

The
SWEETEST
Fix



NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLER

TESSA BAILEY

THE SWEETEST FIX



TESSA BAILEY

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Epilogue

CHAPTER 1



R Reese held the audience in the palm of her hand. There wasn't a single movement in the sea of silhouettes.

She didn't need a mental recitation of the counts because she'd been performing this routine since childhood. "All That Jazz" was engraved on her bones.

Hands up. Stretch. Make every movement of those fingers a meal. No wasted efforts.

She walked all five digits down her thigh like an elegant daddy longlegs spider, popping her left hip twice in quick succession. Bump. Bump.

Inhale.

Slow head roll.

There was a loud voice intruding in the back of her mind, peppered with static, but she ignored it and kept dancing, never breaking the spell she wove.

Toe ball heel, toe ball heel.

Step left. Cross it over. Turn.

She swayed those arms behind her, imaging them as peacock feathers, stopping on a dime to drop her knee, hips ticking like a clock, fingers snapping in time to the music. The grand finale was coming. It rose inside of her like the wings of a phoenix battling the north wind. Her emotions swelled along with it, tightening her throat muscles, excitement making her

next few moves even sharper. Two turns were executed flawlessly, the tempo of the music picking up. She threw her head back and watched her hands arc, left then right.

Here it came. The applause. She could sense the audience gearing up to deliver the standing ovation to her home run. They'd walked in off the street, but she'd transported them into her world of glitter and lights and femme fatales.

Inhale. Quick head turn.

Throwing those hands up in the air, she was a puppet for the higher purpose.

A vessel for the arts.

Again, that nasal voice droned somewhere in the distance, saying something about free coffee in the lobby, but nothing could stop Reese from completing the final drop of those jazz fingers. Or from paying homage to that final genius note. And she did, satisfaction coasting from the top of her head all the way down to the sore toes crammed into the vintage oxfords she'd worn to capture Roxy Hart.

Finally, reality trickled in slowly and Reese opened her eyes, her stomach dropping to find her audience was not on their feet. The single elderly lady who'd stayed for the entire performance was perched on the leather seat of her walker, cleaning a pair of readers with the hem of her puff painted sweatshirt.

Reese determinedly swallowed the rust in her throat and waved at the pre-owned cars on the dealership lot. "Thank you!" She swept downward into a bow. "Thank you."

"Thank you for coming to Cedarburg Chevrolet's February Sales Event. Once you're done browsing the lot, please feel free to come inside for a cup of free coffee. One again, the apple crumb cake is now gone. We apologize for any inconvenience this might have caused." There was a high-pitched whine of feedback, then a muffled, "No, we don't have any in the back, ma'am," before the loudspeaker cut out.

Reese gathered her purple, faux-fur collared coat and wrapped it around her shoulders to combat the wintery

Wisconsin wind, dropping her iPhone and connected speaker into the deep pocket and stomping her feet to keep the blood flowing.

She looked at the old lady.

The old lady stared back.

“Do you want me to wheel you inside?” Reese asked, blowing warm air into her hands.

“Yes.” The woman huddled into herself with a grumble. “The walkway was icy or I’d have been in there early enough to get the damn crumb cake.”

Reese circled around to the back of the walker and pushed it toward the lobby entrance, weariness settling into her shoulders. It was settling in faster and faster these days. Back in high school, it would take her hours to come down after a performance with her competitive dance team. Or after opening night of a high school musical. It hadn’t mattered where she performed or in front of whom—a real or imagined audience—only that she was performing.

Lately the glow started to fade almost immediately.

At twenty-one, her dreams of performing on Broadway were fading, too.

The people of Cedarburg, Wisconsin had spoken.

And they’d chosen Entenmann’s over Reese Stratton.

Even if she managed to scrape together enough money for a bus ticket to New York City for another audition, what made her think casting coordinators would feel any differently?

Reese used her hip to prop open the lobby door so she could push her unwilling audience of one inside, the warmth of the lobby sweeping around her ankles and thawing out her legs. She wheeled the woman to the coffee bar, which was teeming with more locals than the town pub at happy hour, and swept the showroom for the owner.

“Mister Mulcahey.” Reese plastered on her best smile, praying none of her lipstick had transferred to her teeth during the performance. “I’m all finished.”

Without looking up from his clipboard, he nodded.

Reese shifted in her oxfords. “About my payment...”

“See Cheryl at the front desk.”

“Will do! Thank you.”

Briskly, she turned on a heel, but the owner of the dealership stopped her progress. “Oh, uh, Miss Stratton.” He scratched behind his ear. “We don’t need you tomorrow.”

“Why? Tomorrow is Saturday. Is the sale ending early?”

He hurried to look back down at his clipboard. “No.”

“Oh.” She swallowed a handful of tacks. “Gotcha.”

Minutes later, Reese clutched the envelope containing a twenty-dollar bill to her chest and tried not to slip on the ice on the way to the station wagon she’d borrowed from her mother for the gig this morning. A bumper sticker affixed to the rear window read Dance Mom Taxi. To the right, there was another one that said Sorry, We’re Late for Dance. Directly above that one was Dance, Sleep, Repeat. All three of them were faded.

Reese threw herself into the driver’s side and started the engine. The radio came on full blast and she smacked it off, dropping her forehead to the steering wheel, watching her misty breath curl in front of the speedometers.

“If you stumble,” she whispered, squeezing her eyes closed, “make it part of the dance.”

On the drive home, she passed beneath a sign on Main Street heralding the 2021 Regional Dance Champions and their coach, Lorna Stratton.

Over the course of a decade, Reese’s mother, once a celebrated dancer in her own right, had led Cedarburg’s dance teams to regional victories—and even one state title. She was nothing short of a local legend. And although it riddled Reese with guilt to admit it, even silently to herself, Lorna was the last person she wanted to face right now, fresh from her mortification and holding twenty bucks. Walking proof that their dream for her hadn’t come to fruition.

Unfortunately, sneaking into the house wasn't a likely possibility when the engine of the station wagon announced her arrival like a freaking missile launcher. Reese winced at the drag of the gear shift and shut off the engine, pulling her coat tight around her body and exiting the car, looking left and right upon entering the kitchen. Creeping on the balls of her feet—

“Reese’s Pieces! At last, you are home!” Lorna twirled into the kitchen on a painted pink toe, her shirt tied up beneath her breasts, proudly displaying her stretch marks and a couple of tattoos circa the eighties.

Reese’s lips curled into an automatic smile. It couldn’t be helped. She adored her single mother-turned-dance coach superstar mother. Truly, she did. The woman’s energy, optimism and confidence were unmatched.

It was just really, really hard for Reese to be around her when disappointment hung over the kitchen like a raincloud, casting everything that was once so bright in shadows.

“How did the performance go?” Lorna asked, perching her chin on folded hands.

“Amazing.” Reese upped the wattage of her smile. “You couldn’t drag them away.”

From the free coffee.

“That’s my girl,” Lorna said, coming around the kitchen island.

No, strutting. Doing kind of a slow step-bounce, her lips folded inwardly.

It was how she walked when she had big news. Or a secret.

Or when she knew who’d gotten sent home from *The Bachelorette* and was trying not to spill the beans but couldn’t help being super smug about it.

“Mom. What is it?”

“Oh nothing.” She dropped into a plié, pulling something out into the open from behind her back. “Only that you got a letter from the contest.”

Reese's stomach dropped to the floor. "What contest?"

Which was a stupid question. A stalling tactic. She'd entered one contest and one contest only in the last year. Dance for Bexley.

Once a year, Bernard Bexley, famed Broadway choreographer and elusive New York City culture icon, chose five Broadway hopefuls to perform in his presence on the stage of the Bexley Theater. If they managed to impress the stoic luminary, he would green light them. In other words, he would make the appropriate calls to fast track the dancer to The Dream. Also known as a paying position in a Broadway ensemble cast. His assistance was invaluable.

The stuff of every dancer's fantasies, including Reese.

"It's probably a rejection," she said now. "Thousands of dancers submit. From all over the country."

"Don't think like that!" Lorna scolded, slapping the envelope into Reese's palm. "There's no reason he wouldn't pick you. That audition tape was transcendent."

"It was pretty great."

"Of course it was. I did the choreo and you slayed it."

Reese blew out a breath and kicked off her oxfords so she could dance around on the balls of her feet. "Okay. Oh, Jesus. I'm going to open it."

"Hold on. We need better lighting."

Her mother tapped the dimmer switch, considered, tapped it again. "Perfect. Go."

Reese slipped a finger beneath the envelope flap and paused. "Come on, Bexley." She ripped it open and drew out the letter, her insides curling up like the Wicked Witch's toes after the house got dropped on her head. Due to her utter anxiety, the lines were blurred for a moment before racing back together and clearing.

Dear Miss Stratton,
Congratulations.

We are pleased to inform you that Bernard Bexley will receive your three-minute audition at the Bexley Theater this year. Please read carefully and adhere to all Dance for Bexley Contest policies and procedures as written. There will be no makeups or schedule changes. If for any reason you cannot make your appointment on...

REESE DROPPED the letter and screamed.

Lorna echoed her, their faces inches apart.

“I’m in! I’m in!”

“Shut up! Holy crap!” They clung to each other, jumping up and down in tandem, their feet slapping down on the kitchen tile. “I can’t believe it. Thousands of people submit! From all over the country!”

Reese leaned away. “What was all that transcendent talk?”

“I meant it, but your odds were still horrible!”

“I know.” Tears blurred Reese’s vision. “Oh my God, I’m in, Mom. I’m going to dance in front of Bernard freaking Bexley.”

Her mother pulled a bottle of wine out of the cabinet, two glasses off the shelf. “When is the audition?” she asked, looking back over her shoulder.

Barely coherent, hands shaking, Reese stooped down and picked up the letter, savoring the opening line one more time before scanning for a date and...

Panic dropped like the steel blade of a guillotine.

“Oh my God.” She was already halfway up the stairs when the letter floated back to the ground. “It’s tomorrow!”

CHAPTER 2



No. This couldn't be happening.
This had to be a nightmare.

Reese stared at the locked door of the Bexley Theater in a nightmarish haze.

The unthinkable had happened. She'd missed her audition.

She'd...shown up late to the appointment to change her life.

To make her dreams come true.

How? How?

Reese turned and fell back against the door, staring out at the lively Theater District street, and absently wondered how so many people could move that fast without bumping into each other. How did they change directions at the very last second every single time?

These people probably never missed anything important.

They would have parachuted off their delayed flight, right down onto the stage. Or rented a car when a snowstorm had forced the plane to land in Pittsburgh, instead of trying to save cash by buying a bus ticket. Once the bus got a flat tire on the turnpike, they would have gotten out and ran, instead of sitting frozen in her seat, hoping for a miracle.

These New Yorkers definitely would know what to do now.

Whereas she was at a complete loss.

One did not simply miss an audition with Bexley. The man was rarely seen in public anymore, deigning to attend opening nights on occasion and without warning. He descended from his lofty Upper West Side perch once a year to entertain the dreams of five hopefuls before becoming unattainable once again. There was no phone number to call and reschedule. The acceptance note she'd received in the mail wasn't even on letterhead. No email address, no social media handles, nothing. Not to mention the rules were cut and dried.

Reese's phone buzzed in her purse and she pulled it out, shoving it right back in with a squeak when she saw it was her mother calling.

Oh God, what was she going to tell her?

Of course, she'd kept Lorna posted about the travel delays, but they'd hung up with the understanding that she would beg, borrow and steal to get there on time. If she'd only splurged and rented the car, she could have made it.

Numb down to her toes, Reese shouldered the royal blue duffel bag with her name embroidered on the side and walked blindly into the fray of humanity, Times Square flashing with moving advertisements and color in the distance. She hadn't eaten since scarfing down a bag of chips on the flight, but she wasn't sure she'd even consume food again, considering her stomach had turned into a crime scene. Sick. She was going to be sick.

I missed my last chance.

And might as well admit it. That's what this audition had been. She had no college degree or any other useful skill to fall back on. Since graduating high school, she'd been assisting her mother part time at the Cedar-Boogie Dance School, working night shifts at Dairy Queen. Using all of her spare money to attend dance classes in Milwaukee on her nights off. Appearing in community productions where she could as an ensemble dancer. Her plan since childhood had always been to see her name in lights. To succeed at the one and only thing she loved. On three separate occasions since high school,

she'd saved up enough money to travel to New York for open casting calls, but she'd never gotten a callback.

Was this a sign from the universe that it wasn't meant to be?

The next time Reese glanced up, she was in the thick of Times Square.

She slumped down on a stone pillar, bag in her lap, and watched the electronic stock market ticker tape fly left beneath a Calvin Klein billboard. And she tried to gather enough courage to take the phone back out of her purse and call her mother with the devastating news.

"Rough day, honey?"

Reese looked around for the source of the raspy voice, but none of the people currently zooming in both directions appeared to be speaking to her.

"Over here." Again, she looked, but there was no one paying her the least bit of attention. "The Pikachu, honey. I'm literally sitting right next to you."

"Oh." She shook herself, doing a quick once-over of the man leaned up against the neighboring pillar. Indeed, he was well over six feet, dressed like the bright yellow Pokémon character, with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth. "Er... hello."

"Don't feel bad for overlooking me," he said, taking a long drag. "In my experience, not getting excited by a grown man in a costume is a good sign you're a well-adjusted adult. We're more for the kids, you know? It's uncomfortable when grown-ups get excited over a Pikachu."

Reese ordered up a smile, though it felt nothing short of sickly. "Well. If you were SpongeBob, all bets would be off."

"Ouch. You really went there." He clucked his tongue. "There's a lot of competition between us yellow guys, you know."

"I sincerely apologize."

“Ah, I’m just fucking with you.” He offered her a yellow...paw? “I’m Link.”

“Reese.” She shook the cushioned felt. “And yes, you could say it’s been a rough day.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You sure? I’m dressed as Pikachu in Times Square.” He blew out a jet stream of cigarette smoke. “I’m the undisputed king of bad days.”

What would it hurt to unburden herself to this stranger at the crossroads of the world? There was virtually no chance that she would ever run into him again. Besides, she could see through the face hole of his costume that he was roughly nearing the end of his forties and the lines on his face gave him kind of a fatherly vibe. Or what she imagined might be one. At the very least, telling Link what happened would delay the phone call with her mother by a few minutes. “I missed my audition. It was a huge one, with the king of musical theater.” She swallowed, the reality of the situation washing over her again in a hot wave. “I had some...no, a lot of travel issues trying to get here with one day’s notice and it was my only chance. I can’t keep pretending I’m going to make it one day when that is becoming less likely by the minute.”

“Can’t you call and tell the king dude what happened? Plead your case?”

“No. The thing about dance is...there are zero excuses. It’s unforgiving—and getting in front of this guy in particular is like winning the lottery. I can’t ask them to let me win twice. In this world, you show up. You perform. No one cares about your reasons for failing, you know? You just failed.”

“So you’re just going to give up? Like that?”

She removed the rubber band from her long, dirty-blond hair and scrubbed at her scalp. “I don’t see it as giving up. I see it as being realistic.”

“No way.” He tossed down his cigarette and stubbed it out with the foot of his costume, which couldn’t possibly be safe,

but she didn't feel compelled to point it out. "Based on your accent, I'm guessing you're not from around here."

"Wisconsin."

"You got all the way to New York on a day's notice and you're just going to pack it up and go home to friggin' Wisconsin? At the first sign of an obstacle?" He gestured to himself. "Do you know how many guys I had to beat out to land Pikachu?"

"Um..."

"None. Are you serious? That was a joke, honey. Here's my point..." He shifted his stance. "When a door is closed in your face, you have to at least look for a side door. Or an emergency exit. Or a window. And try to get in."

"That sounds a lot like breaking and entering."

"That's exactly what it is—and I should know. Breaking and entering is why I have to battle Captain America and a Smurf every morning for sidewalk space."

Unbelievably, Reese had to fend off a laugh.

"There we go. Now you're coming back from the dead," he said, cuffing her lightly on the shoulder with his paw. "Don't take what I'm saying literally. What I mean is, you have to find another way to get in front of the man. It's easy to blow someone off over the phone, but face to face? Especially with a young kid like you? Not so easy."

The lack of sleep was definitely beginning to creep up on Reese if the Pikachu's words were carrying water. Where would she even begin trying to track down Bexley? In a city like this, he was a veritable needle in a haystack. Throw in the fact that he notoriously kept a low profile—

"Wait." Her spine snapped straight and she started leafing through her bag. "On the way here, I was reading an article about him in *Front and Center* and he has...a son? Yes, a son. He owns a bakery or something. There was a quip made about him refusing to follow in his father's footsteps..." She found the magazine and flipped to the dog-eared page. "Here it is. Bexley's son, Leo, owns a bakery on the Upper West Side

known for perfecting the classics.” She twisted her lips. “It doesn’t mention the name.”

“You have a phone, don’t you? Google it.”

“I will.” She fumbled for the device “I am. I really shouldn’t be doing this, tracking down Bexley’s son. It’s probably only going to piss him off.”

“Or he’ll respect your tenacity.”

“It’s not like he can blacklist me. I’ve never even been on the list in the first place. I mean, I really have nothing to lose at this point.”

“Now you’re thinking like a Times Square Pikachu.”

“The compliment of the century,” she muttered, making him laugh. “So what exactly am I doing here? Just breezing into the bakery and asking this stranger to give me an audience with his father? God, that’s so gross.”

“It won’t hurt to charm him a little.” He pinched his finger and thumb together. “Make him feel like a hero for helping you out.”

“That’s terrible advice. No. I’m going to walk in, be straightforward and hope for the best.” Her Google search yielded its results. “Okay, here it is.” She clicked on an article from *Time Out* titled “Whipping up Wonder on the UWS.” “Leo Bexley...ooh. It’s called The Cookie Jar. That’s pretty cute.” Reese stood and shouldered her bag. “I guess I better find somewhere to stay for the night first. Just in case it works out.”

They fist-bumped, knuckles to foam. “Break a leg, hon.”

“Thanks.” She shook her head. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this has been weird.”

“You’re welcome.”

A kid ran up asking for a picture and Link waved and turned away.

Reese looked down at the map on her phone, determining which way to walk and headed west, before cutting uptown at

a brisk pace. In order to book a hotel room for the night, she would have to dip into what she called her Victory Fund. The bank account she and her mother added to occasionally, in case her dreams came true and she needed to move to New York on a dime. There wasn't much saved, about enough to sublet a room for maybe a couple weeks before she started earning a paycheck.

But before she committed to that, she needed a miracle—and his name was Leo.

CHAPTER 3



Leo leaned an ear toward the swinging door separating the Cookie Jar's main floor from the back room where he did all of baking. It was creeping up on dinnertime, which usually led to a lull in customers, during which he would finally emerge from the back. At the moment, he could still hear unfamiliar voices, so he went back to piping white icing onto a red velvet cake, a deep groove of concentration between his brows.

Interacting with customers didn't scare him or make him nervous. At twenty-eight, Leo just wasn't one for small talk, especially since his tendency to let silences linger seemed to make people feel awkward. Why say something unless it was important or needed to be said?

Are you allergic to tree nuts?

Do you prefer milk chocolate or dark?

Those were pertinent questions.

Talking about the weather or politics didn't make a lot of sense to him when an acquaintance had been made for the sole purpose of consuming calories, so he tended to do a ton of sighing while people peddled extra fast to be polite.

A lot of time that nervous chattering led customers to the inevitable question. Do you sample everything you make? And then they would look twice at Leo and realize what a ridiculous question that was, their faces turning the color of the red velvet cake. Of course he sampled everything. It showed—and then some—on his six-foot-three frame.

By staying in the back, Leo figured, he was saving everyone a lot of trouble. His confections did all the communicating. And if his customers wanted a conversation to go along with their coffee and cake, Jackie and Tad more than made up for Leo's lack of verbal skills. Their voices were filtered through the door now, muffled, unmistakably cheerful. They'd said more words in the last five minutes than Leo had uttered in the last five weeks and never seemed to get exhausted. They were probably robots masquerading as humans, but they were a huge part of the reason customers returned to the Cookie Jar. Leo was smart enough to know he wouldn't be half as successful without them.

Hoping to drown out the background noise and finish the piping before heading home, Leo started to pop in one of his earbuds, Nick Cave's low rasp reaching out—

But he paused when he heard the tinkling of the bell out on the bakery floor and Jackie's called greeting...followed by a voice that brought his head up, the piping bag lowering to the metal decorating table. Her tone was pleasantly accented, husky, smooth and feminine. Like a mixture of warm butter and cinnamon. Leo's interactions with customers might be limited, but he was positive he'd never heard it before.

"Hello!" Jackie called. "What brings you to the Cookie Jar? Looking for a snack?"

"Well if I wasn't," murmured the voice, "the smell in here would have changed my mind. Do you sell this in a perfume?"

Jackie laughed. "Yes, but the trick is you have to walk through the doors to put it on. Once you leave, it'll cling for about an hour. Unless you're me and you work here eight hours a day. I can't get the smell off with a scrub brush."

A bright laugh. "Lucky you. Oh my God, everything looks amazing. Is that peppermint bark? After Christmas? You are doing the lord's work."

"I just sell the stuff. Leo makes it."

There was a short pause. "Oh, is he...the head baker or...?"

If there was ever an opening to pop his head through the swinging door and get a look at the girl who owned that interesting voice, now was the time. Normally he couldn't be remotely tempted to leave his baking haven in the back to do a meet and greet with a stranger.

Which is probably why Jackie said, "Actually, he's the owner. Comes in early to bake everything, then skedaddles."

"Ah."

Leo set down his piping bag slowly, wiping his floury hands down the front of his white apron. Was he considering going out to the front? For a girl? That behavior didn't track. He hadn't asked anyone on a date since culinary school, for a lot of the same reasons he stayed in the back of the bakery. He didn't know how to be entertaining. Or romantic. His associations with women now were more casual. Although he couldn't remember the last time he'd associated with someone. Maybe before Thanksgiving?

Last summer, on a particularly slow day at the Cookie Jar, Jackie and Tad had set him up a dating profile—Leo, baker, 28, UWS—and convinced him to meet a few women for dinner. On each one of the dates, he'd done a lot of listening, trying to keep up with the breakneck subject changes. And a lot of eating. Not a lot of connecting, though. And Jackie assured him, over and over again, that connecting was the end game. Not simply getting a look at the restaurant's dessert tray.

Bottom line, Leo was content to be alone with his ingredients. To avoid that look women gave him when the conversation ran out that said, what else you got? He understood there was a certain gratitude that was expected when a woman went out with him, considering he tested the seams of every dress shirt he owned and grunted as a form of communication, so he always asked them out again. Some of them even said yes, but he'd yet to find someone he could relax around. He'd been more than happy to give up on the endeavor.

"Actually," Jackie said on the other side of the door. "You're just in time to help me and Tad out with something."

“I’m Tad. Hey.”

“And I’m Jackie. Double hey.”

“Hey.” The Voice came closer. “What are you working on?”

“We’re brainstorming an idea for Valentine’s Day.”

“We could use an outside perspective,” Tad added. “You definitely fit the demo.”

“Do I?”

“In a roundabout way, yes,” Jack said. “Generally speaking, men are our main customer on Valentine’s Day. Buying something for their girlfriends. Usually chocolates.”

“Ahh...so you’re wondering what I’d like to receive? As a gift?”

“Bingo.”

Leo frowned at the door. How ridiculous that he didn’t like the idea of her having a boyfriend. The idiot probably wouldn’t know what the hell to pick out of the display case. Honestly, he didn’t want to hear her start a sentence with the words, “My boyfriend...”

So he cracked his neck once and pushed open the door, stepping out into the open.

“Leo!” Jackie exclaimed, with an edge to her tone, probably since she’d covered for him and then he turned her into a liar. But his employee’s subtle admonishment faded out like the final note of a song when he spotted the owner of The Voice.

The phrase “doe eyes” had never been more appropriate.

She blinked her big, brown ones at him from the other side of the counter and took a small step backward, her hands joining at her waist and wringing together.

“Hi,” she mouthed, no sound coming out, but he wasn’t sure she realized that.

In Leo's head, she'd been pretty. But he'd wildly miscalculated.

This girl was stunning. Not in a quiet way, either. Her long, dark blonde hair fell around a face that made his jugular tighten. Generous lips, a beauty mark perched on the right side. To say she was sexy wouldn't be enough.

And even through her leggings and purple coat, he could tell she was a dancer. He'd grown up around enough of them to know. This close to the Theater District, there was no chance he was wrong. Which meant that, even if he had a sliver of a chance with this girl, on the insane possibility that she was single, he couldn't go there.

"Uh...boss? You with us?" Tad prompted out of the side of his mouth.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry. I'm Leo."

Those magical lips of hers twitched. "Why would you be sorry about that?" She took two sweeping steps, toes out, toward the counter, confirming his suspicion that she was a dancer. "I'm Reese. Nice to meet you."

When she extended a hand, he swallowed and took it, incapable of reining in the static that crawled up his arm and warmed his shoulder. Reluctantly, he took his hand back, grunting in the general direction of his employees. "Don't let me interrupt."

They were looking at him and the dancer, Reese, like they'd just shot rainbows from their fingertips.

"Uh..." Jackie recovered first, clapping her hands together and jangling the gold bands of her bracelets against her deep brown skin. "Right. So...Reese. If you wouldn't mind helping us out..."

"I don't mind," Reese said, still looking at Leo, her brow puckered slightly.

He was staring right back. Probably with the same frown.

Couldn't seem to stop looking, despite the reminder she was a bad idea. He'd learned a long time ago that having

Bernard Bexley for a father made him deceptively attractive to dancers. It was extremely unlikely that she was here because of that relationship. It wasn't something that he advertised. Every so often, there was a mention of Leo in an article about his father, but it was usually buried at the end and lacking in important detail.

As soon as she found out who he was, though...

Well, he knew what happened next.

"What would be the ultimate bakery gift from a boyfriend for Valentine's Day?" Jackie asked the question, chin propped on her hands. "Do you mind me asking if you have a boyfriend?"

"Jackie," Leo muttered, finally managing to tear his eyes off the girl, pretending to reorganize one of the display cases.

"I don't. Have a boyfriend, I mean."

There went his gaze, zipping right back to her, relief curling in his chest.

"I'm not sure how this is going to make me sound, but... my perfect gift from a boyfriend on Valentine's Day would be something I could look cute eating."

"That narrows it down," Leo grumbled.

Reese flushed and ducked her head, looking up at him through her eyelashes. And he almost dropped a tray of blondies, his tongue feeling oddly thick in his mouth.

Never in his life had he accidentally blurted something.

Not talking enough was usually the problem.

What the hell was going on here?

"That's a really good point," Tad said, doing a pathetic job of pretending to clean the top of the counter. "So we're talking something that wouldn't get stuck in your teeth."

"Yes." Reese nodded once. "But also something that feels personal. You know what I mean? I don't want to get what everyone else is getting." She gave a wry twist of her lips.

“Wow, I am demanding. Maybe there’s a reason I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Jackie and Tad laughed.

Leo narrowed his eyes at her. Was she one of these people who made fun of themselves in order to receive compliments? The deepening flush of her skin and the renewed wringing of her hands said no. She almost seemed...nervous about something. An odd disposition for someone who probably performed in front of crowds. Who was this girl?

“What’s your perfect bite?”

Leo’s abrupt question startled her. See, this is what he meant about only asking the important questions. He wouldn’t know a segue if it bit him in the ass.

“My...perfect bite?” She dropped into first position and scanned the display case. “I’ve never thought about it.”

He had. At least four times since laying eyes on her.

She’d dropped right into a conversation with strangers as if she’d known them for years, hadn’t even flinched when they asked for her opinion, a left turn for the average person. And he liked her opinion, too. She didn’t give them an arbitrary answer just to make small talk. All those ingredients mixed together made her fun, smart, interesting so he could bet on a refined nut. A more complex palate of salty and sweet. Chocolate, thanks to her voice. It was like a ripple of melted ganache and he could hear her moaning after a bite of the good stuff.

Thinking of what else would make her moan, it became necessary to distract himself or tent the front of his apron. Sliding open the refrigerated case, he used a square of wax paper to take out a chocolate cherry bomb sprinkled with pieces of candied almond and slid it across the counter toward her. “Eat that.”

“Oh.” She came the remaining distance to the counter and picked up the cherry bomb, inspecting it from all sides. “That’s so funny. I was eyeing this.”

Leo nodded firmly, trying not to let it show how much that gratified him.

“Okay.” She shifted. “Here’s the thing about this one. It’s hard to tell if this is a two biter or a one biter. It’s right on the borderline. My instinct is to just pop it right in, but I could be risking chipmunk cheeks. Or I could go the safe route and split it up.”

He had the strangest urge to chuckle.

“Risk it, risk it,” Jackie and Tad chanted, pounding their fists on the counter.

“Okay. Here goes.” Reese tossed back her head and threw the cherry bomb into her mouth like she was taking a shot of tequila. Almost immediately, her eyes flew wide, her cheeks bulging out on either side. “Wrong call,” she slurred around a mouthful of chocolate.

Leo handed her a napkin and watched in amusement as she bent forward and waved her hands, as if that was going to help her swallow. “Am I going to have to Heimlich you?”

She straightened, visibly pulling herself together, though she kept a hand over her mouth when she spoke again. “That was incredible. You didn’t tell me there was a cherry inside. I was caught off guard by the gush, but it was perfect. Exactly what I’d cobble together if I could pick from a hundred different ingredients. How did you do that?”

“Leo has a gift,” Jackie explained. “He likes to convince people they’re wrong about what they prefer. It’s infuriating and inexplicable.”

Reese considered him, finally taking her hand away from her mouth to reveal not a trace of the cherry bomb she’d just eaten. “There’s something kind of eye-opening about it. Maybe I don’t know myself as well as I think, since I was going to settle on an éclair.” The girl gasped suddenly, transferring her attention back to Jackie. “I have it. The Valentine’s Day promotion of a lifetime. We all want something that shows the person we’ve been dating has been paying attention. That they know our taste. Right?”

“Right...” Jackie said thoughtfully. “Except some people, and I’m not generalizing, will be lucky to remember Valentine’s Day at all. Men. I’m talking about men.”

Tad screwed up his face. “I resent that.”

“Sure, you’re totally right,” continued Reese. “A lot of customers won’t know what their significant others wants, but with a few simple questions...”

“Leo will. Bravo,” Tad said, nodding in approval. “It’s a great idea.”

“Sure is,” Leo drawled. “For someone else.” That shocked a laugh out of Reese and the husky music of it almost robbed Leo of his train of thought. Swallowing hard, he dropped his attention from her mouth. “I can see this turning into customers asking for relationship advice. And it requires me to talk to a lot of people. I’d rather walk on Legos.”

“What if you do it online?” Reese suggested. “They can fill out a form...”

He grunted. “You’re pretty willing to sign me up for a lot of work.”

“It was just nice.” She gestured toward the cherry bombs. “Really nice. Having someone take the time to pinpoint what I like. People will love it. And even if it ends up being wrong and some dumb-dumb gives his boyfriend caramel when the dude hates caramel, at least it will prompt a conversation about likes and dislikes. It’s a win-win if you think about it.”

The way she said “caramel” with her Wisconsin accent was ridiculous.

He shouldn’t like it so much.

“Come on, Leo,” Jackie said. “It’s a great way to engage the public.”

“Maybe he’s not up to the task.” Reese sniffed, picking non-existent lint off her collar. “Maybe he got lucky with the cherry bomb.”

Tad and Jackie sucked in identical breaths.

“You think you could do better?” He swept an arm to indicate the display cases, and Jesus Christ, he was actually enjoying this. “Which would you choose for me?”

If his employees thought he couldn't see them nudging each other under the counter, they had another think coming.

After a moment of appearing startled, Reese straightened her spine and walked the length of the case, wheels turning behind her brown eyes. There was no way she was going to guess correctly. It just wasn't possible—

“Biscotti.” She brushed her hair back over her shoulder, nodding at the row of glass jars on top of the case. “Not the chocolate-dipped one. Just the regular, no frills kind.”

“She nailed it,” Tad whispered. “Holy shit.”

Leo echoed the sentiment in his head.

“Connection,” Jackie murmured, falling onto her elbows on the counter. “There it is.”

This whole thing, meeting this beautiful, interesting girl and finding himself pretty eager to know every damn thing about her, was happening too publicly, even if it was only two people watching. He was probably going to say the wrong thing or accidentally offend her and the last thing he needed was an audience. But letting her simply walk out of his bakery?

Yeah. He just couldn't let that happen.

Leo coughed into his fist, hoping his ears weren't as red as they felt. “Do you want to come in back and see my work station?”

Reese didn't seem to register the twin gasps from Jackie and Tad, the corners of her mouth lifting into a quiet smile. “Yes. I'd like that.”

CHAPTER 4



Reese Stratton was a sensible girl. Being a dancer had given her the gift of discipline. Taught her the value of routines.

The last day and a half were an anomaly.

Until this moment, following this great, big, gorgeous bear of a man into the back of his rustic, enchanting bakery, she'd never understood why routine and discipline were so important. Well, now she did. Without rules and schedules, one ended up taking the advice from a yellow cartoon character in Times Square and falling deeper and deeper into a scheme she never should have considered in the first place.

She should have walked in and come clean.

