew how to talk to women and the double date wouldn't be awkward with him around. "Oh, yes. Nana. She was so cold yesterday." He shivers falsely, and I watch Jess to see if she's falling for this.

Mighty stars in heaven, she *is*. She melts in front of me. Positively melts, and I realize I've been flirting all wrong. Number one, I haven't been flirting at all. Number two, if I'd been accused of cutting a woman in line, I'd just apologize and hope she keeps talking to me for the rest of the night.

Not Jason. He moves over to Jess and takes Peaches from her. He sits down but doesn't leave any room on the couch for Jess that isn't immediately next to him. "Tell me who the hot chocolate was for," she says, leaning into the armrest on the couch and twisting to face him. She's wearing a flirtatious smile now, and Jason's got one too, to go with his dark hair, eyes, and pressed, clean blue button-up. He's wearing khaki shorts with that and hiking boots that make him look like he's just come out of the mountains. I wonder if those are a lie too.

Thankfully, Tara steps into the apartment with a, "Hey, sorry about that. I left my keys in the ignition." She shakes her head. "Do not recommend." She surveys the living room, and I simply watch her to get her reaction. "Dear Lord." She sighed. "He's already won her over."

"Seems so." I chuckle and slip my arm around her waist. "Mm, there's never a *dull* moment when you're around."

“You did not just make a knife joke,” she says, turning to face me. Delight fills her eyes, and I get the impression she actually likes my jokes.

“I just heard a new one,” I say. “Wanna hear it?”

“If I must.”

She follows me into the kitchen as Jason says something that sounds so much like, “...the hot chocolate was for my nana, I swear,” and I reach for plates.

“Doctors say it’s important to cut carbs,” I say, reaching for the oven mitts.

“Oh, I see where this is going,” she says, peering into the oven. “What did you make?”

“A poultry-inspired dish,” I say. “You can choose if you want a knife or a fork to cut your carbs with.” I grin at her and pull out the bubbling casserole. Some of the breadcrumbs on top have started to burn, and I frown.

Embarrassment heats my face. “I’m still figuring out this oven,” I say, glancing at Tara to see if she sees I’ve burnt yet another dish. I swear I don’t do that in her kitchen.

“Smells like Swiss cheese,” she says. “Chicken Cordon Bleu.” She meets my eyes. “You know I have a hen named Cordon Bleu.”

“I’ve heard,” I say with a grin. I slide the casserole onto the counter and call into the living room, “Time to eat.”

Jess gets to her feet instantly and turns toward me. I can read her expression, and she’s ready to leave already. I shake my head and say, “Jess, come meet Tara.”

She switches her gaze to my girlfriend—I love thinking those words—and gives her socialite smile to her. “Tara, of course. You know, I can’t get Alec to talk about anything or anyone else.”

“That’s not true,” I say quickly, but Tara smiles as if she likes it.

“Is that so?”

“This was a bad idea,” I say, looking from Jess to Tara.

Jess takes her right into a hug, causing Tara to say, “Oh.” She tries to look at me from over Jess’s shoulder, but she can’t quite manage it.

“So great to meet you,” she says. “Alec’s had a rough time with women lately.”

“Stop talking,” I tell her, but she just shoots me a smile. “It’s time to eat.”

“What are we having?” Jason asks, sidling up to Jess. She trains her smile on him, and she’s slipped into hostess-mode, so I’m not sure how she’s feeling. Something must’ve happened in the few seconds after Tara came in, because Jessie’s not soft and melty now.

“He baked a dish in honor of Cordon Bleu,” Tara says, grinning at her cousin. “Your favorite.”

“Actually,” Jason says without missing a beat. “Alfredo is my favorite. Or Nog.”

“Wait, wait,” Jess says. “Who are these people?”

“They’re not people,” I say in a dry tone. “They’re chickens.”

Jess looks like I’ve picked up a couple of roosters and bopped her on the head with them. “What?”

Tara starts to giggle, and Jason’s smile could fill stadiums with light.

“Don’t try to figure it out, Jess. Grab a plate and a utensil, and let’s eat.” I hand a plate to Tara, who takes it easily.

She starts to dish herself some casserole, saying, “So Jess, Alec says you live with your uncle.”

“For now,” Jess says. “I’m looking for a better paying job.”

“She’s wondering if you have anything,” I say, meeting Tara’s eye. “She’s highly trainable.”

“You’re doing that thing where you make people sound like animals,” Tara says with a grin. “She’s not a dog, Alec.”

“If you need a job,” Jason says, picking up a plate and taking the serving spoon from Tara once she’s finished. “I’ve got an opening in my office.”

Tara’s already shaking her head, her eyes wide. I look from her to Jess, who sees her. “Uh, what do you do?” she asks Jason.

“I’m a lawyer,” he says with a grin, and the polite one on Jess’s face drops.

“I’ve never worked in a law office,” she says.

“I’m not sure if I’m hiring,” Tara says. “Maybe some nightly janitorial help?” She looks at me as if I have any say what she does with Saucebilities.

“I can do that,” Jess says hopefully.

“I thought Alec was going to tell you about Lance Byers,” Tara says, and it’s obvious—at least to me—she doesn’t want Jess working in her kitchen. I’m not sure why, but something tells me it’s because she’s my best friend and not my cousin. Or my sister.

“I did,” I say. “She’s going to call him.” I smile at Jess, who seems to get the message that there’s not a job at Saucebilities. *Sorry*, I mouth at her, but she just nods. Jess is tough; she’ll find the right spot for her, and she’ll move out of her uncle’s house.

I want to put my arm around her and comfort her the way I have lots of times in the past. The way she has for me. Instead, I serve up some casserole and hand it to her. “There you go,” I say. “Salad down there.” I nod needlessly toward it and start to spoon some chicken and ham in the delicious Swiss cheese sauce onto my own plate. I simply mix the burnt crumbs into the sauce, where they’ll soften up.

“So, Tara,” Jess says, following her to the dining table I’ve pushed against the wall in the kitchen. “Tell me about your nana.”

Jason inhales, and he's obviously gotten a piece of poultry stuck in his throat, because he starts coughing and waving his arms like he's bringing in airplanes.

Tara stops and stares at him, his face turning red. In fact, we all just stand there and stare at him as he very nearly chokes to death. "What on earth is wrong with you?" she asks.

"You know how cold nana gets in the...when the seasons change," Jason says, and I can see him begging Tara with his eyes. I roll mine, because this guy is a total player.

My protective side rears its head, but Jess doesn't need me to come between her and Jason. She's already got him figured out, because she asks, "What's her name? Age? Does she have blue hair?"

Tara looks from Jason to Jess, clearly confused. "We don't have a nana," she says. "Well, we did, but she died five years ago."

"Is that right?" Jess sets her plate down on the table and cocks one hip. "No wonder she needed that hot chocolate. It must be *so cold* six feet under."

I try to stifle my laughter, but I've never been very good at hiding how I really feel. My ha-ha's come exploding out of my mouth, and both women join in with me while Jason's face turns an even deeper shade of red.

"Sorry, bro," I say through chuckles. "She's got your number."

"Seems that way," Jason says darkly as I take the seat next to him. Tara sits beside me, with Jessie on the other end of the table. He clears his throat as the ladies stop laughing. "So, Tara, I'm sure Jess would agree with me in saying we'd love to know how you two crazy chefs got together."

TARA

“No, the burner in the back,” I snap, wishing I wasn’t so stressed.

Jared simply flips off the front burner and turns on the back one, nothing said.

“Sorry,” I say.

“It’s fine,” he says. “I wish I could be there tomorrow. Alicia says there’s nothing she can do about the baby.” He grins at me, and I relax a little.

“I can’t wait to meet your baby,” I say, thinking about children suddenly. I’ve never thought too much about becoming a mother, but I guess that comes with getting married. Otis hadn’t wanted children right away, and we’d gotten married when I was twenty-two, so I was fine waiting.

Our marriage had only lasted fifteen months, so I didn’t have any kids. Now, when I think about it, my children are all boys who wear smaller T-shirts than their actual size. They have dark hair and eyes, because both me and Alec do, and they all can zip around the kitchen and put together gourmet meals.

The past couple of weeks with Alec have been divine, and we’re not even pretending anymore. I’ve had a few reporters on my stoop, asking me about Alec and if I have any comment about Brett’s prediction that any relationship I forge will only last a week.

I have not had any comments. I'm done giving him fodder to write about. I'm done thinking about him.

Now, I spend most of my time worrying that Alec's best friend could become his boo, and then I'll be left to cry into my strawberry shortcake cupcakes.

"That's boiling over," Alec says to my right, and I pull myself out of my horrible self-doubts.

"Then get it," I call to him. "Turn it down. Something."

"I'm up to my elbows in this steak sauce," he says, plenty of bite in his tone. I'm using the Saucebilities kitchen to prep all the food for the wedding, which is tomorrow, because while my back yard may be the site for the "wedding of all weddings," as one reporter called Callie and Dawson's nuptials, my kitchen is sorely lacking.

It's not the anything of anythings, and the only reason I said Callie could have her wedding at my house was because she'd bring the awesome with her. She'd set it all up, and she'd pay someone to take it all down. That, and she said my chickens wouldn't have to move.

"Chef," Jared says, and I turn toward him. He's wearing a bright expression that makes my heart sink to the soles of my feet. "She went into labor."

"Go," I say, though his departure makes me angrier and more frustrated than I already am. We've split our manpower today, because I stupidly booked a librarian luncheon for today, and that meant we couldn't start the wedding meal prep until afternoon.

Three-thirty to be exact. Jared and Alec have been here since seven, and I made Henry go with me to the library while they scrubbed dishes and got the physical facilities ready for the second round.

"Burnt," Alec says, drawing my attention from Jared's retreating form. He tosses the sheet pan of streusel topping on the stovetop, where it clatters with a terrible fright.

"Corn chowder," I say, my heartbeat jumping around as adrenaline streams through my body. "Will you calm down?"

“Will you?” Alec barks at me. He reminds me so much of the growly, grumpy bear who first came to Saucebilities a few months ago.

We glare at each other, and I’m thrown back in time. “Barley isn’t even here,” I say.

“You’re yelling at everyone,” he says as if I’ve not spoken.

“Yeah, well, your station is a mess, so it’s no wonder. I don’t even have somewhere to put the dang streusel, even if I had gotten it out on time.”

He takes a step closer to me, his dark eyes so, so dangerous. “You make my blood boil.”

“Yeah, well, join the club.” It’s not like I’m happy with myself right now. A timer goes off somewhere, but I have no idea what it’s for. “I’m not exactly having a vacation here.”

“You shouldn’t have scheduled two events in the same day.”

I start hunting for the stupid timer that’s going to put me in a nuthouse. “Tell me something I don’t know.” I find it, remember I set it for the cupcakes, and reach for the oven mitts. “Can you *please* clear me a spot for the cupcakes? There are thirty-six of them coming out.”

Alec huffs and puffs like the Big Bad Wolf as he starts moving pans and pots and cutting boards off the stainless steel counter. “We need one of those cooling racks,” he says.

There’s a lot of things I need right now, and only one of them is a commercial cooling rack. I say nothing though, and turn with the huge, hot 18-well muffin pan in my hand. He’s cleared me enough room for one of them, and he picks up the mixing bowl he used for the streusel and starts scooping things into it to make more space.

He’s clearly upset, and so am I, and I swear, if I can get my hands on a knife after I get this pan of cupcakes out, something’s going to get cut. I carefully slide the cupcakes onto the table though I want to slam everything.

But slamming baked goods is a no-no, and I have enough control over my temper to manage the slide.

“I need a minute,” I say, tossing the oven mitts on the counter beside the trays of cupcakes.

“We don’t have a minute,” he yells after me. “Tara? Tara, come *on*.”

With that, I spin on my orthopedic heel and march back to him. “No, you come on.” I grab onto his arm and muscle him away from the stove where he’s literally set a bowl with a bag of oats, brown sugar, and vanilla. Right on top of the ruined streusel too. Has he no shame whatsoever?

I’m not as strong as him by any means, but I get him going for a few steps, and the rest is easy. “Everything is going to burn,” he says.

“Let it.” I pull him into the office and slam the door good and hard behind him. My chest heaves, and my fingers curl into fists. “We need a minute.”

He faces me, and I’m not sure what he sees, but he softens. I suck at the air, trying to find a breath that isn’t full of charred sugar or the horrible stench of starchy water searing into a burner. I pace past him to my mini-fridge and pull out my pint of butter pecan. “Sit.”

To my surprise, he does, and in a much calmer way, I pull open my drawer and extract a spoon. “Want a bite?” I glance down, but there’s no more utensils. “This is my last clean spoon, so we’ll have to share.”

He looks at me, and I can’t read his mood. There’s nothing in his expression, and I find that as unsettling as Mr. Grumpy-Cat.

“There’s more out in the kitchen.”

“We can’t go out there.” I raise my eyebrows. “We need a break.”

Alec leans forward, his chef jacket straining across that impressive chest. “You’re not talking about us, right? Just the kitchen?”

I blink, unsure of what he's saying. "Do you want to take a break?"

"Not from you," he says.

I open the ice cream and dig my spoon into the hard treat. "Great. I was talking about the kitchen."

"You should really let me go turn everything off," he says. "This is going to take longer than a minute."

I study him for a moment, consider what might happen if I leave all the burners flaming the way they are. All the ovens on with things inside them. He can either go turn it all off, or this has to take sixty seconds.

I see ashes and smoke and this building I rent burnt to the ground.

I want more than sixty seconds, so I say, "I'll give you sixty seconds to get it all turned off and be back in here. Or I'm not sharing." I lift my spoon, which still holds just a touch of cream.

He jumps to his feet and dashes out of the office, practically pulling the door off the wall in his haste. I laugh, but I still reach for my timer and set it for one minute.

The air in the office is cooler, more breathable. Sometimes I get so worked up, and I just need...a break. I take a deep breath and then a big bite of ice cream, and the world starts spinning at normal speed again.

"Ten seconds," I call, and Alec appears in my office doorway. He's holding a fistful of spoons. I think I fall in love with him right then and there, because he knows I need more spoons for my drawer. He knows how much I love butter pecan ice cream. He knows how dedicated I am to Saucebilities—and Callie—and that I want everything to be perfect for her wedding.

He knows it was really hard for me to let Jared have tomorrow off, even if his wife is having their first baby, and he knows I can't handle the conflict that would come if I told Henry he couldn't leave after the library luncheon to go take his aging mother to the hairdresser.

All of those things have caused me a ton of stress, and it just piles on, and piles on until I'm over-boiling water and burning streusel—simple tasks I *never* mess up.

He closes the door behind him normally—no Mr. Slammy in sight—and crosses back to my desk. “Did I make it?”

The timer goes off, and I grin at him. “Just barely.” I push the ice cream pint closer to him, and he takes a big dig at it with his spoon.

“Look,” I say. “I’m sorry. I—I don’t know what happened. The heat melted my brain.”

“It happens to all of us,” he says quietly before sticking his ice cream in his mouth. Watching him eat is almost as good as kissing him, and I quickly pull my gaze away from those lips. I know if I round the desk and sit in his lap, he’ll kiss me. I’ll get to taste my all-time favorite ice cream on his mouth, and dang, my body is already vibrating and heating up all over again.

“It’s cooler in here,” he says. “We might need to nudge up the AC out there.”

“We need to just breathe out there,” I say. “There’s no race for this wedding. It’s not until tomorrow. We don’t need to have all six ovens on, with every burner at full flame.”

He meets my eye and smiles. “You know what? You’re right. Where’s the fire?”

“It’s going to be right here,” I say, gesturing with my spoon between us. “If we don’t freaking calm down.” I take another spoonful of ice cream and eat it as I sink back into my chair.

“I’m mostly talking to myself, by the way,” I say. “Not to you.”

“You do want to get on home,” he says. “Because it’s Monday night, and you love those game show reruns.” He grins at me, and for some reason, everything that was wrong out in the kitchen is suddenly fine.

“I’ll have you know that I solved the prize puzzle on *Wheel of Fortune* last night.”

“Mm,” he says, digging into my pint of butter pecan again. “Was it from 1985?”

“No,” I say, laughing. “It was a new one.”

He chuckles too, his dark eyes now only dark in color. He really has lit up my world, and I really do like him.

No, I think. You’re falling in love with him.

I know, too, because I’ve been married once before, and engaged once before. I’ve never vowed not to fall in love again, and this time, it feels...different.

We finish the whole pint together, and when it’s gone, I feel like I can get back to work.

“I just realized we can’t go to Mimi’s tomorrow either,” he says. “It’s Callie’s wedding. Duh.”

“There’s always next week,” I say, though I’m not entirely sure what next Tuesday’s schedule looks like. I’m more of the type of person who likes to live day-by-day so I don’t get overwhelmed.

“Better pencil it in,” he says. “Or label it.”

“I haven’t used that label maker in a week, I’ll have you know.” I glance over to where it sits on top of my filing cabinet.

“You’re joking, right?” He gets up and retrieves the label maker. “I think these things have a history on them...” The machine whirs and a label comes out. He rips it off as I stand up. “This one has your name written all over it.”

I approach him, needing a kiss before I get back to work. He puts the label maker back in its rightful spot and faces me. He holds up the dark blue tape, and I read **VERY REAL GIRLFRIEND**.

I freeze, as per my usual when Alec does something to surprise me. He grins as he peels off the back of the label and

sticks it to my chest, right above my heart, where a name tag would go.

He cradles my face in his hands, and they're so big, it's almost like he's holding my whole head. Looking up at him, I'm definitely falling for him. The best part is, he seems to be free-falling for me too.

"I'm sorry I said you make my blood boil," he whispers just before kissing me. This kiss is just as explosive as our first, but we've learned how to harness that heat and speed and power, only letting it come out in doses.

"It's true," he says against my ear. "My blood is like lava right now, but I'm sorry I said it."

I simply run my hands through his hair and guide his mouth back to mine.

"Guys," someone says, and I pull away from Alec to look toward the now-open office door. "What's goin' on out here? Everything's off, but Jared called and said I better get over here, stat." Barley looks utterly confused, which only makes me giggle into my boyfriend's chest.

"Yep, coming," Alec says, and he steps away from me so fast, I nearly fall down. I move a little slower, first peeling off his label for me and pressing it to the corner of my desk. That way, everyone will know it's mine, and that I belong there.

Then I follow him into the kitchen, because we have a wedding to prepare for.

ALEC

“Alec,” Tara says, and I look up from the last of the oysters I’m garnishing. “Ready?” She stands in the doorway, and she’s simply beautiful with all the sunlight pouring in around her.

“Yes,” I say, because we’ve had a great day in the kitchen today, after our disastrous one yesterday. Tara is a lot like me in some ways, in that she gets stressed, and then things come out of her mouth that she doesn’t mean to say. At least that’s what I’m telling myself, because it makes me nicer and her human.

Otherwise, she’s too perfect for me, and I hate thinking I might not be good enough for her.

“I’m just finishing these,” I say, lifting the tray of oysters.

“I have the ice ready,” she says.

I couldn’t believe we were going to serve dinner outside, but Dawson Houser must be related to the Good Lord Above, because somehow, the weather is cooler today than it’s been in months. Maybe it’s Callie Michaels who called in the favor. No matter what, they got a perfect evening for their wedding.

Tara and I have been flirt-cooking all day long, and I actually can’t wait to get out of my chef (straight)jacket and into my suit. I never thought I’d think or say those words aloud, but I’m ready to relax.

I take the oysters out onto the deck, which Tara has shaded to further keep it cool. She also brought over her heated buffet

units and her cold ones, and I take the time to nestle each individual oyster down into the ice. She covers them with plastic wrap and turns to smile at me.

I let my eyes slide past her face to the rest of the buffet, which she's been perfecting for the past twenty minutes. The hot dishes—chicken kabobs, creamy corn, and roasted potatoes and veggies—are all covered with metal lids. The cold gazpacho she whipped up after our come-to-Jesus moment last night waits on the end of the service area, plenty of gold-rimmed bowls next to it.

Then the cold bar starts with macaroni salad, greens, oysters, and the dessert bar, where her strawberry shortcake cupcakes, brownie bites, and the apple and pear tarts with oatmeal streusel—which I had to make twice—are also covered with plastic wrap. Tara's put skewers up from the ice under those trays and serving platters to keep the wrap from touching the delicate tops of the desserts. We definitely wouldn't want our immaculate decorations to be ruined.

Four tables have been set up in at the bottom of the steps, two on each side, creating a pseudo-aisle I know Callie will walk down with her father. Only two dozen chairs make up the audience beyond the tables, in only two rows. No hiding in the back row for me.

No one is hiding at this wedding, as Dawson and Callie only invited a very few people. They'd chosen to be married on a Tuesday instead of a weekend. And they'd told no one but those invited the actual date or time of the wedding.

Thankfully, the reporters surrounding me and Tara have backed off now that a few weeks have gone by. The last article that came out had hit the shelves ten days ago, and it had been a simple couple of inches about how Tara's relationship with me had lasted more than a week.

It seems love can be found anywhere, for anyone, the last line of the article had read. I smile just thinking that, because for a while there, I hadn't believed that. A year ago, if someone had told me that, I'd have scoffed, growled, and gotten behind the wheel of my SUV.

“We need to go change,” Tara says, putting her hand on my chest. Her touch sends a thrill through me and forces me to focus on her.

“Yeah, okay,” I say, turning to go back into her house. I nearly collide with Dawson, who grabs onto my shoulders so I don’t fall backward.

“Whoa,” he says, and that makes me grin.

“See?” I say over my shoulder to Tara, who’s bumped into me because I stopped. “He says it too. It doesn’t mean I’m a horse.”

“I still hate it,” she says.

I move to the side, Dawson backs up, and Tara slips through the doorway. “We just need five minutes to change,” she says.

“That’s fine,” he drawls, already inside his professional Society skin. “That’ll give me time to talk to Mother and this date she’s brought.” He casts a look made of thunder and lightning out the door. “Guess I better get to it.”

He sighs and leaves the house, and I go with Tara through the kitchen and living room to the other side of her house, which hosts the bedrooms. She’s got three, and she nods to the one where I’ve already stashed my clothes as she continues to the end of the hall and goes into the master suite.

I haven’t been in there, and I’m male enough to admit I’ve thought about it. Knowing Tara as I do, I can’t help but wonder what I’d find. Does she label her bathroom shelves for where to keep the body wash? Is every hook labeled with “towel” or “washcloth” the way she labels our hooks at work?

Mine has my name above it, for crying out loud. For how often she turns over chefs, I’m surprised she’s labeling the hooks, but I shouldn’t be. Tara likes having things where they belong, and I can’t begrudge her that.

I pull off my jacket and apron and start to dress in my slacks and white shirt. Tara told me once that she likes the labels and organization, because it’s something she can control. As someone who appreciates only worrying about

what I can control and who's spent a lot of time obsessing over what I can't, I've decided to stop teasing her about the labels.

I finish getting dressed and rush across the hall to the bathroom to wash my face and hands, because I need to look nice. Not only as the chef of the meal some very important people will be eating, but as Tara's escort. She's Callie's maid of honor, and that means she needs someone to walk her down the aisle before the bride. That person should be her very real boyfriend, and I'm happy to do the job even though it makes me nervous to have so many eyes on me.

There's a reason I like being in the kitchen, and a reason I didn't want to be the public face of The Blackbriar Inn.

I oil down my beard and step back. That's about all I can do as a man, and I wonder how Tara's really going to be ready in five minutes. She told me her dress took five minutes to zip up as we frosted cupcakes this morning, and I'm not sure when she's exaggerating and when she's not.

I exit the bathroom to find her two dogs guarding the way between me and the master bedroom, as if I'm going to go down there and do something I shouldn't. "Not on your watch, huh?" I say to Tommy and Goose.

Goose's tail starts to wag, but Tommy just huffs and lays back down. I chuckle at the dogs and crouch down to pat them. Goose is a light brown pup who clearly isn't as old and crotchety as Tommy, and he comes over to sniff and lick my hand.

The door down the hall opens, and I straighten as Tara comes out. She's wearing a gorgeous dress the color of eggplant skin, and it looks like a second skin glued to her body. Oh, those curves would have any man groveling at her feet, but I manage to stay on mine.

"Wow," I say, forgetting about the dog barrier between us and stepping toward her. "You look amazing." I take her hand in one of mine, note her smile, and slide my other hand along that delicious hip.

The floral scent of her perfume undoes my composure. The way she's parted her hair in the middle and then pulled it into a low ponytail gives her a sophisticated, elegant look I haven't seen before.

She's wearing mascara, a light eyeshadow, and eyeliner that makes her brown eyes look twice as big. Her cheeks hold just the right amount of flush, and diamonds drip from her ears, neck, and wrist.

"You *are* amazing," I whisper as I lower my head toward her ear. I like listening to her pull in a breath, and I like the soft skin along her shoulder.

"We don't have time to kiss in the hallway," she murmurs. "You'll ruin my makeup besides."

"What about a quick question?" I ask, and though I try to swallow the words, they come surging out anyway. "Would you want to get married?"

She pulls back, her eyes wide and searching my face instantly.

"I mean, not to me," I say, realizing how stupid that sounds. "I mean...in general. Are you the marrying type?"

She visibly relaxes, but her grip on my hand actually increases. "Uh, I'm not sure actually."

My eyebrows go up. "You're not?"

"I've been married, remember? It was kind of a huge bust. Then there was the other engagement that never made it to the altar." She shrugs as Callie comes out of the room behind her. "I don't know."

"She'd marry the right guy," Callie says, resting her chin on Tara's shoulder. She grins at me while Tara tries to look at her. "Oops, I mean man. She'd marry the right *man*."

"Callie," Tara says in a warning voice.

"But she doesn't want a long engagement," Callie continues as if Tara has turned invisible. "She wants a spur-of-the-moment engagement. A wedding the next weekend. A cruise to the Bahamas."

“Stop talking right now,” Tara says. She turns back to me and starts to turn me around. “Bless her heart, she’s so nervous for this wedding.”

“I am not,” Callie says behind her, but Tara’s almost pushing me down the hall now. Her dogs weave in and out of our legs, and I don’t know how they do it.

In the kitchen, we meet up with the rest of the wedding party, which consists of Callie’s sister and her boyfriend, Ariel and Walker, Dawson’s cousin and his wife, Augustus and Emilia, and their landlord and her husband, Jillian and Tom.

“Where’s Lance?” Tara asks as if she’s the wedding planner, and the man steps out of the dining room.

“Right here.” He does not look happy, but he does look great in his dark suit and tie, though I’m not one-hundred percent sure it matches his shirt. His flower is pinned right above his heart, and his hands hang loosely in his pockets. I’m not sure if Jessie has texted or called him yet, and I need to find out.

“You’re leading us,” Tara says, releasing my arm and going to brush something invisible from his shoulders. “Get up there in the front. We’re ready.”

He walks on wooden legs to the back exit, and Tara returns to my side. “That man.” She takes my arm, shaking her head.

“Cut him some slack,” I say under my breath. “His fiancée left the state, with his ring, what? Three months ago?” Four at the most, and I’m surprised Lance is here at all. I lean closer to Tara, who’s frozen at my side. “If that was me—and I wasn’t even engaged—I’d be somewhere in Colorado about now. Maybe Montana.”

She blinks, those eyes so beautiful when she lets some vulnerability into them. “When Otis left, I slept at Callie’s for three weeks.”

She’s told me that before. “And after Brett?”

“We went to Brussels,” she whispers. “For two weeks.”

“So we’ll forgive Lance if he’s not super-happy to lead the wedding party only a few months after what happened to him.”

“Yes,” Tara nods. “We will. *I* will.”

He moves then, and the rest of the wedding party falls into place behind him. Tara and I bring up the rear, and since there’s very few people actually in the audience, the only eyes I have to endure are Dawson’s mother.

Lila Houser’s sharp-edged gaze cuts me to the core, and I grin at the private knife joke I’ve just shared with myself. The moment Tara and I are in position, the wedding march pipes through the back yard. I lean closer to her anyway, enjoying the chance to do so.

“Wow, Lila’s gaze cut me to the core, as if I were an apple.”

“Oh, my word,” she whispers, but her shoulders start to shake. Her laughter only increases and causes me to laugh, which is so inappropriate for the occasion. Callie reaches the top of the steps and her father, a somewhat short, older gentleman, goes up them to greet her. He gives her a kiss just as Tara’s laughter hisses out of her mouth.

“Stop it,” I whisper, though I’m still laughing too. “This is your best friend’s wedding.” Not to mention we’re the professional caterers, and we shouldn’t be having a horse-laugh session as the bride walks down the aisle.

Ariel, Callie’s sister looks over to Tara, and she manages to control herself. I can’t stop smiling though, but thankfully, that fits into a proper wedding.

“She looks amazing,” Tara whispers. “Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I say, because I’ve had girlfriends before and know when to agree with them. Callie is a pretty woman, but she doesn’t press the right buttons for me. Tara seems to have all ten fingers on them at all times, though.

The bride reaches the groom, and I see the way Dawson looks at Callie. The love shining there is enough to fill a previously jaded and jilted man with hope. My smile

straightens somewhat though, because Tara didn't have time to tell me if she'd get married again. At least not herself.

I want to ask her about kids too, but maybe it's still too soon in our relationship to be talking about such personal things. I'm not sure, because I've had few girlfriends where I have had those kinds of talks. And if I did, we'd been dating for much longer than a couple of weeks, with a fake-dating week before that.

Three weeks, I tell myself. You will not ask her about having kids at three weeks.

I want to, but I won't. I'll have to come up with a few more knife jokes to fill the silence between us.

"Do you, Callie Whitney Michaels, pledge yourself to Dawson Connor Houser, for time and all eternity? To have and to hold, to love and to cherish, in good times and bad?" The pastor pauses, and I clue in to the fact that I've missed the advice part of the wedding.

"Yes," Callie says. "I do."

The pastor repeats the question to Dawson, who also says, "Yes, I do."

"By the power vested in me from the state of South Carolina, I now pronounce you man and wife." He grins at them, and my smile returns too. "You may kiss your bride."

Dawson grins wickedly at Callie, who's already giggling. He takes her into his arms and dips her back while a squeal comes out of her mouth.

Tara makes the same noise and starts to clap as Dawson bends over and kisses Callie. I applaud politely too, enjoying the good feeling in the back yard. And, as the cherry on top, it's time to eat.

"That was so amazing," Tara says, wiping one finger under her right eye. "You're going to watch the buffet with me, right?"

"Of course," I say as Callie lifts her and Dawson's hands. Since there are so few people there, the hugging and

congratulations only takes a few minutes, and then a woman with really short, almost neon orange hair holds both hands high above her head. Callie's mom.

"There's food on the deck," she says. "Let's tuck in."

I step over to Callie and Dawson and envelop them both in a hug. "Congrats, you two," I say, pulling back quickly. "That was really great."

"Thank you," Dawson says, and he radiates happiness from every pore of his body.

Callie grabs onto me as if I'm a life preserver. "You don't let her get away from you," she whispers. She pulls back but doesn't move her face more than six inches from mine. "She'll try, and she'll try hard. It's just what Tara does. And everyone lets her. You can't let her."

I don't even know what she's talking about, but I nod, because I'm experienced enough with women to know when they just want you to agree and when they want you to ask questions. A little tip: They hardly ever want you to ask questions.

"Okay," she says, settling back onto her feet the right way. "I can't wait to eat that cold soup you promised me."

"Alec," Tara says, and she's wearing something sharp in her voice. Both Callie and I look toward her, and I can see there's something wrong instantly. She nods toward the fence, and I'm surprised the man I catch ducking down the moment I look his way hasn't been liquified by the heat in her gaze.

"I'll take care of it," I say, already striding toward the gate in her fence. Time to go Marine on a reporter, and the only thing that's excited me more in the past several months...is Tara. I can't wait to dance with her later, hold her close, and breathe in that sexy, petally scent that goes everywhere with her.

The squawking of chickens meets my ears, and I turn back, thinking she might have a fowl emergency she needs me to take care of more than the press. I find her with a black and white hen in her arms, showing it to someone as if it's a fluffy

bunny rabbit. The joy on her face fills the whole yard, and I shake my head.

I push through the gate, realizing I might have to share my dance with the woman I'm falling for...with a chicken named Hennifer.

TARA

I work hard not to tap my pen on the conference room table, because I want this pool party on my calendar. Martin's been talking for twenty minutes, though, and I get it. He wants to throw an end-of-summer bash for his high school students, because they've all left to go back to school.

The community pool out in Sugar Creek is still open, but they have limited hours, and blah blah *blah*. My patience is gone, and I've been doodling in the corner of his approved menu about which recipe I'm going to type up next for my cookbook.

Saucebilities has a small quinceañera that night, but I'm not going to be cooking. I just want this meeting to be over. I've never been great in meetings, but I nod as Martin asks a question.

"Yes," I say. "We'll use chicken breast on that. That's not a problem."

"Miss Finch?" My part-time scheduler pokes her head into the room, and I leap to my feet. I've never been so happy to see her.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry," Lydia says. "You have tonight's client on the phone." She glances at Martin and throws him a small smile. "So sorry, Mister Powell. I can finish up for Tara."

"I think we're done," I say, looking to Martin for confirmation.

“Yes,” he says, and his papers are already gathered into his folder. “I was just blathering.”

He can say that again, but I’m not going to. I step over to him and give him a peck on both cheeks. “Do say hello to Jane for me,” I say. His wife used Saucebilities a year or so ago for their last son’s graduation party, and I probably don’t need to worry about losing his business.

“I will,” he says, and I gesture him out of the room in front of me. I let him go ahead and walk down the hall bordered on one side with all the conference room windows, and then I turn to Lydia.

“Thank you,” I breathe. “That was torture.”

“I gathered as much from your text.”

“It’s just that we finalized the menu twenty minutes ago, and this is all I really need.” I hand her the sheet. “Will you put it in the calendar for me? It’s a rush job, so I’m not sure what that does as far as scheduling.”

Lydia takes the paper and glances at it. “When is it?”

“A week from Saturday. I didn’t see anything on my calendar.” Which is a little odd, because weekends are my busiest time at Saucebilities.

Lydia starts toward her desk, and she’s at least ten years younger than me, with that early twenties body I haven’t had in longer than a decade. She has regular-shaped legs that don’t look like they’ll snap when she walks, and her pencil skirt would make even Callie jealous.

I watch the way she swings her hips, and I try to figure out how she does it in those heels. Maybe if I wore heels, I’d be able to achieve that side-to-side movement.

I take a step and really try to thrust my hip out the way Lydia seems to do so effortlessly. My ankle buckles, and I plant both palms against the wall to keep myself from falling down. It sounds like a truck has run straight into the building, and Lydia spins around.

The paper flutters to the floor as her hand goes to her pulse. “Are you okay?” She hurries back toward me, and I really wish she wouldn’t. My internal temperature has shot through the roof, and I’m sure my face is the color of the marinara sauce Alec’s working on in the kitchen right now.

I wave her back as my body parts cooperate with me. Lydia keeps coming, and there’s no holding her back now. She is Southern, after all, and we don’t just let friends trip over their own feet and then suffer the embarrassment of that alone.

She puts her hand on my arm about the same time I straighten, and her wide, blue eyes broadcast concern. “Are you okay for real?”

“Yes,” I say.

“What happened?”

“My chicken legs gave out on me,” I say with a forced laugh. Jason’s nickname for me runs through my mind—Legs—but there’s no way I can tell her I was trying to swing my hips the way she was.

“You do not have chicken legs,” Lydia says. “That meeting just went on and on. Come have some lemonade.”

I go with her, this time ignoring her perfect pendulum hips. Maybe the orthopedics will never allow for such a perfect left-right swing.

No matter what, now I know why Rick is in here every day with flowers, jewelry, cookies, Lydia’s favorite soda, and anything and everything else the woman likes. I can’t remember the last time a man bought me a gift, and that includes Alec.

The last week since Callie’s wedding has included good days in the kitchen, perfect parties, and that same, hot kissing I’ve been enjoying for weeks now. If our relationship was fake, I would’ve ended it by now, but since it’s not, we’re going to Mimi’s for their Tuesday-night mousse tasting.

I can admit—only to myself—that our date tonight is the reason I didn’t put myself in the kitchen today. I didn’t want to be oily and sweaty, rushed to shower, and then get back

downtown. Alec lives on the edge of the peninsula, and I'll just go with him to his apartment while he showers.

Lydia hands me a can of sugar-free lemonade and sits down at her desk. She taps and clicks while I cool down my humiliation, with the throbbing in my ankle telling me I'm not going to try that again.

I have a pair of Callie's ankle boots in the car. She's still on her honeymoon, but she told me I could go in her house and get the shoes. She hasn't moved in with Dawson yet, but I'll be helping with that once they get back from Greece.

"Oh, honey, I don't know about next Saturday," Lydia says, and I set down the can of lemonade to peer at her computer.

"Why? What did I do?" I can cater the end-of-summer smash at the pool by myself if I have to.

"It's the Sugar Creek Fall Festival." Lydia looks at me. "You're doing a booth Saturday and Sunday."

"*Noooo*," I say. "That can't be right." How could I forget that? I do the Sugar Creek Fall Festival every year, at least since I opened Saucebilities, because Callie and I lived there for some very key years of our lives. She still lives there, but I moved to Cottonhill when I bought the house I'm in now.

Lydia's calendar on her screen shows the Fall Festival in two bright pink boxes. The pool party would sit on Saturday night.

"You've already scheduled everyone to work Friday and Saturday...and Sunday."

My mind races. "Okay," I say. "I'm not sure why this didn't sync on my phone. I'll...think of something." I've called in emergency chefs before, and I can do that again.

In ten days? I ask myself, but I have to make it work. I straighten and start to text a couple of chefs who used to work for me. Jasper responds quickly and says he can't and he's so sorry.

Phillip says he's opened his own restaurant now, and hey I should come check out the small plates that he serves, since I inspired the menu with one we did of family Easter party a few years ago.

I press my teeth together and text Justin. Then Olivia. Then Sam.

None of them can come help next week.

"I'm headed out," Lydia says, and I look up. I've completely forgotten that I'm still standing out in the lobby.

"Yeah, sure," I say. "Thanks, Lydia." She goes one way, and I go the other. I wanted to work on my cookbook this afternoon before the mousse tasting, and I head toward my office. I can flip through my computer and see if I can find someone, anyone, who can come work next week.

"Maybe I can make the food for the pool party in between the Fall Festival prep." We usually do a bunch of grab-and-go items for the festival, and I can probably fit in the buffalo wild wings, the macaroni salad, and the hummingbird cakes for the pool party.

I push through the door and into the kitchen, the temperature automatically going up ten degrees. Jared laughs as he sautés something on the flat top, and Barley reaches for a stack of transportable, plastic containers. He begins to scoop mashed potatoes into them, catches my eye, and lifts his head in greeting.

I don't see Alec, though I know he's here. At least he was before the meeting-that-wouldn't-end. I frown, wondering if something's gone wrong. It definitely has for me, and my ankle shouts at me not to try the hip-swing again.

Maybe he's in the refrigeration unit, and my lips tingle just thinking about it. He's kissed me in there several times. The first time, he asked me to come help him find the mayo, though he had to know where it was.

Yeah, he did. It was just to kiss me. When I asked him what his fascination with making out in the walk-in fridge was, he'd laughed and said it was a little kissing, not making

out. And that he really liked to feel like he was steaming things up, and all you have to do to produce steam in the walk-in fridge is breathe out.

I turn toward the walk-in fridge just as the door to it opens. Alec comes out of it, laughing in a boisterous, sexy way, and I smile.

That gesture slides right off my face when I see the blonde woman following him. Also laughing. Those blue eyes twinkling.

Jessie Dunaway, his best friend.

Make that *supposed* best friend.

Or “best friend with benefits.”

ALEC

I see the look on Tara's face and cut my laughter off mid-ha. The jealousy streaming from her isn't hard to feel or see, but Jessie doesn't seem to get it. She keeps laughing and even says, "That's because you never know when to stop."

I know when to stop right now, and I wish she'd get the freaking hint. I want to wave my arms and point out the very angry brunette standing ten feet in front of us. Angry's not the right word, and Tara's really good at hiding things.

She also hates conflict, so she lifts her chin and says, "Hey, Jessie," in a voice that gets drowned out by some very loud sizzling from the stovetop where Barley has just put down a whole mess of steaks.

Tara goes by, and I want to tell her I like her hair, and hey, she's so pretty, but her cold shoulder freezes my vocal cords. I watch her walk into her office and close the door, and I wonder if she would've done that if I hadn't just walked out of the walk-in fridge with Jessie.

I have a really good reason for why my best friend is here, and once I explain it all to Tara, everything will be fine.

"Okay, I'm gonna go," Jessie yells above the steak sounds. She tips up onto her toes and kisses my cheek. I do the same to her, because we grew up in Beaufort, and that's what people do. I've probably kissed the whole town a dozen times by now.

I walk Jessie through the kitchen and the dish room to the back door and open it for her. "Good luck with the interview, Jess," I say. "Not that you need it."

She grins at me, and her smile is the happiest I've seen it in weeks. Maybe months. I close the door against the heat of the day and sigh. I need to get back to work, and I look down at the plastic tub of chicken thighs in my hand.

Chicken thighs.

Alfredo. Benedict. Pot Pie. Hennifer. Piccata. No, wait, Tara doesn't have a chicken named Piccata. Yet.

I go back into the kitchen and put the thighs on the counter. "Here you go, Jared. I need to go talk to Tara."

He twists from the massive pile of onions and peppers he's got on the flat top. "Don't take too long. We need to get those grilling."

"Two minutes," I promise him, and I'm proud of myself for being so nice. It feels good to talk to him like he's a friend, but still a little strange to think Jared might actually *be* a friend. A month ago, though, and I would've rolled my eyes and stalked away to do whatever I wanted, no matter what that did to him.

He nods, as he technically has more sway here than I do. I'm still the new man on the totem pole as the last chef Tara hired.

I hurry past the countertops and round the corner to face the closed office door. I steel myself with a deep breath and keep walking. I knock on the door at the same time I open it. "Hey, do you have a minute?" I ask. Actually two, but I've dealt with an upset Tara before, and it usually takes some butter pecan and less than sixty seconds to get her back into her happy place.

"Not really," she says. "That meeting went on forever, during which I double-booked myself in the worst way possible." She's squinting at the screen in front of her and doesn't bother to look my way.

I enter the office and leave the door ajar. "What way?" I ask.

Tara heaves a sigh and looks at me like I've just murdered all thirteen of her hens. "What do you want, Alec? Don't you

have chicken Caprese sandwiches to make?”

“Yes,” I say. “I do. Yes, I do.” I press my hands together and commit myself to getting closer to her. “I saw your face when Jessie and I came out of the deep-freeze, and I just want you to know you have nothing to worry about.”

Ice flows from her expression. “I’m not worried about you and your lifelong best friend. Your super-cute, blonde, grins-like-a-fool, and so-nice-it-hurts best friend.” She glares as she stands. “I don’t have enough butter pecan to deal with this right now.” She strides over to her filing cabinet and pulls open the top drawer. Once she shoulders her purse, she heads in my direction. “I’m going to work at home for the rest of the day.”

I start to say, “Whoa,” and change it to “Wh-hhat?”

She seems to know I’m about to go equine trainer on her, and she pauses a few feet from me.

“She stopped by to tell me she finally got up the nerve to call Lance, and she has an interview with him next week.” I don’t say that it sure would be nice if Tara hired more people, because it’s not what she wants to hear right now. I didn’t used to care about that, but right now, I do.

She folds her arms and cocks that sexy hip. “And you went into the walk-in, because...?”

“Because I’m really busy with the Caprese sandwiches, and I needed the chicken thighs.”

“Right,” she says with a scoff. “If you want to be with Jessie and not me, just say so.”

“I *don’t* want that,” I say, taking another step toward her and cutting off her escape route. “Baby, you have nothing to be jealous about.”

“I’m not blonde.”

“I don’t like blondes,” I say. I take another step toward her. “Listen, okay?” I put my hand on that cocked hip, fire rushing through my veins. “I’ve had plenty of opportunities to be with Jessie if that’s what I want. It’s not. She’s not.” I lower my

head and touch my lips to Tara's temple, then her cheek. "I'm going to hold you close so you can't run away."

I tighten my grip on her, because I can feel the word-vomit starting to surge up my throat. I promised myself I wouldn't fall for her. I am a big, fat liar, because I'm definitely falling for this woman.

"I'm falling in love with you, Boss." I kiss the corner of her mouth and then her earlobe, feeling her stiffen and then soften almost instantly.

"I know what it feels like to be cheated on, and I will never, *ever* do that to someone, least of all you." I run my hands through her hair. "Your hair is pretty today," I whisper. "I like it down and curled like this."

"Stop it," she murmurs.

"Stop what?" I ask.

"Flirting with me. You're really bad at it."

The way she slides her hands up my arms to my chest says differently, but I just smile at her. "Oh, I know what'll win you over." I clear my throat. "I just got a few cats. I named them Spoon, Fork, and Knife. They're my *catlery*."

Tara looks up at me, delight sparking in those eyes. I knew she liked my knife jokes. She bursts out laughing a moment later, and it didn't even take any butter pecan.

"If you want to go, you should," I say as her laughter turns to quieter giggles. "Jared's got us on track out there. I'll come pick you up tonight. You could have a *knife*, quiet afternoon."

Her grin stays as wide as the Great Barrier Reef. "I think I will," she says. "See you *spoon*."

I tip my head back and laugh, knowing my two minutes are up. I still take a moment to appreciate how...happy I am. I silently acknowledge that I'm definitely falling for Tara. I lean down and kiss her, hopefully in a way that would totally have the walk-in fridge full of steam so there's no doubt in her mind that she's the one I want.

“My two minutes are up,” I say as I pull away. “I really need to get the thighs on the grill.” I step back and meet her eyes. “For real, Tara, we’re okay?”

She reaches up and wipes my lip with her finger. “You don’t want to wear pink lip gloss in the kitchen.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes,” she says, ducking her head for a moment and then lifting it to meet my gaze. “We’re okay.”

“Good.” I grin at her. “See you *spoon*...Boss.”

“THIS ONE IS A WHITE CHOCOLATE RASPBERRY,” THE WAITRESS says, setting two small glasses on the table. The mousse goes all the way to the top of the glass, with a fine, pink powder on top.

“Oh, it’s so pretty,” Tara says, her eyes lit up like a child’s on Christmas morning. She looks at me and reaches for her tiny dessert spoon.

I grin and pick up my spoon too. The mousse is two bites, and I’ve had the white chocolate raspberry before. Mimi’s always offers at least five new mousses each week, but they serve some of their bestsellers too.

“Let’s take a bite together,” Tara says, digging into hers.

“All right,” I say with a chuckle. I scoop up my bite, and she counts down.

“Three...two...one.” She slides her spoon into her mouth, which totally distracts me. I’ve eaten with her plenty of times, but once the kiss-barrier had been broken, I’d liked it a lot more. Those lips can drive a man to his knees.

I hardly taste the mousse, and not only because this one has a very mild flavor.

“I can barely get the raspberry,” she says. “You?”

“It comes in the back of your throat,” I say. “At the end.”

“Ah, yes.” She nods and eats her second bite. I do too, and then I reach for my glass of ice water.

“Not my favorite,” she says. “Though I think I should make a white chocolate cupcake with raspberry buttercream. I could melt down a sorbet or sherbet for that...”

I grin at her and set my glass down. “How’s the cookbook coming? Did you get your recipes typed up at home?”

She scoffs and shakes her head. “No,” she says. “I can’t get anything done at home.”

“I bet I know what you did,” I say with a grin.

“Oh yeah?” she challenges. “Do tell.”

I take a moment to inhale, because I feel like I’m about to get myself in trouble. “I bet Tommy and Goose talked you into taking a nap.”

Tara starts to giggle, and I know I’m right.

“Then, I’m sure Hennifer required some of your attention, what with her being so high-maintenance and all.”

She licks her spoon clean and points it at me. “It’s Benedict that’s giving me trouble.”

“Really? Not Hennifer Lopez?” I fold my arms and lean back in my chair. “Seems like she’d be a Chicken Little Diva in that coop.”

Tara smiles, sets her spoon down, and leans her arms into the table. “Alec, what Callie said at the wedding is right. I’d take a chance on marriage for the right man.”

As I note how rapidly she changed the topic—something she’s always accusing me of doing—I realize how much it cost Tara to say something like that, and I lean across the table and take her hands in mine. “That’s great,” I say. “Dare I ask about another serious topic?”

“Let me guess,” she says, looking at our joined hands as she runs her thumb over the back of mine. “It’s about having a little human like you running around.”

“Or a little human like you,” I say quietly, suddenly feeling the need to study the tabletop too. “Someone who loves chickens, label-makers, her friends, inventing recipes, and eating dinner really late at night.”

She smiles, but it’s not the usual sun-rivalry grin.

“Someone who’s smart, runs her own business, is a genius with flavors, and takes time to read bedtime stories to her dogs.”

“Just Tommy,” she whispers. “He can’t fall asleep without it.”

“Hm.”

She lifts her eyes to mine. “You go first.”

I swallow, because I’m not great at this kind of stuff. “I’d take a kid or two,” I say with a shrug. “After I find the just-right woman for me.”

“Yeah? And what is she like?” She’s flirting with me, and I could throw something funny back in her face. I rack my brain for a good knife joke or something self-deprecating.

In the end, my brain has gone on vacation, and I shrug again. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“If I ever get married again, I think kids would be part of the deal, yes.”

“So...what happened with Otis? Why did you two get divorced?”

Tara blinks at me, her eyelashes fluttering like hummingbird wings. “We got married really young,” she says. “Neither of us was ready.” She reaches for her drink, and I recognize it as a diversion tactic.

“And?” I prompt, because I don’t want her to give me a glossed-over answer. Well, she can give it to me, but I don’t want to take it. Callie told me not to let her get away from me, and that’s what she’s doing right now. Trying to get away.

“And he said—” She cuts off as if someone’s pressed mute on the remote control for her voice. Apprehension flashes

across her face, and I hate that I've done that to her. Tonight should be about desserts and fun, in this super-cool environment with low candlelight and live music on the front stage.

"It's okay," I say, totally letting her off the hook. She can swim away from the topic now. "You don't have to tell me."

"No, I can," she says. "He said I left him out to dry. I never told him how I was feeling. He wasn't even sure I *had* feelings." She takes another gulp of her water, and I can see everything she's feeling whether she vocalizes it or not.

She clears her throat and puts her glass down, shakes something invisible from her shoulders, and meets my eye again. "I have feelings. I'm not that great at saying them out loud, but I've gotten better in the past decade."

"I seem to remember you telling me that you wanted a man to talk to you," I say.

"Yes," she says. "And I tell them important things too."

I nod and glance up as the waitress arrives again. "Brand new flavor." She smiles at me, and I recognize her since I've been here before. "Toffee caramel crunch mousse."

"Ooh." Tara reaches for her spoon, our earlier conversation glossed over just how she likes it. "I like anything with the words 'caramel crunch' in it."

I like anything with Tara Finch in it, but I keep my mouth shut. I think I'm further along in the relationship than she is, and I need to make sure she's on the same page as me before I go spilling my guts.

TARA

Sugar-free and gluten-free.

I stare at the chapter heading, wondering when I decided to include this type of recipe in my Southern Roots Desserts Cookbook. Yes, my book has a title now. It's a real book, I've decided. I've moved all the non-dessert recipes to another document, for another cookbook. Possibly delusional, but I've adopted Callie's attitude, and I don't want to throw away the work I've done.

I know lots of people who have family recipes they've typed up over the years and passed down through the generations. Driving through the small towns in Carolina, I once went into an old general store and found a spiral-bound cookbook from people who'd lived there for generations. That's what I want my cookbook to be.

I delete off the horrible words, my frustration growing. My mind sparks, and I quickly go back to the beginning of the book. Once I decided this was going to be a real book, and I was going to somehow find the guts to talk to Lila Houser about a book editor or publisher in New York, I started flipping through my cookbooks at home.

Almost all of them came with a foreword or a little something from the cookbook author at the beginning, before just diving into the recipes. I've never been trained in writing, but I can ramble on about why I decided to do the cookbook as well as anyone else.

The kitchen is quiet today, my book starts, and the same environment surrounds me now. I love coming to Saucebilities before everyone else. I love seeing it in its dormant state, because I don't get to appreciate it once things get boiling and frying.

The kitchen is quiet today, and I'm standing in it thinking about what I should make for dinner. Then I remember that I order dinner from one of my favorite Charleston take-out places every night.

There's no need for dinner recipes. Not when you can have dessert first.

I think it's a pretty decent start to my dessert cookbook, and I navigate to the end of the two pages that I've labeled the foreword, as if I really know what that word means. I don't, but I know what sugar-free and gluten-free mean.

This is not a cookbook for you if you're looking for something without sugar or gluten. These are full-fat, full-sugar, full of flavor Southern desserts from my roots—my grandmother, great-granddaddy, and more. Perfected over the years in quiet kitchens, with Southern love, by one plump chef specifically for you.

“Wow,” I say, impressed with myself. I don't know if that makes me arrogant or just confident, but I do like that little paragraph. It's enough to chase away the frustration I felt a few minutes ago. I sit back in my chair and read the paragraph again, wondering why I thought I needed to include sugar-free recipes.

“For women like Jessie,” I say, frowning. I'm right, and I hate that Alec's best friend has gotten into my head and pushed buttons she has no right to touch. I hate that I've let her. I hate that I've uncaged the green-eyed monster, and I wish I could chase him down and stuff him back into his cage where he belongs.

I quickly lean forward again, my fingers finding a home on the keyboard, and delete the word *plump*. I am not going to give Brett the satisfaction of knowing that he gave me fuel to

use for anything. Knowing him, he'd come after me for some copyright infringement or something equally as lame.

I feel like I need an adjective in front of chef, but I'm not sure what to put. I don't mind thinking of myself as big or fat. I'm a good chef, and a good friend, and a good chicken-mother, no matter my size.

I try those adjectives in the sentence, and they don't seem quite right.

I navigate from my document to the Internet and actually go to an online thesaurus. Is this what my life has come to? Trying to think of words other than *plump* and only being able to come up with two?

"What did people do before the Internet?" I grumble to myself. I suppose I should be glad I don't have to know the answer to that question. Or, I could use the Internet to find out.

I smile as I type *plump* into the search bar at the top. Results come up instantly, and I read the top three. "Chunky... ew. No. Fleshy? This is a joke. Pudgy."

Pudgy. Stars in heaven, pudgy?

If Brett had called me that, I might be sitting in a jail cell about now, for I might have done something illegal to get back at him.

Plump is still body-shaming, and I'm still not happy about it. But at least it wasn't pudgy. Of course, Brett probably didn't have to use a thesaurus to come up with it.

I scan some other words in the list. *Beefy*, *buxom*, and *obese*. Dear Lord, what woman wants to be called *beefy*?

"Tubby," I read, and the word strikes me as hilarious. Giggles come, and I can't stop them. I even type *tubby* into my document and re-read the sentence.

Perfected over the years in quiet kitchens, with Southern love, by one tubby chef specifically for you.

My laughter rings in the quiet kitchen, and as my mind releases with the sound of it and the feeling of being

wonderfully free, I think of the perfect word for my amazing body.

Perfected over the years in quiet kitchens, with Southern love, by one curvy chef specifically for you.

I don't mind being called curvy. Women want to be curvy, right? Never mind that I almost dislocated my ankle and my hip trying to achieve that curve last week. No one needs to know that.

A red light flashes on my computer, and I reach to turn off the monitor. Jared's just arrived, and that means the kitchen is about to get noisy. I probably shouldn't have come in early today, but I couldn't sleep anyway.

Mr. Reynolds will go get my dogs later today, and I even got him to agree to feed the chickens and let them out for their hour of pasturesize. I've got a full day of prep for the Fall Festival in front of me, and then hours more tonight to get ready for the pool party.

I haven't asked anyone to stay and help me with that, because I don't think it's fair. Jared has a new baby; Barley's mother isn't well; Henry's seeing someone new he's really excited about; Alec has Peaches, and he likes to lift weights and soak in the hot tub at night.

I can do the prep myself, even if I'm here until two o'clock in the morning, which let's face it, I will be. But Saucebilities is my company, and I've done worse things than cook for sixteen straight hours.

I managed to rope Callie and Jason into helping me set-up and serve the food at the pool. The party is only a couple of hours long, and though Callie's getting back from her honeymoon tomorrow, that's just a technicality. Her and Dawson's flight touches down at twelve-fifty-seven a.m., so they'll really be home tonight.

Jason has no reason not to help me, and he can set up a buffet and carry in bins of food just as easily as I can.

I get up and leave the cookbook behind. My fingers drift over the label Alec made for me. VERY REAL

GIRLFRIEND. A small smile touches my face, and I look up as I hear voices in my kitchen. One of them belongs to Alec, the other to Jared, and while I'm happy to see them both, I only want to kiss one of them. I'm only falling in love with one of them, and it has nothing to do with his knife skills—or the jokes—or how he can make a piece of chicken taste like heaven in my mouth.

“Hey, baby,” he says when I come around the corner. He wears a big smile and puts his free hand around me. He leans down and kisses me, and I don't even mind that he's done it in front of Jared. “You're here early.” He steps back and starts unpacking his knives.

“Yeah,” I say. “Couldn't sleep, and I was finishing up that Cookie Monster salad recipe for the book.”

He nods, and I turn to the hooks by the inside door. I take the apron from my labeled hook and tie it around my waist. “All right,” I say with a big sigh. “We're doing fried chicken bites with dipping gravy, catfish tacos with Southern slaw relish, and banana pudding. Who wants what?”

The slaw for tomorrow can all be done today. Then we just have to put it on the hot fish to serve it. Someone will need to make and bake the tortillas, and I add, “I only want four-inch tortillas. Corn, to mimic the cornmeal batter you'd get on a fried catfish.”

“We're not frying it, right?” Jared asked.

“No, one fried thing per fair is all that's allowed,” I say. We have to haul in our fryers and equipment, and that makes serving two fried main dishes really hard. We'll barely be able to keep up with the chicken as it is.

“I'll prep all the chicken,” Alec says. “Breast meat, bite-sized.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, looking at Jared. “Do you want to cook and flake the fish? Then we can just heat it up on the flat top tomorrow. Add the slaw. Done.”

“I'll do the whole catfish dish,” he says. “So we've got the fish, the slaw, and the tortillas.” He holds up a finger for each.

“Make the slaw extra sloppy for the sauce?”

“What about a tartar-slaw?” Alec asks. “That would be stellar, and you could add a couple of slices of avocado, and mmm. That would be amazing.”

Both Jared and I look at him, but Alec doesn't even seem to realize what he's just said.

“Tartar-slaw?” I prompt him.

He looks up from his knives. Oh, him and his obsession with knives. “Yeah, instead of making the sauce vinegar-based or mayo-based, we make it tartar-based. Use all those flavors of tartar sauce as the sauce for the slaw.” He glances at Jared. “Fish taco. Sauce and slaw in one.”

“It's genius,” he says.

“How about you dice up all the chicken,” I say to Alec. “And do the slaw. Jared will do the blackening and flaking and get all the cornmeal tortillas done. When Barley and Henry get here, I'll get them on the gravy dipping sauce and the banana pudding.”

“Okay,” he says. “You'll do the sweet tea?”

“Yes,” I say. “I'll do the sweet tea and get our equipment sorted and loaded.”

“What time are we at the fair tomorrow?” Jared asks, his voice a little too high-pitched to be casual.

“Ten for set-up,” I say. “We're serving from eleven to six.” And the pool party is at four. I clear my throat. “I, uh, double-booked myself. So I have to leave at three to go set up for another event. I'll be back to help clean up and close for the night. Then I'll be there all day Sunday.”

“What event?” Jared asks. “Can we combine them?”

I shake my head. “It's a pool party,” I say. “Not a big deal. I'm doing the wild wings, a huge vat of macaroni salad, and hummingbird cakes. It's all easy stuff I can make in bulk and put in a single buffet.”

“Why not do banana pudding?” Alec asks. “Then we can just make a ton more of it.”

“Because that’s not what the client ordered,” I say, already feeling the pressure. “Sorry, guys. This is my problem, and I didn’t ask any of you to stay and help. I’ll handle it.” I nod like that’s that, because it is. “All right, let’s get this weekend prepped.”

I turn to go into the storage room-slash-pantry, which is located right next to the walk-in fridge. I keep all of our big transport tubs in there, and I start to go through them to make sure we have what we need to get two days’ worth of chicken, slaw, fish, gravy, and pudding to the fair. I’ve done the fair before, with a different menu, of course, so I should have the containers I need.

I set them aside, interrupt my work to give Barley and Henry instructions when they arrive, and then start to make a list of what needs to be taken in the vans tomorrow. Every time I see Alec, he gives me a strange look. At least I think he does. It feels like he’s a scientist, trying to figure me out by studying me. I don’t like it, but I ignore it. I have far too much to get done before tomorrow, and I razor my focus on equipment and then cleaning wings, chopping vegetables, and boiling pasta once the kitchen has gone back to being quiet.

“I BROUGHT JESSIE TO HELP,” ALEC SAYS, AND I LOOK UP from where I’m checking the temperature of the oil. It’s taking forever to get high enough to fry, and my irritation is already rising.

I look at him and then the perky, smiley blonde next to him. “Great,” I say with the biggest smile I can muster. I was up until two-thirty, and I didn’t even go next door to thank Mr. Reynolds for taking care of my animals.

Well, I did, but only to leave a tray of banana puddings. I gave him three and left a note to put them in the fridge as soon as he got up that morning. He’s already texted to say he got

them and that he's fine to have Tommy and Goose with him this weekend.

"Where do you want her?" he asks, and he hasn't cracked a smile yet. There's no *Hey, sugar's* or kisses this morning, that's for sure.

"She can do the tacos," I say, straightening. "Jared's getting the coolers right now."

"I'll go help him," Alec says, swinging his backpack to the ground under the table in the back of the booth. "Tell Jess what to do, okay?" He does flash me a grin then, but he turns and walks away so fast, I don't get to enjoy the symmetricalness of it for long.

I'm left with Jessie, and she looks at me like an eager beaver, which just annoys me further. "So it's easy," I say, stepping over to the flat top and reminding myself to be nice. I am nice. I don't like confrontation, and I don't have time for awkwardness. I have to trust Alec that he's not cheating on me, and his words about he'll never, ever do that fill my mind.

I *do* believe him.

"There's a tortilla warmer here," I say, indicating the hot plate. "Jared will wrap the tortillas in a cloth, and you just take one out." I mime holding a tortilla. "The fish will be here. He'll put the fish on the tortilla, and that's where you take over." I make a quarter turn and come to a long, white, six-foot table. "You'll put on the slaw. If you wear a glove—you'll have to wear gloves—you can just use your hand. Then two slices of avocado, which we have to slice on-site so it doesn't go brown. Then fold, fold, and put it on the front table."

I make another quarter-turn to indicate the huge front table that spans the width of our booth. "I've labeled each section so people know what they're getting."

"Alec did say you like to label things." Jessie gives me a friendly smile, and it takes me a moment to return it.

"Do you and Alec talk about me a lot?" I regret the question the moment it leaves my mouth. Jessie looks like I've smacked her with a load of bricks, and I backpedal.

“Chef,” Jared says, saving me. *Thank you, stars*, I think as I turn toward him. “Coolers under this table?”

