

Christmas
WITH THE
Denton
BILLIONAIRES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LESLIE NORTH

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES

The Billionaire's Christmas Fiancée

The Billionaire's Sudden Christmas Baby

The Billionaire's Second Chance Christmas

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BLURB

'Tis the season for fake engagements, surprise babies and second chances...

This steamy boxset from USA Today bestseller Leslie North calls for a frothy cup of eggnog, a crackling fire, and a long afternoon to while away the hours with three irresistible billionaires.

Will a fake Christmas engagement lead to true love in the **Billionaire's Christmas Fiancée**? Amelia MacTaggart wants a promotion. To get it, all she has to do is pretend to be her hot billionaire boss's fiancée for Christmas. But when their fake romance starts feeling all too real, Amelia realizes she may not be pretending after all...

Jules Cardwell has her hands full planning the legendary Denton Hotel Christmas gala. Then she and her billionaire boss, Mitch Denton, discover a real baby in the hotel's manger. Forced together with a storm bearing down, Mitch and Jules are about to discover that all they want for Christmas...may just be each other, in **The Billionaire's Sudden Christmas Baby**.

Things are heating up in the kitchen in **The Billionaire's Second Chance Christmas**! Mara Lancaster's future depends on her winning a local gingerbread house competition. The only problem? Her main competition is her former lover, Chris Denton. It's a recipe for disaster...one that just might leave them both burned.

MAILING LIST

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THE
BILLIONAIRE'S
Christmas Fiancée

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES: BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLURB

Will a Christmas fake engagement lead to true love?

Amelia MacTaggart wants a promotion, and she'll do just about anything to get it. Including pretending to be her hot billionaire boss's fiancée for Christmas. Joshua, her boss, needs to look like a family man to buy a resort—one that happens to be in Amelia's hometown... Which means she has to lie to her family about being engaged. But when their pretend romance starts feeling all too real, Amelia realizes she may be lying to herself as well...

Joshua thought his arrangement with Amelia would be a win-win. He'd buy the resort and Amelia would get her well-deserved promotion. Amelia's smart, efficient, not to mention stunningly beautiful. But Joshua is confident he can overlook that last part. This is just business; he won't let desire sidetrack him from his goals.

Too bad his heart seems to have Christmas plans of its own...

JOSH

Joshua Denton clicked his mouse, his finger tapping the left button like a nervous tick while tabbing through Google searches as a new idea occurs to him. He clicked a link, and music exploded out of his speakers. Jumping at the noise, he simultaneously reached to turn down his speakers and close the offending website, knocking his full coffee cup onto his keyboard.

“Shhhiiit.” Pushing everything aside, he grabbed his keyboard, turning it over and desperately shaking cold coffee from it. The music shifted suddenly to the sound of a woman moaning as though she’s having either the best orgasm of her life or the best bowel movement. He wasn’t entirely sure which, but it needed to stop, now. He reached for his mouse, but his hand came away wet.

He heard movement outside his office and his head snapped up. His long-time assistant, Amelia, sat right outside his office door. His *open* office door. “Why did I think it was a good idea to have an open-door policy?” he grumbled to himself, sending up a silent prayer to anyone who might be listening that she was wearing her headphones.

The music started again and he frantically hit ctrl-alt-delete on his keyboard, but nothing happened. Out of desperation, he reached for the toggle switch on the power strip and turned everything off.

Sudden blissful silence as the music stopped, but then a loud beeping started. “What the—? No, no, no.” He jumped up, his

chair flying back and slamming into the credenza behind him, and he was contemplating throwing everything out the nearest window when someone called his name.

“Uh, Mr. Denton?” His assistant stood in the open door, her headphones draped around her neck. She was rocking some sort of sexy librarian look that gave him all sorts of thoughts.

Dropping back down into his chair, Josh gave up any pretense that everything was under control and gestured at the mess he’d made.

“A little help?”

With a curious look on her face, she joined him at his desk. “Okay, well first...” She stretched out her leg, her skirt riding up her thigh, and tapped the switch on the power strip with the toe of her boot.

The incessant beeping continued and before he could say anything, she squatted in front of his desk and then crawled under.

“There we go,” she sang out.

“What? What are you doing?” His mouth had gone dry as her delectable ass was suddenly right in front of him.

Her voice wafted up from under his desk. “Looks like you plugged your backup power supply into your power strip instead of the outlet in the floor. Won’t help save what you’re working on if you don’t have everything plugged in properly. Now to hit reset.”

The beeping blissfully stopped and he breathed out a sigh. “Thank you.”

“Not finished yet, Mr. Denton,” she told him as she scooted back out only to end up kneeling in front of him. Her cheeks were tinged with pink, which he assumed was from her exertions, but seeing her like this gave him all sorts of ideas he shouldn’t be having about his assistant. Rising up, she adjusted her skirt and then turned to look at the mess on his desk. “All right, let’s see what the damage is.”

Grabbing his keyboard, she gave it a couple taps, and when nothing happened, she frowned. Flipping it over, she did something he couldn't see before setting it back down. Tapping again, suddenly the keyboard lit back up and the speakers...noooo...the speakers kicked back on and the website he was on when this all started was still running. At least it was only music. For now.

"I've got it from here. I—"

"That's okay. I got it," she told him as she began clicking. She was standing directly in front of his computer and he had to slide to the right to see what she was doing. Glancing at his monitor, Josh could see at least a dozen tabs open on his computer and he worried that she'd see where his search had taken him.

Reaching out, he tapped her arm. "Amelia, thank you for your help, but I'm sure you're busy. I can take it from here." The music had gotten louder and he was practically shouting in his need to get her away from his computer.

"Nonsense, it'll just take me a sec. Seriously, Mr. Denton, how on earth did you end up in this circle of spam?" As she clicked to close out the tabs, more would open. With a huff, she tapped ctrl-alt-delete and pulled up the task manager to force his browser to close. "There, that should do it. Now to make sure it worked and...oh. Oh. Oh my."

She froze and Josh had the sudden desire to bite her on the ass, which was still directly in front of his face, or head out to his car and drive far away. He doubted either of those ideas would be any worse than what he anticipated he would see when she finally moved. Except she had yet to move.

Dammit! Could this get any worse? Josh had a doozy of a headache coming on. Blowing out a breath, he was surprised at how calm he sounded when he asked, "Amelia, would you please step away from my computer?"

She sidestepped to his left and he could see what she was looking at.

"Amelia, I can explain."

AMELIA

“Wives for hire?”

Amelia stared at the website open on her boss’s computer, and she fought the urge to laugh. When she first heard the noises coming from his office, she’d decided to ignore it, but just in case, she had turned down the music she was listening to while she worked. When she heard sounds of distress, she decided to investigate, never once expecting to find this.

“As I said, I can explain.” Her normally put-together boss that she so did *not* have fantasies about was looking entirely too flustered with his hair sticking up in places where he’d rubbed his head.

She kept staring at the escort site, which offered a range of what they referred to as “experiences for the discerning man” including temporary girlfriends, wives, and mommies. Amelia was still squeezing the mouse, frozen in indecision, and she jumped when he gently took the mouse from her and closed the website.

Whirling around, she was surprised at how close he was to her and she quickly sidled away from his desk and around the other side. “It’s okay, Mr. Denton. You don’t need to explain anything to me. It’s...it’s completely normal to have urges.”

“Amelia.”

She rubbed her hands, twisting her fingers. “I mean, I don’t get why you’d use a website when you look like you do, but hey, that’s not my business and...”

“Amelia.”

Backing away, she bumped into the chair she normally sat in when they would work together and tried to step around it, but the slit on her skirt caught on the armrest and she found herself stuck. Reaching behind her, she tried to tug the skirt free, but it wasn't working and she had no idea why. She gave her hips a little shake hoping he wouldn't notice but when she peeked up at him, she found him staring at her, which only made her talk faster.

“Really. It's okay. Senior year in college, the Dean of the English department would bring his wife to all the school functions. Eventually, everyone found out that she wasn't his wife. In fact, his real wife showed up to one of the events and I think someone ended up in the pool fully clothed and there was a lot of yelling, but that won't happen to you because you're not married.” She really needed to stop talking but she also needed to get out of his office.

“Amelia. Stop talking and sit down. Now.”

She froze. Her glasses slid down to the tip of her nose and she pushed them back with a huff. She crossed her arms, tilting her hip up but decided that looked too defensive, so she dropped her arms, and then immediately wanted to cross them again. Giving her hips another little wiggle, she felt her skirt finally come away from the armrest with a little tear and she collapsed down into the chair with relief.

Once she was seated, her boss swung around in his chair and reached into the little fridge behind his desk, and pulled out two beers. Popping the caps on both, he set one on the desk in front of her. While they'd sometimes celebrated the end of a busy week with drinks, it wasn't even lunchtime. On a Tuesday.

Taking a long swig, he tilted his bottle toward her. “Have a drink. I think we both need it.”

Nodding her head, she reached for the beer and took several swallows, not really tasting it but desperately needing to do something with her hands.

They sat in silence, deep in their own thoughts when everything that'd happened came flooding back to her and she snorted out a laugh. Slapping her hand over her mouth, she snapped her eyes to his and prepared to apologize, but she found him smiling.

He broke the silence first when he asked, "So you think I'm good looking?"

Instead of answering, she took another drink and almost choked. She managed to swallow without spewing the beer onto her lap and she caught his smirk. Narrowing her eyes, she sat back in the chair, tapping the beer bottle against her lip as she pretended to be deep in thought.

She spoke only when it became clear that he wouldn't break first. "I mean, sure. You're easy on the eyes."

He choked at that comment and she hid her grin behind the beer. "Easy on the eyes? Do people even say that anymore?"

Amelia shrugged, no longer hiding her smile. "In all seriousness, Mr. Denton. Did you accidentally end up on that site or was it intentional?"

Joshua Denton, hotel magnate and one of New York's most eligible and richest bachelors was blushing. There's definitely a first for everything and while she might regret having this conversation with him later, right now, she was all-in.

"Yes and no, but before I get into it, Ms. MacTaggart, how long have you worked for me?"

Was this a trick question? Was he going to fire her? "I've worked for Denton Hotels for four years and I've been your assistant for two of them."

Taking another sip of his beer, he carefully set the bottle down, then rocked forward in his chair, setting his hands on the desk as he watched her. *Do not squirm, Amelia.*

"Then do you think, given all that time and what you witnessed not long ago, you could start calling me Josh or Joshua? Unless of course my being easy on the eyes makes me too intimidating."

Amelia felt the heat from her blush shoot across her cheeks and she couldn't stop the laughter. She snorted and then gasped hoping he hadn't heard, but he had. He chuckled and the weird butterflies that had been fluttering inside her increased their activity and she had to take several breaths before they calmed down. Nodding, she gave the best answer she could. "I'll try."

He gave her another smile, and she wanted to file them all away in her mind to recall later. She picked at the label on the bottle before setting the beer down on his desk.

Easy on the eyes? What had possessed her to say that? Her billionaire boss was gorgeous on a bad day, and now he wanted her to call him Josh? It was hard enough pretending she wasn't attracted to him when she used his last name.

She needed to get back to her desk and pretend none of this ever happened. "Mr. D., uh Joshua, Josh?" *Stop blowing it, Amelia!* "If there's nothing else, I should get back to work."

"Actually there is. Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa," he said, leaning across his desk to grab his mouse and click at something on his computer.

"What about it?" She scooted the chair over to the side of his desk so she could see what he was doing. Thankfully it wasn't another escort site. She recognized the private realty listing site that he regularly used. He was the Senior VP of Business Development, so it was his job to source potential commercial properties to add to Denton Hotels' portfolio.

"It's a prospective property I'm excited about. Located in upstate New York. It's one of the oldest luxury hotels in the state." He had a smile on his face as he clicked through the listing's photos of the property. "It was my favorite Christmas destination as a child. And it's currently on the market."

She blinked and cocked her head. "I know that place. I grew up down the street."

Josh spun in his chair to look at her. "What?"

"Yeah." She shrugged, reaching for her beer again but then deciding against it. "It's so beautiful, especially in the winter."

It looks like something out of a Christmas movie.”

“Wait. You’re from Cedar Grove? How did I not know this?”

JOSH

Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa wasn't just *any* regular hotel property going up for grabs. No, this place was family-owned and operated. It had generations worth of history, and the owners—a married couple set to celebrate their fortieth wedding anniversary this Christmas season—were very clearly searching for the *right* buyer. Which meant price, or the thickness of the wad of money Josh was prepared to offer, didn't matter. At all.

They wanted a family-oriented buyer, and Josh was the farthest thing from it. Both he and his brother Mitch had graced the covers of enough regional magazines and gossip sites touting the billionaire brothers' single status that would make it impossible for him to pretend otherwise. Unless.

He must have spent too much time staring at his computer screen in thought, because Amelia finally said, "Uh, Josh?"

"Hm?" Secretly pleased that she'd not only used his first name, but had shortened it to Josh, he clicked through a few screens as a new idea occurred to him.

"Are you planning to go out there to view the property and make an offer? What do you need from me?" Amelia asked.

"I'm thinking." Josh worked his jaw back and forth, swinging to face Amelia. He studied the top of his desk, lost in thought.

"Sooo..." Amelia reached for pen on his desk and clicked the top. "Are we trip planning?"

“Do you know the owners of the Cedar Grove Hotel?” he blurted.

She knit her brows. “Not personally, no.... But I think their youngest might have been a few grades above me in high school.”

Prickles spread through his gut. He was on to something here.

“And you’re, uh, single, right?” He hated that the words hadn’t flowed easily for him. When she’d started working for him directly, she’d had a boyfriend, but along the way he’d caught wind that situation had dissolved. He made it a point not to inquire into her love life. Deep down, a part of him worried he’d get jealous, which was ridiculous.

Her brows formed a ridge. “Yes...”

He drew a fortifying breath as the final piece of the puzzle clicked into place. The plans he’d wanted Amelia to make were for him to visit Cedar Grove and woo the owners himself. But what if he included her in the mix, and they just happened to think she was his doting fiancée?

“I need you to hear me out before you storm out of here and go straight to HR to file a complaint against me,” he began.

“Well, this should be interesting,” she said.

“Why are you saying it like that?”

She lifted her hand and pointed to his desk while waggling her finger. “Have you already forgotten the events of what...” she looked at her wrist as though she was wearing a watch, “forty-five minutes ago?”

“Okay.” He raised a palm. “I get it.” He fought a smile. “I have an idea.”

She sighed exaggeratedly, pushing her glasses back up her nose and cocking her head, but he could see the smile gracing her lips. As she shifted in the chair, the front slit of her blouse opened, and he caught a glimpse of the fascinating landscape beneath, pure cleavage and creamy skin. His gut tightened.

“The owners of the resort, Stan and Betty Lewis, have a particular type of buyer in mind for their resort. I had

originally intended to go out there hoping to woo them with everything Denton Hotels could offer the resort, but depending on who would be offering competing offers, the biggest hurdle I'd need to get past is my single status." He paused, wetting his bottom lip as he raked his gaze over her. She had to agree to the plan. He'd make sure she couldn't say no. "Now I want you to come with me and pretend to be my fiancée."

Amelia's eyes went saucer-wide. "What?"

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

She scoffed. "*Josh*. I can't do that. That's my hometown, everyone there *knows* me."

"Except the Cedar Grove owners."

She paused.

"It's not like I'm going to ask you to do this without compensation," he went on. "What do you think—quadruple time for the duration of the trip, plus a bonus if they agree to my offer to buy the resort?"

She blinked. "Like...for every hour we're gone?"

He nodded.

"How long will the trip be?"

"Probably a week," Josh said, his heart rate picking up. *Just say yes*. "I promise, it won't eat into your Christmas vacation time. We'll finish up right before you'd be heading home for the holidays anyway."

Her crystal blue eyes went wider, cheeks stained pink. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not. I need you to do this. Please."

She deflated slightly. "But, Josh, you want me to lie. It's true I don't know the owners, but I know everybody else. The people in my hometown have known me since I was a baby. My parents live there, and so do my brother and his family. I don't think I can do this."