Told him everything. About her audition with Bernard, her travel fiasco, the dreams of dance glory she'd been entertaining since childhood.

She just...never expected the instant attraction.

When in real life does it ever happen? Leo Bexley had walked out in his apron, the top of his head nearly brushing the doorframe, and she'd gotten a zap of static in her fingertips. Followed by her toes and then inward. Straight to her belly button. And that was before he'd spoken in that hibernating-with-a-jar-of-honey voice and it resonated everywhere that counted.

As in, her vagina.

Dear sweet Jesus, the man was nothing like she'd expected. Bernard Bexley was known for his lean, wiry frame. His son had the polar opposite build. Less dancer, more... steer. His black hair was slightly unkempt, as if it had been shoved inside a baker's hat all day. His eyes were the most glorious shade of blue. And he was such a grump. Without apology. How refreshing! He didn't even bother trying to bolster a good attitude for her. A customer! At one point, she'd actually wondered if that no-trespassing frown meant he wanted her to leave.

Reese dated on occasion. Her most recent short-term relationship had been with an older brother of one of the dancers in Cedar-Boogie Dance School. She liked the theory of men, but it took a lot to inspire her to flirting. Is that what she'd been doing out there? Flirting?

Yes, definitely. There was no way to help it when he looked like he just wanted a snack and a belly scratch. She'd turned it on. To the point that she completely forgot why she'd come to the Cookie Jar in the first place.

You came here to charm him into helping you reschedule your audition.

Guilt thickened like syrup in her veins.

She should tell him everything before this—whatever it was—had a chance to get too far. But what if his surliness extended to girls who tried to use him to get to his father? Would this whole unexpected connection between them get slashed straight down the middle?

Reese was surprised to find how little she wanted that to happen. More of the frowning and ear blushing, please. Did she have to break the spell so soon?

Leo stopped walking abruptly and Reese ran straight into his ox-like back.

“Oof.”

“Christ.” He turned quickly to steady her, his huge hands wrapping around her biceps. “Sorry, I didn't think you were so close. I'm not used to people following me back here.”

“It’s okay,” she breathed, trying not to be obvious about ogling the size of his fingers.

So. So big.

Up close, she could see his irises were rimmed in black. Although the dark of his pupils was quickly obscuring most of the denim color. Dilating. Definitely looking pretty closely at her mouth. And on reflex she wet her lips, her belly hollowing when his grip flexed in response.

Crazy enough, if he kissed her right now, she would let him.

No. She’d kiss him back.

When had a guy ever affected her like this?

If one had come close, she couldn’t remember. Definitely never this fast.

“How did you know I prefer biscotti?”

This was another reason she already liked him. He didn’t stop to think whether or not the moment was appropriate for a question. Or how he should ask it. He was decisive and blunt. A person would probably never have to worry what he was thinking, and that kind of uncertainty had always been her problem with men in the past. Sure, they asked questions about her, but upon giving her answers, their eyes were almost translucent with boredom, as if they were watching a tiny football game inside their brains, drowning her out in the process.

Leo didn’t strike her as a man of many words. Far from it. Right now, though, she could see he was suspicious about her powers of deduction. Earlier, he’d been relieved to find out she didn’t have a boyfriend. He wasn’t hiding as much as he thought behind that scowl. She could read it just fine, and God, that was nice. Honest and comforting.

Although he probably wouldn’t take kindly to the reason she’d been led to guess biscotti. Basically, she’d imagined him as a bear with his paw stuck in a honey jar. Which led her to the glass display canisters—and boom. She’d known.

“Well.” She thought about reminding him that his hands were still wrapped around her arms, but stayed quiet, just in case the hint made him remove that touch. The tingle was too nice to mess with. “That cherry bomb didn’t look natural in your hand. Too dainty. You couldn’t get rid of it fast enough. So I got the hunch you do the fancy stuff for customers, but you’re into the classics. Big chocolate chip cookies. Black Forest cake. Staples of the bakery world.”

This man was making a visible effort to see into her brain. He made a sound that could only be described as a sexy garbage disposal.

“Then I thought, if you’re a baker, you’re probably up really early in the morning. The natural choice would be biscotti, right?” When the groove between his eyebrows only deepened, she bit back a smile. “Are you going to show me where the magic happens?”

Yup. Definitely flirting.

Definitely flirting with the guy she’d come to beg for assistance. It didn’t matter that one had nothing to do with the other, she was on borrowed time. But she really didn’t want to end this association so soon. Intuition told her that’s exactly what would happen.

Leo did a double-take when he realized his hands were still on her, dropping them away fast and scrubbing his palms on the chest of his apron. “What you said before, about getting up early, is true. But there’s another baker who gets here earlier to do the bread, croissants, quiche and pain au chocolat.” He stepped back, tipping his head toward the far end of the back room, where several racks and oversized ovens were located. “That’s his side. I get here around when he’s finishing up to start the pastries. I prep what I can the night before. That’s what I was doing when you got here.”

“Sorry to interrupt.”

His mouth twitched. “Your smile says otherwise.”

Reese pressed her hands to her cheeks. “Who wouldn’t smile at a spur-of-the-moment behind the scenes bakery tour?”

She turned in a circle, taking in the huge standing mixers, the deep fryer, the clipboards hanging on the walls, lettered in precise blocky handwriting that she surmised belonged to the man following her sound, hands clasped behind his back. “Here’s what I was working on.”

He opened up a door of an industrial fridge to reveal a wonderland of color. Reese didn’t know where to look first. At the rainbow of cake pops or Hershey kiss-sized meringues. The éclairs or...what were those? She pointed and looked at him in question.

“Those are butterscotch panna cotta. Ready for the after dinner crowd.”

“Butterscotch panna cotta,” she repeated, dazed. “I’ve never heard those three words together and that’s a crime.”

Leo shrugged a mountainous shoulder. “They’re no Black Forest cake.”

“Ha! I knew it.” His cheek did kind of jerky thing she interpreted as a smile and it caused a definite flip in her mid-section. This reaction to a guy was so incredibly out of the ordinary, she searched for a distraction that would give her time to recover. And found it just to his right, sitting on one of the metal tables. A red cake on a decorating stand, intricately piped on the side with white tulip outlines. “Who is that cake for?”

“No one,” he said, seeming caught off guard himself. “It’s a display for the front window. Valentine’s Day and all.”

“No one is going to eat it?”

“I usually leave it there for a day, then Jackie gives away free slices to customers.”

“You never give them away yourself?”

The very idea seemed to give him chills. “No. Why?”

“You’re not in this profession for the feedback? I always assumed people baked solely for the moment someone tastes their work. Eyes roll back in the head, inappropriate groaning. Etcetera.” She mimicked what the facial expression she was

referring to, hoping to get another smile out of him, but he only looked thoughtful. “What are you in it for, Leo?”

He crossed his brawny arms and considered, staring down at the cake. “The repetition. The routine and tradition. I like the feeling of waking up in the morning before everyone else and them knowing...that they can walk in here and be fed, no matter what. That someone else took care of that worry for them. I guess I like being a given.”

Warmth smeared across her chest like butter. It took her a moment to gather enough breath. She never could have expected that answer, but it fit him to a T. He didn’t come across like most guys in his twenties. There was a gravity and salt-of-the-earth quality to him and she was positive that in the future, when waking up early, she would think of him doing the same, knowing he wouldn’t deviate for love or money. “That’s really nice. Still, I hope you get a little feedback through the door once in a while. Or maybe scroll through the five-star Yelp reviews late at night when no one is watching.”

“I’ll deny that in a court of law.”

That warm butter sensation spread all the way to her belly. It caused Reese to speak more freely than she intended. Being in this man’s company was calming and stimulating, all at the same time. “My mom and I loved baking on the weekends when I was growing up, trying out recipes we watched people with actual talent make on television. We held a bake sale once a year to raise funds for her dance school and let me tell you, if there was no praise involved, we would have done a car wash instead.”

His left eye twitched. “Dance school.”

“Yes,” she said slowly, sensing his guard coming up. “She taught me everything I know.”

Leo sighed, uncrossing his arms to scrub at the back of his neck.

Whoa. Landmine.

She hadn’t even gotten to the bad part yet.

Go on. She'd landed on the perfect transition. Can you help me?

How hard could it be?

She'd come here for the purpose of getting another chance at Bexley. Just because she was experiencing an odd instant attraction to the famed choreographer's son didn't mean she could just drop her plan, forget the main reason she'd come to New York City in the first place. This was her only hope. The words wouldn't come out, though, remaining stuck like a peach pit in the center of her throat.

Because it was wrong. To use Leo that way. Even if he consented and agreed to throw her a life preserver in the form of a rescheduled audition, it would be awful. And there was something about his reaction to finding out she was a dancer that made Reese wonder if dancers were a hot button issue for him. His suddenly reserved body language hinted at the topic of dancing in general being a no-fly zone.

She ached to find out why.

Ached to know anything more about Leo, really.

But she'd screwed herself over by not being upfront. If she came clean about her ulterior motives now, the last magical fifteen minutes would be seen as an act, when they were anything but. Far from it, actually. She'd forgotten just about everything in the path of those blue eyes.

Guilt pressed down on Reese's shoulders, made worse by the fact that Leo was no longer looking her in the eye, a conflict waging in his expression. There was no choice but to leave and regroup. Think of another way to scrap her way onto a stage.

It wouldn't be through Leo.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, the sincerity of those words pulling a string taut in her chest. "I just realized I'm late for something."

With one last sweeping look at the gruff giant and his colorful, well-ordered baking paradise, Reese swept from the back room, pushing through the swinging door and walking at

a fast clip toward the exit of the bakery. Jackie and Tad were in the middle of helping customers, Reese saw in her periphery, and she threw them the friendliest wave she could muster under the circumstances. Was the pressure in her chest really coming from leaving this man she'd only just met? It didn't seem possible and yet, there was a sense of loss that grew stronger the closer she got to the stenciled glass door.

"Wait," Leo said, thundering out of the back room behind her. "Reese."

Her hand paused on the antique brass door handle, breath catching.

Don't turn around. Keep going.

But then his warmth reached her back. Not touching, just close. And his big hand landed on her shoulder, setting off a little explosion of giddiness in her belly. "I made it awkward, didn't I?" he said, quietly.

"What?" She had no choice but to turn around, her neck craning in order to look him in the eye. "No. You didn't. I just..."

She just what?

Came in here with self-serving intentions?

Ding ding ding.

God, she didn't want him to know that. Would hate for him to disregard her as a schemer. Even if this was their first and last meeting.

"I just, um..." She swallowed. "I have an early rehearsal."

"Oh." Some of the tension left his broad shoulders. "You're already cast."

Jesus. Why had she said that? It was an excuse she'd used seven hundred times to stave off unwanted attention from guys or at the end of a bad date. I have an early rehearsal. Goodnight. She'd neglected to consider that phrase might have a totally different meaning to the son of Broadway's most legendary choreographer.

Say whatever you need to say to get out of here.

“Yes. I’m a chorus line dancer in...” Might as well swing for the fences and name a hit show. What did it matter? She’d never see him again. That thought caused her stomach to flop over. “*Daliah’s Folly.*”

“Wow. That’s the hot show right now. Sounds like the last thing you need is help,” Leo muttered to himself, that hand squeezing her shoulder gently, almost in apology. “Look, I’m not good at this, but...”

He was going to ask her out.

If she let him get that far, she would say yes.

It would be unconscionable.

She’d already lied to him. Once in earnest, once in omission.

Turning him down would be impossible, though.

Panicked, Reese did the only thing she could think of to stop him. She shot up onto her toes and melded their mouths together. A tingle started at her lips and blew down through her limbs, turning her boneless against him. And Leo wasted no time returning the kiss, almost as if he’d read her intentions and prepared himself in a split second, his lips softening and parting slightly along with hers, their breath escaping into one another’s mouth, before they slanted in opposite directions, their tongues meeting briefly, hesitantly, then with more assurance.

Their moans were intimate, breathy, for their ears alone.

Their eyes met with twin wonder, closing again, mouths locking.

It was the single best kiss of her life.

And Leo was only getting started. His touch wound into the back of her hair, cupping the curve of her head, a shift of his fingers on her scalp bringing goose bumps up on her arms, legs, neck. She tipped her head back, letting Leo step farther into her space, her breasts flattening on his apron, the kiss beginning to border on desperate. If they were alone in the

back room, Reese was pretty sure her legs would be winding around his hips about now. No one had ever made her ache between her thighs so quickly and easily, the pulsations echoing in her temples.

Where was this going to end?

She was supposed to be gone by now.

This perfect kiss only hit home how much she'd messed up by lying.

It was Reese's frustration with herself that bullied her into ending the kiss.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, turning and booking it down the avenue, leaving a stunned Leo in the door of the Cookie Jar. When he called her name again, more hoarsely this time, she turned a corner and broke into a run. There. She'd done it. Whatever strange magic had taken place in the bakery, the spell was broken now. Over and done with.

She had no way of knowing the story was only beginning.

CHAPTER 5



Reese leaned against the outside wall of the Bexley Theater and plopped down on her duffel bag, elbows resting on her knees, head in hands.

It was Sunday morning, a mere fourteen hours since the kiss spun from gold. She'd just checked out of the cheap hotel room she'd booked for one night, hoping against hope that she could figure out her next move. She'd gotten away with a text message to her mother, explaining that Bernard Bexley would be posting his chosen ones this morning on the door of his theater. Which was a total scumbag lie and made Reese feel like a beast. Disappointing her one and only fan could wait one night, though, couldn't it?

She lifted her head and stared out across Forty-fourth Street. At the food vendors cranking open their umbrellas, locals walking their dogs while staring bleary-eyed at their phones, cleaning staff coming out of buildings and locking up. There would be matinees at all of the Broadway theaters today. Around two o'clock this afternoon, there would be lines winding around the corner of the block, people clutching their tickets, anticipating a show that would transport them to Cuba or Chicago or the Serengeti.

All she'd ever wanted in her life was to be part of that spell. Knocking people under and sending them back on the streets refreshed, affected by what they'd witnessed. But today she would get on a bus and go back to Wisconsin a failure. No, it was worse than that. She didn't even seize her chance to succeed or fail. She'd spend her whole life not knowing.

Sure, she'd come to New York and auditioned a few times, but dancers often went to hundreds of open calls before getting a break. She'd been so grateful for those few unforgettable chances, nonetheless. They were hard to come by without a lucrative job and a single mother who poured every dime she made into a mortgage and food. Still, she'd never had the opportunity to give her dream everything.

On the sidewalk outside of the Bexley, with the lights of Broadway beginning to turn on around her, giving up and going home didn't sit right.

There was that Victory Fund.

Some of the money in the untouched account was left over from a national yogurt commercial she'd done as a child, though she'd burned through the bulk of those earnings paying for dance classes over the last decade. The rest of the cash in the kitty had been earned by Lorna, day in and day out at Cedar-Boogie.

Rather importantly, the Victory Fund was supposed to be used only if she made it. To help her transition to living in New York City while waiting for that first, glorious paycheck. It could buy her a week, maybe a week and a half.

If she used it now—when she decidedly had not made it—the funds would afford her one last chance to go full throttle and catch the right casting director's eye. Wasn't this what she'd been training for her entire life? A real shot?

Indecision needled Reese in the side.

She might have won an audition with Bexley, but she couldn't even hold an audience at the car dealership. She'd never even made it to the second round of an audition in this city. Was she being selfish risking the money? Would using the money in her fund be a waste? If anything, the money should go back to her mother, the woman who'd earned it. There might not be a ton of cash in the account, but it would take a lot of pressure off the woman who'd done everything for Reese.

She supposed she could try and get a job. But where? She had no waitressing skills. Definitely no office experience. She taught little kids how to shuffle hop and pulled soft serve cones. By the time she found a job she was qualified for, she could be out of money. And anyway, having a job would prevent her from using the meager space of time to attend auditions.

With no solutions forthcoming, Reese did what she usually did in a moment of indecision. She called Lorna.

“Hello, my darling Reese’s Pieces,” Lorna answered slowly, expectantly. Reese could see her mother rocking side to side, toes digging into their old carpet. “Before you tell me if you were chosen by Bexley, I want you to know I’m proud of you, no matter what. Okay?”

Reese’s eyes slid shut, a pang catching her in the breastbone. “Thanks, Mom.” She blew out a breath, finding herself incapable of revealing the depth of her shame. Not even making the audition. It was too hard a pill to swallow herself, let alone ask her mother to share in the grief. “Mom, it’s, um...not going to happen with Bexley. I’m so sorry.”

“Okay!” Lorna said too quickly. “Hey, that’s okay, kiddo. Why would you be sorry? I’m sure you gave it every ounce of effort you had. Did you have fun? That’s what I want to know!”

The only fun she’d had in the last twenty-four hours was with Leo, but there was no point in thinking about that right now. “Mom, I was thinking...and you can say no, of course. Please say no, if it’s better for me to come home. I’ll understand. But—”

“You want to use the Victory Fund.” She could hear the smile in her mother’s voice. “I was kind of hoping you would say that. You’ve never really had a chance to dig in, Reese. You need time in New York. The cash won’t buy you much, but it’s yours. It’s been waiting for you.”

Reese tipped her head back and let out a long breath, relief cascading downward from the crown of her head to her toes. “Are you sure you’ll be okay teaching classes without me?”

Her mother's voice was warm. Reassuring. "I'm positive, kiddo. Go get 'em."

After hanging up the call with Lorna several minutes later, Reese took a moment to let the situation sink in. It was really happening. She had the gift of time, thanks to Lorna. Not a lot. But after the sacrifices her mother continued to make for the sake of Reese's dancing? She wouldn't let a single second go to waste.

Reese woke up her phone again and tapped open the site advertising short-term sublets she'd been browsing on and off all morning. As soon as the ads went up, they disappeared almost immediately, gone in the wave of competitive New York apartment seekers. Even single room rentals were out of her price range...

A new ad appeared at the top of the feed and Reese sat up straighter.

\$100/night. Midtown West.

Was that number a typo?

She could afford that. For a week. Two, even, if she was stingy with her food budget.

Holy shit. This chance was going to vanish in a heartbeat.

It might be early in the morning, but this city never slept. Especially on real estate.

Coming to her feet, Reese tapped the ad, her thumb hovering over the phone number that would connect her with the advertiser. Was she really doing this? Was she going to use her savings on what could be a pipe dream?

The Pikachu's words floated through her mind with startling accuracy.

You got all the way to New York on a day's notice and you're just going to pack it up and go home to friggin' Wisconsin? At the first sign of an obstacle?

No.

If she was the heroine in a musical, she would pull up her stockings, pick up the new edition of *Front and Center*, start circling open calls. She wouldn't let this setback be the end of her hopes and dreams. Doing so would plague her for the rest of her life.

Reese turned in a hoppy circle, then pressed the phone number, blanching when a brisk French-accented voice answered on the first ring. “*Oui*, hello. You are calling about the room?”

“Yes,” Reese breathed. “Am I the first?”

The woman hummed an affirmation. “I'll text the address to this number. When you get to the vestibule, ring the bell listed as LaRue. Sixth floor.”

Reese was already fumbling her duffel bag onto her shoulder. “I'm on my way.”

The line went dead. She paced until her screen lit up with a text.

560 11th Avenue.

Wheels were in motion. This was really happening.

Okay, Reese definitely wasn't the only one who was calling about this room for rent. Most rooms in the city went for double that per night or more, especially in this part of town. Now that the decision to stay in New York had been made, she couldn't leave anything up to chance. So she ran. All the way up Forty-fourth, hooking left on Eleventh—and it wasn't lost on Reese that she'd done more cardio trying to make appointments and escaping Leo than she'd done in a month.

At the reminder of the old-souled pastry chef, Reese stumbled a little bit on the sidewalk.

It was far from the first time she'd thought of him since last night.

In fact, it was more like an every-five-minutes affair.

Was he still wondering about the girl who'd ghosted him in the door of his own bakery? Or had he already written the whole meeting off as a passing oddity?

If she actually managed to score this room, there was very little chance she'd ever run into him again. She had no idea where he lived, but she had to imagine he lived on the Upper West Side, as well, since he spent most of his waking hours at the Cookie Jar, right?

God, she was putting way too much thought into something and someone who could not matter to her. Putting Leo and the insanely perfect kiss they'd shared out of her mind was for the best. If she was going to make this itty-bitty window of time in New York count, she needed to put all of her energy and drive into dancing.

Reese skidded to a stop outside of a high rise. She double-checked the address twice, then launched herself into the vestibule, running her index finger down the panel of names until she reached LaRue, hitting the bell and taking her first full breath in seemingly ten minutes. Please let the room still be there.

The door let out a high-pitched beep and she jogged inside, taking the elevator to the sixth floor, stopping in front of the apartment door and squaring her shoulders.

There is nothing a winning smile can't make better, said her mother's voice in her head. If your face is in the game, your head will eventually follow.

The peephole darkened, followed by the turning of three locks and finally the door was opened to reveal the most graceful-looking woman Reese had ever seen. Her hair was in a tight bun on top of her head, her mouth in a thin, straight line. She reminded Reese of a mannequin, her features seemingly made of marble.

"I am Marie LaRue. You are..."

She widened her smile, holding her hand out for a shake. "Reese Stratton."

Marie didn't spare her gesture a glance. "You can pay up front?"

Taking her hand back awkwardly, Reese nodded.

It was impossible to ignore the fact that her potential new landlady had the unmistakable posture of a dancer. That theory only furthered itself when the woman stepped back and waved Reese inside, her fingers carrying and unfurling slowly in the air like a principal dancer reaching out to caress her love interest's face.

"I am having breakfast, so give yourself a tour. Your room, if you find it acceptable, is the second door on the left side of the hallway."

With that, Miss LaRue took herself back out to the balcony overlooking Eleventh Avenue, where an espresso cup and a croissant was balanced on the metal railing. When the croissant made her think of Leo, Reese rubbed at the lump in her throat and went to check out the room.

From the entrance, the apartment looked small. But stepping inside, she could see that it was actually huge. The kitchen and balcony were to the right, a massive living room connecting to a hallway with five doors. Holding her duffel bag to her chest, Reese made a beeline for the room that had been indicated, her mind conjuring up a small but respectable space that made up for its lack of room square footage with a view of the avenue.

That's not what she got.

"This is a closet," she whispered to herself, staring at the upright coffin in front of her.

Turning, she counted the doors again. Maybe she'd made a mistake?

Behind her, a door opened and slammed shut, hurtling Reese's heart up into her mouth. "Jesus," she breathed, whipping around and throwing herself backward against the hallway wall, coming face to face with another girl, her expression amused. "I didn't know there was anyone else home."

“Sorry about that,” the girl said casually, removing one of her AirPods. “You renting the other room? Damn. LaRue works fast. The other tenant only left this morning.”

Reese split a horrified glance between the newcomer and the closet. “Sorry, can this even be referred to as a room?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, right?” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “I have an extra beanbag chair if you want it.”

Reese blinked.

Chuckling, the girl extended her hand. “I’m Cori. You’re a dancer?”

“Yeah.”

Cori nodded, giving her a perfunctory once-over, popping her headphone back in. “I guess I’ll see you at auditions, then.”

“Wait,” Reese blurted, before she could leave. “Is this... legal?”

Her apparent new roommate laughed. “I don’t know. My room is just as small, if it makes you feel any better. Maybe even smaller.” She hesitated, then turned to face Reese more fully. “LaRue doesn’t volunteer a lot of information, but over the last two months, I’ve cobbled together the gist. She’s a former dancer. Might be on the militant side, but she could probably rent these shoe boxes out for even more.” Cori appeared a little thoughtful. “It’s her way of giving us a shot, even if she probably wouldn’t admit it.”

“Right.” Reese took in a breath and let it out. “Well, it’s not like I have a lot of options. None, to be exact.”

“You’re like, new-new in town, huh?” Cori asked, a hint of a smile tilting the corner of her mouth. “You need help finding open calls, or...”

“No, thanks.” Reese gave her a grateful look. “I’ve got that much covered.”

“What about the free classes?”

Reese did a double-take. “The what?”

“Oh boy.” Cori clapped her hands twice. “Get changed, new girl. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 6



*R*isk-taking simply wasn't in Leo's blood.

He didn't give a new creation a spot in the display case until it had been perfected, taste tested and even after that quality control, he still allowed himself a week to change his mind.

But there was no changing his mind about that kiss.

About that girl.

Reese.

That's how he found himself in the Theater District on a Tuesday afternoon, fresh from his shift, nursing a cup of cold coffee. Just, what? Hoping to run into her?

As usual, he'd screwed the pooch by clamming up on Saturday night, giving her time to second-guess giving him the time of day. He'd made that mistake several times before, but this time...it really felt like it mattered. Not just seeing her again—and the need was growing more urgent by the moment—but he didn't want Reese's opinion of him to be negative. Usually, when women backed off, his chief emotion was gratitude. At least he could say he'd tried and now he could go back to flour, sugar, eggs.

Things he understood.

This morning, he'd burned two cakes and a batch of his butterscotch panna cotta because he'd been trying to find Reese on social media without the use of her last name. That left him one option. Pacing the sidewalk outside of her theater

where *Daliah's Folly* was in its second run in the wake of critical acclaim. By the time she'd shared that nugget of information with him Saturday night, he'd already been kicking himself for his hesitation to ask her out.

Reese didn't seem to need his connections, she was killing it on her own.

All right, there was always a chance that even the most successful dancer could benefit from having an in with Bernard Bexley, but Reese's success took that possibility almost down to nothing. Not to mention, his gut told him she wouldn't do something like that.

Not like—

A storm of male and female voices derailed his train of thought. There was no other way to describe it. A lot of energized people were speaking excitedly at the same time, a door slamming somewhere in their vicinity. He'd been pacing in front of the *Daliah's Folly* theater, but he stopped short now and turned to find a stampede of dancers breezing in his direction, sweat soaking their shirts, jackets hanging loose from their shoulders, bags in hand.

Even as he sidestepped out of their path, he couldn't help searching their numbers for Reese. Thousands of dancers and actors came and went from this spot every day. How often had he witnessed that singular parade while standing at his father's side growing up? It was a long shot that he would find Reese among their ranks. Still he looked, time grinding into slow motion when a toss of dirty-blond hair revealed the face that had remained in his mind's eye long after he'd managed to fall asleep the last three nights.

"Reese."

In a scene from his worst nightmares, the entire pack of dancers stopped and wheeled around to face him, eyebrows in the air. Not surprising, since his intention had been to call her name, but instead it had come out sounding like a barking Doberman.

The girl he'd come to this part of town—which he typically avoided—to find, was the last to turn, her face pale in the winter afternoon light, a bright purple coat wrapped around her upper half. “I...Leo. Hi.” She shook her herself. “Hi.”

Someone whispered his last name and a ripple of gasps passed through the group.

He ignored the sudden, unwanted scrutiny and focused on Reese.

Oh Jesus, she was pretty. Way, way out of his league. Did he imagine that kiss?

She stepped out into the open and it became the greatest challenge of his lifetime to not stare at her legs, exposed almost completely in a very small pair of shorts. It was February in New York. Was she trying to catch hypothermia?

“What are you doing here?” Reese prompted in a murmur.

Heads swiveled in every direction eagerly looking for his father. They wouldn't find him. It wasn't that Leo had a bad relationship with Bernard. They just didn't have a lot in common. Fine, nothing. They had zero common interests. Bernard was forever watching his diet, as did most dancers, so he'd decreed early on to Leo that it was “dangerous” for him to visit the Cookie Jar. Dancing was the world to Leo's father. When they saw one another at holidays or for an occasional drink, the visit would usually start out pretty great. They'd catch up on family business and current events. Until the conversation inevitably fell flat. Bernard didn't know how to interact with someone who wasn't singing his praises and Leo didn't know how to sing them.

“What is a Bexley doing in the Theater District?” someone asked from behind Reese. “You didn't really just ask that. His father practically built this block.”

A male dancer in leg warmers craned his neck over Reese's shoulder. “He wouldn't happen to be around, would he?”

Color built in Reese's cheeks, her expression seemingly troubled.

“No, I’m alone,” Leo answered, not surprised when everyone’s shoulders slumped. “I thought we could talk, if you’re free,” he said to Reese.

A beat passed, Reese pulled her coat tighter around her body. “Sure.” She turned slightly and met the eyes of another dancer in a BTS sweatshirt. “See you at home?”

“Oh yes.” The girl moseyed on, along with the rest of the pack, who thankfully were no longer interested. “Expect questions.”

“Sorry about that,” Reese said after a moment, ducking her head. “So you’re a Bexley.”

He grunted. “Bernard is my father.”

She stared off down the block. “I see.”

Tourists were bottlenecking around them on the sidewalk so he took her elbow gently, pulling her into the relative privacy just outside the theater doors. “Are you coming from rehearsal?” he asked, stooping down a little to catch her eye. The other night, they’d barely been able to unlock their gazes for a second. Now she seemed to be avoiding it.

“A class, actually. A dancer never stops learning.” She wet her lips. “But I guess you know that, don’t you?”

“Not really. I was raised around this world. Not in it.” He lost the battle he’d been waging with his self-control not to look at her legs. Christ. Long and toned and smooth. No doubt about it, she belonged on stage. *Focus, pervert.* “You ran off on me Saturday night.”

She winced. “I know, I—”

“It was my fault. I had a hunch you were a dancer and when you confirmed it...look, I really shouldn’t have judged you like that.”

Reese’s attention drifted to her group of friends who’d reached the end of the avenue. “I can see why you would.”

Surprisingly, the simplicity and understanding of that statement made him want to tell her more, to explain his wariness of dancers in greater detail, but wouldn’t that be

coming on too strong? And when had that ever been a worry for him before? It was probably better to keep his skeletons in the closet, since her interest—had he imagined it?—seemed to have waned.

Hell, he was already here in Times Square standing outside of the theater where she performed. Why try and play it safe now? Besides, that same cool balm was spreading in his chest, just like the last time he'd been around Reese. The fear of saying the wrong thing wasn't as prevalent as usual. Was it the understanding in those brown eyes or the way she seemed to lean into the silences, like he did?

“I had a friend a long time ago—I'm talking high school. Senior year.” He tossed his coffee in a nearby garbage can to give his hands something to do, then sank them into the pockets of his jeans. “My parents sent me to a performing arts high school, which is kind of like sending a bodybuilder to ballet class, but they were donors and knew the faculty. Anyway obviously I didn't fit in. I had friends, but when they were in dance class or singing lessons, I would be baking, and we just...we'd drift after a while. But I had one friend, in particular...Tate. He kept showing up, no matter how many times I blew him off. One afternoon, I walked in and he was passing his headshot to Bernard. Pitching him, essentially. Maybe I should have realized he wanted to earn points with my father, but I didn't know what to look for—”

“Wait, wait.” She placed her hand on the crook of his elbow. “Are you talking about Tate Dillinger? Tony award winner?”

Leo gave a nod. “That would be him.”

“Wow.” Her lids dropped. “I'm sorry.”

“I didn't tell you so you'd feel bad, Reese. Just wanted you to know why I, uh...might have acted like a jackass Saturday night. I've been running every interaction with performers through a certain lens for a long time—”

“You don't have to apologize,” she interrupted, looking almost pained. “Please, don't.”

“I liked kissing you.”

A breath puffed out of her. “Oh.”

“I’d like to do it again.”

Her expression was nothing short of astonished, but he didn’t miss the way her eyes dropped to his mouth and heated. “Is that why you’re here? To kiss me?”

“I’m here to ask you out.” His voice had fallen several octaves. “But if you’re offering...”

“I don’t know if this is a good idea.” She hugged her elbows. “It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s not that I don’t find you crazy attractive—”

“You have weird taste, but go on.”

A laugh shot out of her, warming him. “I just...I promised myself I would put one hundred percent of my drive and focus into dancing. It’s a recent promise and breaking it already would make me pretty wishy-washy.”

Shit. She might really say no. And he’d have no choice but to respect that. But a man just didn’t give up easily on a girl who inspired him to take the train to Times Square on a Tuesday afternoon. A girl whose mouth had spawned hours of fantasies to derail a routine that never, ever deviated. They’d spent less than an hour in each other’s presence, yet he could already tell that if they parted ways now, he’d be thinking of her for a really long time.

“Far be it from me to hit you with a guilt trip, but...”

He was caught off guard when her arms dropped slowly, her throat working with a swallow. “What? I should feel guilty for what?”

“For coming to my bakery and leaving me with a week’s worth of work.” Leo took his phone out of his pocket, waving it. “Jackie implemented your idea on the website. We’ve had two hundred entries for personalized cake pops in twenty-four hours. We’re calling it the Sweetest Fix.”

Reese’s mouth fell open. “Are you serious? That is incredible!”

“Maybe for you, sweetheart. I have to carry the work load.”

She seemed to chew over the endearment, a smile lifting one side of her mouth. “I’m very contrite.”

Leo snorted. “Oh yeah, I can tell.”

She toed the sidewalk with the tip of her sneaker. “So you’re leveraging this into getting me to agree to a date?”

“Someone has to help me come up with the perfect bite for these pathetic souls. Besides me, you’re the only one I know with an aptitude for it.”

“You want my help?”

“It would cut my work load in half.”

“And you might get to kiss me again.” The flirtatious sparkle from Saturday night was finally back in her eye. He was so relieved, he had to concentrate on filling his lungs. “Do I have that about right?”