“Yes,” I say. “That’s where the slaw and pudding goes.” I move away from Jessie and her curled hair and make-upped face. She’s even wearing an orange and pink blouse that looks so freaking fall-festive. “Let’s get this gravy heating. Alec would you check that dang oil? I swear it’s not even on.”

HOURS LATER, THE BOOTH IS REALLY HOPPING. I HAVEN’T eaten anything yet, and I want to rip the next taco Jess makes from her hand and devour it in one bite. There’s no way we’re going to have enough banana pudding for tomorrow, which means I have to go back to Saucebilities tonight and make more.

The fryer is slow as molasses in midwinter, and my word, if I hear Jess giggle one more time at something Alec says, I’m going to go Hulk and turn over every single thing in this blasted booth.

All of my business cards are gone, though, and two full sheets on the clipboard have filled up with email addresses. I send out monthly newsletters with recipes and my booking schedule, and I’ve gotten quite a few clients that way.

I’ve just put four more chicken bites with gravy dipping sauce on the table when Callie appears before my eyes. She looks rested and radiant, and I dang near burst into tears.

“Callie.” I rush out of the booth and hug her, trying to say so much without having to utter a word.

“Oh, dear,” she whispers. “What’s wrong? It looks like it’s going so well.”

I shake my head slightly in the crook of her neck, knowing I look like a fool. There’s just so much to explain and no time to explain it.

She pulls away, and I wipe quickly at my eyes. “Oh, honey,” she says, brushing something off my face. Probably a

piece of cabbage I didn't even now was there. She meets my eyes with her glorious blue ones, sympathy from here to the Mississippi in hers. She glances down my body, but I'm wearing my regular Saucebilities attire. I have to; I have another party in an hour.

"You do know you have a chicken nugget stuck to your shoe, right?" she asks.

I look down, horrified. This is so much worse than a piece of toilet paper. My whole body storms, and I can't even look at her again.

"Boss," Alec says behind me. "More fried chicken bites are up." For some reason—probably the boss comment, maybe that I really don't want to talk to Alec right now—that pushes me over the edge.

I don't even reach down to dislodge the freaking chicken nugget from my shoe. I can't believe I haven't felt it stuck there, but I am wearing the orthopedics, and the soles on those suckers are thick.

"I need a minute," I say, and I spin and walk away from Callie, from Alec, from his perfect best friend, from my booth, and from the chicken bite probably flapping in the wind like Old Glory.

ALEC

“Alec.”

I look up at Callie, who's come around to the back of the booth where I'm frying chicken. I haven't stepped two feet from the fryer in hours, actually. I'm not complaining, because it's a beautiful day. Bright blue sky. Something different in the air—autumn. I've been laughing and talking to the other chefs in the booth, Jess, and Tara.

Everything is running just the way I like it—well-oiled. Tara's meticulous and detailed in her planning, and that makes events easy.

“Yeah?”

“Tara just left.”

I blink and turn back to where the two of them had been standing. Sure enough, she's not there anymore. I try to find her, but the crowd is impossible to see through. “What do you mean, she left?”

“She said she needed a minute, and she left.”

“That's not good,” I say, focusing on the snapping oil in front of me again. “When she says she needs a minute, I mean. That's not good.”

“No, it's not,” Callie says meaningfully.

“Maybe she's going to get something from the van.” I know that's not true even as I say it. We brought everything

from the vans to the booth hours ago. I squirm inside my own skin, but I'm not sure why.

Callie folds her arms and sighs. She has a way of saying so much without even opening her mouth.

"Why is she upset?" I ask, jiggling the basket with my almost-done bites in it.

"Why don't you go find out?"

I look up again. "Do you know how to fry chicken?" I don't mean to sound like a jerk, but honestly. What does she expect me to do? Jared and I have been here for hours. He's leaving when Henry arrives, and Barley will work all day tomorrow. So will Henry, and I'll be the one coming in the afternoon to help finish up the fair and clean up the booth.

"She needs you," Callie says. "She doesn't really want a minute. She wants you to go after her."

I sigh and turn back to Jess. "Hey, baby," I say, realizing in that single moment that I'm a colossal moron. She turns toward me, as if she expects me to address her like that. I tell myself that a lot of people in the South call each other *baby* and *sugar* and *honey*.

It's normal...right?

No, my mind screams. It's not normal, and you shouldn't have brought Jess here today.

A smaller, whinier voice says, But Tara needed the help, and it's been fun.

"What?" Jess asks, and I realize I've fallen into a trance where two voices in my head argue with one another.

I snap to attention and say, "I'm going to do this last round of chicken. Can you serve up the gravy and get them on the table? I have to go find Tara."

Jared looks over to us from the flat top, curiosity in his expression. "I can put down more chicken. Seven minutes?"

I nod, hating that I'm going to leave the two of them to run the booth alone while I go find my boss who might be having

a meltdown.

She's not your boss, the booming voice tells me. She's your girlfriend.

I don't wait for Jess to respond. I pull the chicken from the fryer and set it to drain, then I simply march out of the booth without a backward glance. I feel my old self returning, and I press against him. He's bossy and loud-mouthed. He's grumpy and rough around the edges. He runs when things don't go his way.

I don't want to be that Alec Ward anymore.

I have no idea where to look for Tara, and I praise the heavens that I'm tall enough to see past most people.

I haven't said a single word to Jess about Tara's jealousy. If anything, I've been extra-careful with my best friend whenever I see her, minus that *baby* slip from a moment ago. I see her occasionally, but really, she comes to my apartment and uses my WiFi to look for jobs and community classes while she keeps Peaches company. She's gone before I get home.

Sure, we text, but again, I've gone over my texts to make sure they're not flirty in any way. I may be new back in the dating pool, but I still know what flirty looks like. I haven't flirted with her. Not even a little bit. Not even anything someone could construe as flirting.

Frustration drives me forward, and I can't promise I won't shake Tara when I finally find her. I honestly don't have the energy to reassure her over and over that there's nothing going on between Jess and me. I hate that I need relationship coaching from Callie. I just want a normal, healthy, happy relationship—and I thought I had that with Tara.

You do, the smaller, quieter voice in my head says. Just find her and it'll be okay.

Fine, I think. Where is she? As if Moses has appeared and parted the Red Sea, the crowd thins and there she is. She's holding an ice cream bar and sitting on a bench, her black running shoes on the ground beside it.

I stall at the sight of her, almost seeing her for the first time all over again. The no-shoes thing is definitely odd, and that alone signals to me that something major is happening.

The booming voice in my head tells me to get to her quickly, while the softer one says I should approach with caution. I do something kind of in the middle, with me moving toward her with normal strides, but not too quickly.

“Hey,” I say, taking the rest of the bench. “What’s the flavor of the day?”

She looks at me, those eyes so probing and so open. “It’s vanilla,” she says dryly. “They had no butter pecan.” She lets her gaze flutter around the crowd again.

“I’m sorry I called you *Boss*. It was a slip,” I say.

“That’s not why I left.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I just needed a minute.”

“You’re not wearing shoes.”

“I hate those shoes.”

I don’t know what to say to that, and she’s not giving me anything to go on. Irritation spikes, but I press against it. “Are you going to talk to me?” I ask quietly, employing that smaller voice inside me.

“About what?”

“About what drove you to take a minute.” I look fully at her, refusing to let her get away from me. “I thought things were going really well in the booth. The food has been going out quickly, and with a great response. It’s busy, sure, but I can make more banana pudding tonight. There’s enough chicken and gravy, so that’s not a problem. Jessie’s been doing great with the tacos, and Jared says the fish will hold through tomorrow.” I take a deep breath. “So what’s the problem?”

“No problem,” she says.

“Okay.” I stand up, my heartbeat thundering behind my ribcage. “If you’re not going to talk to me, I’m done.”

“You’re leaving?” She gets to her bare feet, shock in her eyes.

“Yes,” I say. “I’m done, Tara. You’re the one who says you want a man to talk to you, but you don’t want to talk back.”

Maybe Otis was right about her, though I’ve never met the man.

“I don’t like confrontation,” she says and stuffs the last bite of ice cream in her mouth.

“This isn’t a confrontation,” I say, and I sit back down to make the conversation less hostile. “It’s just a boyfriend coming to ask his girlfriend why she left her restaurant’s booth when everything on the surface seems to be going extremely well.”

Tara’s fingers start to clench and unclench, and there’s those feelings she’s having.

“So there’s something going on under the surface,” I say. “But I don’t know what unless you tell me. Unless you talk to me.” I reach out and take one of her hands in mine. “Sit down, sugar,” I say quietly. “Talk to me.”

She sits, all of the fight leaving her body. “I’m overwhelmed,” she whispers. I lift my arm and let her snuggle into my side. “I let Jessie get into my head. She’s literally the nicest person ever, and all I can see is how she could steal you away from me.”

I knew Jess had something to do with Tara’s mood. I’m just not sure what to do about it. I squeeze her shoulder and rub my hand up and down her arm, but I don’t say anything. She needs the space to say something.

“I feel stupid for double-booking myself. I hate that I’m gone from my dogs and chickens all the time. I’ve been missing Callie.” Tara snuffles, and I stiffen. I’m so not good with crying women. “I only slept for five hours last night, and I’m just tired. I just needed a minute.”

“Okay,” I say, bending my head toward hers so I don’t have to talk very loud. “I can tell Jess we’re good, and she can go.”

“It’s fine,” Tara says. “As much as I don’t want to admit it, she’s really good with the tacos, and I’m leaving soon. She’ll have to do the chicken too.”

“There is nothing between us,” I say. “Honestly, cross my heart and hope to die.”

Tara smiles, and I do too.

I clear my throat and look up. I need air to say this next part. “But Tara, if she’s a problem, you better tell me right now. I can...I can tell her we can’t be friends anymore. She’ll understand.”

I don’t know who’ll watch Peaches for me, but that’s a problem I have anyway, especially if Jess gets this job at Lance’s office. Her phone interview went great, and she’s going into his office next week.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Well, I can’t have you needing minutes all the time because of her.”

“Have you two ever...you know? Ever?”

“No,” I say. “Not once. No experimental kiss. No going to a dance together because we didn’t have someone else to go with. Nothing.” I can’t emphasize it enough. “Never, ever, *ever* Tara. She’s like my little sister, and I’m her older brother. I do...” I clear my throat. “I *am* protective of her, because I think of her like my sister. I want her to be happy, and I do things to make her happy. I can stop doing that.”

“No,” Tara says with a sigh. She stands and extends her hand toward me. “Come on, we need to get back to the booth.”

I stand too and take her into my arms right there among the crowds at the fair. “Not until we’re okay.” And not until she puts her shoes back on. I shudder just thinking about all the things she could be stepping on right now. Feet are so dirty, and there’s been a million people at this fair today.

“We’re always okay, Alec,” she says. “It’s just me who’s messed up.”

“Maybe we should try going out with her again,” I say. “A real double-date—not with Jason.” I’m not sure who, because the only single guys I know are Barley and Lance. I would never set anyone up with Barley, and Lance is recovering from his broken engagement.

“Then you’ll see—really see—there’s nothing between us.”

Tara gazes up at me. “I think I just need to figure out how to trust myself.”

“Do you trust me?” I ask.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Good.” I’m not sure I believe her, but I have to go with what she says. “Now, put those orthopedics back on, and let’s get back to work. Jared might quit if we keep leaving him alone in the kitchen.”

“Bite your tongue,” she says, flying to the end of the bench to get her shoes. “I can’t lose Jared.”

“I think I’m getting jealous now,” I say, grinning at her as she stuffs her feet back into her shoes. She brushes something off the bottom of one and stands. I take her hand and kiss the back of it, feeling a little yo-yo’ed for how up, down, and around our conversations are.

As we start back to the booth, she asks, “Will you really come do banana pudding tonight?”

“Yes,” I say, because she refused to let me stay last night, and I’d done my weights and my hot tubbing with a metric ton of guilt attached to my stomach. I pull her closer as if anyone in the crowd knows me and will report what I’m about to say to Miss Opal.

“And maybe, after that, we can sneak into the clubhouse and hot tub together.”

I feel her light up, though she doesn’t look at me. “Did you just use the words ‘hot tub’ as a verb?”

JESSIE

I sit in my car, looking at the nondescript office building. It's gray. Shiny windows in the sunlight. Has a door. Some shrubs out front.

I run through these idiotic details to keep myself from throwing up. This is the closest I've come to getting a real job, ever, and I need this. Not only that, but my car shuddered a time or two getting here, and I can't afford to replace the beast should she decide to die on me.

I need this so badly, I knead the steering wheel and pray, "Please, Dear God in Heaven. It's Jessie Dunaway. Remember me?" I press my eyes closed and tilt my head back. My sister once said if you do that, the Good Lord can hear you better. I didn't think she was right twenty-five years ago, but I'll do anything at this point.

Uncle Jack is like a prowling panther, and I swear Mama calls him every single day to get the dirt on me.

I've resorted to leaving close to dawn and sleeping for a couple of hours in my car outside Alec's building, but I have to stop doing that. Last week, a couple saw me, knocked on the window to check on me, and then jumped back in fright when I sat up, drool pooled on my face.

Maybe they weren't expecting a dead body to move. Maybe they thought my beat-up sedan had been abandoned with the deceased inside. I don't know.

What I do know is that I'm exhausted, as I refuse to go back to the sprawling mansion where Uncle Jack lives with his

adult son before they're having their nightcaps in the library. And let me just say that not all libraries are like the one on *Beauty and the Beast*, with ball gowns and those sliding ladders.

Uncle Jack's library is dark, dank, and very nearly a prison cell. I don't go in there if I can avoid it.

I can't avoid this interview any longer. I talked to Lance Byers on the phone last week, and it went what I would label as semi-well. He never laughed. He shot questions at me that I had to Google to answer. It's a good thing I have fast fingers, because he said things like, "fifty-eight DOM" and "pre-qual interview," and I was like, "Mm hm, yeah, of course," as if I know what those things mean.

There are entire websites on the Internet dedicated to confusing real estate terms, so I'm not a dummy. I'm just not a real estate agent.

"Yet," I tell myself. If I can get this job, I can learn the industry, and maybe I can make a career for myself out of selling houses in the Charleston area. I have no idea how much money Lance Byers makes, as he doesn't own the agency where he works.

The sign above the door reads Finley & Frank, but Lance had said "Double F" on the phone a couple of times last week. That was actually one of the things I'd had to look up to figure out what the heck he was talking about.

My phone *boo-boo-bleeps* at me, and I look down. The only people who text me are Mama, Uncle Jack, and Alec. This message is from Callie though, and she's said, *Good luck, Jessie! Remember, Lance has no idea what you're wearing under your clothes. You hold the power in that interview.*

I shake my head, because Callie is the sweetest, nicest, funniest woman I've ever met. She loves her clothes and shoes, like a lot of the ladies I knew back in Beaufort. But she's not stuffy or pretentious. She doesn't judge anyone. She works hard, and she loves deep, and she's the kind of person I want to be friends with.

Her husband is Dawson, who is Lance's best friend. Their connection to Alec and Tara are how I got this interview, and while I want to get the job on my own merits, I'll take all the help I can get.

I've already asked Callie to help me if I do get the job, because she's been working in a very busy marketing firm for years. She knows the ins and outs of a filing cabinet, and she has systems I can't even fathom.

I'm teachable, though, just like Alec said, and I really want to do something with my life that isn't dictated by Southern Dunaway standards.

An alarm on my phone goes off, and I silence it and get out of the car. I'd set it, because I know myself really well. I knew I'd drive here and sit in the parking lot, freaking out. The alarm tells me that time is over, and it's time to get this job.

The moment I walk into the office, I'm overwhelmed. Someone has popped a bag of popcorn, and the salty, buttery scent of it hangs in the air. There's a reception desk, where a phone rings, but no one's sitting there.

A pair of giant F's hang on the wall behind the podium-desk, with the tiniest ampersand I've ever seen sitting between them. I approach the podium, which holds a bottle of hand sanitizer, along with a clipboard and a pen. It's obvious that others have signed it when they've arrived, but I'm not sure I need to do that.

I look left and right, as hallways leave this main lobby in both directions. I have no idea which way Lance's office is. Soft music plays overhead, but still no one makes an appearance.

I don't have power panties like Callie, but all I have to do is picture James Birmingham and I gain the determination that's leaked away from me in the past sixty seconds.

"Right," I say, going that way first. An office door with frosted glass stands ahead of me, but the plaque outside it reads Winifred Crockett.

Lance hasn't told me how many people work here, but it feels like they all got a memo to disappear at eleven a.m. on Tuesday morning, because the whole building is like a ghost town. The office is laid out in a box, and I walk two and a half sides of it until I see a conference room with a dozen men and women sitting around the table. They're all wearing shades of dark blue, black, or gray, and that's just another memo I've missed.

I look down at my black and white striped skirt and bright blue blouse. I'd chosen it, because I once won Miss South Carolina Teen in a dress this exact color of blue, and I know it looks good with my hair and skin tone.

Really accents her eyes.

The line from my critique runs through my mind, and I flinch when a woman asks, "Can I help you?"

I pull myself out of memories I don't have time for and nod. "Yes," I say, my voice sounding rusty. I do spend most of my time talking to a parrot, so this isn't all that surprising. "I have a meeting with Lance Byers at eleven?" I'm not sure why I've phrased it as a question, but I can't time travel and fix my tone.

The woman in front of me frowns, her off-white blouse made of silk and covered with a navy blazer. "I highly doubt that, but let me check with him." She turns on her heels, and I want to yell at her that I can walk in heels twice as high as the ones she has on.

Panic starts to gather in my gut. Did I get the date wrong? The time? I watch through the glass as all twelve of them look at me. I lift one hand in a half-hearted wave, like I've seen a frenemy while waiting at the bus stop. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've made this exact gesture before.

One man, a sandy-haired god of a male specimen rises from the table and buttons his jacket. It's a Tom Ford or a Brooks Brothers for sure, and that alone screams the amount of money Lance has. He probably has to look good for his super-rich clients—people like my parents.

I steel myself as the panic touches the back of my throat. I've looked up Lance's bio online, because I haven't met him in person and I wanted to be sure I was meeting with the right guy. His headshot was professional, his hair sculpted just-so, like it is right now.

I want to run my hand through it and tussle it all up. See how that ruffles the Perfect Suit that is Lance Byers.

He's frowning when he exits the conference room, and he sweeps one hand down the hall without saying anything. I guess that means I should go that way, so I do, taking care to make sure I don't trip over my feet. My skirt only falls to mid-calf, which would horrify my mother, and I catch Lance scanning me as I approach.

"You're an hour late," he grumbles under his breath as I pass.

I freeze. That can't be true. I set no less than four alarms for today's meeting. "I'm sure you said eleven," I say, automatically reaching for my phone.

"Let's just get this over with." His voice is a growl now. "I have a presentation in ten minutes." He practically shoves me down the rest of the hall and into the other corner office. So he's Big Shot Perfect Suit. Fantastic.

"If you can't be on time, I'm not sure this is going to work," he says as he closes the door behind me. "We open at ten, but I require my assistant to have her phone on all the time."

Her? I think, but I don't ask. There have to be male real estate assistants in the world, but Lance obviously doesn't employ that type. I really want him to employ me, so I don't check the text that listed the time, date, and address of Finley & Frank.

"Did you hear me?" he barks, and I jump.

"Yes," I say. "Phone on all the time."

He looks down to my sandaled feet and back to my eyes. "You can use Word?"

“Yes.”

“Excel?”

“Yes.” I mean, I’ve used them in the past. I don’t have to be an expert in database construction to say yes to that question. At least that’s what Callie told me.

Lance circles me and sits down at his desk. Everything seems to have a precise spot to belong, and he must have a maid walk through here every fifteen minutes to keep everything so polished and dust-free. I should know, because I grew up with maids rotating through rooms every hour to keep my mother happy.

They shouldn’t have bothered. Nothing makes Mama happy. Trust me, I’ve tried.

“You realize the only references you put down are people I’m friends with.” Lance looks up from his paperwork, one sexy eyebrow cocked.

I blink, sure I haven’t thought *sexy* eyebrow. It’s just a regular eyebrow.

“I’m still new in town,” I manage to say, and I only sound slightly like I’ve inhaled helium.

He leans back in his chair. “Well, I talked to Callie over the weekend, and she said she’d come train you and just to hire you.”

“Callie is very kind,” I say.

“Alec said it would be great if I could only give you an evening shift so you could continue to bird-sit for him.” Lance doesn’t smile, but he has to find that funny.

I put a grin on my face that carries enough wattage for both of us. “Alec’s just teasing. He wants me to get this job.”

I’m going to kill him if he ruined this for me. Alec’s my very best friend in the whole world, and I would be lost without his help and steady support. He’s been there for me through absolutely everything, and I owe him so much.

Lance does not smile. “Yes, he did say that too. Said you’re highly trainable and just need a chance.”

“I do,” I say, probably too eagerly.

“There won’t be time for personal texting,” he says.

“I’m new in town and have no friends,” I fire back, suddenly remembering that I’ve dealt with men and women far richer and far more sophisticated than him. I’ve suffered through garden parties in July without a parasol, and I’ve entertained dignitaries and politicians with suits that cost four times what his jacket does.

“No social media during work hours.”

“I don’t do social media,” I say.

That gets both sexy eyebrows to go up, and I decide I can admit that Lance Byers is good-looking. No reason to fight against it. He likely knows it too.

“There’s a ton of evening work,” he says. “It’s your job to manage that, so we know when to come into the office and when we can get a late-start, because we’ll be working later.”

I swallow. “Okay.”

“Lots of weekends.”

“Every day is the same to me,” I quip.

Lance looks like he doesn’t know what to do with me. I know, because I’ve seen this look on my daddy’s face about a hundred times. I simply smile sweetly at him and wait for him to speak. It works on Daddy, and apparently on real estate moguls too.

Lance sighs as he stands. “All right, Jessie Dunaway. I’m going to give you a two-week trial period. If it doesn’t work out, that’s that. No hard feelings.” He hands me a packet. “Normally, I’d go over this with you, but seeing as how you were late and I’m in a meeting, you’ll have to go over it alone. Bring me back the two peach-colored papers, with all the items it says, and Brenda at the front desk will get you set up on payroll, get your badge and keys, and all of that.”

“Okay.” I take the packet, the weight of it like Mama’s jewelry case—heavy.

“It all has to be done by Friday, so you can start next Monday.”

“Yes, sir,” I say as he walks by me, buttoning that coat again. I see the subtle logo for Brooks Brothers, and a flash of pride fills me that I was right. I do adore fashion, and I have sketchbooks filled with ideas roughly hewn out in pencil. I have to have something to do while I talk to that parrot all day long.

I haven’t told anyone about the sketches, not even Alec. I have no experience in fashion, and I don’t know how to sew. I had signed up for a class at the community center, but when I went for the first time, it was full of ten-year-old girls, and the director told me it was a class for kids.

I’d left humiliated, and I haven’t had time to check out the sewing center she told me to check for lessons for adults.

“You can show yourself out?” he asks, standing at the door.

“Yes, sir,” I say again. “Thank you, sir.” I tell myself to stop talking and start moving, and I grin at him as I go past. He doesn’t return the smile, and I make that my number one goal before I get fired (probably) from Finley & Frank: Get Lance Byers to smile.

My more immediate goal is to make it to my car without passing out. I manage that, and I get behind the wheel, roll down my window to let out the stuffy heat, and turn up the air conditioner. My hands shake, and I look at the packet I’ve placed on the passenger seat.

Then I grip the steering wheel, and I scream. Like, really scream the happiest scream anyone ever did hear. I bang my feet against the floor and slap the steering wheel. “You did it! You have no idea how to do anything, but you got the job!”

“Uh, Jessie?”

I whip my gaze out my window, where Perfect Suit stands. Lance extends my purse toward me. “You left this inside.”

Horror fills me, but I take the purse. I can't speak, and Lance frowns deeply at me. Then he simply walks away, and I stare in disbelief as he goes back into the office without firing me.

“I’M NOT KIDDING,” I SAY AS I WALK TOWARD THE DELI. “I got the job!”

Alec laughs on the other end of the line. “I knew you would, Jess. That’s so great. For you, I mean. Peaches is going to be devastated.”

“Do you have anyone for her?” I ask, because I do feel bad about abandoning him.

“Yeah,” he says. “Turner said she can come hang out at the vet’s office. That’s probably what I’ll do.” He sighs. “It’s that or allow the mom down the hall into my house, and I don’t think I can stomach that.”

“Which one?” I ask, too gleeful to be having this conversation. I’ll just tease him about the single moms in his building who want a piece of him.

“Patty,” he says with plenty of disdain. “Her youngest started kindergarten, and she’s—and I quote—available.”

“Oh, wow,” I say with a giggle. “Better warn Tara about her.” I pull open the door and go inside the deli.

“We should all celebrate together, Jess. This is a *huge* deal.”

“Thank you, Alec,” I say. “Really.”

“Of course, baby. I know how hard you’ve worked for this. You just need a chance.”

My chest squeezes, but I will not cry. I vowed not to shed tears after I left Beaufort. A very familiar figure stands a couple of people in front of me, and I hear Tara say something into her phone.

“Oh, Tara’s at the deli,” I say. “I’m going to tell her about the job. I have to go, Alec.”

“Wait, Jess, that’s not a—” he starts, but I hang up and tap the gentleman in front of me on the shoulder.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “My friend is right there. Can I get by?”

He scans me from head to toe too, smiles—finally!—and turns sideways so I can get to Tara. I step to her side, all smiles.

“...honestly, I don’t know,” Tara says, glancing at me. She doesn’t look happy I’m standing so close to her. She does a double-take and says. “She’s right here, Cal.”

“Is that Callie?” I ask hopefully.

Tara nods, her eyes widening with every second. “I guess so,” she says, and whatever Callie’s said to her, Tara doesn’t like it. I can tell, because I’ve spent my whole life studying people and analyzing their reactions. There’s so much to see in a Southern manor, even when no one is speaking.

In fact, it’s during the silence that the real truth comes out.

“She wants me to put it on speaker,” Tara says, her eyes narrowing. “She says you have news about your job.”

“Yes,” I say, and the familiar desperation to fit in with Tara and Callie punches me in the gut. I know it’s hard to penetrate a friend group, and I’ve never had much luck making friends with women. They usually judge me before they know me, and they base everything on surface details like the color of my hair and eyes, and the clothes I wear.

I used to do the same thing, so I understand why people do it. I just hate it.

“I got the job!” I bounce on the balls of my feet. “Thank you *so* much, Callie. I know I got the job because of you.”

When I look at Tara again, she looks like she’s smelled something bad, and she looks away from me quickly. I’d know this response anywhere, and I wouldn’t even have to be a former socialite to recognize it.

She doesn't like me, and I wonder what I did to turn her off.

TARA

Callie says, “Details, Jess. How long were you there? What was Lance like? Dawson says he can be a real killer in the office.”

Irritation flows through me like electricity through a power line. Callie is *my* best friend, not “Jess’s.”

“I was going to call you next,” Jess says. “I just got off the phone with Alec, and he said we’ll have to get together to celebrate.” She looks at me with those baby blues, and I want to spin on my heel and march out of the deli. I’m not in the mood to deal with Little Miss Perfect.

Callie just seems to love her, though. She gushes over the job, and she says she’s sure I can put together the *perfect* celebratory food to go with the party she’ll throw at her house.

“Claude Monet hates it when you invite people over,” I say.

“You should see Claude now,” Callie says. “He’s like a completely different cat with Dawson. He even curls into his hip to sleep. It’s *so* cute.” My best friend sounds so happy, and I’m happy for her. I am. I’m just not sure what my life has become, and I feel...well, I feel lost.

We’d once joked that Callie would never find someone Claude approved of, and therefore she’d be single until his death. Dawson had proved us both wrong.

I think of Alec and his conversation with Jessie, and it annoys me. Of course they talk without my knowledge or

permission. Alec has reassured me and reassured me that there's nothing going on between him and Jessie, and I need to decide if I'm going to believe him or not.

When I'm with him, it's easy to believe him. When he touches me, I believe him. When I inhale that musky cologne, I trust him. When he snuck me into the hot tub and we talked and laughed and kissed a little, everything between us was perfect.

Still, there's something needling at me, and I hate it. I know it's something inside *me* that's put up a wall. I've seized onto Jessie as the reason Alec and I can't be together, and I don't know how to let her go.

In my momma's words, I'm self-sabotaging. I know I am; I can feel it. But I don't know how to stop.

"Cal, we have to go," I say. "It's our turn to order."

"Oh, okay," she says, always so nice though I've interrupted her. "Call me when you get home. I'm expecting that cookbook in no less than an hour."

I press my eyes closed, wishing she hadn't mentioned the cookbook. I catch the look of interest in Jessie's face as I say, "Okay," and hang up as quickly as I can. I don't look at Jessie as I face the front of the line.

We really are next, and while I have this menu memorized, I pretend I don't.

"What's good here?" Jessie asks me, and I sense her nerves.

Regret sings through me, and I take a deep breath and find my core. I'm not a mean-spirited person. I can't handle firing people, and I avoid confrontation. Normally, I would make an excuse and leave the deli so I wouldn't have to stand with Jessie, but today, I don't.

"The Rueben is fantastic," I say. "If you like fried chicken, their fried tender sub is life-changing." I look at her. "Have you been here before?"

“No,” she says, smiling at me but glancing away quickly. “Alec told me about it; he said it was really good.”

“Hm,” I say before I can stop myself. I’m pretty sure I told Alec about this deli, and the only time he’s eaten here was with me, only a few nights ago, after the pool party and the Fall Festival banana pudding prep.

I’d ordered nine of my favorite sandwiches and taken them back to his place, where we’d sampled them all. Since we’ve taken off the whole week after the craziest weekend this year, I was planning to work on the last section of the cookbook and eat sandwiches for the next few days.

“What about the Goblin?” she asks, and I nod.

“Yes,” I say. “It’s excellent.” It’s our turn, and I gesture for her to go first. “I’ll get your lunch.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, Tara,” Jessie says, and she is so dang nice. If she wasn’t my boyfriend’s best friend, I’d really like her. I daresay we’d be friends, and I wouldn’t be making her work so hard for it.

This realization makes me feel like a real witchedy-witch, and maybe if I buy her lunch, I can alleviate some of my guilt.

“I want to do it,” I say, because I know Jessie doesn’t have much money. “Go ahead.”

She steps up to the counter and the girl standing there and says, “I’ll have the Goblin please.”

“Wheat, white, sourdough, rye, or oat bread?”

I should’ve warned Jessie about the laborious ordering process here. She glances at me. “Uh, sourdough.”

Oof, I wouldn’t have chosen that for the Goblin, but I say nothing.

“Do you want onions?”

“Does it come with onions?” Jessie looks back up to the menu board.

“No onions,” I say, smiling at the woman. I look at Jessie. “You’ll thank me later.” Back to the woman, I say, “Yes to the

honey mustard dipping sauce. Cold, not hot.”

She nods and then looks at me. Beside me, Jessie visibly relaxes, and I feel like I’ve done a good deed for the day. “I’ll take a number three, two number sixes, a seven, two nines, and a twelve.”

Her eyes widen, but I plow forward, wishing Montgomery stood there to take my order. He can do it almost as fast as I can say it. “All on white bread,” I say. “No onions on any of them. All dipping sauces, and can I get double the avocado dip with the sixes?”

“Three, two sixes, seven, two nines, and a twelve.”

“Yep.” I dig into my purse to get out my wallet, ignoring the wideness of and the questions in Jessie’s eyes.

“Seventy-four dollars and twelve cents,” the woman says, putting a plastic number in front of me. After paying and stepping away, Jessie and I find a table and sit down.

“You’re working on a cookbook?” she asks, and I almost flinch with the question.

“Yes,” I say.

“That’s pretty cool,” she says. “My, ahem, brother’s wife works in publishing. She’s edited a few regional travel books.”

“That’s great,” I say. “Is she in New York?”

“Uh, no,” Jessie says, clearly uncomfortable. She’s the one who brought it up though. “There’s a publisher in Atlanta, and Beatrice works for them. Remotely. She sometimes goes into the office, but not often.”

“Is she interested in a Southern desserts cookbook?” I ask, grinning and sure she’ll say no.

“Maybe,” Jessie says, and my hope starts beating against the back of my throat. “I, uh, don’t really talk to my family very much. But Alec could call and find out for you.” She puts a bright, cheery smile on her face, not realizing she’s taken a knife and jabbed it into my balloon of hope.

“Why would Alec be able to call and find out?” I ask, because I apparently like to punish myself. I glance toward the pick-up area of the counter, but I don’t see two bags there waiting for me. With the seven subs I’d ordered, there will be at least that many.

“Oh, well, he talks to Beatrice and Carlton more than I do.”

I fix my gaze back on Jessie. “That’s kind of weird.”

“He’s just protective of me,” she says. “He knows talking to them upsets me, so he does it to let them know I’m doing fine and they don’t need to worry.” She must be able to read something on my face, because she hurries to add, “It’s nothing. He hardly ever talks to them.”

“Still,” I say, and I’m not sure what will come out of my mouth next. Thankfully, they’ve called my number and distracted me from telling this woman that her relationship with Alec is very strange to me.

I get up and retrieve my sandwiches, ready to get away from everyone. I hand Jessie her single sandwich, and say, “I’m sorry I can’t stay. Congratulations on the job.”

“Thank you,” she says, and I keep going toward the exit. Once out on the street, I take a deep breath, feeling a sense of relief and regret at the same time. As I drive back to Cottonhill, my self-righteousness grows. By the time I get there, I’m exhausted with thinking about Jessie and Alec, Alec and Jessie.

Tommy and Goose bark as I come through the front door, and I say, “Oh, hush,” to them. “It’s just me.” I hold up a bag of sandwiches. “Come on, and I’ll give you some turkey.” As if the dogs need to be told twice.

We sit down together in the kitchen, and cut the subs into several pieces each. This way, I can have a little bite of one, and then a taste of another.

My phone distracts me for a little while, and I realize I’ve been home for an hour and haven’t even thought about my blasted cookbook when Alec’s text comes in.

I want to throw a little party for Jess this weekend. What do you think?

“What do I think?” I ask myself as I tap on the text to open the app. I think that’s a terrible idea, but I can’t tell him that. He wants me to talk to him, and I want to do that too.

“If you bring up Jessie one more time, he’ll break-up with you,” I tell myself. Maybe that’s what I want. No, what I want is to end things on my terms. Otis was the one to say he wanted a divorce, and he’d filed the papers and left. Brett had sat me down and told me I wasn’t making time for him.

As I eat my way through a whole sandwich without tasting it, I realize that the only man I’ve ever broken up with was the shy nude male model. Everyone else has ended things with me. I feel flawed, like I have some inherent thing inside me that is broken.

It’ll be small, Alec says. Me and you. Peaches, of course. Your dogs are welcome at my place. Callie and Dawson. Maybe even Lance.

Won’t that be weird to have her boss there? I send.

True, he says. I’ll cook. You won’t have to do anything but show up.

“Ah, but showing up is most of the battle,” I whisper to myself. I don’t know how to respond to him. I also can’t break-up with him. I can’t even let go of a chef who’s doing a bad job; there’s no way I can end a relationship with a man I want to stay with.

Tears press behind my eyes, because I don’t know what to do. Alec texts a few more times, but I stay silent. He eventually calls, and I decide I can’t ignore him forever. “Hey,” I say, and I hear defeat in my own voice.

“Hey,” he says. “You went silent.”

“Yeah.”

He says nothing, and the tension between us is astronomical. “Let me guess,” he says, and his voice is not filled with compassion or kindness. “You need a minute.”

“Yes,” I say. “I need a minute...from you. From work. From everyone.”

“From me?”

I nod, tears pressing behind my eyes.

“I’m going to take this silence as a yes,” he says, and he actually sounds tired. Probably tired of me and my jealousy. I wish it was a string I could just snip, and it would go away. Drift by on the breeze and leave me alone.

He sighs, and says, “Okay, well, I’m having a party at my place on Saturday night for Jess. She likes you, Tara. Lord help me, she does, and she wants to be friends with you.”

“Don’t tell her that,” a woman says, and it’s definitely Jessie. They’re together.

“I don’t know how to do that,” I say.

“Maybe you should grow up,” he says, and I suck in a breath. “Forget I said that. I’m sorry. I have to go.” He hangs up before I can catalog the tone of his voice, but as I stare at my phone as it goes dark, I whisper, “He didn’t sound sorry.”

That’s because he isn’t sorry.

I get to my feet, suddenly unable to stay inside walls. I hurry outside to let the hens out, but I have zero patience for Benedict and her stubbornness about staying inside the coop. “Get out of there,” I practically yell at her, and I have to get almost all the way in the coop to scoop her up and force her into the pasture for her pasturecize.

I stand there, my chest heaving, and it has nothing to do with my chickens. *Maybe you should grow up.*

He sounded like the Grumpy-Cat Alec I’d met the very first time he’d come to Saucebilities, and I picture the disgust and danger in his dark eyes. He’s better than me in the kitchen, and I knew it the first time I watched him cook.

He’s better than me as a person, because he forgave his brother. He’s talked me off the ledge a few times now. He always has butter pecan when I need it, and I spin back to the house to go get the gallon I have in the freezer. I can sit on the

back deck and eat it while my hens get their hour of free time, and I do just that.

I can't decide if I'm going to go to the party on Saturday or not. If I don't, that'll be the end of me and Alec, and while that makes my stomach hollow and tighten, I almost feel like it'll be the safest thing for me to do.

You'll go, I think with my next bite of ice cream. *You won't go*, I tell myself with the next, continuing the game until the very last bite. I don't like what I land on last, but as I go back inside to throw away my empty ice cream container, I know I'll honor it.

ALEC

I stare at my phone, my heart beating so hard it fills my whole chest.

“Who was it?” Jess asks, coming toward me.

I look up quickly and shove my phone in my pocket. “No one,” I say.

She stops still, the blondie I made for her party halfway to her mouth. She blinks, and all I want to do is run away. Just when I was starting to settle too. Just when I thought I had friends.

My phone rings, and it’s likely Dawson or Callie, who’ve both just canceled coming to Jessie’s celebration party.

I’m so sorry, honey, Callie had just said. I know she means it too, because she’s so nice. She doesn’t want to hurt anyone. I just can’t do that to Tara.

Tara’s *not* coming, but she hasn’t told me that directly. Her silence the past several days has spoken far more than she ever could with her mouth.

“You better get that,” Jess says, dropping her hand to her side. “Might be your mom.”

“Shoot, you’re right.” I pull the phone back out of my pocket, and sure enough my mother’s name sits there. I swipe on the call and turn away from my best friend. “Hey, Momma.”

“Alec, darling,” she says as if she’s just perched on a throne, tiara set in place and a cup of tea nearby. “I just heard the news about Jess. How *wonderful* for her.” The sentence takes about a year to deliver in her slow, Southern accent.

“Yeah,” I say, turning back to Jess. She’s put the last bite of the blondie in her mouth, but her focus is on her phone now. My adrenaline spikes, because I’ll bet everything I own that she’s texting Callie. She’s going to know any moment now that it’s just me, her, and Peaches for the party.

“She’s pretty excited,” I say. “We’re having a little party today.” I’ve been in the kitchen since noon, whipping up appetizers and one-bites, desserts and homemade butter pecan ice cream. What can I say? I’m a fool. A freaking, hopeful fool who might be in love with Tara Finch.

I turn away from Jess as her face falls. She’s going to cry, and I’m terrible with crying women, even her. “Listen,” I say. “I might have to cancel next weekend.”

“What? Why?” my mother drawls.

I pace toward Peaches, hoping she’ll start chattering and causing a huge scene. She chirps at me in normal bird fashion and nothing else. Traitor. My parrot actually likes my mother, and she seems to know to stay quiet during this call.

“I jumped the gun,” I say as bravely as I can. “I hadn’t talked to Tara about going to Beaufort, and she’s got a big dinner party next weekend.”

“So you’ll come the following weekend.”

I start shaking my head mid-sentence, my patience already thin. “I don’t know, Mom. We’ll have to wait and see. Will you be out of town in the next month or so?” I know she won’t be. My mother doesn’t travel anymore, not since the divorce. And especially not since my younger brother got married and had his first baby. Carl and Katia live around the corner from my mom, and I know she spends a ton of time with them.

Carl’s the brother who fell into line. He’ll inherit the mansion and land in Beaufort, and he’s let our momma groom him to be the Southern gentleman she dreamed of having. I

need to get down there and see everyone, and I should've gone this week while I had time off.

In truth, I sat around the apartment and visited the clubs and restaurants alone, not wanting to go too far in case Tara came knocking on my door.

Pathetic, really.

"I'll be here," Momma drawls.

"Okay," I say. "It might be a last-minute thing." Jessie touches my shoulder, and I turn toward her. "I have to go, Mom. Love you." I hang up before my mom can respond, because she's seriously like a sloth when it comes to conversations. Everything is slower in Beaufort.

"I'm sorry," I say to Jessie, taking her right into my arms.

"We don't need to have a party," she says. "We've already celebrated together."

"What am I going to do with all this food?" With horror, I realize I sound like my mother, complaining about not having the guests she wants for her prissy parties.

I pull away, unrest seating itself deeply in my soul. "She's just being stubborn."

"Alec," Jess says quietly, but I don't look at her.

"C'mon, Peaches," I say, lifting my arm for her. "Come check out these birdseed cupcakes I made for you." They're made with all bird-safe ingredients, and Peaches flaps her wings and flies over to me as I walk into the kitchen.

"Bacon, bacon, bacon," she says.

"Where was the bacon when I was on the phone with Nell?" I grumble at her.

"Alec," she chirps. "I love you. Alec. Bacon."

Fine, so I spent quite a bit of time this week teaching Peaches some new words. She can't quite say the T-sound, so Tara's name is still unrecognizable.

“Alec,” Jess says again. She hasn’t moved from her spot in the living room, near the birdcage and the door. “I’m just going to go.”

“No,” I say. “You can’t.” Peaches nibbles along my fingers, anxious for her treat, and I reach for the tiny, thumb-sized seed-cakes I put together for her. I give one to her, and she hops down onto the counter to wrestle with it.

I face Jess. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I do,” she says, taking a step forward. She holds up her phone and faces it toward me. “Read Callie’s texts. Then you’ll know what to do.”

“I don’t want to read her texts to you. She texted me too.”

“I bet she didn’t text this.” She shakes the phone, insisting I take it.

I glare at her. “You’re being impossible.”

“I am not,” she says. “You’re in love with Tara.”

“So what if I am?” I bark. “Who freaking cares? *She* doesn’t care. Callie doesn’t care. I don’t know how to choose her or you. I don’t. I can’t.” I’ve never had to do this before, because I’ve never been in such a serious relationship that my friendship with Jess became an issue.

“Just read it,” Jess says quietly, putting the phone on the counter. “I’m going to go get something out of my car.”

“Jess,” I say, but she turns and leaves the apartment without looking back. She’s strong, and I know she’ll be fine without Callie and Tara as friends. I just wanted them to get along so badly. I like Dawson and Lance, and I have so few friends as it is.

If Tara and I break-up, I’m back to having no one.

“That’s not an *if*, buddy,” I tell myself. “You’ve broken up. Neither of you will admit it, but it’s true.”

I sigh, my chest feeling so flimsy, and pick up Jess’s phone. She doesn’t have it locked, so all I have to do is swipe to open. I tap on her texts, and Callie’s is at the top.

“What in the world am I doing?”

“What in the world?” Peaches repeats. “I love you. Love you.”

No matter what, I’ll have Peaches, but the thought doesn’t comfort me the way it once did.

I tap on the text and scroll up to today’s messages.

I’m so sorry, Jess. You know I love you and I’d love to be there. Dawson and I are thrilled for you. We’d love to go to dinner with you soon.

See? Callie’s so nice.

We just can’t abandon Tara. She’s never had anyone choose her, and well, I have to choose her in this case. I hope you understand.

I understand, Jessie had said. I would like to choose Tara too. She has to know there’s nothing between me and Alec. Honestly, Callie, there’s not. There never has been.

She might just need some time, Callie had responded.

Alec says he’s given her all week. She won’t talk to him.

She likes to push people away when things get hard, Callie had said. I told him not to let her get away from him, and honestly, I’d like to shake that man and tell him to choose Tara. That’s all she’s looking for.

Jess had responded with, *I know. Alec gets too far inside his head sometimes. I’ll talk to him.*

Callie hasn’t said anything else yet.

I look up from the phone, my mind racing. “I have chosen Tara,” I say to the spread of desserts on the countertop. “Over and over, I’ve chosen her.” I don’t know how to choose her in a different way, not without cutting Jess out of my life. And if I do that, she’ll really have no one.

She’ll have Callie and Dawson, the small voice in my head says.

The apartment door opens, and Jess walks in. Her eyes fly to mine. “Did you read them?”

“Yes,” I say, striding toward her. I engulf her in a hug despite the brightly wrapped box she carries. “I have to choose her, Jess. I’m sorry.”

“I know you do,” she says, stepping back. “I got you a present for being so amazing. You’re always there for me, and you’ve been nothing but supportive since I left Beaufort.” Tears fill her eyes, but she blinks them back. “It can be a good-bye present. For now. I think Tara will come around. She’s too nice and too rational not to.”

“She just needs a minute,” I say, taking the gift. My mind seems to be moving as slow as my momma’s mouth, because I just stare at the present. “I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Jess says. “You’re here, and Callie and Dawson are here, and I’m starting a new job in an office with at least a dozen people.” Tears splash her cheeks, but she wipes them away quickly. “How are you going to choose Tara?”

I cock my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...Alec.” She puts one hand on her hip. “You can’t just show up at her house.”

“Why not?” I ask. I’ve done that before, after I drove to Atlanta, just to kiss her.

Jessie shakes her head. “No, honey. Sorry, but no. I know you and Tara have talked about me before. What will one more talk do? Nothing. This has to be huge. It has to be something that erases all of her doubts. It has to be...I don’t know. Like writing her name in the sky.” She sweeps her hand above her head, and I smile.

“You’re being dramatic again.” Jess loves to be dramatic.

“Here’s a little tip, Alec,” she says with a smile. “You know how you’re always bragging that you know what women what?” She leans closer, like she’s going to tell me a big, juicy secret. I find myself leaning closer. “Women like dramatic. We *like* being in the center of the stage, the spotlight on us as our

man is down on one knee, begging to be with us for the rest of his life.”

She pats my chest and falls back another step. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to load up a plate with as much food as I can carry and leave you and Peaches to brainstorm about how you can shine that spotlight all on Tara.”

She steps past me and heads for the kitchen.

I’m still trying to figure out if Tara likes the dramatic or not. I turn on numb feet to watch Jessie pile one-bites and appetizers onto a plate. As she starts cramming on desserts, I say, “I don’t actually have a diamond ring. Do you think I need to get one?”

“Not yet, honey,” Jess says. “You need to get the woman back first.”

“She’s the one who pushed me away. Don’t you think she should be trying to get me back?”

“She will,” Jess says. “As soon as you turn on that spotlight.” She finishes with her plate and comes toward me again. “I’m sorry it’s come to this, Alec. I’ll tell Callie all about my first day on Monday, and she’ll tell you.”

“I hate that,” I murmur.

“It’ll be okay,” she says. “Because you don’t want to lose Tara over this.” She stretches up and kisses my cheek, just like we always have. Then she’s gone, and I’m alone in the apartment, wondering how to shine the spotlight on Tara.

She hates the spotlight, as evidenced by the reporters that followed her for weeks, and the articles—I suck in a breath. “That’s it,” I say to Peaches, who’s still working on that birdseed cake.

“That’s it!” I race into the kitchen and grab my keys out of the drawer. “I have to run out Peaches. Come on.” I pick her up and take her and her birdseed to her cage. “I’ll be back soon, I swear.”

As I rush out of the apartment, I pray that newspaper reporters work on Saturdays.

TARA

“No, Momma,” I say as I lift my glass of diet cola to my lips. Nothing is the same in Miami as it is in Carolina, and I’d rather have sweet tea. I don’t tell my mother that. I haven’t told her much of anything. “I can’t stay. I have a baptism party on Tuesday.”

“Seems like an odd day for a baptism party,” my mother says. She sets another plate of cookies on the table between us. She and Daddy bought a condo here in Miami a few years ago, and I can admit the view is fantastic from the twentieth floor. The breeze pushes through my hair, and the people on the sand down below seem like ants scurrying about.

I’ve been here for a few days now, and I purposely booked my return flight over Jessie’s party so I could put my phone on airplane mode. Childish, I know, but the butter pecan told me I wouldn’t be going to her party.

Callie’s been texting me non-stop all day, to the point that I finally put my phone on silent and left it in the guest bedroom.

“They had family out of town or something,” I say. “For the actual baptism, but they’re back, so we’re doing it Tuesday.”

“That’s two whole days after you go back.”

“Momma,” I say. “I have to work. I have orders to put in and groceries to pick up. I have to have a staff meeting with my chefs.” Alec hasn’t formally quit yet, but I suspect he will. He’s such a talented chef, he’ll have no problem getting hired

on somewhere else, and I'll need to put up a new listing for a new job too.

"It's just been so nice having you here." Momma reaches over and pats my arm. "How's the dating front going?"

"I already said I wasn't going to talk about that." I send her a glance-glare and look back out at the ocean. "I'm married to Saucebilities, remember?"

Momma says nothing, and that alone is a feat. We sit in silence for a while longer, and I finally get to my feet. "I should get going. My flight isn't going to wait for me because I don't want to leave this view." I smile at her as she stands too. "Or you." I hug her tight, my emotions balling up all the words I want to say. "Thanks for letting me come crash with you last-minute."

"You're welcome any time," she says. She smiles at me with glassy eyes and turns to go back into the condo. "I'll call a cab."

"Thanks, Momma." I go get my suitcase and purse, which I'd packed that morning. I hug my daddy and then momma again, and then I'm walking down the hall to the elevator alone.

Always alone.

At least when I trip over my own feet, there's no one to see me when I'm alone.

From the condo in Miami back to my house in Charleston, I remind myself of all the people I have that love me. I have to extend it to living things to include all the hens, Tommy, and Goose, who I go to get from Mr. Reynolds next door.

I'd baked a whole slew of hummingbird cakes before I'd left, and I offer them to him as he opens the door. "Time for a tea party?" I ask, not wanting to be alone tonight.

"There's always time for a tea party," he says, smiling at me. "Come in, my dear."

I step into his house, which is such a comfort to me. "I can brew the coffee."

“I’ll do it,” he says as my two little dogs start to jump up on my legs. “You take care of those hounds.”

“Hounds,” I say with a laugh. I set the hummingbird cakes on the coffee table and get right down on the floor with Tommy and Goose. They’re wild tonight, jumping at my face to lick me and running all around as I try to give them hello scrubs. “I missed you guys. Yes, I did. Did you miss me?”

They act like they did, and my thoughts move to Alec. Has he missed me this week? My missing for him yawns as wide as the ocean and as high as the sky. I should probably text him and ask him point-blank if he’s going to quit, but the very thought makes bees buzz in my stomach. Besides, tonight is his party, and I don’t want to interrupt that.

Mr. Reynolds returns to the living room with a stack of napkins, plates, and forks. He groans as he sits on the couch. “Coffee’s on. What did you bring?”

“Your favorite,” I say. “Hummingbird cakes.”

His face lights up and then falls. “Daisy used to make hummingbird cake for our kids’ birthdays.” He reaches for the cake anyway. “Thank you for bringing it.”

“I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

He gives me a quick smile. “It’s a happy-sad, Tara. Reminds me of her, which isn’t bad. I don’t want to feel bad thinking about her.”

“Of course not,” I say, and I wonder if I’ll ever get to the point where I don’t feel bad when I think about Alec. I wasn’t even brave enough to talk to him and end things properly. I sigh, and that draws Mr. Reynolds’s attention.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks.

“Oh, I…tell me about Daisy.” I smile again, but the corners shake.

He studies me for a moment. “You know all about Daisy.”

“You miss her so much.” I’m not asking.

“Yes,” he says. “I do. There are good days and bad days, and then there are in-between days where I get to eat hummingbird cake and remember the good times.” He hands me a plate holding half of one of the mini cakes I’d made.

“Did you have bad times?” I ask.

“Every couple has bad times,” he says, returning to the cakes and taking the other half for himself. “We worked through them the best way we knew how.”

“What if you didn’t know how?”

He takes a bite of cake, his older eyes so much wiser than mine. I can’t get myself to eat right now, so I just watch him. “I think as you grow older,” he says softly, slowly. “You realize more about what’s important, and what’s not.”

I nod, though I have no idea what he means.

“So Daisy loved to garden. She’d spend hours out in the yard, and sometimes I felt neglected. Like she cared more about her plants than she did me or even the children. Which is ridiculous. They’re just flowers and shrubs.” He smiles and shakes his head. “The older we got, and the more I loved Daisy, I realized how the gardening for her made her into the kind, patient woman she was with me and the kids. If she didn’t get her therapeutic time outdoors, she wasn’t very nice indoors.”

“Interesting,” I say.

“It’s like you with your hens,” he says. “They bring you joy.” He grins at me and gets to his feet. “Or Saucebilities. It’s your baby. You love it. But that doesn’t mean you don’t have room in your heart to love something or someone else too.” He turns toward the kitchen. “The coffee has to be done.”

Wait, I want to tell him. I want him to come back and explain more about what he means by what he’s said. I puzzle through it while he bumps around in the kitchen, and when he returns, I look up at him.

“Thank you,” I say, accepting the cup of coffee I know he’ll have put caramel cream and a touch of sugar into. I breathe in the scented steam and feel myself start to relax. “So

you're saying if I don't get to work at Saucebilities, I won't be happy."

"No," Mr. Reynolds says. "I think there are things every person has that makes them happy. Content. Pleased with life. Whatever you want to call it. If we don't get to do those things, we don't feel whole."

"So then, when we have to interact with others, we're kind of beastly."

"Yes," he says with a nod and a smile.

"So what was your thing if Daisy's was gardening?" I ask, wondering if mine is the catering, the hens, or the cookbook. Or my obsession with my yard, even if I don't do the work. Or my relationship with Callie.

Mr. Reynolds starts to answer, but my ears have gone deaf.

My relationship with Callie. If I couldn't have that, I'd be...beastly.

Alec started out beastly when he came to Saucebilities, but things got better. Those things got better the more I got to know him and the important people and items in his life. I can list them on one hand—his bird, Peaches, his best friend, Jessie, and his job. He loves his late-night weight-lifting and hot tubbing too. Those are all things he needs in his life to feel content, and that doesn't mean there's not room for me too.

I jump to my feet. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Reynolds," I say. "But I have to go."

"Yes, of course," he says. "Go."

"Come on, guys," I say to the doggos. "Let's leave Mr. Reynolds alone for a while."

He still walks me to the door, hugs me, and says good-night. I'm leagues away from bedtime, though, and I don't even go in the house. I hurry Tommy and Goose through taking care of their business on the front grass, and then I herd them into the car.

I have to go talk to Alec right now, even if I don't want to. Even if confrontation scares me. Even if I've already ruined

everything with him.

I simply can't be the reason he loses two ultra-important things to him and cause him to run again.

He's said the dogs are welcome at his apartment, and I pray that's true with every minute that passes between my house and his place.

Once there, I leash the pups and hurry up to the sixth floor. His apartment sits down at the end of the hall, and I'm panting and sweating by the time I arrive. It's barely nine o'clock, so surely the party is still in full swing.

I ring the doorbell and stand back, trying to get my heartbeat to quiet. It's not so used to running and rushing, and I really hate confrontation. I feel like I'm going to pass out, and I brace myself against the wall across from his door. Wouldn't that just be the peachiest ending to this week? Alec opening the door and finding me prostrate in the hall, unconscious, sweating, and with two dogs at my side?

It turns out that I don't pass out, and Alec doesn't even open the door. I try knocking and calling through the door, but he still doesn't answer. I work Peaches up into a real lather, though, and that only adds another dose of guilt to my already writhing gut.

"Come on, guys," I say after another minute of that blasted door staying solidly closed. "He's not home." I retrace my steps to the car, and the miles back to my house, my heart heavy.

I think about calling him as I unleash the dogs and we go into the house. But I want to see his face when I apologize. I want to look into those eyes when I tell him I understand his relationship with Jess. I want to hold him and kiss him and make sure he knows I'm not just a jealous non-communicator with a butter pecan problem.

I scoff at myself, and it sounds suspiciously like a sob. "Butter pecan is only one of your problems," I whisper to myself.

My phone goes *boom-chicka-pop*, and I reach for it to read Callie's message.

Did you make it back from Miami? Dawson and I have something for you.

Of course she does. Callie is my savior, the one person who gets me completely. I don't know why I couldn't see that that's who Jess was for Alec too. She might still be, and that should be okay with me. They have a history I can never replicate, and I don't need to.

I know that now.

Yes, I type out. I'm home with the dogs and thinking about ordering Chinese.

The phone rings, and I answer Callie's call. "Don't do that," she says. "We have the Chinese and we're five minutes from your place."

"Do I have to talk?" I ask, feeling drained from the flight and then the rush over to Alec's for no reason. My adrenaline is coming down, and I just want to collapse on the couch.

"You do not have to talk," she says.

"How was the party tonight?" I ask, sinking into my plushy couch. It could seriously be called plump, and I smile thinking about that adjective for a piece of furniture.

"We didn't go to the party, Tara," she says. "I could never do that to you."

I press my eyes closed, my misery now complete. "Cal," I whisper. "You should've gone. You like Jess, and she'll be so disappointed."

"She understood," Callie says simply. "You will always be my first choice, Tara."

"I'm such a bad person," I whisper, knowing she isn't right. Dawson is her first choice now, as he should be. "I don't want you to choose. I don't want Alec to choose. I even went over there just now, and he didn't answer the door. I ruined his party, I ruined Jess's celebration, and I ruined my whole relationship with him."

I'm such a walking disaster, and not just because my feet are too big and I wear those ugly shoes.

"We'll be there in three minutes," she says. "You're not a bad person."

Oh, I am, but I don't argue with her. I let her end the call and I keep my eyes closed. Then I just pray that Alec and Jess will find a way to forgive me once I can finally talk to them.

ALEC

“Pancake, Alec. I love you,” Peaches chirps in the shower.

I grin at her. “I love you too, Peaches.”

“Peaches,” she says. “Peekaboo.”

I hold my thumb out, and she presses her beak into it. “Peekaboo,” I say back to her.

She makes happy birdy noises from her perch while I wash up, shave, and pull on a pair of pants. My T-shirts are once again draped over the back of the couch, and I’ll have to get one when I finally brave going into the living room.

I turn off the shower, Peaches shakes herself off, and we go into the living room. I pause while she flies to the top of her cage, my mind suddenly working overtime.

I face the door. The paper should be here by now. I’ve deliberately slept late, taken my time in the shower, and that newspaper absolutely *has* to be here by now.

I take a deep, deep breath and hold it. Then I open the door. I’m not sure what I expect to find there, but I jump back as if someone will have filled the hallway with snakes.

They haven’t, of course. The paper isn’t there either, and I frown as I look down the hallway. No one’s there, and the chiming of my phone draws me back into the apartment. In all honesty, I’m surprised I haven’t left Charleston yet.

After what I've done this morning, though, there's no way I can leave.

I head into the kitchen and pick up my phone. My heart falls to my feet when I see it's Tara who's texted me. I fumble the phone in my haste to get the text open, and it drops to the floor. A *crack!* fills the air, and I drop to my knees, saying, "No, no, no."

"No, no, no," Peaches chirps.

The doorbell rings. Peaches imitates it.

I scoop up my phone, noting the huge crack across the front of it, and get to my feet. "Just a second," I say, and I swipe to get to the texts.

Tara's says, *Are you home? I want to ask you about your job.*

That only gets my pulse positively hammering, and I look to the door. *I'm home*, I tap out quickly and then stride to the door. If it's not Tara on the other side of it, I'm seriously slamming it in whoever's face is standing there. Seriously.

I've been Alec-the-Grumpy-Cat, and I'm not afraid to go feline again.

I pull open the door, and Callie stands there, one hip cocked. Dawson is only a couple of feet away from her, and he's wearing a smile as wide as the sky.

"Alec Ward," Callie clips out. She brings her hand out from behind her back and lifts the newspaper she's holding. "You tell me right now: Did you do this?"

"Yes," I say, and the word is mostly air, no bark in sight. I also haven't slammed the door in her face, thank you very much.

"Do you mean it?"

"Why wouldn't I mean it?"

"You could've used a better knife joke in the fifth paragraph, bro," Dawson says. "I mean, life is *dull* without her? It's not that original."

I blink as Callie bustles past me and into the apartment. Dawson does too, clapping me on the shoulder with one hand. “You might want to put on a shirt,” he says. “Callie sent about five hundred texts on the way over, and I have a feeling she called in the calvary.”

“Five hundred?” Callie demands. “You exaggerate so much.”

“You like it,” Dawson tosses back at her, and I turn to watch them, still in shock.

“Where did you get that paper?” I ask. “Mine wasn’t in the hall this morning.”

“Hmm,” Callie says. “That’s weird.” Her voice pitches up slightly, and she won’t look at me.

“Callie Houser,” I say, using her tone of voice. “You tell me right now: Did you steal my paper?” I march toward her, ready to rip it out of her fingers. I’ve only seen the article on a computer screen, and I want to see it in person.

She hides her paper behind her back, her eyes widening. “No,” she says quickly. “I didn’t steal your paper.” She nods behind me. “She did.”

I stall and spin, nearly falling flat on my face. Thankfully, there’s those lovely double ovens to hold me up as I throw my hand out to catch myself.

When I see who “she” is, I sag into them.

Tara enters the apartment, and she’s wearing a tight pencil skirt that makes my male side roar with want. Her red sweater only makes her dark hair look darker, and it all goes perfectly with her green-apple bag.

She calmly puts the bag on the top of the birdcage, but I catch a tremor in her hand. She plucks the newspaper from her bag and holds it in front of herself like a shield. Even from twenty feet away, across the apartment, I can read the headline.

Number one, it’s humongo. Like, huge. Three-inch letters. The story takes up the whole front page, not just the Local

section like Stephen said it would.

CHEFS OF ALL SIZES FIND LOVE IN CHARLESTON

I know what the first line is, because I wrote it.

At least, one chef hopes they do. See, Alec Ward has fallen in love with “plump chef” Tara Finch, and it happened right there in the kitchen at Saucebilities, the best catering company in the city.

“Does this mean you’re not quitting?” she asks.

I lift my chin, though I feel naked from head to toe, and not just head to torso. “I’m not quitting,” I say. “I’m not quitting at Saucebilities, and I’m not quitting on us.” I take a few steps toward her, though she still grips that paper with white knuckles. I don’t care that Callie and Dawson are there. I printed over a thousand words about the awesome that makes Tara Finch in the local paper. Everyone will know how I feel. Positively everyone.

If that’s not a bright enough spotlight on Tara, I seriously don’t know what else to do.

“I told Jessie we can’t be friends for a while,” I say. “You’ve had your minute, Tara. I need to know if *you’re* quitting or not.” My fingers clench, as does my jaw, and I tell myself to relax.

“I love you,” I say when she still says nothing. “I want you. I don’t care about anything else.” I probably could’ve just said those ten or eleven words instead of writing the dissertation that I did. But Stephen Fyfe had given me the space, and I’d just let my soul fly.

Behind me, Callie snuffles, but I don’t turn around. I can’t look away from Tara, and I can’t stand the idea of her walking out on me after what I’ve done.