"If money won't convince you, then what will?"

Amelia nibbled at her bottom lip, the lip that he had imagined kissing only in his weakest moments. He looked away. He knew better than to mix business and pleasure, which was why this idea felt safe to him. Amelia posing as his fiancée was pure business. And he'd make sure to keep it that way by making sure she was fairly compensated.

“Honestly? A promotion.”

Her words fell with a thud. He frowned, letting the idea percolate through him.

“You’re sick of being my assistant?” He tried to joke it off, but the fear was real. He would be lost without her backing him up and keeping his life organized.

“Definitely not sick of it. When I accepted the position of your assistant, I’d hoped to learn from you, which I have, with the intent to move up the ladder.” She softened a moment later, like maybe she’d noticed that he was worried. “Trust me, I love working with you. But I want to be a location scout. I want to search for new properties to add to the hotel portfolio. I love the idea of being out on location searching for hidden gems.”

He couldn’t fight the grin. “Hidden gems?”

She nodded so hard, her glasses slipped back down her nose and she pushed them back. “You get so excited when you come across a unique property. And then when you manage to turn it around and make it better? I want to do that too.”

“That amount of travel will give you no time for a personal life.”

She shrugged, not even flinching. “I already don’t have one of those, so no big deal.”

“Why haven’t you applied for any of the open higher-level positions?”

“You mean in marketing or accounting? No thanks. I’d still be stuck behind a desk all day. And the location scout roles are hard to get because everyone seems to love their job and doesn’t want to leave.”

He hesitated. "I really hate the thought of losing you as my assistant. But..." He shook his head, allowing the truth to settle into him. "I knew this day would come."

She batted her eyelashes at him, an infectious grin overtaking her face. "So? You'll do it?"

"If you'll come on this trip with me and help me secure the hotel," he said, the words coming out heavy, "then yes. You'll get your promotion and the money."

Amelia squealed and leaped out of the chair, pumping her fist in the air. "Then you have a deal!"

AMELIA

It was after ten and Amelia could barely think for how anxious she was for Josh to get there.

Mixed emotions swirled inside her, making it difficult to concentrate on the remaining tasks she needed to do before leaving. She'd packed eighteen pairs of underwear, mindlessly stuffing her panties into the suitcase before realizing just how many she planned to take. She could pee her pants twice a day and still be fine. Not that she planned on it.

All she could think about was this getaway and how she was supposed to spend a full week up in Mr. Denton's...Josh's business without losing her cool. When he'd first offered her money, she'd almost said yes. At that hourly rate, she could pay off the last of her student loans and have enough left over to put a sizable down payment on a newer car with working a/c, not that she needed it right now. But then when she had the idea about the promotion, she figured it couldn't hurt to ask, never anticipating that he'd agree to both. This was either going to turn into her dream come true or an absolute nightmare, and she still wasn't sure which.

She would never admit it to anyone, but she'd been crushing on her boss since the day she'd started working for him. As it was, staying unaffected around the man required a fair degree of compartmentalization. The guy was sex on legs and didn't even know it. It was like he had no interest in exploiting his sex appeal via flirtation or dating or *anything*. Least of all with her.

Not that she'd been hoping for any hint of interest from him. Nope.

It was for the better, though. Dating her boss wasn't wise, and besides, if things got ugly? She didn't want to lose her position within Denton Hotels. She loved her job there and working with Josh had given her a taste for the location scout role. And it's not like she'd never see him. The location scouts all fell under Business Development, so she'd still interact with him, but not daily and probably mostly via email and Zoom.

More importantly, if she got out from under the penetrating, stormy blue gaze of Josh, she might be able to find any other man attractive again and maybe even find a boyfriend. Like she had once, *pre-Josh*. Not that it was his fault she'd broken things off with her ex. She couldn't abide cheaters.

As Amelia did a final sweep of the apartment, making sure she packed her good heels, her best work dresses and every single pair of earrings she owned, a horn honked from outside. It had to be Josh. She scurried to the window facing the street, a gasp rocketing out of her once she saw what awaited her at the curb.

A limo.

An honest-to-God stretch limousine.

"Oh, hell no," she groaned, pushing the window up so she could lean out and shout at him from the third story. Josh exited the back of the car, and she barked out, "Hey! Up here."

His grin was a mile wide. "What do you think?"

"Uh, how about *no*?" she asked, her teeth chattering a little from the cold December air. "Josh, do you know where we're going?"

He narrowed his eyes, shutting the door gently. His dark waves were looser than he normally kept them at the office, and without his nicely pressed suit, his weekend vibes were strong. His jeans were the perfect amount of distressed, and his sexy black leather jacket reeked of money.

"Cedar Grove, obviously," he said, heading toward the apartment building.

“Yes, and Cedar Grove is a small town, a family-oriented place. It’s like, secretly the set of every Hallmark Christmas movie ever made.”

“Really?”

“Not *really*, but I’m saying it’s not the place to bring a limo, unless you want to prove to everyone you’re some rich jerk from the city who can barely turn down the side street to get to Dax’s Bakery.”

He sighed, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Okay. You have a point.”

“I know I do. We’ll take my car.”

Josh looked annoyed, but he didn’t fight her on it. She popped back inside the window and shut it tight, then shrugged on her heavy fur-trimmed wool coat. Only the best for Cedar Grove this time around. After all, if anybody asked her why she looked *so* dolled up, she had an arsenal of excuses at the ready. First and foremost: she was a big-city girl now working for one of the largest hotel magnates in the country.

The fact that Christmas was in a week was also a good fallback. Everyone seemed to love dressing up for the holidays, and Amelia was no exception.

But dressing up to impress her rich city-slicker fiancé? That was the last excuse she wanted to use.

Even though nobody would necessarily blame her for it. She hated the idea of anyone thinking that she would change herself for a man, for a relationship. Because if there was anything that she strove to project in her life, it was the fact that her career was her life and everything else came after.

Which was, ironically, what had gotten her into this fake-boyfriend situation in the first place.

Make that fake-fiancé.

When she hit the sidewalk outside her brick walk-up in Brooklyn, Josh was unloading his rolling suitcase and talking to the limo driver. He slammed the trunk shut, and the driver got into the car and drove away.

“Hope he’s not sad to miss the Cedar Grove trip,” Amelia said, tugging her keys out of her coat pocket. “My hatchback is in the garage around the corner. It’s not far.”

She hoisted her big purse higher up her shoulder and started pulling her rolling suitcase. Josh shook his head, easing the handle out of her hand.

“Let me,” he said sternly, pulling both suitcases behind him. “You might tip over in those heels, with the weight you have in that purse. It looks like if you swing it too far in one direction, you’ll go with it.”

She scoffed but couldn’t ignore the ripple of delight that coursed through her. She had a soft spot for traditional gestures of chivalry, even though she prided herself on being independent and self-sufficient. She would never admit how much it made her melt on the inside.

“You know I’m perfectly capable of pulling my own rolling luggage, right?”

“Just getting myself ready for the next week,” Josh said.

“Ah, that’s right.” She tightened her grip on the strap of her purse. “My doting fake-fiancé.”

“You’re going to have to sound more excited than that if you want to convince the Lewises that we’re devoted to each other.”

She sighed, steeling herself against the flutter in her belly. She hung a left before the intersection and led him through the pedestrian entrance of the parking garage.

“You know, you could have included some training on how to be your fake fiancée before this,” she teased, thankful he couldn’t glean how hard her heart hammered in her chest.

“I think we’ll be able to figure it out on the fly,” Josh mused, sending her a mischievous smile. “You’ve been my assistant for two years. You know me better maybe than my brother does.”

A sarcastic laugh erupted from her, but he wasn’t entirely wrong. She *did* know him better than a lot of other people in

his life. Hell, the only thing they hadn't broached before this was the romantic realm.

And hopefully that would still be the case after these next few days.

Amelia unlocked her car once it was in sight, and the lights of her black hatchback blinked rapidly. Once they reached the back of the car, Josh held out his hand.

"I unlocked it," she said. "The trunk should be open."

"I know. But give me the keys. I'm driving."

She blinked. "Why?"

"Because fiancés always drive. That's the rule."

Amelia held the keys out of reach and looked him up and down. "I always see you riding in the back of cars. Are you sure you remember how to drive?"

Josh pressed his hand to his chest and tried to look shocked. "I'll have you know that I'm an excellent driver." He kept his hand palm up and wiggled his fingers. "Gimme."

She huffed, but passed the keys over anyway, trying to fight the grin.

Having a hot-as-hell fake-fiancé wasn't so bad after all.

For now, at least.

JOSH

The first half of the car ride with Amelia at his side went about as Josh expected, full of jokes and work conversation. When they stopped for hot chocolate halfway through, his normally talkative assistant was quiet as she sipped her drink.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her, casting glances her way.

“Nothing’s wrong.” But he could tell from her answer that wasn’t true.

Reaching out, he squeezed her hand. “Is there something we should talk about before we get there?”

“So many things, but—” She shrugged. “I know you said we could figure things out on the fly, but I’d feel better if we had some sort of talking points.”

Josh loosened his grip on the steering wheel, glad she didn’t have cold feet. “That makes sense. So, where did we meet?”

“Uh. Work?”

“And how long have we known each other?”

“Two years.”

“Okay, how about something harder. What’s my favorite beer?”

“Anything from Dogfish Head Brewery, duh.”

“And you can’t tell the difference between an IPA and a pale ale. I think we’ve got it.”

It was almost four p.m. when they hit Cedar Grove and by the time they pulled up to the brick-laid driveway winding through the expansive property of Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa, Josh felt like he was stepping back in time.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, slowing Amelia’s car to a crawl as he peered through the windshield at their surroundings. Pine trees dotted the rolling hills of the front lawn, which was coated in a fine sheen of white snow. It had started flurrying halfway there, and the tracks from a previous car were barely visible on the brick path beneath them.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? Like a Christmas card.”

“It looks just like I remember it,” Josh said, drawing a deep breath. He crept along the path at five miles per hour, drinking in as much as he could. He gasped when he saw the first gnomes—tiny little statues nestled in the grass. They’d been more famous than the Taj Mahal for him during his childhood. “There they are! Just like I remember.”

Amelia snorted. “How many times have you been here?”

“Used to come every Christmas with my family,” Josh said, squeezing the steering wheel. They’d even come the final Christmas before his mother had passed. It had been a bittersweet reunion, knowing that she wouldn’t outlive her cancer to see another Christmas after it. But spending one last Christmas in their favorite place as an entire family was a memory he still cherished.

“I’m surprised we never ran into each other,” Amelia mused. Josh followed the curving brick path down a hill, where the big, cabin-like hotel stood proud. If the exterior was slightly rustic with a touch of neglect, the interior more than made up for it. He couldn’t wait to see if it had changed, and how, on the inside. “I always used to play an angel in the nativity play the church put on here,” she said.

Josh cast a glance her way. Of course she’d be an angel, with those icy eyes and strawberry blonde locks, which she had pulled back in a braid instead of her usual librarian bun. “Tell me there’s photographic evidence.”

“Bursting with it, I’m afraid.”

“Well then, I’ll need to see it before I release your bonus check.”

She scoffed, swatting him on the arm as he pulled into the cul-de-sac hugging the big front doors. When he cut the engine, she said, “I can’t believe you’re haggling to see my old church pics.”

“I’ll haggle if I want to,” he shot back. “You ready for this? Mr. Lewis knows we’re arriving, so it’s game on once we get inside.”

Amelia nodded, chin lifted. “I was born ready, Denton.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Good to know, MacTaggart.”

They swept inside the hotel, where the big, atrium-style foyer greeted them. Everything was just as he remembered: the glass-paned dome looking up into the heavens; the log-cabin siding lending an earthy scent to the air; the colorful, unique rugs across the floors. Then there was the decorations, some of them dating back decades, daring anyone who entered not to fall in love with Christmas.

“It hasn’t changed a bit,” Josh murmured as he looked around. But that wasn’t entirely a good thing. Sure, it was great for the trip down memory lane. But he guessed the place hadn’t been updated in all the years since he’d last visited. His mother had passed more than ten years ago, and even then, the hotel had seemed a staid reminder of years past.

The Lewis family had barely touched this place, which meant the next owners had a lot of work cut out for them and he wouldn’t know what problems lay beneath it all until he could get a formal inspection.

“I just love this place, especially around the holidays. They know how to do it right,” Amelia said, pulling her coat around her tighter. He glanced at her, catching her arctic gaze. A shiver raced through him.

Amelia was beautiful on any given day. But here, right now? With that wonder shining in her eyes? Josh’s mind went blank, and he struggled to remember what she’d said. He gazed at her

for a moment too long, not even noticing when a hotel employee approached them.

“May I help you two?” the clerk asked.

“Hello!” Josh snapped back to the present, feeling his clarity return to him now that he wasn’t staring at Amelia like some lovesick teenager. “We’re Josh and Amelia, here to visit with Mr. and Mrs. Lewis during our stay.”

“Ah, yes. We’ve been expecting you. Please follow me.” The clerk led them toward a sweeping wooden reception desk, where he checked them in quickly. Before they were handed their room keys, Mr. Lewis breezed toward them with a big smile on his face.

“You must be Joshua Denton,” Mr. Lewis boomed, offering a solid handshake. His white hair was slicked back stylishly, and the man’s frame looked like he was a retired linebacker.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” Josh said, returning the man’s firm grip. “I’m here with my fiancée, Amelia MacTaggart.”

“Great to meet you, sir,” Amelia said, offering her hand and a bright smile.

“In fact, I think Amelia is acquainted with your children,” Josh went on. He’d been looking forward to dropping that detail early on. “I believe she went to school with your kids.”

“Class of 2015,” Amelia clarified. “CGHS.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” Mr. Lewis said, looking at Amelia like she’d just performed a magic trick. Yes, this link was proving to be a *very* good idea. But he couldn’t get too excited. Not yet. “A homegrown Grover looking to buy the hotel?”

Amelia smiled sweetly. He wanted to high five her.

“We’ve been so eager to visit the hotel during the holiday,” Josh went on, slipping his hand over the small of Amelia’s back. He brought her closer to him, flush against his body. The warmth made it hard to think, but he pressed on. “I used to come here each holiday season with my family growing up, as well. It looks just like I remember.”

“I’m very pleased to hear that,” Mr. Lewis said, bowing his head slightly. “Now grab your keys! Let me show you to your room, and I’ll tell you about the fun lineup of activities we have planned.”

A porter had loaded their bags on a cart already, so Josh grabbed the room keys and kept his hand on the small of her back, unwilling—maybe even unable—to break this connection now that it was opened.

“I always knew you’d be a possessive boyfriend,” Amelia murmured as they followed Mr. Lewis down a moose-themed hallway. Josh snorted with laughter.

“Just need everyone to know that you’re mine.”

“Next time, bring the collar,” she said from the side of her mouth as they headed for the elevators. Mr. Lewis awaited them inside, waving them closer.

“You’re funny, Meelie,” he said as he stepped into the elevator. Amelia arched a brow, which he could see in the mirrored walls of the elevator car.

“Oh, please. Not as funny as *you*, Joshie.”

Josh didn’t bother hiding the grin as the elevator soared upwards.

This arrangement wasn’t anything he’d tried before, but he suspected that being fake engaged to Amelia was going to be a lot of fun.

AMELIA

Once Mr. Lewis—or *Stan* as he insisted they call him—had left their room, Amelia and Josh looked around in silence for a few moments.

There was a lot to take in.

It wasn't only the elegant luxury suite, but also the lingering sensation of Josh being so close to her. She wasn't immune to the shift in energy once he'd put his hand on her. Even though she'd teased him when they were out in the hall, it still felt possessive. Or maybe she was imagining it all, but a part of her didn't want to know the answer.

Whatever it was, her head was spinning now that they were alone in this gorgeous room.

"They put rose petals on the bed," Josh said, chuckling. She walked farther into the suite, staring at the king-size bed.