“I’d be lying if I said that didn’t cross my mind eight hundred times.”

“Since Saturday?”

“Since we’ve been standing here.”

“That’s a lot,” she murmured sweetly, before visibly shaking herself. “Still, I-I’m trying to channel all of my energy into my reason for being in the city, you know? I have to eat, sleep and breathe dancing to be competitive.” She tucked a few strands of dirty-blond hair behind her ear. “As much as I like you, I just...I can’t say yes.”

A weight dropped in his stomach. “All right, Reese. That’s fair.”

Knowing when he’d pushed his luck far enough, Leo gave her one last look and backed away. He could understand her reasons. Hadn’t he been shutting out everything and everyone in favor of pastries since opening the Cookie Jar four years ago?

Still. Damn, this sucked.

How long was it going to take the funny feeling in his jugular to go away?

Reluctantly, Leo started to turn, as difficult as it was when Reese was still staring after him with her shoulders drooped—and he almost ran smack into a man walking in the opposite direction. “Leo?”

He reared back. “Minh,” he said, fondness rolling through him, despite the apple core stuck in his throat. “Hey, man.”

Minh, one of the building managers who’d been working at his father’s theater since Leo was in grade school, used his hip to balance the heavy bag in his arms. “Where’ve you been? I haven’t seen you around the theater in a minute.”

“Busy with the bakery.” He glanced back to find Reese still hesitating outside the theater. “Where are you headed with that bag?” Leo asked, facing Minh again. “Need a hand?”

“I wouldn’t turn it down.” Without a hint of warning, Minh heaved the bag into Leo’s arms and mopped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his sweater. “You always liked feeding the pigeons on the roof of the Bexley, right? That’s where I’m headed.”

“Sure.”

He wasn’t positive what made him turn around and try one last time with Reese. She had every right to turn him down. But he had the unmistakable gut feeling that she wanted to say yes and something was holding her back. Why else was she still standing there looking like her puppy had just run away? He didn’t like seeing her like that. Not at all. Was there some other reason, besides her commitment to dance that was keeping her from saying yes?

“Want to come, Reese?” Leo asked.

“Me?” She pressed a graceful dancer’s hand between her breasts. “The roof of the Bexley? No. I’m...I have an appointment this afternoon and I have to change...”

Leo swallowed hard. Grunted.

“Um. Are you sure?” Minh hopped in cajolingly, as quick a study as Leo remembered. “It’s only one block south. You can see every theater in the neighborhood from up there.”

Her expression turned dreamlike. “I really shouldn’t.”

“This bag of bird seed is pretty heavy,” Leo said, feigning difficulty. “I could use some extra muscle.”

A laugh bubbled out of her. “You filthy liar.” Squeezing her eyes shut, she hopped back and forth on her feet. “All right, you win,” she blurted, finally. “Five minutes.”

The pressure in Leo’s chest cleared like post-storm clouds.

So this was what it felt like to win the lottery.

CHAPTER 7



Dammit. Why did she have to like this guy so much?

Sometimes she wondered if members of the opposite sex were allergic to making an effort. When she dated the older brother of one of her dance students for a little over three months, being texted more than once in a day was almost an imposition for him. Likewise with the men who'd taken her out on dates, but never made it to relationship level. She likened those dates to tap dancing, trying to keep an audience's fleeting attention. And it was never worth the effort, so she ended up happily dating herself again in no time.

Leo showing up and asking her on a date resonated.

Not only that, he hadn't balked at being scrutinized by a dozen performers. The intimidation factor had been high. He'd simply zeroed in on her. Told her he'd liked their kiss. Risked rejection—and didn't get butt hurt when she said no.

Leo Bexley, gruff gentleman baker, had character.

As they took a service elevator up to the roof, Minh cheerfully reciting a brief history of the landmark building, Leo holding the bag of birdseed in a bear hug, Reese desperately tried to justify spending more time with him. On Saturday night, she'd forced herself to make a clean break. It was the right thing to do.

Being around him was like a breath of chocolate-scented air, though. His smile made feathers flutter from throat to belly, toes wiggling in her shoes. She wasn't lying about finding him crazy attractive, either. Her attention kept

traveling to his massive hands, her apparently shameless mind wondering what they would feel like cradling her hips.

Or fisting her hair.

Reese coughed a little too forcefully into her elbow. Leo winked at her, as if he knew exactly which images her mind was conjuring up and they shared a slow smile.

Oh God, she was doomed.

The doors of the elevator rolled open so suddenly, Reese sucked in a breath. And she never got that breath back, because the view that greeted her was the stuff of dreams. Hands clapped over her mouth, she preceded the men onto the concrete roof of the Bexley Theater, dropping the dance bag from her shoulder, her eyes tracing the lights and jagged edges of Manhattan.

In the scheme of New York City, they weren't that high up, only about eight stories or so, but it was enough to see the constantly changing screens in Times Square, billboards, flashing lights, pedestrian traffic weaving together below, the Hudson in the distance, the marquees of several other theaters proclaiming their resident shows as Tony award winners or featuring famous actors.

Three days ago, she'd felt like gum on the sidewalk of this city, but in that moment, she was reminded why the work was worth the exhaustion. Looking out over the small section of the island that made up the landscape of her fantasies, her determination to make it on her own, of her own merit—as unlikely as that might be in the two weeks afforded her by the Victory Fund—was renewed.

“What do you think?” Leo asked, setting down the bag of bird seed behind her. “Was it worth putting up with me for another five minutes?”

“Oh, easily.” She took a deep breath and let it out, grateful the February wind dried the moisture in her eyes. Once all trace of her waterworks had gone, she turned around to find two pigeon lofts on the far end of the roof, the frame made of painted green metal, the front crafted out of wiry mesh. There

was a little welcome sign fashioned above the pigeon-sized slot where the birds could come and go at will. “Wow. This is not what I pictured.”

Minh poked his finger through the wire, petting the neck of one the pigeons. There were at least four dozen and more on the way, now that feeding time was imminent. “What were you expecting?” asked the building manager with a curious smile.

“I thought you were going to kind of...” Reese wiggled her fingers at floor. “Scatter it.”

“Floor feeding? Not for my babies,” Minh crooned, gesturing at Leo to pick the feed bag back up. “Come on, man. Can’t you see they’re starving?”

“Sorry.” Reese and Leo traded an amused wince—and then she promptly grew distracted by the ripple of back muscles that took place when Leo held the bag aloft, pouring seed through the slot at the front of each loft.

“So, um—” She stopped, clearing the throaty purr from her tone. *Lord. Get yourself together.* “Have you spent a lot of time among the pigeons?”

“Enough,” Leo said, shaking a little more feed into the slot and setting the bag down at his feet. “I used to come here after school to wait for my father to finish working so we could go home. Around the time I started hearing eight-counts in my sleep, Minh had pity on me. Brought me up to the roof and introduced me to the crew. I started feeding the pigeons, instead of watching rehearsals.” Leo shot her a wry look. “You hate me a little bit for that, don’t you?”

She pinched her index finger and thumb together. “Just a smidge.”

His chest rumbled.

Unable to shake her smile, Reese leaned back against the perimeter wall of the roof and let out a gusty sigh. “This feels like a scene from *Rent*. I’m a long way from Cedarburg, Wisconsin.”

“Should I pretend I didn’t already nail you for Wisconsin with that accent?”

“How soon could you tell?”

“Before I walked into the front of the bakery.”

Her gasp was exaggerated. “And you picked a cherry bomb over the cheese Danish?”

“Come on, now. That would have been a little on the nose.”

Reese wasn’t aware of how long they smiled at each other. Not until Minh cleared his throat and broke the spell. “Lock up for me, would you, Leo? We have a concessions shipment arriving and I need to let them in.”

“Will do,” Leo said, without taking his eyes off Reese.

A moment later, the elevator doors slapped shut and they were alone on the roof.

Leo stuck his hands in his pockets and sauntered toward her, taking a spot beside her at the edge of the roof. “So. You’re a long way from home. How long have you been in the city?”

Her smile wavered, the reminder of her lies of omission twisting bolts on the sides of her throat. “Oh, not long.” She turned and propped her arms on the wall, looking out over the city blocks. “I wish my mother could see this.”

“You said she owns a dancing school. Was she your teacher?”

“When I was little, yes. Around age ten, she thought I needed something a little more advanced.” She gave him a prim look. “It paid off, too, don’t you know? You might remember me from a certain national Red Rover Yogurt commercial.”

He turned slightly, squinting an eye at her. “Wait a minute. No way.”

Reese pushed off the wall and performed the soft shoe routine she’d done thousands of times—mostly as a party trick

—since the age of eleven. “No preservatives or chemicals, we’ve got your all-natural meals,” she sang, “Choose Red Rover products and kick up your heels.”

“Holy shit.” He stared at her, dumbfounded. “The audacity of me to ask out a celebrity.”

“Please.” She fluffed her hair. “I put my pants on one leg at a time like everyone else.”

They seemed to gravitate toward each other naturally, as if there was no other option, until their faces were a handful of inches apart. “How about those shorts?” he said gruffly. “You get those on the same way?”

A hot, fizzy stream of awareness circled and danced in her midsection. This was flirting. But not the kind she was used to. Where she worried about every line out of her mouth, worrying they would come across too desperate. Or if the guy would think she was funny. No, it was easy as breathing to pull back the edge of her coat, drawing his attention downward. “What? These old things?”

“Yeah.” A muscle ticked in his cheek. “Those.”

She leaned in like they were sharing a secret and watched his eyes darken. “I have to wiggle around a little to get these on.”

They exhaled into each other’s space, not bothering to hide the fact that both of them were breathing faster. “Damn, Reese.”

There was a wealth of meaning in those two words. Not just, damn, you look good in those shorts. But damn, this attraction between them was not typical. “I know,” she said in a rush, their mouths almost touching. She wasn’t sure what made her pull away before he could close the distance for a kiss. Maybe it was to gather her wits or a tug from her conscience. But she took a long pull of February air to perform maintenance on her short-circuiting brain. “So, um...” She resisted the urge to fan herself. “How long have you owned the bakery?”

With his own centering breath, Leo slowly settled back in a safe distance away. “Four years,” he said, voice gravelly. “Took me a while after culinary school to build the capital and find the right people. The right place. Didn’t want to rush it.”

“Capital?” Her question hung in the air for several seconds before she realized what a stupid assumption she’d made. “Forget I said that. I just...I thought with your father being who he is...”

“That I would have an automatic investor?” He shrugged a shoulder. “Natural to assume that. Don’t worry about it.” There was an assessing glance in her direction, as if he wasn’t sure whether to say more. She held her breath, hoping he would. “I guess it didn’t feel right taking money for something he doesn’t have a real interest in. Baking. I’m not saying he’s unsupportive. We’re just about different things. Felt better doing it on my own.”

“That’s admirable.” She wanted to tell him how much she could relate. Currently. Trying to grasp something that felt just within reach, refusing any shortcuts. How it could feel scary and unfair one minute, rewarding the next. “And I guess you found the right people. Jackie and Tad.”

Warmth moved in his expression. “Yeah. Tad was actually an usher downstairs when I met him. We interviewed Jackie together. She’d just dropped out of nursing school because the emotional toll was more than she expected.”

“So she went for the exact opposite.”

“Only for a while. I doubt she’ll be at the Cookie Jar forever. But I’ll be glad to have her as long as she puts up with my grumpy ass.”

“You’re not coming across as grumpy as you did Saturday night.”

“That’s because I’m trying to charm you into going out with me. Is it working?”

Her laugh drifted out over the rooftops. “Maybe. How long until the grump returns?”

“I skipped lunch. So...imminently.”

God, she couldn't remember smiling this much when it wasn't for the sake of a performance. The conversation was light and carefree, but there was a weight in her belly that continued to pull down, down, with every word. Like her body knew they might be skimming along the surface of the getting to know you phase, but it was headed somewhere else. Somewhere deeper. And once again, their bodies seem to magnetize and draw them together until Reese's hip met the outside of Leo's thigh.

When his arm slowly draped across her shoulders and eased her close, tucking her into his side, Reese's eyelids fluttered. Oh, this. This was the place to be. Warmth wrapped around her bones, the scent of powdered sugar and cinnamon filling her nose. He was like a walking cup of hot chocolate by the fire.

"That's nice," she sighed wistfully into his shoulder.

His chest rumble was even better up close.

They stayed that way for a few minutes, content in the silence, watching the repetition of lights and the honking, cranking, windy sounds of the city. Until Leo nodded at something across the street. "Look. There's a fight happening in that office."

Her interested gasp was humiliating, frankly, but she owned it. "Where? Where?" She followed his line of sight and found he was right. In the top right corner of the building across the street, there were two people—a man and a woman—having an obvious shouting match over a desk. The woman waved a sheaf of papers in the air, the man massaged the bridge of his nose. "There are some unknown charges on the company's expense report," Reese murmured. "She's demanding to know what they are. But he can't tell her."

Leo's voice emerged just above her ear. "Why?"

"Because those charges are for a surprise birthday party he's throwing in her honor, of course. He loves her. Always has. They started this company together, from the ground up, and turned it into an unmitigated success. The more time he let pass without telling her how he feels, the stronger their

business partnership became. And now he can't risk it. So he performs these little gestures, showing her without words how much he cares."

A long pause ensued. "Did you just come up with that whole thing in your head?"

"I love a good storyline." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Dancers might not have speaking roles, but...in a way, we have to act with our bodies. Sometimes if the story isn't inspiring—to me, at least—I make up my own. To bolster performance."

She could feel his gaze tracing the lines of her face thoughtfully. "Well, you can't stop now. I'm on the edge of my seat."

"Okay..." Having more fun than she could remember having in her whole life, Reese chewed her smiling lip a moment. "So it could take a romantic comedy turn. Or a tragic one. In the rom-com version, he announces at the birthday party that he's transferring to their London office, because secretly, he can't stand to be around her anymore and pretend he's not wildly in love. But she goes home after the party and it hits her, she's loved him all along. Before he can get on the plane, she kisses him. Roll the credits."

"What happens in the tragic version?"

"He cancels the party, marries her sister and only then does she find out he spent years loving her. But it's too late."

"Jesus. That physically hurt to hear. And I don't even know these people."

"What can I say?" She huffed a breath onto her fingernails, polishing them on the front of her coat. "I'm just that good."

"You are." His thumb brushed up and down her arm. "You know, this is the same skill set that you're going to employ helping me fulfill the Sweetest Fix orders."

A laugh whistled out of her. "Oh no." She shrugged out from beneath his arm, backing toward the center of the roof. "I never agreed to help."

“Okay...” Following her, he drew the word out. “But it might interest you to know that there’s one guy who can’t figure out what his cross-country skier girlfriend who loves classic movies wants in a cake pop.”

“Coconut, obviously. It’s an old-fashioned flavor. And the little flecks of white will call snowflakes to mind.”

Leo gave her lopsided smile.

She couldn’t help returning it, even as she grumbled under her breath.

“The thing is...” Reese started, knowing she shouldn’t say the rest, but unable to help it. There was a current of acceptance and familiarity—a spark between them that shoved the words right out. “If I spend time with you, Leo...” she said quietly. “I have a feeling that I’m going to want to spend a lot more time with you. Leo.”

He was only a few inches away when his smile dipped, a muscle jumping in his cheek. “You won’t hear me complaining.”

“Hmmm.”

Their breathing had already turned shallow by the time their lips locked, muffled sounds breaking from both of their throats. Reese felt the contact all the way down to her heels. The low voltage of it raising bumps on her legs, her arms. He was warm, his breath racing, matching her pulse beat for beat. Her lie of omission hung between them, guilt sneaking into the space between her shoulder blades, but then his mouth opened over hers and it sailed away on a jet stream of enjoyment.

Just like the other night, Leo’s hands were part of the kiss. They slid inside her coat to mold over her hips, his thumbs brushing her belly. And that hot thrum started between her thighs, the one he’d tickled to life the first time. Little spokes reached out from her core, teasing her nipples into points and making her breath catch.

Holy hell.

Were those her fingers sinking so confidently into his hair, pulling him down closer so she could deepen the kiss? A

pretty bold move for a girl who wouldn't agree to a date, but who cared? Because his mouth came when beckoned, his lips pressing hers wider for the invasion of his tongue, his hands drawing her tight to his body, slowly lifting her onto tiptoes. Or maybe she did that herself, there was no way to tell when her thoughts were muddy with pleasure.

Being this close to him, there was no way to miss the rise of his manhood, the length of it settling against her belly, swelling with every stroke of their tongues. And the pace, the tone of the kiss was changing rapidly, going from exploratory to demanding, his hands beneath her shirt now, smoothing over the base of her spine, her lower body moving of its own accord, twisting subtly against his erection. A line inside of him frayed, she felt it in a brief stiffening of his upper lip, and those huge baker's hands dropped to her bottom, grinding her closer once, just once, before he broke the kiss with a groan.

“Goddamn, Reese.”

“Yeah,” she managed, pulling air into her lungs. “So, okay. M-maybe we can have one brainstorming session about the, um...the Sweetest Fix. I mean, since it was partly my idea and all. That only seems fair.”

A combination of relief and victory lit his face. “Brainstorming session. Yeah.”

“We should probably have it somewhere...” She pulled her coat closed to hide her body's intense response to the kiss. “Public.”

“If we want to get anything done,” he said slowly, tongue pressed into his cheek. “This isn't ah...typical for me. I just... want you to know that.”

“You don't spontaneously make out with strangers the first two times you meet them?” A laugh left her on an exhale. There was more to it. More than kissing. The kissing seemed to happen almost as a given because of the push and pull between them, the forming connection. “No, it's not typical for me either.”

They looked at each other for several beats. “I guess you should give me your number then,” he said finally.

“I guess I should.” She waited while he took out his phone, reciting his number while she punched it in. “I have some—” She stopped herself before she could say “auditions.” Was this...going to be okay? Seeing this guy after meeting him under false pretenses? Or was she signing up for something seriously problematic?

Tell him the truth. Now.

It was right there, poised on the tip of her tongue.

I don't have a job yet.

I'm sleeping on a beanbag chair in a closet.

I was supposed to audition for your father.

But she couldn't pull the trigger.

Frankly, it was embarrassing to have reached this point. To have been celebrated as a child competition dancer, cast in a huge commercial and hailed as the next big thing. And then kind of just...fizzle out. Go nowhere. To suddenly be twenty-one and have no college credits, no future prospects in this career she'd foreseen. The thought of Leo knowing those things about her made Reese queasy.

If she made it...no, when she landed a spot on a chorus line, she'd have the confidence to explain. And she would succeed. She'd do everything in her power to get hired. She'd stretch her capabilities to their limit to realize the ambitions she'd had since childhood.

If Leo was still in the picture when that happened, she'd tell him everything. There was a chance he might not even be around that long. Right? Maybe after some time in each other's company, this...powerful magic would fade? And while that seemed highly unlikely while standing in his epic chocolate-scented warmth, could one little date hurt? She couldn't remember any other guy giving her butterflies quite like this.

“I have late-morning rehearsals. Classes. And shows obviously. Five nights a week,” Reese said, digging herself deeper into the hole, dirt flying up and landing back down on her head. For a moment, she couldn’t look him in the eye, but he tipped her chin up and gave her that lopsided smile again. “Since you work mornings,” she breathed, in danger of swooning, “Maybe late lunch would be best.”

All he did was nod. Reach down and take her hand, picking her bag up with the other. He brought her back down in the elevator, her head resting on his shoulder. When they reached the bottom, she wasn’t sure what to do. It almost felt odd to simply walk away from him after what they’d shared on the roof.

“Um...” She adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder. “I guess—”

The sound of her phone ringing cut her off.

Leo had his own cell pressed to his ear.

Lip caught between her teeth, Reese fished her phone out of her bag and answered. “Stratton residence.”

He huffed a laugh. “May I please speak to Reese?”

She covered the receiver and called, “Reese?” A beat passed, her hand dropping away. “Hello, this is Reese. Who is calling?”

“Leo.”

“Leo. So nice of you to call. It’s been an age. How may I help you?”

“By coming to lunch with me tomorrow.” Lord, his voice. All deep and crackly. “One o’clock?”

“That sounds good.” Well aware she was blushing, she hung up. “Text me the place.” Again, he just nodded, watching her, obviously in no rush to move. Apparently it would be up to her to break the huddle. “Well. Bye for now.”

He grunted, but finally started to back up, both of them turning and walking away at the same time. She lost count of how many times she glanced back and caught him doing the

same. And it was a wicked combination, the lightness in her step mixed with the foreboding in her stomach.

CHAPTER 8



Early the next morning, Leo stood in the back of the Cookie Jar dipping madeleines in melted chocolate, sprinkling the dipped end with crushed walnuts, putting them on the drying rack, the routine ingrained in his muscle memory. Even though he knew damn well it was only eight o'clock in the morning, his eye continued to stray to the clock, usually finding only a minute had passed since the last time he checked.

He wasn't too proud to admit that he'd splashed on some extra aftershave this morning, either, frowning down at the tiny print on the bottle to see how long the stupid woody scent was supposed to last.

"Leo?" Tad blew in from the front of the bakery tangled up in his apron. "I just got a call from my mother. She fell down again in the apartment and she refuses to use the button thing I got her, even though it's hanging around her neck. She just needs a boost back up onto the couch. Preferably before *Live with Kelly and Ryan*, she says. It should only take me an hour to get to the Bronx and back." Clearly flustered, he finally got himself free of the white strings, hanging it on one of the designated hooks just inside the swinging door. "I know you hate working the front, but Jackie is twenty minutes away and if I wait that long, my mom is going to give me the silent treatment for a week." For a moment, he looked thoughtful. "Maybe that wouldn't be so bad."

Leo wiped his hands on a clean rag with a grimace. "Go. I'll watch the front."

“Thanks, boss.” Tad leaned in to hug Leo and got a madeleine shoved in his mouth before he could get too close. “When it comes to customers, just comment on the weather. Compliment a piece of their clothing. It’s easy.”

“No.”

“Great. I’ll be back as fast as I can. Hopefully before we get too many Yelp reviews about the curmudgeon owner.” Tad started to leave, but wheeled back around. “Wait a minute, are you wearing cologne?”

“It’s aftershave. Weren’t you leaving?”

“Who are you wearing it for?” Tad took a bite of his cookie, giving the obligatory approving eye roll over the taste. “It can’t be the girl you kissed in the doorway. She didn’t give you her number, unless I missed something. And I was taking notes with the single-minded focus of a court reporter, so I don’t think I did...” He popped the rest of the madeleine into his mouth, speaking around the bite. “Unless...did you seek her out?”

Refusing to acknowledge the heat climbing the back of his neck, Leo glanced meaningfully at the clock. “Your one-hour window is rapidly dwindling.”

“Oh my God. You did go find her.” Tad sputtered. “This novel initiative from the man who can’t even muster up a full sentence for his customers?”

“Why do I employ you again?”

“Come on. Everyone loves a ginger that tells them they deserve cake.” Snorting at that, Leo tried to step around Tad, but his friend and employee blocked his exit. “Whoa, whoa. The bell over the door will tell us if someone is coming in. I want to know the details.”

Leo tipped his head back and sighed, but there was a part of him that didn’t particularly mind telling someone he was going on a date with Reese. Ever since yesterday, the knowledge that he would be sitting across from her at The Marshal this afternoon had a shaken champagne bottle in his stomach getting ready to pop.

Yeah. To say he was looking forward to seeing her again would be putting it mildly. Most of the time while baking, he could blank his mind and lose himself in the process. It was part of what he enjoyed about his profession. But this morning, buried elbow deep in pastry and flour and chocolate, he could think of nothing but that kiss. How it seemed to be set in motion the second he saw her on the street. As if them getting close enough to touch was a foregone conclusion. A matter of when, not if. And then when it happened, he'd gotten hard fast enough to make himself dizzy.

Christ. He'd spent some extra time in the shower this morning thinking about how, instead of being offended, she'd rubbed herself against him, purring at the contact from his tongue. If he hadn't been so determined to do things right and take her on a date—hold doors, pull her chair out, the whole nine—he wasn't sure where that kiss might have gone.

A thought that had required a second shower.

Noticing that Tad was watching him with amusement, Leo cleared his throat hard. "I'm meeting Reese for lunch. You happy?"

Tad opened his mouth, closed it. Started again. "So you skipped social media. And instead, tracked her down and asked her out on a date."

"That's right."

"Which exact words did you use?"

Leo tried to walk around him again.

"Come on, boss! Give me something. You're not exactly verbose—"

"I can be verbose with her," Leo said, positive he sounded like an idiot. "For some reason, it's easier with her. She doesn't mind the silences or...she doesn't seem expectant when I'm not saying anything. So it's not...rushed, I guess. I like talking to her."

It was the truth, even if saying it out loud made his neck burn.

There was the kissing, yeah. His insane attraction to her. But he was looking forward to lunch because he wanted to hear her laugh. He'd only been in her company twice and already, there was a sense that they knew each other. The awkward getting to know you phase was over, because there'd never been one. As if they'd been intuitive enough to skip that part without feeling like something was missing—and God, he appreciated that. Maybe they were employing the same skill they used to predict what desserts people like? Leo didn't know. It was unique, though. He wanted to be around her.

Was it one o'clock yet?

Again, Leo had dropped into the lake of his own thoughts, hadn't he? When he glanced up again, it was to find Tad looking dumbstruck. "This is all happening just in time for Valentine's Day. It's serendipity. Kismet—"

"Jesus, get out of the way," Leo said, pushing through the swinging door.

A customer walked in off the street at the same time, rubbing her hands together and looking at the glass with undisguised glee. Leo could appreciate that. Of course he did. But when the woman raised her eyes to his and smiled, waiting for a greeting like she might get from Tad or Jackie, he could only seem to muster a grunt. It obviously disappointed the customer, some of the excitement fading from her expression.

"The fudge is fresh," he offered, preemptively pulling out a wax paper square from the box. She nodded and continued perusing.

Had he always been bad at small talk?

Or any kind of light conversation?

Yeah. As far back as he could remember, at least.

Leo's father had cast a long shadow and Leo had been the pudgy kid standing in it. When an admirer approached Bernard Bexley backstage or at a party, they would make the moment count, as his father was notoriously hard to pin down. They would ask, "What was your most memorable

performance?” Or “What inspired the opening dance number of *Skipping Stones*?” And Bernard would reply with something that left them in tears. Mute with gratitude. In the space of a few sentences, he could have his fans gasping for air or reaching for a tissue.

Nothing Leo ever said seemed to be anywhere near as important.

It wasn't that he wanted attention. Jesus, no. But his youth had been spent listening to a master weave magic to get the emotional response he wanted from dancers. Giving interviews in the living room to the *New York Times*. Bernard would hold anyone within earshot in his thrall. Eventually Leo was relieved that no one spared him much more than a glance.

It was easier to say nothing than say something less than brilliant.

When the customer looked over at Leo, seeming hesitant to call out, he headed toward where she stood, opening the display case she indicated.

“A half dozen of the mini snowballs, please.”

“Good.”

He packaged them up in a box and sent the woman on her way without exchanging another word, relieved when Jackie blew in as the customer was walking out the door. “Well hello, Miss Mary. Did you get yourself something yummy?”

The lady nearly fainted with relief to have the silence broken. “Yes! I picked up some snowballs to share with my grandson when he gets home from school.”

“Fantastic. You'll be a hero!”

Mary beamed. “Have a good day, hon.”

Leo stared as the woman left and Jackie bustled in behind the counter. He'd kind of gotten comfortable being antisocial. After all, he'd never been anything but. Was it time to start making more of an effort to fix that, though? This was his business. People probably shouldn't dread running into him when they walked through the door. Based on how often Tad's

mother fell off the couch, this wouldn't be the last time he worked the register.

The memory of Reese standing on the other side of his display case came to mind. What if he'd scared her off that night? Sent her running with a dark look and never found out how...easy it could be to talk to her?

An unexpected prickle of alarm crawled beneath his skin.

Yeah. Maybe it was time to adapt a little.

"Where's Tad?" Jackie asked, approaching while tying on her apron.

"Putting his mom back on the couch again."

She stopped short. "Hold up. Are you wearing cologne?"

He shook his head. "Already went through this once. Not doing it again."

All right. So he'd start adapting tomorrow.

Deep in thought, Leo pushed through the swinging door, his gaze immediately straying to the clock. Eight twenty-one.

CHAPTER 9



Reese's sides heaved, perspiration sliding down her spine beneath her lucky red bodysuit. The blisters in her LaDucas were sprouting blisters. And the woman leading them through the choreography for the audition sure as shit wasn't doling out recovery time. It was put up or shut up. Reese had made it past the first round of cuts, but there were three more to go. Her legs were as limp as the noodles she'd eaten for dinner last night and her lungs were laboring to keep up with the exertion.

Boom.

On came the song again.

"Positions!"

Some fuzziness encroached on the edges of her vision. She shook it off and found her mark, the count coming over the loudspeaker. Waiting for the sequence to start, she couldn't help but observe the competition. The imposter syndrome was real. These girls barely looked winded, so chic in their wrap skirts and crop tops. Their arms were cut, calves toned, lines immaculate. Not a hair out of place.

She looked like she'd just come out of hibernation.

And the log she'd been sleeping in had rolled down a hill.

How did I even make it past the first round?

Not for the first time today, she longed for someone to talk to. Someone to give her advice, a mentor to point her in the right direction and help her feel a little less lost in the shuffle.

Did such a thing exist or was it truly every woman for herself?

The intro faded and Reese poised her body to execute the steps she'd learned only five minutes earlier, right knee out front, bent, hands extended up. She was auditioning for the chorus of a long-running musical about rival gangs. Getting a part would more or less put her in the background, but what a lot of people failed to realize was the background needed to be completely flawless. It was a swath of fabric and one tear would throw off the balance of an entire number. She chose to think of being in the chorus as creating a foundation for the show to thrive. To build upon.

God, she wanted it so bad.

You'll do it. You'll get there.

The beat picked up. Reese kept her default earnest expression on her face, knowing now was the time to let her body do the talking. She rolled her hips, careful to keep any modern energy out of her steps, as the musical was set in the nineteen fifties. Hands up. Pause. Clap clap. Leap. Three, four. Bompbompomp.

She shouldn't have looked at the table where a panel of casting directors and choreographers sat with a stack of headshots in front of them. If she hadn't looked, she never would have seen them passing her headshot down the line, making notes on the back in Sharpie. What were they thinking? Were they discussing her talent or lack thereof?

That split second of distraction cost her. The toe of her LaDuca caught the floor in the middle of a turn and she stumbled, watching her headshot float down to the table an instant later, forgotten. They didn't even let her finish. None of the other dancers broke pace or paid her the slightest attention. The woman reciting the counts waved Reese toward the side exit—and she went, red-faced and panting, managing to scoop up her bag and coat on the way out.

“Dammit,” she heaved as soon as she hit the street, the cold air turning her sweat icy on contact. Shivering from the cold as much as the humiliation, she shrugged on her jacket,

leaning back against the building to swap her heels for flats. When that task was done, she mashed the heel of her hand against her forehead, trying to dull the fresh slap of failure.

She didn't belong there. *Get thee to Penn Station and get on a bus, Gus. This city is not your friend.* More importantly, it didn't need her. She was trying to shoehorn her way into a seamless process that operated without a hitch. What was she thinking? Spending a sickening amount of money on a closet, embarrassing herself in front of veritable theater gods, missing the audition with Bexley in the first place. She was the mayor of Fuck Up Town. Population one.

All right, a public pity party wasn't helping matters, but damn did it feel good. Her nose burned from unshed tears, her feet throbbed, heart twisting painfully as she took one last look at the theater door and limped her way toward the West Side.

When her phone started ringing, she almost didn't answer. Unless it was one of the casting directors calling her back to resume the audition, she wasn't interested. Swiping a wrist across her damp eyes, she tugged the phone out of her coat pocket, skidding to a halt when she saw Leo's name on the screen, complete with heart emojis on either side of those three simple letters.

But there would be nothing simple about cancelling their lunch date.

No way she could go feeling so trampled on.

Like she'd blown it—again.

It was more than just failure weighing her down, it was fear of time running out and her having nothing to show for her very expensive last-ditch efforts. Nothing to show for her mother's encouragement and dedication. This was not a date mood. This was a silent sobbing in the shower with vodka mood. And dammit, she couldn't deal with her guilt over Leo on top of today's screw up.

With a blown-out breath, she answered the phone. "Hey Leo."

An oven closed on the other end of the line and Reese could almost smell the chocolate cinnamon heaven of the Cookie Jar. “That doesn’t sound good.”

She wasn’t expecting his voice to comfort her so much, but it did. So much that she veered out of the dense sidewalk traffic to plop down on a bench. “I’ve had a pretty rough morning.” Her voice caught, making her wince. “Do you mind if we do lunch tomorrow instead?”

Only the slightest pause. “Sure.” The silence stretched, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. More like they were both giving themselves a few seconds to be disappointed. And Reese found herself squinting in the direction of the bakery, even though it wasn’t within seeing distance. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asked, finally.

The fact that she couldn’t made her throat ache. “Just your average, run-of-the-mill dance stuff. My brain wasn’t connecting with my feet today.”

“I’m sorry.” A beat passed. “You probably already know this, but off days happen all the time. For dancers, I mean. Even my father had them.”