She turns the paper and looks at it, the pages rippling as her hand shakes now. “This is...well, it’s just perfect.” She looks up at me, tears in those eyes. “I came by last night to apologize, but you weren’t here.”

“I was at the newspaper office pretty late,” I say, everything softening inside me.

She came by.

“Do you really love me?”

“All the way, one-hundred percent yes.”

She flies toward me then, and I catch her in my arms. “I love you too, Alec,” she says as she sobs into my neck. “I’m so, so sorry. I’m just this flighty bird, and I don’t know. I let the wind push me this way and then that way, and there was this prettier bird, and I just got jealous.” She steps back. “Then I realized that you *need* Jess to be whole, and what kind of seagull-trash-bird am I to separate the two of you? And you’ll never be whole without her, and I don’t want a non-whole Alec.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about, so I just look at her and breathe in the scent of her perfume, her hair, her skin.

“Life is dull without you,” she says, looking back at the paper and rattling it on purpose this time. I want to pump my fist in triumph that she caught the knife jokes—and tell Dawson that one isn’t lame. “You do make the cut.”

“Do I?” I ask quietly.

“Alec.” She looks at me. “You absolutely do. Every time, at least for me. I’m sorry. Please tell me you can forgive me.”

“Oh, the door is open,” someone says, and Tara turns that way just as a group of no less than a dozen men and women crowd into the tiny space. The only reason they enter the apartment is because the ones in the front are getting jostled by the people in the back.

“Alec, is this true?” someone yells, waving the paper.

“Tara, are you going to take him back?”

“Does he make the cut?”

“Why do you use knife jokes? Is there an inside joke between the two of you involving a knife?”

I start to laugh, because I can't believe that's the question they have.

"Get in closer," someone says, and they're not talking to me or Tara.

"There's Peaches. Be sure to get a shot of her."

"Where's Jessie, Alec?"

"Is she going to pull you apart?"

I slide my hand along Tara's waist, the touch so intimate and so delicious, I can almost taste it. She shivers and sags into me. "You better answer their questions, baby. They're asking a few I have too."

She tilts her head down, her mouth toward me. "What do you think? Answer with a kiss and not a single comment?"

"Oh, I like the way you think," I whisper, gripping her a little tighter and turning her into my body. I meet her eyes, and yes, I forgive her for the "minute" of silence she needed, and then I lower my mouth to hers.

I wasn't going to really *kiss* her—after all, there are other people present. People with cameras. But the moment her lips touch mine, all bets are off and all explosions are happening, just like the first time we kissed.

I can't even imagine what next weekend's headlines will read like, or what kind of accompanying photos they'll have. I don't care. I got Tara Finch back in my life, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep her there.

Somewhere among the cheering, that small voice tells me to keep it clean and wrap it up. So I do, pulling away while I'm only breathing hard, not panting, and my hands are still in an appropriate place.

"Alec," someone says, and I know that voice. "Excuse me," Jessie says, pushing her way through the crowd of reporters. "The show's over. Get out. Back up, please." She muscled them all out of the way despite her smaller frame and closes the door behind her. She turns to face us, and I can't help grinning at her.

She's not looking at me though. "Tara," she says, but she doesn't turn her head when Peaches blurts out, "K-kara, I love you. Love you."

TARA

I'm not sure where to look first. Jessie, who's standing there with a wide, pie-eating smile on her face? Or Alec, who rushes toward his bird's cage and says, "Shh, Peaches. Not yet," as he throws the blanket over the wire? Callie and Dawson, both of whom are chuckling in the kitchen?

I honestly feel torn in thirds.

"She's here," Jessie says.

"I'm aware," Alec growls at her. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I came to see if you'd really done this." She holds up the paper.

Alec glares at her and turns to face the rest of us. I'm stuck in between everyone, but I can't help smiling. "Why does no one believe I did this?"

"It's just so romantic," Jessie says. "I didn't know you could write like this."

"I worked with a reporter," he says, sounding semi-disgusted those words come out of his mouth.

"I think it's beautiful," Callie says. "In fact, Dawson and I are going to find all the copies we can. That way, I can make a scrapbook page of it for my bestie." She steps over to me and hugs me tight. "Love you, my friend."

“Scrapbook page?” I ask when I should say *I love you too, Cal*. “Who has scrapbooks anymore?”

“*You’re* going to have one,” Callie says, stepping back. She gives me a stern look before reaching for her husband’s hand. “You can put it on the shelf next to your cookbook.” Callie speaks as if what she says is law. When she’d showed up on my doorstep about ninety minutes ago, with a newspaper in her hand, my whole world had changed.

She’d helped me get dressed, and we’d driven over here. I’d kyfed Alec’s newspaper so I’d have a copy of my own, and we’d waited like stalkers on the sidewalk below until we’d heard Peaches start to babble. Lucky for us that Alec likes to keep his windows open. Also that there were no cops lurking about. Been there, done that.

Callie opens the door, and shouts fill the air again. She and Dawson slip out into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind them and shutting out the shouting.

I press my palms together and face Alec and Jessie. I’ve already apologized to him, but I still have some awkward conversations to endure. “Jessie,” I say. “I’m so sorry. If you weren’t so awesome, and so you know, pretty. And perfect.” I blow out my breath. “I’m not very good at this kind of stuff, but I want to get better.”

“What stuff?” Alec presses.

“Talking,” I say. “And realizing that not everything is about me. That you have things and people you need to feel complete, and Jessie is one of those people.”

He looks at her, his eyebrow cocked. “She’s not wrong,” Jessie says. “Get over there and kiss her.”

“I already kissed her,” Alec says, grinning from her to me.

“I wouldn’t object to another kiss,” I say, returning his smile.

“I’ll get out Peaches,” Jessie says, and Alec comes toward me again.

“What’s this about me being complete? Whole?”

“So I was talking to Mr. Reynolds last night, and he said he used to get mad at his wife for working in the yard all the time. Jessie’s the yard. She’s important to you, just like the gardening was important to his wife. She needed it to find her center and be her real self. Her whole self.”

I run my hands up his chest, enjoying the way his eyes darken with desire. That’s all for me, and I can scarcely believe it. “When you’re your whole self, you’re not Mister Grumpy-Cat. You’re brilliant in the kitchen. You’re sexy, strong, and smart. You’re the guy who drives five hours to make amends with his father and his brother. You’re everything I want in my life, so I can be happy too.”

He watches me for a few moments. “And what’s your thing, Tara?”

“Saucebilities,” I say. “Or tea parties with my neighbor. Letting the hens out for their pasturecize. Making sure my yard is perfect. I don’t know. The stuff I spend my time and energy on, because I like it.”

“I think it’s the hens,” he murmurs, lowering his head toward mine again. He pauses before kissing me. “You forgot Peaches for me.”

“Mm, yes,” I whisper, the strength of his arms around me igniting a fire inside me. The warmth of his hands on my back sends pinpricks of excitement through my blood. “Seems like you taught Peaches some new words.”

“You picked up on that, huh?”

“You have to get up really early to pull a blanket over that bird’s cage...so I don’t know,” I say, but my quip makes no sense.

Alec starts to laugh, saying, “I have no idea what you just said,” among all the ha-ha-ha’s.

“Do you want her?” Jessie asks, and Alec takes the green and white parrot from her.

“All right, Peaches,” he says.

“Peaches, peaches,” she responds.

“No,” he says. “Let’s practice what we do when we see Tara.” He nods toward me, but the bird has never liked me much. That’s because I don’t like her much. Being attacked the first time we met has definitely cast a shadow over our relationship.

“Tara,” he says again.

“Kara, I love you,” Peaches says. “I love you.”

“That’s right.” Alec grins at the bird and holds up his hand. She leans out and boops her beak against it, making a kissing sound as she does.

My heart melts watching this tall, muscled, ex-Marine-turned-chef interact with a four-ounce bird. He loves her with his whole soul, and his expression doesn’t change one iota when he switches his gaze to me.

“Tell her. Tell Tara.” He faces Peaches toward me. “Tell Tara.”

“Kara, I love you,” Peaches chirps. “Bacon, love you. Motor-bike!”

Alec laughs again, and so do I. He slips the bird to his shoulder and takes me into his arms again. “I do love you, Tara. Something clicked inside me when we went to Florida, and it might be fast, but I’ve never been very slow at anything.”

“I’m a little scared,” I admit, leaning into the steadiness of his body.

“No rush,” he says. “You can take all the minutes you want, but I do have one favor...”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“My mom found out about us, and she wants me to bring you to Beaufort to meet her.” He nuzzles my neck, lowering Peaches closer to my ears.

“What in the world?” she screeches, and that about sums up how I feel about meeting Alec’s mother.

But I say, “Sure, baby. That sounds fun.”

LITTLE DID I KNOW THAT WHEN HE SAID, “SHE WANTS ME TO bring you to Beaufort to meet her,” that we’d literally be going that day. But we do. I have an overnight bag in the back of Alec’s car, and he’s brought Peaches in her travel cage, along with a duffle of his own.

It’s only an hour and a half drive, and we go over a couple of bridges to an area he calls Ashdale.

“This is super nice,” I say, gazing up at the huge, sprawling white house with six columns along the front porch.

“Some places have private docks,” he says. “They’re right on the water.”

“Let me guess,” I say. “Yours is one of those.”

“I mean, my momma,” he says.

“You did grow up here,” I point out.

“Yes,” he says. “That one right there is Jessie’s family’s place. The Dunaways.”

Since they grew up next-door to each other, I automatically look down the street. But there’s far too many trees between the properties, and these are more like estates than just plots. I realize that she’s not right next door the way Mr. Reynolds is to me, or the way Callie was before I moved to Cottonhill.

If Jessie had been crying in her backyard, Alec wouldn’t have heard her. “I’m nervous for some reason,” I say, looking away from the cream-colored mansion that is Jessie’s childhood home.

“My momma is just a person,” Alec says. “Since I gave her warning, I’m sure my brother and his wife will be there.”

“Carl and Katia,” I say. “Right?”

I can’t believe how nervous I am. I’ve only met Otis’s parents, because even though Brett and I were engaged, he had

never taken me to meet his family. My parents had just moved to Miami, and we'd gone there twice.

"Right," Alec says, kneading the steering wheel. At least I'm not the only one who's nervous, and at least I've left my orthopedics at home today. "They have a baby boy named Houston. That's my momma's maiden name."

"How very Texan," I say.

"She's from right here in South Carolina," he says, smiling. "She used to travel a lot, but not anymore."

"Like you," I say, and Alec looks at me, surprise in his eyes. "You're not going to run away again, are you, Alec?"

"No," he says quickly. "I've returned to my southern roots, and I'm sticking around." He grins at me. "You won't be able to get rid of me."

"Good," I say. "I don't want to get rid of you." I reach for his hand and lace my fingers through his. "What are you thinking for a wedding?"

"Oh, we're talking about that already?"

"I'd like to," I say.

"I'm thinking you should tell me what you want, and I'll do that."

"You have no thoughts?" I'm sure his momma will.

"I think you should dress up the hens in little flowery dresses and let them cluck down the aisle for their backyard-cize."

"It's pasturecize," I say, but I want him to go on.

"Okay," he says. "But they won't be in the pasture. They'll be in your backyard, leading the two of us to the altar. And we'll be married in a small ceremony like Callie, and then I'll whisk you away to the huge Rocky Mountains for a couple of weeks. We'll sleep in the back of a truck or a tent or a cabin, and I'll brew coffee while the sun rises, and we'll stay up late and watch the sunset too."

“Oh, wow,” I say, laughing at this picture-perfect life he’s describing. “From sun-up to sun-down, huh?”

“And we’ll sample all the restaurants in Boulder or wherever, and then we’ll come back to Carolina. You’ll find someone to publish your cookbook, and I’ll work for you until I figure out what kind of restaurant I want to open.”

He makes a turn to go down a lane, and I lose track of what he’s said as I peer up at the white house with two large windows on the blocky right side of the house, which matches perfectly with the left side of the house. A bright red door sits smack dab in the middle of that, with two more smaller windows on either side of it.

Five peekaboo windows line the roof above the middle section of the house, and he takes us past plenty of trees that are probably two centuries old to the driveway. There aren’t any other cars there, and I think maybe his brother hasn’t arrived yet. We sure didn’t give them very much notice that we were coming.

Which is probably a good thing, I think as Alec brings the vehicle to a stop. If I’d have had more time to think about meeting Alec’s mother in a plantation-style home like this, with a private dock right onto the water, I’d be a puddle of blubbering goo right now.

“There she is,” Alec says. “She’s not the subtlest of people. She’s going to love you.” He nods toward the front porch, but I’ve already found his mother. She’s a tall woman, or maybe she’s wearing nine-inch heels under that prom dress.

“My goodness,” I say.

“It’s the Sabbath,” he says. “She likes to get everything and everyone all dolled up at least once a week.”

“Is that tulle?”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Alec says, and he hasn’t moved to get out either. “Oh, she’s folding her arms. Come on, let’s go.” He gets out of the vehicle and comes around to hold my door for me. He gets Peaches out of the back seat and we face his mother together.

Then he's laughing and darting ahead of me, taking his momma into a big Alec-Happy-Bear hug. She giggles too, and he twirls her around, that massive skirt billowing out with at least ten yards of fabric.

When he sets her on her feet, her smile is as wide as this mansion where she lives. She faces me, and I'm about as opposite of her as a person can get. At least Callie put me in a pencil skirt today—one of hers—and made me bring my fancy-pants purse.

"You must be Alec's Tara." She extends both of her hands toward me and I put mine in them. I like the way she drawls, though Alec said her slow speech drives him crazy.

"I am," I say. "You must be his momma, Nell."

"My momma," he says quickly. "Nell. Momma, Tara." He beams at me, as I lean in to kiss his momma's cheek. First one, and then the other.

"Well, well," another man says. "Look who the cat dragged in."

"Carl," Alec says, and the two brothers hug. He steps back and reaches for my hand. I move past Nell and he says, "This is my younger brother, Carl. Carl, this is Tara Finch." He looks at me, those eyes that used to glitter so much distaste and disgust now like bright stars in a gorgeous navy sky.

"The woman I'm in love with."

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit." Carl grins at me, grabs onto me, and pulls me into a hug while Alec protests against his brother's Southern slang.

I just laugh and hug him, glad I've been so accepted into Alec's family. I step back to his side and take one of his hands into both of mine and gaze up at him.

"Okay?" he asks, leaning down to touch his lips to my forehead.

"Okay," I confirm, because I'm feeling more okay than I ever have before.

ALEC

“**T**here’s Jason,” I say, and I reach for the door handle. In the passenger seat, Jessie sighs. “You don’t have to date him.” I give her a look, and she does seem exhausted. She started at Lance’s real estate office this week, and she’s being the most Positive Polly on the planet about it. But even makeup can’t hide the watery weariness in her eyes.

“Good,” she says. “He’s drop-dead gorgeous, but my goodness, he’s such a player.”

“Tara says he’s a good guy.”

“Sure, he is,” Jessie agrees. “He just doesn’t want to settle down.”

My eyebrows go up. “Do you?”

She shakes her blonde curls over her shoulder. “I mean, yes. I do, with the right man.” She tears her gaze from the windshield to pierce me with it. “And look at you. I never thought in a million years you’d get married.” She grins, and I shake my head.

“A million years? Come on.” I get out of the SUV and step onto the sidewalk. “Hey, man. Thanks for coming.” I shake Jason’s hand and indicate Jess. “You remember Jessie.”

“Of course.” Jason grins at me and then her, steps into her and kisses both of her cheeks. “How’s the new job going?”

“It is wonderful,” she says, wiping away her tiredness. “I’ve got the afternoon off today, because we’ve got a big open house in the morning.” She indicates the jewelry store we

stand in front of. “I asked around, and this is the best place for custom pieces.”

I look at the glass door, which bears the name Henson Handcrafted Jewelry, and I tug on the bottom of my polo. “Okay,” I say and take another deep breath. “Let’s just go look.”

“You’re not going to buy today?” Jason asks, stepping over to the door and opening it for me.

“Maybe,” I say. “It just depends on what we find.”

“Callie says she’s two minutes out,” Jess says, and neither of them will enter the store first. I’m in love with Tara, and I want to marry her. I have the perfect proposal all written out—and yes, it’s got a knife reference in it. Maybe two or three.

Our relationship is still new, though, and we both still need time to get to know each other well. I’m starting the search for the perfect ring to go with the perfect proposal—*I can’t wait to make you my knife. Oops, I mean my wife*—and that gives me the courage to enter the store.

Jess follows right behind me, always such a support for me, and Jason comes in right after that.

“Good afternoon,” a sharply dressed man says. “How can I help you today?”

I freeze, the cases and cases of rings and watches in front of me seemingly going on for miles and miles.

“He’s looking for something for his girlfriend,” Jason says, glancing at me as he passes. “She’s a chef—an amazing chef, so he wants something that has diamonds but that can be removed or worn separately.”

“So she has a ring she can wear in the kitchen without gems,” Jess says, stepping to my side. She puts her hand through my arm. “And one with diamonds he can show to his momma when they go visit.” She grins up at me, and somehow that thaws me.

“Right,” I say, moving forward to shake the man’s hand.

“I think I can help you find that,” he says. “My name is Tom, and most of our two-piece rings are over in this case.” He indicates the right side of the store and glances to the door as the bell sounds.

Callie walks in, a smart red purse on her arm. “Jessie.” She gives her a hug and then grabs onto me. “How’s it going? Sorry I’m late. You would not *believe* what Claude Monet got into.” She shakes her head. “He’s still adjusting to the new house and the fact that Dawson comes home with me at night, every night.”

She smiles at Jason and then the salesman and leans toward him. “Honestly, so am I.” She laughs lightly, and she has this way of making everything full of unicorns and sunshine. I honestly have no idea how she does it. “Anyway, if you see feathers anywhere on my clothes, just brush them off. We’re down a couple of pillows as of right now.”

Jessie giggles, and Callie’s smile grows. She has no feathers anywhere, and I step to the front of the group to go with Tom to look at the two-piece rings on the right side of the store. I’m expecting silver and gold, and I definitely see those. But there are some darker metal rings in the case too, and I say, “Tell me everything. I’ve never bought an engagement ring before.”

Tom smiles at me as if he’s a lion and I’m fresh meat. I suppose I am, and I just smile back.

“We have the traditional gold, silver, and white gold,” he says. “But since this is a specialty shop, and all of our rings are handcrafted by a master metal-worker and gemologist, we have some unique metals too.”

“Like those darker ones?” They almost look reflective, and some of them have designs carved right into the band.

“These are men’s rings,” he says, taking out the ones I’ve indicated. “They’re made of high-carbon steel.”

I look up at him. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” he says. “Some of this lighter patterning you see—that’s stainless steel. Some of them are silver. They’re all

one-of-a-kind and made right here, in the back of the shop.”

“Who makes these?” Callie asks, picking up one of the bands. “Why didn’t I know about this place when I was buying a ring for Dawson?”

“Because you didn’t have Jess,” I say. “She’s the best at finding the most amazing shops.” I smile at her as she steps up to the case.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says.

“Yeah? What am I thinking?”

“I really like these,” Jason says before Jess can answer. “If I ever get married, I want one of these.” He picks up one of the male wedding bands too.

“That one’s called the cowboy,” Tom says. “It’s completely flat so it won’t catch on anything while you’re working. But it’s got these ornate designs underneath.” He indicates them with a slim pointer, almost like a pencil.

I really like the ring in Jason’s hand, and I meet Callie’s eye. I’ve brought her along, because she knows Tara better than anyone, but she can also tell Tara what I like. I’ll tell her too, but I know she listens to Callie in a different way than she does me.

“Callie, do you know what the best chef’s knives are made of?” Jess asks, pressing one hip into the case.

“I have no idea,” Callie says, peering past the male bands on top of the case to the rings still inside it.

“High-carbon steel,” Jess says, and that brings Callie’s eyes up. She wears surprise and delight there, and I know exactly how she feels.

I turn my attention back to Tom, the knife jokes flowing through my mind now. This couldn’t be more perfect. “Do you have female bands made of the high-carbon steel?”

“Only one right now,” he says.

“But this is a custom shop, right?”

“That’s right.” He pulls out another six rings on a display case. “This one is high-carbon steel.” He takes the ring off the support and hands it to me. “We can lighten it up with some silver or white gold. It would go well with...” He searches the case and pulls out another strand of rings.

“See this setting? How the top of the ring can go down next to the main band?” He looks up at me, and I nod. “So she can have the bottom band for the kitchen, and again, if you don’t like how dark it is, we can add in some other metals. Piper is absolutely amazing with patterns, and the high-carbon steel is such a strong metal that it can hold others.”

“Piper is your master jeweler, right?” Callie asks.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tom says. “Piper Newman.”

“Is she here?” Callie asks. “I’d love to meet her.”

“Unfortunately, she’s not.” He looks genuinely sorry too. “She’s in Belgium, getting some new diamonds for a client.”

“Fascinating,” Callie says. She faces me too. “Tara would like a ring like that.”

“What are we talking for a custom ring with the high-carbon steel, some of that inlaying, the diamond...”

“Our custom pieces generally start in the five-thousand-dollar range.”

I pull in a breath, though the money isn’t really the problem. My mother has called me every day this week, and she’s said she’d love to help me get Tara the perfect ring.

“Okay,” I say. “I’m not going to propose right away. I can start saving.” I don’t want anyone to know my momma is going to help with the ring. Well, I’ll tell Tara, but no one else needs to know. “I mean, this is the rest of my *knife*, right?” I glance at Jess to see if she’s caught the pun.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re such a dork.”

“It’ll be *knife*,” I say. “Really *knife*. Five-thousand-dollars *knife*.”

Jason shakes his head though a chuckle comes out of his mouth. Callie looks from me to Jess, and I'm grinning like I'm the world's next amazing comedian. "What is happening here?" she asks.

"Alec thinks substituting the word *knife* for a variety of words is so funny," Jess says, plenty of eyerolling in her tone.

"It is," I say, glancing at Tom. He's grinning too. "Right?" I ask him. "She's my sig-*knife*-icant other. She should have the *knifest* ring possible, right?"

Tom starts to laugh, and even Jessie does. Callie still looks like I've pulled a knife on her, and she blinks rapidly as she tries to decide what to do.

"Piper will be gone through Wednesday," he says, still smiling. "I can schedule a consult with her for when she gets back, if you'd like."

I look at Jess. "What do you think?"

She cocks her head to the side, and she looks happier than I've ever seen her, even if she is tired. "I think... No *cuts*, no glory."

I do the blinking now, and then all of us burst out laughing.

LATER THAT DAY, I STAND BEHIND TARA AS SHE WRESTLES HER stubborn hen out of the coop. "I'm going to make you into your name," she grumbles at Pot Pie. "First Benedict, and now you too?" She drops the brown and white hen on the ground, pushes her hand through her hair, and faces me.

I don't see her with her hair down all that often, and I sure do like it. I smile at her as the chicken warbles and struts away like she's done nothing wrong. "You'd never eat these hens."

"Come hold the basket for me."

"Yes, ma'am." I already have it in my hands, and I simply take a couple of steps to stand beside her as she starts to gather

the eggs from the coop. “Can we use a few of these for dinner tonight?”

“I don’t cook dinner at home, remember?”

“Right, but I do,” I say. “I’m thinking...fried rice. Beef fried rice.”

She glances at me. “Can I order Chinese food to go with it?”

I grin at her and lean over to kiss her. With my lips still on hers, I whisper, “You can do whatever you want, baby. It’s your house and your party.”

She smiles against my lips and kisses me again. I drop the basket of eggs, some of them clacking against one another as they hit the ground. Neither of us seem to care, and I push my hands through her hair and deepen the kiss. With no reporters around, I can put my hands where I want, and Tara has no objections.

“Can I have a few eggs for a cake?” I ask, sliding my lips to her neck.

“I guess,” she says as she sighs into my touch.

I straighten and smile at her. “It’s your birthday, baby. You have to have a cake.”

“My birthday isn’t for a few more days.”

“Yeah, and you scheduled someone else’s birthday party over your own.” I bend to pick up the basket, noting only one egg is actually leaking the white through the shell. “Which I have to help you cater.” I smile so she knows I don’t care.

“Yes, and it’s a very important birthday,” she says.

“Who’s is it?” I don’t keep the schedule. I work when Tara tells me to, and I make what she tells me to. She used to be just my boss, but she’s so much more now.

She nods next door, across the pasture. “Mr. Reynolds, and it’s a surprise. His kids hired me, and we’re all invited, so keep your big mouth shut tonight.”

“My big mouth?” I abandon the eggs again and grab onto her. “My big mouth? You’re the one who told my neighbor about my after-hours hot tubbing, and now Miss Opal says I might not get to keep doing it.”

She giggles as I swing her away from the chicken coop. “I’m sorry,” she says, though we’ve already talked about *her* big mouth. She glances down to my lips and back into my eyes. “It won’t matter for much longer, though, right?”

“Why wouldn’t it?” I ask, though I know what she’s saying. I just want to hear her say it.

She swats at my chest and rolls her eyes. “You’ll move in here when we get married. We can put a hot tub right there on the deck.”

“Mm.” I look over to the deck as if inspecting it. “And you’ll order Thai while I lift weights and soak, is that it?”

“That’s about it, baby,” she says.

“And you don’t want a long engagement.”

“No, sir.”

I almost drop to my knees and propose then, but I don’t have the ring, and I’m still working with Peaches on her part of it all. “Well, I guess the appointment I made for next Friday at the custom jeweler won’t be a waste of time.”

Her eyes widen, and I chuckle. “I love you, Tara.”

“How long until you propose?” she asks.

“Honey.” I touch my lips to her forehead and then her cheek. “A man needs time to prepare something perfect for the woman he loves.”

She sighs, her fingernails in my hair like magic. Deep, Southern magic. “Okay,” she says. “I’ll be patient.”

“Heard anything about the cookbook?” I ask, still working my way toward her mouth. If I’d known how amazing egg-gathering could be, I’d have been here every night to help her with it. Of course, Tara has an erratic schedule, so sometimes her hens get their “pasturecize” in the morning and sometimes

the afternoon or evening. Or even a late-night hour out of the pen.

“Nothing yet,” she says, melting into my touch. “But Lila’s only had it a few days.” She cups my face in her hands and forces me to look at her. “I love you, Alec.”

My smile is soft and probably the realest it’s ever been. “I love you too...Boss.”



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**BOOK 3: JUST HIS
ASSISTANT**

ABOUT JUST HIS ASSISTANT

She's just his assistant, which is exactly how this Southern belle wants it. No spotlight. Not anymore. But as she struggles to learn her new role in his office—especially because Lance is the surliest boss imaginable—Jessie might just have to open her heart to show him everyone has a past they're running from.

Jessie:

Lance Byers is by far the meanest man in Carolina. Both of them. All of the South. Heck, the whole country. He makes demands I don't know how to fulfill, like, "Bring me those closing docs," or "Set up that open house."

I'm trying to learn as fast as I can, but the real estate market in Charleston is like a jet plane flying at three hundred miles per hour. It moves, and it moves fast.

Lance is smart, handsome if I can admit that out loud, and entrenched in this realtor lingo I don't understand. He even brings in someone to train me, but I'm pretty sure I'm failing him on a daily basis.

Failure? *That*, I understand.

I'm determined to figure this out, though. I have to, because my only other option is to run back to Momma and Daddy in that big house I hate.

I won't. I can't do it. Which means I have to figure out how to deal with Lance's attitude, learn what an escrow payment is, and hide my secrets all while smiling and entertaining clients.

When a ball somewhere gets dropped and I'm about to take the blame, I decide to try one more thing...bare my soul to the meanest man on the planet. Surprisingly, I learn that Lance is human after all, and hurting just as much as I am.

I suddenly want to take him under my broken wing and show him that there could be a second chance for both of us...if he doesn't fire me first.

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JESSIE

When my alarm goes off, I groan and roll over to silence it. It's been the longest, worst week of my life—but also the very best—and it's only Friday morning. It's almost October in Carolina now, and that means it's not exactly light at five-thirty in the morning.

I'm not one-hundred percent awake. But I will be, because my boss and I are meeting this morning to go over the open house happening tomorrow. It's my first open house—this week has been stuffed full of firsts for me—and I want to get it right.

There's very little that's gone right this week, other than the fact that I keep showing up—on time, thank you, thank you. I wasn't late for my interview last week either. I have the text from Lance Byers to prove it, though I've never told him that.

He still hired me, and I'm still one-thousand-percent determined to figure out the real estate business. "Don't be one of those people," I sleep-mutter to myself. I once dated a guy who said stupid stuff like, "One hundred and ten percent, Jess," for everything. It grated against my nerves then, and now *I'm* using the nonsensical figure.

There's only one hundred in a percentage. Anything above that just makes no sense.

I roll over and sit up, taking a moment to stretch left and right. The bed my uncle has provided for me is very much appreciated, but it is not very much comfortable. I've also put

on about twenty pounds since arriving in Charleston six months ago. All that sitting on Alec's couch with his parrot on my shoulder and eating the delectable food in his fridge hasn't exactly added to my physical fitness.

I don't care though, despite the looks Uncle Jack gives me when I butter my cornbread muffins in the morning. If he doesn't want me to eat them, why does he have his chef make them every dang day?

Because he can, I tell myself as I finally stand. I go through my morning routine, which includes complete skin and hair care, carefully inserting my contacts, doing my makeup, and the careful selection of clothing. Lance told me yesterday that I wear too much red, and I could only stand there in my very crimson dress and stare at him.

He'd sighed—a sound I have memorized after only four days of working with him—and gone back into his office. His has a door and walls—windows on two of those too—while mine doesn't. I just sit at a desk that faces his office, the wall across the hall to my right, and a huge bank of copy machines on my left.

If someone uses the machines, they can't actually see me, because there's a six-foot divider there. Still, when those things heat up, that hot air just comes right around the divider. I've said nothing to anyone about it, because we're Southern, and we understand heat.

A woman named Olive sits at the front podium-desk most of the time, and if the wall with the giant F&F wasn't behind her work area, I'd be able to see the front door and her desk too. As it is, though, I'm pretty isolated at my desk. I have a great view of a clock though—and Lance's door.

That's the most important part. I'm his assistant, and apparently that means I'm supposed to be able to read his mind. Somehow. He even said on the first day, *Jessica, I need you to anticipate my needs and have things ready for me.*

“Anticipate his needs.” I scoff. I know what men need, and that's constant fuel for their egos. At least all of the men I've

ever known or dated, with one rare exception in my best friend, Alec Ward.

Alec does like being the best though, and people constantly praise his food, myself included. So he probably has plenty of fuel for his ego. He also struck the jackpot when he got his job at Saucebilities, because they're now the top-rated catering service in Charleston, and he's about to get engaged to the owner and his boss, Tara.

I smile just thinking about the two of them, which is such a different reaction than what I'd been doing only a week ago. I carefully paint the pink lipstick onto my lips, pressing to really seal it in. I have permanent lip staining, but it requires some touch-ups from time to time. Lance gives me a *up-down-check-out-in-a-non-sexual-way* look every single time he sees me, and I know if I don't meet his requirements, he won't hesitate to tell me.

I finish up with my makeup and shimmy into a chestnut brown leather skirt I've borrowed from Tara. She said I could keep it, because she literally wears the same thing to work every single day and it doesn't fit her anymore. But it feels like charity to me. I don't need to be given clothes.

I go back into my bedroom and open the closet. I adore clothes, and I've kept all of mine that I brought from Beaufort when I left. Some of them I can't wear anymore due to that fourscore increase in poundage, but I can't get rid of them. Fabrics and patterns inspire me, and I reach out to touch an off-white dress with bright butterflies on it.

It makes me feel like I can spread my wings and fly too, and a smile moves through my soul. I could probably let out the dress and still wear it, though I'm not attending charity luncheons or non-profit fundraisers anymore.

No part of me yearns for that past life, with all the fake smiles, false eyelashes, and phony friendships. No, thank you. Not for me.

A wave of loneliness washes over me, and I close the closet. "It's Friday," I say. "You're only working half the day. You can do this." I started listening to affirmation podcasts a

couple of months ago, and I do feel better about myself and life in general.

I also know I won't only work half the day, because everything that Lance knows how to do instinctively, I don't. I have to learn it, and that takes twice as long. But I only have to be in his presence until lunchtime. Thankfully.

After that, Callie, one of my only friends here in Charleston, said she'd come over and help me institute a filing system. Right now, the precarious stacks of folders on my desk aren't really getting the job done right. Lance even eyed them yesterday like they were giant slime balls that might attack him next time he strode past my desk to use the restroom.

Honestly, the man is a like a big, black fly in a perfectly pretty glass of lemonade. He's the party-crasher. The killer of fun. He probably laughs when babies cry—that's how surly the man is.

I remind myself that he's in the top five real estate agents in terms of sales in the whole state of South Carolina, and I'm very lucky to be learning from him. "Very, very lucky," I tell myself as I leave my bedroom and head into the main part of the house. Hopefully, it'll still be too early for Uncle Jack or my cousin Rufus to be out and about.

They're about as insufferable as the hundred-degree temperatures on a Carolina Sunday, and I'm *this-close* to being able to move out. I need my own freedom, and in any spare time I have, I've been looking at apartments around the city.

The trouble is, everything is more than I can afford. I'm almost hoping Alec will get his plan together to propose to Tara, and then I can ask if I can sublet his apartment from him. He'll probably let me, and I can even say I'll take care of Peaches for him when I'm not at work.

The cornbread muffins sit on the kitchen counter, but I don't see any evidence of nearby humans. However, as I split and butter a muffin, footsteps approach. I know the sound of shiny, leather shoes that have literally never seen the outside of this mansion. They belong to Uncle Jack.

“There you are,” Uncle Jack says in that ultra-smooth voice of his. It’s like he polishes his voice box in one of those rock tumblers before using it. He swoops his medium brown hair to the side just-so, and I’ve never seen him with an ounce of stubble. Not even a half-ounce.

Where else would I be? I wonder, but I say, “Here I am. Good morning, Uncle Jack.” I step over to him and give him a kiss on both cheeks. I am a proper Southerner, after all, and I’ve been taught to respect my elders no matter what.

No matter that he tried to set me up with someone fourteen years older than me. No matter that Rufus keeps bringing home these little weasels for dinner, as if it’s an accident they’re all dressed up in designer suits and silk ties.

I may be from a rich family, but I’m not stupid.

“Thanks for always getting these muffins,” I say, slathering on more butter though it’s a little heavy-handed, even for me. I smile and take a big bite, immediately regretting it. Way too much butter, and I didn’t think that was even something that could happen. Still, I chew through the slippery butter-muffin in my mouth like it’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted.

My uncle gives me a terse smile, which is actually a step up from his tight ones. “I’m glad you like them.” He reaches for the coffee pot and frowns. “Oh, brother. Wesley didn’t make this in the last hour.” He looks around as if his personal assistant will be hovering there, waiting for his approval on the brew.

“I have to go,” I say, because the last thing I need is a display of Uncle Jack’s money. We get it, he’s got money. Enough to have a personal assistant make his coffee and a personal chef cater all of his meals. Enough to have a shed full of cars and motorcycles. Enough for a pool, a theater room, and that prison-like library.

Big freaking deal. BFD, as I like to say. Tons of people have money, and it doesn’t make them special, just like it doesn’t make Uncle Jack better than anyone else.

Outside, my sedan sticks out like a whore in church on Sunday, but I smile at her. I've nicknamed her Lucy, because Lucille Ball is a personal heroine of mine. She opened doors for women in comedy no one had before, and she was the first female to head a production studio.

Mama hates my idolization of Lucille Ball, but she's not here in Charleston, and I don't have to answer to her anymore. I get behind the wheel and pat it. "All right, Luce. Just to work and back today, I swear."

Sometimes we go all over town—or at least to Alec's—but since I'll spend the day at the agency and I have that open house tomorrow, I have no detours planned today.

She starts up on the second try, and her engine seems to chug along pretty nicely. I ease away from the front of the house and along the graveled drive until it turns into hard-packed dirt. Uncle Jack lives on the outskirts of the suburbs of Charleston, in a town called Sugar Creek. Barely in Sugar Creek, which is where Callie lives. *Lived*. She moved in with Dawson, who's in another small town kissing up against Charleston—Cottonhill.

Lucy and I go down the road, really gaining some momentum when we hit the road that leads into a more populated area of town. The downtown area of Sugar Creek is straight out of the historical South, and I love every old brick and all the crumbling façades.

Lucy doesn't seem to love the quaint buildings as much as I do, and she starts to sputter just as I go through the single stoplight. I ease her over right in front of the bakery, noting the steam starting to rise from the hood.

"That's not good." I get out of the car and stand on the sidewalk. I've seen people open the hoods of their cars, but I'm wearing a silky white blouse with orange trim on the sleeves to signal my support of autumn arriving. A single smudge will ruin the entire outfit.

This might be the end of Lucille Ball the Camry, but I still have to get to work. Callie doesn't own a car, and she and Dawson go to their downtown office together.

Lance lives in Cider Cove, and while it's not exactly on the way through Sugar Creek, it *is* on the way into the city. Since I left over two hours before I need to be at work, surely he'll still be home.

I pull out my phone, who I've named Missy Rings-A-Lot, though she doesn't, and tap when I see I've gotten a text from him. *Confirm that you've received the Hudson docs.*

"Would it kill him to say please?" I mutter to myself, and I tap on his name to call him. I'm sure I got the docs, and I can just tell him I did and then check my email. I mean, do people not get emails these days?

"Jessie," he says. "You got the docs?"

"Yes," I say. "But actually, Mister Byers, I'm calling for a favor."

"A...favor?" he asks as if he doesn't know the meaning of the word.

"Yes," I say, lifting my free hand to my mouth to bite the thumbnail. "My car broke down in Sugar Creek, right in front of the bakery." I turn and look at the building, which already has a line out the door. "I was wondering if you could stop by and pick me up on the way to the office. I can get a Carry home."

Why I can't get a Carry there, I'm not sure. Maybe because my bank account has seventeen dollars in it, and I tell myself in a stern voice, *no maple bacon doughnut for you, Jess* as the scent of the treat reaches my nose.

"Fine," Lance says as if I've asked him to rip off his arm and feed it to his dog. "I'll be there in an hour."

"Thank you," I say, my voice small and tinny. The call ends, and I face my nemesis: the bakery. A maple bacon bar won't be seventeen dollars, but I figure I better go take care of my money situation before treating myself to a second, fat-filled pastry that morning. After all, I do now have an hour to kill.

LANCE

I see my assistant, Jessica Dunaway—Jessie, she’s asked me to call her—sitting on a bench, her blonde hair reflecting the morning sunshine in so many haloes of gold light. I clench my fingers around the steering wheel, because I have a soft spot for blondes.

Scratch that. I have no soft spots anymore. When my fiancée left Charleston with my diamond ring on her finger, everything turned hard. My heart is hard. My chest always feels stuffed full of concrete, so my lungs can’t really get enough air. I’ve been pouring myself into the treadmill and the gym since Hadley’s departure, so my muscles are hard too.

Life, in general, has been hard for me lately.

I flip on my blinker and ease up to the curb in a spot several yards down from where Jessie sits with an older gentleman. She pinches off a piece of doughnut and tips her head back as she laughs. I can’t hear her, as I’ve got my windows up and the AC blowing. Watching the two of them feels like a scene from a peaceful movie, and I long for the easier days of this year, when everything seemed to be going my way.

A doughnut sounds amazing, and I get out of my truck and walk down the street in my casual Friday clothes—a black pair of slacks and a light blue button-up shirt. I’m wearing a red and white checkered tie that my mom gave me for my birthday at the beginning of the year, and I feel patriotic and put-together at the same time.

Jessie's wearing a gorgeous silk blouse that looks like God Himself reached down and touched it, making it glow white. Dark orange strips of fabric rim the sleeves, a very subtle nod to the calendar, which is almost to October. She's paired that with a brown leather skirt, and I lick my lips and swallow the sudden extra saliva in my mouth.

It's because of the mini pecan pie on the bench beside Jessie. Yeah, that's it. It's not because she's the type of woman that ticks every single box I've ever thought of when it comes to a girlfriend.

I'm not dating for a while. I need to figure out where I went wrong with Hadley, and where we deviated. I hadn't even known it, and that unsettles me the most.

I'm cursing Dawson's name when Jessie turns toward me. I'd told him I couldn't hire her, but my two previous assistants hadn't even lasted a week. Not even long enough for his wife and secretary—who's seriously one of the best in the city—to come train them. She's coming this afternoon, though Jessie wasn't the one to tell me.

Callie told me, because she said I better have Cayenne's there for lunch, and plenty of Skittles to help her get through the Friday afternoon at the real estate agency. I'd promised her she'd have it all, and I'm actually pretty proud of Jessie that she's made it through this whole week.

She has no idea what she's doing, but she tries. I can tell that much.

"Mister Byers," she says, rising to her feet. "I got this for you." She collects the miniature pecan pie and extends it toward me, as well as a friendly, if professional, smile.

I simply stare at it as I take it from her. "Thank you."

"Is this your sweetheart?" the older gentleman asks, his voice raspy like sandpaper over rough wood.

"Oh, no," she says waving her hand. She darts a look at him, back to me, and then to him. "He's my boss."

"She's just my assistant," I say, smiling at the older man. My heart pounces through my chest, and I hate that. I feel like

I'm falling for a minute, and then I look at Jessie again. "Should we get going?"

"Yes," she says. "I'm sorry you had to go out of your way. I'll use a Carry from now on." She tucks her hair behind her ear, but the thick lock just flops right back out. Her hair isn't quite long enough to tuck and have it stay, and I smile at the rebellious curls.

"It's fine," I say. "You'll have to deal with Cha-Cha's hair, though I did try to brush it off." I had, but only for a second at a stoplight on the way here, when I'd thought about it.

"Cha-Cha?" she asks, looking at me with those big, beautiful blue eyes.

"My dog," I say. "She's a corgi, and she's shedding her summer coat to grow her winter one." I open the passenger door for Jessie, because I'm not a complete ogre. I'm just on a female fast. I also don't mention that I open the door for Cha-Cha, and that I have to lift the stubby-legged pup onto the seat so she can ride up front with me.

"Interesting name," Jessie says with a smile and a glint in her eye that says she really thinks it's silly.

"I didn't name her," I say as she slides by me and gets in the truck. Her skirt pulls up as she steps up onto the runner, and I stare at the extra thigh I can see. My whole body flushes, and I feel like I'm sinking in quicksand. Everything is moving quickly around me, but I'm stuck moving at sloth-speed.

That's why I don't realize Jessie is stumbling before she's falling backward. All I have time to do is open my arms in a wide splay and catch her as she hits me. I grunt and fall to my knees, but that's as far as I have to go.

I'm touching so many inappropriate things, but I can't let go of her. Her body shakes even as she says, "I'm so sorry. My heel slipped."

I can't speak, so I just steady her as she gets to her feet, trembling all the while. She brushes her hands down the front of her body with her back to me, and after several long seconds, she turns to face me.

Bright pink patches decorate her cheeks, and she extends her hand toward me. “Did you rip your pants?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I say as I take her hand, not that I need her help to get up. I do need help with something else—my erratic heartbeat and the way my hands now have muscle memory of the feel of her body against them.

I manage to stand up, and I glance down at my slacks. Sure enough, there’s a rip in the knee on my left leg. Jessie sucks in a breath and starts to apologize again.

“Stop it,” I say, and I don’t mean to sound so much like a scoundrel. I sigh when our eyes meet and hers are filled with anxiety. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to bark that. I’m just...tired of listening to you apologize. It’s not necessary.”

The expression in her eyes changes to one of defiance, and she nods just once, barely any movement at all.

“Ready to try again?” I ask when I realize we’re just standing there staring at one another on the sidewalk.

“Do you need to go home and change?” she asks.

“No,” I say. “I have extra clothes in the office.” I indicate the truck. “I’ll help you up this time.”

“My heel just slipped,” she says again, turning. This time, she does grab onto the bar just inside the truck, and I put my hand on her hip to balance her. She doesn’t flinch, and my skin tingles though I’m really just touching the leather on her skirt.

She makes it into the passenger seat, and I close her door for her. I go around the front of the truck, straightening my sunglasses and wishing I could straighten out my thoughts and my pulse. Well, maybe not my pulse. A straight heartbeat indicates death, and I don’t want to be dead.

I just don’t want to be duped again.

I get behind the wheel and cast a quick glance at Jessie. As I buckle my seatbelt, I say, “All good?”

“Yes, sir,” she says. We ease away from the curb, and she clears her throat. “Who named your dog if you didn’t?”

Everything tightens again, and I work to release it, the way I've been learning to do in therapy. "My ex-fiancée." It's my turn to clear my throat. "The first one."

"Oh." Jessie adjusts her purse and grabs the pecan pie as it starts to slide. "How many have you had?"

"Just two," I say, though that's a lot of fiancées, in my opinion. Especially if you can't get them to become wives.

"Ever been married?"

"No," I say. "You?" I'm not sure why I ask. Seems like the right thing to do. Someone asks you how you are, you answer and then ask them how they are. Right?

"No, sir," she says. "Never been engaged either, much to my mama's disappointment."

"Yes, well, it's not all that fun to tell your mama that your fiancée has called off the wedding either." I'm aware of how dark my voice comes out, but I don't know how to lighten it. Hadley left four months ago, and I feel like I should be further along than I am. The truth is, I have good days and bad days. Some days where I think I'm going to be okay, and I could probably, definitely, take a new woman to dinner. Some days where I think I'll never figure out who I am and what I want, and getting it is never going to happen.

Today is kind of in the middle, to be honest.

"I'm sure it's not," Jessie says. "I'm sorry, Lance."

"Jessie," I say in a warning voice.

"Oh, sugar honey iced tea," she says. "I apologized again. I'm sor—" She clamps her mouth shut and claps one hand over it. She isn't one of those women with fake nails and fake eyelashes and a fake chest. I know, as I basically just felt her up while she fell backward.

I smile and look away from her before I drive us right off the road. I need to get us back on safe ground, and there's nothing safer for me than work. "All right," I say, maybe adding on a little thickness to my Southern accent. "What did you think of the Hudson docs?"

“Oh, uh, I thought they looked good,” she says, and I hide my smile. She has no idea what the Hudson docs even are, and in all honesty, I shouldn’t expect her to.

So teach her, I think but that’s very dangerous ground. If I start to teach her, that means I care about her, and I absolutely, cannot—*will not*—start to care about Jessie Dunaway as more than just my assistant.

But I do want to have a good, competent assistant. I sigh as I turn toward her. “It was a letter of intent to purchase,” I say. “Shiela Hudson wants that riverfront property I showed her a couple of weeks ago, and she doesn’t want anyone to slide in an offer before she can get hers in.”

Jessie turns toward me, and she looks like she’s ready to soak up every single thing I say. “Okay,” she says. “Is there an acronym for that?”

I grin at her. “Yes, Jessie. LOI.”

“LOI,” she repeats, plucking her phone from her purse and starting to type a note into it. “Got it. Was there anything else in the docs?”

I like that she’s eager to learn, and I shake my head. “Not in that email.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, going back to her phone as I continue the drive toward the downtown agency. I tell myself that telling her about a letter of intent was not an attempt to get closer to her. It wasn’t flirting, because that would be pathetic with a capital P.

It was just me being...nice. Yes, I do know how to be nice, and I’m proud of myself for achieving it so early in the morning.

JESSIE

My brain is full of acronyms and words like “closing docs” and “escrow lost” as I get out of Lance’s enormous truck. He has a front spot near Finley & Frank, because he’s a managing partner. I didn’t realize that until Wednesday, but luckily, I only managed to wedge my toes into my mouth before I figured it out.

There’s nothing wrong with my leather skirt as I follow him up the sidewalk, but I keep brushing at it anyway. He’s the one with the rip in his pants, though his stride is sure and even. Everything about the man comes across that way, and I can’t help giving him a smile as he opens the door, pauses, and waits for me to go through first.

Southern gentleman, enters my mind, but I quickly try to banish it. I can’t even imagine what Mama will do if I text her and say I have my eye set on a successful, good-looking real estate agent in Charleston. She’d probably look them all up and text me their pictures one at a time, gauging how fast I respond to determine which one it is.

That brings a small smile to my face, and I greet Olive with it as Lance and I approach the front desk.

“Mister Byers,” she says, sliding a red folder onto the countertop. That’s for me, and I know what’s in it. I may have only been at the agency for four days, but I know red folders are Lance’s important documents for the day. It’s my job to make sure he sees them, signs them, and gets them out to wherever they go by five o’clock.

The pressure behind my eyes double, and I glance at Lance, literally seeing red.

“You have a conference call in fifteen minutes,” Olive continues seamlessly. I wonder if my voice sounds that polished and professional, and I highly doubt it. I’m a little nasally on the best of days, though I’ve never had anyone complain about the timbre of my voice.

Except Mama, of course. The woman can complain about how much money she has in the bank, as if it’s some great burden she carries alone. I mentally roll my eyes while sliding the red folder off the counter and into my hands.

Olive reaches for something on the lower desk. “And this message came in for you.” She looks up, clear worry in her eyes. She hands the slip of paper to Lance, and while I have fast eyes, they’re not that fast.

Lance frowns at the paper, fists it, and tosses it onto the counter. “Tell her not to call again, should she choose to do so.”

“Sir,” Olive says.

“Olive,” Lance warns. He doesn’t slide his eyes toward me at all. It’s like I’m not even there. “Send the call through with Kyle when it comes in. Jessie.”

“Mm hm, yes,” I say, though I’m not sure why. Perhaps to remind myself—and everyone else—that I’m in the room.

“I need all the Hudson docs before the call.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, not even sure what that entails.

He does give me a look this time, and I nod like I’ll have it all in hand. No problem. Yes, sir. I really want to grab that tiny wad of paper and find out what the message was that made him go from pecan-tartlet-happy to stormcloud-over-a-picnic grouchy in less than a second.

He walks past me and toward his office, and Olive’s eyes round. “Lance,” she says, but he just keeps going. “You have a problem...”

He enters his office and closes the door without turning or looking back.

“...with your pants,” Olive says. She trains her wide eyes on me, and I simply give her a smile.

“I like these cat’s eye glasses,” I say, indicating hers. “The purple is amazing too.”

“He had holes in his pants.”

I brush at my leather skirt unconsciously. My feet shift. “Uh, yes. Lucille Ball broke down this morning, you know?”

Olive’s surprise turns to confusion.

“She’s my car,” I say quickly. “Lance—Mister Byers—had to give me a ride to work. He has this huge truck, and I maybe couldn’t quite get in it. My skirt is a smidge tight.” I laugh like me falling backward into Lance’s arms is the funniest thing since Bette Harold came to town and charmed us all with her Southern stand-up comedy.

In truth, pure humiliation still rifles through me.

“Why does he drive that huge truck anyway?” I ask, glancing toward the frosted glass in his door. Lance Byers, ABR, ALC stare back at me in gold. *Gold*. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my name in gold. Maybe blue gel pen, when I was fourteen.

“Lance bought the truck a month or two ago,” Olive says, her eyes dropping back to her desk. She shuffles things around like she’s suddenly very busy and can’t talk to me. She’s always been kind to me around the office, and I don’t want that to change. “He said he needed it to move furniture, stage homes, that kind of thing.”

“Makes sense,” I say brightly, and that brings Olive’s eyes back to mine. Surprised again. Probably at the level of enthusiasm I just displayed for why someone would buy a truck.

“Okay,” I say with a laugh that sounds nervous. “I have a lot of docs to print.” It’ll take me the twelve minutes I have

before the conference call just to figure out which docs to print, and I see some yelling in my future.

I glance at the tiny, wadded phone message, and Olive swipes it off the counter. I turn on my heel like I've joined the marching band and dash down the hall and around the bank of copiers to my desk.

I need twelve months to sort through everything here, but I take a deep breath and focus. Hudson docs. I only need to find and print all the Hudson docs.

I open my email, because I know Lance sent me something about the account today, and everything I need is probably there.

The top email reads *Here are all the Hudson docs. One copy each, please.*

It's from Lance, and the black, bold letters stare me in the face. My heart begins to pound like a jackrabbit jumping away from a fox, and I have no idea what to do with that please.

Please?

"Jessie," someone says, and I flinch away from my staring contest with my computer screen.

"Yes." I clear my throat and look up. Right into Lance's baby blues. I jump to my feet. "Yes."

"I don't hear the printer whirring," he says, knocking twice on the edge of my desk. "Right now, please."

"Yes, sir," I say for probably the tenth time that morning. I tell myself it's not an apology, and I hurry to get his email open and the docs printing. Eight minutes later, I take them into him, along with his red folder of must-do's for the day and hand everything to him.

As I turn to leave, he says, "I need you in here for the call."

I stall, the first part of his sentence every woman's dream. *I need you.* I can imagine him saying it right before he lowers his head and kisses me. My face flushes, and I nearly trip over my own feet as I turn back to him.

“You do?”

He looks up from the red folder, his pen still scratching out his signature. “You want to learn real estate, don’t you?”

My mouth gapes like a fish out of water. *Blub, blub*. “I’m sorry?” Mama would’ve turned British and used, “Pardon?” but I can only stare with my fish-lips flapping.

Lance gives me a sly smile, as if he can see through my clothes to my underwear underneath. “We’re not apologizing, remember? Go get your laptop and get back in here. Once the door closes and the call starts, the offer expires.”

I stand there for another moment, and then I fly back to my desk, collect my laptop, a yellow legal pad, and a black pen. I’m at his door when Olive’s voice comes over his intercom. “Mister Byers, I have Kyle Corison on the phone.”

“Great,” Lance says. “Send him over.” He sets aside the items in the red folder and nods to me. “Close the door, Jess.”

I do, wondering if I’ve confined myself to a lion’s den or a day at Disney World. Right now, with the look of determination on Lance’s face, it’s a toss-up.

“I BROUGHT REINFORCEMENTS,” CALLIE HOUSER SAYS AS SHE sails into the real estate office. I turn from the counter, where I’ve been going over a scheduling thing with Olive.

A smile pops onto my face at the sight of her. She is just so pretty, and so kind, and so dang smart. I tell myself I’m smart too—I’ve just never had the opportunity to prove it to anyone quite the way Callie has.

She holds three to-go cups of coffee in a carrier, the branding for Legacy Brew evident. As she sets them on the counter, and we all reach for a cup, I say, “You’re a lifesaver.”

“And right on time,” Olive says, taking the cup marked with caramel. “Are you sure you don’t need a new job?”

Callie giggles and shakes her head. “I like working with my husband.”

“Yeah?” Olive asks dubiously. “Because I’d kill mine if I had to do that.” She grins, takes a sip of her hot drink, and settles back into her chair. I switch my smile from her to Callie.

“Come on back,” I say, inhaling the earthy, strong scent of the coffee Callie’s brought for me. It’s just after lunchtime, but Callie never comes empty-handed. Besides, for what she’s going to be teaching me, I’m going to need the caffeine buzz.

I step around the wall with all its fancy lighting on the ampersand between the Finely and the Frank, and move past the copiers. One of them is shooting papers the color of canaries into the tray, but no one’s there babysitting it. The *chunk-chunk-chunk* at lightning speed makes me wince, and I take a long draw of my coffee before I even round my desk.

“Wow,” Callie says—more like yells—above the shockingly loud copier. She eyes it like it might turn into a wolverine and attack at any moment. I’ve done the same, so I get the feeling. No, I’ve eyed it like I have a pitchfork in my trunk I know how to stab with really well. I don’t, but the thought of going after that copier until it’s last replication wheezes into the tray has crossed my mind a time or two.

Or twenty-nine.

Callie stalls at the corner of my desk, pure horror entering her expression. If the copier doesn’t kill her this afternoon, it looks like the manila folders and stacks of paper on my desk might do the job. “What is going on here?” she asks, her voice getting punctuated with the *chunk-cha-ch-chunk* of paper hitting the tray and falling into the pile.

“This is my desk,” I say, pushing aside a box of paper clips to make room for my cappuccino.

“No.” Callie shakes her head as if I’ve committed some sort of assistant assassination. Her lips press into a tight line. “No wonder Lance glares at you all day.”

I did tell her that, but I'm not sure what my desk has to do with it.

I indicate the huge pile of folders nearest her hip. "Those came right there in that spot. I *inherited* this mess."

Callie sighs—or it looks like she does. I can't actually hear her above the copier—and sets her drink on top of the folders. "Honey, you *inherit* diamonds and estates. Files, you shred or put in a drawer." She smiles at me in a kind way, and I want to scream *help* at her.

Help me, I beg silently instead.

Callie must be really good at reading minds—or maybe women's faces with wide I'm-trapped-in-the-headlights eyes—because she continues around the desk and says, "Okay. This is what we're going to do."

She proceeds to walk me through making piles. Shred. To-file. Working documents. Current clients. To-do daily. To-do this week.

Somewhere in there, the copier finishes clunky-chunk-ing, and at the end of a couple of hours, we have the trio of filing cabinets in my space labeled and organized. She feeds another file into the shredder, the sound of it doing about the same to my nerves.

My desk looks like Marie Kondo has shown up, and it currently holds two trays Callie's labeled with *Daily* and *Weekly*. They're empty, which makes me feel so accomplished.

She perches on the edge of my desk and finishes her coffee. Mine's long gone, and my head pounds in a way I haven't felt in a while. I used to get these types of headaches whenever Mama would say, "I've asked Stan to make us a nice dinner tonight."

That was code for, "I've asked a man twice your age to come eat with us in the hopes of marrying you off."

Happiness accompanies the freedom I feel as I collapse into my desk chair. "Lance is going to be so impressed."

Callie smiles and reaches into her purse to pluck out a bag of Byrd's cookies. She had those all this time and didn't get them out? I eye her like she's just escaped from prison and wants a ride somewhere.

"He does like things neat and nice," she says.

"Ninety-degree Lance is what I call him," I say, taking an offering gingersnap with a smile. I immediately want to suck the words back into my mouth. Callie's friends with Lance, and I shouldn't be bad-mouthing my boss.

Callie tips her head back and laughs, a reaction I wasn't expecting. It sends relief through me, and she offers me a handful of candy. I let her sprinkle some Skittles into my palm while she finishes giggling, and then she looks over her shoulder toward Lance's closed door.

"He only has this now," she says, a somber quality entering her voice.

"This?"

"The real estate firm," Callie says, meeting my eye again. "Hasn't he told you?"

Lance and I have spent very little time discussing personal things, so I just shake my head. "I don't need to know."

"His fiancée—"

"She said she doesn't need to know, Cal."

Callie jumps, nearly going pretzel as she twists to look at Lance behind her. I didn't see him ninja-up on us either, and I too leap to my feet. I adjust my skirt and run my fingers through my hair, as if I care what the blond god thinks about my looks. We've just spent hours getting dirty and sweaty, and I don't.

I do *not*.

Lance wears a look of complete disapproval on his face and nods to my phone. "I've called you four times. Why is your phone on silent?"

LANCE

I'm seriously second-guessing my decision to teach Jessie anything about real estate. Maybe third-guessing. Fourth and fifth-guessing as Callie launches into a lecture about how she's spent all afternoon in my copier-infested office helping my assistant, and I have no right to glare at her with the force of gravity.

I do, actually, as she was about to tell my assistant personal things she has no right to tell. I simply roll my eyes and step toward my desk. "Come on, Cha-Cha." My corgi waits at my calf, as usual, and we go into the office.

"You brought your dog," Jessie says, her heels following me into the office. "Hello, sweetie. Oh, yes, you're so sweet, aren't you?" She crouches down and puts her face right next to Cha-Cha's. The corgi goes into Bliss with a capital B and gives me a look that says she wishes I would pay this much attention to her.

I give her an eye roll too, because it's not like I haven't walked her, fed her, given her fifteen body rubs that day, and then fed her bites of my hamburger as I ate lunch. Not only that, but she got to ride in the truck, the window down, and her funny face out into the wind as she sniffed all the smells of the city.

Jess looks up at me, and I lean against my desk. She straightens, her easiness with the dog disappearing as she smooths her clothes. "What are you doing here? I thought you were taking this afternoon off?"

I sigh, my lips almost fluttering the way a displeased horse's would. I manage to pull back on the ferocity of the sigh before then, thankfully. The last thing I need to do is turn into an equine in front of my pretty assistant.

She's just your assistant, I tell myself sternly. It doesn't matter what she looks like, as long as she gets the job done.

"A prospective new client called," I say.

"Did you see my desk?" Her eyes light up then, the way my soul did when the call had come in from Thurston Meadows. I have plenty of clients, and far too many to take on another one right now, especially one as articulate and sharp-tongued as Mr. Meadows.

But my mind had immediately seized upon Jessie, and then all kinds of trains had swarmed, all of them crashing and derailed and creating complete chaos in my head. For some reason, out of all the thoughts in my head, I'd plucked out the one that told me to call Jess and find out if she wanted to take on a client of her own.

"I did not," I say.

"Come see." She gestures for me to follow her, and since Cha-Cha doesn't seem to care that she's on a leash and has been *my* dog for six years as she follows the energetic Jess back into the hallway, I go too.

She brandishes both hands toward it now, indicating where Callie has sat behind the computer. "Ta-da!"

The surface of it can actually be seen, and surprise fills me. "Wow," I say, not wanting to be rude.

"We filed everything," Jess says in a rush. "Shredded stuff you don't need and kept all of our other clients in the cabinets." She indicates those as if I've never seen one before. Her face glows, and I find I want to know so much more about her than I currently do.

"Callie set me up with two trays—things I need to accomplish that day, and things I need to finish by the end of the week."

“And,” Callie practically yells, pinning me with her bright blue eyes. I hate it when she looks at me like that. She puts both palms against the desk and pushes herself to a stand as if she needs her hands to do so. She looks around innocently, as if really searching for something. “There’s no Cayenne’s here, and it’s well past lunchtime.”

I give her a smile, because she really is an amazing woman. Dawson’s the luckiest man in the world to have been tamed by her—plus, he got her all the way to the altar, something I haven’t been able to do with anyone.

I glance at my oversized watch. “Ten minutes,” I say. “It’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“Why are you here?” Jess asks me again, coming to my side. She looks up at me, and I can’t have her doing that. The scent of her perfume follows the direction of her gaze and goes right into my nose.

The flowery, soft scent addles my mind, and I blink at her. “Uh, a new client called.” I clear my throat. “I can’t take them on, but I don’t want to turn them down.”

Jessie blinks at me. Blink-blink-blink. Her eyelashes are really long, and then her perfectly pink lips curve up. I can’t even form thoughts.

Her mouth moves, but I’m not sure what she says. My phone rings, and I jolt with the buzzing in my pocket and the jazzy, snapping pop-music that indicates it’s Dawson on the other end of the line.

“Is that your ringtone?” Callie asks with a snicker.

I pull out the phone to silence it. I answer the call and say, “I’ll call you back in five minutes,” and hang up before Dawson can say a word. He knows his wife is here; he knows I’m not working this afternoon; he probably wants to hit the rec center and play basketball or pickleball.

Callie’s face is turning bright red, and I look from her to Jess, whose grin is now a mile wide. “What?” I demand.

“I’m pretty sure that was Britney Spears,” she says. “No?”

Embarrassment shoots through me, and I pray Dawson never calls me again. Unfortunately, his ringtone fills the air again, the high-pitched tones of *Oops, I Did It Again* making me cringe.

I want to throw the phone in the shredder and escape the state, but I stand there, holding my ground. “I happen to like pop music,” I say.