"It's so pretty," she murmured, looking around. In the attached living room, there was a couch. And this bed. Which meant...
"Where will we sleep?"

Josh blinked, and slowly the realization crept across his face too.

"I couldn't have asked for a room with two beds," he said.

"I'll sleep on the couch," Amelia suddenly said, feeling like she needed to draw this line in the sand. Even though there was plenty of room for both of them to splay out and not touch each other in that huge bed, it seemed wise not to tempt fate.

“No, no,” Josh said. “I really don’t want you to do that. I mean, look at this bed. We can both fit, as well as about three others. I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

She narrowed her eyes playfully as her heartrate picked up. Better not to think about what it might be like if he *didn’t* keep his hands to himself. “You better, because I didn’t see anything about consummating the fake engagement on the agenda.”

Josh laughed, but it sounded nervous. Maybe even forced. Of course, Amelia’s cheeks went hot, as she regretted what she said. To him, the idea of having sex with her was probably laughable. Why would a man like him want to sleep with his assistant? She’d done enough social media stalking to see that she didn’t fit the profile of the women he dated, if the photos of him with his last girlfriend was an indicator, which Amelia was sure it was. She had no idea why it didn’t work out or who had ended it. But if that was who Josh went for? Then, personality aside, Amelia couldn’t even hope to compete. Only after a full year and a half in NYC did she finally splurge on her first set of name-brand heels.

She put a stop to the direction her thoughts were going. What was she thinking? That she and her boss had a chance at something real? She was too realistic for that. Besides she had career goals and those didn’t involve being in a relationship.

“If you sleep on the couch, it might look suspicious,” Josh went on. “The maids will be in here every day and it might somehow get back to the Lewises. It’ll be better to share.”

“Fine.” She flopped back onto the bed, sighing as her body sank into the cloud-soft mattress. She’d been wrong to think that there had ever been a glimmer of attraction between them, even if it was only for thirty seconds a half hour ago. Her time here with him was business, not personal. “I suppose I can’t complain. This mattress is amazing.”

Josh surprised her by sitting down on the bed, and then laying back so they were side by side. He let out a groan. “You’re right. This does feel good. Especially after spending five hours on the road in that tiny car of yours, when we would have been far more comfortable in the limo.”

She was not going to contemplate what kind of fun they might have had in the limo while someone else drove them to Cedar Grove. “While I won’t deny that, if we had arrived in that ginormous vehicle, you would still be calling Stan Mr. Lewis. That, I can guarantee.”

Chuckling, he tapped her elbow with his own before sitting up. “You’re probably right.”

Amelia watched him get up, then open his suitcase and rummage through the contents, removing neatly pressed slacks, trendy ties, and a small stack of black boxer briefs.

Her mind refused to stop speculating on what it might be like to be Josh Denton’s girlfriend. She needed to get it together. This was a job. Nothing more. At the same time, she couldn’t help feeling sad that someone like Josh could be inches from her, yet be so far out of her reach.

She’d made a bad choice when she agreed to this idea. Sure, the money would be great, as would the promotion. But more than that, this trip would serve as a reminder of the one thing she worked daily to ignore: She was secretly in love with her boss and had been since the day he’d hired her.



Amelia and Josh took their time settling in and freshening up for that evening’s festivities: the Cedar Grove Hotel tree lighting ceremony. It was a separate occasion from the town’s tree lighting, which took place right after Thanksgiving. Their trip just so happened to coincide with this very popular event, so of course all of Amelia’s family would be here and ready to meet the fiancé.

When she’d texted her mom to let her know that she’d be coming home early for a work trip, with plans to stay on through Christmas, her mother had been ecstatic. When Amelia had hinted at wanting her to meet “someone special,” her mother had about blasted the phone open with exclamation marks.

Amelia had intended to leave the fiancé bit out, since that was purely for the Lewises' sake. But of course her family couldn't leave well enough alone, and Amelia's attempt to keep the fiancé part quiet lasted approximately five minutes.

"I hope you're ready for, like, all the hugs," Amelia warned Josh once she'd touched up her lipstick in the bathroom. "My parents have been waiting for me to find someone since the second my older brother got engaged. Now he has a kid and another one on the way, so basically this is a sigh of relief for them."

Josh hummed. "Won't they be upset when we don't end up getting married?"

"They'll get over it. Sometimes, I think their push for me to settle down and get married is more for them than me. They don't understand that I want to work on my career first." She laughed, but to her ears, it sounded hollow.

Josh stood in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror, grabbing for a sweater hanging over the back of the armchair. He'd taken off his leather coat once they arrived at the suite, and the sight of his toned forearms with a smattering of hair on them left her wishing to see more.

"You don't plan on getting married?" he asked before tugging the sweater over his head.

"Not right now. I want to focus on my career."

Josh arranged his sweater, turning to her with a smile on his face. "Good?"

A grandmother's knitted rendition of a sleigh being pulled by reindeer greeted her. She snorted.

"Looks like you're ready for an ugly sweater party."

"That's why I brought it." He reached for his leather jacket again. "It's an ugly conversation starter."

Amelia snickered. "You're planning to win over Stan and his wife with your sweater?"

"Absolutely." He flashed her a grin that made her belly tighten. "You ready to go? Wait. Something's missing." He

looked her up and down before snapping his fingers. “Your glasses. Where are they?”

Laughing, she tapped her temple. “Contacts.”

Amelia scooped up her coat and tucked her phone and a keycard into a pocket before following him out of the suite. Everywhere she looked, the holiday decorations filled every open space, challenging anyone to deny that the Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa was the place to go if you wanted to do Christmas right. It was a short walk to where the crowds were already gathering and they passed groups of people all decked out for the holidays.

Josh tapped her elbow and gestured to another man wearing an almost identical Christmas sweater but in a different color. “See? There’s another person with excellent taste in holiday attire.”

Amelia rolled her eyes and grumbled. “In your dreams, Joshie.”

Josh took her hand, tucking it on his arm. “Oh Meelie, what must we do to get you in the holiday spirit. Maybe we should find you an elf hat to wear.”

“Oh, hell no.” Amelia was saved from further teasing when they reached their destination.

The enormous pine tree was the epicenter of the back property, and the oversized decorations, some of them going back to when the hotel was first built, lent credence to how much Christmastime dominated the hotel.

Fat silver and red balls dangled from the branches, and lights were strung around the tree awaiting the countdown for the tree lighting. Excitement welled up within her; attending this lighting ceremony was one of her family’s longest running traditions. When she looked at Josh, she could see the same excitement shining in his face.

“I haven’t been to one of these in so long,” he said softly, almost reverently, as they wound through the gathering crowds. Amelia and her family planned to meet up by the Santa statue, which was also on display year-round. Just when

she saw the red tip of the statue's hat, Amelia's mom shouted for her.

"Oh, honey! Over here!"

Amelia saw her family, bundled up and gathered by the enormous jolly old Saint Nick. Her mom and dad waved, breath puffing in front of them, while her brother held her two-year-old niece in his arms, and his round-bellied wife waved at his side.

"Hey, everyone!" Amelia rushed forward, hugging everyone quickly. "Meet Josh! Josh, these are my parents, Tom and Susan MacTaggart, my brother Rob and his wife Rebecca, and this little sweetie is my niece Elise."

Josh started a round of handshakes, and she couldn't help but sigh a little as he flashed that winning grin to each and every family member. Already, her mother was shooting stars out of her eyes.

"I didn't even know she was dating anyone," her mom said to Josh, "much less *engaged*. And look at you, all decked out in that sweater."

"That's because we are discreet," Amelia said, shoving her hands into her coat pockets, "and wanted to wait until the time was right."

"No better time than Christmas," Josh said, his broad smile feeling contagious.

Elise said something between English and Toddler. Amelia put her face close to Elise's, making kissy noises.

"You sweet little pumpkin," Amelia said, running her fingers through Elise's sandy blonde hair. "You're getting so big. Do you even remember who I am?"

Elise looked unimpressed and buried her head into her daddy's shoulder.

"It's been a minute, huh?" Amelia said.

"Well, you didn't come home for Thanksgiving," her mother started.

“I was working,” Amelia said.

“I told her she needed to go home,” Josh piped up, his voice pure friendliness and bass. “To see you all and spend time with family. I wanted to come with, so we could share the good news. But your daughter is so committed to her career, even I couldn’t drag her away.”

Her mother cooed, squeezing Amelia’s arm. “That’s my baby girl.”

“So how did you propose?” Rebecca asked, her eyes twinkling. Rebecca was a girl’s girl through and through, and Elise was dressed in tutus and pink bows more often than not.

“Oh...the proposal.” Amelia turned to Josh, hoping he could see her panic through her forced grin. They really should have talked about this more on the way here. He squeezed his arm around her, bringing her to his side.

“It was a beautiful evening,” Josh said, looking into Amelia’s eyes. That gaze erased some of her anxiety about needing to come up with a story on the fly. Whatever he said, she’d accept. As long as he kept looking at her like that. “I took her down to Central Park, where we walked along the lake at the golden hour.”

“That sounds romantic,” her mother said.

“Until the geese attacked,” Amelia blurted. She couldn’t make this *too* lovey-dovey.

“Yeah, that sort of ruined my vibe,” Josh said effortlessly, laughing. “They actually pecked at my ankles.”

“But you know what they say about geese and lasting love,” Amelia said, smiling up at Josh.

Rob snorted. “Do they say *anything* about geese and lasting love?”

Amelia swatted at her brother’s arm. “No, they don’t, but come on, we have to make it romantic.”

Everyone laughed, and Amelia hoped the terror she felt inside wasn’t transmitting. She really didn’t like this—lying to her family. She hadn’t expected to have to make up stories and

perform in front of them. She needed a diversion, and fast. She spotted a beverage table farther down the brick walkway.

“Hey, guys, I’m gonna go grab a soda. Does anyone want anything?” Nobody did, so she squeezed Josh’s wrist. “I’ll be right back. Just feeling a little parched.”

Amelia hurried over to the line forming in front of the table, hopping from foot to foot as she tried to counsel herself about the fact that she’d just told the biggest lie of her life to her family. It’s not like anyone would be outraged if they found out it was a sham engagement, but it didn’t feel great. Her family were good people and only wanted the best for her.

And apparently her best was pretending to be in love with her boss and raking in thousands of dollars for it.

She was so lost in thought by the time she got up to the table that she startled when someone said, “Hey! Amelia!” The lady behind the table smiled at her from under a floppy red Santa hat. “Long time no see!”

It was Judy, her parents’ neighbor. “Oh my goodness! Sorry—I spaced out. How are you, Judy?”

The two chitchatted while Judy poured Amelia a big plastic cup of punch. After they’d caught up on her job in NYC and Judy’s kids moving abroad, Judy said, “Take a second one, but don’t tell anyone I gave you two!”

Amelia laughed and thanked her, moving out of the way so the line could continue. She took a sip of the punch—delicious and cherry-infused. She hummed and then took a gulp. Extremely refreshing. She needed to ask Judy for the recipe. She’d downed the entire first cup before she started the walk back to her family and started in on the second as she rejoined the group.

Josh was in the middle of telling a story that had everyone on pins and needles, even Elise. Amelia watched as he spoke, admiring his perfect hairline and his dark, bushy brows. Everything about him was perfect—at least what she’d seen of him so far.

Prickles of heat swept through her, and she laughed just as hard as everyone else once Josh finished his story. The anxiety was slowly dissipating now, bleeding out into a contented buzz. When Josh put his arm around her this time, she burrowed into his embrace. Feeling exactly like she belonged there.

“You two are just so cute,” her mom cooed, squeezing Amelia’s arm. “So in love. Come on, let’s take some pictures!” Her mom pulled her phone out and gestured for everyone to stand closer together. Flagging down a passing server, she handed him her phone and they spent the next couple of minutes posing for a group photo. When the server handed her phone back, her mom had tears in her eyes when she swiped through the different pics.

Amelia’s phone pinged with a text and she found that her mom had sent her some of the pics. “Awww, check us out. You really stand out in the Christmas sweater,” she teased as she showed Josh.

“If, by stand out, you mean devilishly handsome, then yes, you are definitely correct.”

She couldn’t help snorting. “Well, I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

“I’m pretty sure you told me that recently,” he said, as he grinned.

Rolling her eyes, she swatted his arm. “No, I said you were easy on the eyes. Not devilishly handsome. Keep up, Joshie.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her from behind. “It’s hard not to be in love with your daughter, the way she keeps me on my toes,” Josh said, looking down at Amelia. He sent her a smile that would have erased every doubt and confirmed every desire...if only this weren’t acting.

Still, Amelia let herself get lost in his gaze. Get lost in the fantasy. Because soon enough, reality would set in and they’d be back to nothing more than work colleagues, and Amelia suspected that was going to be far more painful than having to explain the deception to her family.

JOSH

Stan and Betty Lewis joined their group a bit later, with handshakes all around. Josh was relieved that Stan had organically run into them while with Amelia's family. Turned out that Stan had gone to the same school as Amelia's father and they were friendly with each other still, which was all the better.

Amelia laughed into his arm, prompted by nothing. She'd been a little giggly this evening. He glanced down at her.

"Everything okay?"

She snorted and righted herself. "Everything's fine." A moment went by, and then she burst into laughter again.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Just, all of it." She waved her hand in front of her. "Hey, this punch is really good." She lifted her empty cup. "You want some? I'm gonna go get another one."

"Wait." He grabbed her hand, bringing his face level with hers, even though he had to hunch to do it. "What's in that punch?"

"I dunno, it was the punch they had over there." Her cheeks were ruddy, but that could have been from the cold. But he would swear she was slurring. It was slight, but there.

"Are you sure it's not spiked?"

She narrowed her eyes, then her mouth rounded. "Ooooh, I wonder. Because I was nervous, and the punch made me feel better."

“Uh-huh.” He straightened, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “You stay here with me, drunkie. I don’t want you falling on the icy ground or deciding to crawl under the Christmas tree to take a nap.”

She snickered again, wrapping both her arms around his waist. He couldn’t ignore the thrill of contentment this prompted. Had it been so long since he’d been touched by a woman? Or was it just because it was Amelia finally touching him in the way he’d denied wanting from her?

Stan stepped closer to them, a big smile on his face. “Look at you two lovebirds. You remind me of me and my wife when we were young.”

His wife swatted Stan’s chest. “He doesn’t mean to say married life goes downhill. It keeps getting better, we promise.”

“When’s the big date?” Stan asked.

“Uhh,” Josh started.

“June third,” Amelia blurted.

“I looove spring weddings,” Rebecca cooed while she rubbed her belly.

“You’re a lucky father-in-law,” Stan said, clapping his hand against Amelia’s father’s shoulder. “To have the son of the Denton empire courting your daughter? It’s truly an honor that Denton Hotels is even interested in Cedar Grove.” His wife murmured her agreement, while Amelia’s dad beamed.

“We feel just as lucky but mostly, we’re pleased for our daughter,” he said.

Inside, Josh pumped his fist. They’d been here less than a full day and already everything looked very promising. But he had enough business experience not to get his hopes up yet. Not until he had the signed contract in hand.

“I’d just like to say,” Amelia piped up, “that I feel the luckiest of all.”

Amelia’s drunken honesty raised alarms for him. How drunk was she...and what might she reveal without thinking? Even

an off-the-cuff drunk remark could raise suspicions. He squeezed his arm around her waist, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

“Wrong,” Josh countered. “I’m the luckiest.”

“I’d say we’re all pretty dang lucky,” Amelia’s mom spoke up.

Amelia looked up at him, questions swirling in her eyes, a type of raw honesty he’d never seen there before. But they didn’t have a chance to delve further, because the lights on the patio dimmed and Christmas music filled the air.

Per tradition, the instrumental version of Silent Night played while a procession of schoolchildren holding candles filled the brick paths. Their voices soon joined the musical accompaniment. When Josh looked down at Amelia, he swore tears were shining in her eyes.

Once the song ended, the crowd erupted with applause. Some schoolkids smiled back, while others fidgeted in their spots. An announcer took the mic and greeted the crowd.