She swallowed hard. “Really?”

“Not that he would admit to it, but yeah. Of course.” She pressed the phone closer to her ear, settling into his voice. “You have a hard job. If everyone was perfect on the first try, there wouldn’t be rehearsals. Tomorrow will be better.”

Gratitude welled in her chest. “Thanks, Leo.”

His grunt made her smile. “If it makes you feel any better, my brain wasn’t connecting with my mouth today.”

Her smile dimmed slightly. “You seem to be back on track now.”

“Don’t I?” He muttered something under his breath and more bakery sounds ensued, soothing in her ear. “You already know I don’t specialize in customer service, right?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” She noticed a sketchy splotch of liquid on the bench and scooted a little farther away.

“I was a customer and now you have my number.”

“You’re...that’s different.”

Warmth spread in her belly, the splotch no longer a concern. She suddenly regretted rain checking their lunch date. Three minutes on the phone with this man and she already felt remarkably better than when she’d fled the theater in shame. “Hey, I was thinking...maybe we should have lunch today.”

“Yeah?”

She hummed, adjusting the duffel bag on her lap. “I was worried I wouldn’t be good company, but I’m feeling better after talking to you.”

Leo didn’t speak for several seconds. She waited.

“What were you going to do instead of lunch?” he asked.

“Honestly? Take a shower hot enough to scald myself and take a depression nap.”

His chuckle warmed her ear. “You could do those things with me.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. “What, like a nap date? Is that a thing?”

“It’s a thing if we make it one.”

She thought of her postage stamp-sized bedroom and inwardly cringed. “Where would this nap date take place?”

He gave her one of his signature chest rumbles. “My apartment isn’t far from the bakery. It’s clean. By man standards.”

Reese leaned back against the bench, wondering if she was crazy for considering this. Going to Leo’s apartment and napping with him. It sounded insane. But she’d been in those arms, she’d felt that strong shoulder against her cheek. After the morning she’d had, she couldn’t think of anything better than snuggling all up in that and falling asleep. However. “Do we really think we’ll, um...nap?” Heat rose in her cheeks. “If we get in bed together.”

The tone of the conversation was changing. Rapidly.

Whereas a moment ago, her body was nothing but weary and sore, it was showing definite signs of life, her thigh muscles flexed, her nipples tingling at the prospect of getting into bed with Leo. It was too soon, wasn't it? They hadn't even gone out on their first date yet. Although, oddly, nothing about this felt rushed. She was more comfortable with him than guys who'd taken her on multiple dates.

"I don't know, Reese," he said, his voice significantly deeper. "If you want to nap, we'll nap. If you want something else..." His breath rasped in. Out. "I'll give it to you."

Okay, she was definitely getting hot and bothered on this grimy bench.

What was it about this man that gave her libido teeth?

"I have to take a shower," she managed.

"I have one of those, too."

Her laugh came out husky. "This is crazy."

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "I'll text you my address and apartment number. Tell someone where you're going to be."

Oh cool. Now she extra wanted to jump him. "I was planning on it." Her legs were shaky when she stood up from the bench, her feet taking her in the direction of the Cookie Jar. "I guess I'll see you soon, Leo."

CHAPTER 10



Leo was almost surprised when the buzzer went off in his apartment.

Had he really suggested a nap date?

Ever more unbelievable, did she actually accept?

The weirdest part of all? Inviting Reese over to sleep didn't feel all that bizarre, considering how they'd gotten here. This whole thing between them didn't seem to have a playbook. And Reese had that unnamed something that wiped him of any self-consciousness, allowing him to throw the odd idea out there.

Now she was going to be in his place. In his bed.

If he thought too hard about what could take place in that bed—if she asked for more than a nap—he was going to answer the door with wood.

“Jesus, pull it together,” he muttered, crossing his apartment to the intercom and hitting the buzzer to let her in downstairs. After unlocking his apartment door and leaving it open, he turned to view the space through a woman's eyes. He hadn't brought anyone back there for some time, and even then, there'd been no thoughts paid to the apartment's appeal. Now, it seemed to matter quite a damn bit.

He lived in a one-bedroom in a pre-war building in Hell's Kitchen, exposed brick making up the walls, original crown molding. Old, but kind of charming, maybe? His living room had all the basic furniture—television, coffee table. A couch

big enough for a man his size to sit comfortably. But it was the kitchen where he'd paid the most attention to detail.

A metal rack hung from the ceiling above the free-range stove, spatulas, scrapers and ladles hanging down like a culinary wind chime. The apartment was rented, so he'd probably violated his lease by installing the sea glass backsplash behind the counter. There were Tupperware containers stacked everywhere, holding baked goods he tested in his spare time for their potential sale at the Cookie Jar. A window on the far wall overlooked the avenue, a fire escape affixed to the side of the building and bisecting his view. This was where he spent most of his time. Is that why his palms were sweating over her reaction?

Leo dragged a hand down his face. "You've got it bad."

"What was that?" Reese asked from his doorway. "Sorry, it was open. Should I just—"

"Come in. Yeah." He was momentarily dumbstruck by how fucking pretty she looked in the afternoon light, her hair pulled up in a ponytail, little curls springing out near her temples.

She's exhausted.

That much was obvious. She hadn't been lying about her bad morning.

And he'd never wanted to take care of someone so badly in his life. Reese was capable of doing that for herself, but just for this afternoon, maybe he could take some of that responsibility. No way in hell she was leaving his place without looking more rested and happy than when she walked through the door.

Leo moved toward her without a command from his brain., reaching past her to close the apartment door and lock it "Hey." He eased the duffel bag from her shoulder, setting it on the ground. "Shower, then nap."

He watched her mind turning things over. "Are you letting me know who's in charge, Leo?"

“No, I’m giving you the option of letting me be in charge for a while.”

“Oh.” She wet her lips, giving him a semi. Just like that. “Then I’ll allow it.”

“Good.” His hands itched to touch her, even just to smooth the loose strands of hair back from her face, but he settled on unbuttoning her coat instead, revealing a tight, red bodysuit that made her tits look like juicy apples. Black shorts similar to the ones she’d worn yesterday clung low on her hips, those long legs stretching all the way to the floor. God. She’d been in his place one minute and his mouth was already dry as a dust. “You have a change of clothes in this bag or do you want one of my shirts?”

She considered him through her lashes. “One of your shirts, please.”

Leo nodded, turned for his bedroom, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. Her slow touch slid up to his shoulder, her finger tracing a line down the center of his chest. “This one.”

Jesus, all of his blood was rushing south. “You want the one I’m wearing?”

“Yes.”

“Because you want to see me shirtless or because you feel vulnerable in my place and want to even the odds?”

Her mouth ticked up at one end, as if she appreciated his perceptiveness. “Both.”

Leo nodded. “All right.” He reached back, pinching the cotton material behind his neck...and he hesitated. Even though that hesitation was ridiculous. With their clothes on, it was impossible to miss the fact that they possessed vastly different body types. She was a petite dancer with tight curves. And he was a tall, thick man with some definite heft. The longer he took to remove the shirt, the deeper the thoughtful groove became between her eyebrows. Because he didn’t want her questioning his indecision, he took a deep breath and

whipped off the shirt, handing it to her with a cough. “The smell on it...it’s aftershave. Not cologne.”

“Oh,” she whispered, her attention traveling from his throat to his waistband. “Th-thanks for letting me know.”

He made an inarticulate gesture at himself. “This going to work for you?”

“Hell yeah,” she breathed, looking at him like the question was insane.

His surprise was swift and—*don’t smile, Leo. Don’t fucking smile.*

Too late. By the time he turned toward the bathroom, a grin was stretching across his face. “You can shower in here.” God. He could even hear the smile in his voice. “Everything is in there. Left a towel on the sink.”

“Thank you.”

On her way into the bathroom, she leaned in and kissed his bare shoulder, twirling the shirt over her head a couple of times, closing the door on the sound of their mutual laughter. Unaware that she’d left his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

* * *

WHEN REESE WALKED out of his bathroom ten minutes later, Leo promptly forgot about the stack of papers sitting on the coffee table. Knowing Reese wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing on the other side of the door had required a distraction, but there was no distracting him from the beautiful girl wearing his shirt, the hem brushing her knees, her dirty-blond hair towel dried and sitting in a loose knot on the top of her head.

Watching her approach, his pulse beat low and thick in the base of his neck.

God, he wanted to fuck her. He couldn’t deny that.

There was also a developing tightness in his throat. Something about her being here in the middle of the day,

essentially wearing pajamas. It called Sundays to mind. A couple doing lazy things, making no excuses for their lack of ambitions for the weekend. He liked it. He liked her being there. A lot. In his shirt and no makeup. No shoes.

If they'd been at this a little longer, he would have thrown her over his shoulder in that moment and carried her to bed, wasting no time tasting all those places she'd so recently cleaned. But while she might have given him the freedom to take charge, he didn't have any intention of abusing that privilege. Or pushing his luck.

“Catching up on some paperwork?”

He dragged his attention from the curves of her knees, patting the cushion beside him. “These are some of the order forms for the Sweetest Fix. Jackie printed them out for me.”

Reese rounded the couch and sat down beside him, bringing a waft of shower scents and clean skin. “Ah. I forgot this was a working lunch.”

“It doesn't have to be,” he said slowly, considering her profile. “I'm just trying not to rush you into my bedroom.”

Her expression was appreciative, thoughtful. “Thanks.” A beat passed. “Although, I keep thinking this nap date should feel weirder than it does.”

“Yeah.” Jesus, there went his heart again. “I know what you mean.”

They stared at each other for several moments, until her cheeks started to color and she ducked her head, smiling down at her lap. “Let's do a few of the orders.”

“Sure.” He picked up the top sheet. “This one is from Tony, twenty-eight, construction worker. Wants the perfect cake pop for his girlfriend, Alice, twenty-five. She's an emergency room nurse.”

“Ooh. Okay.” Reese settled into the couch cushion, rubbing her hands together. “ER nurse. To me, that's someone who doesn't get a lot of time for herself. When she does, she makes it count. So...something that will knock her out in one bite, like dark chocolate truffle.”

“Nice. Hard agree.” Trying and failing to temper the grin on his face, Leo made a notation on the sheet and set it aside. “Next up is Penny, requesting a Fix for her girlfriend, June, a fashion consultant who also has a successful vision board shop on Etsy. I don’t know what most of those words mean.”

“It’s a good thing I’m here,” she said, solemnly, placing a hand on his knee. A touch he felt straight up to his groin. “If she’s into fashion and visuals, she’s definitely going to post pictures on social media. Definitely something photogenic, maybe a lavender sponge? An edible flower and some shimmer?”

“Oh. Sure, I have tons of edible flowers lying around.”

Her giggle warmed him. “You can pipe it on. I’m not picky.”

He let his amusement show. “Are these for you or the customers?”

“I’m not going to lie, there is something really satisfying about blurting flavor combinations and knowing someone else is going to do all the work. This is the closest I’ll ever come to being the queen.” She put on a British accent. “You there. Lavender cake, at once. I shall be dazzled. Pip pip.”

Leo’s laugh sounded like an engine in disrepair, but it made her beam, so he guessed it couldn’t be as off-putting as it sounded to his own ears. “All right. One more.” He slipped a random order form from the middle of the stack. “Edna, seventy-one, wants a Fix for her...”

Reese leaned over, pressing their shoulders together. “What?”

“Her Chihuahua, Gregory.”

Slowly, they turned to look at each other. “What have we done?”

“Oh no, we did nothing,” Leo said. “This was your idea. Now I’m a canine pastry chef.”

She visibly suppressed a laugh. “I need more. What are Gregory’s interests?”

Even though Leo couldn't remember the last time he'd had this much fun, he sighed, glancing back down at the form. "Influencing." He frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

Reese fell against the back of the couch laughing, the joyful sound fading after a moment. One of those easy silences fell and she didn't rush to fill it, merely considering him beneath her lashes. "I was thinking about what you said on the phone. About not specializing in customer service."

Briefly, his mind drifted back to the awkward moment in the Cookie Jar earlier that day. "Yeah?"

She hummed, turning to the side and tucking her hands beneath her cheek. "Do you think it's because you're overthinking your own side of the interaction?"

"Maybe." Unnecessarily, he restacked the papers. "I have nothing to say that's going to be interesting to them."

A few seconds passed. "Why would you think that?"

"I don't know." He thought about his father giving a toast at the head of a banquet table, weaving a spell around everyone present. Having company at their house had been a common occurrence until Bernard started keeping more to himself, claiming Broadway had turned too gimmicky for his taste. "I guess I grew up leaving conversations to the expert. When I finally had something to say, it was about baking and that wasn't interesting, either."

"It's interesting to me. To plenty of people." She smiled against her hands. "Allow me to direct your attention to thirteen cable shows about cupcakes."

Damn, he loved the way she didn't make a huge deal out of his admission. Just quietly contradicting him in that humorously logical way she seemed to have. The way he felt about his personality couldn't be changed. It just was. And then she comes along, says two sentences and makes him think. Makes him wonder at possibilities.

"Make it about them. Not you." She crossed her lithe thighs, making his mouth water, but he held on to his focus. "You know. The way I made up that story for the couple in the

office building? Give the customer one. It could get you out of your own head.”

“How is that going to help me converse with them?”

“You can ask them questions to help build your story. Do you live in the neighborhood? Are you coming from work? When you ask people questions about themselves, they’re going to ask you some in return. You’re more than worth their time.” Her gaze danced across his shoulders and only then did he remember he wasn’t wearing a shirt. “You’re genuine and interesting. I wouldn’t be here if you weren’t.”

He swallowed hard. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, Leo,” she murmured, sitting forward and stretching her arms up over her head. “Is it time for nap date now?”

CHAPTER 11



Falling asleep when she was this turned on was going to prove a challenge.

That theory grew stronger when she followed Leo into his bedroom and found a hidden pocket of paradise. The space could only be described as masculine, yes, but it was the definition of comfort. His bed? Huge. Like she could get lost in its dark cream sheets and navy comforter. The blinds were drawn, with only hints of afternoon light peeking in around the edges. Unlike the kitchen, this room was located at the back of the building, so it was quiet. As if they'd left Manhattan and been transported to a cabin in Wyoming.

And the scent.

It got into her blood and made it rush faster, the mingling aromas of aftershave and chocolate. She wanted to roll around in the source of wherever it came from.

Leo moved past her to the bed and drew back the comforter, revealing more of the cream-colored sheets. And she congratulated herself on asking him to take off his shirt. Because wow. Wow. He was thick everywhere. His arms, his torso, his fingers, his thighs. Built to move mountains or haul lumber, but he'd been called to this giving profession. One that made other people happy almost by accident—and it fit him so beautifully, this pouty man bear.

Her feelings for him were developing at an unexpected rate. Fast. This was fast. But also...right. Which was definitely scary, considering he didn't know about her lost audition with

Bexley. How she'd planned to use Leo to get another. Nor did he know she wasn't a successfully employed Broadway dancer, she was merely one of thousands of hopefuls, her deadline clock ticking ominously in the back of her mind. The hole she'd dug had reached her neck, but no amount of guilt or dread could force her into ruining these perfect moments with him.

She'd resolved to tell him everything as soon as she got hired. As soon as there was no question about her intentions. But after this morning's disastrous audition, that reality seemed further out of reach than before. Another reality moving further out of reach? One where she and Leo weren't compatible and didn't want to see each other again. With every passing moment, that didn't merely seem unlikely. More like impossible.

How long was she expecting to drag out this pretense?

What if she never got hired?

Banishing the troubling thoughts from her mind for later, Reese followed Leo to the bed, slowing to a stop in front of him. Because nothing between them ever seemed to feel awkward, she gave in to the impulse to lean in and smell the hair-dappled skin between his pectoral muscles. "Are you going to get comfortable?" she asked, easing back to nod at his jeans, complete with belt buckle.

"Comfortable might be a stretch," he rasped, his mouth resting on her temple.

His chest was so warm, she couldn't help leaning against it, absorbing the heat. "It doesn't seem fair that I'm the only one who gets to be without pants on this nap date."

For once, she had no idea where a situation was heading.

Were they really going to nap?

Were they going to have sex?

No clue. Everything between them moved in an addictively organic fashion and this moment before they climbed into bed together was no different. There was no mistaking his hard-on. It curved the fly of his jeans, straining

the button. She was sorely tempted to reach down and pop the button, lower the zipper, slide her hand inside the denim and memorize his response to her first stroke, but there was something more unique to them in the pauses. The lack of rush. The letting things happen.

So Reese boosted herself onto the bed and waited, cool silence surrounding them.

Leo watched her in that serious way, his hands eventually moving to his belt, unbuckling and letting the leather sides sag within their loops, unbuttoning next and pulling down the zipper. Her mouth opened on an involuntary puff of breath over the way his shaft swelled into the opening, hugged tightly in the black cotton of his briefs.

Boxer briefs, she amended, when he pushed down the jeans and stepped out, kicking them aside. Neither one of them moved right away, simply taking each other in, Leo's gaze tracing the lines of her dangling legs, her attention mostly riveted by his hands. The way they flexed, but made no move to touch her, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Finally, he circled around to the other side of the bed and climbed in under the covers, the weight of his attention resting on her spine.

Tingling with more awareness she ever knew was possible, Reese swung her legs up onto the bed, tucking them into the cool, smooth sheets and fluffy comforter, inwardly moaning over the comfort of this bed compared to the beanbag chair she'd been sleeping on. She rolled onto her back and looked at Leo, finding him watching her in the near darkness, and they just kind of gravitated in one another's direction, the way they always seemed to do.

They met in the middle of the bed and he shifted slightly, offering his shoulder as an even better pillow—and she went, her nose tucking naturally into his neck, inhaling him without subtlety. Their thighs were next, pressing, hard against smooth, his erection a thick column between their stomachs. They'd only been lying that way for a moment, breaths growing choppy, when the fingertips of Leo's right hand dragged up the outside of her thighs slowly, traveling the

valley of her side, the featherlight touch making her damp. So damp between her legs that she gasped, pressing closer.

And their mouths were simply powerless to do anything but find one another in the darkness, their bodies shifting to accommodate the kiss. The hungry energy of it. Her fingers curled in the waistband of his boxers, urging him closer, his right hand twisting in the T-shirt material covering her back.

“Maybe we’ll be able to nap if we...” Reese started, whispering the words against his mouth. “Exert some of this energy.”

They fell into another explosive kiss that took a full minute to break, both of them pulling apart, gasping. “Is that what you want?”

Her nod was painfully enthusiastic. Or it would have been painful with anyone else but Leo. Their need matched like it had been cut from the same cloth. Her leg rose to drape over his hip, his hands catching it mid-move, already anticipating her, and they rolled, Reese ending up on her back, thighs clinging to his waist, both of them fumbling with the hem of her borrowed T-shirt to get it off, every second that passed without their skin touching unbearable.

They could barely stop kissing long enough to get the material over her head, their tongues in a constant, sensual tangle. When they finally came up for air and managed to remove the garment, Leo’s expression of bald male lust seared itself into her memory for all time. “I didn’t have a change of panties in the bag,” Reese managed, explaining her total nudity around labored breaths. “Or a bra.”

“I’m not complaining. I’m the opposite of complaining.” His palm stroked downward from the between her breasts, brushing her belly and traveling back upward to take her right breast in his hand, molding it with just the right amount of pressure, the intensity on his face making her pulse quicken. “Christ, Reese. You’re so fucking beautiful.”

“I feel that way. When you look at me.” Wow. That was easily the most vulnerable thing she’d ever said during an intimate moment...and she didn’t feel any less secure for it.

The reverse, actually. The connection between them only burned hotter, brighter, Leo swooping down to claim her mouth for another kiss.

They made out. Naked, except for Leo's boxers. It went on for hours. It lasted minutes. She had no idea when her thoughts were tilting and spinning, wrapped up in this man. No one's touch came close to the buzz she got from dancing. Until now. This was better. Leo Bexley's mouth, the substantial weight of his body pressing her down, his hardness rocking against her sex again, again, again made her higher than dance.

They broke the kiss out of necessity, breath pelting each other's lips. "I want to go down on you," they said at the exact same moment, their resulting laughter one of the best sounds she'd ever been a part of making. "You first?" Reese purred, pushing at his shoulder in an attempt to roll Leo onto his back.

But he wouldn't budge. "No. You first."

He started to kiss his way down her throat, breasts, stopping for several moments to kiss them, rolling her distended nipples on his tongue, making her hips writhe until he had to pin them down beneath his weight—and God, God that made her so hot. "Maybe." His teeth raked her nipple lightly and she whimpered. "S-same time?"

Why she was suggesting such a maneuver when she'd never done it before in her life was anybody's guess. Leo didn't hesitate to agree, though. In his own way. The moment the suggestion was out of her mouth, she was quite simply being manhandled into position.

Leo turned onto his back, all heavy lidded and flexed with anticipation, dragging her over for a stabilizing kiss. Pulling away to look her in the eye, his hand took her knee and hauled it over his chest, facing her away from him in a straddle, her bare backside on full display a matter of inches from his face. And it should have been nerve-inducing, right? It wasn't. Drowsy from kissing in the dark, with this man, it was decadent, especially when his hands molded to her buttocks, his breath rasping in and out, that big thumb sliding up the

center and making her gasp. “Get back here and let me lick it, Reese.”

Well heck.

You don’t have to tell me twice.

Her knees slid backwards in the sheets, partly of her volition, partly because Leo was tugging her hips closer, then sliding his hand up to her back, pressing her forward, giving him access to her sex—and he immediately took full advantage, holding her still to tongue her folds apart, the tip teasing her clit, easy, easy, then laving it richly, his groan of male appreciation vibrating up through her body and making her desperate, achy to give, as well as receive.

The pleasure he wrought blurred her vision slightly, making it hard to concentrate on leaning forward to push down the waistband of his briefs. Freeing him.

Oh my God. Definitely proportionate to the rest of his large body.

And then she was so eager for the hard weight of him in her mouth, no concentration was required. There was only feeling. Only the slickness of her mouth and the salt of him waking up her taste buds. The ridges of his shaft traveling a filthy path along her tongue, the way he cursed every time she sank down, down, down just a little more each time. His hips lifted as if he couldn’t help but jolt at the pleasure, one of his hands gripping her hair, the movements of his tongue speeding, slanting, targeting her right where she needed it.

She’d always categorized this act as scandalous. Probably because every idiot male she’d ever met in high school laughed whenever the teacher asked the class to turn to page sixty-nine until she’d eye rolled enough times to disregard it as gross.

There was nothing scandalous or gross about this. They were two people who were too impatient to please each other that it couldn’t wait. They were greedy, Reese’s hips beginning to roll, pushing back into the strokes of his tongue, a whine breaking from her throat when Leo took her backside in his

hands, handling it roughly, squeezing her cheeks like dough, parting her for a slow plunge of his tongue inside of her.

The unexpected move made her moan, tilt her hips for more. Made her forget all about the barrier of the back of her throat and take him almost fully into her mouth, her hand tightening around the base of his swollen shaft. And she had the pleasure of watching his knees jerk up, feet digging into the bed. The trunks of his thighs shook, his harsh breaths bathing the most intimate parts of her body.

“Do it again, Jesus, please, Reese, do it again.”

She did, slower this time, pumping her fist around him on the way back up.

“Fuck,” he panted. “Fuck.”

His middle finger found her then, almost like a reward, polishing her clit in fast revolutions. Pressure built in her throat, along with a climax in her middle. Deep, down in her middle. That tongue sinking inside of her and twisting, tossed her over the high jump bar, the intensity of it giving her no choice but to let Leo’s erection fall from her mouth so she could scream her way through it, the single best orgasm of her life.

Every one of her senses heightened as it roared through her muscles, turning them to shaking jelly. The hand in her hair pulled, prickling her scalp deliciously, Leo’s body hair chafed her belly, making her feel feminine and delicate and coveted. An object of pleasure. Giving and receiving. The wicked clenching between her legs ebbed and flowed, her teeth chattering with every feverish pull of tissue. The rush of wetness, of bliss, had her floating so high off the ground, she was barely aware of Leo turning her around to face him. She simply opened her eyes and found herself facing him in a straddle, his mouth right there, giving her no choice but to kiss it for everything she was worth.

“What do you need now?” Leo asked hoarsely, after he’d succeeded in making her delirious. “You want me to put you on your back and lick it some more?” His palm coasted down over the curve of her buttocks, delving between and petting

her sex from behind. “Believe me, I’d already kill for another taste of this sweet little thing.”

Her hand moved, as if magnetized, to the male arousal lying large and hard on his stomach, massaging it up and down in a loose fist. “Can I have you inside me?”

One of his hands shot out before she’d uttered the final word, yanking his side table drawer open and producing a condom. Ripping it open with his teeth, he handed her the latex, head falling back on a groan. “Why am I not already there, Reese?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her words practically slurring together as she covered him, fingers clumsy in her haste. Task done, she rose up onto her knees and guided Leo where he was needed. Desperately. Even after the orgasm to end all orgasms, there was a lack of completion without this final joining. This deeper act of intimacy.

She’d never known herself to be noisy, or a screamer, but apparently that all changed today. The further she sank down on his thick inches, she more these desperate sounds poured from her throat, sawing in and out, culminating in a full-bodied moan once she’d seated Leo completely. He leaned up, pressing their foreheads together, his hands clamped down on her hips. And he spoke to her through his teeth. “Don’t move. Don’t move.”

“Okay,” she breathed. “Why?”

“Are you serious?” His laughter was strained. “You deep throated me twice. All while grinding this tight—God, it’s so tight—waxed pussy on my mouth. I’ve never had to concentrate so hard on not coming in my fucking life. Don’t. Move.”

Her entire body was trembling with the need for friction, but she bit down hard on her lip, held tight to his shoulders and tried to stay still. “The waxing m-makes it easier for costumes,” she said, in an attempt to distract them both. “Was I really grinding it?”

“This isn’t helping.”

“Sorry.”

Although, she kind of loved this. Having him poised right on the edge, that hard appendage pulsing inside of her as it could erupt at the slightest movement. She wanted to give him that. Wanted to drive him crazy. Give him the same kind of pleasure he'd just given her. Feeling feminine and maybe, possibly, a little evil, Reese squeezed the delicate muscles of her core around him, gratified when his eyes rolled back in his head. “Christ oh Christ oh Christ.”

There was no waiting after that. Leo shot up into a sitting position, gripped her bottom and jerked her into a gallop. With their mouths fused together, she rode him hard, throwing her hips back and slapping them forward, flesh to flesh, Reese crying out in the direction of the ceiling over the sheer carnality of the act. Fingernails dug into muscle, bed springs squeaked, sweat appeared on skin, and faster and faster they went, her vocal cords aching with throaty renditions of his name.

“That’s right, sweetheart,” Leo growled in her ear, his palm cracking down on her butt cheek. “Let everyone in the building know you’re getting that good dick.”

That command set off a telltale clench. “Oh my God. It’s...again. Now happening.”

“Fuuuuck, me too. I’m there. Can’t stop it.” When her head fell back on a moan, he raked his open mouth up the curve of her neck, across her shoulder. One of his hands left her backside, finding the wildly sensitive nub of flesh between her legs, rubbing it gently at first, then with firmer pressure. “Come on, Reese. Let me feel it,” he rasped. “Bet when you come, this pussy gets even tighter than your pretty little throat.” With that, his teeth sank lightly into the body part in question, just above the hollow, trapping her in a prison of lust.

And she spun, inundated with wave after wave of release.

It shook her, rattled her bones, and she was lifted higher into the atmosphere when Leo’s hips spasmed beneath her, her name leaving his mouth as a base, guttural sound. The second

time he said it—Reese—his tone had been laced with awe, that hearty body of his rolling beneath her, wringing out every ounce of what they'd done. She dropped her forehead onto his shoulder, licking the salt from his skin, and let him manhandle her through his climax, his hands pressing her down into his lap, shifting her, bouncing and jerking her until finally the tension left him and they fell backward together into the pillows.

For long moments, there was nothing but the sound of their labored breathing in the dim room. Here they were. The point where, in the past, Reese started to feel awkward, wondering what came next. There was none of that with Leo, though.

No, they only looked at each other across the pillows, content in the silence.

Content to...be together.

“Holy shit, Leo,” she said, finally. “That was...”

“Yeah.” He disposed of the condom and fell back against the pillows, his chest rising and falling. “The only phrase coming to mind is thank you. Because...Christ.” He shook his head. “Just...Christ. I’m supposed to just go back outside now in the regular world and walk around like everything is normal?”

She giggled, scooting closer to him, sighing over the way he lifted his arm automatically to let her into the warmth of his side, lifting the comforter over them both. With her head resting on his shoulder, their legs twining together in a tangle, Leo and Reese finally got their nap. With her body so deeply sated and the comfort Leo provided wrapped around her, Reese slept more deeply than she could ever remember, waking up with no idea of the time, a lopsided bun on her head and deliciously sore muscles.

Reluctantly disengaging from Leo, she sat up and stretched her arms up over her head, purring in her throat, when Leo lifted a hand, trailing his fingertips down the center of her bare breast, perking the nipple right up.

“We’ve either been asleep five minutes,” she said around a yawn. “Or five years.”

He hummed, his palm skimming down over her belly. “What time is your curtain call tonight?”

Thank God she wasn’t facing Leo or he would have witnessed the blood draining from her face. The pulse in her neck started hammering a million miles an hour, guilt and alarm colliding in her belly. “Um...” Weeknight. Shows are at seven. “Six o’clock.”

When Leo stiffened beside her, Reese assumed her answer must have been implausible. Good. She was caught. Part of her was relieved. How could she share such perfect intimacy with someone while being a total fraud? “Reese...” Leo started, sitting up. “It’s five-forty-nine.”

In other words, she was late for her fake job.

This is why lies were poisonous. It was never just one. One was only the beginning.

Reese looked around Leo’s cozy apartment. Through the door, she could see his perfect, grown-up kitchen. Just down the street, he had his own successful business. Knew exactly who he was, what he wanted, how to get it. Meanwhile, she’d reached for her dreams over and over, failing—just look at this afternoon—and the humiliation scabbled up her spine.

She couldn’t make herself turn to him and admit she was an unemployed dancer. That their meeting hadn’t been random. That she was actually in New York on a shoestring budget, taking one final shot at glory. The odds of her succeeding were so precarious, she couldn’t even talk about it out loud, lest they topple completely. Lest someone say to her, out loud, what a ridiculous idea it had been to stay. To try at all.

Well if she wasn’t woman enough to tell Leo the truth, then...right here, right now, is where she needed to break it off. Right? She’d gotten in too deep, never expected to...to bond with him so quickly and completely. Meaning, the longer she waited, the harder this would be.

With her heart lodged in her throat, Reese pushed out of bed, trying to remember where she'd put her clothes. Right. They were in her bag. "Whoops." She swallowed hard and left the bedroom, beelining for her duffel. "Good thing we're not too far away."

As quickly as possible, she pulled on her red bodysuit and loose pants, not bothering with the underwear. She sensed Leo watching from the doorway of his bedroom and heat pressed in behind her eyes. "I could come watch you dance sometime," he said.

Oh God. How far had she expected to take this lie?

"Yeah. I don't know," she returned, standing and shouldering her bag without turning around. "That would be like, a really big step. You know?"

Leo said nothing.

The acidic words that would end their budding relationship completely sat heavily on her tongue, but she couldn't bring herself to say them. To outright hurt him. It was hard to believe, but in a short space of time, she'd fallen for Leo. Causing him pain simply wasn't in her repertoire. Reese schooled her features and turned, sending him a quick smile over her shoulder.

"I should run," she blurted, turning the deadbolt lock and jogging out into the hallway, out of the building and onto the sidewalk, the memory of his somber expression haunting her all the way back to her rented closet.

CHAPTER 12



Leo stared through gritty eyes at the cheerfully written note on the dry erase board.

**TODAY IS SATURDAY THE SIXTH. ONLY EIGHT DAYS UNTIL
VALENTINE'S DAY!**

He pounded his fist into the pastry dough a little harder than necessary, wanting nothing more than to scrap the Sweetest Fix idea. It might have great margins and invited more local interest in the bakery, but every time Jackie handed him a new order, he thought of Reese and the way he fucked everything up so spectacularly. Asking to see her perform had been too much too soon. He could still remember the way her shoulders stiffened at the suggestion.

Buying a ticket to a performance might not seem like a huge deal to most, but in the world of behind the scenes Broadway, it means things were tipping toward serious. If he'd just taken a moment to think, he might have taken a more cautious approach with Reese. After all, she'd originally turned him down for a date before grudgingly agreeing. Then she'd tried to cancel. When he finally got her pinned down—literally and figuratively—he'd read way too much into her interest. Assumed it matched his own.

Obviously it didn't, since she wasn't returning his texts.

Meanwhile he couldn't go two minutes without remembering the shape of her in his arms while she slept, the memory of her smiling beside him on the couch. The way she'd murmured into his neck and cuddled closer, her knee

bumping into his thigh. He thought how the sunlight in his apartment set off gold in her hair, highlighted her unique combination of determination and fatigue. And God, he thought of the unbelievable sex. Without her hiccupping calls of his name, the bedroom had been deadly silent for the last three days. God, just knowing sex that incredible even existed had him beating off twice as often as usual, visions of a climaxing Reese playing in his head.