Callie bursts out laughing, as does Jessie, but I don’t care. I can see the irony of liking Britney Spears when I’m this polished, buttoned-up version of my step-father, the man who knew more about real estate and the market in South Carolina than anyone who’d ever lived. I’ve never seen him wear a shirt without a collar, and while he has a lot of admirable qualities that I’ve worked hard to emulate, he definitely needs to relax in the clothing department.

I start to chuckle despite myself, and blast Dawson from here to Mars, he calls me *again*. This time, fearing he’s suffering from a shark bite alone, I hum along to the Britney Spears song for a measure or two before answering his call with, “What?”

“You hang up on me?”

“I said I’d call you back in five minutes,” I say.

“No, you answered, and then promptly hung up.”

“Okay,” I say, deciding not to argue with him. “What’s going on?”

“Do you need five minutes?”

Callie and Jess probably do to get over the stupid-laughter they’re still in the throes of, but I turn away and say, “No, what’s up?”

“I need a second pair of eyes on an ad campaign,” he says. “I figure you’re not doing anything this afternoon...”

I glance over my shoulder, then refocus out the window in my office. “All right,” I say, pulling a page from his wife’s book. “But I want Alec’s steak bites with blue cheese for dinner, so you better make a call the moment we hang up.”

“Steak bites with blue cheese,” Dawson repeats. “I’ll get him to make those asparagus things with the bacon too.”

“Vegetables?” I grin at the sunshine through the window, starting to feel slightly like myself again. He comes and goes, and while he’s here, he doesn’t stay for long. The moment the call ends, the shelled, hollowed-out version of myself that I’ve become will return.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Dawson says with a laugh. “Especially not Callie.” His voice turns hard and all traces of laughter disappear. “If she knows I actually like vegetables, it’ll be all I hear about for weeks.”

Voices beyond my office door distract me, and I turn that way to see the man wearing a Cayenne’s shirt turn the corner. Perfect.

“I need twenty minutes,” I tell him. “Your office?”

“See you soon.”

The call ends, and Jess fills the doorway. “A new client called?”

“Yes.” I take a deep breath, knowing there’s one more delivery, and I’d like to get out of here before the rainbow screams start. “I can’t take on a full client. I was thinking... you could take the lead. I’ll advise you.”

Her blue eyes round, and those pink lips nearly undo me for a second time today as she asks, “Take the lead?”

“Candygram!” a man yells, and then he appears directly behind Jessie. She turns, and we both stare at the man wearing the colors of ROY G BIV from head to toe and bearing not just one case of the rainbow-colored candy that Callie loves so much. Not simply two. But six.

“Skittles for days!” he announces as if royalty has arrived.

A shriek fills the air, and I can’t help grinning again. I step closer to Jessie, pressing in close behind her. “I told her I’d make sure she had her Cayenne’s and her Skittles.”

“You delivered,” she says.

“She helped you?”

“So much,” Jess says, turning toward me slightly. Our faces are far too close together for a man on a female-fast. The thoughts—biscuits and gravy, my thoughts. They’re Thoughts with a capital T, and none of them support my current dietary habits.

“I’m glad,” grinds through my throat, and then Cha-Cha joins her surprisingly loud barks to the shrieking and hugging Callie’s doing in the hallway.

“Lance,” she yells. “Get out here.”

“We’ll talk more about the client at the open house,” I say. “Okay?”

“Sure,” she says, and I might need to get my eyesight checked, because it sure looks like she swallows before she ducks her head and vacates the doorway.

“THE ORANGE IS TOO BRIGHT,” I SAY THE INSTANT DAWSON pulls out the mocks.

“I knew it.” He sighs and runs his hand down his face. “Fred thought it would make it all pop.”

“All it does is give me a headache,” I say, though that’s because those train-thoughts have been crashing into my skull for hours now. “And then go—wow, that’s a lot of orange.” I lift the soda I stopped to get to my mouth and take a long pull on the straw. The carbonation and caffeine should help me through this evening. Cha-Cha collapses in the corner of Dawson’s office, clearly worn out from all the shrieking and patting that happened at the agency.

I give her a smile and look back at the mock. “Everything else looks good. Maybe the word ‘occasion’ is a little too small.”

“Yep,” Dawson says. “What else?” He sits back down at his desk and starts to type. The keyboard is one of those

gaming ones, and it makes horrible clacking sounds as his fingers practically assault the keys.

“The green outline on the bird needs to go,” I say.

“Mm hm.”

“Maybe a light blue instead of the orange.”

“You don’t think that will make the darker blue words less...amazing?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “You’ll have to see.”

“Next?”

I tilt my head to the side, as if I’m really thinking hard. “The colors on this are so wonky.”

“That’s their business,” Dawson says. “Keep going.”

“I’m thinking of asking my assistant to dinner,” I say.

“Okay, and—” Dawson cuts off, and so does the typing. “What?”

“Yeah,” I say with a huge sigh. “I think you go back to the drawing board on this.” I look at him and stoop for my dog’s leash. “I have to go.”

“You can’t go,” Dawson says as Cha-Cha gets to her feet.

“Come on, Chachy.”

“Lance,” Dawson says.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I walk out of his office as he calls, “But the steak bites aren’t here yet.”

I keep going, and Dawson runs after me. He beats me to the door and presses against it with his palm. “You’re not leaving until the food comes. Now get back in my office and start talking.” His dark eyes give me zero room for negotiation, and I’m a pro at such things.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t care. I have a secretary that became my wife. I have some experience with this. Now get going.”

He's not going to budge on this, so I turn around my corgi and head back into his office. Maybe if I give him a few details, he can help me figure out how to handle Jess at the open house tomorrow in a way that doesn't make me look or sound like a complete fool.

JESSIE

I lean against the live oak, feeling the hundred years of its life flowing through me. That's probably really the pink drink I'm sipping, as I read an article once about how pink things make us feel better. Not just pink things, specifically drinks.

So instead of the buttery corn muffins I usually eat in the morning, today, I asked Wesley to make me a strawberry banana smoothie. He did, and I finish the dregs of it next to the live oak.

Lance hasn't shown up yet, and I remind myself that I came out to the road at least forty-five minutes before our agreed-upon time. I didn't want him to have to drive down the dirt lane, past all the billions of live oaks, the emerald green grass, to the columned mansion. I don't need that drama in my life. At least not with Lance.

The image of him comes up in my brain, even when I try to push him out. That blond hair that he keeps so perfect. Those blue eyes. I swear sometimes they can cut through icebergs, and sometimes they look like they could radiate sunshine the way the sky does.

He's strong, and tall, and I shiver when I think about him stepping so close to me in the doorway of his office yesterday. It had taken every ounce of my willpower not to sag into him and just let some of his body warmth sink into mine when we touched.

My mouth curves when I think about his horrible ties. Well, the ties themselves aren't horrible. They're actually quite expensive. He just doesn't know how to make them match anything he's wearing. I wonder, not for the first time, if he's colorblind, but I've heard him ask for blue folders and the other day, when someone needed to sign something, he said, "Sign on all the red flags."

Of course, I'd put the flags on, and Lance could've been guessing. He doesn't seem like the type to guess at much of anything, IDT. I don't think. I've only known him for a couple of weeks, but nope, he's not a guesser.

I raise my cup to my lips again, though the smoothie is mostly gone. I suck the straw anyway, getting a little hint of the pink.

A horn honks, and I jam the straw straight up and into the roof of my mouth. A curse flies from my lips at the same time Lance says, "Sorry, I thought you saw me."

I drop the cup, because I don't want to take it with me to the open house. The taste of blood touches my tongue, and my hand moves to my mouth to see how bad it is. Why do we do that? I know I'm bleeding. Why do I have to see it too?

I step away from the tree, annoyed with myself for letting my thoughts—fantasies, if I'm being honest—run away from me. I was so distracted thinking about Lance's eyes, and his silly ties, and what I think about him.

"It's fine." I take a professional step, whatever that means, toward him, the rumble of the truck engine now filling my ears. The stupid things betrayed me, and I tell myself to focus today. I have to, because Lance spent a large part of last night texting me about what we needed to talk about today before the open house. Then I need my game face for the event.

I'm not going to fall getting into Mammoth Truck. *Not today, Satan*, I think as I reach for the door handle. "Thanks for coming to pick me up," I say as I open the door. Lance hasn't gotten out of the truck, and he smiles at me from behind the steering wheel. I've ditched the heels for today's event, and I step up onto the runners of the truck in my ballet flats.

They go amazingly well with a black denim skirt with chunky buttons down the front, none of which are the same shape or size. Some are made of wood, some metal, one even a bright turquoise.

I pull the skirt straight and glance over to Lance, catching him eyeing the skirt. “I like that skirt,” he says, and the words sound like he put them through a meat grinder first.

I look at it again. “Thanks.” I take in his clothes too—khaki slacks, mint green polo, no tie. “I’ve never seen you without a collared shirt and tie.”

“It’s the weekend,” he says.

“You look very nice,” I say, facing forward again.

He clears his throat, doesn’t say thank you, and puts Mammoth in drive. “You got your paycheck okay?”

Relief punches me, though it’s a good question, with an even better answer. “Yes, thank you,” I say. Now any maple bacon doughnuts I buy won’t be what costs me a twenty-dollar overdraft fee.

“What ever happened with your car?” he asks.

I wave my hand. “Oh, my cousin went and got it. He took it to a shop for me.” I make it sound like the repairs for Lucille Ball won’t take long and will be no big deal, but the truth is, Lucy might be on her last leg. Her final breath. I ignore the pinch in my chest, reminding myself that it’s just a car.

She’s not just a car to me, and I clench my fingers together, wishing I had a pencil in my hand.

“You live with your cousin, then?” Lance doesn’t look at me as he asks.

“Yes,” I say, my voice turning a little more guarded. “And my uncle.”

He nods and doesn’t say anything else.

“You live alone?” I ask, immediately regretting it. Of course he lives alone. The absence of two fiancées is my first clue.

“No,” he says, almost a bark. “There’s Cha-Cha.”

“Oh, right.” I flash him a smile that feels way too tight along the edges. My fingers wind around one another, and I hate it.

“Nervous?”

“Yes,” I say. “I’ve never done an open house, and you haven’t said one word about taking on clients of my own.” A surge of word vomit rises up my throat, and I can’t swallow fast enough. Last time this happened, I left Beaufort and haven’t been back.

“I can’t take on clients of my own, Lance. The very idea is preposterous.”

“Sure, you can.”

“I don’t even know what half the acronyms mean.” My hand gestures wildly also of its own accord. “The ones I do are only because I’ve been studying at night.” My chest heaves wildly, and let me tell you, that’s not a good look for me.

“Jess,” he says, and I like how he uses my nickname. Almost like we’re friends. Almost like we could be more.

I don’t stop, however. Because he’s lost his ever-loving mind if he thinks I can take on a client, even with him at my side. “I could never have printed off all the docs you needed for that meeting yesterday. I didn’t even know how to file the folders sitting on my desk until Callie showed up.”

She’d gripped me by the shoulders after Lance had hugged her and said she was very welcome for the six cases of Skittles he’d bought for her. And all that chicken, which I had eaten with her after he’d left to go help Dawson with something.

She’d told me I could do this job.

She’d made me promise not to quit until at least a month had gone by.

I’d believed her then, but now? Sitting in Mammoth with some horrible pop song on the radio? I don’t believe her.

“Jess,” he says again.

“No,” I say. “Don’t *Jess* me. We all have strengths, and one of mine is not LOIs, or—or FSBO or FMV or any of the Fs!” I take a deep breath, my throat so dry. I need more pink to drink.

“Are you done?” he asks.

I take another breath and blow it out slowly. “Yes.”

He makes a right turn, and magically, the house that we’re showing that day appears on the right. I haven’t kept very good track of the time or the turns. He pulls down the street and parks in front of a house two down from ours and throws Mammoth into park.

“Why don’t you have a place of your own?” he asks.

I’m so tired from my outburst that I just reach up and touch the corner of my eye. I’ve done my makeup to perfection today, and I’m not going to ruin it by arguing with my boss. Or crying. That would be akin to returning to Beaufort and telling Mama to “make a nice dinner.”

“Because, Lance,” I say. “I’m poor. I don’t have enough money to get a place of my own.” I look over to him and add, “Yet,” in a loud voice. I remind myself that I’m Jessie Dunaway, and I don’t need to do anything to impress Lance, except keep the to-do basket empty by getting all my work done.

He gives me a small smile and nods. “You’ll get there, Jess.” He exhales and reaches for his seatbelt. “Come on. I suppose we better go see how things look inside. The Morgans left a few weeks ago.”

He slides from Mammoth and opens the back door while I’m still caught in the jaws of the seatbelt. I press the button, and still, it doesn’t release the clasp. Lance gathers the things he’s brought, and the back door slams.

I’m still wrestling with the seatbelt, my heartbeat flapping against the back of my tongue when Lance opens my door. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trapped,” I say. “Mammoth won’t release the stupid buckle.”

“I think it’s the catch you need to release,” Lance says, those blue eyes sparkling like clear water on an even clearer day.

“Really?” I snap at him.

“What’s Mammoth?”

More humiliation drives through me. “I, uh, named your truck Mammoth.”

Lance chuckles and bends to set the basket he’s holding on the ground. “Let me help you.”

“You have a very large truck.”

“Mm.” He leans over me, and I press my back into the seat, though every cell in my body urges me to wrap my arms around him and take a deep breath of his cologne, the rain-crisp scent of his body wash, and the cottony freshness in that perfect polo.

“Mammoth is brand new,” he says, the warmth of his chest flowing right over my lap. “I can’t believe he has a flaw already.” He’s totally making fun of me, but I can’t get my voice to work right now.

Thankfully, Lance struggles with the stubborn seatbelt too. He grunts as he puts quite a bit of pressure on my hip. “I’ve almost got it.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I can try it.”

He pulls on the shoulder part of the belt, which tightens the strap across my lap, which makes my breath suck right in. “Lance,” I say.

“I’ve almost got it.” He grunts again, and this time when he pulls and the belt doesn’t release, the back of his wrist flies up toward the ceiling of the truck. He makes a terrible groaning sound, and still the seatbelt stays clasped.

Now his breath heaves, and his eyes meet mine. The moment lengthens, and I wonder what he’d do if I took his face in both of my hands and kissed him.

“How hard is it to replace a seatbelt?” he asks.

“I have no idea.” I blink, and I see myself stuck in this beast of a truck forever. Lance will have to bring me my meals, and somehow, I’ll have to figure out how to take care of my business. Hairdressers will have to come to Mammoth to cut my hair, and I’ll die in this skirt.

At least it’s cute, and I glance down at the buttons. They bring me back to reality, as does the very distinct flicking, metallic snick of a pocketknife opening.

“I guess I’ll find out,” Lance says, and the next thing I know, he starts sawing at the belt that goes across my shoulder. When that one releases, he works at the one near my hip. Finally, he steps back and offers me his hand.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Not apologizing,” he says, his lips quirking up. “Though the number of problems you’ve had with...Mammoth is making me rethink giving you a ride again.”

I put my hand in his and manage to get out of the truck without making a fool of myself. He picks up the basket, and I say, “Aren’t you Little Red Riding Hood?”

He chuckles and flips open the top. “Just a few things that make open houses go better.”

I spy chocolate chip cookie dough, the kind that comes in a chub. “We’re baking cookies?”

“Yes,” he says. “It makes people think of what after school will be like with their kids.”

“Wow.” We move down the sidewalk together, and if I could just slip my arm through his, and we escaped into the woods, it would be a picnic. A date.

My mouth turns dry again, making swallowing very difficult.

“What else have you got in there?”

“Candles,” he says. “Everyone loves candles, and they set the mood. It’s very homey.”

“Sure,” I say. “Is this what you do in your spare time? Put together picnic baskets to take to open houses?”

“No,” he says. “I run. Play basketball with Dawson. Eat Alec’s food. What do you do?”

I feel his eyes on me, but I don’t look at him. The little white brick house we’re showing today is on our left, and I can’t tear my eyes from the apple green door. “Maybe I should buy this place,” I say.

“You don’t answer very many of my questions,” he says.

“I do too.” I pause when we reach the sidewalk leading from the road to the front door. “In my spare time, I design clothes.”

His mouth drops open, and I pluck the basket from his hand and leave him standing on the sidewalk. “I’ll get the cookies started,” I say, because while I’m not a great cook, I know how to put rounded spoonfuls of already-made cookie dough on a tray and slide it in the oven.

LANCE

Nothing has gone right since I cut Jessie loose from “Mammoth.” First, I can’t get my pulse to freaking stop leaping around like a ridiculous frog. I can even hear the ribbiting in my ears somehow.

The house wasn’t in great shape when I followed Jessie to the front door and unlocked it so we could go inside. Everything smelled musty, and someone had left a window open, and we’d spent thirty minutes cleaning up dust and dirt that had been blown inside over the past couple of weeks.

She’d put the cookie dough in the oven, and that had improved things. Several people had come through the house—also good. But I have ears like a hawk, and I’ve heard them all say a version of the same thing.

There’s too many different types of flooring.

The Morgans are going to have to do a carpet allowance or something if they want to sell this house. I’ve told them that before, but they wanted to try one more open house.

Finally, the last potential buyer leaves, and I close the front door in one of the most ghastly colors of green that exists on Earth. Jess had gushed over it, and she’d hung the wreath I’d brought in the picnic basket while I’d been up to my elbows in cleaner.

“All right,” Jess says, handing me the picnic basket with the wreath and any trash we’ve created. “That was actually fun.”

“You’re good at talking to people about nothing,” I say, meaning it as a compliment.

She smiles at me, and now that the adrenaline of the event has worn off, I can see how tired she is. I want to ask her about the clothes she designs. I’ve seen her wear some interesting things, but I don’t usually comment on my assistants’ clothes. I did tell her not to wear so much red, and she hasn’t worn the color again.

Her blouse today is a light sky blue, and it makes her eyes brighter somehow. Right now, they hook into me and make me think I’ve said something wrong.

“I think that was a compliment,” she says.

“It was.” I open the de-wreathed door and hold it for her to go first. “Did you design your skirt?”

“No,” she says. “I mean, kind of.”

“Kind of? What does that mean?”

“I sewed on new buttons,” she says. “That’s all.” She marches away from me and down the steps, and I stand in the doorway, wondering how many more things are going to go wrong today.

I follow her, my determination to renew my female-fast much easier when she’s not fluttering her eyelashes at me. Dawson told me to see how today went and give myself another couple of nights of sleep before saying or doing anything. I’d told him that I hadn’t done anything. No invitations to dinner. No hand-holding. No indication of interest whatsoever.

It’s what happens to a man’s head on the inside that messes us all up. Dawson told me to try to make sure I have my head on straight first.

An image of her gazing into the distance next to that tree fills my mind, but it’s not nearly as good as the one I have right in front of me at the moment. Jessie Dunaway walking away from me in that dark skirt, her hips swinging side to side.

I hurry after her, wondering if she's said something else I've missed while I've been standing there in a stupor. "You had to have the eye for the buttons," I say, catching her.

"I collected them over several months," she says.

I don't know what I did wrong, but I let her keep her silence all the way down to the truck. I open the door for her, and the ruined seatbelt stares us both in the face. "Need help?"

"Not yours." Jessie steps past me and gets in the truck just fine.

I frown at her, but she doesn't look at me. She also doesn't have anything else to do, as she can't fiddle with the seatbelt. It hangs like a limp noodle near the door, and the other straps have been laid over the console.

"What did I do?"

"What did you do?" Jessie whips her attention toward me. I actually fall back a step with the danger in her expression. "You have not said thank you one time for what I did back there. You made sure everyone who walked through the door knew I wasn't the agent in charge. You ate the last cookie, right as I was reaching for it. And then, you stood there on your phone while I went around and cleaned up."

I blink at her, sure that's not true. I'd gotten an email that had come from the interest form on the website for Finley & Frank. I had to answer it.

"I'll get you a cookie," I say.

"Don't you dare," she says in a hiss. "Please take me home." She comes right at me, and I back up again. "In fact, I'll call a Carry."

"You don't have to do that."

She pulls in a breath, and I like this version of Jess. The part of her that is a little bit wild. A little bit out of control. A little bit uncensored. She's been so buttoned up with me, and I like riling her up—too much.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't realize I was doing any of those things."

“You haven’t said a word about having me take the lead with anyone, which means you don’t think I can do it.”

“You said you couldn’t do it.”

“Lance,” she barks.

“What?”

“You’re arrogant. You’re too good-looking for your own good. And your shoes don’t match your clothes *at all*.” She slides those eyes down to my feet and back, and I do the same with my gaze.

“My shoes?” I look at the red loafers. “I like these shoes.”

“They look like clown shoes,” she says. “They don’t go with khaki and mint, not even slightly.”

My mind whirs. “Mint?”

“And your ties never match.”

“Hey, now,” I say, lifting my eyes to hers. “My ties match.”

“Not once,” she says. “In five days. Not even one time, honey.”

I don’t know what to do from here. I’ve always thought I looked good, but now my confidence is shaken. My houses don’t usually sit on the market for this long either. I host one open house, and I have five offers by evening.

I don’t think anyone will call today.

My phone rings, and mercifully, it’s not Dawson. It is, unfortunately, my sister. Her ringtone isn’t that much better, and Jess actually starts to sing along with the Justin Bieber song before I can swipe Ruth to voicemail.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “I didn’t mean to treat you as inferior. I didn’t know my shoes came from Clowns-R-Us.”

Jess folds her arms.

I search my brain for what else she said, and it’s incredibly difficult with that hip cocked and all. “Thank you for all you

did today. I think you're smart enough to learn how to take on clients of your own."

Really smart and really pretty, my mind screams at me.

Jess visibly softens, her arms unclenching. She nods.

"You're not going to quit, are you?"

"You seem worried about that."

"I am worried about that."

"Why? Because you're such a beast to all of your assistants? You told me it was their incompetence that made you go through them so fast."

I lift my chin. "I'm not in a super-great place right now."

"Why's that?"

"I'd rather not talk about it without a lot more cookies between us."

Jess narrows her eyes at me and studies my face. "Okay," she says slowly. "But not the gross kind with all those preservatives. *Homemade* cookies."

"You just complained about how I ate the last cookie."

"Seriously?"

I hold my hands up in surrender. "You want cookies? Let's go get some cookies."

She nods like *dang right you'll get me some cookies*, spins on her heel, and gets back in my truck.

I GLANCE UP TOWARD MY OPEN OFFICE DOOR AS VOICES COME my way. Our way. I glance at Jess, who's also twisting that way. The voices go by instead of coming in, and she focuses on me again. Today, she's wearing a pair of big, square glasses that make her even sexier than without them. I've chosen not to comment on her wardrobe choices anymore, because she clearly has the upper hand.

I've brought no less than six neckties for her approval, and she looks back at the neckwear on my desk. She glances back to me, and I feel naked in front of her. This can't be this hard. I'm wearing a pair of black slacks and a light pink shirt.

"Let me see the shoes," she says.

I work hard not to roll my eyes as I step out from behind the desk. This is the third day we've done this, and I remind myself that I asked her to help me. I don't want to be walking around Charleston looking like a fool. The fact that I've done so for so many years brings heat to my face as it is.

"They're just shoes," I say.

"No," she says. "Those are Beckett Simonon's." Her eyes travel back to mine, hers getting a little wider. "Tan, I believe."

I look back at the shoes. "They're loafers."

"Bite your tongue," Jess says playfully. At least I think she's teasing me. When I meet her gaze again, she's smiling at me in a way that's less assistant and more friendly. Definitely teasing. For some reason, I smile back at her too.

"If you want...loafers that go with anything, you need to get the brown ones of these," she says, turning her attention to the ties on the desk. "Or the Bordeaux would work too. You chose tan, which means they have a ton of red and a ton of orange in them."

"I'm wearing orange shoes?" I lift one foot as if I can't see down the length of my body. "They look tan to me."

"No blues or purples with reds and oranges," Jess says as if I haven't spoken. "You want more reds, oranges, or..." She whaps a tie against my chest. "With that pink shirt, I'd go brown."

I put my hand over the tie before it can fall from my chest. She releases the tie and smiles at me as if she's just climbed Mount Everest. I look at the tie, and it's the ugliest one I brought. In fact, I only brought it as a joke.

"This isn't right," I say, my brain not quite computing.

“It’s right,” she says. “Put it on, and then you promised me you’d tell me about some rent-to-own options.”

I make some grunting noise that elk probably do when they see a female elk they like. I can’t believe it, but I tie on the neckwear she’s selected and look longingly at the others on the desk. “Are you sure...?” I begin, but her icy blue eyes slice me into silence. “Fine.”

I round my desk, my red-orange clown shoes getting caught on the leg on the far side. I stumble but catch myself with one hand against the top of the desk. Will nothing go right today? It’s Wednesday, and we’ve always gotten along just fine. Today, however, Wednesday seems to be After Me, with a capital A and M.

“All right,” I say, breathing out over the top of the words. “Rent-to-own.”

“You can’t just walk in there,” Olive says, her voice on the outer edge of panic. Both Jess and I look toward the open doorway again. A woman has indeed just walked into my office. She’s wearing similar professional clothes to Jess—skirt, blouse, ballet flats. Her midnight black hair has been piled on top of her head in a bun, and she too sports a pair of glasses on her face. Hers are small, though, and I like Jess’s way better.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“Sorry, sir,” Olive says, squeezing into the room too. “She insisted.”

“It’s fine,” I say, though Jess shoots a dagger in my direction. She says I’m a little ADHD, to which I scoffed and then moved onto the next subject. I can focus. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her, for example. Tell me that’s not some serious attention dedication, not a deficit.

I still don’t know what to do about all of the thoughts. Dawson called me on Sunday, but I didn’t know what to tell him. The open house hadn’t gone great. Jess had been upset with me. We’d eaten far too many cookies. I dropped her off by the live oak. The end.

She's been helping me with my ties for three days, and I've promised her I'd help her find somewhere to rent so she can move out of her uncle's house—and we're still working toward her taking the lead with clients.

Unfortunately, another new one hasn't come our way. The email I got on Saturday was a dead-end, and the guy I was going to originally train her with was a no-show yesterday afternoon.

"Yes, this is Lance Byers," Jess says, slapping her palm on my desk. I blink, because I've zoned out a little bit.

Mm hm. Yep, I'm Lance Byers. I stand, as Jess has, and look past her to the dark-haired woman.

"I filled out your interest form," she says. "No one called."

My brow furrows. "Oh." I jiggle the mouse to wake my computer. I apparently haven't even gotten that far this morning. "When did you fill out the form?"

"Last night."

"Last night?" Jess asks. "Before or after business hours?"

"When I got home," the woman says.

"Mister Byers is very busy," Olive says, and I nod to that.

"I normally get a notification when someone fills out the interest form," I say. "I didn't get one last night." I check my work inbox. It's stuffed to the gills with emails, but none of them are from the interest form.

I glance over to the woman and find her rolling her eyes. I don't like her, and I don't want to work with her. Jess steps in front of me. "Are you looking to buy or sell?"

"Buy," she says. "I'm in this awful situation, and I need to get out of it."

"Mm, yes," Jess says. "I understand that." She throws me a smile. "I'm sure we can help you."

I've only worked with her for a week and a half, but I know that sparkle in those baby blues. She wants to take the lead with this client. I look at the other woman again, noting

that Olive has left the office. I'll probably have to go talk to her too, just to make sure she knows she didn't do anything wrong.

"Jess," I say. "We're really busy right now." That's my gentle, compassionate way of trying to tell her that we don't want this woman as a client. She has Problem written all over her, all of the letters in caps. I give her a professional smile that my sister has told me looks like I need to use the bathroom really bad. "Sorry."

"We're not that busy," Jess says through her teeth. Her smile hasn't slipped a bit.

"Yes," I insist, thinking of the note Olive tried to give me the other day. I don't need clients who just cause problems. There are plenty of others out there to be had, and I'm not working for my was-gonna-be-mother-in-law, even if she does have money.

"We have all of our clients here," I continued. "A new place we're trying to find. All the problems with the carpet, and then the trees."

One of our properties—I'm not sure when I started grouping Jess and I together—had two trees blown over in Monday's windstorm. And the Morgans agreed to the carpet allowance, but *they* want to replace the carpet and then do another open house.

"How long have you two been together?" the woman asks, slicing her gaze between me and Jess.

I open my mouth to protest. Jess and I are not together. She's just my assistant.

But Jess gives a little giggle and says, "It's still very new." She moves forward and actually reaches out and touches the woman's glasses. "I love these. Mine might be too big."

"They look great with your short hair."

I have no idea what world I've just been dropped into, and all I can do is stare.

“What’s your name?” Jess asks, reaching for the legal pad she was about to take rent-to-own notes on.

“Sabrina Shadows. I’m a lawyer at Farmer, Buhler, and Cason.”

“You’re kidding,” Jess says, plenty of gasp in the words. “I know someone who works there.”

“Yeah?” Sabrina looks like she might pin Jess to the ground if she says the wrong name. “Who?”

I actually move around the desk so I can assist Jess in her soon-to-be wrestling match with this Shadows woman. She is definitely a problem, and I’m going to have to tell Jess how to read a person before taking them on as a client.

“Jason Finch?” Jessie guesses.

Sabrina—who was one stiff wind away from a hurricane already—goes to a full Category Five in less than a breath. “Oh, yeah,” she says with plenty of bite. “I know Mister Finch.”

“We went out once,” Jess says. “Trust me, that was all it took.” She laughs and shakes her head.

“Must’ve been a while ago,” Sabrina says, tossing me another look. “You two seem to get along well. I’ll admit, I’m not sure about working with a boyfriend-girlfriend pair.”

“We’re—” I start to say, but Jess overrides me with “Completely professional on the job, Miss Shadows.” She steps even further into her, causing the dark woman who matches her name to turn around. “Why don’t you come out to our assistant’s desk, and I’ll get some info from you? Lance has a conference call in about twenty-four seconds.”

She practically yells that last part, and I follow them to the doorway. Olive stands at the end of her desk, her eyes wide. She’s worked for Finley & Frank long enough to know what to do, and precisely twenty-four seconds later, she says, “Mister Byers? I’m transferring over that...conference call.”

Jess meets my eye from behind her desk, so many emotions there I can’t name them all. Pleading, sure.

Playfulness, maybe. I can't quite tell if there's any desire or if that's just wishful thinking on my part.

"Mister Byers?" Olive chirps again, and I wave to her. I disappear back inside my office and close the door. Then I start to pace like a caged tiger, wondering what Sabrina saw between Jess and I to think we're dating.

If a perfect stranger can see whatever is between us, can everyone else?

JESSIE

I haven't had to employ such fakery in a long time, and I'm surprised at how easily I can smile, nod, and get Sabrina Shadows to agree to let me find her some houses to look at. In all, the conversation takes about fifteen minutes, and that's only because I then asked the lawyer about her skirt.

"I got it online," she says, looking down at the patchwork of patterns. "It's from that design show."

"Cutting the Cloth?" I ask, my whole soul lighting up. "I love that show."

Sabrina smiles as wide as the sea. "I do too. Thursday night is my favorite night of the week."

"Same." I stand, noting that Lance's door is now closed. Sabrina gets to her feet too, and I walk her toward the exit, telling her I'll be in touch later that day or for sure tomorrow morning with a few things she might want to look at.

"Really?" she asks. "That soon?"

I swallow, thinking I've made a horrible mistake by saying I can look at listings and find some for her. She gave me what she's looking for. Square footage, bedrooms, bathrooms, yard. Air conditioning. The glint in her eye when she said that was fierce.

I've never sat in with Lance when he goes over things with a new client, but how hard can it be?

"We'll see what's out there," I say. "I know of a great little white-brick house we have. They're putting new carpet in it

this week.” I’ve never been happier to have ridden in an enormous truck I’d had to be cut out of to go to an open house than I am in that moment.

“Okay,” Sabrina says. “You have my number.”

“That I do.” We reach the double glass doors, and out she goes. I breathe a sigh of relief, my breath fogging up the glass in front of my face. “What in the world are you doing?”

Sabrina Shadows is smart. Like, lawyer-smart, not just regular-person-smart. She’s going to see right through me in a matter of seconds the moment I start showing her houses. At the same time, she thought Lance and I were dating, and I can’t help wondering why that had been so obvious to her.

I turn around and meet Olive’s eyes above the chest-high counter. She’s seated, so I can only see her from the nose up. I approach, more nervous than when I showed up for my interview. “Was Lance mad?”

“I have no idea,” Olive says. “She’s going to be a client?”

“I think so,” I say. I didn’t get her to sign any paperwork, because Lance only signs contracts with sellers. Buyers are free to use different agents to find them their dream house. Miss Rings-A-Lot snaps and crackles, and I pull it from my pocket.

“It’s him,” I say, lifting my eyes back to Olive’s. She lifts a bowl toward me, and it holds Hi-Chews. I take a grape one and a grapefruit one—the two most superior flavors of Hi-Chew—and turn to face the frosted glass in his office door.

Those gold letters.

I picture him in that brown paisley tie and his light pink shirt, and my knees go a little weak. *Game face*, I tell myself as I take the first step.

Somehow, I rap on the door and open it at the same time. Lance stands at his window, gazing out. He turns toward me as if someone had slowed time to half speed. Then it freezes all the way, and I see him for what he is.

A god among men.

So terribly good-looking. So tall. So talented and strong and discerning.

He sees everything when he looks at me, and the only thing I have going for me is that I've opted for a bright blue blouse today after learning that he graduated from Auburn, whose colors are blue and orange.

A fashion nightmare for everyday wear, but for the runway or for haute couture, orange and blue would be fabulous. The beginnings of a dress start to form in my mind, and I wish I had a pencil and my sketch pad.

Instead, I have the gorgeous, grumpy, going-to-train-me-now Lance Byers staring holes into my face.

I step inside, breaking the time-warp between us, and close the door delicately behind me. "So she wants me to show her some houses," I say. "I'm going to need your help."

"I don't think you should take her on as a client."

I tilt my head to the side. "Why?"

"She's trouble," he says. "With a capital T."

I smile at him, because what an adorable thing to say. "Mister Byers," I say. "Do you think I can't handle a little trouble?" Heck, I'm craving it right now.

"You realize she thought we were dating," he says.

I sober and nod. "Yes," I say. "She did mention that a couple of times."

He moves over to his desk and perches on the edge of it. "Why do you think she thought that?"

I shrug, suddenly too nervous to get any closer to him. "IDK."

"IDK?"

Everyone knows what that acronym means, don't they? "I don't know."

"Did you tell her we weren't?" He gestures as if he's trying to swat away flies. "You know? Dating?"

“No,” I say slowly. “It didn’t come up while she was telling me how many bedrooms she wanted.”

“Jessie,” he says, the word full of frustration.

“Lance, just listen.” I fly toward him now, my hands doing things my brain hasn’t told them to do. I pat his tie so it’ll lay flat, and wow, the man has muscles in his abs. I reach up to straighten his tie, though it’s perfectly knotted around his throat. “She showed up. She’s the first one who has, and you don’t want her as a client anyway.”

Lance holds very, very still and glares down his nose at me. “You don’t either, trust me.”

“But maybe I do,” I say. “You promised to teach me real estate, and I can learn it. I can. But I need a client.”

“You’re not a licensed agent,” he says. “At Finley and Frank, we only employ licensed agents.”

“You’ll be the agent of record,” I say. “Come on, Lance. So we have to pretend to date a little. Is that the worst thing imaginable?” WTI, as I always say. I have a few of them, which doesn’t make one “the worst,” but I keep that to myself for now.

“You can help me find an apartment *and* teach me how to sell a house to Miss Shadows.” I don’t beg him by adding a really pathetic *please* on the end of the statement, but it hangs in the air between us anyway.

He softens, though he keeps his hands in his pockets. My hips are practically burning for how badly I want him to put his hands there. “I can’t say no to you. This is ridiculous though.”

“So it’s not the worst thing imaginable.” I back up, grinning and gesturing between us. “Me and you dating.”

“No,” he bites out. “It’s not the worst thing imaginable.”

“Yeah,” I say. “You wearing that sky blue tie with those shoes definitely is, though.”

“Come *on*,” he says, though a small smile appears on his very strong lips. Kissable lips. With horror, I realize I might

have crossed some imaginary line with him. He straightens and goes around his desk, adding, “We’re going to need some rules.”

“Rules?”

He takes his seat, and so do I. Our morning is starting all over again, just an hour later than it should be. “Yeah, Jess,” he says. “Fake dating rules.”

I pick up my yellow pad and pen and write those three words on the top line. I look up at him, my eyes wide behind my non-prescription glasses. “Ready.”

“Ready?” he repeats, surprise dancing across his face.

“What’s your first fake dating rule?”

“I’m not going first.” He folds his arms and stares me down. “You name one.”

“I’ve never fake-dated anyone before.” I don’t tell him it’s been quite a while since I’ve real-dated someone. “You’re the one with two fiancées.”

A growl comes out of his mouth, and his eyebrows bunch over those eyes. They’d been shooting blue fire at me before, but now I’m getting punctured with cold ice shards. “That’s called real dating.”

“Okay,” I say. “So in real dating, people hold hands.” I scratch it out on my paper. “Doable or not?”

“Doable,” he grunts.

“They go to dinner,” I say, almost sing-songing the words. “Walk on the beach. Text each other.” I look at him, hopeful. “We’re already doing that.”

“We have not walked on any beaches.”

“Why are you so grumpy?” I set down my pad of paper and push up my glasses.

“I’m not,” he says. “You want to go to dinner?”

“Sure,” I say, grinning at him, not sure why I find teasing him so fun. I’m not usually the giggly, flirty girl.

“Mister Byers,” Olive says, intruding into the conversation. “Your step-father is on line three.”

“Thank you, Olive,” Lance says, his voice turning more professional—deeper, even—with every syllable he says. He reaches for the phone, and then stalls. “We need to talk about—uh—kissing. Kissing rules.”

My mind blanks for a second, like I’ve never kissed anyone before. Then Lance nods, picks up the phone, and says, “Hey, Dad,” while I’m still there doing the fish-mouth thing and wonder if Lance likes to kiss fishy faces.

Then I get the heck out of his office, taking my legal pad with a very lame rule about how hand-holding is okay in a fake relationship.

“OH, THIS IS A NINE-ONE-ONE SITUATION,” TARA FINCH SAYS as she arrives at the end of the table. For some reason, my eyes fill with tears at the sight of her. Maybe it’s the sight of that pink pastry box she’s carrying.

I jump to my feet and hug her. Nope, definitely her.

“What is going on?” she asks, completely dumbfounded. I step back and swipe at my ridiculous tears, nodding at Callie to fill in the silence.

“Jessie has gotten herself...into a...situation with Lance.”

Tara swings her ginormous purse off her shoulder and sits on the couch with Callie and me. In front of us is an assortment of all the deliciousness Legacy Brew offers. Coffee cakes made with pumpkin, as is everything this time of year. Million dollar bars. Brownies with marshmallows and walnuts.

Tara sits her box on the coffee table in front of us and opens it. A sigh actually passes my lips at the perfectly decorated sugar cookies.

“Did you make these?” I ask.

“Yep.” She beams first at them and then Callie and me. “It was a client’s party. These are leftover.”

“Just four?” Callie asks, her eyebrows up near her hairline.

“I maybe have more in my freezer at home,” Tara says with a grin. “Planning a wedding is hard, you guys.” She shakes her head and takes out a delicately decorated daisy. She hands it to me, saying, “But we’ll talk about that later. What situation with Lance? Did the ogre fire you?”

I shake my head, sure the flaky cookie is going to be The Thing to make me feel better. I take a bite, and while delicious, it doesn’t solve my problem with Lance.

“She led a client to believe that they were dating.” Callie accepts a cookie from Tara, which is a good thing, as Tara stills and gasps at the same time.

“You did not,” she says. Her dark eyes search my face, and I have no defense. No excuse. No nothing.

“I want to learn real estate,” I say, but it sounds like a pathetic excuse wrapped in a tinny voice. “And this lawyer came in, and she didn’t like Lance. I could tell. Anyway, he’s been saying he’ll teach me, but our other clients canceled or didn’t show up.”

Tara blinks and returns her attention to the cookie box. “Okay, first, breathe.” She takes out a rose with dollops of deep red frosting. “Second, how did that lead to you dating him?”

“Fake dating,” Callie chimes in.

“Sabrina thought we were dating,” I say. “I didn’t correct her.”

“Sabrina?” Tara asks. “Sabrina who?”

I swallow and set my cookie down. After slumping into the couch behind me, I close my eyes, wishing I can just drift away into the kaleidoscope of colors behind my closed eyelids. “Shadows,” I say. “She works at Jason’s firm.”

“Yes,” Tara says. “I’ve met her. She’s a...severe woman.”

My eyes pop open, but I can't quite see Tara's face. Her back is still straight, and she's facing the table. "I liked her," I say.

"You like everyone," Tara says, dismissing me. As if liking people is a bad quality. "So what happened?"

"We talked for a minute," I say. "Before his step-dad called. He said holding hands is okay, and he asked me to dinner."

"Wait, whoa," Callie says at the same time Tara chokes. Then she asks, "Like, legit asked you to dinner?"

They both stare at me like I've grown fifteen horns on my head. "Yes," I say. "What is the big deal? It's fake."

"Mmm-nope," Callie says, shaking her head. Her dirty blonde hair swings with the action, and she tucks it behind her ear. "I've known Lance Byers for years. *Years*, Jess. Over a decade. He doesn't date casually. He doesn't do *fake* anything."

I sit up, puzzling through what she's said. "What does that mean?"

"If he asked you out, he asked you out," Tara says, translating Callie-speak for me. She nods, and then speaks slowly. "I think she's right. Lance is...careful. Lance is polished. Buttoned tight. He's serious, but he doesn't take himself too seriously."

She dusts her hands of the cookie crumbs. "He's honestly perfect for you. I should've set you up with him instead of Jason."

Callie coughs, and it distinctly sounds like she says a name.

"Who's Hadley?" I ask.

Callie's bright eyes round, and she shakes her head. "You'll have to ask Lance."

"One of the fiancées?" I guess.

She and Tara nod, but they don't say anything else. Even when I try to get them to tell me more, they won't.

"You'll have to ask Lance," they both say, over and over and over until I want to take a glob of the daisy frosting and stick it in my ears just so I can't hear them talking.

So I say, "Fine. I'll ask him." I'm not sure if I will or not, but if a woman named Hadley is going to be a problem or come between me being able to sell Sabrina Shadows a house, I need to know.

"Did you try on the dress today?" Callie asks, and I whip my attention to Tara.

"You tried on a wedding dress today?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. "No. Maybe? Sort of."

"How do you sort of try on a dress?" Callie asks, shaking her head. Before Tara can answer, another woman joins the party by flopping into the recliner situated at the head of the coffee table.

"Howdy, ladies," Macie Wilhelm says. She wears a bright smile and zero makeup, though she does brandish a cup holder filled with fresh coffee in to-go cups. She sets it on the table, nudging over the pecan tartlets a little to do so. "What's going on over here?"

"Tara was telling us about how she sort of tried on a dress today," Callie says, meeting my eye.

I swallow even as she nods at me again. This time, it's real subtle, like *Go on. Tell her. Show her.*

I clear my throat. "Tara," I say. "I'm, well, I like to—design clothes. I wondered if you wanted to look at some of my wedding dress drawings and have one made for you." I cough, because she's only the second person on the planet—whoops, the third, as I did tell Lance I designed clothes in my spare time—who I've told about my sketches.

She'll be the second person to ever see them.

Her eyes round, and she looks past me to Callie, and then over to Macie. "A custom wedding dress?"

I can't tell if she's excited or wants to throw me through the front window for suggesting it. I nod, doubts flying from left to right inside my head. "I'm not any good," I say. "I just thought—"

"She's amazing," Callie says, and I wish she wouldn't. I don't need her to come to my rescue, especially not with Tara. She's not jealous of me anymore, but we had some rough times for a while there. She's engaged to my very best friend in the whole world, and Alec Ward happens to be a man.

So me being in his life...well, it was hard for Tara.

"I want to see some sketches," Tara says, smiling at me. "I'm sure they're good, Jess."

"No obligation," I say, bending to get the sketchbook out of my bag. "But I had the greatest idea for a dress today—right after the whole fake-dating conversation, actually."

"Wait a hot chicken minute," Macie says. "Fake dating? Again?" She shakes her head, her eyes moving along all three of us seated on the couch. "No. Y'all have *got* to stop this."

Callie grins and gestures to Tara. "It worked out for us. We're batting a thousand."

I flip open the sketchbook, and Tara gasps again. "Jess," she says, snatching the book from me without asking. "Yes. Yes, I want this wedding dress." She looks at me with stars for eyes, and all I can do is smile.

LANCE

“Come on,” I grumbled to Cha-Cha, though I suspect she’s doing the best she can with her short, stubby corgi legs. I can’t seem to run fast enough, and I only have two legs. Someone honks, but I just keep going.

No, I’m not abusing my animal. I know I don’t have a shirt on despite the near arrival of November. I know what the thermometer says. My blood happens to be boiling, thank you very much.

Holding Jessie’s hand.

Ridiculous.

Taking her to dinner.

Preposterous—and I’d canceled via text and spent Wednesday evening lying on my couch, a throw pillow my sister gave me for Christmas last year clutched to my chest. It was downright pathetic. *I’m* downright pathetic.

The fact that I didn’t throw that pillow in the trash on December twenty-sixth proves that. I can’t tell you what it has on it, other than when Ruth comes by for a visit, she smiles at it.

I jog in place at a stoplight in Cider Cove, where I live. There is neither cider made here, nor a cove nearby. I’m not sure how the town got its name, but I know I like living near the city but not in it. I like being close to the beach but not on it.

I like working with Jess but not dating her?

I shake my head as Cha-Cha positively pants at my feet, and the light turns green. Off we go again, and Cha's nails *tickety-tick-tick* along the asphalt until we get to the other sidewalk.

Someone honks again, and this time I throw up the hand that's not holding Cha-Cha's leash. *I'm fine. Thank you.*

"Hey, bro," someone yells—another male, at least.

I glare as I look to my left. I don't ask the twenty-something practically hanging out of his friend's window anything.

"Did you know you've got company?" He laughs and points behind me. My breath wheezes into my chest as I turn and see not just one woman, but two, three, four, all jogging in my direction.

The light is still green, and more women—*shrimp and grits*, I think. *Those are girls*—round the corner I just did. The man's laughter rings in my ears, and his buddy floors the accelerator. Tires squeal, and Cha-Cha barks.

Only one of the women in the pack is old enough to be out of high school, and she gives me an up-down look as she approaches. "We've been trying to catch you for a mile," she says, her breath catching like mine.

"Why?" I ask.

"Track team," she says, flying by me. "You should come train with us. I see you running every day."

As teenaged girls—teen girls!—go by me, every one of them wears a smile and a high ponytail. The very last thing on this planet that I need is to run with the girl's track team at the local high school. I can see the scandalous headlines now.

I stand there like a fool, nodding and smiling while mostly naked, until the track team passes me. Then I turn Cha-Cha around, pull my shirt out of the waistband of my shorts and back over my head, and start for home.

Along the way, a jammin' tune by Ariana Grande comes from my phone, which is secured in my bicep holder. Since

I'm meticulous about assigning everyone who calls my cell their own ringtone, I already know it's Jess.

Jess.

Jess, Jess, Jess.

What am I going to do about Jess?

I can't ignore her. Despite her obvious lack of real estate knowledge, she is a good assistant. Dawson told me yesterday afternoon while Callie got her nails done that I like Jess because she's moldable. She'll do anything I say, the moment I say it.

I told him he makes me sound horrible, like some sick puppet-master who only wants his women to be seen and not heard.

Jess certainly isn't that, and I don't mind all of her questions. I also know why she's calling, and I can't let her call go to voicemail without some consequences.

Unfortunately, the straps holding my phone to my arm take more time than I have to undo, and the call does go to my inbox. I quickly get the device out and return her call.

"Hey," she says, a bit of fluster in her voice. "I'm standing on your front porch, and you aren't here."

"Why are you standing on my front porch?" I'm at least two miles from home and currently walking with no intention of picking up my pace again. I pause and turn the other way. Cha-Cha looks up at me with a devilish look in her eye that says she's going to bite my jugular in my sleep if I start running again.

Her tongue lolls out the side of her mouth, and I regret not bringing her traveling water bowl. I'm a bad dog dad, but I'd been in a hurry that morning.

All at once, I realize why I'd been in a hurry. "The apartment showing," I say at the same time Jess does. "Jess, I'm so sorry. I'm on the way home right now."

I start to jog, and let me tell you, running breath into the phone is so not sexy. I slow to a walk again and pull the phone

away from my mouth. My thoughts are all derailed again, the loudest one clanging and chugging at me. *Why do you care if she thinks you're sexy?*

I don't know why, only that I do.

"Are you out running?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Where are you? I'll come get you so you don't have to run home. Unless you're just around the corner."

"I'm not just around the corner," I say. I'm fast, and I could probably be back to my house in fifteen minutes. Then I'll want to shower, change, make coffee... "I'm on the corner of Pine and Main. I have Cha-Cha with me. It would be great if you could come get us."

"Okay," she says. "Lucy can't wait to meet Cha-Cha."

I look up into the sky, noting how gray it is. "You'll let me shower?"

"Do you have time?" she asks. "Don't we have an appointment for the showing?"

I pull my phone away from my face, horrified at the time. Ten-oh-seven. "Yes," I say. "We don't have time." I look down at my running clothes. The thing with exercise apparel for men is that we don't wear it around town.

Women can, sure. They have these cute leggings, and everyone likes seeing women in tight clothes. Even their tank tops have flowers and sexy stripes, and most of the women I see wear stuff like that to the grocery store, the park, everywhere.

Men?

No man wants to wear his ultra-short running shorts and his sweat-stained tank top to an apartment showing. Especially not with the woman he's been crushing on—hard—for the last week.

"Could you get me some clothes?" I ask, immediately regretting the question.

“What?” Jess sounds like I’ve asked her to blast off to the moon.

“Never mind,” I say. “You’re what? Five minutes out?”

“Yes,” she says. “If that.”

“Pine and Main,” I say, glancing down the row of shops on the other side of the street. “Five minutes.” I hang up and sprint into the road, practically dragging Cha-Cha with me. She barks, but I keep going. There’s a department store right in the middle of the block, and Franco’s has men’s shorts and polos.

“Ma’am,” I call to the woman who’s just come out of the shop. “I’ll give you twenty bucks to stand here with my dog for less than five minutes.”

She looks at me like I’m crazy, and right now, she’s not far off. “Please,” I say, not above begging in this moment. “My girlfriend is on her way to pick me up for an appointment I forgot about. I can’t wear this.” I gesture to myself as if I’m covered in honey and cat hair and nothing else. “Less than five minutes.”

I hand her the leash as her expression softens. “Okay,” she says.

“Thank you.” I kiss her cheek and dart into the store. I don’t have time to try anything on, but I don’t need to. I know what size I am, and I’m not here to buy a designer suit that needs alterations.

I yank a blue polo with white stripes and a sailboat on the front of it from a hanger, then grab a pair of khaki shorts in a thirty-eight. I’ve just swiped my credit card when my phone rings out Ariana again, and the clerk—a middle-aged woman—looks at me with raised eyebrows.

I smile, tell her to keep the receipt, take my twenty bucks in cash-back, and dash for the dressing rooms. “I’m almost ready,” I say in lieu of hello. “Are you on the corner?”

“Yes,” she says. “There’s a cop here who’s eyeing me and Lucy.”

“That’s just because he’s never seen a car like her before.” Sixty seconds later, I exit the store, exchange the twenty for Cha-Cha, and scramble back across the street.

I tell myself to calm down as I approach Jess and Lucy. Her sedan is a color I can’t name—it’s not quite beige, but not tan. It’s not orange either, but somewhere in the middle of all of that. She’s definitely Unique with a capital U, and I pull open the rear passenger door and command Cha-Cha to get in.

The corgi does as Jess twists to look at me. Her eyes widen at my “running attire,” and as I slide into the passenger seat, she starts to giggle.

“What?” I ask, swooping my hand through my hair. I’ve lost my visor somewhere, and I realize I left all my running clothes in the dressing room at Franco’s. I don’t envy the person who finds them, but I grin at Jess like I’ve planned this whole morning.

“You run in a blue-and-white-striped polo?” She reaches over and peels a sticker from my chest. “Hmm, a large blue-and-white-striped-polo.”

With a massive grin, she folds the sticker on itself, hands it to me while I’m still trying to think of something to say, puts the car in gear, and eases away from the curb. “I can’t believe you forgot about the showing this morning.”

“I didn’t forget,” I say, shoving the size sticker in my new shorts pocket. “I just...got sidetracked.”

“Mm hm.” She cuts a look at me out of the corner of her eye, and I know that look. Women have given it to me for years.

“I’m not ADHD,” I say, giving her a side-eyed look too. She’s wearing the most crimson top I’ve ever seen. I blink, and the shape of her sleeveless blouse burns behind my eyelids. I look fully at her, but the sunlight glints off an enormous gem that sits right at her neckline.

My gaze slips down, and I can imagine cleavage. I grind my voice through my throat and return my eyes to something safer. More appropriate. “I was running my dog.”

“To death, apparently,” Jess says, glancing in the rear-view mirror. “Poor Chachy.”

“Not poor Chachy,” I say, though the corgi has already passed out on the backseat. She doesn’t even open her eyes when Jess coos at her. “What kind of dog dad would I be if I let my dog get heart disease? Running is good for her.”

“Dog dad?” Jess’s smile lights up the whole car, dimming the brilliance of the yellow gem resting against her chest. “That’s a new adjective for you I haven’t thought of yet.”

“Yeah?” I look out the passenger window, still a bit breathless from the running, the dashing through the streets, and changing my clothes. Maybe that red shirt. “What adjectives do you use for me?” I swing my attention back to her. “And don’t say grumpy or scatterbrained.”

I’m neither. I have a lot on my plate. I’m *busy*. My fiancée took my diamond ring and left town. I’m *healing*.

She doesn’t know that, I think, and the next thought is the most dangerous one of all.

Then tell her.

I can’t do that, not right now. The words sit in a lump halfway up my throat while I wait for Jess to use some adjectives.

“Hard-working,” she finally says. “Handy. Honest.”

“Those are all H-words,” I say, something starting to glow in my chest. “Are we doing them by letter?”

Jess grins at me and follows the directions the computerized voice on her phone tells her to. “Sure,” she says. “You go next and say an adjective for me starting with an A.”

Attractive pops into my head, but I can’t say that. Can I? *Beautiful* is better, and that’s a B. She’ll get B, and I try to count all the way to G for *gorgeous* or P for *pretty*. I get lost pretty fast inside my own head, and Jess says, “Nothing? You’ve got nothing for A?”

“Articulate,” I say, almost cutting her off.

“Brainy,” she says to me, and the game is on.

“Clever.”

“Dedicated.”

“Easy...going,” I say.

Jess shoots me a sharp look. “Nice save, boss.”

“I was going to say *easy on the eyes*,” I say, shrugging as buckets of embarrassment fill me. “Or *easy to talk to*. Then I thought that was too close to articulate.” I glance at her, and she doesn’t look like she’ll come across the console and rip my face off with her fingernails. “I could go with *enthusiastic*.”

She peers up and through the windshield as she eases up on the accelerator. She comes to a stop in front of a duplex, and I recognize it from the listings we looked at on Friday after work. “This is it.”

“Yes.” I wait for her to get out, but she doesn’t. She puts Lucy in park—my word, I’m thinking of her car as a person now—and looks at the duplex. After several seconds of sitting there in silence, I ask, “What are you thinking?”

“It has good curb appeal,” she says, turning to look at me. She wears hope in her eyes, obviously seeking my approval. “Don’t you think?”

I grin at her and hold back my chuckles. “That’s thinking like a real estate agent,” I say. “And today, Jess, you’re just you, looking for a place to live.” I reach for the door handle. “Come on. Let’s go see what it’s like inside.”

JESSIE

Fantastic.
Fabulous.

Fit.

Funny.

All F-words that I could've used to describe Lance. I didn't get the chance before we arrived at the apartment, and now my feet are taking me down the sidewalk after him.

He would've gotten G, and I wonder what he would've said for me then.

Gorgeous.

Generous.

Gifted.

Green.

Any of those work. I feel like I'm about to throw up, so the green fits. I'm also brand-new at this realtor-ing and assisting, so it definitely describes me.

I can admit I want him to use *gorgeous*, and I continue to plot ways to continue the game the moment we're back in the car.

Lance runs his fingers down the front door of the apartment on the left, and my eyes get drawn to the peeling paint too. "We should ask them about this."

"Should we?" I ask.

He twists and looks at me over his shoulder. “Yes, we should.”

“There aren’t a lot of apartments in my price range,” I say. “And the ones that are available go really fast.” In fact, this apartment’s been up for rent for four days now, and if we don’t put in an application today, I’ll lose it.

A sour look crosses Lance’s face. “That doesn’t mean they can’t take care of the place.”

He can say that, because he has a house. A nice one too, from the look I got on the front porch. He has spectacular curb appeal, what with two skinny, Cindy-Lou-Who pine trees and a bush with lots of knobby branches. The leaves had started to fall on that, but I hadn’t seen a single one on the ground.

Lance had probably been up at the crack of dawn to rake them, then paint his front door—which had been a stark white without a single smudge anywhere—and then go for a sixteen-thousand-mile run with his corgi.

“Oh, Cha-Cha,” I say, turning back to Lucille Ball. “Is she okay in there?”

“I should get her out,” Lance says. The door swings open, and he pushes it with a couple of fingers. “You go inside and look around. I’ll be right back.” He moves past me, and it’s probably my imagination, but it feels like he moves into me, not away from me.

I look up at him, but he’s only there for a moment, then he’s past me and headed down the sidewalk. I watch him go for a moment, trying to figure out when my pulse started running the hundred-yard dash inside my chest.

I do want to see the apartment without any outside pressure, so I lean forward and peer inside. The first thing I see is a giant deer head on the opposite wall. That will have to go instantly, as I’m not trying to create a backwoods bayou vibe in my first apartment.

That’s not even an accurate description, and as I step into the house, I start searching for gator skin or swamp things.

That would be more bayou. I'm confusing myself, and I clear my head.

The elk-deer-whatever draws me back to him though. I want to tear it down right now, because the last thing I need is any hoofed animals in my life.

I finally tear my gaze from Elky-Boy to find the living room takes up the space to my left, and the apartment comes furnished. Those aren't in large supply either, which is another reason I should've put in an application on this place yesterday when Lance had found it on his fancy, backdoor realtor listings. Sight unseen.

A couch and a loveseat sit perpendicular to one another, and they look like they're in decent shape. The floor is hardwood, with a rug the color of snail slime—if I'm imagining such a thing to be gray and dull. That will have to go too.

I need color in my life, and I'm actually surprised Lance didn't comment on the color of my shirt this morning. A coffee table fills the living room, and it's actually too much furniture. I'd remove the love seat and the table, and leave the couch, add a cute, bright rug, as well as a tall lamp with a funky shade.

The whole place would look more open and brighter if I did that, and I smile to myself as I notice the big window behind the couch. I'm thinking like a realtor, and I can hardly believe it.

The window needs a curtain, as does the one beneath Elky-Boy, and then my gaze swings toward the kitchen. It sits in the back right corner, and it has all of the essentials. The same flooring runs through the whole space, which is nice, and I nod in approval.

A small dining room table sits in the awkward space between the kitchen and living room, and I'd definitely move that. Or get rid of it. There's no breakfast bar to sip coffee at, but I can buy something like that at a home goods store. Now that my bank account isn't so slim, that is. And maybe not for a while still.

The hallway only takes three steps to move down, and I take in the curtain hanging at the end of it. I reach out like I'll find a dead body behind it, but when I yank it to the side, there's only board games and hand towels.

“So this is the storage system,” I murmur. I passed the bathroom on the first step, and there was nothing remarkable about it. I'm definitely going to have to watch some cleaning videos to sanitize this place—if I get it. We're talking sudsy mop heads scrubbing the tub and all the way to the ceiling.

The bedroom is nothing remarkable, and the smell alone tells me a man lives here right now. I don't go inside, because I wouldn't want someone all up in my underwear drawer or seeing what I'd eaten last night from the dregs of what remains on my plate.

Of course, I'd take my dishes down the hall to the kitchen sink. It does only take six steps, for crying out loud. The sink was white at one point in the past, and I remember a video about vinegar that will probably at least eradicate any viruses nacho-man has left behind.

I sigh and turn, having seen all six hundred square feet of the apartment already. It's nothing to write home about—not that I'm in the pen pal mood with Mama—but it would be mine.

A sense of pride starts to creep up my throat, and I take a few steps past the kitchen table to the window Elky guards. There's a small yard in the back, but as autumn is breathing out the last of its life and winter is about to arrive, the grass isn't super green.

Outside, Cha-Cha barks, and Lance says something to her in his bass voice. I can't catch the words, but I do turn back that way. I take a step, but something yanks on my hair. My hand flies to the back of my head, and I feel...antlers.

I suck in a breath and glance up, expecting Elky-Boy to have dropped several feet. It's not him. He lords over me though, and while I'm looking up at the bottom of his mouth, it sure seems like he's laughing at me.

“What is this?” I ask, feeling around behind me. My curls have only gotten more tangles in even more of the horrible, pointy fingers of whatever head was mounted to the wall that I didn’t see.

Lance comes through the door, and Cha-Cha beelines for me. Apparently, she’s found her second wind, and she launches her thirty-pound body against my legs. “Hey, Chachy,” I say, trying to bend down and pat her while keeping my head straight and level.

Since I’m not Go-Go-Gadget, and I actually have a spine, that doesn’t really work. In fact, my hair pulls more, and my eyes start to water. Cha-Cha leans her front paws against my knees, keen to get a scrub.

I look up at Lance, who’s frozen in the doorway. “Help,” I say, and that springs him into motion. He crosses the microscopic apartment in only three strides, and then his hands are in my hair.

Sweet honeyed tea. I’d get my hair stuck in fifteen deer’s antlers to have Lance’s hands in my hair. Deers? Deer?

I close my eyes as he jostles my glasses, because it’s taking everything I have not to sigh and sag into his chest.

“This is insane,” he says in a disgruntled voice. My eyes fly open again, and my glasses sit sideways on my face. Our eyes meet, and he adds, “Oops.” He tries to fix the glasses, but they’re a lost cause.

I want to rip them off and toss them to the side the way heroines do in movies. Then they pull out their ponytails and the man of their dreams pulls them close...and kisses them.

“I’m going to pull it,” he says, his deep blue eyes searching mine. “Okay?”

“Okay.” I hold as still as possible, and then my scalp is on fire. “Ow,” I moan.

But I’m free. I stumble away from the jaws of antler death on the wall and bump right into Lance. His arms do come around me, and the whole world frosts over. I breathe in. He does too.

We breathe out.

“I think it’s a jackalope,” he whispers, as if the beast is still alive and he’s afraid to scare it.

“A what?” I ask, still lost in his eyes.

He chin-nods toward the wall. “Half-rabbit, half... something else.”

I turn, and sure enough, a rabbit head has been mounted to the wall. An antlered rabbit head. A couple of the antlers hold blonde strands, and I reach out and brush them away. They fall to the ground, and I realize Lance hasn’t backed up.

Almost at the same time, we move—him backward and me toward the kitchen. He coughs and bends to get Cha-Cha’s leash. “Come on, girl,” he says. After a healthy pause, he dares to glance at me. “The attacking jackalope notwithstanding, what do you think of the apartment?”