“Josh, let’s move closer.” Amelia took his hand, lacing her fingers through his, and urged him forward. They crept along a line of hedges, inching closer to the spectacle. She tipped her head back and sighed. “Right here is good.”

He grinned, distracted by the wisps of blonde hair that had escaped her knit hat. She looked every inch a winter beauty, with her wool coat and plaid scarf and ruddy cheeks. When she glanced up at him, nervousness flashed across her face.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Can’t I admire my fiancée?” he asked.

The corners of her mouth turned upward. “Only if you kiss her, too.”

Her comment stunned as much as it thrilled. He ran his fingers along the line of her cap, brushing over those fly-away hairs.

“I mean, we need to convince people,” she said in a softer voice, and then pushed up onto her tiptoes to kiss him.

He wasn't one to argue. The brush of her lips against his was soft, barely there. But the electricity it provoked was very real, and *very there*. He cupped the sides of her face, diving headfirst into this unexpected turn of events. *Convince people*. Sure. They were tucked away near the line of hedges. Her family stood half a football field away.

This kiss wasn't for their sake.

It was for *themselves*. And he loved it.

Amelia drew a ragged breath, deepening the kiss, clutching at the front of his coat. When her mouth parted, his tongue surged forward to find hers. His cock pricked to attention. Damn, he hadn't counted on this—kisses so good he'd be left fantasizing about them for the next six months.

She released a small whimper and collapsed against him. Josh steadied her, drawing deep breaths that left clouds and question marks in the air between them.

Suddenly, lights blared behind them. Josh twisted to see: the tree had been lit. White and gold lights twinkled, completely filling the tree with light. They'd been so engrossed in making out that they'd missed the announcement.

"Wowww," Amelia said, resting her head against his chest. "That's even better than fireworks."

Josh wrapped his arms around her, enjoying the view with her heat pressed against him. They stayed like that for a long time. So long, in fact, that Josh forgot that nobody was watching them. They didn't need to be acting the part right now.

But it felt too good to abandon. Somehow, getting lost in this fantasy with Amelia felt better and more right than anything he'd done in a very long time. Maybe that's what two years of suppressed attraction had done to him. Turned him into a desperate man, willing to accept forced displays of affection as authentic.

Josh was partially to blame for this. He'd dated on and off over the years, many of them not particularly serious given the hours he tended to work. His last girlfriend, Hannah, had business aspirations of her own, which made them a good fit

as they both understood that work often came first. He'd been considering taking things to the next level with her, but then Amelia had accepted the position as his assistant.

His relationship with Hannah ended pretty soon after, but he couldn't remember for the life of him what had been the cause.

He just knew that Hannah had nothing on Amelia, but he'd never been able to admit it to her.

Not while she was his trusted assistant.

Not while everything worked perfectly as-is.

AMELIA

Dinner at Cedar Grove's best steakhouse had come and gone in a delicious blur filled with entertaining conversation as she sat with the Lewises and Josh. Amelia made sure not to lay into the wine too heavily, after her unexpected spiked-punch experience the night before. Thankfully, no hangover.

No, it was just plenty of regrets and embarrassment that still clung to her. The fact that she'd thrown herself at her boss, clearly unable to control her attraction any longer with her lowered inhibitions was something she deeply regretted. Partly. Sure, they'd kissed—*and hard*—but it wasn't like he wanted to continue it. Josh had simply quietly wrapped up the evening, gotten her back to the suite, and she'd fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

And today? They weren't talking about it. Weren't even addressing it. Because it was better to pretend it hadn't happened. Even though his lips had practically left scorch marks against hers.

"We obviously have many ideas about things we'd like to incorporate into such a gorgeous space as the hotel and its surroundings," Josh said. Amelia had missed about half the conversation, lost in her own thoughts while staring at Josh's perfect face. She'd realized, over the course of this dinner, that his celebrity twin was Liam Hemsworth. And that somehow made everything worse.

Because now, Josh was even more perfect.

Perfectly out of reach.

“Amelia, didn’t you say last night you would love to see a tulip garden planted out back?”

Josh’s question made her jolt to attention. Tulip garden. Had she said that while drunk? “Oh, yes. Pink tulips, actually, would be my preference, but I’m open to other colors.”

Stan and Betty laughed, sending warm smiles their way. Josh had been right to bring her along. The owners were falling in love with them. Josh’s natural charm made it hard not to like him, and Amelia’s hometown girl aspect really made the whole thing a home run. Josh, as usual, was a genius. Going after what he wanted and *getting it* simply by being himself. Granted, his love for his mom and his happy memories at the Cedar Grove Hotel drove his reasons for wanting the property beyond the financial aspects, which would also be substantial given that the hotel always seemed busy year-round.

“Amelia, is that you?”

A new voice made Amelia twist around. At her side, Mrs. Pemberley smiled down at her—Amelia’s tenth-grade history teacher.

“Mrs. Pemberley!” She shot up out of her chair to hug her favorite teacher. Mrs. Pemberley was graying now but wore the same little round glasses she’d been famous for back at Cedar Grove High. “It’s so good to see you!”

Stan and Betty greeted the older woman, who had also taught their sons. The smile on Stan’s face grew even larger. Josh couldn’t have planned a better unlikely reunion and judging from the smile on his face, he could tell it was working in his favor.

“This is my fiancé, Josh,” Amelia blurted, feeling her cheeks get hot. “Mrs. Pemberley is my favorite teacher of all time.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Josh said, standing to offer his hand. “And now that makes you *my* favorite teacher of all time.”

Mrs. Pemberley swatted away the compliment. “I just wanted to say hello. I don’t want to hold up your dinner. I need to get

back to my husband. We're here celebrating forty years together."

Stan and Betty offered their congratulations, and Amelia noticed how Stan squeezed his wife's hand. They had to be close to a forty-year anniversary too. Hell, her parents were on their way to forty years. The realization made her dizzy. And here she was, faking it for money. She wouldn't even reach her wedding day. Much less her first anniversary.

"Hopefully we'll make it to forty years," Josh said with a wink in Amelia's direction, but this time, his charm couldn't sway her and her misgivings were clamoring to be heard.

"It was so good to see you," Amelia said to her favorite teacher, squeezing her hand. "Enjoy the rest of your meal."

Mrs. Pemberley said goodbye and disappeared into the depths of the restaurant.

"One of my favorite parts about coming to Cedar Grove," Josh said, his eyes sparkling, "is seeing proof of how loved Amelia is."

Amelia forced a smile, his words clanging hollowly inside her. Once again, she was questioning agreeing to the lie. The money would pay off the last of her student loans and the promotion would be a dream come true, but at what cost?

She was lying to her family; she was lying to Mrs. Pemberley. The sale of this hotel would be based on a lie.

Was the money really worth lying to the people who'd always loved and believed in her?

When the bill came, Josh insisted on paying and managed to slip his credit card into the slim folder and hand it off to a waiter before Stan could protest. The four of them said their goodbyes at the front door of the restaurant, and both Stan and his wife hugged her before setting off. They were at *that* level already, on day two. This sale was practically in the bag.

They stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, their breaths billowing in the cold air. The gilded doors swung shut behind them, blocking out the murmur of voices that had

followed them from the packed dining room. Josh nudged her with his elbow.

“You okay?”

She tugged her wool coat around her, thankful that its long length kept most of her warm on such a chilly night. “Yeah.” They started a slow walk down the sidewalk, heading toward Amelia’s car.

“Want to go for a walk?” Josh asked. “It’s a beautiful night and I’d love to walk off some of that meal. Especially dessert. That chocolate torte was delicious, but I didn’t need to eat the whole thing.”

“And part of mine,” she reminded him. “You kept sneaking bites off my plate when you thought I wasn’t looking. I thought I was going to have to change seats with Betty.”

“Hey now, can I help it if I love dessert?”

Laughing, she felt some of the growing tension ease. It wouldn’t go away entirely, but she could stop and enjoy the moment. She looked around. The entire downtown was lit up like a Christmas village. Wreaths hung from the street lights, and enormous ornaments dangled from the doorways of storefronts. The smattering of snow that had fallen twinkled in the light like tiny crystals. It was charming in a way that made her heart ache. “Yeah. Let’s take a walk.”

Silence settled between them as they meandered down the sidewalk. Downtown Cedar Grove was a veritable small-business wonderland, with kitschy coffee shops, craft stores, her favorite used bookstore that now seemed to include a wine bar, and the toy store, with its window displays filled with amazing mechanical toys. Returning to Cedar Grove, even for a short time, always felt like a breath of fresh air after living in the hustle of the city for the past four years.

Except now she was deceiving everyone who’d ever supported her. Regret thudded through her again.

“You seem kind of...off,” Josh ventured after nobody had spoken for several minutes. “Is something bothering you, Amelia? Normally you’re talking my ear off.”

She frowned as a chill went through her. Shivering against what she hoped was the cold, Amelia looked up at the gently falling snowflakes.

“I’m just...I dunno.” She sighed. “Seeing Mrs. Pemberley kind of made me feel bad. It hit me that I’m lying to everyone I know. Everyone I grew up with. Everyone that ever supported me or believed in me. And it sucks.”

Josh was quiet for a moment, and then he stopped walking, grabbing her arms. He made her face him, leveling her with his gaze.

“Hey. I hear you. I understand what you’re saying, I really do. But I promise you, this will all be worth it. While acquiring Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa will be a great boon for Denton Hotels’ portfolio of properties, it’s personal for me. I really want to do something with this place that would have made my mom proud. I’m sure it sounds weird given that she’s dead, but I.... If you can stick it out a little longer.”

Amelia nodded. “I get it. If I were in your shoes, I’d probably do the same. But I didn’t think it would be this hard. I see the happiness on my mom’s face and the smiles the Lewises have been giving us and I feel guilty that we’re deceiving them.” She pulled her coat tighter around her.

Josh brushed the snowflakes off her hair and the side of her face, which sent a jolt of heat through her. Not enough to combat the cold, though. “You’re shivering. Do you want my coat?”

“No, I’ll survive.” They started walking again. “Besides, we’re not on a real date. You don’t have to be chivalrous.”

“I don’t have to be dating someone to want to be nice to them,” Josh said, wrapping his arm around her. He rubbed his hand along the side of her arm. It helped a little. “Besides, you’re my right-hand woman. I need to take care of you.”

Amelia grunted, feeling a little snarky. “Not for much longer.”

Josh sighed. “Did you have to remind me about that?”

“You’ll be fine. You’ll find someone else just as capable within two weeks, and by summer, you will have forgotten

that I was ever your assistant.”

She'd meant it as a joke, but Josh's face darkened, his grip around her tightening a little. “Come on. I'm not that much of an asshole. Besides, you'll still technically be reporting to me, although there will be a manager in between. I fully plan on visiting your new office to harass you once you're not my assistant. Under the guise of checking on your projects, of course.”

Something in his tone sent her heart rate skyrocketing. The idea of him visiting her, maintaining their friendship...that meant a lot to her. And yes, he would still be her boss, but she also knew that he dealt with the managers not the scouts.

“Do you know how to find your way around the rest of the building? You barely leave your office.”

Josh laughed. “Only if you send me a map before your duties as my assistant end.”

She couldn't squash the giggle that escaped her. “What if they transfer me to the Chicago office?”

“Guess I'll have to plan more site inspections.”

Her heart raced, and she fought the urge to tip her head back and get lost in his blue gaze. They were just joking around right now. Talking like friends. Because if anything, after two years of working together, they *were* friends.

But still, it was hard not to read into his comments. Hard not to let the dreaminess take flight and completely consume her.

Keep it professional.

She needed to remember that.

Even if every inch of her body wanted to throw professionalism to the wind.

JOSH

The two of them got up early the next day to get to work on the proposed hotel revisions. Stan had been very interested to see an overview of what, exactly, Josh planned to change if Denton Hotels became the new owner. Which meant they had a lot of work to do, and a lot of imagining beyond the tulip garden in the back.

Besides, getting up early wasn't a problem when Amelia lay two feet away in a skimpy tank top and booty shorts, her chest rising and falling softly. Josh had spent the first hour he was awake quietly watching her. Wondering what might happen if he were to press kisses to her creamy skin working his way up to her jawline until she woke up.

She was so hard to read when she used humor as a defense. Half the time, he was positive that she'd react poorly if he tried anything with her. The other half the time, he was doubtful but still not convinced. That kiss at the tree lighting didn't mean anything. She'd gotten drunk, and fast. People did silly things they didn't mean when they were drunk, and that kiss was no exception.

And even though every inch of Josh wanted to push the envelope and see if she really did want more, he was hesitant to use this work trip as the test. He was paying her to be here—a *lot* of money. The work element changed things, and using their fake engagement as a launch pad for intimacy felt wrong.

Which meant he was at a loss. *Still.*

Amelia had asked for a half hour to wake up and start her day in the hotel gym. Josh was tempted to join her, but he knew that more skimpy clothing and increased heart rates would not bode well for beating back his attraction, which had only quadrupled in the past forty-eight hours. Instead, he ordered room service and took an extremely cold shower. He pulled on some sweatpants and towel dried his hair as he sat down in front of his laptop to check email.

He wasn't a minute into his work when his father called. At eight a.m. on the dot.

"Hey, Dad," Josh said, leaning back into the overstuffed chair.

"Got a minute?" his dad barked. Mitchell Denton Senior had a voice that belonged on a football field, shouting at players, instead of in a board room

"Sure. I was about to start on the proposed plans for the Cedar Grove property."

"Ahh. Cedar Grove. I forgot that's where you were right now. They still got that huge Santa statue?"

Josh laughed. "Oh, yeah. And it's actually bigger than I remember. We saw the tree lighting two nights ago."

"What a treasure," his father murmured. "You know, your mother and I started going there years before you and your brother were born."

"Really?" Josh ran his finger along the shimmery seam of the armrest. "I thought we always came because it was great for kids."

"Yeah, it sure is a kid's paradise, but your mother and I loved it even pre-kids." His father laughed, but it sounded melancholy. Their mother's death had left him different, sort of permanently sad in the background. Really, it had affected all of them that way. "It would be a boon if you can seal the deal before the holidays."

Josh perked up at the request. "Yeah?"

"I just had that property fall through in Colorado," his dad went on.

“The ski resort near Elk Lodge?”

“That’s the one. Such a shame, dammit.” His father sighed, and Josh could almost see him rubbing at his forehead like he did whenever he was stressed. His father didn’t take failure or disappointment well. “So I need you to close this deal. We need to go into Christmas with a win.”

Josh swallowed hard, nodding even though his father couldn’t see him. “Yeah. Of course. We’re really close as it is. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t, son. And hey, keep Christmas Eve open. I’ll make sure to find you.”

When Josh disconnected the call, his father’s request weighed heavily on him. This hotel already was a big deal for him, but now? Failure was not an option. He *needed* to make the deal.

The door to the suite opened a moment later, and Amelia bounded inside, *glistening*.

Her face fell when she saw him. “Oh.”

“Hey.” He offered a quick smile, then focused on his laptop again. Anywhere other than Amelia. She wore teal workout shorts and a black sports bra, which showcased the fact that she had a very obvious tattoo of a white rose covering her ribcage on the right. Curiosity snaked through him, but he had to *focus*. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” She came into the living room where he was set up. She sniffed, propping her hands on her hips. “I thought that maybe there’d be breakfast.”

“It’s on the way.”

Silence settled between them, and his bare chest prickled under her gaze. He might have left his shirt off on purpose.

“Well,” she began, rocking back on her heels, “In that case, I’m going to go shower.”

“I already did.” He flashed a grin.

“Oh? Did you?” She clucked her tongue. “Okay. Very nice. Well, I’m going to...” She wandered into the bedroom, and the

bathroom door shut a moment later. He smirked. This felt like a small victory somehow. And very possibly the small amount of evidence he needed that Amelia MacTaggart was definitely interested in him.

Josh managed to get lost in his work as he drew up a list of proposed additions to the hotel. He could feel the same sort of blind determination that overtook him whenever something became imperative for the family business. By the time Amelia came back out, he had a two-page list of proposed changes ready for her review.