Thanks to his screw up, whatever they'd had was over before it started.

Leo realized his fists were buried unmoving in the dough, his gaze staring at nothing in the distance. With a swallow, he resumed his task. Of course the first time he really liked a girl, wanted to see a lot more of her, she ghosts him.

Although...there was something about her manner when they woke up from the nap that still didn't sit right with Leo. Maybe it was presumptuous of him to hold the gut belief that he knew Reese well enough to judge her behavior as Reese-like or non-Reese-like. There was no help for it, though, dammit. Did he imagine the unique sense of...homecoming between them? Was it possible the connection he'd felt had only been one-sided?

Of course it was. He'd always been a loner. The one time he'd made a friend growing up, he'd misread the guy's intentions, too, completely missing the ulterior motive. Keeping to himself was easier than trying to be social, but that decision was now biting him in the ass, because he had little experience with interpersonal relationships. How to read someone.

It hadn't seemed like he needed those skills with Reese. With her, everything had been easy. But he must have been wrong. Must have misread a sign somewhere along the way.

Leo threw the pastry dough into a pie tin, shaping it with his fingers. He poured in the apples and cinnamon filling, forming a lattice pattern over the top with ribbons of dough. With the final pie of the morning in the oven, he found himself unable to settle on the next task, his feet moving to the back

exit, instead. Maybe some air would clear his head enough of thoughts of Reese to do his damn job.

He propped the door open with a broom and stepped out onto the sidewalk, the cold February air dropping his body temperature by several degrees on contact. On a weekday, even this early in the morning, there would be a ton of foot traffic by now. But on a Saturday, there was only the odd person walking their dog or braving the early morning chill for coffee and a newspaper. It was silent enough that Leo could hear the tinkling of the bell over the door in the Cookie Jar. He'd only closed his eyes briefly, a drowsy, smiling Reese filtering into his thoughts, when a voice effectively broke that silence.

“Leo, right? Are you Leo Bexley? Oh my God. This is perfection.”

One eye popped open to find two young people, a girl and a guy dressed way too nice for a Saturday. They were standing in his personal space. “Why?”

“You own the Cookie Jar,” the girl pointed out.

Leo raised an eyebrow, impatient for her to continue. He hadn't gotten enough sleep in the last three nights for this shit. The guy jumped in, instead, waving his phone in the air. “You might know us? I'm Daschul. This is Rylee. We're the VIP Section on TikTok. We review restaurants in Manhattan. Just hit a million followers yesterday.”

They seemed to be waiting for a reply, so Leo said, “Congratulations, I guess?”

“Oh my God. Thanks,” cooed Rylee. “Daschul's friend's stepsister posted about the Sweetest Fix thing you're doing, but like, no one follows her boring ass, so we're going to do it better. Can we TikTok in the bakery?”

“You should let us. Seriously. We have a million followers and that doesn't include YouTube, so...” Daschul trailed off, swiping through his phone. Which he then promptly held up to start filming Leo.

“Nope,” Leo said, turning to go back inside.

“Hey VIPs,” Rylee exclaimed, stopping Leo with a hand on his elbow. “We’re here with Leo Bexley, owner of the Cookie Jar on Ninth. If you’re looking for a gift for that special someone, or if you’re just trying to like, hook up, the Cookie Jar came up with a low-key gift idea that we are officially recommending.” She stopped to execute a baffling series of dance steps. “It’s called the Sweetest Fix, kiddies. Link in our IG bio for this cozy widdle West Side bakery. Just tell Leo about your significant other or booty call or whatever and he’ll whip up a personalized cake pop.”

An undiscovered vein between Leo’s eyebrows started to throb. “No.” He shook his head, trying to step of the frame, but the synchronized pair moved with him. “We’re closed to orders. Not taking any more. Can I go now?”

“You mean, like, there’s a waiting list?” Rylee asked, eyes growing rounder. “Or a VIP list? There has to be a way to get on it—”

“There isn’t.” He wedged himself into the door opening, holding the broom between him and the overdressed pair. “Don’t bother.”

“Can we post this?” Daschul called before he could close the door.

“I don’t care,” Leo shouted back. Maybe it would be a good thing if the weirdo twins did put the impromptu interview up on TalkTalk or whatever the hell it was called. If people knew the bakery was closed to submissions, maybe Jackie would stop passing him new orders. They’d agreed to keep the online form open until five days before Valentine’s Day and he was almost in the clear. If the video was effective, he could avoid reading any more notes from people gushing about their partners. They were just reminders to Leo that he’d blown it with Reese.

Through the rear door of the bakery, he heard Rylee say to Daschul, “Let’s grab some shots from inside the bakery, ’kay?”

“Obvs.”

Leo sighed and went back to work, forgetting about the encounter within minutes of getting back into his routine. But he would be remembering it soon enough...

* * *

REESE SAT on the floor of the dance studio, wincing as she removed the tape wrapping from her bloody toes. The last three days were one long, continuous blur of dancing. Everywhere hurt. Her lower back protested the slightest movement, but she bent forward and re-wrapped her toes, anyway, giving the task single-minded focus, just like she'd given every task since Wednesday afternoon.

This is why I'm in New York City. Dancing.

Not to fall for a big, gruff, endearing baker.

With mad oral skills and dirty talk game.

It was stupid to miss Leo, right? To miss having that protective arm slung over her middle, holding her close while she napped? It only happened once. Why did she feel like she'd just gotten out of a long-term relationship?

Not answering his texts kept her up at night.

They were so perfectly Leo. To the point. She could hear his voice in every one of them.

Reese. Hi.

I hope you're having a better day.

Can we talk?

Swallowing the knot in her throat, Reese shoved her sore feet back into her shoes, eyes straying to the clock. Five minutes until the break was over, then back to the free class. Despite the fact that she'd exhausted herself with two auditions yesterday, making it to the second round of both before being cut halfway through the routine, she'd set her alarm for five a.m. to make a free workshop.

Sitting still for even a few minutes already had her muscles coiling up and stiffening, so she leaned forward and gripped the arches of her feet, groaning at the pulls and twinges. She didn't look up when Cori fell into a cross-legged heap beside her. Her new closet-dwelling friend had been at the same auditions yesterday, suffering the same fate, and they'd walked to the workshop together this morning. Reese liked Cori, even if the dynamic between them was competitive at times. Hard to avoid it when they spent every waking moment strained, the prospect of failure hanging over their heads like storm clouds.

“So, okay, I have to show you something,” Cori said, tapping away on her phone. “Right now, right now.”

Reese turned her head, asking absently, “Did a new open call get posted?”

“No.” Cori held the phone up so Reese could see the screen. “This TikTok of Leo Bexley is going viral. Didn't you date him?”

Seeing Leo on the screen shot her heart up into her mouth. “Oh...no. We didn't...” His mouth moved, but she couldn't hear his voice—and after three days without it, she didn't have the willpower to pass on the temptation. “Can you turn it up?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Cori tapped the volume button on the side of her phone. “Hold up. Let me start it over.”

Over the next sixty seconds, Reese watched clips of Leo talking in between sweeping shots of the bakery display cases at the Cookie Jar, the video set to a hip-hop classic. It was clear that he didn't want to be interviewed and knowing him, there was no way he'd agreed to it. How did they manage to get him on camera?

Cori snorted when Reese played the TikTok a second time, her chest growing heavy when she noticed the circles under Leo's eyes, the dusting of flour on his apron. The crook of his neck would smell like chocolate. His arms would be so warm. Knowing he was only a short walk away made her pulse pound. But she'd made it three days. Going back now would be the equivalent of playing games with him. Walking away

had been the right thing to do after her deception. It had all gone too far in the first place.

Besides, she only had enough money to make it eight more days. According to the constant math she'd been performing in her head, her funds—and her closet subplot—would run out on Valentine's Day. If she wanted to catch a break by then, she'd have to be at every audition, every class, every open call. No time for anything else.

“Brilliant marketing move,” Cori laughed. “Right?”

Reluctantly, Reese handed her back the phone. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, telling people they can't have something, especially this Gen Z audience, is like ringing a dinner bell. The Cookie Jar website crashed an hour after the VIP Section posted this video. The Sweetest Fix might as well be the newest iPhone.”

Reese's mouth hung open, her head swimming with the implications of what her friend was telling her. “Oh no,” she breathed, closing her eyes.

In the TikTok, Leo said submissions were closed, but Leo had told Reese they wouldn't officially stop accepting orders for a few more days. Meaning, the Cookie Jar got so many submissions, their website crashed. Now Leo would have to fulfill them all.

And this whole thing had originated with her.

Two sharp claps signaled class resuming. With guilt germinating in her stomach, Reese stood up and fell into position, memorizing the quick burst of choreo being demonstrated at the front of the room. She executed the moves, improving her timing slightly with each pass, but her head wasn't in it. No, her brain might as well be on the counter of the Cookie Jar—and that's where it stayed on the way home, with Cori and a few other dancers chattering beside her on the sidewalk. The animated group invited her to brunch, but she declined, walking the rest of the distance to her building alone.

Her plan was to shower, change and search online for more open call listings, but when she walked into the apartment and smelled chocolate, a wave of sadness rolled through Reese, halting her halfway between the front door and the hallway.

Marie, her landlady, turned from the kitchen counter where she appeared to be whipping frosting in a standing mixer. She cast an assessing glance in Reese's direction, drawing a chocolate-dipped finger in and out of her mouth slowly. "Broadway has chewed you up and spit you out already?"

Reese firmed her chin. "Not just yet." She'd already learned to have thick skin where the blunt Miss LaRue was concerned. "What are you making?"

"Dark chocolate truffles." For a moment, the landlady seemed hesitant to share more, but she finally patted a white sack on the counter. "This is cocoa powder used at my favorite bakery in Paris. My childhood friend Jean-Marc sends me some every month. There is nothing in this country that compares."

"Wow." Her throat hurt. "I know someone who would love that."

"The boy you are moping about, I assume."

"I'm not—"

The French woman's snort cut her off. "You chose the dance over the boy. I did this, too, once upon a time."

"It's a little more complicated than that," Reese said quietly.

Marie hummed.

"Do you regret it? Choosing dance over everything?" Reese asked.

"Depends what time of day, what time of year, what time of month you are asking, *oui?*" A brief smile danced across her lips and she regarded Reese out of the corner of her eye for a beat, then flipped the standing mixer on a higher setting. "Jean-Marc sent me two bags of cocoa this month," she said

loudly to be heard over the whirring appliance. “If you have use for the rest of his bag, I suppose I can spare some.”

“Oh.” The unexpected kindness from the usually standoffish woman had her sputtering. “Thank you.”

Reese made it two steps to her bedroom, before she turned back around and collected the bag of French cocoa powder from the kitchen, making Marie chuckle quietly. Reese would drop the sack off tonight at the bakery for Leo. Just by way of apology for causing him so much extra work. Maybe she would include a tiny, little—friendly—note. This was a safe move because he wouldn’t be there and it would go a little ways toward easing her guilt. This whole viral TikTok thing was squarely on her head and she owed him a gesture, at the very least.

He wouldn’t be there.

She’d be in and out. No risk involved whatsoever.

CHAPTER 13



Every business owner in Manhattan dreamed of wall-to-wall customers.

Even Leo, on occasion.

But not today.

It was getting close to dinnertime and the place was jam-packed with young people offering them an obscene amount of money to be added to the non-existent VIP list and asking to take selfies with him, which he all too quickly declined. Apparently in the space of a few hours, he'd become known as #meanbaker on TalkTalk and he wanted no part of it.

After their website received two hundred orders in the space of fifteen minutes, Leo was able to convince Jackie to close the submission form, but that didn't stop the traffic from crashing the site completely. Leo knew he was supposed to be thrilled about this. But he only wanted reality put back the way it had been this morning.

Or better yet, Wednesday, before he'd overstepped and sent Reese running out of his apartment like her hair was on fire.

Was it that thought of Reese that had him imagining her in the crowd of fifty trust fund kids, pushing her way toward the register?

No.

She was actually there. Reese was in the Cookie Jar.

When their eyes locked, her step faltered and he could see it. The way she thought about turning around and walking back out. His pulse flew into a race and he knew, didn't have a doubt that he would go after her, if she did. Seeing her face was like breathing fresh air after being trapped in a fucking mine and he couldn't let it end so soon.

She didn't leave, though.

Leo could only stare at her mutely as she came forward slowly, stopping in front of the counter and setting something down between them. That ease she brought with her flowed into his bloodstream, the silence seeming to pack in around them, insulating them from the surrounding crowd. The bakery might as well have been empty except for her.

"I saw the TikTok. Which is technically now on...every platform." They traded a grimace. "I brought you cocoa powder from Paris to dull the sting of unwanted internet fame. Courtesy of my landlady, the mysterious Miss LaRue," she said, finally, loud enough to be heard over the noise. "Leo, I'm sorry about all this."

He liked it too much that she knew him. Well enough to know he would hate this disorder to his world, as opposed to loving the extra business and attention. "It's not your fault, Reese."

A smile ghosted across her lips and instantly, he was in physical pain that he couldn't kiss her. "It is a little my fault."

"Fine," he said gruffly. "A little."

Without breaking eye contact, she nudged the bag toward him. "Mea culpa."

Leo picked up the sack, pretending to examine it, even though he could think of nothing but how pretty she looked. "You didn't have to do that."

"I knew you'd appreciate it."

"I do," he said, meaning it.

Reese rolled her lips inward, glancing around the shop. "Do you want to maybe...talk in the back?"

Maybe he should have double-checked to make sure Tad and Jackie had everything covered, but not a split second passed before he answered. “Yes.”

Some kid bounded up to the glass. “Mean Baker, can I get a self—”

“Nope.” He lifted the hatch for a giggling Reese and she ducked under. A minute later, they were in the back, the excessive noise muffled by the swinging door. For a moment, all he could do was look at her. “I can hang up your coat.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Watching her flick open the purple buttons one by one, her graceful fingers seemed to move in slow motion, causing his tongue to grow thick in his mouth. She parted the wool and shrugged it off, her breasts jiggling left to right inside her tight, white V-neck sweater. Jesus, he could actually hear himself swallow, his body recalling the erotic sensation of her hips whipping back and forth on his lap, her mouth open in a throaty moan.

Was she staring at his mouth or was that wishful thinking?

“Um...” Her cheeks were the color of cotton candy. “I’m not just sorry about the extra work. I’m sorry about not answering your texts. The way I ran out the other day...”

“I pushed it. That’s on me.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, asking to come see me dance was totally normal. Sweet, actually. I’m the one who acted weird.” She looked like she wanted to say more, so he waited. Watched her pace around his workspace, hands tucking and untucking themselves into the pockets of her skirt. “I guess I feel some pressure, you know? To make the most of this opportunity to dance.”

“Is the pressure coming from you?”

“Mostly. Yes. Investing all this time in something and not seeing it through. I guess that kind of scares me. I don’t want to have regrets. I don’t want my mom...to have them, either. Not that she would even allow herself to have them. Out loud. She’s such a good mom. A friend, too. But...” The light sheen

in Reese's eyes gave him the overwhelming urge to hold her. "When my father left, she rebuilt her whole life around this thing I love. I don't want her to feel like she wasted her time. I want her to say...it was worth every second."

"Reese..." It took his full effort to remain where he was standing. "You are making every second count. No one could say you're not seizing the opportunity."

She looked down at her feet. "There's always someone better. I'm just...I can barely keep up. That's the truth." She wet her lips, lifted her eyes to him. "I just want to make sure I'm giving it everything, you know? It's a constant push just to be decent."

Leo's throat was too dry for swallowing. "I hope you weren't worried about me coming to watch you and being underwhelmed."

"I wasn't. I don't worry about anything bad when it comes to you. You're so...solid."

She blinked, as if realizing she'd revealed too much.

Maybe she had, because that admission had his pulse slamming into his jugular.

"Reese," he rasped. "Stop avoiding me. If you're here now, you don't really want to."

"Of course I don't want to. Wednesday was..."

"Wednesday," he growled. Rein it in. The last thing he wanted to do was give her another reason to get skittish. At the same time, he wanted to make plans. He wanted to make plans with this girl. "What are you comfortable with, Reese? With... us."

"Us," she repeated. "What are my options?"

"How about I give you one option. If you don't like it, I'll come up with another."

She blew out a breath. "Okay."

Leo took a stride in her direction, noting the way her pupils dilated, her lips parting slightly. And knowing he wasn't

the only one who was under this intense physical pull gave him some added confidence. But not so much that he lost sight of Reese's reservations. She didn't want a distraction from her career. So he'd minimize the risk of that. Let it happen at her pace even if it killed him. "For now, we do this one day at a time. Tonight, I take you out to dinner. Tomorrow, you decide if it's dance that needs your attention." Slowly, he backed her up against the industrial refrigerator, cupping her jaw and tilting her head back. "Or if you want to let me give you some attention."

"You give really good attention," she whispered, fingers curling in his apron.

Their mouths melted together like warm chocolate meeting melted marshmallow, just sinking right in, mixing needs and becoming indistinguishable. He held his lust in check and let the kiss take its own course. At least until Reese twined her arms around his neck, going up on tiptoes and aligning her hips with his lap, both of them inhaling at the contact of their sexes. Hard on soft. Both of them remembering what he felt like inside of her.

What it felt like to fuck each other.

"More," she breathed.

"Goddamn. Missed you." Leo flattened her roughly against the refrigerator, his tongue sinking deeper, his hand climbing upward beneath the back of her skirt, getting a tight handful of her sweet ass, kneading it like he would—

The swinging door flew open.

"Leo," Jackie started, clapping a hand over her mouth when she saw them in a compromising position. The door behind her slapped shut again. Just not before several customers took pictures with their phones, gasping and whispering to one another. "I'm so, so sorry..." Jackie said, backing out of the room. "I didn't see you come in, Reese."

"It's okay," Reese said, her inability to catch her breath giving him way too much satisfaction. "Hi Jackie. I-I was, um..."

“We were talking about going to dinner,” Leo continued the sentence for Reese quietly, studying her reaction up close. “If Reese doesn’t have any plans.”

A conflict waged itself on her face, followed by... something. Like maybe she couldn’t help but say yes, same way he couldn’t help thinking about her. Wanting her. Like maybe there was nothing one-sided about these extraordinary feelings whatsoever. A man could hope.

“Okay,” she said, closing her eyes. “Let’s go to dinner.”

CHAPTER 14



This was a nice restaurant.

One that Reese probably couldn't afford if she wanted to eat for the next week. Her step faltered on the way through the entrance, the thin bills in her wallet shrieking in terror. It was located in the basement level of a brownstone in Midtown. Low ceilings, dim lighting, eclectic décor. Because it was Saturday night, the place was packed, mere inches of space between the tables. Conversations were loud to compete with the buzzy music.

"Oh..." She tugged on Leo's hand, which she'd been holding on the walk east. "You know, we can just go grab a slice. They probably don't have a table..."

"Leo!" A young man threaded his way toward them through the crowd, his T-shirt rolled high on his arms to show off his tattoo sleeves. "You're actually here to eat?" he yelled, when he reached them, noting Leo and Reese's intertwined fingers with interest.

"Yeah," Leo rumbled. "You have that booth in back?"

The man craned his neck to glance back at the restaurant. "The party sitting there are finishing up, then it's all yours. Give me five."

Leo nodded and the guy took off again, picking up empty plates and wine glasses on his way to the back of the space, disappearing into what looked like the kitchen.

"How do you know him?" Reese asked.

“I come by twice a week to make deliveries. We’re their dessert supplier.”

A smile twitched her lips. “Are you trying to impress me?”

“Yes.”

Reese laughed and leaned her head against his shoulder, sighing over the way he automatically wrapped an arm around her upper half, pulling her closer. The ease of them, the sense of belonging was too nice. Too perfect. And she didn’t want to second-guess it right now.

I’ll work twice as hard next week. Dance until I drop.

Anything was better than using Leo as a ladder rung—and she would make it.

She’d see her name one day in a Playbill. She had to believe that.

Everything would be easier once she had some solid ground beneath her feet.

“Table’s ready,” called Tattoo Sleeves, waving menus at them.

They were led through a velvet curtain, which helped reduce the noise in the rear of the space. Tables were more spread out, their booth in the corner. Private, dark, intimate. Reese felt sexy just sliding onto the pillowed seat, Leo taking the spot beside her and resting a hand on her knee, squeezing it and sending a pull of longing straight to her core.

A bottle of red wine was brought over, on the house, though Leo ordered a beer regardless. They dipped crusty bread in olive oil, ordered a bunch of appetizers to share, and Reese couldn’t deny it was already the best meal she’d had in a week. Possibly ever.

Leo’s middle finger drew a circle on the inside of her knee and she shivered.

“Cold?” he asked.

She squinted over at him playfully. “The cold doesn’t exist to me. I’m from Wisconsin.”

“That explains you wearing shorts in February,” he said, earning himself an elbow nudge. “The winters back home are that bad, huh?”

“Let’s put it this way. We didn’t have snow days. We had snow weeks. That’s how long it took us to dig out the driveway.”

He resumed his stroking of the inside of her knee. Between his touch, the romantic atmosphere and the glass of wine she’d already drunk, she already felt achy and swollen in her panties. “And it was always just you and mom to do the digging?”

“Since I was eleven, yes. That’s when my father was offered a tech job in Florida. We were supposed to follow him after the school year ended, but the separation made my parents realize they’d kind of grown apart, so...we stayed in Cedarburg. I hear from him on birthdays and Christmas, but it’s not the relationship I wish we had.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, meaning it.

Reese nodded, gave him a lopsided smile. “Anyway, my mom made a game out of shoveling snow, so it was fun, instead of a chore. For every twenty scoops of snow we shoveled, we added another marshmallow to our hot chocolate afterward. By the end, we needed an entirely separate cup for excess mallows.”

“Excess mallows.” He seemed to turn that over in his mind, finding it amusing. “Is it too late to rename my shop?”

“Yes. I love the Cookie Jar as a name. It’s so welcoming.” Feeling loose-limbed and relaxed, she watched Leo pour her another glass of wine. “What about your mother? Are you close?”

He hedged. “We’re kind of a holidays and birthdays only family. I have a good relationship with my mother, but I wouldn’t call us close. She runs a charity that hosts kids from other cities, brings them to Broadway shows to foster an appreciation for the arts. It keeps her busy. She lives separately from my father now, but they never divorced. They’re good

friends, actually. They're just too fussy to live happily with another person."

She exhaled. "Wow. That all sounds so sophisticated."

Leo shrugged. "Only people with a lot of money have that kind of option."

"Yeah," she agreed, searching for a way to veer the conversation away from Bernard Bexley. "What about you? Did you get the fussy gene?"

"Only with my kitchen drawers."

"Really?" She laughed. "Do you have your utensils organized according to height or is it an alphabetical order situation?"

"Ah, I'm not that bad," he chuckled, turning his beer in a circle on the table. "It's more like controlled chaos. I'm the only one who knows where I keep the whisk or the piping tips. If they're not in that exact place when I go to look, they might as well be lost forever. I'm never going to find them."

Reese pursed her lips. "I think what you're describing is the male condition."

"Yeah?" He smiled into a sip of his beer, set it back down. "What do you know about the male condition?"

She paused to think. "Nothing, actually. I'm mainly basing this on the reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond* my mother forces me to watch." They shared a laugh, doing that thing they always did, moving closer in that uniquely unconscious way, Reese's body turning toward Leo's in the cushioned seat, the outside of her breast pressing to his shoulder.

Eventually they couldn't get any closer and Leo made a frustrated sound, lifting Reese's left knee, draping her leg over his thigh. "This okay?"

"Yes." Her whisper sounded a little winded as she cinched her right leg over. "Just let me make sure I'm not flashing the restaurant."

"Sorry," he leaned back slightly and glanced down, his Adam's apple sliding up and down at the sight of his big hand

cradling her thigh. “I thought you had those leggings things on under your skirt.”

“No. Just thigh highs.”

“What are those?”

Instead of telling him, she tugged up the hem of her skirt, showing him where the thick, black material of the stockings ended, leaving the tops of her thighs bare.

“Jesus, Reese,” he growled, his hand dragging up her leg to brush the exposed swath of skin, the tip of his index finger tucking beneath the edge and sliding left to right. “I guess I’m going to eat dinner hard tonight.”

In her peripheral vision, she noticed the waiter approaching and pulled her skirt back down. “Sorry about that,” she managed through the clamor of her pulse.

Both of them seemed to regroup while the waiter set down their appetizers. Miniature pork belly tacos, dates wrapped in bacon, shrimp bathed in soy sauce and ginger. Basically she’d died and gone to heaven. Leo didn’t take his hand off her thigh throughout the meal, using his left one to eat, meaning a lot of bites got stuck in her throat and required healthy gulps of wine to wash them down. By the time the waiter brought out the chocolate-filled churro for them to share, the thrum between her legs had turned into the drum section of a marching band, beating toward the crescendo.

It didn’t help that Leo watched her in the candlelight like she was the actual dessert. Having her legs parted, even if she’d been careful to keep herself publicly decent, was fast becoming a problem, so she removed her thigh from Leo’s and crossed them securely, almost moaning over the friction of her own thighs meeting.

“Everything okay over there?”

Had his voice gotten deeper since they’d arrived? She stopped just short of fanning herself. “Yes.” *Get yourself together.* “I just hope they’re not charging you for this churro, since you’re the one who made it.”

His lips twitched as he picked up the cinnamon-covered dough, holding it to her lips. “Take the first bite.”

“Yes, sir.” She sunk her teeth into the crunchy dessert, chewing, licking sugar from the corner of her mouth and watched his chest shudder up and down, telling her she was far from the only one getting worked up. “Oh my God,” she moaned, the taste of the churro momentarily demanding her attention. “This is phenomenal. I didn’t see these in the bakery.”

He took a healthy bite, his throat muscles working in a swallow. “I only make these for the restaurant. A couple of other ones, too. Tres leches cake. An almond tart...”

“Do you supply to other restaurants?”

“Not yet. I’m thinking about it.” He cleared his throat, shifting in the seat. “Maybe opening up into the shop next door and expanding the kitchen. Right now, we don’t have room for another baker, but the idea is to have someone there to focus on restaurant contracts.”

“That’s amazing, Leo.” Her hand flew to his arm. “Do you have a timeline?”

“Not yet.” A beat passed. “You’re the first person I’ve told about it. Still kind of chewing the whole idea over.”

She forced a solemn look onto her face. “You’re worried about having to rearrange the utensils, aren’t you?”

His smile tied a knot in her chest. “You got me.” They stared at each other through a few second of silence, the noise around them drowned out by her heartbeat, his smile eventually slipping into a more serious expression. “I want to ask you about your job, Reese. I just get the feeling you’re protective about it. I don’t want to make you run again.”

Her stomach dropped, but she did her best not to show a reaction. “I won’t run.” She took a long sip of wine to moisten her dry throat. Oh God, please, I don’t want to lie to this man anymore. The knowledge that she wasn’t using him, as originally intended, and was trying to make it on her own merit did nothing to calm her nerves. When she pictured the

horror on his face when she told him she was not, in fact, a gainfully employed dancer, but a dime a dozen hopeful sleeping in a closet, she could only croak, “What do you want to ask me?”

When he blew out a thoughtful breath and turned in the seat, like he couldn't wait to find out more about her, she fell for him a little more. “Is *Daliah's Folly* your first show? Did you travel from Wisconsin for open calls or did you move here first?”

A combination of relief and resignation settled over her.

For better or worse, this was the moment of truth. These were direct questions. She couldn't dig herself any deeper. He deserved to know whose meal he was paying for, who he was spending his time with. His reaction was irrelevant at this point. Whatever it was, she would deserve it. But she liked him too much to tell him any more falsehoods.

A hard lump formed in her throat. “Leo—”

Loud voices cut her off, coming from a group of people entering the back room through the velvet curtain. They were laughing so loud, it was impossible to ignore them. She turned her head and immediately recognized the man at the center of the pack.

Tate Dillinger. Tony award-winning dancer.

Also known as the friend who'd burned Leo in high school to get ahead.

“What are the odds, huh?” Leo said quietly.

You have no idea.

Reese's gaze shot back to Leo's, finding the skin around his mouth pulled taut. Needing to be his ally, her hand curled into his automatically, finding it clammier than before. She rummaged through her mind for something supportive to say, but everything sounded hypocritical. Because it was.

“Hey,” she settled on, her voice sounding strained. “You know, the best way to deal with this might be to smile at him. Take it from a girl who did cut-throat dance competitions her

whole life. There's always someone walking by who beat you last year. Or reminds you of a terrible day. Sometimes if you pretend you've shaken it off, your head follows." She threaded their fingers together more securely. "Besides, if he has half a brain, he regrets losing you as a friend more than you regret your part in what happened."

Leo considered her as she spoke. His expression was unreadable, so she definitely wasn't expecting it when he said, "God, I'm fucking crazy about you, Reese."

"Oh," she whispered, semi-dizzy. Was this swooning? "I'm crazy about you right back," she said, meaning every word. But also extremely aware that if Tate Dillinger hadn't walked in, they would be having a much different conversation.

"Oh yeah?" Leo said.

"Yeah."

"And I don't care who walks in." He ducked his head on one of those rumbling chuckles. "Doesn't seem to matter as long as I'm sitting with you."

He leaned in and brushed their lips together, Reese allowing hers to part so he could sample her with a slow, restrained kiss, their tongues meeting briefly, yet sparking enough electricity to power the entire city block. "You know," she murmured, "kissing your date is probably just as effective as smiling...i-in terms of showing an old rival that you're on to better things. Maybe you should do it again."

"No." Their foreheads met and rolled. "When I kiss you, there's only you. Nothing else."

They hummed into another light sipping of lips, Leo's hand fisting in the front of her skirt, an arousing contrast to the restraint he was showing with his mouth.

"Ready to go?"

Thoughts scrambled, Reese could only nod.

Leo signaled for the check, grunting in offense and shaking his head when Reese offered to pay for half—causing a sheepish, inward sigh of relief. They waited while the waiter

ran his credit card and brought back the receipt to be signed. Leo helped Reese out of the booth, assisting her in putting on her coat and rejoining their hands.

“Hey!” someone called. “Mean Baker!”

“Oh my God, I thought it was him,” another diner gasped. “See if he’ll take a selfie.”

“Christ,” Leo muttered, starting to pull her toward the exit. Then he stopped suddenly. “What was it you said at my place? Don’t overthink my side of every interaction. Give people a backstory and make it about them?”

The way he recalled exactly what she’d said made her forget to breathe. “Yeah,” she managed around the flutters. “Maybe they’re aspiring bakers. Or maybe they don’t like being bombarded outside of their job by TikTokers, either, and admire the way you handled it.”

“I thought it was TalkTalk.” Reese burst into laughter and his deep rumble joined hers. “All right, fine, let’s take some selfies.”

Reese tucked her clasped hands up beneath her chin, uncaring that her grin was verging on maniacal and watched Leo suffer through selfies with four different people. All while a Tony award winner watched in stony silence from a nearby booth.

On the way out of the restaurant, she leaned into Leo and kissed his cheek. “I take it back. That was way better than smiling at him.”

CHAPTER 15



*T*his girl made him feel light.
Happy.

He couldn't recall a single other time in his life that the emotion of happiness was so obvious that he could recognize it in the moment. Call it by name. But walking crosstown holding Reese's hand, he knew. Call him crazy, but he knew she was the one. The fact that they weren't on solid ground and didn't have a spoken commitment made him anxious, no denying it, but if having her meant patience, he'd dig to the bottom of the barrel for it. And then he'd find another barrel and crack that one open, too. She was worth that and more.

There was no mistaking her discomfort when he brought up dancing tonight. Again. While that really confused him, he didn't want to prod the sore spot any more. For a long time, he'd been protective of his baking. His parents never showed interest or encouraged him, so he'd built a wall around that part of his identity. If he didn't reveal that part of himself to people, they couldn't tell him he should be playing football or taking a job in the theater industry, like his parents.

Opening the Cookie Jar had been kind of an exposing experience. He'd made himself wide open for criticism. For judgment and failure. Maybe Reese had a similar wall erected around her love of dancing, although...that didn't track, since she had a supportive mother. Maybe it had something to do with her father. Or perhaps being a Broadway performer was still relatively new and she didn't want to jinx herself by getting comfortable. Complacent.

Whatever the reason she didn't want to talk about her job, Leo would wait for her to tell him herself. They had plenty of time.

If she decided to see him again. Didn't he promise her they'd take it one day at a time?

Great plan.

One that should have made Leo feel like he skated on thin ice. But...he didn't. How was he supposed to be anything but optimistic as hell when she smiled over at him, the February breeze blowing a strand of dark blonde hair across her face?

"Are you okay walking or should we grab a cab?" he asked.

"I'm happy walking. I love the city at night." Their joined hands swung between them. "Besides, I'm a straight shot west on this street. It's not far."

"Good. I'll walk you to the door."

Did he imagine the way the blood drained out of her face? Or was it just the streetlight hitting her in a certain way. "Oh," she laughed. "You don't have to do that."

"I'm not letting you walk home alone, Reese," he said firmly, unsurprised by the protectiveness building in his gut, because what didn't this girl make him feel? "You don't have to invite me up. That's not what it's about. I just need you safe."