“Hey,” a man says, and someone four times as wide as me fills the doorway. He’s carrying a case of Coors Light and a plastic grocery sack. “Sorry. I thought you’d be done by now.” He comes into the apartment as if he owns the place, because he definitely lives here.

That guy has jackalope written all over him.

“We’re done,” I say in a VAV—very authoritative voice, the same one I used on Mama when I left Beaufort—and stride toward the exit. I don’t breathe until I get outside, and then I suck in a big breath of fresh air.

Lance follows me, but neither of us speak until Cha-Cha is in the back seat and we’re buckling our belts.

“I do like the orange tabby cat brick,” I say.

“But the paint on the door is peeling,” he says.

I nod and knead the steering wheel. “Yeah. Yep. That one’s out.” I look over to him. “Want to take me to lunch and give me a starts-with-G adjective?”

A smile blooms across his handsome face. “We’re actually on F, and it’s your turn.”

“Fine,” I say, feeling flirty and fabulous—both F-words. “I’m going to go with...fit.”

“Fit?”

“Yes.”

He harrumphs, and I giggle. “Come on,” I say. “I just said you were physically attractive.”

“You did?”

“Come *on*,” I say, full-on flirting now. If he doesn’t know it, he’s deaf and blind. I even reach up and tuck my curls behind my ear, where they promptly pop out again. I eye him for a moment. “I can even see the ripples in your abs through that shirt.”

Lance looks down at his midsection and then over to me, that smile even wider now. “Okay,” he says. “My turn.” He reaches toward me and takes my right hand from the wheel.

I pull in an audible breath as he tucks his fingers into the spaces between mine. “This is okay, right?” he asks. “I believe our dating handbook had holding hands in the approved column.”

I nod, my voice box a tiny jack-in-the-box in the bottom of my stomach.

He sighs and leans his head back. “Good. Okay, for you... G...I’m going to go with genuine.”

“Lame,” I say, my fingers automatically tightening in his. “You’re handsome. That’s the H-word I’m going with this time.”

“Lame?” he asks, immediately followed by, “Handsome?”

“Yes,” I say, bringing up every ounce of bravery I have as I drive one-handed through Cider Cove. “And your correct G-word, Lance, was *gorgeous*.”

LANCE

“Jolly?” I scoff. “I think this game is over.” The hostess beams at me with a smile as wide as George Washington’s nose on Mount Rushmore, and I incline my chin. “I think they’re ready for us.”

Thankfully. I don’t want to come up with any more adjectives to describe Jess.

Gorgeous, Lance. The G-word you’re looking for is gorgeous.

Of course I would’ve said that if she was my real girlfriend. But she’s not. Even though I lost my mind for several minutes there and held her hand. Even though she let me. Even though she spoke to me in that flirty tone I’ve heard women use before.

So much confusion streams through me. I like this woman, and I can’t figure out why. That sounds terrible, because Jessie Dunaway is amazing. She’s pretty—*gorgeous*—witty, and trying so hard. She’s a sponge, soaking up everything I tell her.

Right after she told me I should’ve given her *gorgeous*, she squeezed my hand tightly and told me how she’d thought like a realtor inside the apartment. We’d talked staging and then I’d started swiping to look for more for-rent listings as she drove us to this Mexican restaurant.

There isn’t much on the market right now, but I’m determined to find something for Jess that she can afford. She hasn’t said much about her living situation, but I can tell she doesn’t like it. I have back-channels and friends in the industry

I can text, and I'm willing to bet one of my pinkies that I can find her an apartment before it gets listed.

I haven't told her that yet, but I've got it tucked away in my back pocket.

"You don't like jolly?" Jess asks, her voice on Flirt Level High as she follows me and the hostess.

"No," I bark at her. "I'm not Santa or one of his elves."

She peals out a string of laughter that I can admit makes me feel more like a man. As much as I like it, I also hate it.

I'm on a female-fast. That means no women. None.

As I slide into a booth and people descend with chips and salsa and wanting to know my drink order, my phone starts to mimic Justin Bieber. I swipe my sister to voicemail and give Jess a piercing glare. "Not a word."

She mimes zipping her lips closed, though her eyes sparkle with a teasing glint I normally like. She picks up her menu and so do I, though I've been here plenty of times and know the loaded beef chimichanga is the way to go. I've actually choked on how much meat they can stuff into a tortilla here, and I'm hoping it'll happen again today.

Maybe then, I'll stop saying inappropriate things.

"Has anyone ever told you that you go from hot to cold really fast?" Jess asks, keeping her gaze buried in the menu.

"No." I whip the word toward her. "No one's ever told me that."

"First time for everything." Her eyes flick toward mine, but I look down. Something seethes inside me, and the self-loathing grows in my lungs until I can't breathe.

I slap the menu on the table. "You know what? I dated a woman before you." I cut off, not even quite sure what I'm saying. We're not dating. Jess and I. We're not.

"For a while. Two years or something like that. I was in love with her." My chest heaves, but this is just the pain of

stabbing into a really infected wound. Once I get all the words out, I'll feel better. I know I will.

“I bought her this really expensive diamond that took me three months to save for, and you know what? She took it and left Charleston only eight days later.” I reach for a chip and dunk it in the salsa almost angrily.

I am angry. I'm angry at Hadley for what she did to me. I'm angry I didn't see her for who she was. I'm angry about how much money I wasted on her. And the time. Blue corn chips and hot salsa, the *time* I lost on my relationship with Hadley.

“So you'll excuse me if I'm a little hot and cold about... this.” I push the chip toward her, some of the salsa flying at her and causing her to flinch. I stuff the tortilla chip into my mouth and mash my teeth together like a monster. “I don't even know what *this* is. It's all confusing.”

Jess has lowered her menu too. Her eyes are wide as moons now, and those long lashes wave at me as she blink-blinks.

“Hey,” a woman chirps. I glare up at her instead of at Jess. “My name is Annika, and I'll be your waitress today. How's the chips and salsa?”

“Fabulous,” I say, though it sounds like I said they're laced with arsenic.

Annika blinks too. “Are you ready to order?”

“Yes,” I say, though I want to walk out. I just need a minute to breathe, and there's no air in here. “I want the double-beef enchilada, loaded.” I hand her the menu and pick up my water glass. The water will taste like dirt, and there's no ice in it. My pineapple daiquiri can't come fast enough. “And a huge Diet Dr. Pepper,” I add. “Tons of ice.”

“Yes, sir,” Annika says, and she's smart—an S-adjective—as she's realized this is not a personal lunch. To make that true, I pull out my phone and start texting a few colleagues in the real estate industry while Jess scrambles to put in her order.

By the time Annika walks away, my texts are sent, and three people have responded that they'll let me know ASAP about any one-bedroom apartment rentals that come up for eight hundred or less. Satisfied that I've made this a business lunch and not a personal one, I shove my phone under my thigh.

Humiliation dive-bombs me the way seagulls do when someone drops bread on the beach. "Listen," I say in a measured voice. "I'm...sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you about...whatever I just said."

To my great surprise, Jess paints a small smile on her lips. It's pretty and perfect and not even a little bit patronizing. "You don't have to apologize to me," she says. Both of her hands come across the table and cover mine. "I'm so sorry you went through all of that. How...long ago did this happen?"

"Four months," I say. "Give or take." I focus on the tabletop, further embarrassment coursing through my veins like red blood cells are made of it.

"Unbelievable," Jess says. "You're so put together. If that had happened to me, I don't think I'd have left the house yet."

A waiter arrives with our drinks, and I immediately reach for the straw, slipping my hands out from under hers. She pulls her arms back across the table and does the same with her straw. I take a big drink of the sour drink and feel the alcohol take effect immediately. My muscles relax even as my throat burns.

Jess stirs her strawberry smoothie and takes a more delicate sip. "I left Beaufort with whatever I could fit in Lucille Ball after a massive fight with my mama. She's been trying to marry me off for a decade, usually to men twice my age. I'd had enough."

She pauses to set her glass on the table, really studying it. "She cut off my money, and I drove to Charleston a sobbing mess." She shrugs one shoulder like everybody has days like the one she just described, but I don't think they do.

"I'm sorry," I say.

“Are you close with your family?” she asks, looking up at me again.

“Yes,” I say. “I mean, my mom and step-dad. My sister and her husband. My biological dad...not so much.” I take a moment to think about the man I haven’t talked to in a while. How long? At least five years.

“He and my mom divorced when I was only three,” I say. “He wasn’t around much. Mom remarried only a few years later. My step-dad is my dad.”

Jess nods, her smile encouraging now.

“What about you and your dad? He just let you walk out?”

“Well, Daddy spends a lot of time out in the battlefield,” she says casually, as if everyone does such a thing. “Mama can be...difficult, and he’s been with her a long time. He copes the best way he can.” A hint of sadness accompanies the words, but her face brightens only a moment later. “Is the salsa hot?”

I nudge the bowl toward her. “No.” I don’t know what to say to what she’s told me. Despite her obsession with red, on the outside, Jess looks put together. She has cute clothes that fit in the office, and I’ve never seen her without draping jewelry and plenty of makeup. I would’ve never thought she was running out of money or that she didn’t have stellar relationships with her parents.

She definitely seems like a woman who calls her mother every night after work, and I’m a little jarred—and embarrassed to admit to my judgment—by what really happens behind closed doors.

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry about your mom and dad,” I say.

Jess flashes me a smile and takes another chip to swipe through the salsa. “Thank you,” she says. She takes a deep breath. “Okay.” She blows out the air. “Let’s talk about something else.”

My phone chimes, and I pull it up to the top of the table. I glance at the text from Rich. “Oh, this is good,” I say, flipping

the phone around so she can see it. “A friend of mine might have an apartment for you.”

Her gasp is probably heard in Mongolia. “You’re kidding.” She lunges for the phone, which makes me chuckle, and all of the knots in my chest finally untangle all the way.

“YES,” I SAY TO MY SISTER, RUTH. I GLANCE OVER MY shoulder as if Jess has followed me inside my house. She hasn’t. She didn’t even get out of Lucille. I press my eyes closed and clench my jaw. I can’t believe I’m calling that sedan Lucille Ball.

“She said I was handsome.”

Ruth whistles in a super-annoying older sister way. “Wow, Lance.”

“Not wow,” I say, moving over to my fridge and opening it. I’m not hungry. Jess and I just went to lunch, where the conversation after the initial confession-fest was actually really great. “I’m not dating right now.”

“This isn’t dating,” Ruth says, and it sounds like she has something in her mouth. Probably her paintbrush, as my sister loves to call me while she’s painting. She tucks her brush in her mouth, steps back, and tilts her head to examine her work when she’s not quite satisfied with it yet. “It’s fake dating.”

“I’m bad at both,” I say, practically slamming the fridge. “Who fake-dates?” Is there a guide for this type of thing?

Like a flash of lightning, I realize that Dawson—my best friend in the whole world—started his relationship with Callie on false ground. “I have to go,” I say to my sister.

“No,” Ruth shouts. “Don’t hang up on me, Lance.”

I want to rush out to my truck and get over to Dawson’s right now. My muscles bunch and release, tighten for a moment before I almost fall down.

“Lance?”

“I’m still here.” My older sister can be so bossy sometimes.

“Listen,” she says, and I know I’m not going to like what she says next. The paintbrush has come out of her mouth, and that means she’s ready to lash me with her words.

“If you like this woman, you don’t need to feel bad about that. If you don’t like fake-dating her, then make it real. Just because Hadley hurt you doesn’t mean she will.”

I hiss at my ex-fiancée’s name, but that doesn’t slow down Ruth’s tongue. “Just because you declared yourself on a female fast doesn’t mean you can’t break that at any time. You’re smart, so figure it out and talk to Jess.”

I swallow, because I’m not sure I can open the chambers of my heart only to have them hollowed out again. “Okay,” I say anyway.

“Text me after you do.”

“Okay.”

“Do not just parrot affirmations to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, which would cause her to throw a saltshaker at me if we were in person together.

She growls and says, “Lance,” in her Mom-voice.

“Can I go now?” I ask, starting to laugh. She hates it when I treat her like my mother, but then she shouldn’t lecture me like I’m her son.

“I’m calling you tomorrow after work,” she says. “I expect some action on your end.”

“You want to hear about my action?” I ask.

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Good thing,” I say, chuckling now. The call ends, and I drop my hand to my side. The laughter dies, and I wish my thoughts would. They don’t, and instead of rushing out to find Dawson and solidify the fake-dating rules, I head down the hall to shower, as I never did that after my run.

Maybe the rainfall shower head will help my mind align and know what to say to Jess that can take our relationship from fake to real without making me sound or look like a fool.

JESSIE

“**A**nd what?” Tara asks, glancing over to me from her spot in the grass. Her hens cluckle and warble around her, pecking at the feed she’s sprayed from her fingers.

“And nothing.” I study the blade of grass in my hand. Maybe it will have tiny letters on it that’ll tell me how to act at work tomorrow morning. “The conversation moved on. It was a fun lunch. I dropped him off at home.”

“He didn’t call or text?” Tara walks over, and I scootch over so she can sit on the steps leading up to her deck.

“No,” I say, throwing the grass out into the lawn. “We’re not dating, Tara. Why would he call or text?”

“You said he expects you to be ready twenty-four-seven,” she says.

“Yeah.” He has called or texted on evenings and weekends in the past. I mentally command myself not to pull out my phone to check and make sure the volume is all the way up.

Tara says nothing, and her dogs smash themselves between us. As I absently rub Tommy’s head, my thoughts can only rotate around one thing: Lance Byers. How he got so completely inside my head I have no idea.

Not only that, but he’s my boss. I’m his assistant. I don’t want to mess anything up by assuming something with him or doing something that can cost me my job. I need the job, and I like the job, and I want him to teach me about real estate.

What if I kiss him and it goes badly? I could never show my face at Finley & Frank again, and my whole future as the sixth best real estate agent in Carolina will disappear faster than steam.

“You have the rules,” Tara says. “You stick to those.”

“He held my hand.”

“But that’s within the rules.” Tara’s gaze lands on the side of my face. “Right?”

I look at her and shrug. “Yeah.”

“Then he didn’t break them.”

“We weren’t in public. No one was around.” We were just driving in my car. My stupid fingers twitch as if they need his between them to stay calm.

“Maybe he...” Tara exhales. “I don’t know, Jess. I’ve been there, and I still don’t know.”

“How did you and Alec take it from not-real to real?”

“He showed up on my doorstep one day and kissed me,” Tara says. “We had a very, um, short talk in between some more kissing about how it wasn’t fake.” She brushes her hair back off her face just as a male voice calls, “Hello?”

“That’s him.” She gets to her feet and extends her hand toward me to help me up too. I make the mistake of meeting her gaze. “Just maybe...try to find out if it’s real.”

“What if it’s not?” I ask. And if I try, and Lance is like, *Nope, so sorry. Just assistant-boss from here on out*, then what will I do? Hide behind a wide-brimmed hat and the copiers forever?

I’d have to quit, and I know this way down deep inside. I don’t confront problems head-on. I’d rather say nothing and let hurricanes blow by, or I’d rather scream and shout and then run out.

There is no way I could continue to show up for work, day after day, and see Lance if he told me he wasn’t interested in me after I’d told him I was interested in him.

“Hey,” Alec says, and I turn toward him.

“Not a word,” I say out of the corner of my mouth, but I take one look at Alec, and it’s obvious he already knows something. Maybe not that Lance and I are having a fake relationship, but at least that I said something to Tara just now.

“What’s goin’ on out here?” He scans the yard beyond us as Tara and I climb the steps. I let her go ahead, noting how she jogs the last couple of steps to Alec, and how he swoops her into his arms. They love each other so much, and I’ve never seen Alec so happy.

My heart swells with joy for him, because he’s my best friend, and after he lost his inn, I thought he’d be lost forever.

“Hey, Alec,” I say, tipping up to kiss his cheek as he lets Tara go.

“What were you two talking about?”

“It was a private conversation.”

“Right,” Alec says, obviously not caring or believing me. “Something about Lance, maybe?”

“No,” I shout, and even I wince with the volume of the word. Who knew two-letters could be so violent? I glare at Tara. “I shouldn’t have told you. I didn’t realize you’d blab to Alec.”

“We’re engaged,” Alec says while Tara shakes her head.

“I didn’t tell him,” she says, and Tara has never lied to me. Sure, we had a rocky start, but that’s all over now.

I switch my eyes to Alec and then fold my arms and park them across my midsection. He’s familiar with this stance, and he sighs. “Dawson may have mentioned something,” he says. “Lance told—said—some...thing.”

My curiosity flies off the charts. “What did Lance say?”

“I don’t know,” Alec says. “They’ve been friends since college. I’m the new guy. I wasn’t there.”

“New guy,” I repeat with a scoff. The chickens have moved on from the feed in the yard to the pasture that borders

it, and I watch them bob around, searching for food. Chickens are funny little creatures, and I bend down to pick up Goose, Tara's second dog.

"Can I take him home with me?" I ask her, knowing she'll say yes.

"Sure," she says.

"I can't." I stroke the canine's head, wishing I could. "My uncle would throw a fit." I set Goose on the ground and sigh. "I'm going to go. Thanks, Tara."

"Anytime," she says, and I start into the house. Alex asks her about me, and why I came over, but Tara says, "She can tell you if she wants to," and I appreciate that so much.

I haven't even moved through Tara's whole house before my phone dings. I pull it from my shorts pocket and see Alec has texted me. *Come for an early breakfast tomorrow. I'll make the bacon and spinach quiche, and you can tell Peaches your secrets. We both miss you.*

Tears spring into my eyes, because my life before I started at Finley & Frank was so easy. No, I had no money. No, I existed with mostly hopelessness—and a parrot who says "bacon pancake" more than any other English words.

But I wasn't confused. I wasn't worried about how to talk to a man. I wasn't scared of losing things I didn't even know I wanted.

Okay, I tell him, and then I silence my phone, noting that I have no missed calls or texts from the handsome, honest, handy, hard-working Lance Byers.

KIND.

My heart rebounds from my feet, where it had fallen when I'd seen my boss's name on the phone screen. I look up, but I'm momentarily blinded as darkness has fallen completely since I retreated to the study to put something on TV.

I didn't put anything on. I'd suffered through dinner with Rufus and Uncle Jack, and that alone can cause a woman to need a nice long winter nap. I'd laid down on the couch and enjoyed the silence, that was what I'd done.

I may have fallen asleep. The jury's still out on that one.

Lance's text has woken me way the heck up. "Kind?" I repeat out loud, suddenly catching up to our alphabet game. I have to sing the alphabet to get to the letter after K—L, by the way—and then I let my phone fall to my lap.

I had great H-words for him, but J was a flop, and I can't let L be lame too. At least if it's not geriatric and mythical, I might be in the clear.

Instead of texting him another adjective, I let my fingers fly across the screen. *Thank you*, I say. *I had a good time yesterday. Did you get your afternoon nap with Cha-Cha?*

He'd said he wanted to shower and sleep when I'd dropped him off. I'd teased him about the size of the chimichanga he'd consumed at the restaurant, and how I'd sleep for a year after eating all of that.

Unfortunately, he says back. *My sister called, so no nap.*

Ruth had called while we were at lunch, but I don't remind him of that. *Oh? What did she have to say?*

I'm not sure if this is a friendly conversation or a flirty one. In the fourteen days since I started at Finley & Frank, Lance's only texts were about documents, clients, or emails he'd sent me.

Do you have an older sister? he asks.

Yes, I tell him.

Then it's like that. He sends a smiling emoji with it. *She likes to boss me around.*

I can't imagine you being anything but the boss, I say, and *that* definitely is flirting. The way I'm smiling tells me that, though Lance can't see me. To me, Lance is a powerhouse. He has the pinstriped suits and the shiny shoes. The boxy shoulders, and every time he enters the office, I imagine paper

airplanes made out of Post-It Notes flying around in the tornado his very persona creates.

Everyone bends to his will, including me, and we all secretly want to be let behind that frosted-glass door with the gold lettering on it. I mean, it takes someone special just to have a door with gold lettering on it. A boss.

Are you home? he asks, and my smile slips.

Yes.

Wanna go for a ride?

I immediately look up, as if Lance will be standing outside the study windows. I get instantly transported back to high school, when hearing the *tick-click* of a rock against glass could get my heartbeat spiking up to dangerous levels.

Of course, no one is standing outside, and even if they were, I wouldn't be able to see them. There are thorny rose bushes outside the study besides. And it's pitch-black.

Instead of answering him with my fingers, I call him. "Go for a ride?" I ask when he picks up.

"Yeah," he says casually, as if he hangs out with all of his co-workers on Sunday evenings. "It's cool tonight, and I have a convertible."

Of course he does. I swallow, not sure how to say yes or how to say no. Why is there no easy answer to this question?

"I want to talk about the fake-dating rules," Lance says, his voice almost an octave lower than normal. He clears his throat. "We never got back to them the other day, and I don't think they're complete."

I get to my feet, plenty I could say about how Sabrina isn't expecting to see both of us for a while. Who are we really pretending for? No one else at the office heard me tell Sabrina that we were dating.

"I need to get shoes," I say, scanning myself to make sure I'm dressed. Uncle Jack requires a dress for Sunday dinner, and I certainly can't go meet Lance in my semi-formal gown, even if it is blue.

Why not? a voice whispers in my head. I didn't wear shoes to dinner either, and I decide a joyride with Lance doesn't require footwear. My heart tap dances in my chest as I consider what I'm doing. I'm thirty-four years old and about to sneak out of my uncle's house, shoeless.

"Where are you?" I ask, hitching up my skirt. I can't get down to the live oaks along the road very quickly.

"I just turned down the lane," he says.

"Wait there," I practically yell. "I'll be there in a minute."

"You sure? I can just come up to the house. I live in the South. I know what mansions look like."

Uncle Jack has cameras anyway. If Lance is just sitting there, headlights on, idling, Uncle Jack might send out Donovan, his evening security, to find out why.

"Okay, I say, making a snap decision. "I'm on my way. I'll see you right outside the front doors."

"Sounds good." Lance hangs up, and I dart over to the study door. I tell myself that I'm thirty-four years old and allowed to leave the house after dark.

Then I run on my tippy-toes down the hall and around the corner, my sights set on getting to the front doors without anyone seeing me.

LANCE

I'm sure I'm hallucinating when the double-wide, double-tall front doors of the mansion open. A woman slips out, a beautiful blue ballgown coming with her. With a start, I realize it's Jessie.

I fumble my seatbelt, and by the time I get out of the car, she's already reached the top of the steps. She comes down them in a step-step, step-step-step pattern that makes her more feminine.

I am in so much trouble.

I was all Dawson-prepped to lay out the fake-dating rules. No touching except when Sabrina is around. No one else knows about the false relationship, and I don't need to be holding Jess's hand in her car while she drives us to lunch.

We don't need to be going to breakfast, lunch, or dinner. No coffee, no stopping by cookie parlors, no nothing.

As I stand at the corner of the convertible, I can only stare. If I met this woman somewhere, I'd try to get her number. First, I'd try to talk to her to see if I like her, then I'd try to get her number. But I already know Jess. I know she's articulate and clever, easy to talk to and genuine. I'd also given her the adjective *intelligent* for the letter I, and then *kind*.

She's all of the above, and drop-dead gorgeous too.

She works for you, I start to chant in my mind. *She works for you. She works for you.*

She reaches the bottom of the steps and says, “Hey, why are you out of the car?”

Because I can't tell Ruth I didn't come around and open the door for a princess, I think. “Let me get the door.” I dart around the hood and reach the passenger side of the car just as Jess arrives. She gives me a smile that is only illuminated by the moonlight, and then sinks into the convertible, the top of which is already down.

A flush fills me from top to bottom, and the night suddenly isn't anywhere cool enough for this ride. I actually pull at my collar, which has three buttons undone. If I pull on it anymore, it'll rip down the middle.

I do a deep-knee bend to get into the car, and I take a moment to get comfortable in the capsule-like pod meant for the driver. “Okay?”

“Yes,” she says, her seatbelt clicking. “Unless this car of yours decides not to let me out.” She flashes me a smile that only sends a hormonal shock down to my toes.

“I tested the seatbelt before I came over,” I say.

“Really?” Jess giggles, and that doesn't help my train of thought. It derails, and I grip the steering wheel like it's a throat, and I can choke it to death. I release my fingers, because I don't want to choke anything to death. Maybe the seatbelt if it doesn't release when it's time for Jess to get out of the convertible.

“I did,” I say with a smile. “Clasped and unclasped just fine, about five times.”

“Perfect,” Jess says, glancing toward the house. “Let's go.”

I put the car in gear and go, because I don't need to be told twice. Jess sighs and puts her right hand over the windowsill in the car. “This is so nice,” she says. “It really is different than just riding in a car.”

“It really is.” My throat is so dry, but the convertible is a two-seater and isn't big enough even for cup-holders.

“Restless tonight?” she asks innocently, and I hear her ADHD accusation in the tone. I ignore it and chase the moonlit shadows from the live oaks.

“A little,” I admit. I reach the end of the lane and make a right, which doesn’t take us back toward the city or into Sugar Creek.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“The country,” I say.

“Is this your car?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “Sort of. My step-dad and I bought it together, and I keep it here in Charleston. He lives in a fifty-five-plus community in Florida, and they don’t have the parking.” I glance at her, and she’s pushing her hand through her hair.

I have never envied someone’s hand so much. I focus on the road, but all I can imagine is myself pushing my hand through Jess’s hair while I kiss her.

Jess lets a mile or two go by in silence, and I’m still trying to figure out how to swallow. “You wanted to talk about the fake-dating rules?” Jess prompts just as I ask, “Do you always wear ballgowns on Sunday evenings?”

Jess exhales a long sigh that tells me I’m insufferable—or else the dress is. “My uncle requires a dress for dinner on the weekends,” she says. “At least it was only him and Rufus tonight. Last night, he tried to feed someone named Phil and did I mention that there was a light violet gown laying on my bed? Just you know, in case it was my size.”

I grin into the night, a measure of relaxation flowing through me. “Let me guess: it was your size.”

“Yes, it was,” Jess says. “Lucy and I went to get a hamburger, and while I was gone, the gown mysteriously disappeared.”

“Did you say anything to your uncle?”

“No,” Jess says, her voice as dark as the night. “That’s not what we do in my family, Lance. We just stay silent and

pretend like nothing happened.”

“But he came into your bedroom—twice—without your permission.”

“I haven’t had privacy for years,” Jess says, and she keeps her head turned away from me while she does.

“Jess,” I say, but she just shakes her head. My heart pounds against my breastbone. “When you get your own place, you’ll have all the privacy you want.”

“Yes,” she says quietly, but the vastness of the sky seems to trap the emotion in the word and echo it back to me endlessly.

“I heard from Chip too,” I say, though her apartment isn’t what I was going to talk about with Jess tonight. She finally turns toward me, such hope in her face. “He said he doesn’t have anything right now, but he’ll let me know if something comes across his desk.”

“Thank you, Lance,” Jess says, and she reaches over and brushes my hair off my forehead. Time slows to nothing, and I’m surprised I don’t drive the convertible into the nearest tree.

I press harder on the accelerator, not quite sure where I am or where I’m taking us. I finally get my voice to say, “I thought we could go up and around Hidden Wood and back into the city from the north.”

“Sure,” Jess says, as if she doesn’t have a care in the world. On the outside, someone meeting her for the first time might think that. I probably did. No, I probably scanned her down to her shoes and found her lacking. I’m sure I frowned at her, and I’m sure I said something about how I’d see how long she could last.

Sometimes I really hate the things that come out of my mouth.

Thankfully, the stars keep us company as I drive, and nothing needs to be said. I know the way, because I’ve done this drive plenty of times. I’m alert and awake, thanks to the copious amount of coffee I drank at Dawson and Callie’s. They’re working on a big project with a deadline this

Wednesday, and I left them in a mess of samples, advertising banners that had been printed in the wrong color, and vats of take-out.

The lights in Charleston come into view, and Jess pulls in a breath. “Oh, wow,” she says. “Look at the city.”

“It’s beautiful at night,” I say, glancing over at her. “You haven’t seen it like this?” I hardly recognize the gentle tone coming out of my mouth.

“No,” she says, turning and smiling at me. She reaches for my hand, and I happily give it to her. I might be in trouble with this woman, but I decide with her slender fingers in mine that I don’t care. If there’s trouble to be had, I want it to be with Jess.

“Thanks for inviting me on this drive,” she says. “It’s exactly what I needed to face the week ahead.”

“We don’t have a busy week,” I say.

“Maybe you don’t,” she says. “Every day is like navigating a mine field for me.”

I chuckle, realizing too late that I shouldn’t. I try to judge how she feels, but I can’t quite see her whole expression. “Is it because of me?”

“Let’s just say I’m still learning how to anticipate your needs.”

“You’re the one with all the nonsensical acronyms,” I say, grinning. “I’ve started a list in my phone and everything.”

She bursts out laughing and says, “You have not.”

“Yes, I have.” I’m not sure if I’m flirting or just having a good time. Ruth tells me I’m too proper to flirt, and Dawson says I need to either let go or do up another button and be Aaron Finley to the T. But I don’t want to be my step-dad, at least not in that way.

“Tell me one acronym I’ve used that you didn’t know,” she challenges.

“NBD,” I say instantly. “You texted it to me on Thursday, and I’m still not sure I know what it means.”

Jess laughs again, and let me tell you, I want to make her do that every single day of my life. I find myself laughing with her, at least until she says, “Well, what does it mean?”

I cut her a look out of the corner of my eye, the city lights coming closer. “No big deal?”

She beams so brightly she could be the moon. “You got it. That’s UGI, BTW.”

I blink. “You did not just say all of that.”

“Everyone knows what UGI is, Lance. It’s like that LOI or the FVM or the CDC.”

Laughter soars from my throat. “I’m pretty sure that last one is the Center for Disease Control,” I say through my chuckles.

“Laugh it up,” she says, though she’s laughing too. “In fact, I’m going to make that an acronym too. LIU.”

“Oh, we can’t have two with L’s and I’s.” I grin at her. “That’s just too much.”

She shakes her head and readjusts my hand in hers and settles them both on her leg. The orange streetlights come over us, and a new weight settles on my shoulders. Out in the country, I can’t feel the pressure, but back in Charleston, it descends with the force of gravity.

She allows me to drive through the city, right along the water, and start for Sugar Creek again. Only a couple of miles from her uncle’s house, she says, “You never said anything about the fake-dating rules.”

“Mm.” I keep my gaze on the road in front of me. How do I tell her I don’t want it to be fake? Will she think I’m just rebounding? What if I am?

I come to the lane that leads past all the live oaks to the mansion, and I make the turn. I let the convertible ease to a stop, and I gaze down the straight lane, with all the trees clawing up into the moonlit sky.

“Jess?”

“Yeah?”

I’m going to just say it. If I regret it, I’ll survive somehow.
“What if I don’t want it to be fake?”

Jess turns her head to look at me, but I can’t quite meet her gaze. “I...”

“Just say it,” I say, because I got to say what I wanted.

“All right.” She takes a breath, and one thing about Jess is she doesn’t ever clear her throat. I have to work hard not to do it right now myself, but she breathes when she’s nervous. I sound like I’m gargling glass.

“I’m scared,” she says. “What if it doesn’t work out, and we break-up? I need this job, Lance. You’re my boss. You said you’d teach me real estate.” She pulls in another breath, and I slide my hand out of hers.

“Fair points,” I say as evenly as I can. She just friend-zoned me. No, worse. Boss-zoned. The simmering, bubbling anger boils in my stomach. I get the convertible moving again, and neither of us say anything until I pull in front of the wide front steps and marble columns on her uncle’s mansion.

“Jess,” I say. “I just don’t want us to be like your family. We have to be able to talk.” I turn my head and look at her. “Okay?”

“Of course,” she says, almost in a British accent.

“Okay,” I say. “So fake-dating when Sabrina Shadows is around. Otherwise, boss-assistant.” I touch my chest on the word *boss* and gesture toward her on *assistant*.

“I’m sorry, Lance.”

“Please,” I say. “Don’t be sorry. It’s fine. I’m on my female-fast anyway.” I try to give her a smile, but I’m pretty sure it looks like I’m one breath away from eating off her face.

She looks...sad. Hopeful. Upset? Confused? I honestly have no idea. But I know she needs to get out of my car right now before I made a bigger idiot out of myself.

“See you tomorrow,” I say, turning to look out the windshield again. Jess gets the hint—and my Southern gentleman act has fled—unbuckles her belt, and gets out of the car. As she tippy-toes back up the steps, I realize she isn’t wearing shoes.

A shoeless princess.

I sigh as I drive away and leave her in my rearview mirror. Isn’t the prince supposed to rescue the shoeless princess—my word, she’s Cinderella—and whisk her away to his castle, where they’ll live happily-ever-after?

“Yeah,” I mutter to myself as I drive under all those statue-like trees again. They’ll probably turn into her carriage drivers to get her to a real royal man. “But Lance, you’re no prince.”

I’m just a man on a female-fast whose fake girlfriend just told him she doesn’t want to try a real relationship in case she then loses her job.

Definitely not a prince.

JESSIE

I pick the piece of bacon from the eggy custard Alec has baked to perfection. “I don’t know.” I pop the bacon in my mouth and do my best not to look at my best friend. I fail at that, just like I’m failing at everything these days.

“What does that even mean?” Alec challenges me. He always has, and I’m not sure why I got up before dawn and left the house to come be interrogated by him. Probably because anything is better than running into Uncle Jack in the morning. And this quiche is fifty-two times better than the corn muffins I like so much.

“Jess,” Alec barks at me, and I sigh. My head rolls on my shoulders, almost too heavy for me to hold up.

“It means, Alec,” I say, employing my Southern socialite tone. I glare at him, but he simply looks steadily back at me. “That I don’t know.”

“You like him.”

“I mean, yes.” I can admit I like Lance. “He’s a little..intense sometimes.”

“We all are,” he says. “Men. You know. It’s how we are.”

“Daddy’s not like that.”

“Because your mama is intense enough for both of them,” Alec says, a frown appearing between his eyes at the same time a small smile touches his mouth. He sighs, his quiche long gone. “Jess, I just don’t get it. The man came to the house

last night and took you for a ride. He didn't do that to talk business. He likes you."

"I know that." The words come out of my mouth, but I'm not sure my heart believes it. My brain is still having a hard time catching up to the situation too.

"You held his hand. You touched his face..."

"Are you saying I led him on?"

"I'm saying he probably thought you liked him too." Alec stands and picks up his plate. "Are you going to eat that?"

"Yes," I say, picking up my fork. "You can't take my quiche."

He chuckles, shakes his head, and walks into the kitchen. "I'll box this for you. You can take it to work."

I groan out the word, "Work," then stuff my mouth with more eggs, spinach, and bacon. What am I doing? How am I going to face Lance in just another hour?

I can't.

My first instinct is to fly away. Grow wings and soar up into the sky.

My second is to stay right where I am. I never need to leave Alec's apartment again. I can go back to birdsitting Peaches, who squawked so passionately when I got here that Alec had to cover her just so we could talk. He has a couch; I can sleep there.

My third thought is to grow up and face Lance like a thirty-four year old woman. I can do it. He's my boss, and I want the job. I can do the job. I can learn. I'm smart.

I tell myself all of these things while Alec puts my lunch-quiche in a plastic container and then returns to the table. "Jess." He sits down again. "Here's what I think."

"Here we go," I say, teasing him.

He smiles, but it's fleeting, and I know it's time to be serious. "You don't want to go back to Beaufort, I get that. You finally found a job you like, and honestly, you must be

good at it, because Dawson says Lance has fired his last several assistants after only a few days. One was gone by lunchtime on the first day.”

I cut off another bite of quiche, my eyes filling with tears. I can't eat. I can't swallow. I can't breathe.

“Honey.” Alec covers my fork-holding hand with both of his. “He put himself way out there. I know you like him, and I know you don't want to pretend in front of your client. So don't pretend.”

“I don't know how to tell him,” I whisper. “I *am* worried about losing my job.” I look at him, silently begging him to understand. To tell me what to do.

“How about you tell him all of that, and make an agreement that he can't fire you if it doesn't work out? That you can only be let go if you mess up—which you won't, Jess. You won't.”

His doorbell rings, and no sheet or blanket can contain Peaches when that happens. She starts to imitate it, then screams, “Someone's here. Someone's here. Someone's here,” on repeat.

I grin at him and stand up. “You get the door. I'll get Peaches. She misses me so much.”

Alec stands too, but instead of going for the door—it's probably Tara or one of the ten-year-old twins down the hall—he takes me into a hug. “Jess,” he whispers. “It's time to be that phoenix you've been trying to become.” Then he walks away, leaving me in the kitchen while he deals with Peaches and one of the twins.

The boy came to see the bird before he has to go to school, and his mother hovers in the hallway while Peaches does all of her new tricks for him.

“Time to become the phoenix,” I tell myself. They're majestic birds, and they can be reborn from ashes. That's what I had to do when I first came to Charleston, and even though I burned everything between Lance and I last night, I can rebuild it this morning. I know I can.

“Bacon pancake!” Peaches yells as I approach. She takes off from the boy’s hand and lands on my shoulder. “Motorbike, I love you!”

I laugh at her, give her a stroke with my pointer finger, and hand her back to Alec.

“Going?” he asks.

I take a breath and square my shoulders. “Yes,” I say. “I’m going to fix this.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I GREET OLIVE WITH A SMILE. SHE stands from her anchor-spot in the office and extends a yellow piece of paper toward me. “A message?” I ask, true surprise flowing through me. “For me?”

“Sabrina Shadows called,” she says. “Twenty minutes before we opened.” She gives me a look that says the same thing Lance told me. Sabrina is Trouble with a capital T.

“Thank you,” I say as professionally as I can. I put my leftover quiche in the office break-room fridge and make my way to my desk-copier compound. Happiness flows through me at the sight of the clean desk, the two trays, and my computer. I open my bottom desk drawer and put my purse inside, then pluck the picture frame out I brought that day.

It goes next to my computer, and it shows me with my brother and my sister. I’m the middle child, and Amelia is a few years older than me, and Jonathan is a few years younger. Mama has never called them anything but their full names—I get called Jessica whenever she speaks to me—but I call them Amy and Jon.

They’re still in Beaufort, but they’re still talking to me too. Amy is blissfully married to a man named Scott Sorenson, who is a decade older than her. She has her own mansion and gardens to maintain, and how she has survived there, I have no idea.

Jon isn't married yet, but Mama has the Southern belles coming all the time. I swear, she hosts balls and parties and dinners just to bring women over for him to pick from. It's almost like those Regency novels and movies, where people's eyes meet from across the room, and though they know nothing about one another, they fall madly in love.

I don't believe in Regency romances, and while I adore ballgowns and tiaras, I would rather never attend another ball.

I glance over to the gold-lettered door. It stands closed, and I have no way of knowing if Lance is in yet. "Of course you do," I mutter to myself, and I glance down at my phone. The clock on it bounces from spot to spot on the screen, and it's not nine a.m. yet.

Which means he's not in.

Lance is nothing if not the most scheduled person alive, and he has four more minutes before he'll come through the double glass doors out front, chat with Olive for a moment, and then move into his office.

I'm expected to be here before him, and I am. I wake my computer, my heartbeat thumping like a jackrabbit's hind leg. I read my message from Sabrina, but all it says is to please call her at my earliest convenience. I'm feeling rather inconvenient right now, so I put the note in my to-do-today box and check my email.

I know the moment Lance enters, because he's on the phone, and his voice fills the lobby and carries around the corner to my ears. "...absolutely not, Kyle. Sheila Hudson has a letter of intent to purchase, and you will not accept that offer."

I stand, imagining him with those paper airplane Post-Its and his hair waving in the wind. His jacket flaps open to reveal that broad chest, and he'll be wearing a light-colored shirt in violet or pink or yellow, with a tie that doesn't match.

My mouth turns dry at the fantasy in my head.

"I don't care what you told them," Lance says, appearing past the wall and then the copiers. "I know you got that LOI.

My assistant confirmed it with you days ago. The offer will be —” He enters his office and slams the door behind him hard enough to make the glass rattle.

My bones do the same thing, and I swallow down anything I’ve planned to say to him. He didn’t even use my name with Kyle, though the other agent knows who I am. I’ve spoken with him on the phone several times, and we exchange emails like we’re pen pals.

I sit back down, but it’s more like a stone dropping. My chair has wheels, and it slips. I’m free-falling for a moment, and then my shoes grip the ground, and I manage to keep myself from barreling into the temporary wall behind me. Peter Frank’s assistant has a little cubicle there, and I suddenly want to find a shank and tunnel through the beige, carpet-covered partition and escape into her area.

The warden opens his door and looks at me. “I need Sheila Hudson right now,” he says, ducking back into his office.

“Yes, sir,” I call after him, wishing I was important enough to not have to dial my own calls. At least he didn’t slam the door this time. My fingers tremble as I pull up Sheila’s number and dial it for Lance.

She answers with a, “Hello, Jessie, darling.”

I smile despite the mood in this corner of the agency today. “Howdy, Sheila,” I say, really drawing out the Southern syllables. She’s from Georgia, and she loves Southern belles. “Mister Byers needs to talk to you about the riverfront property. Can I transfer you over?”

“In a minute,” she says sweetly, in her own slow-as-cold-molasses drawl. “You got yourself a boyfriend yet, sweetie?”

“Uh.” I pause, because I don’t know how to answer this question. With red phoenix wings in my head, I continue with, “Almost, ma’am. Workin’ real hard on it.” I don’t know why I slip into a Texas cowboy accent instead of my born and bred Carolina one, and I press my eyes closed. “Let me transfer you.”

The first time I tried to transfer a call from my phone to Lance's, I hung up on the client. The second time, I couldn't get it to leave my headset, and Lance had come out to my desk to take the call, glaring like he'd been born with an exasperated expression on his face and it had been stuck like that forever.

Olive finally took pity on me and taught me how to do it, so the call goes easily from my phone to Lance's, and he answers on the first ring. I hang up, because Sheila is not my client, and I'm just the assistant.

My ears ring, and when I blink, I can't focus on the letters on my computer screen. I won't be able to either—until I talk to Lance. I get up and move around my desk, positioning myself next to his door. I press my back into the wall like I'm a cat burglar about to steal the Queen's jewels, and tilt my head to the side, listening.

"...know that, Miss Hudson," he says, his tone placating and a complete one-eighty than it had been when he'd requested I get her on the line. "But we need the offer by five p.m. today, or the seller is going to accept the offer that's already come in."

Lance won't be happy if he loses this purchase. I don't think men like Lance Byers know how to lose, and I can't imagine what his night was like after he dropped me off.

You're such an idiot, I tell myself for the hundred and twenty-first time. The moment I'd gotten out of his car, I'd wanted to get right back in. I wanted to tell him I'd made a huge mistake, and of course—absolutely of course—it was fine that he didn't want our dating to be fake. I don't want to fake it either. *Take me to dinner right now.*

I press my eyes closed in the silence, and then Lance says, "You're lucky I got us until this afternoon," and his voice is far too close for him to be at his desk.

I whip open my eyes, and sure enough, he's standing in the doorway. His eyebrows are an angry V, and he somehow raises them in the same position. His question is clear: *What are you doing, lurking here against the wall?*

I wish I knew.

My heart pounds so dang hard I'm sure it's going to crack a rib.

“Five o'clock,” he says, and then he lowers his hand holding the phone. “Miss Dunaway?”

I take a steeling breath and throw myself off the cliff. “I need to talk to you,” I say. “In private.”

Lance's angry-V disappears, his eyebrows still sky-high. He steps back and gestures toward his office. “This better be quick.”

LANCE

I'm already back to my desk by the time Jess takes a seat. She promptly gets back up, and I stay on my feet too. With the desk between us, I feel like I might be able to hold my composure for however long this conversation is going to be.

When she doesn't say anything, I go, "Well?" I have plenty to do today, and I can't believe Kyle Corison is going to sell that property out from under me. My blood boils at the thought, and Jess's bright blue sweater with a star right in the middle of it isn't enough to distract me.

"I made a mistake," she says, twisting her fingers around one another.

I reach up and pinch my fingers along my forehead. I didn't sleep last night but spent hours tossing and turning in some level of dozing, thinking about Jess.

Then, the line at Legacy Brew was twenty cars deep, and I'd skipped it, knowing there'd be coffee here. Then Kyle had called, and I still haven't been properly caffeinated.

"With what?" I ask, trying to think through what houses we've been working on. I shuffle a couple of files on my desk just to have something to do with my hands. "If you can't book Laura for the pictures for the Gilmore estate, just get—"

"With you," Jess blurts out. "I was so stupid last night. I don't want to fake-date either."

My eyes fly to hers, noting how much anxiety she carries in her shoulders, her face, and even her stance.

“I like holding your hand,” she says, licking her lips—completely distracting me yet again. “I loved riding with you in that convertible, and talking to you over lunch—and I don’t mean about business things. Just...Lance things.”

I have no idea what to say. An insane amount of hope builds in my chest, but I will not let it out. Not yet. Not until I’m sure Jess knows what she’s saying—and means it.

I blink, and Jess relaxes slightly. “Maybe it was a one-time offer,” she says. “I know you’re doing this female-fast thing, and I don’t want to break that for you. Maybe we could just, I don’t know, give it a try, and if it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out.”

I start nodding about halfway through. “If you want.” My voice grinds through my throat as if I’ve been stung by a jellyfish.

“Is there some office policy or something?” she asks. “Like, maybe then, if I know you can’t fire me just because it doesn’t work out...”

Ah, so she wants assurance she’s not going to lose her job. *That’s smart*, I tell myself, just like I did all of last night. I’ve never thought Jessie Dunaway was stupid, that’s for sure.

“I own the agency,” I say slowly. “Well, Peter and I do. There’s no official policy against two co-workers dating, and we’ve never had a problem with it.” I sit down, my feet and knees thanking me instantly.

“You own this place?” Jess asks, dumbfounded.

“Yes,” I say.

She falls into her seat. “I didn’t know that. I’ve been here for two weeks. Why didn’t you say so?”

I shrug, because I didn’t feel the need to tell her. “My stepdad co-founded Finley and Frank with one of his best friends. Simon Frank. Peter is his son. I’m Aaron Finley’s son. We co-own it.” I click my mouse like this is no big deal. To me, it isn’t.

“No wonder you have a convertible,” she says.

I look over to her, a smile forming in my soul and working its way toward my mouth. The silence in the office isn't quite so charged anymore, and I like that. Jess, of course, brings a shot of electricity to my blood every time I look at her, so there's definitely still some current. It's just not as angry or frustrated.

"I can guarantee you that the only reason I would fire you is if you mess up on a job-related item," I say. "Is that good enough?"

Her face lights up. "A personal guarantee from the great Lance Byers?"

"Stop it," I say, letting the smile touch my mouth. I don't want her to know how tightly she's got me wrapped around her finger already.

"I'd say that's enough," she says.

"Great," I say, not sure what to do next. There's all this real estate work, but now that we've decided to maybe not be fake-dating, shouldn't I ask her out or something? "So...what are your plans for tonight?"

"No plans," she says sweetly.

"Dinner, then?" I ask, and I make sure I'm looking right into her eyes when I add, "And we won't be talking about business."

A flush fills her cheeks, and dang if that doesn't make me ten times hotter than I already am. She nods, gets to her feet, and says, "Stand up. We need to fix your tie."

I grin from ear to ear as I do what she says. She moves over to the bank of cabinets beside the entrance to my office and opens the one closest to the door. "Let's see..." She checks over her shoulder a couple of times as I unknot the tie around my neck. "This one."

She plucks down a dark red, orange, and purple tie that's covered with polka dots of varying sizes.

"Really?" I hand her the offending tie, which I thought matched the baby blue shirt I'm wearing. It's navy blue, so it's

in the same color family.

“Contrasting is always better,” she says as I loop the tie around my neck. “You’ll see.”

I finish up with the tie and smooth it down my chest and abdomen, my eyes following it. “I do like it.”

“It’s fabulous,” she says. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go return a call for my client.”

I chuckle as she walks away, wondering if she knows she’s adding an extra swing to those sexy hips. If she doesn’t, she’s simply amazing. “You like saying that, don’t you?”

“You know what?” She turns back at the door, her smile oh-so-beautiful. “I really do.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I’M NECK-DEEP IN GOING OVER AN offer that came in on one of my properties—which has pushed my regular work to the side—when I hear a couple of voices I don’t recognize.

That’s not all that abnormal, because we have clients in and out of the agency all the time. Besides Peter and me, there are six other agents working at Finley & Frank, all of them buying and selling real estate and commercial properties in the Charleston and surrounding areas.

But these voices sound angry.

“Let’s go in here,” Jess says, and she appears in my doorway. She’s clearly out of her element and her league, and she throws me a look that screams *help me, Lance!*

I get to my feet, the proposed offer forgotten, and round the desk just as Sabrina Shadows bustles by Jess. Right on her heels is Jason Finch.

“...walk away like that,” Jason says, clearly upset. “And don’t think that just because you’ve hired one of the best real estate agents in the city means that you can get away with

undercutting me.” He glares at Sabrina, who keeps her back to him, and looks at me. “Hey, Lance.”

“Hey,” I say as Sabrina whips around.

“You know him?”

“Of course I know him,” Jason fires back at her.

She cocks one hip so hard I’m sure she’s going to fall. I even lunge toward her just in case. She gives me the dirtiest look a woman has ever given me and switches her glare back to Jason. “I suppose you’re going to hire him to sell the house.”

Jason lifts his chin. “Yes.”

“What is going on here?” I ask, holding up both hands. I even step between Jason and Sabrina, because one of them is going to start throwing punches at the other. My bet is on Sabrina, because that woman is not afraid of anything or anyone.

“Miss Shadows found a property she liked,” Jess says, those hands winding and twining. I need to tell her to knock that off. She should be the Power Suit in the room, not the Nervous Nellie.

I take a step toward her and put my hands over hers. “And?”

She stills and looks up at me. “And Jason—uh, Mister Finch—owns it. Sabrina wanted to put in an offer below asking price, and I called Jason, who’s selling his own property. You know, a FSBO? Anyway.” She swallows and does her deep-breathing thing. “Things sort of snowballed from there.”

“And by snowballed, she means *Miss Shadows*,” Jason sneers. “Put in an offer at half the listed price. It’s insulting.”

“Jess,” I say, trying not to be condescending.

“That’s not true,” Jess says, removing her hands from beneath mine. They clench into fists as she steps next to me. “There was no offer made. I wouldn’t do that, because I know

the value of your property, Mister Finch, and I was advising my client—”

“It’s not my job to pad your bank account,” Sabrina says over Jess.

I want to tell her to duck and cover, but I’m too proud of her. Of course she did her homework on the property Sabrina liked. And of course she didn’t try to low-ball the seller.

“It’s not my job to sell to you for half the value just because you want it,” Jason snaps back.

“You’re so used to everyone bending to your will, because you’re so good-looking,” Sabrina hurls at him. “Or you think you are.”

“No one bends to my will,” Jason says. “I work hard for what I have.”

“So do I.”

“Do you?” he challenges, even taking a step forward. “Did you bring me the Callahan case files from storage last week when I asked for them?”

“I’m not your paralegal,” Sabrina growls.

“No.” Jason wears a dark, dark look. “You’re my *junior partner*. That means you work on cases *with* me, and I shouldn’t have had to waste my afternoon at the depository to get that case.”

“I shouldn’t have had to either.”

“You put in a request, and they send it!” he yells. “Neither of us should’ve had to, but you didn’t do what I asked you to do.”

“Okay,” I say, stepping in, because this fight really has nothing to do with me or Jess. “You two need to deal with your work issues somewhere else.” I look between them, giving them each a fierce enough glare that they both back down. “Miss Shadows, Jess cannot put in an offer that isn’t fair for the seller. If you’d rather not work with someone of her caliber, that’s fine, but I don’t think you’ll find any agents here at Finley and Frank that will do that for you.”

Message: *Take your business somewhere else.*

“I’m happy to show you the properties I found,” Jess says, her voice as sweet as sugar pops. “Including a tour of Mister Finch’s century-old house. But there are market values we want to observe.” She cuts a quick look at Jason, who now wears a smug look. I want to slap him and tell him he’s not doing himself any favors.

“Jason,” I grumble out of the corner of my mouth.

He looks at me and takes his arrogance down a notch, praise the heavens. “I don’t think I’m needed here,” he says.

“That you are not,” Sabrina says. “And if you follow me again, I’m calling the cops.”

“You do what you have to do,” Jason says breezily as he exits the office.

Jess and I are left with Miss Trouble, and I look at her, trying to anticipate Sabrina’s next move.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snaps. “It’s men like you who make women sit out in cubicles.” She looks me up and down. “With your fancy ties and jackets, you act like you own the world.” She stomps past me and then Jess, who doesn’t linger in my office.

She goes after Sabrina with, “Miss Shadows, he is one of the top five real estate agents in the state. He isn’t *taking* anything from me or anyone else.”

I smile to myself, because Jess has some fire inside her too. You just have to know how to light it. I move to the edge of the doorway and listen, much the same way Jess did to me this morning.

Eavesdropping...who knew I’d be reduced to this inside my own agency?

“He’s teaching me everything he knows,” Jess says as her office chair squeaks. “Besides, he can’t match his ties to his shirts to save his life, so he’s definitely not perfect.” She inhales, and I hope that quiets her nerves for her.

“Please, sit down, and let’s look at these. I found some great places.” She sounds in control and professional, and I’m so, so proud of her.

“You’re only saying that because you’re dating him,” Sabrina says.

“No,” Jess says firmly. “Lance and I are seeing one another, but that has nothing to do with the professional respect I have for him. Now, this one has the big windows you said you wanted.”

Professional respect.

I ease away from the door and let Jess handle Sabrina, no eavesdropping needed. She’s obviously better at it than I am—than anyone else—and as I go back to my own offer, I pray that Jess will be able to put together this deal...and that I won’t mess up too badly tonight at dinner.

JESSIE

My phone bleeps out several *bloopety-blink-blips*, and I realize I was probably in a dead-zone. I'm not sure, but I suspect the texts are from Lance. I glance at the clock and realize he can't be here yet. My adrenaline has spiked already, and I do see his name on my phone.

All of the texts are from him, and I smile to myself. A warm feeling envelops me, and I lean against the wall and tap to open the messages. My goodness, he's sent me five pictures, each numbered, mind you, that show an outfit lying on the bed.

They each have a pair of slacks, a light-colored shirt—everything from pale canary to baby-girl-pink—and a tie in them.

Do any of these match? he'd asked.

I giggle to myself, finding him utterly adorable. The man is thirty-seven and asking me what he should wear on our first date. Can he get any cuter?

None of these, I tap out quickly. I send the message, and then I take a breath. If I know him even a little, I know he'll call.

Sure enough, my phone rings, and Lance's polished, professional agent picture comes up on my screen. "Okay," I say instead of hello. "We're going to dinner where?"

"Oh, uh, I thought we'd try this place called Panini Palace."

I burst out laughing. “You’re kidding.”

“No,” he says, his voice somewhat wounded. “Why? I’ll admit, it’s a bit of a cheesy name, but it’s getting really good reviews on all the foodie blogs around Charleston.”

“And you think you need to wear slacks and a tie?”

“I—” He cuts off, and I can’t stop smiling.

“Honey,” I say, really drawling out the word. “It’s the end of October, so maybe not shorts. But put on some jeans and a polo. Shoes you don’t have to shine. And come pick me up.”

Silence comes through the line, and I check my device to see if the call is still connected. It is. “Lance?”

“I don’t actually own a pair of jeans.”

I laugh again, because AFD—A-Freaking-Dorable.

“Khakis?” I suggest.

“I have those,” he says.

“Great,” I say. “Those. Loafers—not dress shoes. And Lance, search your closet for something that isn’t pastel.”

“Isn’t...pastel...” He says the words like he’s not sure what they mean.

“And then surprise me,” I say.

“What are you going to wear?”

I glance down at myself. “I’m not sure. I was just on my way to get ready from the pool.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“I’ll be ready,” I promise, and the call ends. I can’t decide if he sounded nervous as he’d said his last statement or not. I tell myself not to obsess about anything, and I pull the oversized blouse covered with splashy flowers over my head. I’ve paired the red, orange, and blue shirt with a pair of black skinny jeans, and as I shimmy into those, I feel so great about myself.

I can’t do much to tame my curls, but I spray in my detangler and run my fingers through my hair. It actually looks

pretty good, and I swipe on a pale purple lip gloss and a few dashes of mascara.

I leave my bedroom, pausing just outside the door. I think about what Lance said about not having privacy, and I reach back around to lock the doorknob. I have the key on my ring, and a sense of power fills me as I walk down the wide hallway.

“Jessie,” Uncle Jack says as I move past the dining room.

I pause and hold my breath before I turn toward the doorway. “Yes?”

He holds his soup spoon above a gold-rimmed bowl, but at least he’s the only one seated at the table tonight. “Going out?”

“Yes, sir,” I say.

“With whom?”

“My new boyfriend,” I say, hoping he’ll text those exact words to Mama the moment I turn my back. Or right now. “He’s almost here, so I have to jet.” I wave to him and smile widely. “Have a good night, Uncle Jack.”

I don’t need to antagonize him. I am grateful that he’s let me live here for the past few months. He provided a sense of freedom and safety for me I hadn’t had in Beaufort, and that will always mean a lot to me.

Leaving the mansion goes down like a breath of fresh air, and I practically skip past the marble pillars and down the steps. I’m wearing a pair of strappy sandals that leave my heels flapping, and I should know better than to skip.

My shoes trip me, and I stumble down the last couple of steps to the graveled drive. It looks like someone’s raked it recently, and now I’ve caused a couple of foot-sized potholes.

I manage not to fall, which is a miracle, and only a couple of seconds later, Mammoth’s growl fills the air. His headlights light the night, and I step back up onto the bottom step of the sweeping staircase that leads up to the cement front porch with all those columns.

I can't wipe the smile from my face, and I wait right where I am as Lance puts Mammoth in park and gets down. He jogs around the front of the truck, and he's wearing a big grin too. It goes well with his light gray cotton pants and the deep, midnight black polo that hugs his shoulders and chest.

Such a lucky piece of cloth. I wonder if it knew it would get to touch Lance's body when it was sewn into a shirt. Probably not.

"Howdy, ma'am," he says, and then he wraps me into a hug. This is so different from his demeanor and greeting at the agency, but I don't complain. Not even a little bit.

"Hi." I run my hands up his back, getting the silky quality of the polo. "This shirt sure looks nice."

"Does it?" He steps back and brushes something down his abs. "I found it buried in the back of my closet."

"You don't like dark colors," I say as a statement of fact.

"Not particularly."

"You should wear them, though," I say. "You're fair, Lance. Blond men do well in navies, blacks, eggplant, or ooh, you know what you'd look amazing in?"

"Do tell," he says, plenty of teasing in his voice.

"You're not going to like it," I say, waiting for him to open my door. He does and steps out of the way so I can put my foot on the runner and boost myself into Mammoth's interior.

"Tell me anyway," he says, looking and sounding more relaxed than I thought he'd be. He did say I was easy to talk to, and I hope we can pick up our alphabet adjective game tonight.

"Brick red," I say, noting the fixed seatbelt inside Mammoth.

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Never gonna happen."

I boost myself into the truck without falling backward into my boss, thankfully, and when I'm seated, I ask, "What about mustard? Or burnt orange?"

“Those are doable,” he says. He leans in and adds, “You look amazing tonight, Jess. I’m glad we’re doing this.” Before I can answer, he steps back and closes the door.

I watch him walk through the headlights and back to the driver’s side, and I can admit to myself that I’m glad we’re doing this too. Really glad.

Giddy-glad, and I hope that my enthusiasm for this new relationship doesn’t kill it before it can get legs and start to grow.

“So,” he says. “It’s your turn. We’re on L.”

“L,” I repeat, my brain matter firing adjectives at me. *Lucky. Lazy. Large.*

I could kill the relationship—and lose my job—with this letter.

“Nothing?” he teases, his phone brightening the cab of the truck. He glances at it, and then quickly grabs the device. “This is Rich.” A pause. “He’s got an apartment we can go see tomorrow.”

“You’re kidding,” I say, my breath catching in my throat. “One bedroom? In my price range?”

Lance’s grin is illuminated by the blue light on the phone, and he is so sexy my muscles quiver. “Yep,” he says, his fingers flying over the screen. “I’m going to tell him I’ll have my assistant check my schedule, and we’ll let him know when we can go tomorrow.”

I giggle—and then get busy checking his schedule on my own phone. As he drives us toward the city, we decide we can go look at the apartment tomorrow after lunch. I take his phone and send the message to Rich, as if I’m Lance, and with that all settled, a glow starts in my chest.

Things are finally starting to look up. I just might have a chance at the life I want, instead of the one that’s been dictated to me for three decades.

“You’re not getting out of L,” Lance says.

“I don’t have anything,” I say. “What would you say about me for L?”

“We can come back to it,” he says. “I have M for you, and I’m going to go with *mesmerizing*.”

I laugh, because everything is better with a man when I don’t have to pretend. This is going to be a great date, and I have an apartment to see tomorrow too.

“Limitless,” I blurt out. I swing my attention toward him. “You’re limitless.”

He nods, not saying anything right away. “Yeah,” he says slowly. “I like that. Thanks, Jess.” He speaks with such a genuine quality to his voice, and I sink further into the seat—and into him as he continues toward the city.

I EASE LUCILLE TO A STOP IN FRONT OF A LITTLE WHITE HOUSE that sits back from the road. Neither Lance nor I say anything. I’m taking in the blackness of the roof, and the fact that the flowerbeds have been cleared for the winter. The grass is neat and trimmed, and the driveway is flat and runs along the side of the house.

“It’s a basement apartment,” Lance says.

“Yes.” My voice is barely loud enough to leave my throat. I have a very good feeling about this place, just like I had a great feeling last night after Lance had dropped me off after our date.

We’d had the best night—good food, fun conversation, and lots of laughter. He’d held my hand, ordered six desserts so we could try them all, and walked me all the way to the front doors of the mansion. There had been no kiss—at least not on the lips—and I’d slipped into the house feeling like toasted marshmallows from head to toe.

We’d worked like a well-oiled machine at the agency that morning, and now, I was looking at the house where I was going to live. I just knew it.

“Okay.” I take a big breath and open the door.

“You left your keys,” Lance says, and I duck back into the sedan to pull them from the ignition. So I’m nervous. BFD. The last time I’d looked at an apartment with Lance, my hair had gotten ripped out by a jackalope. I certainly don’t want to repeat that.

He meets me at the front of the car and takes my hand in his. “Rich said this place was nice,” he says. “It’s not on the listings yet, so you don’t need to make a decision in the next five minutes.”

“I know how to weigh options,” I say.

“Hm.”

I let this go, because he lets me tease him about being ADHD. So I tend to see something or hear something and make a decision quickly. That’s not a crime, thank you very much.

A door sits halfway back on the side of the house, right in the driveway, and it’s painted a bright yellow. *Ew*, I think, but I can live with a yellow door if it’s the golden ticket to my own place. The yellow brick road to Oz. Something.

“They said it would be unlocked,” I say, and the knob turns like a greased watermelon going down a slip-n-slide.

I expect a pungent scent to punch me in the face, but I get...lilacs. My soul swells, and I look right and up a few steps to a closed door. Another set of steps on my left goes down, and I move first to go that way. Eight stairs later, I reach the basement floor.