He glanced up at her, hearing the record screech in his head. Her damp hair was tousled and down, reaching her shoulders and her usual glasses were perched on her nose but they weren't giving him librarian vibes this time. Not with the heather gray spaghetti-strap tank top and yet another pair of booty shorts she was wearing. His gaze swept her body noting that her nipples were two tight points beneath her shirt as she settled into the chair across from him. His mouth parted as he watched her.

“Okay, I’m ready. I was thinking we could call to have a printer brought up?” She glanced at him as she reached for her laptop. “Or no?”

He forced his mouth shut. “That’s a good idea.” His cock pulsed, reminding him that he couldn’t even *look* at her now. He’d be sleeping on the couch tonight, for sure. The last threads of his restraint were about to dissolve, and he didn’t know what might happen once he made the decision to go for it with the hope that he wasn’t reading all the signs wrong.

A hard knock sounded on the door, and he surged to his feet to answer it. “That’s probably breakfast.”

“Oh, goodie,” she said, voice huskier than normal, giving it a sexy rasp liable to send him over the edge. “I hope you got pancakes. With strawberries and cream.”

“You’ll have to wait and find out,” he called out as he opened the door. He’d love to lay out strawberries and cream all over her sexy body, but that might be going too far. For now. The server had a full tray of food on his cart, and he wheeled it in,

setting everything up on the long table facing their work area. Josh tipped him a twenty-dollar bill before he left, and then got to work unveiling the spread.

“Coffee, soy milk for your weird ass, pancakes, waffles, yogurt, granola, and a fruit bowl.” He popped a slice of cantaloupe into his mouth and chewed as he looked back at her. “Happy?”

He knew the answer without her needing to say a word. She shone, basically bouncing to her feet to load up a plate. Josh popped a grape into his mouth as he watched her pick out her breakfast.

“That all you’re gonna eat?” she asked as she forked a pancake onto her plate, followed by a waffle.

“Nah, I might have some yogurt.”

She huffed, tossing a grape at him. “Loser.”

“Damn. Is that a challenge, MacTaggart?”

“No, Denton, it isn’t, but this *is* vacation breakfast,” she said, adding a pile of strawberries on top of her pancakes. “Which means, one of the few mornings of the year I *don’t* start with yogurt or granola.”

“Fair enough.” He forked a waffle onto a plate to appease her but still loaded up a bowl of yogurt. When they settled back into their chairs, Amelia eyed him cautiously.

“I don’t understand how you can eat without a shirt on.”

“Um, pretty much the same as eating with a shirt on.”

She snorted, cutting a fat bite out of her pancake.

“You can give it a try,” Josh urged. “See what it’s like.”

“Ha ha.” She forked the pancakes into her mouth. “Not happening. I wouldn’t enjoy my food if I was eating naked.”

“I didn’t say anything about naked,” Josh said, feeling even more of his professional façade crumbling away. “But if you want to take it there, I mean, I’m game.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, and he was thankful she couldn't tell how hard his heart pounded in his chest. That look she'd given him though—that was a sign he needed to stay in his lane.

“So, take a look at this,” Josh barreled on, quickly changing the subject as he turned his laptop toward her. “I’ve come up with a list of proposed renovations that we could include in the plan for Cedar Grove once Denton Hotels acquires it.”

Amelia sat cross-legged on her chair, popping strawberries into her mouth as she read. Her brows slowly knit together the more she read.

When she was done and handed the laptop back, all she said was, “This looks...interesting.”

“You don’t sound enthused.”

“It’s a little out of left field,” she said. “The family fun center with a rock-climbing wall is probably the only thing on it that makes sense. But hosting presidential galas? A couples-focused hot springs addition with romantic massages? I mean, they’re cool ideas, but...”

“But what?” Josh asked, irritation sparking. He looked at the list again. “I need to close this deal, and fast. The bigger the better.”

Amelia sighed, shifting in her seat. “This is like when you showed up at my apartment in a limo.”

Realization began prickling through him. “Is it?”

“You’re losing sight of the goal,” she said calmly, in the way she was so good at. The way that made them a perfect pair, at least in business. And maybe in more ways, not like Josh would ever get there to know. “Focus on the parts that you loved about this place as a kid. Because *that’s* the spirit of Cedar Grove. These galas and extreme vacation experiences are nice, but it’s not right for *here*. You know what I’m saying?”

She had a point—a very good one. He could feel some of the tension from his conversation with his father unwinding,

allowing clarity to return. The wheels began turning, and he revised his list with family in mind.

Hours slunk by so stealthily they barely noticed; the breakfast table was slowly picked clean. Josh and Amelia had thrown a couple more grapes at each other. When only a dribble of coffee remained in the pot, Josh checked his phone and realized their time to meet with Stan was fast approaching.

“We need to get ready.” He set his laptop aside, then stood up and stretched. Amelia’s gaze sizzled on him as he scratched at his chest before wandering back into the bedroom. Let her take him in—all of him. If the sight of his bare chest would make her crack, then he’d use it to his advantage. At this point, though, it seemed like nothing would make her crack. Had he really read everything all wrong?

“Okay. It’s go time.” Amelia hopped up and followed him into the bedroom. They were quiet as they picked out clothes. Josh hazarded a glance behind him at Amelia’s side of the bedroom, finding her in just a bra and panties, facing the closet. His chest tightened, and he dropped the clothes he was holding. The past two nights, she’d changed in the bathroom. Now, she was bold enough to change in front of him. His fingers twitched, and he forced himself to finish picking out his clothes.

He shoved his sweatpants down out of sheer defiance. If she could do it, then so could he. Heart thudding, he wandered past her in only his boxer briefs on his way to the bathroom. He glanced over at her as he passed, adjusting his junk.

“Sorry,” he said with a grin and then stepped into the bathroom.

The look of shock on her face seared itself into his brain. He waited for her to follow him inside, but she didn’t come. Josh gripped the edge of the marble countertop and stared at his reflection in the mirror. Not like they had time for a premeeting quickie anyway. His cock twitched in his pants from the thought alone.

There would *always* be time for a premeeting quickie with Amelia...if only she wanted it.

Josh heaved a sigh, splashing cold water on his face to clear his head. Time to focus. No more teasing and coquetries. He pulled on his clothes in the bathroom, dark gray slacks and a white button-down. Casual and comfortable. When he breezed out, Amelia had slid into a long-sleeved floral print wraparound dress. She was just slipping her feet into pumps.

“Oh, good, we match,” she said then went into the bathroom. He finished getting ready, snapping on his watch and sliding his feet into his shoes. As he worked with his hair in the mirror, Amelia breezed out.

When she glanced his way, her dark lashes and ruby-red lips stole the air from his lungs. Yes, she was ready. But she’d been ready before, too. He loved the different sides to her he was getting to know while sharing a space with her. The makeup-free Amelia was just as beautiful as the carefully curated version she presented every day at work.

In fact, if he was being honest, he was desperate to have more mornings like the one they’d shared today—relaxed, in pajamas, tossing grapes at each other.

On their way to the conference room, Josh spotted Stan and his wife in the hotel lobby.

And shaking his hand was Colin Forest, the owner of Forest Family Hotels. Denton’s biggest competitor.

“Shit.” Josh stopped walking, grabbing Amelia’s wrist. “Do you see him?”

“Wh—” Her mouth rounded. “That’s Colin.”

“Yeah.” Josh raked a hand through his hair, facing Amelia. “Okay. Look over there. Is that his wife and kids with him?”

Amelia peeked over Josh’s shoulder and then nodded. “Yep. Confirmed wife and kids in tow.”

“Shit.” Josh had upped the ante by bringing his fiancée and about-to-form family on this trip, but Colin could easily demolish that effort with his fully-formed family. His mind went into overdrive, trying to regroup.

“Stan is laughing at something he said,” Amelia reported, still peering around Josh.

“Let’s take things to the next level,” Josh said, gripping Amelia by the arms. “Let’s say that you’re pregnant.”

Amelia’s eyes went wide. “Josh,” she hissed, “are you out of your mind?”

The suggestion crashed through him, and he pinched his eyes shut. “You’re right. Bad idea.”

“We’re being deceptive enough with the engagement,” she went on. “I’m *not* adding an unborn baby into the mix.”

Hearing those words from her lips didn’t sound as weird as he’d expected. In fact, it settled rather nicely. But now wasn’t the time to dig into that.

“Sorry. Forget I said anything. We’ll go in there and rock the plan as it is.”

“Yeah. That’s better.” Amelia straightened her back, peering around Josh again. “Okay, Colin and family are heading toward the front desk. Looks like we’ll have new friends while we’re in town.”

“Great.” Adrenaline and competition raced through him in equal measure as he started his brisk, confident pace toward Stan Lewis.

Just the juice he needed to make sure that *he* was on the closing end of this deal, and not Colin.

AMELIA

Amelia and Josh wandered around the hotel property after their successful meeting with Stan discussing how they'd like to see some of the transformations Josh had suggested. One of Amelia's favorite parts about working with Josh was watching his determination unfold, like an expertly arranged origami swan.

Whenever he talked to his father, his energy shifted and he seemed to turn into a carbon copy of Mitchell Denton Senior with his hyperfocus on profitability and the bottom line and limited regard for the very real people impacted by the decisions made. She was always there to remind him that it was possible to do both—be profitable and take the human element into consideration—and it seemed to be working here at the hotel. Stan had been pleased with Josh's ideas for upgrades.

And whenever he was faced with direct competition, much like his father and brother, he became ruthless, determined to win. It was downright sexy to Amelia.

He was a masterpiece, truly. One that she never tired of looking at and absorbing.

In the afterglow of their successful meeting, Josh wanted to walk down memory lane in advance of dinner. As it was, they only had a few days left here, and Amelia was already feeling reluctant to part ways with Josh. Not just as his assistant, but as his fake fiancée.

It was nice waking up with him at her side. Catching glimpses of him lost in thought, half naked, or fussing with his hair. Sharing the same living space with him, even for a few days, was far more comfortable than it had been with her last serious boyfriend. And that was saying something.

Being with Josh felt natural.

She just wished they could get past what had them both running hot and cold with each other.

“It’s really snowing,” Josh remarked as they paused at a long line of windows in the sunroom. Couches faced the windows, and farther down guests lounged on the massive cushions. Josh glanced down the line, and then wrapped his arm around Amelia.

“Still pretending, huh?” she teased, but burrowed deeper into his embrace.

“I told you, a week.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Her heart raced as she contemplated saying the words bouncing around in her head. “If you aren’t careful, I’ll try to kiss you again.”

Josh lifted a brow. “I’d rather not be careful.”

“Right, because it’s important that we convince perfect strangers that we’re engaged,” she said, feeling dizzy. Josh was the only thing grounding her right now, the warm steel of his body against her, his fingers dipping into her natural waist. Josh turned her to face him, dragging his palms up her arms.

“Just admit that you want me to kiss you, Meelie,” he said, a smile tugging at his lips. He was probably still teasing; especially with his use of that horrible nickname. But something shivered between them, something heavy and real. Something way beyond the confines of this agreement they’d made for the week.

“Okay,” she said but couldn’t even force out any more words because Josh surged forward and captured her lips in a kiss. She made a small noise and clutched at his arms for support. In an instant, her hesitation dissolved and she was finally facing her base desires, all the heated lust that she’d been

ignoring for the past days, weeks, months, and years. All the quiet pining and suppressed admiration. They consumed her, leaving her blind and grappling for the wall of man in front of her.

She kissed him like she wanted to. Like she'd dreamed of doing so many times late at night, with just her hand to console her. Her tongue surged forward to find his, starting a sloppy, desperate dance. Josh cupped her face, and they stumbled sideways from the intensity of it all, knocking against the windows.

Amelia snickered, and Josh glanced around making sure no one was watching. Nobody cared, but still, they needed one hundred percent more privacy for what she was desperate to do with this man.

"Let's go over here," Josh said, leading her by the hand to a small alcove with a fireplace. A curved loveseat faced the roaring fire, and Josh sank onto the couch, tugging her down beside him. Before she could say a thing, Josh had her face in his hands, lips drawing more kisses out of her. She sank back into the couch, relishing the heat of the fire mixed with the heat of Josh's mouth. It stoked the fire inside her to dangerous levels. When they finally broke for air, Amelia's chest was heaving.

"Jesus, Josh," she panted.

He wet his bottom lip, his gaze still on her mouth. His hair was already tousled, shirt slightly askew. She had a fistful of his button-down in her right hand, just a breath away from ripping the thing off him.

"Actually," he said, his voice husky, "I was wrong. Fuck this fireplace. Let's go back to our room."

His implicit suggestion thrilled her, and she was nodding before she could think better of it. Because what was a better suggestion than *that*?

Screw the consequences. Screw the fact that he was her boss and they were on a work vacation and every source of etiquette and conduct would tell her *not* to do this.

Right now, after those kisses, she couldn't say no.

Josh and Amelia ran toward the elevators, laughing like teenagers. In the elevator, he pinned her to the shiny wall and kissed her so hard her lips tingled and then started a path down her neck and chest. He barely had time to compose himself once the doors slid open on their floor. They edged past a family of five, who stared at them, the parents glaring as if their kids were witnessing something they shouldn't. With a wave, Amelia laughed as Josh tugged her hand and they ran toward their suite.

Inside the room, Josh pinned her against the door with more kisses, and moaned in appreciation. The noise ripped out of her, unbidden. She tugged at his shirt, pulling it out from the waist of his gray slacks. He grunted, fumbling with the tie at the waist of her dress, tugging at it without being able to loosen it.

She tried to help him but returned to her own task of tearing his shirt off his body. She had too much to do and not enough attention span to do it.

She needed more of him—now. But their damn clothes persisted in being in the way. Josh finally stepped back and drew a deep breath.

“This needs to come off,” he said, his voice rough. He fumbled with the tie again, failed, and then swore and lifted her dress from below. Amelia laughed as he came to an impasse at her waist. She undid the knot herself, which allowed the fabric to cascade open. He pushed it over her shoulders and down her arms, leaving her in her bra and panties.

“Yes,” he groaned, trailing his lips down the center of her chest toward the mounds of her breasts. She inhaled sharply when his lips grazed the valley there, then again when he nipped at each tight nipple in turn. “You have no idea how long I've been waiting to do this.”

His words echoed through her, sending heat and lightning and all manner of fireworks shooting off under her skin. She never imagined that maybe he'd been desperate for this too. Whether

it was for a day or for a year, it didn't matter. Just the simple fact that he *wanted* her was enough.

"Oh my god," she groaned as he hoisted her up by the hips. "Tell me about it." Her ankles locked behind his body, and he carried her into the bedroom. She ran her hand over the strong ridge of his shoulders, down the rippling muscles of his back. She'd been dying to know what he looked like underneath his pants, and finally, here she was: wrapped around him and about to find out. Part of her wondered if this was a dream, since the reality of her and Josh hooking up was as exotic and unlikely as a unicorn sighting.

Christmas freaking miracle right here.

Josh tossed her onto the bed, and she bounced softly, her knees falling open. Josh made quick work of his shirt, tossing it aside, and then shucked his pants. His cock made an impressive mountain out of his boxer briefs. She reached for him, trying to touch it, or maybe get a glimpse of it. But he surged forward, showering her belly with kisses, smoothing his lips over her hip and along her panties, until he was tugging at the pink fabric with his teeth.

"Oh my god," she moaned, squeezing her legs together, afraid to let him see how wet he'd made her *already*. "I can't believe this."

"Believe it," he said, and then he tore her panties down and dove headfirst between her legs.

It was one thing to kiss your boss. It was an entirely different matter to have your boss *eat you out*. Amelia's lips parted as Josh's lips connected with the stiff peak of her clit, nibbling and licking at her until she cried out. Amelia arched her back, her entire body hot and buzzing under his attention. Josh kept her pinned to the bed at the hips, sliding a finger inside of her. And then a second finger. He fingerfucked her while he sucked at her clit, and suddenly she was in a downhill race and tumbling across the finish line headfirst.