After a moment, she gave a jerky nod. "Okay. Just to the front door of the building, then. It's not that I don't want you to come up. I just have a really early workshop—"

"And tomorrow is Sunday, so that means a matinee performance, in addition to your regular show," he said, squeezing her hand. "You don't have to explain."

This time, when she looked over at him, he couldn't read her expression. But he couldn't deny the intuition that he was missing something here. With her. About her. Once again, he reminded himself to be patient. It was right on the tip of his

tongue to ask Reese to spend the night at his place, but the last thing he needed to add was pressure.

As badly as he ached to be inside of her again.

The image of those thigh high tights would not leave him alone.

“Bryant Park,” he rasped, jerking his chin in the direction of the landmark to his left. “You’ve probably been here a few times by now.”

“Actually,” she murmured. “I haven’t. Show me?”

Leo steered her into a turn and headed up the wide concrete steps, guiding her into the nearly deserted park. On a cool night in February, the crowd was thinner than usual, save people buying coffee from the vendors that surrounded the giant green. “There’s an ice-skating rink here at Christmas.”

Reese sent him an interested look. “Do you skate?”

“Not for a million dollars,” he answered without hesitating. “They never have my shoe size, anyway. It’s always been my get out of jail free card.” They stopped at the edge of the sprawling lawn, the trees whispering in the wind behind them, the sounds of city traffic humming on all sides. “I bet you’re a great skater, aren’t you?”

“I’ve made it my mission in life to be good at anything that requires me to wear a sparkly costume.” Her laugh turned into a wince. “I just had a flashback to a high school field trip.”

“Oh God. That’s never good.”

“You’re going to end the date if I tell you this.”

Leo’s head fell back on a laugh. “Now I really need to know.”

She visibly braced for the reveal. “The entire freshman class went ice skating. It was an end of the year trip. Parental chaperones and everything. Loud bus rides. I was trying to get Drake Millhouse’s attention. So I...oh lord. I wore a white, sequined skating dress under my street clothes and executed a big costume change in the bathroom when we got to the rink. I

really thought a bunch of fourteen-year-olds were going to cheer me on.”

“What did they do instead?” Leo asked.

“They roasted me.” She shook her head. “I can’t even blame them.”

Leo was so glad to be talking about her. She had no problem talking about her past. It was only the present where she seemed to throw up roadblocks. “Were you an overachiever in high school?”

“Yes. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been. Being second or third best wouldn’t hurt so bad now.” She seemed to catch herself, snapping her mouth shut. Looking thoughtful, she stared out at the giant lawn. “Hey, Leo. Maybe instead of talking to you about my dancing...I could show you?”

Seeing that hopefulness in her eyes? He’d have given her anything she asked for. “I’d love that, Reese.”

Her nod was brisk. “Hold my stuff.”

He watched, stupefied, as she stripped off her purse and coat, piling them into his arms. “You’re going to dance here? Now? It’s freezing.”

“I’m a Wisconsin girl, remember?” She winked at him, taking a position several yards away on the hard grass. “I once performed outside at a used car lot when there was still ice on the ground. True story.”

She struck a pose and Leo knew enough to recognize her lines were what his father would call immaculate. Right there, in the middle of the park, she moved fluidly into motion, a contemporary routine. There had to be music playing inside of her head. And she made him hear it, too, curling her spine downward, hands sweeping toward the ground, slowly rising back up, fingertips reaching and arcing overhead, leaving a pattern in the night sky. She turned slowly, then faster, faster, leaping to land without a sound.

The sight of her dancing in the park, her face at peace, the city sprouting up behind her, was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. She couldn’t be real. And she was good. She was

really fucking good. Considering she'd made it to Broadway, that shouldn't have surprised him. But he'd watched a million dancers throughout his life and never once had he ever been unable to move, his heart lodged up into his throat.

When she finished, back in the same pose in which she'd started, it took Leo several moments before he could speak again, his voice emerging rusty. "Reese..." He shook his head. "You're not second or third best at anything."

Her arms dropped to her sides, her chest rising and falling, once, twice—and then she ran to him. He only had a split second to register her lost expression and drop her purse and coat, before she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. Leo held her back without hesitation, burying his face in her hair and squeezing, sensing she needed it. Wanting to give her anything she required.

They stayed just like that for long minutes, Reese on tiptoe, Leo rocking her side to side, absorbing her. It took a physical effort not to dig, to ask her to confide in him about whatever caused her to look lost, but he didn't want to ruin this. If she could share something like that dance with him, he'd have faith that the rest would come in time.

Buttoning Reese back into her coat, he walked her toward the West Side, protectiveness filling his chest to the limit. Kissing her goodnight and walking away was going to be impossible. She belonged in his bed, his shower, his kitchen. His life.

One day at a time.

After another twenty minutes of walking, Reese turned him onto the avenue, stopping in front of a medium-sized high rise. "This is me."

Resisting the urge to carry her home, Leo gave a firm nod. "Okay."

She pressed up against him, twisting and untwisting her fingers in the strings on his jacket. "This was the best date I've ever been on, Leo."

Pride swarmed him. "Better than nap date?"

“I’ll rephrase. This was the best traditional date I’ve been on.”

“Give me the chance,” he said, tucking hair behind her ear. “I can top it.”

Reese’s softening eyes were the last things he saw before she lifted up onto her toes and kissed him. It started off slow, like a goodbye kiss, but it didn’t stay that way. It couldn’t when she whimpered at the invasion of tongue, her thighs shifting restlessly against the fronts of his own. His dick turned stiff in approximately one point eight seconds, his hands closing around her hips and tugging, some hungry male part of him needing her to feel it. Acknowledge what she did to him.

Their lips broke apart and he kissed down her throat, dragging his hot open mouth up the side of her neck, his hands slipping around to her ass, clutching it tightly. “Come home with me.” His teeth grazed her ear lobe and she moaned. “Let me fuck you again.”

“I can’t. I...early w-workshop—”

He stamped his mouth back over hers, lust battering his brain, making him forget the plan to take it slow. And their hands collided in the act of getting his jacket unzipped, her coat unbuttoned. Opening the sides of their outerwear so their bodies could get closer, feel more. Press in shamelessly, heat on heat, hard to soft. They met with a joined exhale, a shudder passing through them both. With the sides of their open jacket and coat shielding them from view of the street, Leo’s left hand traveled over the front of her sweater, kneading her tits, thumbing her hard nipples through the thin material.

“Leo,” she whispered against his mouth. “Feels so good.”

His cock strained at those words, his need firing hotter, starved to hear her say them again while he buried himself between her legs. “Do you have roommates?” He backed her toward the building door, flattening her up against it, raking kisses down her exposed throat. “Invite me up, sweetheart. Just long enough to give you an orgasm. You think I don’t know you were wet in the restaurant?” His hand moved from

her tits to the waistband of her skirt, fingertips slipping beneath to brush her belly. “Let me deal with it. Hard and fast.”

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “R-roommates. Yes. I have them. I—” She broke off, visibly attempting to collect her thoughts and not succeeding. Drawing him down for another out-of-control kiss, instead. And God help him when one of her thighs crept up around his hips. He looked down and saw that short skirt riding up, revealing the smooth skin at the tops of those tights. It was, quite simply, on after that. The warmth of her pussy, the promise of friction, was too tempting and he lifted her up by the waist, settling her down on his aching cock, her legs clamping around him automatically.

The sidewalk wasn’t busy at this time of night, but the odd person walked by, thankfully keeping a New York vibe and not paying them much attention, eyes on their phones. So he couldn’t help but rock her on his lap, thrusting his hips up and watching her eyes grow unfocused. “What’s it going to be, Reese? You going to go home all wet and achy? Or am I going to give you the ride on my cock you’re begging for?”

She took several panting breaths. “I won’t make it upstairs.” Without looking, her hand fumbled for the building door handle, pushing it down and sending them stumbling inside into a dimly lit, medium-sized vestibule, complete with a wall of mailboxes and door buzzers. “Right here. I need you here. Now.”

Risky, public sex—public anything—was not his personality. At all. So it was a testament to how this girl affected him that he didn’t even hesitate. There was only getting inside of her as fast as possible. Feeling her. Getting as close to her as humanly possible.

He broke eye contact with Reese only long enough to determine the vestibule was cleaner than most Manhattan entries, noticing a small alcove in the corner. Not big enough to hide them from people coming in and out of the building, but they’d be hidden from the street. And he was already carrying her in that direction, lust blanketing his mind, his

cock trying to push itself through the fucking teeth of his zipper.

“Goddammit,” he gritted out, lowering her into the alcove and spinning her around. “Goddammit, sweetheart. Hands up on the wall.”

Sucking in a breath, she did as he asked, bending forward slightly and tucking her ass back into his lap. Or trying to, anyway. Their height difference forced Leo to wrap a forearm around Reese’s hips, lifting her so she could stand on the front of his boots. And then, oh fuck, she teased his lap with a grind. A few more seconds of that torture and he could have come, that’s how hard up she made him. Desperate. Balls in his fucking stomach.

“Shit, Reese. Wait until I’m inside you to do that again.” His hands shook as he peeled up her skirt, no choice but to take a moment to appreciate the tight, red bun huggers she wore. Throw in the thigh highs and Leo knew he’d never jerk off again without thinking of this. Hearing the breath sawing in and out of her throat when he unzipped his jeans, her sides heaving, fingers curling into fists on the wall. Picturing his hands tangling in the delicate material of her panties and shoving them down to her knees. Hunger ratcheting higher, higher, he quickly found the condom in his pocket, covering himself.

He needed pleasure from her body so bad, he was almost nervous about taking too roughly and hurting her. In a rush, he peeled off Reese’s coat and stuffed it between her and the wall, his touch traveling southward on her belly to check for wetness between her thighs, finding her pussy soaked and soft. A fantasy. And following instinct, knowing why she held her breath, he pushed his middle and ring finger home inside of her.

“You want me to fuck this?”

“Yes.” She clenched around his knuckles. “Yes.”

He opened his stance wider, doing the same to hers, since she stood on his boots. With his mouth on the side of her neck, kissing and sucking, he worked his fingers in and out of her

opening slowly, the wet sounds, that audible proof of her lust, making his dick stiffen to the point of near agony. “You know how many times I’ve thought of you riding me since it happened? I lost count when you’d only been gone an hour.” He pressed his fingers deep and pulled her body up, jiggling those digits until she clawed at the wall, gasping. “Once wasn’t enough. Nothing is going to be enough with you.”

“Leo,” she moaned, one of her hands coming off the wall, reaching back to grasp at his hip, twisting in the sagging material of his jeans, yanking him closer. “I need you. Please.”

Though he wanted to cater to her urgency, he couldn’t resist pulling his fingers out and dragging them, wet and warm, over her clit, causing her to bury her face in the bunched-up coat between her and the wall, wailing his name into the soft wool. When her hips started to shake, Leo knew she was close—and he needed that. Needed her to be on the verge of coming because lasting was going to be a problem when he was this turned on. He gave that swollen nub a final firm stroke and reached for his cock, guiding it to the opening of her flesh and plowing deep in one powerful move.

Reese’s scream was muffled by her coat and the sweet, strangled sound of it almost ended things for Leo, then and there. Right on the edge of his willpower, Leo gripped her hips and gave her three rough pounds, almost knocking her off the perch of his boots.

“Too hard?”

“No. It’s so good. Harder.”

Jesus. Starved for release—hers and his own—Leo wrapped her in a bear hug to keep her steady, bent her body over slightly and drove into her repeatedly, his own grunts echoing in his ears. He pumped himself into her with such force, he was almost ashamed of himself, but her hips cinched back to meet him every time, her voice chanting more, more, more, and so he couldn’t stop, couldn’t temper himself, his world whittled down to Reese and the wet pliancy between her thighs, welcoming every slapping thrust of his cock.

“Did you wear those little tights for me?” he rasped above her head. “Did you know they’d make me so fucking thick when I saw them?”

“Yes,” she panted, clenching around him, milking his flesh eagerly. “I knew.”

Leo’s balls wrenched up, telling him he didn’t have long. Oh God. Oh God. This girl. She broke him so easily. His muscles were starting to vibrate, the base of his spine pulling back like an elastic band getting ready to snap. “Play with yourself, Reese. Think about what you did, teasing me like that.” He heard the shift of material and knew her hand moved to follow his instructions. “Making me obsess over how goddamn tight you are when I’m trying to eat. If that’s what you wanted, you got it. Make it up to me by getting off, sweetheart.”

“I’m coming. Leo,” she said shakily, her back stiffening against his front. “I’m...oh...”

He kept his bruising pace, burrowing his face into the crook of her neck and breathing, breathing there, waiting for her climax to hit, ready to beg for it so he could stop holding back his own. A wrenched sob fell from her mouth, followed by the wet pulsing of her pussy. It pulled like a trigger, the delicate muscles tightening around him in waves—and he blew. No stopping it when feeling her come was the hottest turn on of all time, her thighs shuddering against him, his name leaving her in sexy whimpers.

“Oh my God,” he said through his teeth, hissing at the straining in his stomach and balls, the intensity of the pleasure/pain that came before relief. He tightened his bear hug around her and thrust several more times, vision depleted, nothing existing or mattering except for the wet, delicate clench of her, the triumph of bottoming out, leaving no part of her untouched, his seed leaving him in hot bursts. “Fuck. Reese. Nothing feels like you.”

“You either, Leo,” she sobbed brokenly.

Several moments later, he finally came down the other side of his climax and gathered her close, breathing into her hair

until he regained his equilibrium. Keeping one arm wrapped around Reese lest she disappear, he reached down and pulled her panties and skirt back into place, sliding his lips up her nape and kissing her hairline, reveling in her sigh of contentment. Wanting to hear it every day of his life. A loud group of people walking past the building brought Leo back to reality, however, and finally he let her go, disposing of the condom in a nearby wastebasket and zipping back into his jeans.

He turned back around to find Reese flushed and glassy eyed, slightly off balance on her usually nimble feet. His heart flipped like a pancake in his chest. Not holding her through the night after sharing a physical experience that mind-blowing... it felt wrong and he hated it. But he forced himself not to push. "I'll let you get some sleep," he said gruffly, reaching out to cup her cheek. When she leaned into his touch, they each moved closer until her chest met his stomach and he couldn't help but add, "Are you going to call me tomorrow, Reese?"

Her eyelashes fluttered, a soft expulsion of air leaving her mouth. "Hell yeah I am." She went up on tiptoes and kissed his mouth, good and thoroughly, her fingers curling in the material of the jacket covering his shoulders. Just when he started to get hard again, she broke away and sauntered around him to the door, pulling a key from her coat pocket and sliding it into the lock of the second door that led to the apartments. "Good night, Leo."

"Night, sweetheart," he said, battling the urge to reach out and draw her back for another kiss, possibly more. "Good luck tomorrow."

She wet her lips, nodded in thanks, and disappeared into the building. And Leo walked home counting the minutes until he saw Reese again, staunchly ignoring the intuitive ripple in his gut telling him that he was missing a piece of her puzzle.

It would come. All in good time.

He had no way of knowing his time with Reese was running out.

CHAPTER 16



On Sunday morning, the night after the single greatest date of her life, Reese shouldered her duffel bag and limped down Forty-first. She'd forgotten to bandage her blisters before the workshop and paid the price dearly. A cold wind blew through her sweaty hair, so she pulled up her hood to prevent getting sick. Up ahead, a group of fellow dancers skipped along merrily, stopping every so often to execute one of the moves they'd done in the class this morning, laughing, trying to outdo one another.

Cori waved at Reese to catch up with them, but she shook her head. Took her phone out of her pocket and pointed at it, signaling that she needed to make a phone call. A week into her Broadway quest and she'd still had no luck. More than anything, Reese had wanted to wait to call her mother until she could share good news, but none had been forthcoming—on the dancing front, anyway—and a catch-up conversation with her mother couldn't be put off any longer.

She tapped the phone against her thigh, took a deep breath and pulled up her contacts and dialed. In true Lorna fashion, she answered on the first ring. "Hello, my darling girl!"

"Hey, Mom." Reese could picture her mother sitting in bed as she usually did on Sunday mornings, the *Today* show on in the background while she planned classes for the week in her notebook. "It's nine-thirty, so you're trying to talk yourself out of a third cup of coffee, huh? Just have it. You never win that battle."

“My willpower is weak.” Lorna chuckled, and Reese heard the sound of her closing the notebook, settling into the bedding for a chat. A wave of homesickness caught her around the throat. She’d have given anything in that moment to lay her head in Lorna’s lap and zone out to the news. To eventually plod downstairs together in their slippers and make pancakes. Instead, she had bloody feet, seven days left to become gainfully employed...and a man she couldn’t stop thinking about...who believed her to be someone else. A successful someone. “Well?” Lorna prompted. “How are things going?”

Perfect. Terrible.

Reese swallowed and straightened her spine. “I just came from a workshop put on by one of the choreographers of *Rained Out*.”

“Oh, Reese. Wow. How was it?”

“Hard.” Her rush of breath was visible in the February air. “Really hard. But satisfying.”

A beat passed. “And the open calls you’ve been going on?”

“Nothing yet,” Reese said quickly, doing her best to sound upbeat. “I made it through the first couple rounds of one last week. It was a great, you know...experience. It just wasn’t the right fit. But I have a slew of auditions coming up this week. I feel really good about them.”

“Fabulous, honey.” There was a stretch of silence. “Are you doing okay for money? If you think you’ll need a little longer, I can see about adding some classes to the schedule at Cedar-Boogie, asking the parents to pay in advance. Or—”

“No. No, Mom. Don’t do that.” She’d lost count of how many similar sacrifices her mother had made in the past to keep Reese dancing. To be able to afford shoes and costumes and hotel rooms for competitions. This was it. No more leaning on Lorna. The pressure of making it was solely on her shoulders now. “No, I’ve got a week. One more week.”

She could all but see Lorna wringing her hands. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m positive.” Instead of following her friends farther west, Reese found herself veering toward Times Square, suddenly wanting to lose herself in the chaos. “Go back to the *Today Show*. I’ll give you a call in a couple of days.” The homesickness swelled. “I hereby give you permission for that third cup of coffee.”

Lorna laughed hesitantly. “And I give you permission not to put so much pressure on yourself. Okay, kiddo?”

Reese closed her eyes. “Okay, Mom. Bye.”

It wasn’t until Reese saw the Pikachu up ahead that she realized she’d been seeking him out. Kind of like a sinner showing up for confession, secure in the knowledge that everything she said would be confidential. She sat down in the very same stone pillar she’d occupied the last time, after missing her audition with Bernard Bexley. Leo’s father. Duffel bag in her lap, she waited for the Pikachu to finish taking a selfie with someone in an I Love NY T-shirt.

He did a double-take when he saw her, ambling over. “Well, well. Look who’s back.”

“Hey, Link.” She waved. “I wasn’t sure you’d remember me, considering you see thousands of faces every day.”

“This might come as a shock, but I don’t have a lot of meaningful conversations dressed like this. You stood out.” He fell onto the pillar to her right and produced a cigarette, lighting it. “So. You stuck around, huh? How’s it going?”

“I met someone.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of your fault. Remember how I missed that audition? When I left you, I was on my way to convince his son into helping me out...”

“Uh-oh.”

“Uh-huh. That’s my someone.”

“Damn. Did he? Help you get the second audition?”

“I never asked him. I changed my mind. But he doesn’t exactly know why I showed up in the first place. Turns out, he’s had people use him before. To get to his father. And I didn’t want him to see me like that, so I lied about being employed. I’ve been lying about a lot of things and now I can’t see a way out of this without losing him. Or hurting him.”

The Pikachu gave a low whistle, pulled hard on his cigarette. “This is a quandary. It reminds me of my second marriage.”

Reese looked over at him. “How so?”

“Mid-twenties. I’d lost my job as a plumber. Did you know that people’s houses don’t have the same rules as hotels? They don’t want you to take the towels, robes and soap.”

Reese blinked. “Oh. You don’t say.”

He paused in the story to take a picture with two children, not bothering to put out the cigarette. Then he came back and picked up in the middle of his story. “I didn’t tell her I’d gotten fired. I mean, I was going to get another job, right? I just needed some quick money to get me over the hump. So I left every day dressed for plumbing. But she was a smart one. Smarter than me. She tracked my phone to Aqueduct Race Track where I’d been playing the horses every day for a month. Turns out, gambling with the grocery money is frowned upon.” He squinted over at her. “The moral of the story is, they always find out.”

A pit opened up in her belly. “This isn’t me. I don’t deceive people. What am I doing?”

“You’re saving him from one type of pain. Replacing it with another, worse one.”

“Ouch,” she breathed. “You were encouraging last time I was here. What happened to that positive rhetoric?”

“Ah, we’ll get to that. There’s a method to the Pikachu’s madness.” He tossed down his cigarette, ignoring the glare from a passerby. “So you never got that audition with this guy’s father, right? What have you been doing instead?”

“Trying to make it on my own. Hitting every open call. Trying to catch someone’s eye at a workshop. Practicing. I’m giving it everything I’ve got, but it’s not...” She took in a slow breath. “It hasn’t been good enough.”

He considered her. “You know, lies aside, you did technically do the right thing. You didn’t use the guy. You adjusted when your conscience said it was wrong. If he’s reasonable, he’ll appreciate the effort you put in instead of trying to take the easy road.”

“I don’t know.” She thought of him holding her in Bryant Park, the swaying motion of their bodies, the thundering of their matching heartbeats. “It’s gotten serious.”

The man hummed, leaned back on the pillar. “Well if you’re not employed, how are you still here?” He narrowed an eye. “Did you come here looking for a gig? I hear Dora the Explorer got a stress fracture. Maybe you could fill in?”

“I’m...good. Thanks. I have enough money for one more week.”

“And then?”

“And then...” Her mouth went dry. “If I haven’t gotten hired by then, I go back to Wisconsin. I won’t be able to justify sinking any more money into this...fantasy. Money that I didn’t even earn.”

“So the problem with the guy might take care of itself, right?” He shrugged and stood up, scratching a chin that looked like it hadn’t been shaved in days. “Give yourself the week. Hard work always pays off.” He spread his arms wide. “Just look at my success story.”

Reese tried to swallow a laugh and didn’t quite succeed.

“All right, we got a laugh out of her after all.” He opened his arms for a couple of tourists to rush in, slinging them across their upper backs and throwing a wink in Reese’s direction. “This is New York City, kid. Miracles happen. You’ll get yours.”

She wasn’t so sure of that, but standing and shouldering her duffel bag, Reese could admit to feeling better after

confessing her transgressions out loud. Being honest with someone other than herself. Not quite ready to return to her rented closet, she went into a bodega and bought some Band-Aids, patching up her blisters as best she could. Then she roamed around the city for a couple of hours, stopping for a hot chocolate and walking the Hudson.

More than anything, she wanted to go to the Cookie Jar and see Leo. Get one of those priceless hugs, experience that security and happiness he made her feel. But if she were a chorus line dancer in *Daliah's Folly*, she would be getting ready for the matinee performance, wouldn't she? So she shot him a text, instead.

Nap date, tomorrow? I'll bring sandwiches?

Best text I've ever gotten, he responded, immediately.
Hands down.

Her lips curled up into a smile. *I promise not to touch your utensil drawers.*

I want your hands all over my...utensils.

Reese snort-laughed loud enough to draw the attention of a couple walking by. It's a date, she typed back, unable to ignore the helium-like feeling in her belly. It carried her along the path for several blocks, before she turned back and headed for the apartment, mentally preparing for long hours in very cramped quarters. With her dwindling lack of funds, going out wasn't an option. She was probably better off studying dance tutorials on her phone anyway. Maybe watching some old competition footage and look for areas of improvement.

Just before she reached her apartment building, memories of her tryst with Leo playing in Technicolor in her mind, a push notification came up on her phone from the app she'd been using to find open calls.

**CASTING CHORUS LINE DANCERS FOR THE MUSICAL
CHICAGO. COORDINATOR STATES: SEEKING AN
EXTREMELY LIMITED NUMBER OF POLISHED,**

EXPERIENCED DANCERS, PREFERABLY WITH BROADWAY EXPERIENCE. FAMILIARITY WITH THE MATERIAL A PLUS. OPEN CALL ON FEBRUARY 14TH AT NOON. ARRIVE EARLY. PARTICIPANTS TO BE SEEN ONLY IF TIME PERMITS. 200 WEST 49TH STREET.

REESE COULDN'T BREATHE.

And then all of a sudden, she was breathing too quickly. So fast that she stumbled to one side and wedged a shoulder up against the closest building in order to remain standing. *Chicago*. Her dream musical. God, there would be hundreds of dancers there, eager to get this kind of steady work on the iconic show. She'd be an even smaller fish than she'd been thus far while auditioning for less established productions.

But she had to try. She had to take her shot.

The open call was one week away. Valentine's Day. Her last full day in New York if she didn't get hired. Between now and then, she would dance her ass off. Hit every audition possible. And if she didn't land anything...*Chicago* would be her last shot. After the music cut out and she'd left her soul on the stage, there would be no doubt for the rest of her life that she'd given her dream every ounce of her effort. If that effort didn't pay off, she would go back to Wisconsin.

Right after she came clean to Leo.

God. He deserved to know. It would just make ripping off the bandage so much easier if she had an actual, real life job in her back pocket when it happened. And she would kill herself trying to make that a reality. For her sake and for his. For the sake of her dream, too, because there was a possibility that if she told Leo now, if he didn't wish her straight to Satan...he might try to help. Intervene with Bernard. And that would be too tempting. Too easy. She wouldn't give herself that out. She'd make it on her own merit or not at all.

Come on, Reese. One more week.

Make it count.

* * *

LEO SET down his phone with a grin on his face.

Plans with Reese. He had them.

For a moment, he stared down at his work station, completely at a loss for what he'd been trying to accomplish before she texted him.

The Fixes. Right.

Seven days to Valentine's Day. People who'd placed orders were scheduled to begin picking them up in five, meaning he had a lot of work to do creating each individual cake pop. Jackie had ordered personalized boxes stamped with the Cookie Jar logo. There were red ribbons involved, too, but it would be a cold day in hell before he started tying bows. That was all Jackie and Tad. He just needed to focus on the pops themselves.

Usually at this point, he would be heading home for a few hours to sleep after an early morning of baking, but there wouldn't be any downtime if he wanted to complete all the Fixes by the 14th and still leave space in his schedule for Reese. And he did. Very much want to leave space for her.

Over the course of the next few hours, Leo mixed ingredients, creating several flavors of cake batter, baking, forming them into balls. Whipping up buttercream. Melting white chocolate and dark for drizzling, leaning sideways to read his notes on each one of the printed-out order forms. By the time he'd worked through three dozen orders and placed them in boxes, the clock—and his stomach—told him it was dinnertime.

Jackie came through the swinging door looking exhausted. "I'm taking my break. Going to sneak out for some ramen, I think. Do you want anything?"

"Soup isn't a meal. It's an appetizer."

"There are noodles involved, boss, but I'll take that as a no."

He'd never be sure where his next words came from, but suddenly he was speaking them. "Why don't you and Tad go together? I can watch the front."

Jackie paused in the act of removing her apron. "Huh?"

Leo grunted. "I can watch the front. Go. If you're forcing yourself to eat liquid for dinner, at least have some company."

"Who are you and what have you done with Leo Bexley?"

That was a good question. Maybe he just wanted to try and be better with people. Maybe it didn't seem so daunting after he'd talked to Reese about what typically held him back. He'd written himself off as antisocial for so long, but after last night, did he really have to be? Or was that just an excuse not to have to try? With Reese, he had things to say. With her, it was easy. A lot easier than it had been growing up. And while it wouldn't be like that with anyone who walked into the Cookie Jar, he wanted to make the effort. Wanted to earn her confidence in him and prove something to himself in the process.

Tad breezed into the back room, noticing Jackie's odd expression. "What's going on?"

"Um...nothing. Leo is going to watch the register while we go have dinner."

"Soup," Leo corrected. "Arguably a snack."

"Speaking of a snack," Jackie hummed, busying herself tying a red ribbon around one of the finished boxes. "Is a snack named Reese responsible for this change?"

Leo started to tell them to mind their own business, but apparently his mouth not cooperating with his brain was becoming a regular occurrence. "We went out last night."

His employees executed an air high five. Tad said, "O-kay. Based on that baritone, I'm going to assume it went extremely well."

"When are you seeing her again? When do we get to hang out with her?" Jackie wanted to know. "Show her you have friends, boss. Charming, attractive friends."

“I’m seeing her tomorrow. You’re definitely not invited to that.” He cleared his throat, threw back a single shoulder. “I don’t know. She just needs to keep it...day to day right now.”

Both employees rocked back on their heels.

“So she’s not interested in a commitment?”

Leo’s head came up. “Who said that?”

“I’m just picking up on a little unwillingness to get attached. Am I wrong?”

Leo hated to admit Jackie was right. Between Reese balking at the prospect of dating at all, clamming up when it came to certain topics, not wanting him to see her perform and refusing to invite him upstairs last night, all signs pointed to Reese wanting to keep things light. But there was no way to explain how his gut believed the opposite. When they were together, the worry of her backing off was completely absent.

“The real test will be Valentine’s Day,” Tad said, looking smug. “You’ll know where you stand by then.”

“I’m not putting that kind of pressure on her.” Fuck, he was starting to sweat. “Do you think I should plan something for Valentine’s Day?”

Jackie and Tad sucked in a simultaneous breath. “Risky move,” Tad said. “Very risky. Relationship is quite new.”

“Could also be a baller move,” Jackie chimed in. “It depends.”

“Christ, go eat your soup.” Leo waved them off. “You’re sowing chaos.”

“No, no! Let us help.” Jackie bounced side to side, stilling suddenly. “Oh, I have the best idea. Plan a group hang out for Valentine’s. After the bakery closes. That way, you’re expressing your desire to spend this romantic holiday with her, but you’re also keeping it casual, in case she’s skittish.”

He didn’t hate the sound of that. He didn’t care how he spent time with her as long as it happened. Often. “I’ll ask her,” he relented, pointing at the back exit. “Go.”

Jackie and Tad disappeared, leaving Leo to eye the swinging door to the front of the house thoughtfully. Wiping both hands on his apron, he shouldered his way to the front, crossing his arms and leaning back against the rear counter. Only a few seconds passed before a group brought the cold air in, laughing and rubbing their hands together. They were young, phones in hand, reminding him a little of the selfie people from the night before. Instinct told him to stay quiet and try to blend in until they addressed him and he could just give them what they wanted, send them on their way. But he heard Reese's voice in his head.

You're genuine and interesting. I wouldn't be here if you weren't.

Give them a story. Get out of your head.

"Hey," he rumbled, whipping out a sheet of wax paper, picking up on the very distinct scent of marijuana. "Let me guess. You folks just came from church."

They all jerked around, wide-eyed. And promptly burst into laughter.

"I told you the Mean Baker was cool."

One of the young guys approached, looking at the display case the way one might look at a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Behind him, two girls whispered furiously to each other, one of them making swoon eyes at the kid's back. "Damn. Those brownies look insane."

"They might not have the ingredient you're looking for," Leo said.

The young man snorted, glancing back over his shoulder, definitely making goo-goo eyes right back at the interested party. Leo studied the guy closest to him, noting he was probably no more than seventeen, probably limited cash-wise, but trying his best to impress the girl and hell, even Leo could relate to that now.

Leo slid open the bakery case and wrapped a frosted purple cupcake in wax paper, sliding it across the counter to the kid. "Here," he said. "Give her that."

A disbelieving laugh puffed out of the young man. “Seriously? Thanks, man.”

“No problem.” He nodded once, crossed his arms. “Now beat it.”

The kid barked a laugh and turned back to his friends, handing off the cupcake to the girl with a flourish. And when the whole group cheered like it was a marriage proposal, the other guys in the group teasing the young man mercilessly on the way out of the shop, Leo couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“What do you know?” he muttered to himself, picking up a rag to clean off the counter, but not really seeing it. Seeing Reese, instead. “It works.”

CHAPTER 17



This was one of those times. When something seemed like a really great idea. But upon execution? Begins to feel like a potentially humiliating mistake.

Reese hopped out of the Uber in her high heels, arms crossed tightly over her midsection, Leo's building entrance only twenty yards away.

Seemed more like a mile.

She might be a Wisconsin girl, but with nothing but panties and thigh highs beneath her coat, even she could admit it was too cold to walk, so she'd spent ten dollars on the quick cab ride.

God, Reese.

People only showed up naked at their love interest's door in movies.

In real life, she might look ridiculous, but she'd come too far to turn back now.

At least the prospect of showing up at Leo's apartment door naked was distracting her from everything else. The pressure of her upcoming open calls, perhaps the final ones of her dance career. The ticking clock on her time in the city. The pit of untruths she'd dug herself. This naked party trick might be corny or played out, but it was giving her something to focus on besides her potential defeat.

Reese drew to a stop in front of Leo's building, stepping inside the vestibule and ringing the buzzer for his apartment. She smiled when the inner door clicked open within a second. Giddiness stole over her on the way up the stairs, the thrumming between her thighs growing heavier, even more unbearable than it had been all morning. This was some *9½ Weeks* type stuff. There was no turning her off anymore. Even in the free class this morning, her movements were executed with more sensuality than ever, her palms raking down her belly, her hips giving that extra roll, fingertips cruising along her scalp, senses heightened.