The hallway branches left and right, and I look both ways while Lance crowds in close behind me. “Sorry,” I say, realizing I’ve stopped right in the way. “Bedroom is this way.” I look to the left, and that’s actually the bathroom. It has the standard stuff, and right next to it, in the corner of the apartment is the laundry room.

“Washer and dryer,” I say. “That’s nice. Did you know it had this?”

“No,” Lance says, and I watch him scan his eyes over the window in the bathroom and up to the ceiling. I need to be more like that. More discerning. More observant. See more details.

“That’s it over here,” I say, and I go down the skinny hallway. Maybe I could get a couch in here if I had two strong men to tip it on its side. The room opens up then, and the dining room, living room, and kitchen take up the rest of what I can see.

“A couch will fit in here,” Lance says. “Maybe not a love seat, but definitely a recliner too.”

“Mm.” The dining room table has four chairs compared to the jackalope’s two, and I don’t see any mounted Elky’s. So it’s a win all around. The kitchen holds outdated appliances, but I figure a stove with coiled burners still cooks.

My stomach swoops as I realize I’m going to have to cook my own meals, and I suddenly wonder if I’m ready for this.

Thankfully, that only lasts a moment, because I am so ready to live on my own. Do my own laundry. Pay my own bills, buy my own groceries, and cook my own meals.

The windows actually let in a lot of light, something I wasn’t expecting for an apartment halfway under the ground. They don’t have curtains, and most of them are only a few feet long anyway.

“I don’t get it,” I finally say, turning toward Lance, who’s standing in front of the microwave, frowning.

He turns fully toward me. “What?”

“There’s no bedroom.” I also don’t have furniture, nor the funds to buy much, but I can make do if they’ll leave the dining room table and chairs. “Is it a studio?” If so, I don’t know where the bed is hiding.

“No,” Lance says slowly. “Rich said it’s a one-bed, one-bath.” He enters the living room too, and he points to the door in the corner. “Gotta be back there.”

I didn't even see that door, but now I move toward it, Lance hot on my heels. The door opens into the bedroom, which is far larger than I anticipated. "Wow."

"This is great, Jess," Lance says.

"Kind of a long trip to the bathroom in the middle of the night," I say. "But at least anyone breaking in won't be able to find the bedroom." I grin at him, and he shakes his head.

"You should talk to Callie. She'll come over and serial-killer-proof this place for you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Lance's hand slips along my waist, causing me to suck in a breath. The man causes sparks and sizzles to zip through my whole body. "Do you like this place?"

"Yes," I whisper. "Can I afford it?"

"Rich said nine-fifty."

I can afford it, and my nerves begin shouting at me to *take it. Take it. Take it!*

"I want it," I say, turning into him in excitement. "I can't believe this, Lance. My own apartment." Joy and wonder parade through me, and I gaze into his eyes, wondering what he sees when he looks at me.

"What do you think?" I ask, searching his face now.

"I think..." He reaches up and runs his fingertips down the side of my face. "I think you're pretty." He leans down and touches his lips to my cheek. "Passionate." His mouth slides down to my jaw, and I lean into his touch.

This man lights me up in all the best ways, and my heartbeat hammers at me while my mind tells me to enjoy this moment. Just enjoy the clean linen scent of him, and the warmth of his mouth against my throat, and the way his husky voice says, "Powerful," just before he pulls away.

I've fisted my hands in the collar of his dress shirt—which is a marvelous mauve today, and which I paired with a very Auburn blue-and-orange striped tie—and I don't settle back

onto my feet. My eyes are only half open, and when Lance exhales, his breath cascades over my cheek.

“Jess.”

“That was a lot of P-words,” I say, my own voice filled with plenty of emotion. “I meant what do you think of the apartment?”

“I’ll tell you after,” he whispers.

“After what?” I sway, or maybe that’s the earth moving because of how near Lance stands to me.

“After I kiss you.” He gives me a second, then two, to deny him, and when I don’t, he touches his mouth to mine. Explosions go off in every cell in my body, and I’m certainly going to combust before my next breath.

Praise the stars above that I don’t, because Lance and I breathe in together, and then he kisses me again, his mouth the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted. The earth is definitely swinging wildly now, and nothing I do will stop it.

So I just keep experiencing the very best kiss of my entire life.

LANCE

I can't stop kissing Jessie. I don't *want* to stop kissing her, despite the way my muscles have tensed from toe to scalp. I want to relax into the motion, really enjoy the stroke of her mouth against mine, and the feel of her hair through my fingers.

But everything is on high alert, and it's not until we breathe in together, our lips only millimeters apart, and then simultaneously close the distance between us again that I relax. Instantly, I feel the silkiness of her hair between my fingers, and I slide my hands down her face and along her neck. Over her shoulders and to her back, where I keep her pressed right against me.

She tastes like strawberries, something spicy, and hope. I tell myself to get in control of my hormones and stop all this kissing, but it takes me another couple of seconds to do it.

My chest inflates as I pull in a long breath, and I'm aware enough to notice the way Jess has to breathe in and out rapidly a couple of times. I open my eyes and look at her. Her eyes are still closed, and I haven't backed up a single step. I don't give her an inch, and at some point, I press her against the wall right next to the door leading into her bedroom.

She opens her eyes and looks at me. I don't laugh, or smile, or duck my head in embarrassment. I'm not embarrassed that I kissed her. I wanted to do it, and I want to do a lot more of it.

“Okay?” I ask, because I need her to be okay with what just happened. Kissing her has changed a whole lot in my life, but it can’t be weird between us at work.

“Yeah,” she says, a smile revealing her expensively straight white teeth. “I’m okay.”

The tension in my muscles eases a bit more, and I allow myself to duck my head and touch my mouth against her delicious throat again. “Okay.” I breathe in deep again, getting her floral perfume with a hint of oranges in it, and back up a step, then two. “So you want it.”

“Yes,” she says again. “I want it.” She edges along the wall and into the doorway of the bedroom. Facing it, she adds, “You cheated, you know.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. That kiss was Life Changing, with a capital L and C, and I’m going to need some time to wrap my head around what that means. “On what?”

“We were on the letter N,” she says, turning toward me and cocking one sexy hip into the doorway. “Which is my letter for you. Then you were supposed to have O for me. P is my letter.” She steps toward me, her expression only made of flirt. “You cheated.”

I grin at her, easily taking her into my arms again. “Yeah? Are you going to punish me for going out of order? Or stealing your letter?”

“Mm.” She runs her hands up the front of my shirt, which lights all of my skin cells from sole to forehead on fire. “Both, I think.” She tips up and touches her lips to mine again. This kiss is sweet and special. *Sacred*, I think, once again wondering what that means, and then Jess is out of my arms again.

“This is Alec,” she says, holding up her phone. I hadn’t heard it ring or chime. “Can I?”

“Of course,” I say, grinding my voice through my throat. “I’ll text Rich that we want this apartment.”

Jess doesn’t answer the phone. Instead, her hand holding it drops to her side. “My friendship with Alec isn’t going to be a

problem for you, is it?" Her blue eyes are so innocent, so wide.

"No," I tell her honestly. "I know Alec. Seriously, you should've answered." Surely the call has ended now, and Jess lifts her phone to find the screen dark. "Call him back," I say, swiping to get to Rich's name. "I'm going to call Rich."

As she chats with her best friend, and I tell Rich we want this apartment, I relive the kiss in the back of my mind. Again and again, because it was that spectacular. As soon as I get off the phone with Rich, I get a text from Ruth.

My heart jolts as if someone has hooked it to a live wire, because there's no way I can talk to my sister and not tell her about this LC kiss with Jess. I glance over to the blonde woman who's turned my world upside down in only a couple of weeks, and I smile as she tips her head back and laughs.

Ruth can wait. I approach Jess, feeling a buzz in my veins I haven't in so long. Even when I was with Hadley, I didn't feel this...alive.

Jess ends the call and meets my eyes when I'm only a couple of paces away. "What's so funny?" I ask.

"He's got a new puppy," she says, shaking her head as she pockets her phone. "So Mister Byers. Do we have time to go by his apartment and see a little German shepherd puppy?" She looks at me with puppy dog eyes, and I would never say no to her when she looks at me like that.

"Sure," I say, my voice lodged somewhere in my throat. "Let's go."

"NOTORIOUS," JESS SAYS AS I PUSH THE BUTTON TO CALL THE elevator in Alec's building.

"Notorious?" I repeat, glancing at her. I held her hand from the parking lot to here, and I take it in mine again. I wasn't expecting to have anything but ashes in my chest where my heart is, but somehow, Jess has made something out of the chaos there.

I never thought I'd hear my heart beat as loud as it does right now, as she turns and looks at me, her smile as wide as the Mississippi. "What's wrong with notorious?"

I try to tell my pulse to settle the heck down, but it doesn't comply. Confusion runs through me at how this woman has restrung me with a simple kiss. Then I remind myself that she is not simple, and neither was that kiss.

"I'm not a fugitive," I say, shaking my head as the elevator dings its arrival.

"Notorious means famous," she says, leading me into the car.

"For something bad," I add. "Come on. Something else."

"I might need to come back to it." She presses the button for Alec's floor, which is great, because I don't know where he lives. "What about you? O?"

"Open-minded," I say without thinking too hard about it.

"I'll accept that answer."

I just smile at her and ask, "What do you want to do about P? Since I 'stole' it from you."

Her grin is made of sunshine and flirtatiousness. "You did."

"Mm, yeah," I say, turning toward her fully. "I don't regret it." I kiss her again, still stunned I've found my way out of the darkness that's been living in my soul since Hadley left. I don't carry on nearly as long as I did in the basement apartment, mostly because the elevator is fast, and our kiss slow.

The chime dings again, and the doors start to slide open. A mother stands there with her two boys who look to be about ten or eleven. I'm super-glad Jess and I stopped kissing before they could see us, and they step back so we can get off.

Jess talks to them like she knows them, but I just enjoy the taste of her lip gloss in my mouth and the feel of her skin against mine until she starts to walk down the hall toward Alec's apartment.

When we arrive, Jess cocks her head and pauses. “Do you hear that?”

“I’d have to be deaf not to hear that,” I say, recognizing all the yips and cries as dogs. As in multiple dogs. Puppies. Lots of them. Above it all, a bird screeches like she’s allergic to canines, and Jess heaves a sigh as she opens the door.

“Alec?” she calls, and he says, “Don’t let them out!” in an urgent voice.

Jess and I duck inside, dodging no less than six German shepherd puppies, who converge on us like we’re fresh meat. Because we are. Jess giggles, and key lime mango pie, the sound ignites another part of me I thought had died when Hadley left Charleston.

I find myself smiling and crouching down the same way Jess does. She released my hand when we walked in, and she’s all the way down on the floor, four of the pups licking her face and vying for attention.

I watch her for a moment, because she embodies joy in that moment, and I want to feel like that too. My smile softens everything in my body, and I barely notice the chaos around me. Jess erases it all, and I’m once again left wondering what that means and if I need to do anything about it.

Then Jess says, “Alec, why are there so many?”

I glance away from her to find the other man’s gaze glued to me. He saw me watching her, and I quickly duck my head to the single shepherd who deemed me better than Jess. I drop to my knees too, and the little dog climbs right up into my lap.

“Ohh, you’re in trouble,” Jess singsongs. “That one’s yours.”

“No,” I say, though I’m stroking the puppy like I’ll take him home to meet Cha-Cha. Jessie giggles and fends off one of the German shepherds just to have two more lunge for her. She starts cooing at them, and Alec hasn’t looked away from me.

I meet his eyes, and his eyebrows go up. I shake my head once, a silent way to say, *Nothing’s changed. Don’t make a big*

deal out of this.

Internally, my relationship with Jess is already a big, huge, humongo deal, and I need time and space to think about it before I start talking about it. Especially with Alec. I like the guy, but he's not my best friend and he is Jess's. The real problem is, Dawson won't be much help either.

I think of Ruth, and I figure I better be calling her sooner rather than later.

"Why are there so many?" Jess asks again, and Alec finally switches his gaze to hers.

"The guy said I could pick any one of them I wanted. Tara's on her way to help, and I figured you should weigh in too."

She grins at him, then the pups, then me. "Well, obviously not that one." She's glowing she's so happy, and I've completely forgotten what that feels like. I want to feel that way again, and Jess thaws part of me that had frozen maybe when my first fiancé had called off the wedding.

"I'm not taking a puppy home," I say, but the little dog in my lap looks up at me as if to ask me *why not?* He nips at my hand as I stroke his head, and I immediately curl my fingers into a fist.

"Boy or girl?" Jess asks, picking up one puppy and getting back to her feet. The others don't like that, and a couple of them start to cry.

Peaches goes ballistic inside her cage, and she hands the dog to Alec as he says, "I'm thinking girl. The two I like best are females."

"Peaches," Jessie sings to the bird. "Calm down and I'll let you out."

"At your own risk," Alec says, eyeing the bird. "She's acting like she'll have to let the dog sleep in her cage."

"She's just jealous," Jess says, opening the door and putting her hand inside for the green and white parrot to jump onto. "Aren't you, sweetheart?"

“Bacon,” the bird yells. I mean, I knew she could talk, but I didn’t realize how vocal she could be. “Motorbike, I love you!” She hops up onto Jess’s head, and for some reason, that sight tickles everything inside me that makes me laugh.

Jess doesn’t mind at all, and as I start to chuckle at the sight in front of me, she just strikes a pose. Then another one. I laugh and laugh, and some of that happiness Jess exudes finally, finally enters my heart.

FINE, I SAY A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER. I’M SENDING ONE picture, and that’s it, Ruthie.

I can practically hear my older sister growl through the text, and I smile though it’s far too late for me to even be awake. Jess and I have a couple of meetings in the morning, and I’ve been texting her for most of the evening about her solo meeting with Sabrina Shadows tomorrow afternoon.

It better be a good one, Lance, Ruth texts. Full faces for both of you.

It’s a good thing Jess takes pictures of everything and she’s a pro at selfies, otherwise I wouldn’t have a picture of us. The past couple of weeks have been close to magical, and while there’s no company policy against dating a co-worker, Jess and I have managed to keep everything professional at the agency.

I’ve kissed her on the front sidewalk and around the corner of the building. At her car in the lot, and against the doors of Mammoth. But never in my office.

I think about that and if I want to kiss Jess in my office or not while I find the best selfie Jess has sent me and attach it to a text to Ruth. I’ve told her about Jess—almost everything about her—and without my sister, I’m not sure what kind of knots I’d still be in.

Ruth is a voice of reason, and since she doesn’t live here and there’s zero chance of running into her around Charleston, she’s been an impartial source for me. I’ve been able to tell her

about kissing Jess, working with Jess, and getting to know Jess. I've kept my healing and feelings about having a girlfriend again to myself, though Ruth does know how to pry well enough to have gotten a few things out of me.

My phone rings, and I swipe on the call from Ruth. "That was a good picture," I say, absent-mindedly stroking Cha-Cha. I did manage to resist getting one of the German shepherds, but Alec had gotten two. According to Jessie, Peaches had calmed down, and his trio of pets has started to figure out how to get along.

"Lance," Ruth says, and she's not barking or warning. She also doesn't say anything else.

"What?" I ask her. "It's late, Ruth."

"She's gorgeous," Ruth says, and her voice breaks. Like, legit breaks.

"Yes," I say, because I did say Jess was pretty. Gorgeous works just fine too.

"You look so happy with her," Ruth says.

"Ruth," I warn her. "Don't."

"I'm just saying, I've seen plenty of pictures of you and Hadley, and in none of them were your eyes shining like they are in this one."

"I'm hanging up."

"Lance," Ruth says again, and I pause. I say nothing, and several seconds of silence pass through the line, both of us sitting there together.

"I know, okay?" I say.

"I'm just saying."

"I really do have to work early in the morning," I say, my voice almost a whisper. "I'll talk to you later."

"Love you, Lance," Ruth says.

"Love you too, Ruth." I end the call then and let the phone fall to my chest. I heard everything Ruth said in that silence.

You're happy with her, Lance.

You're falling in love with her, Lance.

What are you going to do about all of the above, Lance?

I reach over and plug in my phone, neither confirming or denying anything Ruth didn't say. As I fall asleep, I imagine kissing Jess in my office the next day. I've never kissed a woman in my office, and it's always been a safe spot for me after every one of my past relationships has ended.

Maybe, this relationship with Jess won't end.

Maybe I don't need my office to escape to anymore.

Maybe.

SABRINA

I have all of the documents printed and lined up in the conference room when my assistant comes on-speaker with, “Miss Shadows, Jessica Dunaway is here to see you.”

“Yes.” I lean forward to speak into the phone, but I don’t know why. It’s a habit, I guess, and one I’m supremely glad no one has seen me do. “Send her to conference room four, please, Cheryl.” I stand and reach for my cardigan. My mother told me it adds fifteen years to my age, but I don’t care. At least I pretended like I didn’t when she’d said it. Now, I wear the sweater into the office, shed it and let it keep the back of my chair warm, and then put it back on when necessary.

“Conference room four?” Cheryl repeats.

“Yes,” I say, already clicking my way toward my office door. I made junior partner several months ago, and that perk came with an office with four walls and one window. One door, and a secretary who sits down the hall and keeps unwanted people away from me.

Since I don’t really like people in general, I wish I could zip Cheryl into a suitcase and take her home with me too. That sounds way worse than I thought it would...

“Ma’am,” Cheryl says, and that alone stops me in my tracks. I’m thirty-four, which is nowhere near “ma’am” status. “Mister Finch just had me send clients into conference room four for him...” She trails off at the end, which is about when my vision starts to go red along the edges.

“Didn’t you tell him I reserved it on the calendar?” I ask, though I realize a moment later that the question is a waste of my time. Cheryl’s not going to fix this problem.

My hands shake as I open my office door and stride out into the hall. At least I try to stride. The skirts I’ve been wearing have gotten a little more narrow and usually don’t go below my knees, so the length of my stride might not be as long or as powerful as I’d like it to be.

Since I’m also only a hair over five-foot-three, I’m neither commanding nor intimidating, while the tall, tan, dark, delicious Jason Finch is.

He’s not delicious, I tell myself as I march down the hall toward the quad of conference rooms in the back of our offices here on the seventeenth floor.

He is with clients, but I open the door anyway and poke my head in. He stops speaking as he sees it’s me, a look of great distaste entering those midnight eyes. “Can I help you, Miss Shadows?” he asks without bothering to get to his feet.

“Yes,” I say as sweetly as I can, which means it still sounds like I want to poison him. “Can I talk to you for a moment out here?” My eyes sweep the table, and all of my documents are gone. That man.

My stomach quakes as I back into the hall, and I pace from one side of it to the other three times before he graces me with his presence. I stop and hold my ground as he closes the door behind him.

“What?” he barks.

“I reserved this conference room for today at two,” I say, gesturing toward the blinded windows. “I had my documents laid out in there.”

Jason blinks, and I see the truth slide right through that expression. “You did?”

“You saw them, you snake,” I hiss at him, very much the one who’s acting like a snake. “Where are they?”

“I had Brenda come in and prep the room for the Winterings,” Jason says smoothly, which is how he says everything. The man is a player if I’ve ever seen one. He’s slippery, and he’ll say anything to get the spotlight either on him or off of him, whatever suits him the most.

“That is not true,” I say, calling him on the lie. I park my hands on my hips and lean forward. “Brenda took a half-day today to go to her almost-daughter-in-law’s bridal shower.”

I once again watch Jason blink, but this time it’s more like a *bl-blink, bal-blink-blink*. Maybe he’s not used to being caught so blatantly in his lies.

“Sabrina,” Jessie Dunaway says smoothly as she comes down the hall. “Jason. How good to see you.”

I swing my attention to her at the same time Jason does, and she’s wearing what I wish I could. But Jess is a few inches taller than me, so the long maxi dress with soaring butterflies on it doesn’t make her look like she’s a beach ball.

Her eyes meet mine, and I try to smile. I fail, and Jessie sees it. She steps over to Jason and presses a kiss to his cheek. “What have you done to her, you scoundrel?” She gives a light laugh as she moves to my side, but I know she’s not kidding.

“I didn’t do anything,” Jason says with his signature chin-raise. I swear, one day, I’m going to make that head lower in acquiescence to me. “Conference room four is occupied.” He turns to go back inside, but I lunge for him.

“Jason,” I say, grabbing onto his arm. He’s opened the door, and he’s halfway turned, so he’s not steady on his feet. I’m certainly not steady in any regard, least of all physically. We both topple into the room, me right behind him. He stumbles a couple of times to try to catch himself, but in the end, he fails.

He calls out and grabs onto the nearest chair. *He’ll save us*, I think, but unfortunately, all of our chairs in the conference rooms roll, and the chair is no good to us as an anchor.

We’re going down, I think just as we do exactly that.

The chair goes spinning toward the far wall, where it clunks noisily while several people start to exclaim. I can't make out all the voices, though I'm sure Jessie's is in there somewhere. All I can focus on is breathing, which I'm doing in a rapid fashion.

Jason is too—I know, because both of my hands are planted against his chest. I actually slide them down, feeling the ridges in his abs, before I figure out what I'm actually doing.

My eyes fly to his, and our gazes lock. In that moment, everything falls away—the other voices, the sound of chairs moving, everything—and I only see Jason Finch.

The man is incredibly good-looking, whether I want to admit it or not. In one breath of time, I see something in his eyes I don't think he wants me to see. He's...soft, which is so unlike every other persona he's allowed me to witness.

I've seen Lawyer-Jason, and he's fierce and talented. I've seen Playboy-Jason, and he's eyeroll-worthy and actually a little cringy. I've seen Arrogant-Jason, and he's the guy I want to punch most of the time. I wish I could see Soft-Jason more, or even Mentor-Jason, but either he doesn't exist or Jason won't let him out of the closet, because he still refuses to help me with any of our shared cases.

“Sabrina,” Jessie says, her voice finally loud enough and close enough to break me from the trance. Her hands touch my elbows and forearms and help me to my feet.

“I'm so sorry,” I say, adopting my professional voice. I smooth down my cardigan when I really want to rip it off and tell Cheryl to put it through the shredder. Cheryl's standing by the door, wringing her hands, as I turn that way.

“We can meet in my office,” I say, putting my own chin in the air as others move to help Pretty-Boy-With-Good-Abs-Jason to his feet. I'm several feet down the hall when Jason calls my name.

My face already burns with humiliation. What more can he take from me? So I turn around and glare my *Yes, Mister*

Finch? in his direction.

A storm mars his handsome face, and it takes him a few seconds to say, “Your... ‘documents’ are on my desk.”

I SIGH AS I PUT MY FEET UP ON THE SAME COFFEE TABLE where Macie has hers. She looks over at me, her mug already at her lips. “Rough day?”

I nod, because I don’t want to talk. Macie said I could have all the free coffee I wanted—and that I didn’t have to talk.

“You didn’t find a new place?”

I shake my head and stir my cappuccino. Maybe she’ll get the hint and just let me exist inside my own mind. Macie and I have been friends for years. She’s the reason I’m not homeless right now, and I often stop by Legacy Brew on the way back from the law office just to see how her day is going.

She’s off for the evening, but we like to sit on this orange couch and nurse a hot drink for a bit before retreating into our private lives. Her mom and my mom are best friends, so we’ve known each other for a while. She knows how prickly I can be, and that I can’t hide how I’m feeling very well, and I expect another question in oh, less than seven seconds.

Sure enough, only six later, Macie says, “I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

I take a sip of my coffee and lean forward to set the cup next to my feet. “Jessie stopped by, didn’t she?”

“She may have been here after work, that’s all.” Macie takes a ginormous bite of her lemon pound cake, her way of saying, *Yes, and she told me all about the two-body-pile-up in conference room four.*

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the cushy couch. “She says there’s at least two places that will work for you,” Macie says. I listen between the lines, which only makes my mood darker.

“I want amazing,” I say. “Not something that merely *works*.” I open my eyes and meet Macie’s. “You’re okay if I stay with you a little longer, right?”

“Of course.” Macie waves away my concern. “I just don’t see why you want an old house.”

“I want charm,” I say, something I’ve told her in the past. “I want a project.”

“Honey,” Macie says, giving me an up-down look. “You’re a project all your own.”

“Hey,” I say, though when I look down, I discover I *am* wearing the cardigan. At least it’s black and slims me slightly. I sigh again, my thoughts flying right back to Jason.

I’d collected my printouts of the houses Jessie had sent me from his office, and Jess and I had gone over things in mine. I’d gone to look at a couple of places with her—the two best ones. Truth be told, either of them probably would work. One had some great calico brick and an in-ground pool. The other had gargoyles guarding the front gate, and while that definitely isn’t something I want, I can only imagine my joy at knocking them down.

Really pounding my anger and frustration into the stones and watching them crumble, imagining Jason’s face on each of the gargoyle’s.

I reach for my cappuccino without a tremor in my hand, which is something I haven’t achieved for a few hours now. I just need this hot coffee and then a hot bath, and everything will be fine.

“When are you going to just tell him he better ask you to dinner?”

I choke on the sip I’ve just taken, and hot liquid splashes over the rim of the cup and onto the back of my hand. I yelp, and all that does is draw attention to me in my should-be-burned-ugly cardigan.

Macie hands me a couple of napkins, her left eyebrow cocked higher than her right. She says nothing while I glare at her and then mop up the mess.

“I’m not interested in Jason Finch,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, and I don’t pine over Andrew Cash.” Macie sighs as I toss the wad of wet and ruined napkins on the table.

I look over to her, and a beat of silence passes between us. “You actually have a shot with him,” I say. “Jason looks at me like I’m something he scraped off the bottom of his thousand-dollar shoes.”

“Oh, please,” Macie says, waving her hand. “That’s because he feels cornered by you. He knows you’re better than him, and he’s nervous.”

“Yeah, I doubt that.” I pick up my coffee again and lift both of my eyebrows at her. “Am I safe to sip this time?”

“Safe to sip,” she says with a grin.

I do, and then say, “Why don’t you ask Andy to take you out? Or better yet...to stop by for coffee one evening after you get off? He could be sitting right here instead of me.” I grin at Macie, the perfect date happening in my imagination.

Macie smiles too and shakes her head. We both giggle, and the last of my tension from my day at the law office fades into relaxation.

Then a woman says, “Hey, Mace,” and I glance up to see Callie Houser plopping down on the other side of Macie. She looks at her husband. “Our usual, honey.”

Dawson goes to get whatever their usual is, taking Alec Ward—one of his best friends—with him. Behind him walks Lance Byers, but Jessie and Tara detour toward us already on the couches. I smile at them, though we’re not all besties yet. I have such a hard time making friends with women, because most of them want me to change who I am. At the very least, they don’t appreciate a good messy bun or my knowledge of the law.

I choke on my cappuccino again when I see Jason enter the coffee shop after holding the door for another couple. *So chivalrous*, I think, and then I tell my heartbeat to stop betraying me by banging so dang hard against my ribcage.

He meets my eyes, and I wish I could sever our connection. I feel the eyes of the other women already in the seating area, and I know they're thinking Things That Aren't True.

Or maybe they are...

"Hey," he says, his eyes flitting away from mine first. "Looks like the guys got in line."

"Yeah," Callie chirps. "But you can just sit right there on the end next to Sabrina. I'll text Dawson to get what you want."

I switch my glare to Callie, but she's made of iron, because she simply smiles back, her fingers moving a mile a millisecond across her screen.

JASON

I feel like a real schmuck, which honestly isn't a new feeling for me. It's been happening more and more lately, and I'm not sure what to do about it. With Jessie Dunaway, I did nothing. I played things off as ha-ha-friendly, and she still speaks to me.

She won't go out with me, but that's okay. I don't think she's really my type anyway.

No, I'm not super into blondes, despite what my last several dates have looked like. I swallow as I look at Sabrina Shadows.

I really like a woman with dark hair and fire in her dark eyes—which is exactly what a man gets with Miss Shadows. Not only that, but she's intelligent and sharp, and I have the very distinct feeling I'm going to get gutted by this woman before long.

I don't squeeze onto the oversized couch beside her, though in the past, I might have. I definitely would have, because a past version of myself liked to get women's numbers and go out with three or four women in a week. It was fun. It was thrilling. I never had to be too serious or settle down for too long.

Only a few months have passed since I started feeling myself change, but it's long enough to know I can't rebuild a bridge I might burn, especially with Sabrina Shadows.

I sigh as I sink into an armchair perpendicular to where she sits. "Did you see anything good this afternoon?" I ask, not

truly looking at her.

She turns her head toward me, her eyes wide. She folds her arms as those eyes narrows. “A couple of things,” she says evasively.

Part of me wants to quip at her. Ask her if she’s going to put in half-price offers on good real estate, the way she almost did to me. I bite my tongue—a real feat for me—and give her a smile instead. She looks utterly confused, as if she doesn’t know how to take the gesture.

From me, maybe she doesn’t.

That’s not a maybe, Jace, I tell myself. Since Sabrina’s become my junior partner, my life in the office has gotten harder, not easier. She’s my first junior partner, but I’ve seen plenty of others before me get their juniors. I have a mentor who’s given me advice for how to mentor Sabrina along. She makes everything difficult though, because she wants to be in my position when she hasn’t earned it yet.

I need to have her into my office for a meeting, but the truth is, I’ve been too much of a chicken to do it.

I’m going to name my next hen Jason, Tara told me twenty minutes ago when I told her what had happened between me and Bri at the office today. Alec had remained silent, thankfully, but Tara’s never held back with me.

She even made chickeny bok-bok-bok sounds at me after I’d admitted that I haven’t scheduled my initial junior partner meeting with Bri yet. It’s a good thing I didn’t tell her about cleaning up Bri’s real estate papers and putting them on my desk, as if I didn’t know she wanted to use the conference room.

I still don’t know why I did it. Maybe so there would be a reason Bri would have to talk to me? Come into my office and look me in the eye? Bring in that curvy body and the scent of her perfume, and be less than six feet from me?

“Are you going to stare at me for much longer?” she asks now, leaning forward to set her empty coffee cup on the table. She looks at me, and I meet those dark eyes with mine.

“No,” I say, forcing myself to look somewhere else. I hadn’t even realized I’d been staring at her. The woman dominates my thoughts, which is just another annoying thing about her. “Listen,” I add. “We need to schedule a meeting.”

She settles back into the orange couch again. Those arms cinch right over her chest. “We do?”

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “I should’ve done it a month ago. We need to talk about our...working relationship with you as my junior partner.”

Further darkness enters her expression. I expect her to spit like a camel and stalk out, the same way she did this afternoon. I’d barely gotten back to my feet before I’d realized Bri was long gone.

Instead, something shutters over the emotion in her eyes, and she says, “Okay.” She pulls her phone out from under her leg, which only draws my attention there. The woman has great legs, and I quickly yank my eyes back to hers.

She’s scrolling on her phone, only glancing up without truly looking at me once. “When?”

“Whenever is convenient for you,” I say. “My schedule is synced with yours.” That happens when a junior is assigned to a regular partner, so I know her schedule too.

“Next week is free for both of us on Thursday,” she says, her voice set on the type of professional I hate. “Before ten.”

“Nine then,” I say, the headache behind my eyes intensifying. Dawson better be hurrying with that coffee. I look over to him, and he’s taking his card back from the cashier.

“Nine,” she says, tapping on her phone. “Your office?”

“Yes, please.”

Bri’s gaze is heavy now, and I look fully at her. “Please?”

“I’ve said please before,” I say.

“Not to me,” she says.

“No bickering tonight,” Macie says. “I can’t handle it after today.”

“Me either,” Callie says.

“Yeah,” Tara says dryly. “Since you didn’t go in until two o’clock this afternoon, I can see how tired you must be.” She grins at Callie, who smiles back.

“Helping my best friend with her wedding gown was *very* taxing,” Callie says, and the two of them laugh. I love Tara with my whole heart. She’s never given up on me, ever, for any reason. She always invites me over to her house or next door to Mr. Reynolds’ when she’s got a new recipe she wants us to try. She stops by and gives me dinner just because.

“Did you get the dress done?” I ask, once again glancing at Bri. She’s like a North Pole to my South, and I can’t help myself.

“Almost,” Tara says. “Oh, and be warned, Jason. My mother is coming in this weekend to do a few wedding things. She’s calling your mom tonight to see if she wants to come.” She glances up as Alec appears at her side, her coffee in his hand. She beams at him as she takes it, and he perches on the armrest of the couch beside her.

Dawson hands me my coffee and goes to sit beside Callie, which shifts Bri and Macie down, closer to me.

“Great,” I say dryly, then take a sip of my coffee. The last thing I need is to deal with Cynthia Finch, but I keep that to myself. The five-letter word made of desert sand said enough. At least to anyone listening.

Tara gives me a sympathetic look—she was listening.

Bri’s look is curious—she was listening too. My pulse jumps into the back of my throat, and it’s everything I can do not to ask her to dinner for that night. She’d say no anyway, and I’d be embarrassed in front of the only seven people who I can call friends.

Well, I do have a few friends at the office, but not anyone I really want to hang out with like this.

“I’ve got to get going,” Bri says before Lance arrives with his and Jessie’s coffee, and though Macie, Callie, and Tara all protest, she stands, gives everyone a smile and a few air-cheek-kisses, and then walks out.

The wake she leaves behind is laced with discomfort, though I’m sure I’m the only one who can feel it. Lance and Jessie arrive, and I move over to the couch next to Macie so they can share the armchair.

“So,” Macie says oh-so-casually. The lawyer ears I have hear everything in those two letters, and I feel the insatiable need to bolt. Now.

“So no,” I say, but Macie says, “When are you going to ask her out?” anyway.

No one says anything, and they all stare at me.

“I’m not,” I say, lifting my mug to my lips in a calm, controlled manner. “She’s just my partner.”

“Bok, bok, bok,” Tara says under her breath, though definitely loud enough for everyone to hear.

“I’m not,” I insist, glancing around at the lot of them. In that moment, I see three couples who work together. They blur, and I’m not sure how I didn’t put all of that together until this moment. “I’m not really dating right now. Decided to take a break.”

Lance starts to laugh, but I don’t see what’s so dang funny. I glare at him and bark, “What?”

“That’s what I told myself too,” he says, still chuckling. Then he lifts Jessie’s hand to his lips and kisses it. They look at one another, and it’s so sweet, I almost throw up.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I said ‘she’s just my secretary’ about five thousand times,” Dawson says, grinning at me. He tries to hide behind his coffee mug but fails.

“But she was,” I insist, glancing at Callie. “For a long time. A really long time.”

“Until she wasn’t,” Dawson says, beaming at his wife. They make me sick too.

I get to my feet, saying, “I have to go.”

“Don’t go, Jace,” Tara says, jumping up too.

“Good to see you all,” I drawl out. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Jason,” Macie says. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” I set down my coffee and head for the door, Tara right behind me.

“Jason,” she says.

“Tara,” I say back, finally reaching the door. I practically punch the bar that will release the latch and let me into the fresh air.

“Will you stop for two seconds?” she asks.

I do, my chest heaving for some reason I can’t name. I also can’t look at her. She stands right in front of me, almost as tall as me, but I can’t meet her gaze. “You’ve changed,” she says quietly. “I didn’t see it until now.”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“I know you are,” she says. “Of course you are.” She puts one hand on the side of my face and guides me to look at her. I do, seeing so much of myself in her eyes. It makes sense. Our dads are brothers, and we both have the Finch eyes and the slope of the Finch nose. “Dinner at my place tomorrow night,” she says.

“You’re catering that cowboy gala tomorrow night,” I tell her, feeling wicked inside. I hate feeling like this. When I do is when I say the wrong thing and go out with too many women.

“Breakfast on Saturday,” she says.

“Gonna have to be brunch,” I say. “I know how late you sleep. And your mom is coming into town.”

“Nine a.m.,” she says. “Not a minute later.” Fierceness enters her eyes. “It’s okay to be someone different than you were before.”

“I know,” I say, though I don’t. I don’t know who I am anymore, or what I want. I thought I did. I thought I had my whole life figured out, but I don’t. Not even close.

She nods and drops her hand. “Text me when you get home, so I know you’re safe.”

“Okay.” My heart pinches at the love my cousin has for me. Tara’s been such a Godsend in my life, and I’m too chicken to tell her. I open my mouth to say more, but she’s already heading back inside.

It’s just as well. I can communicate with clients, but that’s head-thinking. Heart-thinking and emotional-talk... I am the worst at both of those.

So I head for my car, which is parked around the block. I think about Sabrina on the way home, which is nothing new. Now that we have a meeting on our schedule, perhaps she’ll mentally go away and leave me alone. Maybe I’ll be able to go back to the man I was before, which would be a relief to me. At least I knew who I was and what I wanted.

Now? Now, I’m not so sure, but being one-half of a couple who looks at one another with starshine in their eyes sounds really nice...

Really, really nice.

JESSIE

“Just that last bag,” I say, indicating the colossal-sized laundry basket of clothes. Moving for me is mostly about fabrics and hangers and less about boxes and furniture. Hey, Lance, Dawson, and Jason should be thankful they don’t have to try to fit a settee through the narrow doorways and down the microscopic steps in my new basement apartment.

I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life for this day, this very moment, and I pause in the doorway of the bedroom at my uncle’s mansion after Jason takes the collapsible laundry basket into the hall. Over the past two days, this room has looked like a bomb has gone off. Now, it looks like an upscale guest room Uncle Jack can offer to his richest acquaintance.

Or another wayward niece, I suppose.

I’ve scrubbed the windowsills and oiled the tracks on the closet doors. I washed all the blankets and sheets and remade the bed. Lance vacuumed not twenty minutes ago, while I wiped the mirror and continued to direct Dawson and Jason to take out the things I’d packed.

A sadness I was not expecting creeps up on me, striking me hotly behind the heart. I pull in a breath as tears touch my eyes.

“You’re all done?”

I turn toward Uncle Jack, one betraying tear sliding down my face. I swipe at it and fly into his arms. “Yes,” I say.

He holds me tight, and while I ran from Beaufort too, I still got to hug Mama and Daddy this way too. They still love me.

Uncle Jack steps back and sniffs, about all the emotion I've ever seen from him. He's wearing his usual attire for the day—slacks and a button-up shirt, no tie yet. Even Lance had on his gym shorts this Saturday morning, along with a T-shirt that clung to his biceps in a way that told me he works out with weights.

“We'll miss you,” Uncle Jack says, glancing toward the open bedroom door. “You come on back if you need anything.” He looks at me again. “Anything, Jessie, okay?”

I nod, not sure how to get my voice to work properly. I hate crying. It makes my face all puffy and my eyes red, and I already have a pretty amazing albino look going on with my pale skin and light hair. I don't need the red eyes too.

“I know what life is like with your mama,” Uncle Jack says with a sigh. “She's proud of you, whether she'll ever say it or not.” He smiles at me and tucks his hands in his pockets. “I'm proud of you too.”

“Thank you, Uncle Jack.” I mean it too, and I nod. “For everything.”

“It's amazing what a little confidence will do for a person.”

It is, but I can't say that. I came here with nothing, and while I'm leaving with about the same stuff I brought, I do have so much more.

“Jess?”

I turn toward Lance as he comes toward me. He slings his arm around my waist easily, and I lean into his strength. I look up at him as he looks at Uncle Jack. “So great to finally meet you,” he says again, extending his hand for Uncle Jack to shake.

“You take care of her,” Uncle Jack says.

“He's not moving in with me,” I say, switching my attention to my uncle. “I can take care of myself.”

Lance chuckles. “You heard her. I’m not getting in the way of that.” He gazes down at me with adoration in his eyes. I’m not sure how or when he started doing that, and surprise bolts through me. “You’re all ready?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Said your good-byes?”

“Yes.” I eye the bedroom door. I’ve only ever had a bedroom in someone else’s house. I don’t even know what apartment living will be like. I know I made a few phone calls to set up utilities. The apartment comes with cable from the couple upstairs. It’s mostly furnished, so I don’t need a lot, other than what I have.

I take a Big Bird Breath—BBB—and face Uncle Jack. “I’m ready.”

“Let’s go then,” Lance says. “Dawson is already complaining about how long this is taking.”

“It’s been thirty minutes,” I say, turning with him. “Dawson...I’m going to drive Lucy as slow as possible on the way over.”

Lance laughs again and says, “That’ll show him.”

I don’t really want to upset Dawson. I know he’s had some big clients at work lately, and he’s likely headed downtown after this. Outside, he waits next to Mammoth, typing furiously on his phone.

“Dawson,” I say sweetly. “You can go if you need to.”

He looks up, his eyes glazed. “What?”

“He’s not going,” Lance says, glaring at me and then his best friend. “Callie’s handling everything, and he can give us another hour.”

Dawson meets Lance’s eye, and something bromantic or bro-related passes between them. He shoves his phone in his shorts pocket. He’s wearing gym shorts too, and it’s like he and Lance went shopping for their workout attire together. “Yeah, no problem,” he says, and it actually sounds like he means it.

“Great,” I say. “I’ve got the keys, and y’all can follow me.”

Jason nods and gets in the backseat while Lance goes around to the driver’s seat. I wait for Dawson to move toward the front passenger seat, and then I head for Lucy. I get behind the wheel and start her up.

“All right, Luce,” I say, just like I did in the driveway at the mansion in Beaufort. “Another new adventure. We’ve got a new place to live, and you’re going to love it so much.” I clench my fingers around the steering wheel and look out the windshield.

Then I put Lucy in drive, and we head down the dirt lane with all the live oaks standing sentinel, the mansion in our rearview mirror—and the future wide open in front of us.

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, I LEAN IN THE DOORWAY OF Lance’s office. He’s got three ties laid out on the front of his desk, but he’s typing furiously on his keyboard. “Just a sec,” he says, and he’s the most focused I’ve seen him in a while.

Only a few seconds later, he turns, his expression changing instantly. How he does that, I’ll never know. “My tie, if you would. I have a golf date with Mister Nickelson in thirty-five minutes.” He stands and comes around the desk as I enter his office.

I scrutinize the ties he’s selected. “What do you think?” I ask, refusing to look at him. I told him on Monday that he should start to at least try to pick out his own tie. I can tell him why or why not, and he can learn.

Isn’t that what you’re always telling me? I’d teased with his office door closed. Lance won’t kiss me in his office. He never has, not even once. When I tried to tip up onto my toes and press my mouth to his, he backed away.

I’d been stung, sure. But he said he wanted to keep things professional around the office. He didn’t want others to be

uncomfortable around us, or worry that they might walk into a room anywhere at the agency—including his office—and see something they didn't want to.

Once he'd laid out his argument, I could see the wisdom in it. We try to keep our meetings open-door, and I even asked Olive if she was uncomfortable with any of the exchanges she's heard between me and Lance.

She said she absolutely wasn't, and if there's anyone who sees and hears and knows everything in any office, it's the front desk receptionist.

Now, he sighs like I've asked him to eat his vegetables before he can be excused from the dinner table.

"I sent the escrow statement to Debbie Hymas," I say, still refusing to look at him.

That stops him. "You did? You filled it out?"

"Yes, sir," I drawl, finally looking up and into those brilliant blue eyes. I want to dive into them and never get out of that pool. I can feel myself falling in love with Lance Byers, and I wish there was something to do about it. Since I've never been in love, I don't know how long the falling lasts, or if there's anything anyone can do to stop it.

"If I can learn what an escrow statement even is, you can at least try to pick a tie from three. You have a one-third shot of getting it right." I grin at him and indicate the ties.

"So there's only one good choice here?" he asks, stepping beside me.

"In my opinion."

"Yours is the one I want," he mutters as he reaches out and picks the yellow tie with black and white stripes. He's wearing a baby blue dress shirt, buttoned all the way to the collar, with a pair of black slacks. I've managed to get him off the pastels for polos, but not for his office attire.

It's fine, because he looks good in soft colors, dark pants, and bright ties.

"Bravo," I say. "Now, why is that the one?"

“Contrasting colors?” he guesses as he starts to loop the tie around his neck.

“Mm.” I brush his hands away and reach up to do the tie myself. “You want a thick knot on this too, Mister Byers. It’s a skinnier tie, and they look better with bigger knots, especially for a man your size.”

“Is that a fat joke?” He grins down at me, one hand coming to rest on my hip. He barely touches me in the office, and I didn’t realize how much I crave his warmth until I instinctively lean into his palm.

I smile and keep my chin down. “Dinner tonight? My place?”

“You just like saying my place,” he teases. “Did they get the toilet fixed?”

“This morning before I left,” I say, looking up at him. Time freezes, and I think he’ll finally lean down and kiss me right here in his office.

His eyes blaze with the desire to do so, though his mouth has told me he won’t.

His intercom beeps, startling both of us. “Mister Byers,” Olive says crisply. “Your father is on his way in.”

“Thank you,” Lance says at the same time he backs up. I do the same, not realizing how freakishly close I’d been standing to the chairs situated in front of his desk. My wedged heel catches on one of them, and my leg goes limp. My body has the worst ways of betraying me sometimes.

I fall to one knee with an “Oof,” at the same time a man’s voice booms through the agency. The whole world, really.

“There he is,” Aaron Finley bellows to the world, his laughter just as loud as it fills the room a moment after he finishes speaking. He swallows Lance in an embrace, and I’m left to myself to get back to my feet.

I manage it by holding onto the desk with one hand and the chair with the other, wondering why I’d worn this ridiculous

pencil skirt. Callie had told me I'd look good in one, what with the legs I have and all of my cute shoes.

I never should've invited her over to help me unpack.

I wipe my hand through my hair, feeling the sweat along my brow, as I face Lance and his dad. Technically, his stepdad, but as they part, they sure do look alike.

"Dad," Lance says, very obviously nervous. "This is Jess, my..." He clears his throat, panic evident in his eyes. It practically burns me, but I don't know what to say either.

"Jessica Dunaway," Lance tries again. "She works here."

"I'm his assistant," I say, thrusting out my hand. "Here at Finley and Frank, which is an amazing agency, sir." I give him my brightest Southern Socialite Smile—the triple S. Mama taught it to me when I was six years old. She says nothing beats the Triple S.

The way Aaron Finley returns my smile and pumps my hand tells me Mama was right.

"He's also my mentor and teacher," I say, shooting a professional smile at Lance. "He's been helping me learn the real estate business too. And he's my boyfriend once the clock strikes five, and usually all weekend, unless we have an open house."

I pull back my hand and watch Aaron's face as surprise and then glee tramples across it. "Well, now," he says, and though he's been living in Florida for a few years now, he sure sounds Southern. "I like her." He grins at Lance. "Assistant, student, and girlfriend. We better be callin' your momma the moment we get in the car."

Lance smiles and shakes his head. "I suppose so." He reaches for his jacket, which he draped over the back of the chair that tripped me. "We'll be back before lunch," he says. "If the Bowmans get here before I do, you can—"

"I'll have their docs ready," I say. "I'll pull in Leann if I need to." I smile sweetly at Lance and clasp my hands in front of me so I don't fidget with them. Lance taught me that, and I have to say I'm a very good student.

A moment freezes where Lance and I get lost in each other, and then he jolts and turns back to his dad. “All right,” he says. “Let’s go see how badly Byron wants to destroy us today.”

Aaron laughs like a cowboy and says, “I don’t have to lose to him anymore, son. That’s just your job,” as they leave the office. Honestly, the lack of sound Aaron Finley leaves in his wake echoes in my ears, and I stand in Lance’s office for a few seconds while everything rings the tiniest bit.

Then I head for my desk, because I have work to do too. My phone lights up as I sit, and I pull my rolling chair forward and grab the phone when I see the 212 number.

“New York,” I whisper to myself, and then I swipe on the call. My mouth tastes like metal and is as dry as cotton on a heat-wave-summer day. Yet somehow I manage to say, “This is Jessie Dunaway,” as if I get calls from New York City every minute of every day.

The fashion capital of the US screams through my mind.

“Yes, hello, Miss Dunaway,” a woman says, her accent definitely from up north. “I’m Kira Chatwood, and one of my assistants put your portfolio on my desk this morning. I’m quite interested in speaking with you about it. Do you have a few minutes?”

I blink at my computer screen, which has two hundred and fifteen unread messages. I have docs to print, and forms to fill out. I have listings to look at, and if I don’t speak with Sabrina today, I will regret it for the rest of my life.

I press my eyes closed, shut all of it out, and with my heartbeat tap dancing through my whole body, I say, “Yes, I do. How nice to hear from you Kira.”

LANCE

“Ma, can you stop?” I smile to myself in Mammoth’s rearview mirror, and then switch my grin over to Cha-Cha, who’s riding shotgun. “I’m not answering any more questions about Jess.”

“Just one more,” my mother says, and since I can’t say no to her, I say nothing. “Are you going to ask her to marry you?”

My foot jams on the gas pedal of its own accord. “No,” barks out of my mouth.

“Lance, sugar,” my mom coos at me. I’ve seen women do this before—most recently, Jess, when she was trying to calm down Peaches. I’m not a parrot, or a cat, or a dog, and I don’t need to be stroked

“Mom,” I say firmly. “I’m going to tell you the same thing I told you last weekend, when Daddy made me call you. It’s new still. Of course I like her, or I wouldn’t be dating her. But we’re dating. That’s all.”

I dated Hadley for over two years before I asked her to marry me. I can’t help feeling like there are huge, vast, cavernous differences between Hadley and Jess, but I keep that to myself. I have all kinds of secrets I don’t let out of my bedroom, as I have a hard time falling asleep at night, and my thoughts have a way of running off on tangents.

“Okay,” Momma says, managing to turn the simple word into three syllables. “I love you, baby.”

I pull up to the white-brick house and crane my neck to see if Jess is coming down the drive. “Love you too, Momma.” The call ends, and Cha-Cha turns to look at me expectantly. “Do you need to get out?” I ask her, which sets her little tail stub to wagging. “Fine.”

I heave a sigh as I get out of the truck and go around to let Cha-Cha out. She jumps down despite her tiny legs, her nose already to the ground. I hope she has to take care of number one, because I packed all the bags, and I don’t want to dig through granola bars and pretzels to find them.

I glance around in the awkward silence that always accompanies a dog and their ritual to find the precise spot to relieve themselves. I don’t see any neighbors, nor the owners of the house...or Lucille Ball.

As I pull out my phone to call Jess, Cha-Cha finally finds the right spot, and thankfully, I don’t need a bag. “Hey,” I say when Jess answers. “I think someone forgot our morning date.” I grin, because *finally*. The woman doesn’t forget anything, and she’s always on time—early even. She never passes an opportunity to tease me about having to buy clothes to get dressed to go see that first apartment, and I’ve been trying to catch her off her game for over a month now.

“Not true,” she singsongs. “I’m coming around the corner now. I just had to run Tara’s dress over to her, and I stopped to get breakfast on the way back.”

I frown. “I thought we were dropping by that French bakery.” I may or may not have practiced pronouncing a couple of their menu items.

“I see you,” Jess says. “I’m hanging up.”

Lightning strikes through me as her beat-up white sedan pulls up to the curb behind Mammoth. Cha-Cha seems to know exactly who’ll be behind the wheel of that car, and she barks and bounds over to Lucy.

“Hey, Chachy,” Jess sings to the dog as she comes around the hood. She takes a moment to pat my dog, then she straightens and nearly blinds me with her smile.

“What is going on?” I ask, though my own mouth starts to curl up. “You have mischief written all over your face.” I take her into my arms, enjoying the nearness and the scent of her skin, but looking past her to Lucy.

“Nothing,” Jess says. “Just that you’re dating a woman who’s now made her first real estate sale.”

I yank back, my eyes searching hers. “Did Jemma Jones sign?”

“She signed, she sealed, I delivered the paperwork by six p.m.” She starts to laugh, and I join her. I can’t tell her—or my momma—that I’m falling in love with her. I don’t understand how my heart can even be ready for such a thing. Nothing between me and Jess makes all that much sense, and yet, I’m the happiest I’ve been in years. Even when I was with Hadley, I wasn’t happy.

I was...hopeful. I was comfortable. I was willing to do whatever she wanted me to do.

“Jess,” I say as my chuckles fade. “That’s so amazing. Congratulations.” I lean down and kiss her, but her mouth doesn’t straighten for long.

“No kissing this morning,” she says, taking my hand and leading me toward the car. “Let’s get the pastries and hit the road. We’ve got sights to see today.”

I shake my head, but she doesn’t see me. She opens the front door of her car and hands me a big, brown box, with a very French flourish on the top.

“You stopped at the French bakery.”

“Oui,” she says, giggling afterward. “Do you have a leash for Chachy? Or should I go get the one I have here?”

Just the fact that she has a leash here isn’t all that lost on me. Fine, it’s not lost at all. Cheese and crackers, this woman has me knotted and unknotted in the best ways possible.

“I have one,” I say, turning to take the pastries to Mammoth. “I hope you have your hiking shoes.” I turn back to

her to find Cha-Cha glued to her side and a plastic grocery sack in her hand.

“I do.” She holds up the bag, her face once again made of enough light to rival the sun, moon, and stars. Combined.

She is Beautiful with a capital B, and I can’t see myself with anyone else. The thought terrifies me, and I stuff it back inside the box where it belongs. “All right,” I say. “Come get in, then. It’s an hour to our first stop.”

About seventy minutes later—Jess had to stop to use the bathroom—we pull up to the sign marking the trailhead for the Appalachian Waterfall. Jess changes out of her sandals and into her hiking boots while I leash Cha-Cha.

We’ve eaten fancy French pastries, sipped juice, and talked about everything at work. I don’t want the rest of the day to have any acronyms—at least real estate ones—or client names or anything related to Finley & Frank in it.

When Jess gets down and shoulders her backpack, I say, “I don’t want to talk about work again today.”

“Deal,” she says, grinning at me.

I smile back at her and face the trail. I have a pack with water, snacks, and food for Cha-Cha, as well as appropriate bags to pick up her waste should I have to. “It’s a short one,” I say. “Only half a mile.”

“I might die,” Jess says. “The most exercise I get is when I sprint into your office.”

I tuck her into my side and kiss her forehead. “You’ll be fine.”

“You go first anyway,” she says.

I do, because while I’m not a huge hiker, I do run a lot, and I can help guide her if the path is wet or rocky or whatever.

“Lance,” she says behind me, and I glance over my shoulder. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure.”

“I...well, I need a few days off.”

I pause and step to the side of the trail. It's really only big enough for one person to walk comfortably in either direction, but it's November now and there weren't hardly any cars in the lot. "A few days off? Why? When?"

She smiles at me, but I see the nerves right there in her blue eyes. "Do you not allow your assistants to take time off? I've been at the agency for almost two months now."

"We have a vacation policy," I say automatically, still confused. "Are you going to go visit your folks?" She told me she might, though she didn't ask me to come with her. She met my dad, but I haven't planned a trip to Florida for her to meet my mom.

We're barely six weeks into a relationship. I don't need to rush.

"No," she says slowly, moving past me on the trail and continuing up. "I sent a portfolio of my sketches to a designer in New York, and she wants to meet with me."

The words are English, but I have no idea what they mean. "A portfolio?"

"Yes."

"How many designs did you send?"

"Why does that matter?"

"How many is she interested in?"

Jess stops and turns back to me. "Again, why does that matter?" She shoots fire at me with just her eyes, but I can't look away.

"I thought you wanted to be a real estate agent," I say. I've been teaching her morning, noon, and night for two months. She'd be a great asset to Finley & Frank.

But I know that's not the real reason her simple request for time off has turned into five hundred needles stabbing at the backs of my eyes. I don't want her to leave Charleston.

Leave *me*.

Everyone in my life has left me behind in Charleston, and I can't... If Jess goes to New York, I have the very real feeling, she won't be coming back.

Jess wears a crestfallen look, but the walls around my heart have suddenly grown about twenty-nine feet.

"This is no big deal," she says. "It's just a trip to see what she says."

"NBD," I say. "Sure." I try to step past her, but she holds up one hand.

"What's going on?"

"How many designs is she interested in?"

Jess raises her chin. "Just one." She crosses her arms across her chest, and that's always a bad sign, at least for Jess. We work so well together, both at the agency and out of it. She told me I have an R-REF, which is so similar to her mama's RBF. After I'd laughed and laughed, I'd asked what my acronym meant.

Resting Real Estate Face, she'd said. *And trust me, Lance, no client wants to see you glaring at them.*

I don't glare, I'd told her. It might have been a bark, but Jess has been at F&F for two months, and I've worked there for almost two decades. She has no idea what every day with me has been like.

No, maybe not, she'd said. *But every client wants to feel like they're your most important client, whether they are or not. And your R-REF doesn't convey that to them.*

I'm sure I have an R-REF right now. "How many in the portfolio?"

"It's meant to be a collection," Jess says. "That's how fashion works. You don't send less than ten."

"So less than ten percent."

"Why are you being such a jerk about this?" She spins in her hiking boot, which she somehow makes look natural and sexy at the same time. "I've been racking my brain for X and

Z adjectives, and I was totally going to finish today.” She strides away on the path, leaving me to feel like I’ve made a huge mistake.

Which, of course, I have. But watching her walk away from me...it’s torture. I wish it wasn’t. I wish my heart was all those ashes I’d once assumed it was. I wish it was filled with cement and so hard, no woman will ever penetrate it again.

“Jess,” I say, pushing myself to catch her. My calves scream at me that they run on flat ground, and hey, can I take the jogging uphill down a notch? Like, all the way to nothing.

“Jess,” I say, panting once I get right behind her. “Come on. I’m sorry.”

She spins again, and I nearly ram into her. “For what, Lance Byers?”

“Not being excited for you,” I say even as a pinch of hurt runs from my ears to my ankles. “You didn’t even tell me you were sending off a portfolio to New York.”

Her expression softens, probably because of the wounded quality of my voice. She heaves a sigh, following it with a huge breath. “I know.”

“Why not?”

“Because, then after six months or a year or whatever, when I didn’t hear back, no one would ask me about it.”

I look down at the ground and then take her hand in mine. I like the way our fingers look twined together. “How’s Tara’s dress?”

“It’s going to be done on time,” Jess whispers.

“Are you going to New York before or after the wedding?”

Alec didn’t want a long engagement, and Tara set a date that barely gave her enough time to get a gown. Jess designed it and has been doing a lot of the embellishments as the pieces have been tailored. The whole dress came back from the seamstress a couple of days ago, and I lost my girlfriend in the evenings to beads, baubles, and other blitzzy things.

Tara and Alec are getting married in only two more weeks, the weekend before the week of Thanksgiving, and maybe Jess will go after that.

“I was hoping to take an evening flight next Wednesday,” Jess says. “It’s fine if I can’t. I told Kira I needed to talk to my boss.” She gives me a look with such a dangerous glint that I feel a slice go right through my throat.

“You can go,” I say, trying to think through next week. “I’m sure I can handle whatever Thursday and Friday hold.”

“I rescheduled Sabrina,” Jess says with a smile. “Other than that, you’ll be fine.” She focuses on our hands near our waists too, and I use my free hand to lift her face back to mine.

“I’m sorry,” I say sincerely. “I just...” I exhale, because I don’t know how to explain. I don’t want to explain. It’s too soon, and I can’t be saying any of the things that run through my mind at night. I can’t.

“Can I see the portfolio?” I ask gently, which brings her gaze back to mine. “You never show me anything.”

“You make that sound so scandalous,” she teases, inching closer to me. She stands on higher ground, which means she’s about the same height as me right now.

“Well, we can talk about that too,” I say, a slow grin tracing its way across my face. “But really, Jess. I’m interested in your fashion design. I’m not going to make fun of it.”

“I know,” she says lightly, almost in a tone that suggests she doesn’t believe me. “It’s not that I think you’ll make fun of it.”

We start up the path, her hand trailing behind her so she can keep it in mine. I sure do like that, and I smile to myself. “What is it then?” I ask, because I can keep the conversation on this track.

“I don’t want suggestions,” she says. “I know some of them aren’t quite right, but I want to be the one to figure out what the design needs.”

My immediate reaction is to deny that I'd suggest anything to her. But I practically bite my tongue I snap my mouth closed so fast. I do tend to be a fixer. If someone comes to me with a problem, we brainstorm solutions. Jess doesn't want that.

Which is Fine with a capital F. "I won't make any suggestions," I say.

"I know you, Mister Byers," Jess says, her voice back on Flirt. "You will."

"I won't," I insist. "If I do, you can...I don't know, cut off my tongue."

She bursts out laughing, and that brings a smile to my face.

"I'm gonna need that in writing," Jess says, turning back to me again as the path flattens for a few steps. "Is there a contract at the agency about cutting out tongues?"

"Oh, sure," I say breezily. "The COT clause. Haven't I told you about that one yet?"

I LET DAWSON DRIVE PAST ME AND LAY UP THE BASKETBALL without opposition. The ball bounces back to the floor as he turns to face me. He wipes the sweat from his brow. "This is boring," he says. "You're not even trying."

"Yeah, well, I already ran five miles this morning." I give him a sour look—at least it feels sour all the way down to the soles of my sneakers. "I only came because you wanted to." I palm the ball and get it to bounce high enough to catch.

"What's eating at you?" He takes the ball from me, and we start toward the bleachers where we've stowed our stuff.

I collapse onto the bench seat and stare out at the shiny blonde-wood floor. "Nothing."

"Sure," Dawson says with the quality of the Sahara. "Because when I played like this, there was nothing wrong

with me either.” He starts packing up his stuff. “Let’s go get breakfast at Alec’s.”

“Is he working today?”

“Not at Saucebilities,” Dawson says. “But the girls are off doing the dress, and he texted me to say he was working on a breakfast sandwich if I wanted to offer advice.”

I don’t let my jealousy take root. Alec probably texted me the same thing, but I don’t check my phone as often as Dawson does, especially on the weekend. “Fine.”

“Are you angry or hurt?” Dawson asks.

I think about it for a moment. “Both. I need an AA meeting.”

Dawson jerks his attention back to me. “AA? It’s that bad?”

I realize what I’ve said, and I quickly shake my head. I forget not everyone and their platypus makes an acronym out of something. “I’m angry, and I’m...anguished,” I say. “AA.”

“Did you drink alone last night?” he asks. “Because I needed a drink *bad*.”

I grin at him and shake my head again. “No. Jess showed me her sketches. She’s going to New York on Wednesday.” So much more is said in those few words, and understanding dawns on Dawson’s face.

“I don’t want to talk it to death,” I say, pulling my phone from the pocket of my duffle. I swipe and type and look up. “It’s thirteen minutes to Alec’s apartment. That’s how long you get.”

“I hate these terms, for the official record,” Dawson says, but he’s grinning as he says it. “One day, I’m gonna tell Momma Byers that she cursed me when she implemented speaking time limits for you.”

I just grin at him and act like I’m starting a timer. I pick up my bag as Dawson does, and then he says, “Okay, so here’s what I think.” He glances at me as if he needs permission to keep talking.

I say nothing. I don't even look at him. He's going to continue no matter what I say. I gave him thirteen minutes.

"I've known you forever," Dawson says. "Through the Diane Disaster, and all through Hurricane Hadley. A—I've never seen you this happy."

"You're going to letter it all?"

"That's right," he snaps at me. "So buckle in, Byers. B—" He cuts off as if there is no B. We exit the building, and I head for Mammoth, as I picked up Dawson that morning when he wouldn't let me get out of playing basketball at the rec center.

"Okay, look," Dawson says, obviously abandoning the lettering. "Jess is so different than anyone you've ever been out with. You're this buttoned-up, never-wears-anything-but-slacks real estate agent. You're dang good at what you do, and you expect excellence from everyone you come in contact with."