"Ooooooh, *Josh!*" she moaned, and all it took was one more swipe of his tongue against her and her entire body went rigid. Pleasure ricocheted through her, making her temporarily blind

as she came around him. Her hips jerked beneath him, but he didn't let up. Fuck, her orgasm roared through her like a tidal wave leaving her with numbing pleasure and the feel of him filling her.

But it wasn't even all of him. And there was still so much more to come. Her mind spun as he sat back, his mouth shiny from her juices.

"Wha..." she began, unable to finish her thought.

He smiled widely and pushed his boxer briefs down. His cock bobbed out, finally free. She inhaled sharply as she realized just how huge he was.

"J..." she tried again.

"What?" He looked so self-satisfied right then. And hell, he should be satisfied. He'd stolen her ability to speak. He'd made her come in under three minutes harder than she ever had before. And now he was about to fill her so deeply she might not be able to walk afterward. "I have a condom," he added, reaching for his pants. He fished his wallet out of his pocket.

She covered her face with her hands for a moment, still unable to accept that Josh had given her the best orgasm of her life. Hands down. Nobody could beat him.

It wasn't fair.

"Are you okay, Amelia?" he asked, the laughter in his voice.

"Nnnngh," she said.

"I'm not done with you," he warned.

"Yes," she croaked.

"Ah," Josh said, tugging a condom out of his wallet. He tore it open with his teeth and then rolled it down over his massive cock. "So you *can* speak."

She gaped at the monster between his legs. "You've been hiding that for the past two years? Are you kidding me right now?"

“Pretty sure it’s called harassment if I show you my dick while we’re at work,” Josh teased, easing onto the bed between her legs. The top of his cock brushed her damp folds, and her pussy clenched in anticipation.

“You could have at least *told me* you had the world’s hugest dick,” she said, breath hitching as his hips rested against hers.

“Still harassment,” he said, flexing so that his cockhead dragged along the nub of her clit. A shiver wracked her body, and another sigh escaped her.

“I guess it wouldn’t have mattered,” she said, looking down between their bodies as Josh lined up their parts. She still couldn’t believe it. Boss. Josh. Dick. Inside her. It was the most beautiful equation she’d never imagined possible. “Even if I’d have asked you to fuck me two years ago, you wouldn’t have.”

He gave an incredulous snort. “You don’t think?”

“Come on, Josh. You’re only horny right now because we’re two grown adults sharing a bed,” she said, the words a tactical defense against her fears. “Pretending to be a couple, on top of that.”

He grunted, easing his fat cockhead inside her. All the air in her lungs hissed out, and she melted against the mattress.

“You are so wrong,” he groaned.

It was hard to remember what they were even talking about. The rush of stretching and heat and steel was overwhelming. All-encompassing.

“Am I?” She dug her fingernails into his back as he pushed himself deeper. A low moan escaped her.

“I’ve wanted you since the day you started as my assistant,” he grunted, and then surged forward, claiming every last inch of space inside her.

She arched back, fisting the comforter as he flexed against her, finding even more depth. His confession filled her as much as his cock did. If her head was spinning before, now it had rocketed out of orbit.

But she couldn't think about that now. Everything shrank to an intense roar, which filled every inch of her limbs as Josh started a brisk and determined rhythm. He rocked into her, over and over again, his blue eyes so intense it felt like something inside of her broke in half. But she didn't dare break this connection, the juicy way he sank into her, the heartbreaking depth of this union. It was everything she'd ever fantasized about and that much more.

Amelia wasn't surprised to find herself falling over the edge—again. She pinched her eyes shut and clutched his biceps, crying out as yet another orgasm washed over her. Josh stilled against her, a gruff cry escaping him as he found his own peak.

Chest heaving, Amelia searched his face for something to grab onto. Some sign that their joining had been just as intense for him.

Josh surged forward and kissed her tenderly, far softer than she expected after getting fucked like that.

He rolled off her, quickly taking the condom off and tossing it in the trash by the bed, before pulling her into his arms.

“Hope you're a cuddler,” he said into her ear, and she dissolved into giggles.

He was the only man who could make her *giggle*. The only man who'd ever made her come twice in twenty minutes. The only man who she could spend days with at a time and not tire of. The only man who she knew better than anyone else, and now, knew him just a little bit more.

This was the afterglow. And damn, she'd been missing feeling like this.

Time to enjoy it.

Amelia snuggled up into his chest and let her eyes drift closed.

JOSH

The next morning Josh couldn't stop smiling. They'd had an amazing night together and he'd be lying to himself if he didn't readily admit that he wanted more. Now, all they needed to do was seal the deal on Cedar Grove Hotel and this would be his best acquisition yet. And if he got the girl on top of that, it would be a Christmas to remember.

With the holidays nearing, they had a light schedule, which pleased him. Amelia was still in bed, mumbling something about being kept up all night, so he sat comfortably in the sitting area answering emails when a Skype request came through. Looking to see who it was from, he grinned as he answered the call.

"Elkin. Been a long time. How are you?"

His old college roommate grinned back at him. "Good to see you, Denton. Busy as usual. Especially this time of year. Once the snow starts falling Elk Lodge fills up. How's business? Your brother still have all his hair?"

Josh snorted out a laugh. His older brother Mitch had always been the serious one growing up and their dad had started grooming him to take over the family business before he'd finished college, which had led Jonas Elkin to tease him about premature balding. "No combovers yet. But you didn't answer my question. How are *you*?"

Jonas shrugged and Josh could see him look off to the side as though someone came in. "My grandmother has cancer."

Josh stiffened. His grandparents had raised the brothers after their parents died and on the few occasions that he'd visited Elk Lodge, it was clear that Elin Elkin was the matriarch of the family. "She's asked us all to come home for what might be her last Christmas, so we're doing what we can to make it special."

Rubbing at the sudden ache in his chest. "Oh damn, I'm so sorry to hear that. Please give her my regards and I'll try to make it out after the new year for a visit."

"Thanks, man. I bet she'd love that. She always had a soft spot for all the Dentons, including your cousin Chris."

Josh could hear Amelia up and moving around in the bedroom. "I'm guessing that's not why you called?"

Jonas shook his head. "I understand you're looking at possibly acquiring Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa?"

"I am. I have so many happy memories here, I really want to do something special with the place. In fact, I'm here now. Why?"

"I'm assuming Colin Forest is there as well?"

So that's where this was going. "He is. My dad just lost out on a bid for a ski resort near your lodge. Should I assume he's the one who got it?"

"He was."

Wait, was?

"Turns out he wasn't completely honest with the owners about some of his plans for the resort, and they're trying to cancel the contract. He stands to lose a lot of money if the deal falls through, so he might push harder to acquire Cedar Grove."

Josh knew his dad had wanted that resort. "So does that mean they'll be entertaining bids again?"

Jonas chuckled. "Nope. Gran's already spoken with them, and assuming they can get the contract canceled, we're hoping to expand the resort."

"Of course you are."

The bedroom door opened and Amelia came out wrapped in a robe with her hair in a towel and Josh shifted his laptop so she wouldn't show up on camera. "I'm starving after the night we had. Please tell me there's coffee."

Josh grinned as Amelia answered her own question and watched as she poured herself a cup and added creamed and sugar. She looked adorable after her shower and he'd already forgotten he was on a video call.

"Dude, I thought you were on a work trip?"

"Oh shit, Josh, are you talking to someone?" Amelia practically squeaked.

He looked back to his friend. "I am. Thanks for the heads up. I'll call you after the holidays to set up a time to come out to Colorado."

"Well, clearly I'm being dismissed," Jonas responded with a laugh. "I have questions. I will expect answers. There will be Scotch involved."

Josh ended the call and closed his laptop.

Turning back to Amelia, he could see the blush that she tried to hide behind her coffee cup. "Are you off the call now?"

Setting his laptop aside, he held out his arms and she came to him. Taking her hand, he pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her before burying his nose in her neck. She smelled like the floral shower gel the hotel supplied. Pressing a kiss to her neck, he told her, "Jonas Elkin was my roommate in college. He was calling to warn me about Colin Forest."

Snuggling against him, she kissed his cheek. "Is there going to be problems with him?"

Taking the coffee cup from her, he set it on the side table before tugging the towel off her head and tossing it to the floor. Running his fingers through her damp hair, he kissed her. Shifting so Amelia lay on the couch, he pulled the tie on her robe free and opened the robe to feast his eyes on the creamy expanse of skin, which had a beautiful rose flush.

Thoughts of Colin Forest and the hotel acquisition could wait. Amelia lay before him like some sort of divine offering and he fully intended to enjoy himself.

She stopped him before he could do anything. “Josh? What about Colin?”

Nipping at her fingers, he moved so he was laying between her legs. “Don’t worry about him. I have it all under control. What you should worry about is the number of orgasms I intend to give you before I’ll let you eat breakfast.”

Her answering moan was music to his ears. He could definitely get used to this.

JOSH

Things had been cozy between them all day, probably in large part due to the earth-shattering orgasms they'd exchanged. But if Josh was being truthful, it was much more than that. Amelia was special and spending time with her like this only cemented his desire for more. Much more.

When Amelia got a text from her mom suggesting they both come to the house for dinner, Josh was more than ready for the family time. "Let's just try to keep talk about wedding stuff to a minimum," Amelia was saying as she pulled on leggings. "I hate lying, but even more with specific information. It'll be too easy for things to blow up in our faces."

"Deal." He couldn't keep his eyes off the curve of her ass as she checked herself out in the mirror. He gave a low whistle.

"Yeah? You like what you see?" she teased, reaching for an oversized gray sweater. Once it was settled around her, perfectly slouchy but still revealing her curves, she worked on pulling her hair into a low bun. "Gonna have to keep it in your pants for a few hours, stud. My parents won't take kindly to us fucking in the bathroom like teenagers."

"Did you fuck in your parents' bathroom when you were a teenager?" he asked.

She faltered. "Well...*no*..."

"How about this: I'll wait to fuck you when we get back to the room. Deal?"

She snorted, wobbling where she stood. "Yeah. Deal."

He pressed a kiss to her cheek as he breezed past, reaching for his coat. Yes, things were *very* cozy. And he liked it more than he could even describe.

They called for a rideshare to take them to her parents' house, since they both planned on drinking there. It wasn't more than a ten-minute ride, though, just like practically all of Cedar Grove, everything was close by. Her parents had a secluded house out on a country road, flanked by woods on one side and an apple orchard on the other.

When they got out of the car, Amelia's mother was already hanging out the front door, urging them in. "Come on! Hurry up, lovebirds! Dinner's ready!"

Josh laughed while Amelia groaned. "She's always *hurrying me*," she complained with a grin tugging at her lips.

"Finally I get to see the family dynamics that shaped you into the woman you are today," Josh said.

"I wish it were more interesting than it really is," she remarked.

Inside the house, a flurry of hugs and chatter greeted them. Rob and Rebecca were there, while Elise ran around underfoot. Amelia's mom immediately led Josh toward the platter of meats, where she carefully explained all of his options.

"The lamb is over here," she said in a low voice, lifting up some slices with a knife. "But I have ham too, because I don't know how you feel about lamb."

"Whatever you made is fine by me," Josh said, fighting a grin.

"She's very attentive to people's meat options," Amelia said behind them. Once they shucked their coats, she squeezed Josh's side as she headed for the dining room table. Two empty seats remained on the far side of the table, which Amelia's father indicated were for "the lovebirds."

The whole thing was so unlike his childhood experience, which had always involved nannies and someone running late. His parents ran empires, and while the love was there, the

physical presence had sometimes been lacking with the exception of the time they spent at Cedar Grove.

Amelia's house burst with warmth. With genuine interest and presence and it was clear this was a regular occurrence.

As the dinner began and everyone got to talking and eating, it became hard not to fall in love with everyone and everything. Red wine flowed as conversation easily shifted from sports teams to jokes to casual work talk. Once dessert was brought out, Amelia's father leaned in close to Josh.

"Hey," he said, in a conspiratorial whisper. "Want to see some of Amelia's high school pictures?"

Amelia snorted. "Dad, I can hear you!"

Her mother squealed, leaping up from the table. "I'll get them right now!"

Rob rolled his eyes, but a grin tugged at his lips. "I think they *live* for this moment."

"Yeah, and with this one, we barely get the chance to embarrass her," her dad complained jovially.

"Are you trying to say that I never have boyfriends?" Amelia asked in mock injury.

"Yes, dear, he is," her mother confirmed, returning with a stack of books and what looked like a pile of photos on top. "Now, Joshua, I have all the damning evidence anyone could ask for, so I hope you have a few hours available."

"I have days available for something like this. Weeks, even. Oh, but wait. I do have to ask. Are there any pics of Amelia playing the angel in the nativity play?"

Her mom smiled broadly. "I do believe there's a few in the albums and I'm sure there's video if you want to see more."

Amelia groaned. "Pretty sure I feel a stomachache coming on. Maybe we should go."

"Dear, there's some antacid in the hall bathroom. Help yourself," her mom told her as she waved to the hallway.

Her mom and dad cooed over each new photo unearthed from the stack, which was immediately passed around Amelia and into Josh's hands. Amelia watched with narrowed eyes, shaking her head at the worst ones.

"And here's our little Meel in band," her mom said, handing over the individual band photo from sophomore year showing Amelia clutching her clarinet between her hands.

"Oh, wow, Meel." Josh clucked his tongue, nodding. "You were a band geek."

"Hey—" she started.

"No, no. Don't worry. No shade here." He smiled at her. "I was too."

Her eyes widened. "No way. What did you play?"

"Flute."

Rob snickered across the table.

"Are you serious?" Amelia had the beginning of an incredulous smile on her face. "That's so...*cute*."

"I was first chair even." Josh sniffed, receiving another picture from her mom. Sure, playing flute had been a way to learn music, but as the buff, sports-inclined guy he also was in high school, it had been a new angle for him to get laid. He didn't need to go into all that over the dinner table, though.

They all laughed over old pictures and memories until dessert was cleared and Josh felt the buzz through his body. When he looked over at Amelia, she had a heavy look in her eyes. One that told him *it was time to go*.

"You ready to head back?" he asked in a low voice.

She nodded, then reached to pull up the rideshare app. "Let's do it. Hey, Mom and Dad, we're gonna head out. There's still some work waiting for us in the morning, so..."

A chorus of *aww*'s erupted.

"Why don't you let me drive you?" Her dad stood up, pushing the photos aside as he did. He headed toward the front hallway and slid into his shoes.

“We can call for a ride,” Josh said.

“Nonsense. You’re my children. I’m taking you.”

Josh grinned at Amelia and found her smiling into the heel of her palm. They got coats and shoes on, while her mom sighed that she didn’t want to see them leave, insisting they should have stayed in the spare bedroom upstairs, and why didn’t they have the wedding in the backyard already. By the time they’d hugged their way through the family and out the front door, Josh had Amelia’s hand in his, more than ready to get back to the hotel.

But he had to play the nice-guy part a little bit longer. They climbed into the back seat of her dad’s car, laughing as they did.

“Why do I feel like I’m back in high school?” Amelia teased.

“Because I’m not allowed to touch or kiss you right now,” he whispered into her ear. That prompted more laughter, and a quizzical look from her dad through the rearview mirror.

“I’d say hands off my daughter, but it’s too late for that, isn’t it?” he mused, blinker ticking as he pulled out onto the road.

Josh kept his grip on Amelia’s hand the entire drive back to the hotel, keeping the conversation fun and lighthearted, even though desire streaked through him.

Despite last night and this morning, he was hungry for her, again. He had no idea how things would be once they left Cedar Grove, but he would enjoy their time together now and tackle that potential hurdle later.

By the time they’d reached the hotel, Josh was half-hard and ready to bolt to their room. He’d simply been holding Amelia’s hand, proving to himself even more that she’d turned him into a horny teen somewhere over the course of last night.

After a friendly goodbye and lots of waving, Amelia’s dad finally pulled away. He cinched his arms around her waist, bringing her jolting against him.