In front of Leo's door now, her knees shook, anxious heat making her skin flushed, dewy in that intimate place between her thighs. The lock slid on the other side of the door and there he was. *I'm really doing this. I'm actually doing this.*

And then there was Leo, outlined in the doorframe, his head nearly brushing the jamb. The sheer joy that leapt in her breast at the sight of him, the way her knees stopping shaking for one reason, then resumed trembling for another, told Reese she hadn't just fallen for Leo. She was well on her way to being in love with him. In love with his intensity, his bluntness, his passion for his job. The depth of him, his wealth of honesty, the way he took things she said to heart. She especially loved the way he was looking at her now, as if she'd arrived on a cloud from the heavens, instead of a pair of cheap heels.

As if they had all the time in the world.

Which they very possibly didn't.

That troubling reminder gave Reese the impetus she needed to unbutton her coat, spreading the sides and letting it hang open, knowing full well what he saw. A pair of sheer black panties that barely covered a thing. And skin that had been lotioned head to toe.

Reese cocked a hip and rested one hand on the doorframe. "Mister Bexley?"

In the afternoon light pouring down the hallway, she could see his pupils expand until his eyes were almost black, the

knot in his throat bobbing up and down. “Fucking Christ.” His hand shot out to grip the doorjamb. “Yes. I’m...yes.”

She trailed the tip of her index finger downward between her breasts, over her belly, stopping to play with the edge of her panties. “Did you order a nap date?”

Reese’s startled peal of laughter hung in the air as Leo bundled her inside the apartment, kicking the door shut and locking it haphazardly. Within seconds, her coat had been stripped away, panties ripped down the center by desperate male hands, tossed by the wayside. In nothing but heels, she was thrown up onto the closest surface, a narrow entry table that knocked loudly into the wall, sending mail in a colorful waterfall to the floor.

“I forgot the sandwiches,” she gasped.

“Forgiven,” he rasped, his eyes raking down the front of her. “It’s forgiven.”

“I guess you didn’t think my naked-gram was corny and played out,” Reese breath-laughed, a split second before Leo’s mouth landed on top of hers, hard to soft, spreading, tongues delving greedily, pulses flying into twin gallops.

His mouth moved south from her lips, sucking at the exposed skin of her throat, neck, shoulders. “Corny and played out? As soon as puberty hits, men start fantasizing about a naked woman showing up at their door. We keep thinking about it until we die.” He lowered his head to tongue her perked up nipples, one, then the other. “Jesus, Reese. My dick is so hard, I can barely think straight.”

She captured his face, bringing him back for a kiss. “Don’t think.”

Leo jerked down his zipper and applied the condom, breaching her with a stuttered groan a moment later and hitting the ground running, ramming the table into the wall with an unrestrained thrust, two, three, her ass squeaking on the wood, legs jostling around his hips.

Reese tipped her head back and moaned. “Oh my God.”

“It’s so goddamn good,” he growled into her neck, pumping into her again, faster, faster, until they were straining, fingernails digging into flesh, the sounds of frantic fucking echoing around the hazy afternoon sun of the apartment. And she loved every wince that crossed his face, every bite of his lip when he tried not to come. She was blessedly naked, he was fully clothed, save his lowered zipper, and it felt naughty, illicit, while still being exactly, perfectly right. Because it was her and Leo. “Did you come here to spread your legs for me?” The gritted words were almost inaudible amidst the table slamming into the wall. “Do you love how deep I can get it?”

“Yes,” she panted. “*Yesyesyes.*”

“I’ve got you,” he said raggedly, reaching down to polish her clit with the flat of his thumb, those hips never stopping, never ceasing in their attack, ramming, ramming, ramming that table into the wall, his head falling back on a groan. “I’ve got this pussy.”

His utter thickness stroked everywhere at once, his touch relentless on her sensitive nub, and finally their mouths met to push her over the edge. She screamed, arching her back, her femininity rejoicing in the way he knocked the table out of the way and finished her roughly against the wall, her ass clutched tightly in his hands.

“You’re my tight little fuck, aren’t you, sweetheart?” he gritted into her ear, grinding deep one last time and letting out a guttural sound, his grip turned bruising on her bottom. “Yeah. You are. God yeah, you are. Mine.”

Mine.

His.

She couldn’t even begin to deny it.

They exhaled long and jagged, Reese closing her eyes and memorizing the way his climax pulsed into her, one lick of heat at a time, that giant body shuddering, suffering through the pleasure until it let him down and they sank into one another, sliding down the wall into a heap. A beat passed and then Leo drew her into his lap, slowly kissing her hairline and

cheeks, finally reaching her mouth and drawing her into a savoring kiss.

“Spend Valentine’s Day with me,” he said, pulling back to study her.

With her heart lodged in her throat, there was nothing else she could say but, “Yes.”

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, Leo traced the curve of Reese’s back with his fingertips, marveling over the fact that this girl was in his bed, naked, drowsy, incredible. They were sprawled out in his sheets after round two of the sweatiest, dirtiest sex of his life, made all the more amazing by the fact that his fucking heart had been in it the whole time. To be able to look someone in the eye and say every word bombarding his brain, except for those three bombshell ones, was an experience he’d never known enough to covet.

Reese had piled her hair on top of her head in one of those sideways sagging knots, the strands snarled from his fingers. With her chin propped on a fist, she looked over the stack of remaining Fixes for Valentine’s Day he’d yet to fill.

“Aww, listen to this one,” she said, her voice scratchy from screaming into his pillow. “This guy is ordering a Fix for his mom. She’s a bus driver in Queens, hasn’t taken a day off in decades, loves to garden. No citrus.”

“I have some rose extract at the shop.”

“Really? I didn’t even know that existed. What would you pair it with?”

“White chocolate, maybe.” He traced the delicious swell of her backside. “Blackberry.”

“Yes. That.” She slid the pen out from behind her ear and made a notation on the sheet, her handwriting turning to a scribble when he delved between her cheeks, lower, until his touch found her sex. “If you keep distracting me, we’re never going to get through these, let alone have time for our nap.”

He rumbled a sound and her breath caught. “Or is it safe to say nap date has become code for something else?”

“Definitely safe to say. And I’m one hundred percent behind that.” He teased her with one more delve of his finger, then pulled her body close, the Fixes forgotten above their heads. “But I don’t want you tired tonight at work because of me. Sleep.”

Their mouths coasted over each other, Reese pulling back to yawn adorably. “I wish I could send my mother a fix. I’d do...maple syrup flavor. Crushed macadamia nuts. She would ooh and ahh over it. Save the packaging.”

“You miss her.”

She nodded, snuggling closer. “Definitely. Just yesterday, I got really homesick. It catches me at the weirdest times. It’s not that I would rather be home than in New York. I just miss all the little familiar things. The junk drawer. My mom’s perfume. Knowing exactly where the light switches are on the walls.”

Leo brushed his hand up and down her back, inundated by the desire to give her those things, right here, right now. Wanting her to be happy at all times. Wanting his place to be full of familiarity for her. “Do you ever think about going back?” he asked, immediately wishing he didn’t ask.

Reese remained silent for the moment. “Sure. I think about it,” she said, haltingly. “I can only dance so long, right? What comes after that?”

With pressure in his chest at the thought of her leaving, he drew her even closer, closing his eyes over the soft warmth of her breath on his neck. “Have you thought of teaching like your mother?”

“Yes.” Wrapping an arm around his middle, she drew a lazy circle between his shoulder blades. “I’d like that. And I adore kids, but I don’t think I’d want to teach them permanently like my mother.” She paused for a moment, seeming to hesitate. “I’ve been thinking about how hard it is to learn the ropes when you’re auditioning for stage shows. I’d

love to do prep courses or some kind of advocacy program for aspiring dancers. I would kill...I would have killed for something like that. An affordable one, you know?"

Just when he thought she couldn't amaze him any more. "You'd be great at that, Reese. The way you give people stories, give them meaning. The way you can read a few lines about people and determine what they like. You'd be good at directing dancers, advising them, knowing where they would make the best fit."

When the tips of her ears turned pink, he fell in love with her a little more. "Thanks."

He kissed her forehead. "So you adore kids, huh?"

"Have you ever seen a three-year-old in tap shoes? They're irresistible."

Could she hear his heart rapping against his ribcage? "You want some of your own one day, then?"

After a beat, she nodded against his chest. "Do you?"

Having a family had always seemed like something very far in the future. Or something that he could take or leave, not sure he wanted to permanently disturb the solitude he'd built around himself. Solitude seemed pretty overrated now. She'd only been in his apartment twice and he was already dreading the moment she'd have to leave. And that's when it happened. The image of Reese waddling around his apartment with a baby in her stomach got stuck in his head and wouldn't budge. "Yeah," he said gruffly, pulling the comforter up over the both of them and settling her head onto his shoulder. "I do."

CHAPTER 18



The week leading up the Valentine's Day went by way too fast.

If only it was possible to hit pause and savor every second of her time with Leo. Every second of the open calls she attended, showing up first in line and giving it every grain of her effort, living her dream of dancing on Broadway stages, even if it was only for an audition.

There was a sense of being on the verge of something extraordinary. Of having a breakthrough just within her reach. Not only with dancing, but with life in general. She was in love with a man. A kind, thoughtful, wonderful, occasionally grouchy man who never left her guessing, never failing to give her a sense of security. Belonging.

A man who made love to her like a million more times wouldn't be enough.

Her friendships—with the aspiring dancers she ran into at every open call—sprouted buds and bloomed a little more each day. With Leo knee-deep in crafting the Fixes and her evenings unavailable, thanks to her fake job, they spent afternoons together. Talking, cooking together in his kitchen, thoroughly messing up his sheets every chance they got.

In the evenings, she got to know Cori better, eating cheap from the street carts on the floor of their closet-rooms and listening to K-pop. They walked the city and visited sites from their favorite movies, people watched in Central Park and gave

each other back massages when their muscles burned from overuse.

Yes, for a week, she walked around in a near-stupor, but with Valentine's Day looming, the fissure in her gut widened. With every open call, she came a little closer to reaching the final cut, but never quite got there, always being passed over for someone with more experience. And so on the morning of Valentine's Day, Reese stood shivering in the cold, waiting to be called into the theater where her favorite musical was performed nightly, one final shot in her pocket. The longest shot of all.

Over the last seven days, she'd lost herself in the experience of being in love, with a man and a city, not allowing herself to reach this point of near-hopelessness. Oh, it was upon her now, though. Her limbs were almost numb with the knowledge that her bags were all but packed, her subplot running out tonight, and it was a very bad time to lose feeling in her joints.

Reese shook out her hands. Stretched her heel up to her butt, listening to the counts through the door, already knowing them by heart. She went over them in her head nonetheless, trying to psych herself up for the biggest moment of her life. This needed her full concentration. Leo's image continued to demand her attention until she gave up trying to banish it. No way around it, she wasn't only dancing for herself. This was for them, too.

The metal side door of the theater groaned open and a man stepped out with a clipboard. "Reese Stratton."

"That's me," she said, pasting on a confident expression. Hefting up her bag, she followed him into the theater, her stomach rippling with trepidation at the sight of the six-person panel. They were spread out at a long table, identical reusable cups in front of them. They looked bored as they gave her a now familiar once-over, already making notations strictly based on her appearance.

In the last row of the orchestra, dancers sat side by side. The lucky few out of dozens who'd made it to the next round

so far—and that didn't take into account the other hopefuls still waiting outside for their shot.

Reese kept her poise, dropped her bag and took her position on stage. The music started and she vanished into the moves, casting herself as the femme fatale with nothing left to lose, which couldn't be the further from the truth.

She had everything to lose.

The audition went by in a blur, muscle memory taking over, every note of the song pounding in her blood. She was transported back to her childhood bedroom in Wisconsin where she danced in front of the floor-length mirror hanging from her closet, a framed *Wicked* poster reflected in the wall behind her. How many hours did she spend trying to roll a fedora down her arm and catch it without looking?

And then it was over.

The music stopped and she held her pose for three counts, before folding her hands in front of her waist and waiting, controlling her breathing as best as possible when the wind was struggling in and out of her lungs.

They passed her headshot right to left and leaned back to confer.

“Wait in the back, please,” one of the panel members said without looking up. “We'll call you up for the next round.”

She started, positive she'd heard them wrong.

The one who'd spoken raised her eyebrow.

Reese nodded and mumbled a thank you, jetting off the stage before she could change her mind. But her heart was in her mouth the entire walk to the rear of the theater. The back row dwellers welcomed her to their ranks with nods of approval and she sat, forcing herself to acknowledge the accomplishment of making it past round one. Up against the best in the business. If nothing else, she'd have this memory and she'd savor it.

It took another two hours to complete the first round after which the dancers who'd made it through were given a fifteen-

minute warning and everyone rose to stretch, including Reese. They were brought back up on stage, this time with a choreographer.

“We’re adding a number this spring,” she announced without preamble. “It’s not part of the show, but an interactive interlude involving members of the chorus line before the curtain. A show isn’t enough anymore, audiences want a goddamn experience. So we’re going to give them one. Eyes on me for the choreo. And—”

Reese watched through eyes that suddenly felt bloodshot as the woman executed the moves, ones she hadn’t practiced for a decade in her bedroom, her body moving unconsciously, trying to memorize the counts, the steps, the pauses and beats. The choreographer ran through the dance twice before an unfamiliar piece of music filtered down from overhead and everyone fell into lines, their positions perfect. Poised and prepared for a curveball like this. Not even batting an eyelash.

Tamping down on her nausea, Reese distanced herself as much as possible among the others and waited for the count to start, reaching deep, all the way down for some reserve of talent and confidence. Calling on every year of experience, every loss and triumph, every crying jag in the back seat of her mother’s car, every weeknight spent icing ankles and knees. A glimmer of the night she danced in Bryant Park came to mind, how at ease she’d felt in that moment, how devoid of pressure, and she used that. She just danced. Felt every note. Somehow she didn’t have to overthink every movement or facial expression, she just let it happen. Let the notes propel her.

Her name was called for the next round.

She watched in disbelief as some of the most talented dancers she’d ever performed beside hurried off the stage, gathering their things. *Don’t dwell. Don’t think.* She stayed in the zone, whatever place she’d transcended to seemed to extend her limbs, make her fingers reach higher, her toes pointing that much more. And she made it through to the next round, too.

The final one.

It was down to her and three other dancers. For a spot in *Chicago*.

If her blisters weren't throbbing, she would assume she'd never woken up this morning and was still asleep on her beanbag chair. The gravity of the situation threatened to bury her like an avalanche, but she kept her head up, breathing even, relief prickling her like a thousand needles when the choreographer announced the final routine would be from the musical. Not the interactive section.

Quite simply, she left her body during the piece, hitting beats and stopping on dimes, emotion and heartache breathing from her pores. This was the stage where it all happened. The seats where her audience would applaud stretched out in front of her, lush and velvety, history held within its walls. She danced for love, all different forms and she didn't leave a single regret lingering behind.

When the song ended, she glanced left and right, finding she was one of three dancers remaining. Three. The top three. She was in it. Her heart could barely carry the knowledge of that without exploding into fragments.

Several moments passed while the panel conferred, their spokesperson eventually standing, this time with a smile on his face. "We're going to need the day to think this over. Thank you for your time. Keep your phones with you through the evening. We'll call you."

* * *

THERE WAS no description for what Reese felt that night, hurrying up the avenue to the bar where she was meeting Leo, Tad and Jackie for drinks. Hopefulness had her floating ten feet off the ground, musical notes trilling in her head. She hadn't caught a single breath since leaving the theater this afternoon. With her phone clutched in her hand, the volume cranked all the way up, she found herself desperate to see Leo. Maybe she couldn't share everything about her day, but she

could share this mood. This indescribable feeling. And there was no one else she wanted to share it with more.

When Leo suggested they go out with Tad and Jackie for Valentine's Day, she'd been grateful. With her fate hanging in the balance, it had sounded like the exact low commitment activity that would keep things one day at a time...until she knew she could give Leo an unlimited number of days. Now? She kind of wished they could be alone.

Still, when Reese walked into the Upper West Side bar and spotted the trio, Jackie waving her over excitedly, she couldn't contain her joy. She had people. Plans. She had hope. It was so much more than she had that afternoon just over two weeks ago when she missed her audition, nowhere to go, no idea what to do.

"Hey," Reese said, her heart walloping when Leo turned and stood at her approach, affection sweeping across his face. Stepping into his arms and letting herself be kissed required no thought. Her heart was in control. "Hey," she said gruffly, giving him his own private greeting. "Happy Valentine's Day."

His fingers brushed her temple, down the fall of her hair. "The happiest." He sighed and shook his head. "Tad, I see you taking pictures with your phone."

"Excuse me for immortalizing this momentous occasion." Tad slapped his phone down. "You'll thank me one day."

Reese laughed into Leo's shoulder, allowing him to pull out a stool to their high-top table and boost her into it. Instead of taking his own seat again, he stood beside her, an arm draped over the back. Ignoring the tingles wrought by having the side of her body pressed against him wasn't easy, but she took a deep breath and smiled at Jackie and Tad. "So how was the big day? You must have been swamped."

"Oh my gosh, you should have seen it," Jackie answered, holding up her martini. "We had a line around the block. The big man worked the front and everything. Dare I say he was not only polite, but charming at certain intervals?"

Tad tapped his glass against Jackie's. "You do dare! And I concur. As soon as Reese has a drink, we'll toast to the new and improved man in our midst."

"No, we won't," Leo grumbled, signaling a waitress. "Red wine?"

"Yes, please," Reese responded for his ears alone, leaning in to say, "Worked the front of the house, did you? I'm impressed."

He hummed and moved closer, seemingly distracted by her eyelashes. "I have you to thank for that."

Throat tight, Reese shook her head. "No, I might have given you some encouragement, but you executed. Just wait. People are going to become repeat customers now. Because of you, Leo Bexley."

"They just might," he said, albeit reluctantly. "Time will tell."

She wet her lips, those words causing her pulse to stumble. "Yes, it will."

For long moments, they simply looked at each other, the spell only broken when the waitress approached with a tray. Leo ordered for her and a little while later, they loaded the table with appetizers and another round of drinks, everyone laughing at Tad's impression of the customer who arrived that morning to pick up the Fix for her dog, whispering over the counter to Tad so the dog wouldn't hear and spoil the surprise.

Leo continued to stand beside Reese, arm around her shoulders, his thumb strumming up and down the outside of her arm. She had the warmest feeling, all though her limbs. The buzz of love, laughter, and yes, wine, fully infiltrating her system. She'd almost sunk completely into the warmth and let it swallow her whole when her cell phone buzzed on the table.

The bubble of comfort surrounding Reese popped, her heart ricocheting around her ribs. A Manhattan phone number moved left to right across the screen.

This was it. The biggest call of her life.

“We tripled our Valentine’s Day profit this year, thanks to the Sweetest Fix, Reese,” Jackie was saying, saluting with her glass. “A showstopper of an idea.”

“I’m so glad I could help,” Reese breathed, stumbling over her words while attempting to stand. Cell phone in hand, she backed away from the table. “I have to take this call really quick. I’ll just be right back.”

Leo clearly noticed her odd behavior, but only nodded once, bringing his beer to his mouth. “All right, sweetheart.”

Reese forced a reassuring smile for him and cut through the high traffic bar, trying to reach the bathroom. The phone was on its fourth ring when she finally pushed into the darkly lit bathroom, swiping to answer and pressing the receiver to her ear. “Hello, this is Reese Stratton.”

“Reese Stratton. This is Emile from today’s audition.” He paused. “Listen, I won’t beat around the bush. Your talent and drive show a lot of promise, but unfortunately, it came down to experience and we had to go another way. I’m sorry.”

A sledgehammer drove into her stomach and she pitched backwards, her back landing against the bathroom wall. “Oh,” she said, winded, pain blooming in the center of her chest. “I understand. Thank you for letting me know.”

Reese ended the call, her hand fell limply to her side, her breath coming in fast bursts.

That’s it. Curtains.

She’d failed.

Making it to the top three didn’t matter. It may have been the furthest she’d ever gotten, but there would be nothing to show for it. She’d return to Wisconsin a former dancer, not a current one. Her everything, her all, wasn’t good enough. The dream would remain exactly that. A dream. The hope of a child, not the reality of a woman. A woman who had to face the real world now. Had to adapt. Find something new. Let it all go.

Her limp hand rose against swiftly, forming a fist and cramming against her mouth.

She wouldn't be the only one affected by this. Some part of her had truly believed she would succeed in the end. Subconsciously, she'd convinced herself of it. That the amount of work and time and diligence she put into becoming a working dancer would pay off. It hadn't, though. It hadn't. And now she couldn't stay in New York, not even one more day. Couldn't afford it and couldn't be with the man with whom she'd fallen in love.

Oh God, she'd been very shortsighted about how this moment would feel when it became imminent. Dread and anxiety turned her skin clammy, the ground seeming to loom high, higher, up near her knees. What was Leo going to say? If his whole opinion of her changed in the blink of an eye, could she even blame him?

No.

No, but she couldn't back away from this. She couldn't just leave for Wisconsin in the morning without telling him everything. In fact, she couldn't go another second without exposing herself as a pathetic wannabe dancer, instead of a successful one, as badly as it was going to hurt to be a failure in his eyes. Whatever the consequences, she would face them. He deserved to know. At least she could sleep at night knowing she'd never used him. That whether she succeeded or not, her abilities would be the deciding factor.

At the moment, that reminder provided precious little comfort.

With her stomach tied in knots, Reese left the bathroom, her legs weighing a thousand pounds apiece. Slowly, she wove her way through the restaurant crowd, her mouth growing drier by the second, palms coated in sweat.

When she'd almost reached the table, she noticed Leo was speaking to a man, though she couldn't see who it was, because his back was turned. Leo spotted her approaching and tapped the man on the shoulder. The newcomer turned...

And her world turned sluggish, void of sound.

Bernard Bexley.

Leo's father was there, scrutinizing her curiously, his countenance as shrewd as she'd always imagined. Looking nothing like his son. A falcon beside a bear. Reese's feet stopped moving, keeping her paused in the middle of the restaurant until Leo called her name, frowning with concern. What was she supposed to do? She couldn't run, even if her fight or flight instincts were blaring in the back of her head. With a stomach full of bees, she started moving again, forcing a polite smile on to her face.

"Reese, this is my father. I saw him walking past the bar and ran outside to grab him." Oh God, he looked so sweetly nervous about them meeting. Why couldn't this just be a normal introduction between father and girlfriend? Leo deserved that. "Dad, this is Reese," he finished.

"It's nice to meet you," Reese said, sounding strangled.

Bernard studied her long enough to make it uncomfortable. "Yes, I know who she is." His voice was rich, demanded attention. "You're the girl who missed her audition with me."

Time seemed to stand still.

Jackie and Tad were suspended in animation.

Reese couldn't breathe, her skull closing in on itself.

Leo laughed. "You have her mistaken for someone else, Dad."

"No." He shook his head. "No, I spent a year whittling down entrants to my annual contest. By the time I choose my winners, I know their weaknesses, eye color, their competition background. A little over two weeks ago, this girl right here, Reese Stratton, if I'm not mistaken, missed her audition."

"A little over two weeks ago," Leo repeated, his gaze ticking to Reese. "Is he...is that right? Did you?"

She pushed the words past stiff lips. "Can we talk somewhere, please?"

The realization that his father was telling the truth washed over Leo's face and he rocked back on his heels, saying

nothing for a moment. “I guess we better,” he rasped, stalking past Reese to the door, leaving her to follow in his wake.

Reese followed on shaky legs, finding Leo outside on the sidewalk. “Leo...”

“You clearly weren’t in my bakery by coincidence.” His stare was penetrating, not a hint of its usual warmth. “Start there.”

His harshness almost buckled her knees, but she forced her chin to rise.

You had this coming. Suck it up.

Reese nodded, folding her hand in front of her waist. “I missed the audition of a lifetime. I was desperate. And...and I’d read an article about Bernard Bexley having a son. It mentioned the Cookie Jar in the piece and I thought maybe you’d help me get a second chance...” All at once the wind left her. “Oh God, this all sounds so terrible saying it out loud.”

“Maybe because it is, Reese.” He closed his eyes, as if bracing. A scattering of seconds blew by. “Is this real? Did you even...like me? Or has this all been for show?”

“Leo,” she whispered, shaken, her stomach roiling. “How can you ask me that? I liked you the second we met. That’s why I couldn’t ask you for anything. That’s why I tried to walk away—”

“Even after everything I told you. About Tate Dillinger,” he said, not really hearing her. She could see that. His emotions were in control and she couldn’t blame him. “You were just waiting around for the right opportunity. God, you must have been laughing at me.”

The genuine hurt on his face stole her breath. “No, Leo. It isn’t like that.”

“Oh no?” His voice dropped in volume. “Would we have met if you didn’t want a shot at meeting my father, too?”

Her pulse pumped in her ears. “No. We wouldn’t have met. Not initially. But, Leo...” The lump in her throat wouldn’t

allow her to swallow. She didn't know where to start. How to clarify her motives. How to make him understand why she'd done what she'd done. "I was going to tell you everything tonight. Please believe me."

"Why should I? You came to my bakery with the intention of using me." He laughed without humor, raking a hand through his hair. "Hold on. Why did you need to audition for my father? You have a job." The delivery of his words slowed toward the end, probably thanks to her slow, outward cringe. "You're not in the *Daliah's Folly* chorus line. Are you?" A sound puffed out of him, his gaze shuttering, closing her out. He turned away from her, paced a few feet away. "Well at least it makes sense now. Why you didn't want me to watch you perform. You weren't performing at all. Jesus, what have you been doing this whole time?"

Her lips were stiff. "Open calls. Classes. Anything I could find."

Visibly, he recalled their time together, piecing everything together right before her eyes. "All those times I set your alarm so you could make the curtain call?"

What could she say to that? Nothing. She had no defense against his disgust. His anger. The center of her chest was going to cave in. It hurt so badly, she pressed a fist there to keep it from splitting down the center. "I had two weeks, Leo. It's all I could afford and I just...I don't know, I didn't want you to think of me as a failure. As the girl who gets cut at every open call. It takes a bite out of me every time. Every. Time. It's painful and personal."

Leo shook his head, only seeming to partially process her words. "The fact that you were going to use me...the fact that you lied so easily—"

"Not easily," she stressed. "Not at all."

"—that's the opposite of who I thought you were. God, I'm a fucking idiot." He started to walk away, but came back, the lines around his mouth pulled taut. "I'd rather be an idiot than a liar, though. That's what you are. Good luck with your next victim."

“Leo, stop,” she implored, running after him. “I’m the idiot. I never imagined you’d find out like that. It was supposed to come from me. You have every right to hate me, but...”

He was only walking faster and she couldn’t keep up. Not in her heels. And not with the weight of disappointment and failure and shame pressing down on her shoulders. She tripped to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk, laughing revelers passing her on both sides, their joy the antithesis to her heartbreak. This searing pain in her middle was nothing short of what she deserved. Having to live with his hurt and Leo’s parting words ringing in her ears was the price she paid for deceiving him. She’d let it go way too far without coming clean. She was at fault. He had every right to walk away without a backward glance.

And with nothing left keeping her in the city, with shame biting at her heels, Reese could only stumble blindly downtown toward her building, her fingers fumbling on the screen of her phone to book a bus ticket back to Wisconsin. As soon as possible.

CHAPTER 19



Leo pounded his fist into the dough, leaving dents in the shape of his knuckles.

He'd come straight to the Cookie Jar after walking away from Reese, losing himself in the routine of pastry making. Seeing the color drain from her face over and over again when she realized she'd been caught. Hearing her voice implore him to stop—that got to him most of all. What the hell did she care? Why ask him to come back? Wasn't it obvious she wasn't going to get what she wanted? He'd been right to be wary of dancers. They were all the goddam same. Always looking for a way ahead, ready to step on necks to get there.

He left the dough to prove and moved on to the next task, refusing to pause, jumping from one job to the other. If he stopped, he would have to acknowledge the gaping hole in the center of his chest. The place where his fucking heart had been ripped out. Hours and hours he'd spent with Reese, falling in love, even becoming a better person, a better business owner. How the hell could she have been misleading him?

And after all of this, how could he still miss her so much? Want her like his body was going to crumble without the sensation of her face pressing into his neck?

With a hard swallow, Leo lifted his head, finding himself standing in the supply room with no memory of walking there. Right in front of him on the shelf sat the small sack of French cocoa powder. His throat burned at the sight of it. Clear as day,

he could see Reese walking into the bakery with it as a peace offering after the second time she'd blown him off.

Leo's hand paused on its way to picking up the French powder.

The last week of his life had been so perfect, he'd forgotten about the struggle at the beginning with Reese. Getting her to agree to a date had been almost impossible. That first evening, she'd run out the bakery without even leaving her number.

After he'd made his distrust of dancers blatantly obvious... she'd left.

He'd been the one to go find her days later. Ask her out. And she'd said no. He could still see her standing outside the theater, flushed from dancing, hair blowing across her mouth.

I-I'm trying to channel all of my energy into my reason for being in the city, you know? I have to eat sleep and breathe dancing to be competitive.

As much as I like you, I just...I can't say yes.

In the end, she'd never used him, had she? Did she really spend the last two weeks doing open calls to avoid that very thing?

Leo's gut started to burn.

He backed out of the supply room without getting what he came for, stopping in front of his work table and propping himself up on two fists.

Every second with Reese came back to him in a colorful, endless ribbon of film, beginning and ending with her dancing in Bryant Park, so achingly beautiful she'd slayed him where he stood. She'd been good enough to get an audition with his father. A good showing would have guaranteed her career. Missing it would have been devastating. More than enough to make her consider doing something out of character. And still she'd changed her mind, trying to make it on her own. Did she succeed? He never even asked. Only accused her of lying.

Which she had.

He had to remember that. But...

I had two weeks, Leo. It's all I could afford.

His pulse rapped against his temples. At the very least, he should have stayed outside the fucking restaurant and heard her out. He'd put her in the same category as Tate Dillinger and that...the more he chewed over the situation, the more that didn't feel right. Not at all.

Leo took off his apron and tossed it away, finding his keys and leaving through the side exit, surprised to find the sun already coming up. Jesus. How much time had passed since he'd left Reese? Left those shitty words hanging in the air between them?

He jogged to the corner and waved down a yellow, not wanting to lose time walking, even though it was a short distance to her building. He didn't remember the exact address, only the avenue and cross street, so he relayed that information to the driver, falling back against the seat, his jugular squeezed in an invisible fist. Dread was trying to edge its way into his bones, but he wouldn't let it. They'd talk about this. He'd listen to her side of the story.

There's always someone better. I'm just...I can barely keep up. That's the truth.

Reese's confession from over a week ago echoed in his head.

Her side of the story was important. That much was obvious. And he wanted to know it. He wanted to go back to last night and fucking listen, instead of storming off. What was the matter with him? She'd been on the verge of tears, yet so accepting of his anger. Like she knew she deserved it. Why did that make him want to tear out his hair?

The cab pulled to a stop at the corner and Leo swiped his credit card through the payment terminal, his fingers numb as he punched the buttons. Barely sunrise, there was no one on the sidewalk when he left the cab, striding quickly to her building and entering the vestibule, caught in the chin by memories of the last time he was there. How she'd wanted to

avoid him coming upstairs. Was there more to the story that he was missing? He was going to find out. He needed to know everything.

Right after he apologized for walking away. For saying such hurtful things.

Every second that passed with that last encounter between them was painful.

LaRue.

He scanned the buzzers for the name of her landlord, the French woman she'd mentioned the day she gifted him the cocoa powder—and there it was. Sixth floor. He was probably going to catch hell for buzzing the door so early, but there wasn't a chance in hell he could wait for a decent hour. He needed to see Reese now. Immediately. Nothing felt right. Nothing.

A tired voice came through the speaker, threaded with static.

“Oui?”

“I'm here to see Reese Stratton. I'm her boyfriend. Is she home?”

No answer. But the door beeped after a second and Leo went, pushing inside the building and punching the call button for the elevator, relieved when it opened right away. Was he imagining her scent lingering in the air? The sweet familiarity of it twisted something inside of him until he could barely walk straight off the elevator.

When he stepped out, there was a woman waiting in the hallway with her arms crossed. “She is not here.”

“What?” Cold coated his skin. “I don't...why did you buzz me up?”

“Your girlfriend. She left all of her shit behind. I don't want to deal with it.” She jabbed a finger in his direction, disappearing into the apartment. “You will deal with it. Come.”

Body chilled, head on fire, Leo had no choice but to follow the woman inside. If Reese wasn't there, where was she? Was she safe? Jesus, why did he leave her like that?

The apartment was well furnished, a nice view of the avenue via a balcony. But he didn't see anything right off the bat that called Reese to mind. These drab antiques couldn't have been further from her style. Reese was fresh, optimistic, creative, provocative, nostalgic. None of those things were represented here...and the dread inside of him multiplied.

"Come," the French woman said briskly. "Her room is this way."

Room. Okay, she was renting a room. Not unusual in this city. Also, a good explanation for not inviting him upstairs after their date. Still, wouldn't the lack of privacy have been a good reason to spend the night at his place? She'd never stayed. Not once. Always holding that final piece of herself back. Out of guilt for lying? Or self-preservation, knowing he'd condemn her when the truth came out?