"I don't know if this is a compliment or not," I say. It doesn't sound like one.

"Jess is about the opposite of that. She's the opposite of Hadley, of Diane, of anyone you've ever shown interest in." He gets in the passenger seat, and as he's buckling, he adds, "Think about your second date with Hadley. What did she make you do?"

"I don't know, man," I say. "I'm not going into the memory bank for her." I glare at him, and he raises one hand in acquiescence.

"You wanted to take her to the beach. Casual. I think there was a fair or something there that weekend. She said absolutely not. You two went to The Roof, and I'm pretty sure you wore a five-piece suit and then attended the symphony."

He's not wrong, so I say nothing.

"Now, let's consider Jess."

I pull out onto the street without looking both ways. Maybe if I get us to Alec's faster, Dawson won't be able to finish his point. I think I know what it is already anyway.

“She’s so easy, bro.”

“She is not easy,” I throw back at him.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m sure I don’t.”

“Don’t kill us,” Dawson says, reaching for the handle above the door as someone honks at us. “Maybe you do need an AA meeting.” He shakes his head and relaxes. “She’s so easy for you to be with. She’s convertible easy. You text her about going for a ride in the convertible, and what did she do? She came flying outside in a prom dress, happy as a clam to go. What would Hadley have done?”

I don’t need him to answer the question for me. I know exactly what Hadley would’ve done, because I tried to take her for a ride in the convertible plenty of times. She never wanted to mess up her hair, and the one time I got her in the passenger seat, she wrapped her head all up Jackie-Kennedy-style, complete with the huge sunglasses, and said, “I hope no one I know sees me.”

Hadley and I weren’t even compatible, and how I thought we could make a marriage work baffles me to this day. What did I miss when I was with her? Did I just not want to be alone?

“I’m just saying,” Dawson says. “Jess is good for you. She’s alive, Lance, and she wants to taste life. You need that in your life. You need someone trying to get you to loosen up and unbutton that shirt. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Okay,” I say, because if I agree, maybe he’ll stop talking. I know what he’s saying, and I don’t need a lecture. Thankfully, Dawson and I know when to quit with the other, and he doesn’t say anything for the last six minutes to Alec’s.

The scent of something salty and something cheesy meets my nose several doors down from Alec’s, and Dawson goes into his apartment the same way Jess does—he knocks and then just turns the knob.

Alec’s two puppies don’t move from their spots on some imaginary line just outside the kitchen, but Peaches sure is

happy to see us.

“Tara, I love you!” she screeches, and for some reason, that makes me so dang happy. I laugh and hold out my arm so the parrot will come to me. She does, and I use one finger to stroke her head.

“I love you,” Peaches says again, her voice quieter now.

“I love you too,” I whisper back to her as Alec says something to Dawson several paces away in the kitchen. Peaches imitates the doorbell, her sentiment for me forgotten. But I needed to be reminded that I’m lovable, and whether that comes from a Quaker parrot, my momma, or my best friend, I guess it doesn’t matter.

“Get in here,” Alec says, coming toward me. He grins and takes Peaches, setting the bird on his shoulder. “Dawson says I can’t put cranberry preserves on a turkey bacon breakfast sandwich, and I need you to back me up.” He looks at me with energy blazing from his dark eyes, and I grin.

“You got it, man,” I say, following him into the kitchen. I take the half-sandwich still sitting on the plate, wondering what felon invented turkey bacon. Seriously, the stuff should be banned and sales of it should be criminal. I take a bite anyway, and somehow, Alec has made the stuff mostly palatable.

I don’t hate the cranberry preserves on the sandwich, but they’re not my favorite either. I chew and smack my lips. “Tastes like Thanksgiving morning,” I say.

“See?” Alec’s eyebrows go up in Dawson’s direction, and then he grins heartily at me.

“Conspiracy,” Dawson mutters, though he finishes his half of the sandwich without another complaint.

“Whatever,” I say. “No conspiracy.”

“Jess is gonna be back before the wedding, right?” Alec asks. “She was vague on the details of her trip this weekend.” He won’t look at me as he speaks, and that right there is a conspiracy.

“Overdone steak and potatoes,” I say, straightening and staring at Dawson. “How fast can you talk, man?”

“I said nothing.” Dawson actually looks like he believes himself.

Alec can’t hide his smile though. “Seriously, Lance. She won’t stop texting me about New York City.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” I say, trying to keep the bark and bite beneath my tongue.

“The only thing she’s ever talked this much about before is...you.” He grins and finishes his sandwich. After he swallows, he adds, “She did say she’s going to miss Peaches the most, but you’re a close second.”

“Shut up,” I say, laughing with him. “I’m always going to lose to that bird, aren’t I?”

“Don’t worry, man,” Alec says. “She steals every heart she comes in contact with.”

“I love you!” Peaches yells, but I can’t help wondering if Alec meant her...or Jess. I know one thing—I’ve got to figure out how to be with Jess, with all the ways she loves life and wants to taste it and smell it, or I’m going to lose her.

My heart flops in my chest, because I know one more thing: I don’t want to lose Jessica Dunaway.

JESSIE

My apartment feels like someone trying to stuff more meat into a casing than it can hold. Callie, Tara, and Macie have come to see the dress, and I don't have it ready yet. "Five more minutes," I'd told Tara when she'd arrived with the other women oh, about twenty minutes ago now.

She laughs from the kitchen, but the stress settling on my shoulders presses me further into the chair in front of my sewing machine.

This is her wedding dress. I have to get it exactly right. Not only that, but the wedding is in thirteen days, and I'm going to be gone for four of them. I want the dress done before I board the plane. Tara wants the dress done fifteen minutes ago, when I said it would be.

I glance over to them, my vision blurring for a few seconds. I've been staring at white fabric, glitzy gems, and driven-snow-colored lace for what feels like ages. All that color voidance can obviously mess with a person.

"How's it coming?" Callie asks. If she wasn't so nice, I might think she's hinting I shouldn't even be looking up right now.

"Good," I say, returning my attention to the yards and yards of fabric. I can admit that I've spent a lot of time thinking about what my wedding dress will look like. In my head, I see ruffles and a train a mile long. I see eggshell fabric,

with a white lace covering. I've imagined so many things, and I presented Tara with three designs I'd worked on in the past.

Tears fill my eyes, because this is the first sketch that's actually come to life. "I just need to get two more panels in place." The dress had come back from the professional seamstress—of which I am not—ready to be bedazzled and bejeweled. I've been working on that non-stop for a few days now, only taking a break yesterday to go with Lance on a Carolina excursion that had actually taken us down into Georgia too.

"Oh, honey," Callie says, running her hand along my shoulders. "Why are you crying?" She pulls out the only other seat at the dining room table and sits.

I sniff, which somehow draws the attention of the other two women in the kitchen. I've dubbed this area the breakfast nook, though there's nothing breakfasty or nooky about it. I don't even eat breakfast now that the muffin bar at the mansion isn't an option.

I shake my head. "I just want to get the dress right." I glance up. "Sorry, Tara."

"It's fine," she drawls, and I wish I was as refined as her. She owns her own business. She's renowned around the city now. I've always felt small and insignificant in comparison to her, and I hate that feeling. After she worked through some things with Alec, she's been nothing but kind to me, and I just want this dress to be perfect for her. It almost feels symbolic of our friendship, and I *need* it to be precisely right.

I feed a newly jeweled piece of fabric under the pressure foot of my machine, but don't put that foot down. I can't, or something's gonna break. I've made the stitches ultra-small, which means I can't run my machine faster than a snail moves.

The weight of Callie's gaze stays heavy on my forehead as I work, and a couple of minutes later, that panel is in. I pull the dress out and stand up. "Tara."

She's right there, her dark eyes searching my face. "It's bad."

Fear strikes me behind the heart, lashing at me horribly. “What?”

Tara looks at Callie, uber-serious. “She hasn’t even heard us.”

“Honey.” Macie takes the dress from me, which is quite the feat given how much fabric there is. I simply watch it flow from my hands as I stand there, not quite sure what’s happening. “Tell us what’s going on.”

“Nothing’s going on,” I say, refusing to look at Callie. I know Lance is with Dawson this morning, but I don’t know how much Dawson knows and how much he’s told Callie. They’re married, and just because my mama and daddy hardly talk doesn’t mean that’s how every marriage is.

“You haven’t touched the pecan rolls,” Callie says.

“Okay, this isn’t about breakfast,” Tara says. “Although, I did spend a lot of time on those this morning, and they are divine.” She offers me a smile, which I swear breaks me.

My lip quivers, and the next thing I know, Tara’s gathering me into her arms. “Told y’all,” she says. “It’s bad.”

“It’s going to be done soon,” I say, my voice too high.

“This isn’t about the dress,” Macie says. “She really didn’t hear us.”

I cling to Tara for another moment and then step back. I need Peaches here to lighten the moment by screaming about motorbikes and casseroles and whatever else Alec has taught her. She could chime like my doorbell, except I haven’t got one.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Of course you don’t, because you weren’t listening.”

“I was sewing,” I say, turning away from the lot of them to get the dress. Macie blocks me, and I look into her eyes, truly surprised. She’s been nothing short of amazing, and I didn’t know she had any bones in her body that could cause conflict. She knows how to handle huge crowds at Legacy Brew, and

I've never seen her without a smile for me or for anyone else who walks in.

Sure, she gets tired. She is human, after all. Today, she wears something vibrant in her hazel-eyed expression, and I can't release her gaze.

"Is it Lance?" she asks. "Something with your mama?" She swallows and glances over to the other girls. "Help me out here, ladies."

"Jess," Tara says at the same time Callie says, "This is more than the dress, Jess."

I scan all three of them, not really looking them in the eyes. If I can't tell them, who can I tell? *This is NBD*, I tell myself. "I'm going to New York City on Wednesday night." The words nearly choke me, and I take a deep, deep breath after I've said them.

"Why?" Callie asks, really making the one-syllable word into two. *Why-uh?*

My hands run around and around each other, and I feel the ghost of Lance's over them, calming me in his office from weeks ago. I smooth down my blouse, which is a fantastic pale pink number I found at a second-hand store last night. I'd bought Lance a striped polo in black, fawn, and navy, but I haven't given it to him yet.

"Listen," I say. "I don't want anyone to get all worked up. It's nothing—and it really can be nothing in less time than it takes to breathe." My heart pounds, trapped by all those ribs.

Tara folds her arms, her eyes telling me I better keep talking, and keep talking fast.

"I sent in a portfolio to a design agency," I say. "They were having a contest, and their executive director called last week. She likes one of my designs, and I'm going to talk to her."

The calm before the storm only last half a second, and then both Macie and Callie erupt into congratulations and why didn't you tell us's. Tara takes another moment, her smile plenty big, before she says, "That's so great, Jess."

“Yes.” I adopt my agency persona. “Now, let me finish the dress so you can try it on, so I can have a real, live emblem of one of my designs.” I meet her eyes, all of my confidence gone. “You’ll model it for me, right? Let me take your picture?”

“Of course,” Tara says, her gaze moving to the dress. “Absolutely I will.”

I nod and reach for the dress again. Macie blocks me again, and I don’t know what to do. In situations like this, I clam up and split. But this is my apartment, and these women would just track me down and make me talk.

“There’s more,” she says, narrowing her eyes at me.

“No,” I insist, because I’m not going to tell my friends that Lance’s reaction to this same news wasn’t the same as theirs. I’m not. He came around, and he just needed more time to process. His background is just different. “I have one more panel, and then I’m going to eat all the pecan buns in that tray.” I give them all a warning-eye. “So if y’all want more, you better eat fast.”

“I’ll get the butter out,” Tara says.

“I’ll brew another pot of coffee.” Callie follows her into the microscopic kitchen, the action taking three steps.

Macie watches me, those eyes all-seeing despite the way she’s set them into squints. “Jess.”

“Please, Macie,” I say, almost under my breath.

She straightens her shoulders and shakes her hair over them. She’s got gorgeous curly hair she hardly ever wears down. “Fine,” she whisper-says. “But you can’t hide much from Callie for long. Tara either; she just works more.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” I say, but we both know that’s not true. She lets me gather the dress, and I get back to work as the scent of coffee fills my nose.

Quirky runs through my mind. Lance had given me that Q-word. I’d called him a *running champ*. He said I was *stylish*.

Our adjective game has gone on, but I still don't have a X-word or a Z-word for him. I got the two hardest letters of the alphabet.

Talented, understood, valued, wonderful.

When he'd told me I was *understood*, I very nearly started crying. I wonder if he feels the same way now or if he realizes how very un-understood he made me feel when he turned into BBL on our hike yesterday.

I really don't like the barky, bossy Lance—BBL—but I also don't know how to tell him that. With all the thinking, the panel gets done, and I say, "All right, Tara. Come put this on."

"YOU'VE GOT EVERYTHING?" LANCE ASKS FROM BEHIND THE steering wheel.

"Yes." I clutch my purse, my carry-on in Mammoth's bed.

"You need your driver's license to board." He glances over at me.

I give him my best withering look, and he actually turns to dust. "All right," he mumbles. "You've got everything."

That's right, I do. Just because I've barely left South Carolina doesn't mean I don't know how. I have my ID. I have money. I have a toothbrush. Whatever else I forgot, I can buy in the city. I'll be fine.

I've been telling myself these things for days and days, and I don't need my boyfriend to insinuate that I'm not suited for the Big Apple. My stomach feels like a swarm of angry bees has attacked, and I don't know how to settle them down. Maybe I'll just be this perpetually sick for the next four days.

Things with Lance have been...okay at the agency. His strict rules and definitive lines in the sand actually came in very handy this week. I know how to deal with being his assistant, and he knows how to keep things professional between us.

I did notice that his professional real estate advice hardly came this week at all, but I didn't say anything. I remind myself one more time that we all have things we're working through. Just like Lance has to say *you've got everything*—that *you have* in his question so proper—I have to figure out what I really want my life to be.

I've never really wanted to leave Carolina. I love the South, and I love being Southern. My sketches have always been...an escape. Something only for me to look at, to dream about, and to keep me company. I don't know if I'm ready for them to be more.

I simply didn't want to marry someone I didn't love. I didn't want to wear hoop skirts and ball gowns all day, every day. I don't care about the weather or walking through gardens. Okay, that last bit is sometimes nice, depending on the heat.

My word, I hate all of my thoughts. They feel like they belong to someone else, like I'm doing something inside someone else's body. Something that's not me.

You sent in the portfolio, I tell myself. Just go see.

Go see, go see, go see.

I need to go see. I've always needed to know for myself, something Daddy told me before I left. *Go see, sugar-doll. You won't be satisfied until you go see.*

I'm going. I'm seeing. Then I'll know.

The drive to the airport doesn't take very long. Or maybe I blinked, passed out from my nerves, and then we arrived. No matter what, we're here, and Lance is getting down from Mammoth to retrieve my bag.

I nearly fall as I stumble from the truck, and a curbside attendant lunges toward me. "You okay, ma'am?"

I brush back my hair as he removes his hand from me. "Fine, thank you."

Lance looks at him and then me before setting my suitcase on the sidewalk. "Jess?"

“I’m fine,” I repeat, wishing I don’t feel like someone has cut me into fifteen pieces and the sewed me back together wrong. “Mammoth just tried to kill me. It’s not the first time.” I put a smile on my face, because I know Lance won’t.

He frowns at his truck and meets my eyes. “Cha-Cha wasn’t happy she didn’t get to come say good-bye.”

“It’s not good-bye,” I say, stepping closer to him, a silent indication I want him to take me into his arms. I want him to hold me and tell me everything will be okay. That if New York City chews me up and spits me out, I can show up on his doorstep and find refuge.

He slides his arms around me, and I can breathe again. I take a deep breath of the scent of his shirt—cotton and dryer sheets and probably a little Cha-Cha in there too. “It’s four days,” I say. “I’ll call you when I’m settled at the hotel. You’ll come get me on Sunday?”

He grunts, which is Emotional-Lance-Speak for *yes, of course. I love you and don’t worry, Jess. Everything is going to be fine. That designer is such an idiot if she doesn’t like every single design you’ve ever sketched.*

It’s amazing what a grunt can really mean. Or how disillusioned I am. One or the other.

“Sir,” the attendant says, and Lance steps back.

“Be safe, Jess,” he says, already turning to walk away.

“Wait,” I say, and he faces me again. I can’t go without kissing him. I can’t. He’s not going to kiss me, so I step back into his arms and tip up to touch my lips to his. It’s a simple, beautiful, chaste kiss, and it means so much more than what it looks like on the outside.

“Thank you, Lance,” I whisper. “I’ll see you soon.”

He nods, no smile in sight, and then I’m ready to grip the handle on my suitcase and walk into the airport. And I do exactly that, wondering what lies in front of me...and what I’m truly leaving behind.

LANCE

I look toward the door again, wondering where in the world Dawson and Callie are. I can't believe I agreed to come to dinner with them and the Tara-Alec combo. I like them. Of course I like them. It's not like I want to spend Friday night alone while my girlfriend is out of town.

Callie has some sort of pigeon homing device or something, and she zeroed in on me the moment Jess boarded the plane. Someone knocked on my door two minutes after I'd gotten home from the airport, and there stood a pizza delivery guy.

Dawson and Callie didn't say anything, but it was the fried green tomato type, with plenty of bacon and cheese. Pretty much only Dawson knows I like that, and that I'm a closet-eater of it. Then Callie herself texted me before six a.m. this morning, inviting me to dinner with them tonight.

I glance across the table to Macie Wilhelm, my "date" for tonight. She utters a sound of disgust and looks up from her phone. "I'm not answering him," she says, flipping the phone over and leaving it face-down on the tabletop. "I swear, he thinks he rules the world."

She huffs and folds her arms. I see the indecision in her face, despite what she's said. "Coy?" I ask anyway, though I know exactly who she's talking about.

She gives me a dirty look, her hazel eyes more brown than green, almost the color of old dirt. Her hair is the curly-curly

type, and it goes almost to her waist. She's a pretty woman—when she's not stark raving mad. "Who else?"

"What does he want now?"

"He wants me to go to Veterans Brew and see how they mix their blends." She scoffs, as if market research is such a terrible burden.

"Dawson and Cal handle their marketing," I say, once again glancing toward the door. On the outside, I'm cool and collected. I made it through two days alone at F&F, and it was by sheer will, let me tell you. "They might have some insights."

"They do?" Macie asks.

I merely nod, because I'm starting to get Peeved with a capital P. Dawson and Callie are late, and if Alec and Tara are supposed to be here, they are too. If they don't walk through the door in the next five minutes, I'm leaving. I can order pizza again, or drive through somewhere on my way home to Cha-Cha.

Unfortunately, Dawson walks in before I can take my next breath, and my stomach falls to my loafers. It rebounds quickly, especially when I see the storm on his face. I don't have to ask what the problem is—both he and Callie are both still dressed in their office clothes. Dressed-down-for-Friday for Dawson is his usual clothes, minus a tie. I could take a leaf from his book, in all honesty, and I'm glad I changed out my pale yellow—lemon meringue, Jess had called it—dress shirt for this polo. It gives the illusion that I've been home when I haven't. Plus, I haven't been able to wear a tie for two days anyway, because Jess isn't here to make sure it matches.

I rise from the booth so I can sit on the end and give Dawson a look and Callie a hug. "Thanks for the pizza," I say as I pull away.

She smiles at me and slides against the wall. "Sorry we're late," she says. "We needed to go over a couple of things and get the project off to the printer before we could leave."

“And we couldn’t get Jeremiah out of the blasted office,” Dawson says. “Cal here had to fake an injury to get him to go.”

I grin at him as he slides into the booth too, but he barely cracks a smile. “What kind of injury?”

“Bad back,” Callie says in mock sincerity. “I needed so many pills, and I just had to get off my feet.” She smiles across the table to Macie. “Uh oh. What’s wrong with you?”

“Coy,” we say together, and I give her a smile too.

“Sorry,” Tara says, rushing over to the table. Since I stopped watching the door, I didn’t see her. She stands at the end of the table while Alec joins her. “But guess what?” She bounces on the balls of her feet, a big, yellow-brown envelope clutched in her hand.

Callie squeals and tries to crawl over Dawson to get out of the booth. “I’m sitting here, baby.”

“Get out, get out,” Callie says. “That’s from a publisher. Tara Lynn Finch, is that from a publisher?”

I jump to my feet, because Dawson’s getting out of the booth whether I do or not. Tara thrusts the envelope into the air, her face shining out as much radiance as a spotlight. “It’s from a publisher!” she yells. She giggles, and Macie and Callie converge on her, the three of them jumping up and down in a girl-circle as they squeal and offer congratulations.

Alec wisely stands out of the way, and Dawson and I join him. “Book deal,” he says, obvious pride in his voice. “She’s been writing a cookbook for a while. Your mother really came through, Dawson.”

“She usually does,” he says, and he steps into the fray to hug Tara the moment it seems safe to do so.

I follow suit, telling her, “This is amazing, Tara. Congrats,” before we all settle back into our seats. Macie sits against the wall, leaving me to face Alec. I don’t mind. He’s a great guy, and he won’t badger me to death about Jess. In fact, he and Dawson have made a semi-effective wall against the women, and I’m so, so grateful for that.

“How’s Jess?” Dawson asks, betraying me completely.

All the gushing conversation and passing of papers from the envelope stops, everyone focusing on me.

“Fine,” I say, glaring at him. “She called last night, saying the city is great. Her meeting went well. She had another one today, but I haven’t heard from her yet.” I reach for my water glass, realizing it’s empty, as I drank it all while waiting for everyone to arrive.

“I’m not answering questions about her,” I add. “That’s it. She’s fine. I’m fine. We’re fine.” I lean forward a little bit. “I don’t need pizza or meals. Believe it or not, I’ve lived on my own for a while now.”

Callie’s shoulders go right up. “I’m going to send pizza if I want to.”

I nod, trying to take down the BBL—what Jess calls me when I’m being bossy-barky-Lance at work. I’m not sure if I have my R-REF on or not, but I try to smooth it away. “And I appreciate it. But I’m okay.”

“We know you’re okay,” Dawson says quietly, but I think he worries about me. I get it; for a while there, I worried about him too. He’s *so happy* now, and I want that more than anything in my life.

“Okay,” I say, blowing out my breath. “So, Mace. Tell us what Coy’s doing now. Maybe Dawson and Callie can help.” That gets the attention off me, which is where I need it right now. The conversation switches from that, to the book contract, to the wedding, and I’m happy to go with the flow.

I check my phone a few times, just to make sure it still has power. It does, but there are no messages from Jess. I know the city never sleeps, and I hope she’s okay and having a good time. She had a party tonight, hosted by the designer who called and liked her work.

She’ll call later, I tell myself. It’s not even late yet.

Dinner ends, I drive home, and I scrub Cha-Cha from front paws to back. I shower, even though I’m going straight to bed, and the clock chimes midnight.

Jess still hasn't messaged or called. Since texting is a two-way street, I tap out a quick message to her. *Going to bed. Give me a call tomorrow if you have a minute. I want to hear how today went.*

Then I do go to bed, telling myself she's fine. I don't have to hear from her before I sleep. My thoughts circle and tangle, the way they usually do, and then I fall asleep, the way I usually do. All I can do is hope that everything really is okay for Jess, and that she really will call tomorrow.



I RUN SATURDAY MORNING, THE GIRL'S TRACK TEAM HOT ON my heels. I let them pass me once, but I'm not letting that happen today. I half-expect Jess to call in the middle of my run again, but she doesn't.

I have no idea what I do during the day. Probably stare piningly at my phone or something, willing it to ring. It doesn't. I send Jess another couple of texts, trying to stay upbeat and hopeful. I want her to know I miss her and I'm anxious to hear her news, whatever it is. *Good or bad*, I tell her. *It'll be okay.*

I want her to know she can come back to Charleston proud of herself, no matter what. That I'll be here, and the agency is here, and she can keep trying with the fashion design. She doesn't answer, and she doesn't call.

About five, I order some food, and twenty minutes later, I open the map app to see where the driver is. He's close—but so is Dawson. He shared his location pin with me years ago, because we both like to run, and when he's not on the treadmill, he's out on the trails. I like knowing I can be found should something happen to me, and now, seeing Dawson only five minutes from my house throws me into action.

I hurry into the bedroom, pulling my shirt over my head while yelling at Cha-Cha to get ready for a run. I didn't take her this morning, so she should be fine to go tonight. I've changed and leashed Cha-Cha, and I'm even down my front

steps and a few strides down the sidewalk when Dawson pulls into my driveway.

Callie is with him, and I pause. Have they come to deliver bad news?

Of course they have, I tell myself. The concern in Callie's eyes, even through the windshield, is a dead giveaway.

Dawson gets out of the car while I tighten my hold on Cha-Cha's leash. "Going running?" he asks.

"Yep."

"Didn't you run this morning?"

"Yep." I don't have to explain anything to him.

He sighs and looks toward the house and back to me. "Listen, Lance," he says, keeping his head low as he approaches me. I hate that. I'm not a squirrel he's going to scare away. If I wanted to leave Charleston, I'd have done it when Hadley did, taking three months' worth of my money in the form of a diamond ring with her.

"She's going to come back," he says.

I narrow my eyes at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you talked to Jess?"

I cock my head at him and finally let Cha-Cha go to Callie, who crouches down and gives her love, the same way Jess does. What is with women and corgis?

"If I'd talked to Jess, do you think I'd be going for a second run?" I ask Dawson.

Alarm pulls all the way across his face, and he looks over to Callie. She too wears a bit of horror in her expression, and my curiosity gets the best of me.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing," Callie yells above whatever Dawson says. His mouth moved, but I couldn't hear him. "She'll call soon, I'm sure."

I may not have been able to get to the altar with a woman yet, even after two failed engagements. But I'm not an idiot either. "You talked to her," I say, and I'm not asking. Why in the world would Jess call Callie when she could use her obviously sparse and precious time to call me?

A knife jabs through my ribs and right into the fleshiest part of my heart.

I turn away from the truth, because it hurts too much. "Come on, Cha-Cha," I say, and I pick up my stride.

"Lance," Dawson calls after me, but I keep on going. If my dog comes, great. If she doesn't, perhaps Callie and Dawson will be kind enough to put her back in the house for me.

But I'm not going back. I'm not talking to them about Jess—who they've talked to and gotten news from—when I haven't spoken to her yet.

I'm not. I'm not. I'm not.

My feet beat out a rhythm with the words, and soon enough they're screaming through my head too.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I DON'T TEXT JESS. I CAN'T STAND the thought of sending her six texts without getting an answer. Somehow five was okay, but half a dozen is my limit. I think of how she called me *limitless*, and wow, how wrong she was about that.

It's funny how wrong we can be sometimes. I've been over and over my feelings for her, and I can't figure out if they're right or wrong. Was I imagining the happiness? Had I pretended to start falling in love with her? How does the human heart and soul even know what love is?

I dial her, because either I'm speaking to her today or I'm never talking to her again. That's where I am right now, and praise the heavens and stars and sky above, she answers.

"Hey, Lance."

As I pace from one side of my kitchen to the other, I can't tell how she's feeling. I can't decipher her voice and qualify it into apprehension, happiness, fear, anything.

"Hey," I say, not sure how I sound either. "I haven't heard from you, and I was actually starting to get worried..." I let my words hang there, because I have the very real feeling it's not me who has to talk. I gaze out the window above the sink, wishing life was as simple as wind in tree limbs.

"I know." Jess takes a big breath I can hear over the line—not good. She does these big breath things—a BBT!—when she's nervous and trying to calm herself down—and then exhales. "I'm so sorry, Lance, but I need another day off. Maybe two..."

My mind spins, and I turn away from my backyard. "What?" I'm not entirely sure what's on our calendar for tomorrow and Tuesday. A few swipes or clicks and I'd know. Right now, I can barely see past the chairs at the bar to Cha-Cha lying on the floor by the front door.

"Sabrina Shadows is coming in tomorrow morning," Jess says in a rush. "I can text her and say you'll meet with her."

"Sabrina Shadows?" My mind can't form coherent thoughts yet.

"It's just that Kira wanted to show my stuff to another designer. This guy name Tim? But he's in Paris. Or he was. I guess he's flying home today, and she wants me to meet him, and well, he might not be ready for guests tomorrow what with the jet lag and all."

She keeps talking, but it's all just a jumble of sounds in her pretty voice. I find myself nodding as if she can see me—she can't—and when she finally stops explaining, I say, "Sure, take the time you need."

A pause comes through the line. "Really?"

"What am I supposed to say?" I challenge her, anger touching my voice and chest. "Come home now or I'll fire you?" I shake my head. She must think me the worst boss on the planet. "Honestly, Jess, I thought we were past that." I

can't help the biting tone flowing from me now. "Are you going to make it to the wedding?"

Tara and Alec are getting married on Saturday. She designed the dress. "Yes," she says.

"I hate that you didn't call me on Friday," I say, thinking I might as well lay everything out for her. I walk through the kitchen to the living room, and Cha-Cha lifts her head. "Or Saturday. And I have a very strong suspicion you weren't going to call today. That instead of calling me, your boyfriend and boss, you called Callie Houser and told *her* everything."

Jess doesn't deny it immediately, and I've seen her stand up for herself. I remember her snapping at Sabrina Shadows about the type of real estate agent I was, and her defense of me. There's none of that now.

I sink into the couch. "Tell me I'm wrong," I say quietly, pressing my eyes closed. Cha-Cha jumps up next to me, and I reach over to take comfort from her by stroking her.

"I just called Callie to get some advice," Jess says, zero fire in sight. Not even a hint of smoke.

Anguish pours through me, the kind made of all capital letters. Everything feels so hard, and so dark, and I can't figure out what to say. With one more thought, sunshine pours through the chaos, and I open my eyes.

"Jess," I say as calmly as I can, glad I'm sitting now. "Or rather, Miss Dunaway, please do let me know when you'll be back at work. I'll expect you Wednesday unless I get a call directly from you."

"Miss Dunaway?" Her voice is definitely made of shock now.

"Yes," I say. "I think it's best if we...go back to being professionals." I press my mouth shut, everything in my life crashing and burning. "You're a good assistant, Jess. I'd hate to lose you at Finley and Frank."

"Are you breaking up with me?"

I don't think. I can't. I shut off the feelings, the emotions, the rushing of blood through my body. "Yes."

"Lance."

"I'm sorry," I say again as Cha-Cha jumps down from the couch, her nails clicking across the hard floor toward the back door. "But you couldn't even call me and tell me how your meeting on Friday went, or about the party. I texted you and texted you, and you call Callie? I think you broke up with me, Jess. On Saturday."

"That is not true." She speaks with the fire now, but I honestly think it's a little too late.

"Good luck with your meeting tomorrow," I say, getting to my feet and following Cha-Cha. "And do remember you have to give two weeks' notice to quit the agency." That last part's not entirely true, but I can't keep talking to her. "I have to go. Cha-Cha needs to go out."

I give her a moment—several, in fact—to protest, but she doesn't. She doesn't apologize. I do hear a sniff, and then she says, "I'll talk to you soon, Mister Byers," and the call ends.

I stand in my kitchen, my phone going silent and dark, and Cha-Cha waiting at the back door. I step over to it and open it for her, a bellow gathering in my stomach, then my chest, and then my throat.

At least I haven't asked her to marry me yet, I think, and then I yell my frustration and hurt into the South Carolina sky.

JESSIE

I should be wearing a crown for how princess-like I feel. There's low music playing, and people milling about. I'm holding a flute of champagne exactly the way my mama taught me. No white gloves like I used to wear at my Socialite parties, but close enough.

I haven't stopped smiling since I arrived, and I think anyone in fashion would be doing the same as me.

See, I'm wearing a Victoria Lyons dress, and for anyone who knows, that's *something*. It hugs my curves and really boosts up my chest, and plenty of people have stopped by to compliment me on the burgundy fabric with the black roses velveted in. The dress might be a tad dark for me, but I'm wearing it like a champion, as one must when in the company of the rich, famous, and fashionable.

"You look lovely," a man says, coming to a stop in front of me. His eyes scan from my cleavage to my Choos, and all I can do is giggle and smile.

"Thank you," I say. "It's Lyons."

"Of course it is." He looks at me like I've lost my mind, because anyone who's anyone at this party is wearing something designed by someone else at this party. Not me, though, and the bitterness from the alcohol slides right down my throat.

"You wear this extremely well," he says, circling me. He's wearing a pair of slacks that looks like he's outgrown them—the current style. His shoes are black and shiny, and his glasses

are big and bulky and black. They're perfectly round too, and he looks at me through the lenses. "Do you model?"

"No, sir," I say in my Southern twang. Kira said it makes me sound different, and in this industry, different is usually good. Sometimes it can kill a career though, so I don't put in the sway in my voice I might if I was still in Carolina.

"You should," he says, reaching into his inside jacket pocket. "I'm Stephon Grishwald, photographer. Email me, and I'll call you when I've got plus-size jobs."

I take the card, completely stunned. I look at the letters on the card, and sure enough, he's got a website and an email address. I'm not sure I know what those things are at the moment, and by the time I look up, Stephon is gone.

"Thank you," I call out to no one in particular, a certain giddiness romping through me. I have nowhere to tuck the card, and I turn in a circle, completely lost.

Good or bad, runs through my mind. *It'll be okay*.

Lance's text from Friday night. Suddenly, I don't want to be at this party. I don't care if I can make connections here in New York City, because I don't live and design here. I live and work at a real estate office in Charleston, South Carolina.

The distinct thought of *What am I doing here?* barrels through my thoughts, and I honestly have no idea.

Lance had sent me four or five more texts, each sweet and reassuring. I could tell he was getting more and more worried about me, and then he came right out and said it when we finally did talk.

I should've called him. I know it, and I tip my head back and down the rest of my drink. The champagne burns my throat, and I set my empty flute on a table and walk away, the skirts of the Victoria Lyons dress swishing all the while.

New York isn't nearly as warm as Carolina, and Kira has given me a fur stole to wear with the dress when we're outside. I've left my phone with that, and this card needs to go there too. I'm not going to email Stephon though.

Am I?

Honestly, I don't know much of anything anymore. I sniffle as I enter the coat closet, not really watching where I'm going. I hear some rustling I definitely don't want to hear, and I say, "Excuse me. I'm coming in here."

A man parts the coats in the back of the room, his guilt written all over his face. He says nothing but it's clear he wants me to leave. I'm about to burst into tears, so I don't dare go back out to the party. As it is, I'm going to have to text Kira—or something. She hasn't actually given me her number.

She arranges everything, and I just wait like a lemming on the sidewalk for the car to show up. Tonight's was an hour late, and I didn't dare go back inside the hotel for fear of missing it. It's a miracle I still have my toes, as there's a cold spell in the city right now.

"I'm about to cry," I tell him. "Do you want to deal with that, or can I be alone?"

Something sort of like sympathy crosses his face, and he drags a woman out of the coats as he starts to walk. My sniffing only increases with every step he takes, and the woman trailing behind him in her ultra-high heels—we used to call those UGHs back home. Ultra-glorious heels. I honestly don't know what I was thinking back then—gives me a look that says she understands.

She'll probably spend some part of tonight crying too, if the good-looking, well-dressed, seemingly put together man in front of her is any indication.

I hold back my tears for as long as I can. Long enough to find my fur and remove my phone from the zipper pocket along the right shoulder. I tuck the card in there, but everything is blurry now.

I can't believe I'm still here, a full twenty-four hours after Lance broke up with me. I sat on the couch in the hotel for a good fifteen minutes before his words had sunk all the way into my brain. I'd called him back, but he hadn't answered.

After I swipe on my phone, I go to his texts. I like being tortured, apparently. He sent me five, starting Friday night and running through Sunday morning. Early, like just after midnight.

I hope today was amazing. I can't wait to hear about it. Good or bad. It'll all be okay.

I miss you, Jess. How's New York? How was the design meeting with Kira? Call me when you get a minute.

Hey, I know we don't do real estate on weekends, but Jason Finch says he wants to hire you and not me to sell his house. Doable? I miss you. Let me know.

I close my eyes, squishing out the tears. They run down my face in a warm-then-cold drip, but I can't read any more texts. I miss Lance too. I do. Of course I do. Today's the first Monday in a while I haven't arrived at Finley & Frank, waited in his office for him to show up, picked his tie, and then outlined our week.

Our week. Not his week.

How in the world am I going to work at that agency and not be his girlfriend? No wonder he kept so many lines and so many compartments around our relationship. Him not kissing me in his office? Genius on his part, because now he can work there without having to imagine it.

"He doesn't care anyway," I whisper, though I know that can't be true. I *hope* it can't be true.

I tip my head back and blink rapidly, using my fingers to get the tears attached to my eyelashes. Hopefully my makeup isn't too badly ruined, but I'm not sure why I care. I've just taken the deepest breath of my life, but I haven't decided if I'm going back to the party or calling a cab and going to the hotel, when Kira says, "There you are, darling."

The "darling" gives her away. I cringe as I turn to face her, masking the movement of my shoulders as I reach to pick up my skirts. "Kira, hello," I say as if I've just arrived for the festivities.

“Come meet Tim Vincent,” she says, gesturing for me to go with her. She wears a painted on smile of red lipstick, but she’s a shark. She hasn’t said a single word about my designs without me needling her, and at this point, I think I might be dealing with a Cruella de Ville. You know, someone who steals other people’s designs and passes them off as her own.

She has my portfolio, and I’m determined to get it back before I board the plane Tuesday afternoon. So I paste a smile on my own lips—mine are painted raspberry—and loop my arm through hers.

“Have you had a chance to decide on the jumper or the skirt?” I ask her. She has told me she’s narrowed it to those two, and she wants to know what textiles I’d use with them. I told her I wanted to know which one she would construct before we went any further. That took me all day Friday, and then I attended another ghastly party until well after midnight.

“Oh, we don’t talk business at parties, dear.” She trills out a laugh, and an older gentleman turns from the piece of art he’s studying. He’s got gray along his temples, and he’s wearing a proper suit in dusty charcoal. A bowtie adorns his neck, and it’s very nearly the same color as my dress.

“I love your tie,” I say, grinning at him. If Kira thought I wouldn’t be able to handle her high society fashion parties, she was dead wrong. I’ve been attending these things since I was four years old. “You belong with me, Mister Vincent. We match.” I switch my arm from Kira’s to his, his smile encouraging me all the way.

I leave Kira in the dust as I aim us back to the party. “Tell me, where did you get that tie? I’d love to get one for my boyfriend.” The word sticks in my throat, choking me no matter how much I eat, drink, or talk.

And I know. I have to do something about Lance, or I’m going to lose, well, everything.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, MY PHONE RINGS FROM SOMEWHERE beside me, waking me. I have no idea what time it is, but someone snuck into my room in the middle of the night and replaced my saliva with cat hair.

My mouth is stuck together it's so dry, and I slap at the nightstand to find my phone. I see Sabrina's name on the screen and sit straight up in bed. "Hello," I say, reminding myself this is a business call. "This is Jessie Dunaway."

"Praise the Lord you answered," Sabrina spits. Oh, she's mad, and my heart begins to pound like a cowboy setting a fence.

"Yes," I say, glancing at the clock. It's past ten already, and another round of panic parades through me. My flight is at three, and I have to be out of this hotel room in one hour. "What can I do for you?"

I throw back the blanket, only half-listening. I can't stay in this city for another day, though I'd originally planned to go home tomorrow. I'd called the airline this morning and changed my flight, and the hotel said I could leave early too.

Lance isn't expecting me until Thursday, and I don't know what I'll do tomorrow. "Look for a job," I mutter, and Sabrina goes, "What?"

"I'm sorry," I say, straightening and focusing on the conversation at hand. "My attention was divided, but now it's all yours. What did you say?"

"I said, I got your autoresponder that you were out of the office and to contact Lance, but he's not answering his phone either."

First, I answered my phone, but I don't say that. "He should be in the office," I say, frowning. When I walk in a room, I just drop my clothes wherever they happen to fall, and I have stuff everywhere. "What do you need?"

"I went and asked at that farmhouse, like you suggested."

My heart takes flight, and my lipstick-stained lips curve up. "You did? Sabrina, that's great."

“The owners are interested in hearing more about what their property is worth,” she says without acknowledging what I’ve said. “I told them someone from Finley and Frank would call them yesterday, and Lance did not.”

“I’ll call him and find out what’s going on.” I get to my feet and pick up the hotel pen and pad of paper. I’d wondered what anyone would use this for, and now I know. “Tell me the name and number of the owners. I’ll call them today if I can’t get in touch with Lance.”

“Thank you,” Sabrina says, and she lists the name and number of who I need to talk to in order to appease her.

The call ends, and I reach down to pull on my big girl panties and make a phone call I don’t want to make.

I take a breath and then another one, and I don’t think there’s enough deep breaths in the world to prepare me to call Lance.

My finger shakes as I swipe and tap, his name staring me in the face. I can’t tap the button. I can’t. Maybe I can just text him.

“Grow up,” I tell myself. We work together, and I’m not quitting. If Lance can’t stand to be around me, he’s going to have to find an issue with my performance at the agency and fire me.

I tap the button and lift my trembling phone to my ear. “Be strong,” I recite to myself as the line rings. And rings. And rings. I want to tell him the only reason I called Callie was to get her advice on what to say to Lance, how to ask him for more time off in a professional way.

Lance doesn’t answer, and his voice comes over the recording, making my heart clench. “Hey,” I chirp into my phone. I pace toward the window, where I stood for at least ten minutes the first time I arrived in the hotel room. “I just got off the phone with Sabrina, and she said she tried to get in touch with you. Are you not in the office today? She wanted you to call the owners of the farmhouse.”

I turn back to the nightstand where I jotted down the name. My brain can't hold anything at the moment, and I know exactly why. I'm as nervous now as I was when I first showed up at Finley & Frank for my interview with Lance. I've still never told him I was right about the time, and the thought gives me the shot of confidence I need in this moment.

"The Owens?" I say into the message. "I have their number." I rattle it off and then freeze. Finally, I say, "Okay, thanks," and hang up. I drop my phone onto the messy bed as if it's caught fire, and I take another deep breath. Then another.

"You did it," I tell myself. I'm not sure if Lance will call me back, but my guess is he won't. He's not a chicken or afraid of a challenge, but he'll either text or he won't respond at all.

I start packing, because I have to get out of this hotel. I have to get back to Charleston, and not so I can appease Sabrina.

I have to get back so I can look Lance in the face and apologize. I have to get back to Carolina so I can explain everything to him. If he can just try to see things from my point of view, I know he'll forgive me.

I have to get back, because I have to get Lance Byers back into my life.

SABRINA

I fit my key into the lock and twist, juggling my huge purse with the ginormous paper bag of books I bought at the store just now. I'd already been home from the law office when I'd remembered I needed a new novel.

I'd meant to stop on the way home from the downtown office, but when my meeting with Jason Finch had gotten postponed *again*, I'd left the seventeenth floor in a bit of a fit. Honestly, most walking I do is a bit stridey. A little like a march.

All I know is it keeps people away, and that's where I want them. Away.

I enter my apartment—which I'd found only a week or so ago, the stench of beets or boots coming from the place next door. This place isn't much better than crashing in Macie's spare bedroom, but Jess is out of town until tomorrow, and while she called me back yesterday afternoon to let me know she has a meeting with the Owens out at the Century Farm, nothing moves fast enough for me.

I drop the books and my purse onto the couch, the burden finally relieved from my arms. I exhale as I shrug out of my denim jacket and hang it on the coat rack beside the door. I close that and lock the deadbolt. I don't feel safe if I don't, though I live in a quiet neighborhood tucked off any main thoroughfares in Charleston.

For what I have, it's a nice enough place. One bedroom. One bath. A living room with a dining nook and a kitchen. Big

windows take up the back of the apartment, and my sister even sent some sunny curtains from California where she lives.

I look that way, kick off my shoes, and stop by the couch to pick up one of my romance novels before continuing into the kitchen. My stomach growls at me for something to eat, as it's nearly seven and I haven't had dinner yet. Chelsea will text me to find out if I've eaten, as if she can do anything about it from almost three thousand miles away.

She likes to cook, which is a good thing as she lives up in the mountains in Northern California and there's no such thing as Carry or CarryEats. Her husband is a chef, and if I ask if Doritos count as dinner, I get both of them texting me.

"Oh," I say, the word leaking from my mouth as I see the pot on the stove. I'm a terrible cook—I can burn water, literally—and I toss the romance paperback on the counter and reach for the pot.

The flame isn't on underneath it, but I distinctly remember lighting the burner. I'd filled this pot halfway with water, but as I tip it toward me, there's not a single drop left.

There are also no eggs, and I absolutely, one-hundred percent, for-certain put six eggs in this pot before I remembered I needed a new nightly read and then dashed off to the bookstore.

I look left. I look right.

No eggs. No eggs. Where are the eggs?

With horror cascading through my whole body, my eyes get drawn to the sunny curtains. There's no longer simply smiling cartoon suns on the fabric. Bits of egg—hard-boiled beyond belief egg—cling to the curtains.

And the windowsill. And the wall. All the way to the ceiling, where it looks like hard-boiled shrapnel has been missiled into the plaster.

"Ohhh." Another sigh leaks from my mouth, my heartbeat clogging my throat and nose. How on God's green earth am I going to get this cleaned up? I can't. This apartment needs to be burned to the ground, and even then, the fire marshal will

likely find bits of egg white, egg yolk, and eggshell in the ashes.

I stand there in the poutrified crime scene, wondering how to even start cleaning it up. Eventually, I reach out and brush my fingers against the sunny-eggy-something. It doesn't budge, and I recoil from the texture of it.

"Those are going in the garbage," I say, making an executive decision. I do that all day at work, and my house is no different. "Chelsea simply doesn't need to know."

I nearly rip the curtain rod off the wall in my attempt to get the curtains down, and as I look down at the ruined fabric in the trashcan, I have a moment of clarity.

I need to move. I need to move so badly, and when I do, I'll simply lose my cleaning deposit. I should've torn down the curtain rod, because there's no way I'm getting a cent of my money back. The landlord is going to have to bring in a power-washer, strip the paint, replaster, and then repaint. When the contractor put in *eggshell*-white paint, I don't think this was what he intended.

I lift the pot from the defunct burner—both of which are still warm to the touch—and set it in the sink. Then I pick up my romance novel and march out of the kitchen. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

Maybe with exploded eggs and ugly denim jackets. I shed my clothes and step into silky pajamas. With a sigh, I climb between the crisp, clean, cool sheets of the bed I make meticulously every morning. I open the paperback, determined not to think about work, my clients, the farmhouse, or Jason Finch.

It's that last item on the list that trips me up every time. It's not really his fault that our meeting has been postponed a few times now. Well, some of it is. It's mine too though, so I haven't given him a piece of my mind. Yet.

"You're not giving him a piece of anything," I mutter to myself, focusing on the first line in chapter one *again*. Definitely not my heart, mind, or soul. The whole reason I

moved to Charleston a few years ago was to regain all that I'd given away to a man so very much like Mister Finch, and I won't be making that mistake again. Oh, no, I will not.

My eyes move down the lines of text, but I'm not comprehending them. When my phone chimes, I practically lunge for it, insanely hoping it will be Jason.

It's not. Of course it's not. While he has my number, he wouldn't be texting me after work mid-week unless it was an emergency. Since we're not working any emergent cases right now—or any cases together at all—*of course* it's not going to be him.

It's Chelsea. *Did you eat?*

My stomach roars, and my sister probably heard that in her cabin in the woods. She literally lives in a mountain Hallmark town, and she probably has a three-course meal on the table right now.

Does a handful of M&M's count? I send to her, already knowing it does not. *I was going to make egg salad,* I start to type out to her as her answer-in-the-negative comes in. *But it didn't work out.*

Chelsea calls, as I knew she would. One, she hates egg salad, so I'll hear about that. Two, she senses a good story, and boy oh boy, do I have one for her.

I flip on the call. "Hey."

"Didn't work out? Define *didn't work out.*"

THE ALARM ON MY PHONE GOES OFF THOUGH I'M STARING right at it. I set it for another minute, stand, and start shuffling folders around on my desk. I can see the seconds counting down, but I pretend like I can't.

I'm now two minutes late for my meeting with Jason, which is finally happening today. My stomach has been sick for hours, and I just want to skip out of the office early on this

Thursday afternoon. It would be more like a half-day, but at this point, I'm willing to take the vacation day.

I wonder if it's too late to postpone, then I mutter to myself that of course it is. I don't need a folder. I don't need an excuse to stop by his office. There's no stopping by anyway, as his office sits in a hallway that one only goes down if they're supposed to be there. It's not like I can just "happen by" and he wouldn't wonder why.

I pick up the notebook and array of pens I've had ready for the past hour. My alarm goes off again, and this time I swipe it silent and face my door. "You've got this," I tell myself, but really I want to run to the women's room and throw up. There's nothing in my stomach, because I haven't been able to eat since last night.

Even then, I only ate because Jess stopped by with coffee and pastries, and we went over everything she's learned about Century Farm. Bottom line—it's out of my price range. I don't really want a whole farm to take care of anyway. I just want the charming, white farmhouse.

I want old. I want quaint. I want something I can work on in the evenings. No one—not even my sister—knows I read romance novels by lamplight, and I want to keep it that way. So I need another hobby, and I've always liked fixing things up.

I tug on my cardigan as I leave the office, pulling it up and over the smaller of my breasts. I hate being lopsided, and I'm sure everyone who ever looks at me is thinking how off-kilter I am. If I'm being honest, that's why I wear jackets and cardigans and other things that cover me up. It's easier to hide the bulk on the right side and try to boost the lack of bulk on the left.

I arrive at Jason's office exactly four minutes late. The door is open, but I stop in the doorway and knock. He looks over from his computer, waves me in, and says, "I have to run, Paul. I'll call you back, okay?"

He doesn't wait for confirmation before hanging up. That, or Paul is the fastest talker on the planet. I can't even think

okay before Jason pulls the headset from his ears and tosses it on his desk. He stands, exhales heavily, and puts both hands on his back. He pushes forward, stretching his lower back, and my hormones betray me violently.

So Jason Finch is good-looking. My younger half-sister would say something more like *drop-dead gorgeous* or *hotter than a tin roof on a Texas summer day*.

And he is. Any woman who denies that doesn't have functional eyes. Jason himself has dark eyes, and they know how to soak a woman right up. His hair is just as delicious and midnight, but I keep those thoughts to myself.

He wears the latest fashions for men, and I'm not sure if I like that or don't. The skinny ties, the bright dress shirts, the pants that don't even reach the ankle. All of it is trying too hard in my opinion, and Jason... Well, he doesn't need to try that hard. Let's leave it at that.

"Come in," he says, and I realize I'm lurking in the doorway, staring at him.

"Your button is undone," I say stupidly, my eyes still focused somewhere in his abdominal region.

He looks down and finds the button, deftly doing it right up. Shame, as I thought I saw a peek of tan skin under all that bright blue.

I take a step toward his desk, my notebook clutched to my mismatched girls, hoping he hasn't noticed yet. All we do is bicker, so he probably hasn't. A junior partner can dream.

"I'm glad we're finally sitting down together," he says, and if I had to classify his voice, I'd call it pleasant.

I instantly narrow my eyes. Is he playing some game I don't know about yet? Does Farmer, Buhler, and Cason have some sort of hazing ritual for their junior partners? No snakes pop out and sprinklers don't spring to life on the ceiling, so I pull out the chair, step around it, and sit.

"You can relax, Sabrina," he says, giving me a smile. I wonder how many women he's charmed with that blindingly white thing. My guess is a lot. I used to be wowed by men like

him. I dated one for a year, was engaged to him for another two, and then found out that he was already married with a wife and two kids in Great Falls.

Needless to say, I left Montana before the sun rose the next day, and I nomad'ed my way around for a bit, finally landing in Charleston, at this firm.

“Okay,” he says with a sigh, as I have not released a single muscle in my body. I tell myself to melt into the chair, just let go and relax, but I don't know *how*.

Jason plunks a binder on the desk between us. It's at least a two-incher, and for anyone who's been to law school, we can gauge the size of a binder in less time than it takes to blink.

“Here at FB-and-C, we have a mentoring program for junior partners,” he says. “I have a senior partner as my mentor, and we all learn vertically.” He has a nice speaking voice, and I almost lose my attention to the roll and swell of it. He nudges the binder a little closer to me, a clear indication I should open it.

I reach out and pull it in front of me, perching right on the front edge of the chair. I look at my array of pens and click into action a red one.

“Going for the red ink, huh?” he asks, and when I look at him, a teasing glint sits in those eyes. Oh, those eyes.

“Yes,” I say simply, because my brain has gone bird on me. Small and not much there. All I can think is *peck, peck, pec-without-a-K*. My eyes drop to his chest, and he's certainly not non-symmetrical. He can probably go to the beach and do very well. Very well indeed.

“There's nothing to mark up in there,” Jason says, still smiling at me. “I'd definitely go blue or black. Oh, you even brought—is that a brown pen?” He reaches for it, and I almost smack his hand away. I love my pens, and no one but me touches them.

“It is a brown pen,” he says, clicking it open and closed a couple of times. He's got a plant on his desk that's seen better days, as well as a picture frame with him and Tara in one

photo and him and a couple of older people in another. His parents, I'm assuming.

I hold out my hand, and he delivers my pen back to me.

"You're an interesting woman," he says, and that alone makes everything in my body light up.

"What does that mean?" I ask, and to my own surprise, it's not a snap. It's just a question.

He leans forward, his happy-go-lucky-lawyer persona—the Playboy Lawyer, I've dubbed this particular personally—completely gone. Just like that. A blink, and the man is someone else.

He might be a combination of the Soft Jason and the Mentor Jason I've been dreaming about. I'm not entirely sure, because most of our interactions have been filled with snipes or silence.

"It means I think you're interesting," he says, no smile in sight. "Listen, Tara is getting married tomorrow, and I need a date. Might you be interested in going with me? She's a chef, and so is her husband. Best catering company in the city, in fact. The food will at least be good."

He shrugs like he doesn't care if I come with him or not, and I honestly can't imagine why he would. My brain goes into Big Bird mode, screaming at me in a raspy, muppety voice that *he just asked you out! He asked you out!*

"Is it a date?" I ask, sounding like Big Bird and clearing my throat to get out the feathers.

"If you'd like," he says coolly.

"No," I say just as slowly. Just because I'm not Southern born and bred doesn't mean I don't know how to do the accent. "You tell me what it is. A date to your cousin's wedding? Or a casual thing between two co-workers because you don't want to go to a wedding alone?"

I'm thirty-four, not stupid. I've seen romcoms and TV shows, and hey, I've read plenty of romance novels where the couple gets together simply to go to a wedding so they don't

have to be alone. Then they fall in love. A tiny part of me wants to live out my own romance novel, and the other bigger, louder part reminds me of what happened in Montana.

Jason smiles at me now, some of all of his personalities shining through. He's smart—really smart. He likes that I can see through him, and that I don't put up with any garbage from him. He's arrogant, but right now, it's in an adorable way. Almost like him challenging me to shoot him down and make him go to his cousin's wedding alone.

“You know what?” he asks. “I'm not sure. Right now, I'm about torn right in half.”

Something inside me is tearing right in half too. I raise my chin and prepare to answer him, praying my voice box won't betray me.

When I open my mouth...I don't say no.

LANCE

“**M**omma,” I say, my most disapproving voice set on high. “I told you I don’t need a breakfast bar in the morning.” I can’t even take in all the food on the table. The fruit platter alone is big enough to choke a man to death. Probably several men.

“You go do your run,” she says, bustling over to the groaning dining room table with a plate of bacon that practically drips grease. “This isn’t for you anyway.”

“The breakfast gals,” Dad says, squeezing past me and sneaking a piece of bacon as Mom turns to smile at me.

I stay right where I am and let her embrace me, her smile wider than the ocean. She may live in Florida now, but my Southern momma did try to fatten me up this week. She’s succeeded too, as I arrived on Monday with an empty belly to match my barren heart.

It was time for me to come visit her anyway. It doesn’t matter that she got the whole story about Jess out of me in less than an hour, and that I ate two plates of pot roast while I talked. Having everything out actually makes things easier for me to start to heal.

Strangely, however, I don’t feel any better than I did when I first rang the doorbell four days ago.

“Cha-Cha and I are just going for a short run,” I say as Momma steps back. I glance down at Cha-Cha, who grins up at me with her adorable corgi face. “My plane leaves at one-fifteen.”

“Yep,” Momma says, turning her back on me. “Aaron,” she barks. “You stay away from that bacon.” She marches toward him, and Daddy scoots into the living room, chuckling. I smile at them too, at the easy way they love each other and exist together. They have what I want. Something easy and casual. Something comfortable to come home to every night, and someone to share my every thought—dangerous, emotional, overjoyed—with.

I’m not sure I know what that feels like, though I thought I’ve been in love before. I twist the doorknob and exit the twinhome where my parents live in a fifty-five-plus community. The morning is sleepy and mostly silent, with a lawn mower buzzing somewhere one block over.

As I’m stretching out my calves, a huge Lincoln towncar the color of ruby red apples pulls up to the curb. A woman with a silver bob emerges from the passenger seat, and then the back door opens. More ladies my mother’s age spill from the car, one after the other, almost like a clown car.

I hitch a smile in place, knowing I’m going to have to say hello to all of them.

“My, my,” the passenger says, scanning me from head to toe. I do have my running shorts on, as well as a tank top. I mean, I haven’t even started yet. “That is a good-looking... dog.”

I laugh right out loud and say, “Good morning, ma’am. My momma is inside.”

“Oh, a Southern boy,” she says. “Even better.” She gives me a wink I’m not quite sure what to do with and goes right by me. She doesn’t knock or ring the bell, but simply enters the house.

All of the “breakfast gals” parade past me, each with a smile on their face. “Good morning,” I drawl several times, grinning for all I’m worth. It’s nice to feel like I’m worth anything at all, and I push against my feelings of self-loathing.

“Charity,” the last woman says. “There’s a Southern gentleman out here. Who is he?”

“Let’s go, Chachy,” I say to the dog. It’s definitely time to get out of here.

A few hours later, I’ve showered, packed my bag, and stand in the kitchen again. The fruit platter is half-gone, which is a miracle in my opinion. Those ladies made short work of the bagels and bacon, and I had to eat a bowl of oatmeal with strawberries and blueberries after my run.

“Okay, Momma,” I say. “I have to go. My ride will be here in a couple of minutes.”

“Are you sure you have to go?” she asks as she gets up from the couch. She wears a pout as she shuffles toward me.

“Yes,” I say, taking her into my arms. I don’t care how old a man gets, there’s nothing better than hugging his momma. I close my eyes and hold her tight, wishing she could stitch up all the loose things in my life. “Tara’s getting married tomorrow, and I will never be forgiven if I miss it.”

“Maybe Jess will be there,” Momma says, stepping back. She wears such bright hope in her face, and I wish I could erase it for her.

“Momma,” I say. I don’t have much else to add. “I broke up with her.”

“Yes, but you didn’t want to. Just talk to her, baby. She’s not going to abandon you, I just know it.”

I nod, because if I agree, then we can leave with smiles and hugs, not an open argument. Jess has called a couple of times, but I didn’t answer. She left messages that nearly filleted my muscles right from my bones, and I texted her back with a few crisp words about what she should do.

Both messages held pauses, and in those, I heard so many things. I’ve laid awake at night every day since Sunday, wondering what I can or should do about her. As far as I know, she returned to Charleston on Thursday, as she’d planned to do. Yes, her plans had changed over time, but she’d communicated them to me professionally. I have no cause to fire her. Yet I cannot stand the thought of walking into Finley & Frank on Monday morning and seeing her in my office.

I simply can't do it. I couldn't even go to work this week and see her desk, with its picture frames and neat to-do trays and that lamp she'd bought on our weekend excursion only a couple of days before she'd gone to the city. The base was a high-fashion woman going to the Kentucky Derby, with the shade as her ridiculously huge hat.

Jess had confessed that she's always wanted to go to the Derby and wear a big hat and a skirt that flared out only on one side. I'd asked her if she'd designed the skirt already, and she'd said yes, she had a sketch of it somewhere.

My phone chimes, reminding me I'm still standing in my parents' kitchen. "My ride is here," I say, and Momma moves out of the way so I can hug my dad.

"Travel safe, son," he says. "And listen to your momma." He hasn't given me a lot of lectures this week. He just let me go golfing with him—neither of us having to lose to the other. He talked to me about the agency and family life. He put on movies at night so I could zone out.

"I love you," I say to him, and he nods as he steps back.

"Love you too, Lance."

With that, I pick up Cha-Cha's leash in one hand and grip the handle on her carrier and the one on my suitcase, and we head for the door. Aaron opens it for me, and I leave the sanctuary I've found this week.

On the plane back to South Carolina, I wonder if I should drop Chachy at home and then drive south. Beaufort is only an hour from Charleston, and I could just drop by the Dunaways. Perhaps I could learn something more about Jess. Perhaps I could talk to her daddy and tell him I'm in love with his daughter, but I made a mistake. Ask him how to fix it.

My eyes drift closed as my thoughts do their train-thing and run across the country and back.

I've ignored Dawson and Callie all week, and they'll probably be at the airport with pitchforks and protest signs. Or pizza. Probably pizza. I smile to myself, something my momma said popping into my mind.

I don't see why you have to propose, she'd said. You can say I love you without asking will you marry me?

I'd told Momma I wasn't in love with Jess. I'd denied it vehemently, in fact. I didn't need to say anything more to her. I just needed...time. Just like with Hadley, I need *time* to figure out where I went wrong, and if it's worth even trying ever again. No matter what I do with a woman, it always ends up the same. Me alone, with my heart broken, and I'm really, really tired of that.

The plane lands, as planes do, and Cha-Cha and I wait our turn to get off. I've carried everything on with me, so I head for the doggie potty and then the regular one before making my way past security and toward the airport exit.

I drove myself to the airport and parked in the expensive lot, but I don't care. I couldn't ask Dawson to help me run away, and I didn't even tell him I wasn't in Charleston until he texted on Tuesday night, asking if I wanted to meet him for a game of basketball.

"Lance!" someone yells, and I know exactly who it is. Callie.

I turn toward her, my heart doing this stupid swelling thing at the sight of her, Dawson, Tara, and Alec all standing behind the barrier that keeps those waiting for their loved ones out of the flow of traffic.

They're here. They're here for me, even with everything I lack in my life. I want to cry, but I smile instead, pushing back the embarrassing tears.

"Oh, you let me have Cha-Cha," Tara says, as if I've been abusing her by making her fly to visit my parents. She got duck treats every few minutes on the plane, for crying out loud. She takes the leash from me just before Dawson grips me in a huge hug.

"You're never to leave the city without telling me again," he says thickly.

He's my very best friend in the world, and I should've known I can go to him. The problem is, the last time a woman

cracked my heart in half, Dawson had broken up with Callie. He'd run to my rescue instead of hers, and I just can't be responsible for that again.

He steps back, his dark eyes actually harboring anger. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," I drawl at him, nodding seriously. His wife engulfs me too, telling me she almost flew down there just to make sure I was safe, and she would have if Dawson hadn't shown her my pin and told her I was with my momma.

When she looks me in the eye, I see her concern. I don't need another mother, but at the same time, it sure is nice to know she wants to take care of me. I clap Alec in a hug, and then Tara, and I get my suitcase moving. "You guys ready for the wedding tomorrow?"

"Absolutely," Alec says, throwing Tara a smile. She melts like marshmallows in the microwave and nods.

"Nope," Callie says firmly. "We're not talking about the wedding."