“Upstairs?” he asked.

“Immediately.”

JOSH

They ran, holding hands, into the Cedar Grove Hotel and headed for the elevators. Josh pushed the up button several times, even though it wouldn't help. Once the doors opened, they tumbled inside, tucking themselves into the corner least visible from the outside. Kisses erupted, but this time they were deeper. More passionate.

Josh didn't even notice when the elevator doors opened behind him. It took another guest at the hotel clearing their throat before he could tear himself away from Amelia.

"Excuse us," he said, tugging at Amelia's hand to get off the elevator. She rolled her lips inward, and a laugh burst out of her once they'd walked far enough away.

"Guess we were pretty distracted, huh?" It took three tries for him to swipe the keycard, but once the door swung open, the two of them stumbled in. Josh cupped her face in his hands, finally kissing her like he wanted now that they were in the privacy of their own suite. Long, intentional kisses. Far deeper than prying eyes would allow. Kisses so deep that they stole the breath from him. Made his vision go spotty.

When they finally broke apart, Amelia took a big gulp of air. Her lips were puffy. Kiss bitten. It just made him hungry for more.

"We had sex all night last night and this morning," she breathed, her eyes wild, "but I still feel like I haven't gotten enough."

He grunted, guiding her backward into the bedroom. When she stumbled, he swept her up into his arms. She giggled, kicking her legs while she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Let’s never leave this room,” he suggested after he’d tossed her on the bed and covered her body with his own.

“I’m game. You can do your job from Cedar Grove, right?”

“Absolutely.” He dragged his lips over hers, then tugged at her bottom lip with his teeth.

“And I can probably work in my new position from this suite.” She pushed her tongue into his mouth. He grunted again, settling between her thighs. Desperate to get their clothes off already.

“All these clothes? Need to come off.” He pulled away from her, even though every cell of his body protested the decision. It was necessary for forward movement. To get back to that sweet heat that had held him captive since yesterday. That might keep him captive for days or weeks to come.

Amelia sat up as he helped tug her sweater over her head and then pulled her leggings off before throwing them over his shoulder. He fumbled with the buckle on his belt, almost tripping out of his own pants.

He was forgetting something. What? “Hang on.” Jogging to the bathroom, he retrieved the condoms from his toiletry bag and was already ripping one open as he hurried back to the bed. Sliding it on, he groaned at how sensitive his cock felt. If he wasn’t careful, he’d go off before they could get started.

When he eased back onto the bed, she welcomed him between her legs, hooking her ankles behind his back. His stiff cock immediately found the slick groove of her pussy. She whimpered.

“Jesus, Josh.” She smoothed her hands over the ridge of his shoulders. “I need it. I need you.”

“I know.” He buried his face in the hollow of her neck, enjoying the small jolts of pleasure as his cock danced dangerously close to the prize. “Me too.”

Amelia dragged her fingernails down the sides of his arms, then swirled up the expanse of his back. Her touch revved him up. Every little thing she did was a turn on. All the way down to simply holding his hand.

He didn't know what that meant yet. Didn't know if he should pay attention to it or ignore it.

For now, all that mattered was getting more of her. While he still could.

Amelia moaned through a kiss as his cockhead slipped into place. And then he pushed forward, taking it slow and steady, sinking into her with a patience that he didn't feel even slightly. No, he wanted her hard and fast. But something about this union felt different than their times before.

After the evening spent bathing in the warmth of her family, a new side to Amelia was making him fall even harder for her. She wasn't simply his sexy, smart assistant that he'd been forcibly overlooking for the past two years.

In such a short time, she'd come to mean more to him than anyone else.

"Ohhhhh, Josh," she moaned, throwing her head back. His abs were rock hard as he sank into her, sweat already prickling his temples from beating back the urge to fuck her senseless. Every tremor and sound from her lips sent his heart racing.

He thrust into her, and then drew himself out slowly, watching the expressions on her face as they gradually grew more intense with each upward thrust. He dragged his lips over the hollow of her neck, his torso tense as he fought the swell of pleasure that would end this dizzying union.

"You feel...so good..." He didn't even recognize his own voice. He drilled into her again, stilling for a moment to get his bearings. She arched against him, writhing and jerking.

"Ohhh, Josh," she pleaded, almost whining. Her fingernails dug into his bicep. "Please. Please. I'm so close."

And so was he. Even though he'd intended to take it slow, something about the deliberateness made it hotter. Even harder to beat back the orgasm.

He dipped his head and took one pebbled nipple between his lips. He laved it with his tongue and then scraped his teeth against it.

“Josh!” There was an edge to her voice that told him the little push had done it. She wailed, her thighs turning into a vice around his hips. “Ohhh, Josh, I’m coming!”

He surged into her again, burying himself until he could go no farther, and the velvet squeeze of her pussy sent him over the edge too. His limbs turned hot, and for a moment he couldn’t see anything except the swirl of pleasure inside him. His hips jerked as he came, and a low, gravelly groan escaped him.

“Ohhh my God,” she moaned, a puddle beneath him. Her legs folded down to the bed, and she blinked lazily, a smile creeping across her face.

He grunted, easing himself out of her before hitting the bed. He quickly pulled the condom off, dropping it into the trash by the bed. Rolling to face her, he tugged her into his arms, needing the weight of her against him. They lay like that, breathing heavily and intertwined, for a long time. Saying nothing. Just soaking in the post-orgasm bliss.

Finally, Amelia shifted in his arms, turning to face him.

“Wanna order room service?”

Josh laughed, swiping his thumb across her jawline. “What do you want?”

“Cake.”

“We had dessert at your parents’ house.”

“But I need cake after what just happened.”

Josh laughed, rolling off the bed. He went to the bedside phone, and her eyes sparkled as she watched him.

“Wow. I didn’t mean *you* had to call for cake. But I like the fact that there was no question.”

He smiled, picking up the receiver to call down to the desk. He ordered two slices of chocolate cake, fresh berries and a bottle of wine. Just in case.

“I like this,” she said once he climbed back onto the bed and pulled her into his arms. “Second dessert. It’s almost Christmas, anyway, so why not indulge ourselves?”

He murmured his agreement, his lips trailing kisses down her neck.

“We need to replace the calories,” Josh affirmed. “But it serves another purpose too. Though you might not have realized it, the chocolate cake qualifies as reconnaissance.”

“Does it?”

He nodded, squeezing a handful of her ass. “Oh yeah. You see, I’m big on the cake that’s served in our existing hotels. But maybe their cake is better. We need to find out.”

Amelia laughed, propping up on an elbow to look up at him. “Why the big deal about cake?”

A flicker of doubt flashed through him. He didn’t normally get too deep about his family life with anyone, but with Amelia, it seemed safe to go there. “Just one of the ways I try to honor my mother’s memory. She made *the best* chocolate cake. Like, out of this world. And, well...” The clamp of emotion arrived. But after so many years without her, the grief didn’t hold him hostage anymore. He could talk about her now. “It’s how I try to keep her memory around.”

Amelia trailed a finger along his collarbone, her brows drawn. “That’s really sweet. I’m glad to know that, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I thought maybe you were obsessed with cake.” She grinned, and he tugged her by the hip, bringing her closer to him.

“Maybe I am. But for all the right reasons.”

Amelia snuggled up against him. “Hm. If I had to do something in my mother’s honor for my epic chain of hotels... well...I think she’d like it best if I served potato salad nonstop.”

Josh laughed. “I missed her potato salad obsession over dinner.”

“It’s only a matter of time before she reveals it. Trust me. It was one of the reasons I had to move to New York.”

Josh laughed. “The biggest reason, right?”

“Escaping potato salad for every meal was the primary reason. Building my career was a close second.”

Her words made his smile fall a little. The career that had led her to him...and stalled out in his office.

“And what direction do you want your career to go?”

She narrowed her eyes as she thought. “The top. I don’t know exactly what position, but something like what you do. That’s my dream.”

His smile fell even further, but not because he disliked what she said. Not exactly. He would have kept her as his assistant for the rest of his life if she hadn’t negotiated the promotion as part of this deal. He’d never fully considered the fact that this position might be holding her back...or just a mere stepping stone along the path of her career.

“You’ll get there,” he said, and then squeezed her ass cheek. She giggled.

“Is that the ass squeeze of support?”

“Exactly.” They laughed, just as a knock sounded at the door. The way her eyes lit up sent a hot streak through him. He was having too much fun with her. Enjoying this a little bit too much.

But he needed to remember that however fun it was, this union of theirs was strictly business. Once the new year hit, she’d be moving along. Gone.

Unless there was a chance that this thing between them could become something more.

Something real.

AMELIA

At brunch the next morning, Amelia was practically floating on air. They held hands and snickered at inside jokes the whole way to the lobby.

There was no acting between them anymore. This glow? One hundred percent real, after their two sizzling nights in their couple's suite.

The resort restaurant had a small line at the host's stand when they arrived just before eleven a.m. Amelia leaned into Josh after he wrapped his arm around her. Sure, they could claim they were pretending. Putting on a show for curious eyes.

But she *wanted* to be doing this. Nothing about their laughter or conversation was forced or fabricated.

"Can you believe Christmas is next week?" Amelia asked as they sat near some potted ferns, waiting for the hostess to call their name. "It still feels so far away."

"But it's terrifyingly close," Josh said, straightening slightly. "Let's just hope this deal is done by Christmas. I want a contract in the works before the new year."

"I think you'll get your answer by then." Amelia smiled up at him, getting lost in the icy blue of his eyes. "I think it's already in the bag."

A grin tugged at his lips as he gazed down at her. "Thanks for believing in me."

She returned the smile and then pushed up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

Nope, this was definitely not acting. But if it wasn't acting, then what was it? It wasn't like they were dating now. Except, maybe they could start? The whole thing was so confusing, she didn't even know where to begin.

She figured she'd ignore it a little bit longer. Ride the wave until she was forced to make sense of this.

That seemed like the safest bet.

Loud voices snagged her attention a moment later. Laughter followed, and then Stan Lewis strolled into view.

Followed by Colin Forest and his family.

"No, seriously, I'd love to talk more about it," Colin was saying. Josh stiffened. He only watched them for a moment before something slid over his face like a mask. Steel determination. Focus. She'd watched Josh at work long enough to know that he'd just clicked into competitive business mode.

"Stan! Great to see you again." Josh made his presence known, striding over to offer his hand. He sent a polite greeting to Colin, and Amelia nibbled on her lip as she watched. She was sure that Josh was a shoo-in. But still—Colin made her nervous. She knew enough about him and his business to know that he was a real threat. Which was why Josh was going on the offensive. Why he was standing over there jangling change in his pockets, looking back at her with a bright, but plastic, smile.

"Isn't that right, honey?" Josh asked her. She blinked, realizing suddenly she'd missed a good portion of their conversation.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said we'd just been talking about wanting to speak with Stan again. You should all come sit with us—it'll make brunch even better."

Amelia's forearms prickled, recognizing this for what it was: a power move. She nodded, smiling. "Yes, that's perfect! That way we can all catch up."

Josh made a point of looking around. “Colin, where’s your wife and kids? They aren’t interested in brunch?”

A brief emotion passed over Colin’s face before he smiled. “Afraid not. The youngest woke with a tummy ache this morning and my wife thought it would be best to order room service and stay in.”

“Oh, that’s terrible. You didn’t want to stay to help?” Josh’s question sounded innocent, but Amelia knew better.

Colin coughed out a laugh. “Would I be considered a bad parent if I admit that I was happy she shooed me out of the room?”

Josh gave a slight shrug. “I think only you can answer that. I’ll be right back.” He went to the hostess to amend their reservation, and when he came back, she could see the change in him. He’d transformed in front of her, from the laidback lover she’d met over the past two nights to this bristly, hard-edged businessman. To be fair, she’d seen this side of Josh plenty. But it had never been in comparison to the *new* side of him.

The one that she wanted more and more of.

Their larger group was seated quickly near a long row of windows overlooking the trees lining the southern edge of the property. Josh made sure to sit across from Stan; Amelia faced Stan’s wife Betty, and to her right, Colin.

“You know, I’ve been hearing a lot about you,” Colin said to her once drink orders were taken and everyone had settled into pleasantries. “Seems you’re a Cedar Grove poster child for success.”

Amelia smiled, but panic seared through her. What could he have possibly heard? Maybe she’d underestimated how small Cedar Grove really was. “Is that so?”

“The whole town is proud of how far you’ve gone,” Stan said. “All the way to New York City, working with the esteemed Denton Hotels.”

Amelia glanced over in time to see Colin’s smile tighten.

“And I’ll never forget where it all began,” Amelia said, squeezing Josh’s knee under the table as a quiet plea for help. “In beautiful Cedar Grove.”

Stan smiled wistfully. Colin amped up his smile and leaned in closer.

“You know, Denton Hotels might be great, but have you ever considered working with the Forest Family?”

Amelia blinked, turning to him slowly. She couldn’t have heard him right. “I’m sorry?”

The air cinched tight around Josh. She could practically feel the prickles forming on his forearms.

“With all this talk about how far you’ve gone, you seem like a true rising star. I’ve been on the lookout for a new location scout. If Denton isn’t careful, I might have to steal you away.” Colin laughed in a way that clearly signaled the joke aspect. But was he really kidding?

Josh’s own hollow laughter arrived next. “I don’t blame you wanting to steal her away. Amelia is extremely talented. I’d happily have her as my assistant forever. Why do you think we’re getting married?”

The men at the table erupted in laughter. Amelia tried to force herself to join them, but the joke remained a sinking stone in her gut as the conversation moved on to other topics. Josh must have sensed her glowering, because he kept squeezing her knee and smiling over at her.

But the damage was done.

She faced the truth now.

Josh was a success-obsessed man who would say and do anything to close a deal.

She’d seen it over the years as he fought to win acquisitions. She’d known it the second he asked her to pose as his fiancée. And now, this brunch reminded her how far he was willing to go.

She supposed it wouldn’t have mattered as much if she hadn’t started sleeping with him. If she hadn’t granted access to that

side of her that had been quietly infatuated with him since day one. But she'd allowed herself to fall for him, to get a little lost inside this fantasy of *being with him*.

But this potent reminder prompted more questions within her. Josh knew how to turn on the charm and seal deals. Had he been doing that with her in the bedroom too? Maybe it was all just an act; maybe it *always* was. A twenty-four-seven attempt to wheel and deal to get what he wanted.

Amelia hardly even noticed when the food came, and she floated along in the conversation nodding and smiling at the right times. She couldn't stop thinking about whether Josh truly cared about *her* career goals, or only his. Whether he only saw her as the perfect assistant and not a person with her own life and trajectory.

"I'll be right back," she said once she'd finished her plate of eggs and bacon. She offered a small smile to the table and set her napkin aside, then hurried off to the bathroom.

She needed to be alone in the cool quiet to get her head on straight. She was losing herself out there; sinking deep into the quicksand of feelings and romance, when this thing was only ever supposed to be a work trip.

Romance wasn't supposed to be part of it; what Josh thought about her future or her as a person shouldn't matter.

She needed to remember that too.

She breezed out of the bathroom, determined to keep her chin up. No more getting lost in the fantasy of Josh. Sure, it stung that her years-long unrequited lust for him wouldn't turn into something grander and better, but that was how life worked. She didn't have time for a relationship, and she knew it. She should be thanking him for not being the man of her dreams.

When she rounded the corner into the wide hallway leading back to the restaurant, she nearly crashed into Colin.

"Amelia! There you are." He had a used-car-salesman-style smile on his face. "I wanted to talk to you a bit more about the job opportunity."

She gaped at him. "Are you serious?"

“Very. I wasn’t kidding when I said that I was impressed by what I know about you. I saw your profile on LinkedIn, looking for just the type of job I’m offering. I’ve done my research on you. And I’m prepared to offer you more than what you’d be making at Denton.”

She could only blink in response. She’d forgotten about the LinkedIn *searching* addition she’d made to her profile. It had happened one night last month on a weekend when she’d been tipsy and feeling stuck. She hadn’t even told Josh about it and it was probably why Colin was approaching her now.