Leo's pulse pounded at the base of his neck as he advanced into the room indicated by the landlady, his brain taking a moment to process what it was seeing. "This is not it," he croaked, taking in the discarded dance shoes, forgotten in the corner. "Tell me this is not where she's been sleeping. On a...a beanbag chair? You can't even fit a bed in here."

"I slept in worse when I came to New York City years ago. It's safe and clean. That is the important thing. Dancers are resilient. The girl was resilient." LaRue paused, seeming to view the closet through fresh eyes. "It surprised me that she left."

Leo could barely hear over the rushing in his ears, his horror only allowing him to kneel down and pick up her shoes, turning them over in his hands, wincing over the blood stains in the heels of each one of them. To his right, there was a stack of magazines, newspaper and printouts from the Internet, open calls circled, crossed out. Dozens of them.

This girl had been killing herself.

Absolutely running herself ragged, living in this depression closet, and she'd still shown up to see him every day with a smile, with hope in her eyes. She'd opted for this instead of using him. Instead of asking him for help.

That spoke to her character a lot more than her lying, didn't it?

Who wouldn't lie about being this desperate to someone they liked?

Why wouldn't she feel compelled to keep her rejections to herself? How hard that must have been, day in and day out. And to come back to this...?

Christ, he needed to find her. Hold her.

Why did she leave her dance shoes there? Was she giving up?

No. No, fuck that. Not on his watch.

Leo surged to his feet. "You said she left this stuff behind. Where did she go?"

"She's Wisconsin-bound, Bexley," said a voice behind Leo. He turned to find a vaguely familiar girl coming through a door on the other side of the hallway, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "She was going to catch the next bus at Port Authority." She craned her neck. "Are any of those shoes a size six?"

Leo tore out of the apartment with his heart in his mouth, forgoing the elevator for the stairs, already pulling the phone out of his pocket and calling Reese. Straight to voicemail.

No. No no no, she couldn't be gone.

She couldn't have just left.

There were solutions to their problem. He'd had them the whole goddamn time. She'd never asked. She was never planning to, was she? She was just going to try until she couldn't afford it anymore? But two weeks wasn't enough time to make a career happen. Not for the majority of dancers, let alone people aspiring to any profession. Didn't she know that?

Leo hailed another yellow, burying his head in his hands in the backseat, his organs seized up inside of him. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. He tried calling her again, got her voicemail again and almost smashed a fist through the window. Thankfully, at this time of the morning, traffic wasn't gridlocked yet and they made it to Port Authority in five minutes. This time, Leo threw cash at the driver and booked it, searching through gritty eyes for an information booth. Anything.

"Where would I find a bus to Wisconsin?" he asked a woman in a red vest. "Cedarburg."

"Follow the signs for the departure terminal," the person replied, pointing. "What bus line are you looking for? Greyhound or..."

"I don't know," he said hoarsely, plowing his fingers through his hair.

The woman seemed to pick up on his distress. "I'm pretty sure there's a group down there now waiting to depart. Terminal nine. It would be going to Philly first—"

Leo was already running, dodging people with suitcases to propel himself down the escalator, sweeping the massive lower floor for Reese. There was no group actively waiting to board a bus. Was he in the right place?

He would never be sure what caused him to turn around and move the opposite direction, past the escalator blocking his view. Maybe it was sense of Reese being close. Whatever the reason, through the glass, he spotted her. Waiting in a line outside to board a bus, purple coat pulled tightly around her body, suitcase in hand.

Relief almost capsized him.

"Reese!" Leo shouted her name and forced his unsteady limbs to move, to go to her, throwing himself out the door into the dark, windy underpass. "Reese."

She whipped around, her expression astonished. "Leo?"

"You're still here. Thank God, you're still here." Pulse going a thousand miles an hour, he took the suitcase out of her

hand and set it away, out of her reach. “Enough of this. You’re coming home with me.”

“What?” she sputtered. “No. I’m not. I’m going home. My home.”

“This is your home,” he growled, taking her by the arms, aching so deeply he could barely get a breath. “I’m your home, Reese. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for last night. I was an asshole.”

“No.” Her disbelief was obvious. “No, you weren’t. You were right.”

Trying to stave off the mounting dread, Leo pulled her closer. “You’ve been sleeping in that tiny room, working yourself to the bone. Bleeding for this. All so you wouldn’t have to ask me for a favor, Reese. I can forgive the lying, all right? I understand why you felt you needed to. Just don’t get on that bus. Please.”

Tears rushed into her eyes, filling them so completely that a single blink sent moisture coursing down her cheeks. “I wasn’t good enough. I really tried, Leo. I wanted to stay here. Not just to dance, but for us. I gave it everything and it wasn’t enough.”

What this poor girl had been through. All alone. He wanted to wrap her up in his arms and rock her, protect her from the world. From pain and rejection. He might have been given that opportunity last night if he’d heard her out. But it couldn’t be too late. It couldn’t be. “Reese, listen to me. You’re bringing your things to my place. You’ve belonged there all along—we know that. Two weeks isn’t enough for anyone. You can have as much time as you want this way. All the time in the world.”

“Leo.” She laughed without humor. “No. I’m not letting you move some broke, unemployed girl into your apartment.”

“Some broke, unemployed girl?” He echoed in disbelief. “Don’t you dare talk about yourself like that, Reese. You’re a hell of a lot more. You’re the girl I love. I love you. You want an audition with my father? Done. I’ll make it happen today. This is nothing like what happened with Tate. I was so damn

wrong to say that. You're the opposite, sweetheart. You're the exception to every fucking rule, okay?"

Reese didn't seem to take a breath for long moments, eventually sucking in a quick one. "I love you, too." She swiped at her eyes, probably unaware that she'd just sent his heart into a fit of jumping jacks. "But I had to do this on my own. It had to be my talent that got me chosen. Nothing else. I'd never really feel like I earned it. And you'd always question my intentions—"

"No, I wouldn't." Oh God, he'd fucked up so badly. Been careless and hurtful with his words. Now her belief in him was unstable. "That's bullshit, Reese. Listen to me—"

She cut him off with a kiss, flooding his senses with her beloved taste and feel. "I'm sorry. I'm going home," she whispered against his lips. "I couldn't make it on my own. And I refuse to rely on your help. I'm not even sure I'd have it in me to try again."

And he could see that. Could see how utterly deflated she was. It knifed him through the sternum to see her like that. So unlike her usual positive self. He'd ruined his chance to help her through it and now...she'd become unreachable. Buried under the snow bank of disappointment, a lot of which he'd caused. "So we love each other and you're still leaving." A spike embedded itself in his gut. "I don't accept that."

A honk sounded behind Reese, echoing through the underpass.

They turned around to find the bus driver waving her on impatiently. "I have to go."

"No, you don't," he said raggedly, catching her wrist in mid-air when she reached for her suitcase. "You can believe me when I say living with you would make me the happiest man alive, Reese. It's what I've wanted all along. You there, never leaving. You can come home with me and let me make this better."

"I'm the only one who can do that," she whispered, going up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "And I'm out of fuel. I'm

sorry.”

There was nothing he could do. That sick realization paralyzed Leo. All he could do was stand there and watch Reese place her baggage in the bus compartment and climb on, pausing to look back at him one last time. Then disappearing from his life in a cloud of exhaust.

CHAPTER 20



Reese sat in the driver's seat of her mother's car in the driveway, hands in her lap, heat blasting out from the vents. "For You Too" by Yo La Tengo was playing for the third time since she'd left Cedar-Boogie. She couldn't blame the cold for the numbness stealing through her fingertips. They'd been like this for the three weeks since she'd left New York.

She'd taken over half of her mother's class load at the school and enrolled in night school at the local community college for the upcoming spring semester—and those things, those irons she'd stuck into the fire of her new existence, had stolen the meager energy she had left. Every movement, every thought and response, required acting skills. Pretending she felt normal when she felt anything but, her heart still beating on the floor of a bus terminal back in Manhattan.

Sending the command to her hand to move, she turned off the ignition and climbed out of the car, holding her coat tight to her neck to beat the last dregs of winter. Walked to the house, opened the door and went inside, the scent of her mother's chicken tortilla soup causing her to half smile despite the constant pain she was living with.

She was desperately in love with a man and he was a thousand miles away.

She'd lost track of the number of times Leo had called her, starting as soon as she was on the bus ride. Not once had she picked up, as much as it hurt. There were no answers to give him. No satisfying ones, anyway. And the functioning part of

Reese's brain knew she was punishing them both because her dreams had been snuffed out, but that was pride for you. That was pride and she had only a little of it left, so she needed to hang on to it.

Her pride didn't make it any easier to think of what could have been. If she'd just stayed. If she'd let Leo take her home, soothe her wounds and carry her. It probably would have been so easy, because he would have made it that way. But one person relying on the other is no way to have a relationship. They'd already started off on the wrong foot and she couldn't do them that disservice. No matter how tempting.

Reese paused outside of the kitchen, toeing off the ankle boots she'd put on after class, requiring a moment before facing her mother. With a smile glued to her face, she walked into the kitchen a moment later, finding her mother stirring a pot at the stove.

"Hey, Reese's Pieces. How was jazz?"

"Good. Full attendance. Little Maxine Weaver is showing some early signs of excelling. We might want to talk to her mother about private classes."

"I surely will. How exciting." Her mother made an absent gesture with the spoon. "Something came for you today."

"Oh." Reese's step faltered when she saw the big cardboard box sitting on the kitchen table. "What is it?"

"I don't have X-ray vision," laughed Lorna. "Open it."

When she saw the sender, her heart shot up into her throat.

LEO BEXLEY C/O THE COOKIE JAR.

Those words blurred her vision. The person, the place, the magic had all been real. There were a few times over the course of the last three weeks where Reese wondered if the whole experience had been a dream.

She circled the box once, chewing on her thumbnail, then went to retrieve a pair of scissors from the junk drawer. After only a slight hesitation, she slit the tape open and peeled back

the sides, her pulse spiking at the chance to be close to Leo again in some way.

Cake pops.

Dozens of them, wrapped in cellophane and red bows, carefully packaged with insulated foam and dry ice. Reese pulled out the first one, holding it up to the light. A white outline of a dancer with green frosting making up the background, Bryant Park written in black script. The next one was a pigeon. Representing the afternoon they'd spent on the roof of the Bexley Theater? Another one was a bed with a trail of yellow Z's sloping and looping around the small edible globe. A nap date cake pop. A furry purple coat, too. And on and on they went, pops commemorating their moments together, the final one simply saying "I love you. I'm sorry."

Reese unwrapped that one and bit into it, aching for something he'd touched. Wanting to consume it. The red wine and cherries flavor exploded on her tongue, the closest she could come to kissing him, and she closed her eyes to savor the moment.

"Wow." Reese didn't even realize her mother was standing behind her until she stroked a hand down Reese's ponytail. "A lot of effort went into this."

"Yeah," Reese said around a full mouth of cake, frosting sticking to her teeth. "A lot."

"He must miss you as much as you miss him."

"You're not helping." Reese sniffed, reaching for the only cake pop in the box that wasn't directly dedicated to her, handing it back over her shoulder. "This one is for you. I told him you'd love maple syrup and crushed macadamia nuts one time when we were lying in bed. We'd just had sex, Mom. Really, really fantastic sex." She opened the wrapper of another cake pop, this one with kitchen utensils painted on, shoving it into her mouth. "I didn't mean to say that out loud. My brain isn't working properly anymore."

"Oh, honey." Her mother took a seat at the table beside her, pushing the box of cake pops out of the way. "Why don't

you just call him?”

“What would I say? Nothing has changed.” She squeezed her eyes shut, his lopsided smile painting itself on the back of her lids. “I’m the girl who couldn’t hack it. Sooner or later, he’d be disappointed in me. At least this way, I’m saving us from that. I’ve already disappointed you and that’s bad enough.”

Her mother’s fingers paused in the middle of unwrapping her cake pop. “What in the damn heck did you just say to me, young lady?”

“Mom, please. I don’t blame you.” Reese flopped back in her chair, gesturing to their general surroundings. “You worked so hard for all of this. Worked overtime to bring me to competitions, buy me costumes, drag me from class to class to class. All those opportunities you afforded me and there’s no reward. Nothing I can give you in return.”

“Reese,” Lorna breathed. “My reward was and will always be your enjoyment. Your happiness that came from dancing. I never cared if you won first or eighth place as long as you wanted to lace up again tomorrow. Because it gave you joy. That’s all a mother wants. Their child to experience joy.”

Reese couldn’t respond, her leg jiggling up and down under the table.

“Oh my, what a fine mess we are,” Lorna laughed, scooting her chair over and pulling Reese’s head down to her bosom. “Do you love dancing, Reese?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her chest twisting. “I love it so much.”

“That right there is my gift. Having the privilege of nurturing that love.”

“Don’t you wish I’d succeeded, though?”

“Success is measured in all kinds of ways, honey. And I think finding something you love as much as you love dancing is a success in itself. There are people who’ll never discover their passion, because they never bothered to look.”

That was true. Wasn't it? Dancing had enriched her soul, her existence, whether she made it to the top of the game or not. It taught her about herself. Gave her hope and dreams and confidence. Filled her with drive. And even though she never quite reached the heights she'd been hoping for, there was some satisfaction in knowing she'd given something one hundred percent. That, paired with the sincerity of Lorna's words, started a slow paving over her fears of being a disappointment. It might take a while to pave all of it over, but even a small corner being covered was progress.

"Thanks, Mom." With some of the weight gone from her shoulders, Reese blew out a shaky breath, her eye drawn back to the box of cake pops. "In that way, I was lucky to find him, too. To know what being in love feels like."

Her mother groaned. "Call him, Reese. You're punishing yourself. If he can forgive you for a few fibs, you can forgive yourself for them, too."

"It's more than that. I just..." She tried to find the words to describe her hardened resolve. "I just don't feel whole right now. I don't feel like me. Leo has his dream, knows exactly what he wants...and I'm reimagining my life right now. Starting from scratch."

Lorna sighed. "I haven't met Leo, but..." She flicked the lid of the cardboard box. "Starting from scratch seems like his thing."

Reese appreciated her mother's help, but her spirit was too crushed to do anything but walk away from the possibility of hope. Allowing that emotion only caused hurt and disappointment. "Thanks, Mom. But I have to move forward on my own." She pushed back from the table and stood. "If I used him as a crutch, he'd eventually resent me for it. I'd rather walk away now."

That wasn't the entire truth, but it was all she could do. All she'd allow herself.

Reese left the room and threw herself into a hot shower, her face pressed tightly into the crook of her elbow to absorb the sobs. And for the next week, she continued through the

motions. Doing chores around the house, grocery shopping, teaching classes, preparing for night classes to begin in March at the local community college. Plowing forward, no matter how daunting it seemed.

She kept expecting the feeling of being out of place to go away. But it didn't. Every tap class, every jog in the park, made Reese feel like an imposter. An alien life form inhabiting someone else's body. She couldn't shake the intuition that she belonged somewhere else entirely and it made every second hurt, no respite in sight.

Missing Leo didn't get easier.

She dreamed of him nightly, to say nothing of her daydreams, starring him, too. When she slipped into her sheets and closed her eyes, his mouth moved on top of hers, the fingers between her legs belonged to him. In her weaker moments, she longed to call him, hear his baritone in her ear, but somehow she refrained...and the next day, she would miss him even more, her soul running on empty.

A week after the cake pops arrived, Reese stood in front of her beginner's ballet class, searching for patience for little girls and boys—who seemed mainly interested in giggling over the word fart—when her phone rang. Her pulse skyrocketed, as it did every time her phone rang, Leo's name appearing on the screen.

It wasn't Leo's name this time. However, it was a Manhattan number.

Signaling the class to take a break, Reese answered, pressing the phone to her ear. "Hello. This is Reese Stratton."

One word out of the caller's mouth had her recognizing the voice. It was straight out of the worst night of her life. "Miss Stratton, hello. I hope you remember me. This is Emile. You auditioned for me and my peers a month ago. *Chicago* the musical. Do you recall?"

A laugh snuck out. "Oh yes. I remember very well."

"Right," he said slowly. "Bit of a sore spot? Well. We went with the two other dancers, but one of them isn't working out.

She's just not giving us the energy we were expecting, based on her audition. And honestly, we simply couldn't stop throwing your name around. You have a severe lack of Broadway experience, but you really embodied the spirit of the show."

The giggling and scampering feet around her faded into silence until all she could hear was herself struggling for breath. "Th-thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm willing to admit we made a mistake in letting you go." In the background, she could hear the unmistakable echo of the theater, feet on a stage, music swelling—and yearning welled deeply inside of her. "Have you already signed on with another show or can you be here for rehearsals next week?"

Elation blasted her from all sides. Along with disbelief and gratitude.

Was this real? Was this happening?

She squeezed the phone until it bit into her fingers, shooting pain up to her wrist.

Real. Oh my God.

One thing held her back from total bliss. "You aren't calling because...I mean, Bernard Bexley or his son, Leo... they didn't have anything to do with this, did they?"

"You know *Bernard Bexley*?"

His reaction told Reese everything she needed to know. There'd been no interference. No one greasing the wheels. She'd made them notice her, stood out in their minds. Her acceptance into the fold was coming in a roundabout way, But she'd gotten there eventually—and she was going to seize this chance with both hands.

Not because she was afraid of disappointing her mother or herself.

But because she loved dancing. Because it gave her joy.

In Reese's excitement, she dropped the phone, immediately falling to her knees to scoop it back up, her body

shaking like a leaf. “Thank you. Thank you. I’ll be there.”

When she hung up the phone a few minutes later, her thoughts unerringly landed on Leo and with the breath back in her lungs, she started making plans.

* * *

LEO SLID a fresh tray of éclairs into their slot in the display case, forcing a smile onto his face for the approaching customer. The woman had come in for the first time a week ago and returned every day since on her way home, usually purchasing something for her nanny or dog walker. Or so she said, anyway. Leo highly suspected the desserts were for her.

As badly as he wanted to remain hidden in the back of the store, he worked an hour every day in front. Secretly, uselessly, hoping that doing this thing Reese inspired him to do might bring her back. Or maybe he just wanted to be there if she ever walked in again, her dirty-blond hair carrying on the warming spring breeze, her smile for him and him alone.

An ache struck him so ruthlessly, he had to support himself on the display case.

God, he missed Reese. Every damn second of every damn day.

He’d sent her away, too. This yawning pit of loneliness was his doing. He replayed his stupid speech—on Valentine’s Day, no less—to her on a constant loop, wishing like hell he could take it all back. Wishing he’d put aside his own hang-ups and looked at her pale face. Her misery. Wishing he’d stopped and listened.

Of course she wasn’t answering his calls. Of course she didn’t leave Port Authority with him and come back to his place, to remain indefinitely. In a matter of minutes, he’d stripped away every layer of security she’d had in their relationship. And that on top of her being rejected for role after role. The poor girl had been hollowed out—and he’d added to that feeling. Now he’d fucking lost her and his own agony was well deserved.

She'd helped him become more confident. Find his voice.

Made him acknowledge his capabilities. Brought joy into his life. Reminded him how to laugh, smile, venture outside of his comfort zone. Hell, her Sweetest Fix idea had given the bakery enough capital for the expansion. They planned on knocking down the wall into the vacant space beside them next month. And what had he done for her in return?

Cut her off at the knees when she was already at her lowest point.

After all that, why would she be comfortable enough to let him carry her for a while? He craved the chance to help her. To be her rock while she figured things out. But she couldn't rely on him like that because he'd damaged her faith in him. In them.

About a million times, he'd come an inch away from asking his father to find Reese a chorus position. It wouldn't even be a favor. She was good. Good enough to win an audition with Bernard. If she hadn't missed it, she'd already be working. No question. But Leo knew she'd never accept the help, as badly as he needed to give it, so he somehow refrained.

Forcing himself back to the present, Leo asked about the customer's dog breed and bagged up her key lime tarts, running her credit card and sending the woman on her way. With the bakery empty, he rested his elbows on the counter, massaging the ever-present throb in the center of his forehead. It was nothing compared to the emptiness inside of him, but there wasn't anything he could do about that. Not without Reese.

Voices outside drew Leo's attention and he lifted his head to see Jackie chatting with the mailman. She laughed and accepted the small bundle of letters, bills and advertisements, wishing him a good day and dancing into the store. Leo guessed he looked about as shitty as he felt, because Jackie drew up short at the sight of him, sending him a sympathetic smile.

"Hey, boss. How was the after work rush?"

“Decent. Sold out those cronuts,” he said absently, turning for the back room. “Let me know if you need me.”

“Oh, Leo.”

Something in Jackie’s tone had him turning around, eyebrow raised. “Yeah?”

She stared down at a powder blue envelope in her hands. Started to say something, but held up the envelope instead. His heart almost stopped dead in his chest when he saw it was from Reese. Reese Stratton. A Wisconsin address. Had she written him a letter?

Leo reached for the envelope and opened it carefully, not wanting to screw up his first chance to hear from her in six excruciating weeks.

Inside was a theater ticket. Just one.

For tonight’s performance of Chicago.

Hope almost caused his knees to lose power.

But neither of those emotions came close to the pride that expanded his chest.

“You don’t think...” Jackie started, a smile curling her lips.

“She did it.” God help him, his eyes were burning. “She did it.”

And after everything, she still wanted him? Is that what this meant?

Please God. Please let her still want me. Need me. Like I need her.

A splotch of moisture fell onto the ticket and he wasn’t sure whether it came from him or Jackie, who was openly weeping. “Well, you have to bring flowers. Roses. Find something nice to wear.” She checked her watch, a laugh bubbling out of her mouth. “Better get started, boss. You only have a couple of hours.”

Two hours and one ripped dress shirt later—apparently his shoulders...and the rest of him had bulked up since college—Leo found himself in an aisle seat, anticipation tensing every

one of his muscles, his hands in a white-knuckled grip on the carved armrests, a bouquet of red and white roses in his lap.

Reese was in the building. The same building as him. Somewhere within these walls.

How was he supposed to breathe normally?

Leo had accompanied his parents to *Chicago* years ago, so he wasn't expecting the lights to dim halfway, an unfamiliar song drifting down the occupied rows like smoke in a speakeasy. A murmur passed through the audience when a dancer appeared in one aisle, and then a second performer in the other, a spotlight swinging between them. Even with the hats pulled low over their brow, he could tell they weren't Reese right away, though. Where was—

A beautifully familiar girl in a black vest and tights rolled off the stage, landing on the ball of her right foot, extending her left leg in a seamless high kick—and it was the combination of the move and her feline smile that earned her whistles and applause from the crowd. And suspended Leo right where he sat, thunder clapping in his ears.

It was her. Reese.

Not ten yards away.

The cellophane crinkled in his lap, thanks to his hard grip on the flowers. One thread of sanity held him to the seat when all he wanted was to rise, wrap her in his arms, kiss the mouth he'd missed like lungs without oxygen for a month and a half. Slowly but surely, the spotlight moved with her inside of it until she was dancing within arm's reach, holding the audience members in the palm of her hand, disappearing into the role of jazz hall stunner.

At least until they made eye contact, her gaze softening, her arms falling down at her sides gently. In that moment, she was all Reese. His Reese. And when she walked toward him, crooking her finger at him as the spotlight fell away, leaving them in the dark, Leo was powerless to do anything but stand up and go to her. Her smile wobbled and she gave a watery laugh, his lips cutting off the sound. The taste of her ran

through him like a riot, her curves turning pliant, giving against him, her back curving over his arm and they kissed. Great, devouring kisses that weren't fit for public and made him wish like hell they were alone.

When she moaned in her throat, Leo forced himself to break away.

“Is this going to get you in trouble?”

“I cleared it with the director,” she whispered, her hands warm on the sides of his face. “She seemed to think it might sell more tickets if we started a rumor that the audience members might get a kiss at the show.” She wiped lipstick from his mouth with the pad of her thumb. “But it'll only ever be you,” she said, a sheen in her eyes. “It'll always be you.”

“That's good,” he said, his voice vibrating with emotion. “Because it'll only ever be you for me, too.” He stooped down to inhale her scent. “Christ, I'm so proud of you.”

“I'm proud of me, too,” she said, haltingly. “I had to do it on my own, Leo. Not because of anything you did or said. Not because of our fight. I want you to know that. I just needed to believe it was real. That I reached this goal because of effort. I needed it to be honest. Okay? I disappointed myself by lying to you.” She took a breath. “Relying on myself was how I needed to fix it. For me. For us.”

There was nothing that could ever completely alleviate Leo's guilt over his part in their fight, but the earnestness, the truth in her eyes evaporated the lingering self-loathing in his stomach like sunshine. Because that's what she was. Light and warmth and strength. The girl he wanted to stand beside for an eternity, basking in her glow. “Thank you for finding a way.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “God, sweetheart. Thank you.”

The overhead lights starting to flash, signaling the start of the show. “Meet me backstage afterward?”

He rumbled a laugh. “Try and stop me.”

She started toward the stage entrance, but paused to look back at him. “Missing you made me love you even more. I

hope you're ready.”

They could hear his heart pounding on the moon. He was sure of it. “I love you, Reese Stratton. I’m ready for every damn thing with you,” he managed around the obstruction in his throat. “Forever starts tonight.”

Her smile was the last thing he saw before she vanished into the dark.

And it was the first thing he saw every morning for the rest of his life.

EPILOGUE



Eight Years Later

Reese took her time walking uptown, a bag full of produce from the farmer's market dangling in her right hand. The summer breeze swished the skirt around her ankles, her free hand lifting to brush the hair back from her daughter's head where she dozed in her sling. They were another fifteen-minute walk away from the Cookie Jar, but as she often did, Reese detoured through Times Square, inhaling the chaos of the beloved district where she'd danced for the last eight years, before deciding that once unattainable dream had been duly fulfilled.

She stopped outside of the Bexley Theater and thought of the girl who'd missed her audition. A babe in the woods, wanting so badly to achieve a dream, but no idea how to proceed.

Well. If Reese had her way, she'd reach girls like her past self, one at a time.

She'd be the lifeline in this pitching ocean of a city.

"Won't we, Lily?" Reese murmured, kissing her daughter's head. "Very soon."

With one last look at the locked theater doors, Reese continued to glide toward the Crossroads of the World, no longer pressured by the frenetic pace of the crowds. In the last eight years, she'd learned to move at her own pace. No one

else's. Or maybe her husband had taught her that. How to recognize setbacks as learning experiences, not failures. How to not be so hard on herself and to enjoy the moments, win or lose.

She'd taught him equally valuable lessons along the way—and their marks in the win column vastly outweighed the losses.

After all, Reese and Leo had each other, the biggest victory of all. They married a year after her return to New York City, exchanging their vows on the roof of the Bexley Theater, no one in attendance except for their parents and the pigeons. Up until last year, they'd lived and loved in his one-bedroom apartment, expanding to a two-bedroom when they found out they were expecting Lily. They'd traveled to four countries, their friendships had grown deep, abiding roots, and they lived every day with the kind of blinding joy that only came after almost losing the person one treasures most, knowing it would never happen again.

On her way through Times Square, Reese looked for Link and waved, gesturing to his new getup—Scooby Doo—and giving him a thumbs up. His laughter carried on the summer wind and reached her ears, the nostalgia of seeing her unlikely friend never failing to sweep her with a sense of belonging.

But there was no greater sense of belonging than when she walked into the Cookie Jar, the smell of chocolate and nutmeg and fresh coffee surrounding her in a welcoming cloud. She locked eyes with Leo over the display case, watching his hand pause in mid-air, love transforming his expression at the sight of them...and she lost her breath. She always did. The magnitude of her happiness never failed to knock the wind right out of her.

Especially when she saw he'd worn the Mean Baker apron she'd had made for him their first Christmas together. They'd expanded the shop years ago, adding a seating area along the north wall and pushing the kitchen out to double its size. They had contracts with restaurants, mainly in Hell's Kitchen, their growing popularity even forcing them to turn down contracts. For now. Until they opened their second location this fall.

“Hey,” Reese mouthed at Leo.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he rumbled back, pulling up the hatch and ducking his six-foot-three frame beneath it, curving a big paw over Lily’s head. “I never get used to you walking in here.” He tucked some loose hair behind her ear, his throat muscles working. “Are you ready for today?”

She accepted his lingering hello kiss, gave him one of her own. “The question is not whether I’m ready...” They both turned to eye the back of the Cookie Jar where Bernard Bexley sat with his now-usual scone and black coffee, looking infinitely impatient, his dancer’s foot tapping on the tile flooring. “The question is...will your father and I be a good partnership? I still can’t believe he wanted to help. I strongly suspect he just wants more Lily time and Mentors in Manhattan is just an excuse to make that happen.”

Leo shook his head. “He offered to help because he knows a good idea when he hears one. What you’ve put together in such a short time? It’s incredible, Reese.”

Reese leaned into her husband’s shoulder, giving it a grateful kiss, and thought back to the morning last summer she’d announced over brunch that she’d be retiring from dancing to start her new consultancy for aspiring Broadway performers. Bernard, while calmly scraping the butter off his toast had looked up and said, “Sure, I’d love to help. Thank you for asking.”

It had taken a while—and a few awkward first meetings—to get Leo and his family back in the habit of spending time together. Frequent visits from Lorna had helped, as her mother’s humor and optimism were infectious. And now, it was understood that they ate dinner together on Friday nights and had breakfast every other Sunday. Although with the arrival of Lily, Leo’s parents were beginning to complain about not enough family time.

Now they would apparently be spending all the time together.

If someone told her eight years ago that Bernard Bexley would be her business partner, she would have fainted dead

away. But now? Now...he was just her kooky father-in-law who could still execute a kick-ass barrel turn.

Speaking of...

“Is that my Lily?” Bernard crept toward them, rubbing his hands together. “Is that my little partner in crime? Where’s Lily. Where’s Lily?”

On cue, their daughter woke up, yawned and turned her head, giving her grandfather a drooling smile, two tiny teeth sticking up out of her bottom gums. Seamlessly, Bernard lifted Lily from the sling, the way he lifted Broadway chanteuses back in the day, holding her up in the air for a slow spin.

Leo and Reese traded a suppressed grin. “Are you ready for our first day of work, Bernard?” Reese asked, leaning into Leo when he put an arm around her shoulder, both of them watching their daughter bond with the legendary dancer.

“Sure, sure. Put my name on whatever you want. You get started,” Bernard without looking at Reese. “I’ll babysit.”

“Just as I suspected,” she laughed.

Leo’s fingers intertwined with Reese’s and he tugged. “Come on. I’ve got something to show you.”

Reese followed. She’d follow that big, beautiful back anywhere. “You do?”

Her husband hummed, shooting her a wink over his shoulder, but didn’t say anything else. On their way under the hatch and through the shop, Reese blew kisses to Jackie and Tad who stopped bickering over how to operate the new espresso machine long enough to wave back. Normally, she would have stopped for a chat, but Leo held open the familiar swinging door into the kitchen and signaled her inside. Assuming her husband just wanted to make out now that someone was watching the baby, Reese looped her arms around his neck, moaning when their lips brushed together, pushed apart and took.

Her eager fingers were beginning to walk their way down to his waistband when she realized Leo was backing her through the expanded and improved kitchen. Past the standing

mixers, past the new ovens they'd added. All the way toward the back where Leo's new office was located.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll see," he grunted, swooping back down and pressing their foreheads together. "I missed you all morning, sweetheart. Keep kissing me."

She had absolutely no problem following that command. Kissing this man was her favorite pastime. But when her back touched a barrier, she couldn't contain her curiosity and pulled away, arching a brow at Leo.

"Turn around," he said.

When she did, Reese could only gape at the words Mentors in Manhattan stenciled to the door. "What is this?" she whispered, heart pounding.

"I know you were planning on working at the kitchen table at home for now. But, uh..." He sounded almost shy. "I'd love to have you closer, you know? Maybe I'm spoiled now that you're not dancing at night, but I want you here with me. Lily, too."

"Leo," she breathed, turning the knob. "I can't believe you did this."

"Can't you?" He used a finger to push open the door. "Haven't I told you every day for the last eight years that you're my Sweetest Fix of all?"

"And you're mine," she managed around the obstruction in her throat, eyes clouding.

The office was...perfect.

A feminine desk with a fringed, vintage lamp, exactly her style. A small crib tucked into the corner. Pictures of their travels on the wall. Paris, Berlin, Tokyo. Family snapshots in Brooklyn Bridge Park. A framed copy of her first headshot. A picture of them together backstage after her first performance on *Chicago*, staring into one another's eyes. Playbills of the shows she'd worked on afterward. And finally their wedding day.

“What do you think?” he asked, kissing the side of her neck adoringly.

With affection overflowing in her chest, Reese turned, reached past her husband and closed the door. “I think I’ll show you instead.”

THE END

For more sexy, heartfelt romantic comedies by Tessa Bailey, head to her website: <https://bit.ly/39HjYtb> or find her on Goodreads: <https://bit.ly/3sC0KQj> — happy reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TESSA BAILEY ASPIRES to three things. Writing hot and unforgettable, character-driven romance, being a good mother and eventually sneaking onto the judging panel on a reality show baking competition. She lives on Long Island, New York with her husband and daughter, writing all day and rewarding herself with a cheese plate and Netflix binges in the evening. If you want sexy, heartfelt, humorous romance with a guaranteed happy ending, you’ve come to the right place.