I look at her, surprised. "Oh-kay?"

She's got a power walk going, her heels clicking along the tile as she strides toward the rectangle of light that's the exit. "No," she says firmly again. "And you're not taking your car. You're riding with us."

"It's ten dollars a day to park here," I say. "I'm not leaving Mammoth for another—" I cut off when I name my truck. I freeze right to the spot, unable to keep walking.

Everyone else slows too, taking an extra step or two before realizing I've halted.

My mind races, and I blink, everything around me fading and muting. Callie grins, and Dawson steps toward me. White noise fills my ears, and while I'm extremely grateful my friends have come to greet me, I wish Jess were here.

I clear my throat and say, "I wish Jess were here."

"Exactly," Callie says.

I look at her and then Tara, who also wears a kind smile. “I need help,” I say, sounding like I’ve swallowed sand. “How do I get her back? Do I just show up and what? Apologize?”

Callie loops her arm through mine. “Okay, I’m going to tell you something, Lance Byers, and you will not be upset. Deal?”

I glance at Dawson as Callie gently tows me toward the exit. He grins and shrugs one shoulder, his eyebrows going up in sync with his arm.

“I’ll try,” I say.

“Tara and I, we talk to Jess,” Callie says. “I don’t know a lot of details, but she has mentioned an alphabet adjective game you two have been playing...yes? You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, my throat as narrow as a straw.

“She’s going to be at the wedding tomorrow,” Tara says, drawing my attention to her. “I’m sure there will be a few minutes where the mic is...open.” She glances at Alec, who nods.

“So you want me to...” I leave the sentence there, wishing these women would fill it in with a complete plan. Bullet points would be ideal.

“Dress up nice,” Callie says. “Show up to the wedding. Have a speech prepared that uses your little game. She’ll take you back.”

“You’ve forgiven her, right?” Alec asks.

I nod, because I have. She didn’t really do anything wrong, unless I want to label chasing your dreams as wrong. I don’t. Not for Jess. She has big wings that have been tied to her back for decades. I’m not going to be the one to clip them or re-bind them. I can’t believe I did in the first place.

Ideas pop through my head, and I let Callie lead me to the bus stop. “If you’re not at our house in thirty minutes, I’m coming over,” she says. “We have a lot more planning to do, Mister.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say again, and I give them all one more big hug before they leave with Cha-Cha and her kennel and I wait for the bus that will take me back to Mammoth.

A public apology isn’t really my style, but it might be time to unbutton that top button and let loose a little. I’ve never wanted to do that, but for Jess...

I’ll do anything for Jess.

TARA

I turn as someone ducks into the room, thinking it might be Alec. He's been trying to get in and sneak a peek at my dress all day. Or at least he's been teasing me about it.

It's not my fiancé—about to become my husband—but it is a man. “Lance,” I say, hurrying toward him though I barely wear any clothes. Jess and Callie are a little late with the dress, that's all. Callie's never late to anything, but Jess texted to say there “might have been a mishap,” but that she was taking care of it.

I'd texted back in all caps—*TELL ME WHAT YOU MEAN BY MISHAP*—and she hasn't responded. I'm about four seconds away from losing my cool, but I take a deep breath and flick a look over to my mother. She doesn't even tear her attention from her phone, so she must really be texting up a storm with her sister-in-law.

Jason's mother is out front right now, making sure all of the flowers and tablecloths get set up in the right place. I know how to keep Aunt Cynthia busy, and that's to give her something that she feels in control of. I haven't told her that I met with the decorators four separate times, and they know what they're doing without her help.

I told Janet, the lead wedding planner, to text me if my aunt becomes a problem.

“What are you doing here?” I hiss at Lance. “Jess could walk in at any moment.”

“Dawson has Callie on maps,” he says. “They’re seven minutes away.” He glances around the room as if just now realizing that he’s standing in the brides’ room. He focuses on my face again, his nerves higher than mine. “Tara.”

“No,” I tell him in my best kitchen-boss voice, which admittedly, isn’t impressive. “Lance, you’ve got this. Now, this is my wedding, and I’m letting you intrude on it.” I link my arm through his and lead him toward the door. “You shouldn’t be in here. You have roses to arrange and a banner to check on.”

His real estate game face slides into position. “You’re right. Of course you’re right.” He opens the door and takes a step into the hall at the same time Dawson yells his name.

“The app hadn’t updated,” he says, jogging down the hall in his dark suit and tie. “They just pulled in. Let’s go. Out this door.” He hustles Lance out the door at the wrong end of the hall, and I hold my breath, waiting for the emergency exit alarm to sound.

It doesn’t, and I retreat back to the full-length mirror, stinging ants in my stomach. I’m not nervous about marrying Alec. I’m in love with him, and I already know he’s here. He’s moved about half of what he owns into my house already, and Tommy and Goose seem to like him more than me, the canine traitors.

I worry about being enough for him. Not him, exactly. His mother. She has not come into the brides’ room, though I personally invited her via text, email, and a direct phone call. She’s...iffy on giving me her plans, and I have to force myself not to care. Merging two lives is hard, and while Alec doesn’t seem super-close to his family, I know he’s been working on his relationships with them.

The door opens again, and I spin as a giant white dress enters before the woman holding it. “It’s fine,” Callie says from somewhere in all the lace and fabric. “Nothing to worry about, Tara.”

“Mishap?” I say, practically running in my slip and undergarments toward her. We’d gone bra shopping together,

and I do have the best support on the market for a wedding dress. Jess and I have tried the dress on at least a dozen times, and it's perfect. But that was all before the word *mishap* got sent.

"We were loading the dress," Jess says, coming into the room and closing the door. Her hair is extra-curly today, and she is so...perfect for Lance. I smile at her, and she lets Callie handle the dress while my mom gets to her feet. "And my upstairs-neighbor's cat comes streaking out of the backyard, right?"

Jess steps into me and gives me a light hug. "Cats have claws, you know."

I look at the dress, which doesn't seem to be clawed to shreds. "This is why I have dogs."

"Dogs have claws too," Callie says, turning to face us. "And Claude Monet is declawed. Don't blame this on the whole species."

I grin at her, and she smiles back, tilting her head. "You're getting married today."

I open my arms to her, and she flies into them. We hold each other tightly, because this is a big day for me. My first marriage was oh-so-bad, and I really want to make the second go-round work. I can. I will. Alec loves me.

"Anyway," Jess says, plunking down her purse. "There was a little mishap. I needed my sewing machine, and I got it all sorted."

I step back from Callie, and we both look at the dress. "I'm getting cold in this slip," I say. "Mom."

She abandons her phone, and together with Callie and Jess, they help me into my wedding gown. I've worn it before. I've seen myself in it from toes to the top of my head. Somehow, today, it's different.

The four of us stand there and look at my image in the mirror, and I'm in love with the dress. "It's perfect," I whisper.

“So are you,” Callie says. “Now, come on. Put on your shoes, and let’s go.”

I do what she says, my heart thumping out a couple of extra beats, because I know what’s coming for Jess. I glance at her a couple of times, and she seems relatively normal. She’s distracted and busy right now, though, and I wonder what it’s been like for her at night this past week.

Probably terrible, and once she has my feet in the right shoes and the box put away, she meets my eyes. “What?” she asks.

“Nothing.”

“You’ve been staring at me,” she says, planting her hands on her thighs and straightening. She’s a bridesmaid—which really helped the plan with Lance—and she wears the lavender dress like a pro. So does Callie, of course, because she can make any dress, skirt, or blouse look like a million bucks.

“How are you?” I ask. “I feel like I haven’t seen you...in a while.”

“I was literally at your house until nine o’clock last night,” she says, cocking her hip. She looks at Callie, who wears a forced, I’m-so-innocent smile. “This is about Lance.”

“Hey, she can say his name,” Callie says, looking at me.

“I’m not talking about Lance,” Jess says, picking up her purse and then putting it back down. “I don’t need this.”

“No,” I say, grinning at her. “What did you eat for breakfast this morning?”

Jess’s eyes fly right back to mine. Several seconds go by before she says, “I don’t want to say.”

“Probably cereal with orange juice,” Callie says. “That’s what happened to this friend of mine when her boyfriend broke up with her.”

“I can’t even remember the days after me and Alec broke up,” I say. “They’re like this black hole.”

“Stop it,” Jess says, but her voice holds no power. “He’s going to be here, and I already don’t know what to say to him.” She shakes her head and looks away. “I’m fine. We’ll be fine.”

“Maybe you should just not say anything,” Callie says. “You can just find him and kiss him.”

Jess’s laughter explodes out of her. “Right,” she says with plenty of sarcasm. She brushes at her eyes. “If I want to ruin Tara’s wedding, which I don’t.”

“Tara, five minutes,” someone says from the doorway, and I wave to acknowledge I’ve heard Janet. “Bridesmaids are lining up,” she adds.

Since I only have three, and two-thirds of them are standing in front of me, we have time.

Jess snuffles once, her makeup still perfect. “I’m walking with Jason, yes?” she asks.

I don’t have the heart to lie to her, so I don’t say anything. She doesn’t wait for an answer anyway. I’d texted Jason about walking down the aisle with Jess the moment I’d heard she and Lance had split up.

Then, once Lance got home, I’d texted again that the plan had changed. He’d told me not to worry about him, that he’d found a date to the wedding. He won’t tell me who it is, and I haven’t had time to go spy.

“Okay,” Callie says with a big sigh. “Let’s get these chickens married.”

She leads the way out of the brides’ room, my mom hot on her heels. I exit last, and my daddy is waiting right there for me. I smile at him and link my arm through his.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, and we wait in the hallway while the others go get in line. Since I’ve catered for so many people around the city, I was able to book the indoor gardens at the library, which is a wonderful, if intimate, space. I don’t mind, because Alec didn’t want a big wedding.

My family isn't huge, but I do have employees and important clients I wanted to invite. In all, there should be about sixty or seventy people in the grand hall, and we'll feed everyone a dinner Alec and I put together ourselves.

The line in front of me starts to move, and there's no fighting or screeching, so Jason must have Jess on his arm. Lance will be further up in the line—the first, actually—with Dawson between Jason and Jess. Jared, one of my chefs, is also walking in the wedding party, as well as both of Alec's brothers. They all have wives, and I'm fine with the ladies walking down the aisle ahead of me too.

Janet waves to me from the cusp of the hallway, and I move forward with my father. The crowd starts to come into view, and my heart races around my inside my chest. I deliberately move slow, and I tell myself not to look toward the altar the moment I make it past the corner of the wall.

I fail, and my eyes land on Alec instantly. Everything in the world is now oh-so-right, and I can't help the huge smile that touches my face. He's grinning too, and he actually lifts one hand in a shoulder-height wave. He is just the absolute cutest, and I can't believe he chose me.

I don't wave back, because one hand holds my enormous bouquet, and the other is tucked in my dad's elbow. I can't take my eyes from him, though, as we arrive at the head of the aisle.

Alec clasps his hands in front of him, his smile beaming the way toward him. I hope he'll be able to put up with my squawking chickens, and our late nights together, and me running next door to Mr. Reynolds all the time.

And Callie and Dawson, and Jess, and Jason, and everyone else in my life who is so important to me.

Dad takes me down the aisle, shakes Alec's hand, and passes me to him. Alec wears stars in his eyes, and he leans in close, takes a deep breath of me, and says, "I love you, Tara."

I don't need anyone else or anything else, and we turn toward the altar. As I do, I see Sabrina Shadows sitting on the

front row, an empty seat next to her. I jolt, my eyes flying to Jason's. He gives nothing away—which totally gives him away.

Even as my mind races down a path, screaming, *I thought he didn't like her!* I shelve the information to deal with later.

I'm getting married right now, after all.

“Welcome to the wedding of Tara and Alec,” the pastor says as the guests start to seat themselves.

“Wait,” a man calls out, and I glance to my left, where the sound of Lance's voice came from. Alec's hand in mine tightens, and we grin at each other.

This is going to be perfect.

LANCE

I step out of the line, my heart beating like a great big, huge bass drum. *Two minutes*, I tell myself. *You can do anything for two minutes*. With seventy pairs of eyes on me, I'm not so sure.

I've been featured in magazines and on websites, and I'm used to being in the spotlight. Just not a live spotlight, so this is a different type of stage.

Everything Alec gave me to say to Jess streams through my head. They've been best friends for a long time, and he knows her. He knows what she wants to hear.

I do too.

"I can't stand here," I say, gesturing to the horrible spot on the end where I can't see Jess on the other side of Alec and Tara. I walk past Dawson, who's grinning at me like a fool. I swallow, taking strength from him.

"Because I can't see you, Jess." I make it past Tara and Alec, who've stepped back out of the way. Everyone is silent. Deathly Still with a capital D and S. "I can't stand being at this wedding without you on my arm."

She looks like she's been struck by thunder and then lightning.

"I made a mistake," I blurt out. "I don't want to break-up. I'm—I just wasn't thinking clearly on Sunday. I want to be with you. Can you find any way to forgive me?" I might've

missed a couple of things in there, what with all my ADHD and my derailed thoughts.

“Alphabet,” Tara coughs out, and I startle.

Jess has started to open her mouth, and I hold up my hand. “Wait.”

Her mouth snaps shut, the surprise in those sapphire eyes striking me in the chest. “I think you’re articulate, clever, easy to talk to—I miss talking to you so much—and gorgeous. When I got to G, I was afraid to say that, but I’m not anymore. You’re *stunningly* gorgeous, and I need you at my side today, tomorrow, and at the agency on Monday.”

Callie, who’s manning the front of the line of ladies sighs, and her smile encourages me to keep going. “You’re interesting, kind, and I’m mad for you. You’re open-minded, and an over-achiever, and I love both about you.” I have more letters for her that we’ve gone back and forth with, but I pause to take a breath after the O.

“Okay,” she says, reaching up to wipe her eyes. “You can stop.”

“You owe me an X and a Z-word,” I say anyway, swallowing afterward. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” she says, her voice high-pitched and tinny.

“Go kiss him,” Tara says, and I’m so grateful for her. Callie too. She steps out of the way, giving Jess free access to get to me. I simply stand there and give Jess a moment. She usually needs one or two or twelve.

I see the instant she’s processed everything I’ve said, and in the next breath, she rushes toward me. I take her into my arms, breathing normally for the first time in seven days. The crowd behind us starts to cheer, led by the bride and groom.

“You don’t need to apologize,” Jess says, her voice so soft in my ear. “I’m the one who needs to say sorry for not calling you. I’m sorry.”

“Kiss me, and we’ll agree that we both have some room to improve in our behavior from this past weekend.”

Jess grins up at me, and I experience a blitzing, buzzing feeling moving through my whole body. I think it’s...*joy*, and I hope I can feel it every single day for the rest of my life. If I have Jess at my side, I’m confident I will.

And when she tips her head back and closes her eyes, waiting for me to kiss her, I’m very aware of *alllll* the eyes.

I kiss her anyway, and Dawson’s whoop fills the whole hall and echoes through my soul. I make the same sound internally, because kissing Jess is the single best thing I’ve ever done.

“I’M JUST SAYING,” JESS SAYS RIGHT BEFORE SHE PRESSES HER lips to mine again. “If you apologize again, I’m going to get mad and stop kissing you.”

“Mm.” I pull her back against my chest. “I’m sorry.” I grin at her. “I won’t say I’m sorry again.” I kiss her, because let’s be real. *She* wasn’t kissing me. *I’m* kissing her. I should be switching my laundry from the washing machine to the dryer or ordering something for dinner, but the moment Jess walked in, my regular life imploded, and all I could think about was kissing her.

We’ve been doing that for a while, and I finally take a breath and look around my house. Cha-Cha is lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, looking dejected and forlorn. That’s about normal. Everything else seems different. With Jess back in my life, I feel like I can see color again. I hadn’t realized how gray and drab everything had turned until she’d returned and brightened everything up again.

“Okay,” I say, stepping back so she can move away from the front door. That’s right. I didn’t even let her get out of the doorway before I kissed her. “Dinner? I think you came over for dinner.”

“You said you’d cook.”

“I lied,” I say, giving her a quick smile. “I didn’t have time.”

“Who called?”

“My momma,” I say, leading the way into the kitchen at the back of the house. Chachy jumps to her feet and follows us on her short little legs. “Then Ruth.”

Jess doesn’t ask if they’re badgering me about asking her to marry me. She knows it bothers me, but it’s not because they’re wondering when I’ll ask Jess to be my wife. It’s them warning me to take my time.

I can admit I need a little bit more time to get to a place where I’m thinking diamonds and such. Not only that, but I’d saved for three months to buy Hadley’s diamond ring, and Jess comes from a far wealthier family than she had.

We haven’t talked about gems or gowns yet at all, other than me complaining that my momma wants me to go real slow and make sure I’m very certain before getting down on my knees and popping the question for the third time.

“Are they still sick from Thanksgiving?” Jess gets on the barstool while I open the drawer beside the fridge and pull out the delivery menus.

“Don’t seem to be,” I say. We’d gone to Thanksgiving dinner with Callie and Dawson, at Callie’s parents’ place. I’d called Momma, who’d had Ruth and her family down to Florida. Apparently, they’d all gotten sick the night of Thanksgiving, and Ruth is *positive* with a double capital P it’s because the stuffing was underdone.

“I don’t want to leave the house,” I say. If we stay in, I can kiss her more later. “So let’s do delivery.” I toss the menus on the counter. “You look for a sec. I just remembered I’m waiting for that three-pack of ties, and I got a notification that it was delivered.”

She grins at me as I bustle out of the kitchen, then hurry back in to give her a kiss. “You’ll help me match them with

my shirts, right? You should've seen me last week. It was so pathetic."

"You didn't even go to work last week," she murmurs against my lips, and since I don't want to revisit last week ever again—even if I spent it in sunny Florida with my folks—I just kiss her again.

She lets me for a second, and then she giggles and pushes me away. "Go get your mail. Hurry up so we can order. I'm hungry."

"Yes, ma'am," I tell her. I dash outside and get my mail, then jog back inside. Jess still sits at the counter, and she looks up at me when I enter the house.

"Xerothermic," she says.

I throw the rest of the envelopes and junk on the table just inside the door, retaining the package of ties. "What?" I have no idea what restaurant she's just chosen, and I frown as I walk toward her.

"That's your X-word," she says, grinning at me from that barstool. "It means dry and hot."

I blink, then start laughing.

"Because your sense of humor is so dry," she explains, as if I need her to. "And you're seriously the hottest man I've ever met."

I appreciate the compliment, but I just finish chuckling and shake my head. I rip open the flap on the package and pull out the bundle of ties.

"Lance," she says, jumping to her feet.

"Hmm?" I look up as she picks up the ties.

Her eyes widen, and she meets my gaze. "These are Burt Carol ties."

I look at them and then her. That obviously means something in the fashion world. Kira nor Tim has called her since she left New York, and she's putting on a really brave face about all of it. I know the rejection stings, though, and

while I haven't brought up her sketches or heard much more about her time in the city, she and I still have time to talk about so many things.

"Yes," I say as if I knew all along what kind of tie I was buying. "My dad says they're the best." I take the package from her and start to peel off yet another layer of plastic.

"Your dad," she says, folding her arms.

"Who's—what did you say? Whatever X-word you used for dry and hot. That. Who's that now?"

"Xerothermic."

"That." I grin at her as the last of the crinkly plastic comes off. I drop it on the floor for Cha-Cha, who likes to roll around with it for some reason. Maybe the noise it makes. "You're being very xerothermic right now."

"I don't believe your dad told you about these ties."

"Dawson then," I say, peeling back a blue one from the roll.

"Lance."

"I don't know where I saw them," I finally admit. "Okay? Who is this guy?"

"He's only the very best pattern designer in the world," she says, still plenty of xerothermic qualities in her voice. "He makes the most beautiful fabrics, and then you can construct the most beautiful garments ever."

"Okay," I say. "Well, I did like his ties." I hold up the blue one to my neck. "Yeah?"

"It's a bright one," she says. "I love the little moons on it." She smiles, and everything that's ever been tilted in the world straightens.

I order the Chinese food she wants, and she goes through my closet and matches my new ties to some dress shirts. The doorbell rings, and she's already in the living room with Cha-Cha on her lap while I'm washing out the dog bowl in the kitchen.

“I got it,” she says, and I let her open the door and take the Chinese food.

I finish feeding and watering Cha-Cha, who now seems to like Jess more than me, and turn to help Jess with the food. She’s already put it on the counter, and she’s holding a small package.

“What’s that?” I take out the first container of Chinese food, the scent of sweet and sour sauce hitting me in the face.

“It was on the floor by the front door,” she says, her voice somewhat awed. “You maybe dropped it when you brought in the mail?” She looks up at me, and my mind kicks at me that something is happening here.

I pause in the unpacking of ham fried rice and watch as she holds up the package. “It’s got a return address on it,” she says. “It’s from Hadley Brown.”

All of my muscles go dormant, and the only reason I stay standing is because of the counter in front of me. I somehow reach for the package, though my brain has been disconnected from the rest of my body. I take the package from Jess, and it’s small enough for me not to have noticed it in my haste to get the ties.

There doesn’t seem to be a box inside, but something stiff like cardboard.

“She’s your ex-girlfriend, right?” Jess asks.

“Fiancée,” I tell her, but she knows. Everyone knows.

I rip open the package, my heartbeat drowning out the sound of the paper tearing. Between two pieces of cardboard sits a small envelope. I didn’t even know someone made envelopes this small. It’s not sealed, and I can reach two fingers inside.

I touch metal, and I suck in a breath. I know what this is. I can’t get my fingers around the ring, but it comes out when I pull my hand back.

The diamond ring I bought for Hadley tumbles to the countertop, and both Jess and I scramble to make sure it

doesn't fall on the floor. Once it's settled and still, we both just stare at it.

"Is there a note?" Jess asks, her voice made only of whispers.

"No." There's nothing but the packaging, the cardboard, and the teeny tiny envelope. This is bizarre, and I'm not sure what to think. I need some time to wrap my head around this strange occurrence.

Jess reaches out and picks up the ring. "Wow, Lance," she says. "This is really nice." She looks at me, which breaks the spell I've fallen under.

"Yeah," I say. "Three months' salary."

Jess admires the ring, seemingly scrutinizing every facet of the gem. "Are you going to get me a ring like this?"

I swallow, not sure what to say. I haven't told her I love her. She hasn't said those three words to me. "I mean, not like that one," I say.

She meets my gaze. "No?"

"This isn't a ring you'd like," I say, gently taking it from her. I drop it back into the envelope and press it between the cardboard again. "It's too...fussy."

"Was Hadley fussy?"

"Hadley was extremely fussy," I say, smiling as I do.

Jess steps around the corner of the island and runs her hands up my chest. "What kind of ring would you buy for me?"

With my hands on her waist and the two of us swaying to silent music in my kitchen, I say, "I don't know. Something unique. Dang, that should've been my U-word for you." I grin down at her and lean forward to kiss her quickly. "Something...classic. Sophisticated."

"Oh, don't go too far," she says. "But I do like a princess-cut diamond, and then yes, go with classic and unique."

I clear my throat. "I'll keep that in mind."

Jess steps out of my arms and picks up one of the containers of Chinese food. “I’m not in a hurry, Lance. Besides, you still need to figure out a Y-word, and I’ve given you a whole week before I bounced the ball back into your court.”

She gives me a look that I better get this letter right, or she might turn me into a frog with one of her withering stares.

I have a feeling I’m going to be ribbiting soon, because I’ve done Internet searches, and there are no adjectives that start with Y. At least none I’m going to say to the woman I’m almost in love with.

There’s always yummy, I think. Then I dismiss it, hopefully for the last time. She’s not a dessert...

JESSIE

Lance eases Mammoth to a stop in front of the cream-colored mansion, and neither one of us get out. The whole estate bears lights that are just starting to twinkle on this December-near-dusk.

“Ready?” he asks.

I can’t nod or shake my head. I’m neutral. I think of the past six months, then twelve. So much has changed since I left Beaufort, left this little community of Ashford, left the first part of my life behind.

“I can’t think of a Y-word,” he says, and that draws my attention from the pine wreath with the giant red bow on the front door. He keeps his gaze on it as I watch the frustration roll through him. “There’s nothing good. I can’t say some of them, because they’re rude. The ones that aren’t are stupid.”

He sighs. “I mean, I can’t say you’re *yummy*, even though I seriously want to taste your lips every second of every day. I can’t say you’re *youthful*, because we just had a conversation about skin cream on the way down here and I have a feeling you’ll think I didn’t try.” He looks at me, pure energy blazing in those eyes. “I would say *yearlong*, because I want to spend years and years with you. But that’s idiotic. It’s not even an adjective. It’s something you say when you’re like, battling cancer or something. ‘A yearlong battle with cancer.’”

He blows out his breath, shakes his head, and looks at the front of the house again. “Y is a stupid letter.”

“How about there’s a Y in there somewhere?” I suggest.

He yanks his attention back to me. “Just a Y in the word? Why didn’t you tell me that?”

I reach for the door handle, a laugh already starting in his chest. “Because I didn’t know you were going to go to *yearlong*.” I open the door and slide to the ground. Lance joins me at the corner of the hood, taking his hand in mine.

“Have you tried to find a Y-word?” he asks.

“I have,” I say. “They’re all *yucky*.”

That breaks his moody-mood, and I grin up at him. The gesture falters quickly. “I need you today.”

“I’m right here,” he assures me, and we face the mansion together. I’m not sure if Amelia or Jonathan will be here, but my guess is yes. If not now, then they’ll arrive later. Mama has never been one to not plan a party if there’s an opportunity for one.

Lance and I are halfway up the stairs to the yawning front porch when the front door opens. Daddy steps out, and he looks older than I remember. Tears fill my eyes, and I fly up the rest of the steps and into his arms.

“Hey, sugar-doll,” he says quietly, holding me so tight.

I can’t say anything. The only sounds I hear are my own heartbeat and the footfalls of my boyfriend. I step back and wipe my tears real quick. Lance is a TUB—the ultimate boyfriend—because he’s tall, handsome, employed, and smiling at my father like he’s genuinely glad to meet him.

“Daddy,” I say, all Southern-proper-like. “This is my boyfriend, Lance Byers. Lance, my daddy, Rutherford.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Lance says, and he delivers it in his REA voice. The real estate agent in him is surely going to come in handy this weekend.

“The pleasure is mine,” Daddy says, and they shake hands.

“Why is this door open?” My mother’s voice comes from inside the house. “Rutherford, it’s cold outside.”

It's nowhere near cold out here, and we all turn toward the doorway as Mama fills it. "Oh." Her eyes round, and her perfectly painted mouth drops open. One hand presses against her heart and then plays with the biggest green gem I've ever seen. "My baby."

"I'm not the Prodigal Son," I say, rolling my eyes though my heart is rejoicing to see my mama again. I smile at her, because I've learned a thing or two in the offices of Finley & Frank too, thank you very much. I move into her arms, where she holds me and cries into my shoulder.

I wasn't expecting that, though I suppose Daddy and Amy have always been the strong ones in our family.

"You knew they-all were comin'," Daddy drawls. "Pull yourself together, Constance."

Mama sniffles as she does that, and I sweep my hand toward Lance. The vein in his throat bobs with his pulse, exactly the way it did at Tara and Alec's wedding. Just like it does when he's nervous. It's the only sign of his nerves I've ever, ever seen, and I realize in that moment how much I love him.

My voice chokes, because I can't just blurt out those three words for the first time in front of my parents. "Mama," I say, a waver in the word. "This is Lance, my boyfriend. Lance-honey, this is my Mama." I beam at him and then her, wondering if love can be conveyed with a simple look or if the words have to be spoken.

As he says how supremely happy he is to have met Mama, I realize that the phrase *I love you* has a Y in it.

He steps back and reaches for me, his love for me right there in his eyes. It's present in the fact that he found a dogsitter for Cha-Cha so we could come to my parents' house this weekend for Mama's holiday parties. It flows between us, because he's right next to me, at my side, supporting me here in Beaufort.

Now I just have to figure out how to say the words out loud, and I wonder if the Z-word I've chosen can help me.

MONDAY MORNING ARRIVES, AND WITH IT, I BRING A PLATTER of cheese, fruit, and wafer crackers into Finley & Frank. Olive meets me at the door, her eyes wide and her hands helpful. “Thanks,” I tell her as she holds open the door.

The sun has barely lit the sky, but Lucy got me here just fine. My stomach buzzes, and I wish I could quiet the bees inside. Since I can’t—I haven’t been able to since arriving at my parents’ mansion in Beaufort and realizing I was in love with Lance—I just smile through the wasps and head for my boss’s office.

He’s never kissed me in there, and I’m about to blow open every barrier he’s put between us. In the beginning, I agreed with them, but not anymore. We work together, and I hope to be as good of a real estate agent as he is one day. It’s been three weeks since I returned to Charleston from New York, and I haven’t heard from any of the contacts I made there.

I haven’t emailed anyone either, so I’m probably as much to blame for the silence. Other designers probably send follow-up texts and messages, and I haven’t. I’m still trying to decide what I want my fashion sketches to be, because I might not want them to be anything but what they already are. An escape for me. A way to express my creativity and to dream big.

I think of Tara as Olive unlocks Lance’s office, the tray of fruit starting to weigh too much for me. Tara goes after her dreams, first with *Sauceabilities*, and then with her cookbook. I know she worked on it for a long time—over a year, I think Alec said—before she did anything with it, and she might not have been able to do much without the help of Dawson’s mother.

“Got it,” Olive says, and I smile at her before dashing into the office. It’s chilly inside this morning, as we didn’t come in this weekend. Lance hasn’t worked weekends since the open house a while ago, and I’m glad for that. We’ve been taking

more and more weekend excursions, and I like those far better than talking escrows and money and terminology.

He's still teaching me, and I'm still learning a whole lot. I haven't found anything for Sabrina, but I did just start working with another client who I'm excited about. Farrah reminds me a lot of myself, though she's ten years younger than I am. She's new to the city and looking for an apartment or rent-to-own house. She's just my style, and I actually have a few listings to show her today when she drops by.

"Got it?" Olive asks, bringing in the wad of balloons I'd asked her to pick up yesterday. They float above her head, resisting the movement as she strides toward the desk, where I set down the fruit platter and sigh in relief.

"Yes," I say, smiling at the bobbing balloons. "Thank you so much for getting these." I take the balloons from her and set them behind the tray.

"Is it Mister Byers' birthday?" she asks.

"No," I say, grinning at the deep eggplant balloons, interspersed with pale yellow and baby blue. "I just—we have something to celebrate." I grin at her, and Olive nods.

"I'll leave you to it."

"Okay." I'm super early to work, but that's because I knew if I didn't come at seven a.m., I might flee the state. I press my hands together and tell myself to calm down. Lance stepped out of line at Tara and Alec's wedding, and in front of scads of strangers, he said he wanted to be with me.

I can do this.

Lance doesn't usually get to F&F until about nine, and I sit down at my computer and print out the things I need for Farrah. I check my email messages, my throat constricting when I see one from Jason Finch.

For a while there, he acted like he was going to hire Lance, but his email says he wants to work with me. I have no idea what that means, and I narrow my eyes as I open the email. DTAP runs through my head: Don't trust a player, but I wonder if Jason's changed.

He's been professional with me the last few times I've interacted with him, and he was downright gentlemanly at Alec's wedding. He'd shown up with Sabrina Shadows on his arm, and she'd been stunningly gorgeous with her hair down, her makeup more pronounced, and a gown the color of tangerines gripping her curves.

All at once, I realize what Jason wants. It's not me, and it's not necessarily my services. It's Sabrina Shadows. I'm unaware if they've seen each other since the wedding, and I can't remember anything after Lance stepped out of line and kissed me before the ceremony began. But they were there together...

I don't answer his email yet, and I let my eyes scan down the list. I get a lot of junk here at work, but one subject line catches my eye. *Would still love to work with you*, and the sender is Kira Chatwood.

I gasp, then try to breathe normally as I open the email. I think my brain has forgotten what normal is, because my lungs seem non-functional as I scan her two line email.

I enjoyed meeting you in New York. I've been busy, but I'd love to set up a time to chat further.

Her number sits below that, though I did manage to get it before I left the city.

"He's here," Olive hisses over the copier, and I jump to my feet without closing the email. I can't think about this right now. I don't know what to do about it.

I hurry around my desk, trying to get my game face in place. I hear Lance's voice as I duck into his office, which is where he'll expect me to be for our usual Monday morning meeting. MMM, that's what I've dubbed, it and Lance even uses the acronym when he's texting me about work now.

We'll go over that in our MMM, he says. *I don't want to think about it again this week.*

My heart thunders through my chest as he greets Olive and gets anything she has for him. He then enters his office

wearing his long, wool coat, though no one in South Carolina really needs one, December or not.

He's tieless, of course, because I still pick his neckwear every morning, but his slacks are perfectly pressed, and the dress shirt peeking at me from beneath the coat is pale pink. He carries his briefcase bag and a carrier of coffee, one of which is for me.

He pauses, his eyes taking in the tray and the balloons. "What's going on?" he asks slowly, finally committing to entering the office. He toes the door closed behind him, which sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't. After all, there's never been any kissing in here.

Until today, I think, pressing my palms together. He sees that and offers me a smile. "You're nervous."

"I have your Z-word ready," I say. "Put your stuff down first."

He does what I say, laying out four choices for a tie. I pick a brown and navy blue one and step over to him to tie it for him.

"Lance," I say. "You're a creature of habit, which I love about you. I don't quite know what you do at home before you leave for work, but I'm guessing you pick out your clothes the night before."

"Maybe," he says, his voice still wary. He should be, as I've never brought in fruit and cheese and balloons before.

I focus on looping the longer tail of the tie around the shorter one. "Your Z-word is zonal. It means divided into zones. You like things in their compartments. Work at work. Running is running. Home is home. Weekend excursions are weekend excursions."

"Maybe," he says again, but that's really an admission that I'm right.

With trembling hands, I finish his tie and push the knot into place. His hands come up to make sure it's where he wants it, and then our eyes meet.

“I’m in love with you,” I say, the words suddenly so easy to say. My voice even sounds normal. “I don’t want any more zones between us.”

Lance’s eyes flicker as he looks back and forth between mine. “There are no zones between us.”

“Yes, there are,” I say, reaching to fiddle with his tie. I touch the crisp corners of his shirt. “You haven’t kissed me in this office. There’s a divide here.”

Lance slides his hands along my waist, the nearness and warmth of him so close to me making me dizzy and drunk. “Let’s get rid of that, shall we?” He touches his lips to my neck, which causes me to lean my head back. His mouth travels up toward my mouth, but stops near my earlobe.

“Because I love you too, Jess.”

Delight dances through me, followed quickly by a pinpricking of tears. “Yeah?”

“So much,” he says right before he kisses me completely right there in his office. “I love you with a capital I, L, and Y.”

“ILY,” I say against his lips, and then I kiss him again.

LANCE

I meet Dawson's eyes as I pass him, and he simply lifts his drink to his lips. I don't see how he can be so calm. He'd gone with me to return Hadley's diamond ring, and while the jeweler wouldn't give me my money back, I'd recruited Tara and Callie to help me pick out a ring for Jess.

I'd done some super-spy moves to get Jess's phone and get her sister's number, and I'd texted Amy to see if the choice I'd then landed on would be something Jess would like. Amy and I have exchanged a few messages since then, with her initial one being an emoji face with hearts for eyes.

I'd taken that as a *yes, Jess will love this engagement ring.*

"Will you calm down?" Dawson asks. "Were you this nervous when you asked Hadley and Diane?"

"I'm not nervous," I say, because I'm not.

"Why are you pacing then?" He finishes his drink and sets it on my desk.

"Because, I don't want her to think I'm not ready." I'd stayed away from the holidays for a proposal. We'd spent a fabulous New Year's Eve together, and while I'd glared when she'd started working with Jason Finch when I thought he was going to be my client, I was secretly happy for her.

January is almost over, and I don't want to be anywhere near Valentine's Day when I ask her to be my wife. I'm Ready with a capital R, and I'm not sure I've been convincing enough for Jess over the past several weeks.

Dawson stands and reaches for his suit coat. “Okay, well, it’s been fun. I have to go pick up my wife, and then we’re driving to the airport to get my mother.”

“Mm,” I say, though I know Lila Houser is hard for Dawson to deal with. “Good luck.”

He pauses in front of me. “You’ve got this,” he says. “You love her, and she loves you, and she’s not like anyone else you’ve ever dated or been engaged to.”

After a man-hug where I say, “Thanks, Dawson,” he nods and leaves my office. It’s Friday afternoon, almost quitting time, and the offices at Finley & Frank are almost empty. I walk out with Dawson, and when I turn back to return to my office, I see Peter Frank coming out of his office. He’s coated and carrying his briefcase, and our eyes meet.

I grin at him, as we own this agency together. “Heading out?”

“Yes,” he says, reaching to shake my hand. “Proposing tonight?”

“Yes.” I glance down to my open office door. “You’re gone all next week?”

“Yes, Michelle and I are going to Grand Cayman.”

“Wow, have fun,” I say, wondering where Jess wants to go on her honeymoon. *Our* honeymoon.

“Good luck,” Pete says, and he strides out of the agency. One more secretary bustles out before I’m left alone in the office. Now, I just have to wait for Jess to get back from her showing with Bernadette.

She’s turned into a great real estate agent, and she’s helped two clients from beginning to end now, one with an apartment rental and one with a new purchase. If this afternoon’s showings go well, she might be able to get another offer in, the third of her career.

I’m insanely proud of her, and I try to kiss her in my office every chance I get. I’m still letting her pick my ties, and I’m

still buttoned up too much, but she doesn't seem to mind either.

I don't mind when she shows me her sketches, or the emails she's still getting from Kira Chatwood. Nothing much has come from them except conversation, and Jess says sometimes the fashion world moves fast and sometimes it moves slow. I just do my best to support her and listen when she talks about her designs and her ideas for designs. She's started some sewing classes, because another designer she met in New York City told her a good designer should be able to make their designs too.

I love Jess for how hard she works and how smart she is. I love her because she loves me, and when I return to my office and pick up the deeply dark velvet box, I'm not nervous at all.

"I'm ready," I say out loud.

"Lance!" Jess calls, and I turn back toward my doorway. She comes skidding around the corner, her face lit with joy.

"You got an offer." I stride out of my office, my happiness doubling the closer I get to her.

"Bernadette wants the Salisbury Road place." She shrieks and drops her new briefcase—the one I bought for her at the beginning of the year. In the next moment, she jumps into my arms, laughing so much I have to join her.

"Congrats," I say, because the Salisbury place is one of ours. One of the agents down the hall from Peter is the selling agent for the house, and we often work with our own agents to get properties bought and sold.

Jess calms down and steps back from me, her grin going on for miles. "You're taking me to dinner to celebrate, right?"

"I do have a reservation at The Prime Rib tonight," I say, scanning her navy skirt, which she's paired with a burnt orange blouse. She knows I love Auburn and the blue and orange, and I can't remember the last time she wore anything red.

Her eyes are wide when I bring my gaze back to hers. "You do?" She falls back another step. "Did you know

Bernadette was going to put in an offer?”

“How would I know that?” I ask, taking her hand and leading her gently toward my office. “This is the first time you’ve taken her to look at houses.” My stomach only swoops once as I walk into the office, my eyes already sweeping my desk for the ring.

It’s not there.

At that moment, I realize I’m still holding it in my hand. I don’t have a fruit platter or any balloons. No wine or low lighting, though the sun sets so early in the winter. No roses. I was going to surprise her with the reservation at the steakhouse, but that cat is already out of the bag.

“Jess,” I say, and I don’t even have the urge to clear my throat. I do remember being so dang nervous to ask Hadley to marry me, but none of that exists with Jess.

She looks at me, her expression open and unassuming.

I hold up the box and drop to my knees.

“Lance Byers,” she says, the words a gasp. She covers her mouth with both hands, her eyes never leaving mine.

I grin at her, completely calm. “I’m in love with you,” I say. “ILY from now until forever. I want to marry you. Will you marry me?” I don’t crack open the box. Hadley hadn’t answered until she’d seen the diamond, but Jess is already bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Yes,” she says from behind her hands. They drop, and she giggles. “Yes!” She throws herself at me again, and since I’m not super stable on my knees—who is?—we both topple toward my desk.

I laugh, dropping the ring box and holding onto her as we tip sideways. We end up on the floor together, and I push her curls back off her face. “You’re my favorite person in the whole world,” I say, all the laughter gone. Only love remains, and I find it shining in her eyes too.

“ILY from now until forever too,” she whispers. “I can’t wait to be your wife.” She touches her lips to mine, and this

kiss is so sweet and so intimate and so perfect.

“How long do we have to wait?” I ask, sliding my mouth along her jaw. “What will your mama want?”

Jess grins and giggles, leaning into my touch, which makes me feel powerful and important to her. “You know what? I don’t much care. I’m living *my* life now, so what do you think?”

“I think you’re a spring wedding type of woman,” I say.

She giggles and tucks her cheek against my chest. “Yeah, and you’ve been talking to Amy.”

I pull in a breath. “I have not.” I can’t really lie to her, though, so I chuckle in the next moment. “Fine, I have. She said you’ve always wanted flowers upon flowers for you wedding, and I figure spring is a great time for that.”

“Mm, spring would be fabulous,” she says, kissing me again. I don’t even care that we’re lying on the floor of my real estate office, the diamond ring somewhere around in here, which probably hasn’t been cleaned in a week. No one else is at the agency, and I can lose hours of my life kissing my fiancée. So I just keep doing that.

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Read on for a sneak peek at Sabrina and Jason in **[JUST HIS PARTNER. It’s now available in KU!](#)**

SNEAK PEEK! JUST HIS PARTNER CHAPTER ONE: SABRINA

I glance left and right as I get off the elevator, trying to decide if the smell on this floor is the same as it was when I left for work. There's definitely a funk in the air, and I wrinkle my nose as I walk.

My new apartment sits near the end of the hall, with one more unit beside mine in the corner. I didn't mind the move, because I don't have a whole lot. I had to get out of that place with the blown-up egg bits everywhere, and no, I didn't get my cleaning deposit back. I'm lucky I didn't get an extra bill to redo texture and paint, in all honesty.

I *may* have not left a forwarding address and deleted my former landlord's contact information from my cellphone. Since I only answer calls from numbers I know on my personal line, I suppose he could've called looking for me. I just don't know it.

With every step I take toward my new apartment—where I don't want to be living, mind you—the scent intensifies. I glare at 4I as I pass, my goal 4K, which is where I live. I want a farmhouse in the woods, where Archie—the cat who came with this apartment—can chase mice and birds to his heart's content.

I want to tear out a kitchen and put in a new one. I want to soak in a really old tub, and then replace it with something new. I'm not sure why, as I've never done much remodeling or renovating. It just sounds fun. Plus, maybe if I tear down old

sheetrock and pull out defunct pipes, I'll cleanse myself of the things that need replacing in my life too.

Such a deep metaphor, I know. I am a lawyer, after all.

I reach 4K and fit my key into the lock, the smell as strong as if I'm in the same room with it. Rodizio across the hall must be making his mother's fajitas again. They put off this decaying smell last time he tried, and I cast a look at 4L across the hall from my place as the knob turns.

"M-row," Archie sings, running past my ankles.

"Hey, buddy," I say to him, but he's streaking down the hall. He's kind of a community cat, though he stays in my apartment, sleeps in my bed, and I feed and water him. So he's kind of mine too. The previous renters of this apartment couldn't take him with them, and they'd asked with such sad-kitty eyes if I'd take him that I couldn't say no.

I'm not sure why. I say no to plenty of other things.

Not Jason Finch, I think as I enter the apartment and leave the front door open a crack so Archie can get back in. I sigh, reminding myself that Jason Finch—a man I work with at my firm—isn't asking me any yes/no questions. Certainly not if I'd like to go to dinner with him.

That would be a yes anyway, not a no.

I exhale and wipe my hand back across my forehead and into my hair as I drop my briefcase and jacket onto the armchair in the living room. The smell has gotten worse, and that takes my attention into the kitchen.

My mind is stuck on Jason, the wedding we attended together over two months ago, and our working relationship. That at least is working now, so it's probably best that he doesn't ask me out. In this day and age, I can probably ask him, but again, things are going so well at the firm that I don't dare jinx anything.

Not only that, but perhaps he didn't enjoy himself at his cousin's wedding as much as I did. Or maybe he decided it wasn't a date and that we'd simply gone together so he didn't have to go alone. Perhaps I'm just his partner, and that's just

how he wants it. No matter what, I feel like I failed some sort of test I hadn't known I was taking.

And I'm a really good test-taker, so familiar frustration fills me as I enter my kitchen.

My eyes land on the slow cooker, and the world narrows to that appliance. The smell intensifies, as if I've been cooking squirrels—or human hands—on low for the past eight hours. Horror fills me, and I dash over to the counter and lift the lid on my “no-fail beef stew.”

Oh, I've failed. Big time.

I gag as the full brunt of the scent hits me square in the face, wondering how in the world I ruined a dish that only has six ingredients. Six! Total.

Carrots, potatoes, broth, salt, pepper, and cubed beef.

“More like cubed barf,” I say, slamming the lid down on the cooker. I have to get rid of this, stat. How am I the worst cook in America?

“Because you're Sabrina Shadows,” I mutter to myself, lifting the heavy stoneware piece out of the cooking element. I look at the sink, which has a disposal, and veto that idea. Knowing me, the stew—and I use that term loosely—will get stuck in the drain and this smell will never go away.

The trash is also out, and I simply head for the door. This whole thing is going straight in the Dumpster behind the building, and I feel like a criminal dragging out a dead body as I enter the elevator, relieved I'm the only one inside the car on the way down.

I dash outside and heave the crock over the top lip of the Dumpster, my heart beating so fast. I just know crazy Mrs. Littleton is watching through her back window, and I glance up to the third floor where she lives. I swear the curtain in the third pane over flutters, and I tell myself I did nothing wrong.

Well, besides the crime against carrots, of course.

I'm going to have to move again. I *want* to move again, and I pull my phone out of my pocket as I march back toward

the building entrance. Jessica Dunaway's line rings only twice before she chirps, "Hey, Sabrina."

"Jess," I practically shout. "Any progress on the house hunting?"

"Didn't you get my message?" she asks, causing my brow to furrow.

"No," I say.

"Hmm, strange," she says, and it sounds like she's distracted with something else. I know, because I sound like this all the time, and I'm constantly doing five hundred and eleven different things.

My phone makes a weird *bloopety-bloop* at me, and I pull it from my ear as Jess says she sent over some new listings for me to look at.

Jason Finch sits on the screen, his call coming in over Jess's. I drop my phone, my surprise too great to keep holding it. The device splats against the asphalt, and a terrible cracking noise fills the sky.

The phone tumbles away from me, and I go scampering after it. When I reach it and lift it up, I see a diagonal fissure running from the bottom left corner to the top right. "Great," I say, because the screen is completely black too.

No call connected to Jess. No line ringing in from Jason.

"Just great."

LATER THAT NIGHT, I PULL INTO THE PARKING LOT AT MY building, my ire near its breaking point. I hadn't made it to the cell phone store before they'd closed. I can't get a new phone until tomorrow, and I seriously feel like Archie has gnawed off my arm and won't give it back.

I start to pull into my marked, covered, reserved spot and find a car already there. "Are you freaking kidding me?" I ask, wanting to go Fried Green Tomatoes on the fancy-pants SUV

in my spot and floor the accelerator. See how they like their luxury vehicle then.

Instead of doing something that can get me arrested, I put my car in reverse and straighten out so I can swing into an unmarked, uncovered, and available parking space. Where that guy should've parked. I tell myself it doesn't snow in Charleston, that I'm not in Montana anymore, and it's fine.

Everything's fine.

I keep the mantra running through my head all the way to the fourth floor, where I step off the elevator, the hint of my beef stew fiasco still lingering in the air. Something else has masked it though, and I cock my head, familiarity running through me.

"Ah, there she is," a man says, and I know that voice.

Worlds collide as I turn toward the voice and my apartment and find Jason Finch himself standing there. He's still in his slacks and tie from work, but he's got Archie in his arms, stroking the cat as if he's the original owner of him and has been searching for him for many long years.

My heartbeat goes wild, knocking against my ribcage like a crazed fish out of water. "What are you doing here?" I ask, walking toward him. Everything about this scenario is wrong. Jason Finch doesn't exist outside the walls of Farmer, Buhler, and Cason, Attorneys at Law.

And yet, there he stands, that gorgeous smile on his face and that traitorous cat in his arms.

"I called and left several messages," he says, those dark-as-danger eyes firing at me. "Saying I needed to come by so we could go over a case that's been called up in the morning."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"That would be morning," he says.

I glare at him, wishing his face would melt right off. Wait. No, I take that back. He's too handsome for such a thought. "Can you put down my cat?"

Jason looks down at Archie, and the animal is practically asleep, seemingly in complete bliss. I know if Jason held me like that, I would be.

He looks up at me. “Is he yours?”

“Yes,” I say, taking Archie from him as I reach him. “How long have you been here?”

“A couple of minutes,” he says.

“How did you figure out where I live?” I ask.

“Cheryl,” he says, and I nod. She’s my secretary, so I suppose that makes sense. He’s here about a case, and he stoops to pick up his briefcase. We’ve taken two steps down the hall toward my apartment when the elevator dings again, signaling the car has arrived.

I normally don’t look to see who it is, but when a voice says, “There he is,” in an indignant tone, I do. Mrs. Littleton stands there, pointing her crooked finger in my and Jason’s direction. “He’s been loitering around here for at least an hour.”

Two police officers step off the elevator too, and I can’t help but think of the body—er, crock pot—in the Dumpster out back. I blink, imagining a situation where they ask why it smells like death in my apartment and then haul me down to the station to ask me who I killed and then tried to cook slowly into a stew.

When my eyes focus again, the cops are nearly upon us, and one of them frowns at me. “I’m sorry,” I say. “Did you say something?”

“He asked if you knew me,” Jason says pointedly, to which I blink some more. “Why are you standing there like that?” He sighs and rolls his eyes. “We work together. She’s my junior partner.”

“Work together,” one cop repeats. He’s much bigger and beefier than his partner. I can’t help but wonder what kind of stew he’d make since he is so beefy. Then my brain catches up to the pun, and I shake my head.

“You don’t know him?” the skinnier cop asks. The three of them stand there staring at me, and Archie goes, “Me-row,” before jumping down from my arms.

I watch him do his cat-stalk into the apartment, wondering if he somehow did something to the stew. It was seriously six ingredients, and cats aren’t exactly trustworthy.

“Bri,” Jason barks at me, and I focus on the more immediate situation.

“Yes,” I say to the cops, pulling myself all the way together. It’s hard for this late in the day. “I know him. We work together at Farmer, Buhler, and Cason, and we have to go over a case that just got called into court tomorrow morning.”

SNEAK PEEK! JUST HIS PARTNER CHAPTER TWO: JASON

“**T**ook you long enough,” I say to Sabrina after the cops have gone, after they’ve assured the white-haired lady who’d accused me of loitering that I wasn’t a stalker, and after we’ve gone into Bri’s apartment and closed the door.

“I was thinking about something else,” she says, hurrying into the kitchen to unplug something. It smells like overcooked leather mixed with Brussels sprouts in her apartment, and I really want to go home.

At the same time, the dark-haired beauty across the room holds me captive. I had a fantastic time with her at Tara and Alec’s wedding, but I haven’t asked her out again. I know how to do it, but I’ve held back. I want to get things right with Bri for some reason. I don’t want her to be another woman in my long list of dates and acquaintances.

I’ve been trying out a bachelor lifestyle—a true bachelor lifestyle. The kind where I go to work, do a good job, and then go home. Where I don’t flirt with every woman I meet, and I don’t go out with three or four different women every week. In fact, I haven’t gone out with anyone in the past six months, and that started before Tara’s wedding.

Seeing her so blissfully happy with Alec changed a lot for me. I want her brand of happiness, and I know it doesn’t come from having a different woman on my arm every evening. No matter what, I still go home alone.

I glance around Bri's apartment, taking in the mismatched furniture and the lack of pictures on the wall.

"I just moved in," she says, pulling my attention back to her. I don't see any boxes or anything else to indicate she's in the middle of unpacking, but I don't say anything about it. She opens the fridge and promptly closes it again. "I don't have any food here. Are you hungry?"

"I haven't eaten," I say coolly. "Do you want to get CarryEats or go out?"

She indicates my briefcase with her chin. "We better get CarryEats and get this ironed out." She sounds tired, and boy, do I understand that. Exhaustion pulls through my soul, and no one in law school tells you how tired you'll be some days. They should have an Utter Exhaustion 101 class simply as a way to weed out the strong from the weak.

Right now, I feel like I can't even stand for another second, so I move over to the couch and sit down.

"My phone broke," Bri says, moving to perch on the armrest on the end of the couch. "That's why I didn't get any of your calls or messages."

I look up at her, something quiet and powerful moving between us. I don't know how whatever that is can be both of those things at the same time, but it is. "I'm sorry about your phone."

"I was out trying to get a new one," she says. "You didn't have to wait an hour here."

Embarrassment floods me. That little old lady really sold me out. "It wasn't that long," I say, though it definitely was longer than a few minutes. "We need to go over the case, and I couldn't get in touch with you."

I actually have the case memorized, but Bri and I have been working it together, and I'd love to see her take the lead in court tomorrow. My throat goes dry, because I've never said that to her. Not once.

I pull out my phone and start swiping through the options at CarryEats. "What do you want?"

“Anything but stew,” she says, which causes me to look up at her.

She shakes her head, displeasure in her dark eyes. “Don’t ask. It’s a long story.” She pulls the band out of her hair, which causes it to tumble down over her shoulders. Oh, I can’t stay here for much longer. Not with her dressing down like that, and not if we share dinner.

I’m going to say something I either mean or don’t mean—both are really dangerous right now. I feel fragile, like I’m not sure who I am or what I’m doing. The truth is, I don’t. I’m in a state of flux right now, and that is really bad news for me.

“No stew,” I say, my voice only slightly pinched. “Not Your Momma’s Noodles?”

“Sure,” she says. “I like the firehouse mac and cheese there.”

“You got it,” I say, keeping my focus on the phone and not her. I have to. If I don’t...well, I don’t even want to think about what will happen if I don’t.

She’s just your partner, I tell myself. You don’t want to do anything to jeopardize your job.

I’ve told myself these things before over the past couple of months. There’s no rule at Farmer, Buhler, and Cason that would prevent Bri and I from seeing one another. There’s a folder of paperwork though, and the relationship won’t be kept secret if I start it.

I’m fairly certain I’m going to have to be the one to start it, as Bri hasn’t said a single word about the wedding. She’s so different from other women I’m usually attracted to, because she doesn’t seem to like me. And that only makes me like her more, crazy as that sounds.

I finish with the order and look up again, sighing this time. “Twenty-four to thirty-four minutes.”

She smiles at me and slips down onto the couch. “All right,” she says. “Just enough time to lay everything out in order and then go over it while we eat.” She pulls the coffee table closer to our knees.

“I want you to take lead,” I blurt out, forgetting all of the tactful ways I was going to bring this up with her.

Her eyes widen. “You want me to do what?”

“You heard me.” I reach for my briefcase. “So *you’re* going to lay this out, and then you’re going to present it to me while *I* eat.”

“I haven’t eaten either,” she says, folding her arms and glaring at me. Seriously, that is so annoyingly-attractive, and I can’t help grinning at her.

“You can eat when you get the case right.”

“You’re not my mother, Jason,” she says, reaching for the first sheaf of papers I extract from my briefcase.

“Thank goodness for that,” I mutter, because it would be super weird if her mother had the same feelings for Bri that I do. I’ve already fantasized about kissing her, and yeah. Super weird.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, speaking up. “Now, that top paper is the list of witnesses the defense is going to call...”

BRI EXCHANGES A GLANCE WITH ME WHILE WE SIT AT THE prosecutor’s table. I barely move my chin, and she pushes to her feet. “Mister Davenport,” she says without leaving her spot at the table. “You were driving, correct?”

“Yes,” the man in the witness chair says. People think court is so exciting, and it’s really not. There’s no flashy lights or big-name actors here. This isn’t even truly court, but a grand jury to simply determine if we can take the case to court. It’s a great way for Bri to get some experience with a witness, and she can consult with me any time she needs to.

“Driving your car, correct?” she asks, moving to the end of the table and leaning one hip into it. It was her idea to explore this idea of who the car and the weapon truly belong to, and

honestly, it's a shot in the dark. There are so many witnesses, and so many perpetrators, and every single one of them has a different story.

We've combed over every police report and read every witness declaration, and even I don't know who was really the mastermind behind the United Methodist School robbery several months ago. Bri had the idea to question Derrick Davenport and see what he said about the gun and the car.

Right now, he glances toward the empty defense table and then to me. "Yes," he says.

"Who held your gun to your ribs?" Bri reaches down and shuffles some papers on the table, but I can tell she's not looking at them. She just doesn't want Mister Davenport to feel like she's studying him. There's no judge present today. No defendant is allowed to present his case.

The prosecution lays out the case, their evidence, and can question witnesses, and the members of the grand jury vote in secret as to whether there is enough to proceed with the case. With how convoluted everything in this particular case is, we'll be batting a thousand if we get it past the grand jury.

"Thomas," Mister Davenport says, and Bri lifts her head.

"Thomas Rowberry?" she asks.

Mister Davenport licks his lips. "I mean Teddy. Teddy Christopher."

"Was it Thomas Rowberry or Teddy Christopher?" Bri asks, taking a step toward the podium. She can't go past that, and I told her not to even use it. She stops after a single step, and I mentally cheer for her. She can be an intimidating woman, and Derrick Davenport certainly seems to be shaking in his boots right now.

"Teddy Christopher," he says.

Bri nods and turns back to the table. "And you drove your own car, with your own gun pressed to your ribs, into the river. Is that right?"

“Yes,” he says. “Thomas said I had to. Then there’d be no prints.”

Bri picks up the folder I slide forward on the table. “Yes, the prints.” She holds up the folder. “Evidence for the United Methodist School,” she says crisply. “Only Mister Davenport’s prints were found on the gun and inside the car. He claims to have worn gloves, but no other DNA evidence was found either.”

“Because the car went into the river,” Mister Davenport says.

Bri hands the folder containing the print and DNA evidence—or lack thereof to the lead juror in the grand jury. There’s twenty-one people here today, and Bri continues with, “You can speak freely, Mister Davenport. The purpose of this session is that you don’t have to be afraid of anyone.” She faces him again, and I see the fierceness on her face before she does.

“There’s not going to be any retaliation from what you say,” she says. “No one will know. Grand jury testimony is sealed.” She migrates back to the table while Mister Davenport squirms and then coughs.

My word, she was right. He’s the guilty party here, and we may have charged the wrong individual with being the mastermind behind the crime.

Our eyes meet, and I hope she gets the message I feel blazing in mine. *Ask him. Ask him now.* “Didn’t you simply plan and carry out this robbery by yourself?” Bri asks, taking that step forward again.

Mister Davenport turns a shade of gray I haven’t even seen on the sidewalk. “I—” He glances over to the jury.

“A yes or no,” Bri prompts.

“No,” he says. “It was Teddy Christopher.”

“Not Thomas Rowberry?” she asks as if she doesn’t really care. She’s *good*.

“Teddy held the gun in the car. Thomas masterminded the whole thing.”

“So Teddy is the same man who held your own gun to you and commanded you drive your car into the river,” Bri says. “And whose prints were not found on either.”

Mister Davenport clears his throat. “Right.”

“Because Thomas told you both to.” She sounds like my very disappointed fourth grade teacher, using a voice that indicates she doesn’t believe Mister Davenport at all.

“Yes,” he says.

“Very well,” she says airily as if she’s satisfied with the witness’s testimony. She sits down next to me, and I keep my gaze on the notes in front of me while she closes with the evidence we do have, and how we’ll be pursuing all leads to make sure the right person is charged and brought to justice in the robbing of a prestigious private school in the city.

“Even if that person is Mister Derrick Davenport,” Bri says. “Thank you.” We collect our things and prepare to leave the court-like conference room. Mister Davenport glares knives into Bri’s face, but she acts like she doesn’t even notice.

Out in the hallway, I finally take a breath that doesn’t feel like oatmeal in my lungs. “That was great,” I say, exhaling most of the words out.

Bri looks at me with hope in those pretty eyes. “Yeah? Really? I felt so...off. I really thought he was going to say he did it alone.” She shakes her head, clearly disappointed.

“I think he did,” I say. “And I’ve never thought that before you said it last night.”

“I guess we’ll see what the grand jury says. I really want to take this to trial. There’s something not right with this case.” She plops her bag down on a bench and rifles through it.

“You’re going to read the brief again right now?”

“How long does the grand jury take?”

“Depends,” I say. “Could be a while if they don’t agree. Could be hours or tomorrow. Could be fast.”

“Mister Finch?”

I turn toward the sound of Deputy Jones’s voice. My eyebrows fly toward the sky. “They’re back?” I ask, striding toward him. He hands me an envelope, and I flip it open as he returns to the room.

Bri presses in beside me, and I pull out the note. My whole body screams at me about the scent of Bri’s perfume, and the way her arm is warming mine. I look up. “We can indict.”

Her face splits into a grin, and she laughs. “We did it,” she says.

I can’t help smiling too, because a happy Bri is so much better than a growly one, and I’ve seen both. “No,” I say. “*You* did it.”

She grabs onto me and hugs me, and I try not to close my eyes in bliss. Yeah, that’s a try and a fail. “Thank you, Jason,” she says, so much sincerity in her voice. Maybe I’m imagining things, but I hear some emotion too.

She pulls back, and our eyes meet. She’s maybe five inches from me, and I do what I usually do when a beautiful woman is in my arms. I lean down and touch my lips to hers. Fireworks and the National Anthem and entire choirs of angels sing down from above.

Wow, kissing Sabrina Shadows is *amazing*. Like life-changing-amazing.

She kisses me back, and while she might seem like the uptight, cardigan-wearing lawyer type, the woman has lips made of apples and honey.

My eyes are closed, and the next thing I know, she’s ripped her lips away from mine. She says, “No, we’re not doing this,” and she shoves both palms against my chest.

I stumble backward, my eyes flying open. Surprise and humiliation swirl together in my chest, and all I can do is stand

there as Bri marches away from me, collects her briefcase, and heads for the stairs.

“Wait,” I say, but she’s already gone. I push my hand through my hair and sigh. “Idiot,” I tell myself as I collect the indictment paper and my own briefcase. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

My phone rings, and my cousin’s name sits there. How does Tara always know when I’ve made a complete and utter fool of myself? I won’t be able to hide it from her. I’ll say one word, and she’ll be like, *What happened? Why do you sound like you’ve sucked down helium?*

If I don’t answer, she’ll stop by my house with dessert or a pan of lemon chicken and roast potatoes. I decide I better get something delicious out of telling her how I just made the worst mistake possible with my junior partner, and I swipe the call to voicemail.

Then I hurry after Bri, because she drove us over here. Because I have to make sure we’re okay before we get back to the seventeenth floor of our office building.

Because she *kissed me back*, and I want to know why she did that if she doesn’t want to “do this” with me.



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ABOUT DONNA



Donna Jeffries fell in love with the South on her first trip to Charleston. So setting her sweet romantic comedies among the amazing food, big ships, and vibrant city life seemed like a given. She writes sweet romcom with office grumps in her Southern Roots Romantic Comedy series, always with a side of funny pets.

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