He pressed his business card into her hand. “We’re based in Chicago, but we’re looking to expand into New York and New England. I’d love someone with your expertise in the industry on our team. Promise me you’ll think about it?”

Amelia was nodding before she could even think better of it. It also seemed like the easiest way to get out of the situation. But once Colin headed back to the restaurant and she trailed behind a moment later, incredulity and shock began to swirl in equal measure.

What a bold move. Trying to scout your competition’s fiancée? It almost seemed like it could be illegal. Except it wasn’t. And maybe Colin could sense they weren’t a real couple. Or could sense that something was off between them.

Before she got back to the table, her phone pinged with a text message. It was Rob.

Got time for coffee?

She bit her lip. Josh wouldn’t mind if she took some time away.

When?

Two hours. You know where.

See you then.

She swept back to the table with renewed vigor. She was more than ready to put some space between her and Josh.

To let the confusing dregs of this situation settle and form something even slightly recognizable.

AMELIA

“Thank God for coffee dates.” Amelia sighed as she hugged Rob inside the cozy coffee shop in downtown Cedar Grove.

She’d often spent hours holed up here, nursing chai lattes and barreling through detective novels as a young girl. The place had barely changed through the years, still featuring the same homey dark wood accents and the bearskin rugs. They did have a new wine bar that looked like it was doing well. A fireplace crackled in the corner and they sank into overstuffed armchairs near the fire.

“I’ve been wanting to catch up, the two of us,” Rob said, raking a hand through his short, blond hair. “It’s been so long since we’ve been able to do this.”

“And it’ll be even harder once the next little nugget gets here.” She winked at him from over her chai. Part of the homage to her younger self.

“You ever think about giving them some cousins?”

She laughed, almost spilling her tea. “No. Sorry. I just—I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

“Josh seems like a family man.”

She started to snort, but then she remembered the ruse. The blatant lie she was expected to uphold with her closest family members and loved ones. The one she’d agreed to. “Yeah. He is. We’re just...I don’t know. We haven’t decided yet.”

Rob looked down at the mug of coffee in his hands. “I really like Josh. I think you found a good one.”

She smiled wanly. “Yeah?”

“He’s at your level.”

“My level?”

Rob shrugged. “You know what I mean.” Her brother had never been excellent at conveying himself. “Your type of success level. We always knew you were gonna bust out of here and do something spectacular. He’s at the top, too. Like you.”

“Aww.” She reached over to swat his knee. “Brother. Thank you.” His words did warm her, even though the marriage would never happen. It was nice that he saw her as reaching heights like Josh. She planned to go that high, if not higher.

“And I can tell what a family-oriented person he is. Even if you don’t want kids and all that. He’s already looking out for our family, ya know?”

She sipped slowly at the chai. “How so?”

“Well, he offered me a job already.”

Heat flooded her limbs. This was news to her. “What?”

“Well, he said that if the resort deal goes through, he’d want me on the team to do the renovation work. If he wins the bid, y’know?”

Amelia smiled, but doubts rang through her. That could be a lot of hot air. And maybe it was just Josh’s ploy to win over her family, too. Besides, what was he thinking, offering serious employment to her brother when, after the resort construction began, they wouldn’t even be an item anymore?

It reeked of poor planning at best and transparent manipulation at worst.

“He’s a great guy,” Amelia said, trying to sound chipper. “And I’m sure it’ll be great working for him.” She steered the conversation to other things then—the new baby, how her niece was doing, what Rebecca was planning in terms of going

back to work once the next baby arrived—and an hour melted away lost in conversation.

She would have stayed there all afternoon if her brother hadn't needed to get back to the house. As Amelia headed for the hotel, she couldn't get the sick knot to unfurl in her gut.

Something about Josh just didn't sit right anymore.

She should be glad that she only had days left with him. Soon, she'd get her promotion and move into a new chapter in life.

So why didn't she feel more excited about it?

Back at the hotel room, Josh was bent over his laptop when she pushed inside. He immediately popped to his feet to greet her.

"There you are." He headed her way, pulling her into a hug. "Is it weird that I missed you?"

She couldn't relax in his arms. When he pulled away, concern creased his face. "Is everything okay?"

Amelia could only stare at him, unsure how to form the words that begged to be spoken. She had no right to feel the way she did. She was making a mountain out of a molehill. She and Josh were nothing. So why did it still *sting*?

"Why did you offer my brother a job doing the renovation work?"

Josh's mouth parted, like that had been the last thing he'd expected to hear. "Uh...because your brother works in construction and it makes sense?"

She sighed, walking past him. "Yeah, well, you did that without even talking to me first. And don't you think shit is gonna get weird once our fake engagement ends?"

Josh followed her into the bedroom where she set down her purse and pulled off her earrings. "Rob seems like a great guy. I was trying to be nice, helpful. He has another baby on the way. How is a work opportunity a bad idea?"

"It's not," she said, her voice clipped.

"Besides, it's the type of thing a brother-in-law would do."

“Yeah, except they’re my family—not yours.” She turned to him, hands on her hips. “You shouldn’t have done that without asking me first.”

Josh’s brows knit together. “I can see that I overstepped.” He paused, stepping closer. “Is there something else bothering you? You seem...”

“Watch what you say to me,” Amelia warned.

“Different. I don’t know. What’s up?”

She huffed, turning back toward the bed. Colin’s offer still weighed heavily on her, and she hadn’t decided whether it was a good idea to tell Josh. But the truth bubbled below the surface. Like it was planning an eruption, no matter what she decided.

“Colin made me an offer today,” she said quietly, unable to look him in the eye. “He wants to hire me to be a location scout for their East Coast expansion.”

Josh stepped closer, touching the side of her arm. “And you said no, right?”

She backed up, finally daring to meet his eyes. “I agreed to think about it.”

Josh’s blue gaze hardened into ice. “You *what?*”

“I was so shocked. When he asked me to think about it, I just nodded. I couldn’t even *believe* he had the balls to ask me that.”

Josh scoffed, raking a hand through his hair. “Wow. That’s rich. What do you want, Amelia? More money? I’m already paying you a fucking arm and a leg on this trip and giving you a promotion. Do you want me to sign over my stocks too? What is it?”

Betrayal shone through his words, and for a moment, Amelia could only watch him, shell-shocked. But she remembered then that she wasn’t the one in the wrong. She had simply been approached. She hadn’t accepted. Not like Josh would really care. He only saw her as the perfect assistant, anyway.

“Yeah. Keep it coming. I noticed you’re really good at giving people whatever the fuck they want,” she spat. She turned, storming to the bathroom. Before she shut the door, she leaned out and added, “You’ll buy off anyone as long as it gets you what you want.”

She locked the bathroom door behind her and turned the water on before he could come knocking or get in another word.

She needed to cool off. She needed to think.

She needed to get her head straight so she could survive the rest of this trip.

JOSH

The next day dragged on, frostier than ever, which had nothing to do with the weather. Amelia was distant with him only responding to work-related issues, which annoyed Josh. He couldn't stand the growing divide between them. He could fix this, if only she'd let him.

And he wanted to fix it. Because she mattered to him. Her opinion of him mattered. And he felt like she had it all wrong but she had steadfastly refused to talk about their argument.

That evening, they had caroling and a bonfire scheduled. It was one of the hotel's biggest holiday events, after the tree lighting, and the grounds were packed with carolers and spectators. Josh and Amelia wove through the crowd, winding down the brick path toward the grove of aspen trees where the singing would commence. Everything and everyone around him was festive and spirited.

Everyone except the woman on his arm.

Colin sauntered up to them, looking as smarmy as ever. Tension tightened Josh's muscles, and he tightened his grip on Amelia's hand.

"Josh. Amelia. Great to see you again." He grinned wide at the both of them, but his gaze zeroed in on Amelia. "Have you given any more thought to my proposal?"

Josh recoiled slightly. The nerve of this guy. In front of him, no less.

“You’re very nice to check in, but I’m still thinking about it,” Amelia said, laying on the sweetness. After Colin wandered off, Josh led her off to the side.

“Are you serious right now?”

“What?” she snapped, yanking her hand out of his. “Colin actually seems to value me, unlike you. Why shouldn’t I think about his offer?”

Josh narrowed his eyes. “Oh, cut the crap. I value you more than he does.”

“Do you though? He’s known me two days and wants to pay me more than you do.”

“I told you. Money is no issue.”

“You’re right,” she hissed. “It’s not. It’s just everything else that’s the issue.”

Josh’s nostrils flared. “Don’t convince yourself that Colin is some noble businessman who wants to offer you a job because he’s some sort of super fan. He’s not. He’s making a power play. I’ve seen this sort of thing before.”

“Whatever. Even if I’m a pawn in the game, he’s still willing to recognize my worth.”

Josh scoffed, real anger scorching through him. “Like I don’t? Amelia, you’ve been indispensable to me for two years now. I’ve never done anything but laud you.”

“But you would only agree to a promotion as a last-ditch effort to make a deal.”

Her words thudded between them, landing harder than a punch. He clenched his jaw. He couldn’t fight that. Because she was right, even though it wasn’t the whole story. At his silence, she continued.

“You only care about winning. I hesitate to imagine what might have happened if this hotel hadn’t gone up for sale. Would I still be stuck working for you? What if a position opened up that I was perfect for, would you allow me to take it or find some reason to force me to stay.”

“Amelia, don’t be like this,” Josh said quietly, trying to reel the conversation back into manageable territory. There was more on the line here than her work at Denton Hotels. This was about *them*, too, in some obscure way. About this amorphous future that every cell of his body craved with her without knowing how to get there. “You act like you would have languished for your entire life in my office. I haven’t been holding you back. And don’t delude yourself into thinking that I am.”

Amelia clamped her mouth shut and looked away, crossing her arms over her chest. Her foot tapped for a few moments before suddenly she said, “You know what? I’m not feeling very well. I think I’m going to head back to the suite.”

She brushed past him before he could say anything else. He watched her storm off, half of him determined to follow her and finish this conversation, once and for all.

But he needed to maintain his presence here. To run into Stan, to defend himself against any more of Colin’s advances.

And besides, maybe Amelia was right.

He did care about winning. It had always been the priority. But had he taken it too far?

Thoughts and doubts swirled inside him as he drifted through the caroling presentation. He clapped when everyone else did, tried to smile when others caught his eye. But without Amelia at his side—without her heat sinking into him or the soft sounds of her jokes in his ear—this festive event felt like just one more chore.

There was one thing for certain. He wanted Amelia in his life. Not only in a professional context, within arm’s reach at the office.

He wanted her at his side. His partner. His everything.

He needed to figure out a way to right the scales. Josh dipped out of the sweet harmonies of the carolers early so that he could wander inside the hotel. Lost in thought and combing through options. Every path led him back to Amelia. He’d been attracted to her since the day he met her. And as they

worked together, his admiration and respect bloomed even more.

This sexual dimension between them was the final layer in the cake that looked suspiciously like a long-term relationship. Which he believed they could create. And he wanted to. He wanted to give it a shot with Amelia, because everything was better with her at his side. In business and in love.

And the longer he wandered, the more he realized that there was only one path forward.

If he wanted to convince her that he was being real with her, then he needed to be real with everyone.

It was time to fess up. To Stan himself.

JOSH

After a restless night sleeping on the farthest reaches of the bed, Josh woke up with renewed vigor the following morning. Christmas Eve was three days away, which meant that Amelia would be breaking away today or the next day to begin her previously planned Christmas vacation with her family. He didn't have much time left—with her, or to convince the Lewises. Which meant he had to act *now*.

“What’s on deck today?” Amelia asked after she’d taken her shower and finished her makeup. She’d stopped changing in front of him, stopped sleeping naked. There were lots of drawbacks to their recent freeze, and one of the worst ones was not being able to spoon her naked body at night.

They’d only been intimate for a couple of days, and already he felt like he’d wither if he didn’t get her every day for the rest of his life.

“Well, I scheduled a last-minute meeting with Stan,” Josh said tentatively, taking out his phone to check the message thread. He crossed his ankle over his knee, leaning back in the armchair in the bedroom. Stan was on board but hadn’t confirmed the time yet. “You should be there.” He paused, weighing his words before he admitted his plan. “I’m going to tell him that we’re not engaged and that this was all a ruse to get him to pick me.”

Amelia blinked, turning to face him. Her face was a neutral mask, one he was desperate to break through. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I don’t want to win this hotel on a lie.” He cleared his throat, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I don’t want to lose you on a lie either.”

Amelia’s throat bobbed, and she turned toward the closet to slip her feet into her black heels. “So what’s your plan?”

“I’ll be honest with him. I don’t care if I lose the deal because of it. I’ll tell your parents the same, if you want me to. Because if he picks me, I don’t want the win to be stained by the fact that it was dishonest.”

Amelia was quiet for so long that he worried she hadn’t heard him. But that was impossible. There was so much more he wanted to add, too. About them. About a future. But he had to choose his words carefully.

His phone buzzed then. Stan had sent a text that simply said: *Now?*

“He’s ready. We should go down there.” He sighed and stood, recognizing the nervous flutters. He could be flushing all this hard work down the drain. Good thing his father wasn’t here to watch this. But Amelia’s opinion of him meant more than his dad’s disappointment. Because this thing between them promised to be something real...if only he could get the chance to cultivate it.

“And don’t worry about our arrangement,” Josh said, heading for the door. Amelia trailed close behind, the floral notes of her perfume hitting him in a nostalgic wave. She’d be gone from his life for good after the new year, unless he could convince her to take a chance on this. “I plan to pay you like we agreed. Nothing about that changes.”

“I wasn’t worried it would.” Amelia sniffed, clutching a small handbag against her thighs as they waited for the elevator. Josh drank her in, the oversized white sweater paired with shiny black leggings. Her work boot heels. The bright lipstick that always made him crave a kiss from that juicy pout. “But I appreciate that.”

“Amelia, haven’t you felt...” Josh paused when the doors slid open. They stepped inside and he jabbed his finger at the

ground floor button. “There’s something between us.”

She lifted a palm to stop him. “Let’s talk about it after, okay? Let’s let one thing go down in flames before you light something else on fire.”

He clenched and unclenched his jaw, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He wanted to scoop her up in his arms and kiss away the confusion of the past few days. But she was right. One thing at a time.

And the next thing on his list was winning over Amelia.

They started a somber walk to Stan’s office once the elevator hit the ground floor. He ushered them inside, gesturing to two open chairs facing his wide wooden desk. The bay windows overlooked a secret corner of the property. A side door led out to a little, snow-covered garden, and Josh was suddenly desperate to see what that alcove might look like in the spring. Could already imagine the rhododendron in bloom and the wisteria lining the brick path. And beyond the hidden garden, he could see in his mind’s eye the paths he used to walk with his mother. The rolling hills that had formed a part of his childhood memories and now even his adult memories, with Amelia at his side.

He wanted this property, for reasons that went way beyond just *winning*. It had been that way from the beginning, but if anything, Amelia’s dissent had caused him to look harder at why. She’d formed a new horizon of meaning for him. One that he wasn’t eager to let go of.

“Stan, I’m sorry for the abrupt meeting, but we need to talk.” Josh eased into his seat as did Amelia.

“Is everything okay?” Stan asked, lifting a brow.

Josh licked his lips, trying to recall the monologue he’d been practicing in the suite. “I haven’t been completely honest with you. Owning this resort is a dream of mine, but in my quest to...for lack of a better word, *woo* you, I asked my assistant Amelia to pretend to be my fiancée.”

Stan’s eyes slowly narrowed as Josh spoke, which sent his stomach plummeting to his toes.

“I thought that if I came as a family man, you might be more inclined to choose me. Amelia is every bit as amazing and accomplished as you think she is, and you should know that this was my idea. I asked her to be a part of my ruse. And I wouldn’t feel good knowing that you chose me based on a lie.”

Stan’s gaze shifted to Amelia, who only grimaced in response.

Josh pushed ahead. “As I’ve told you before, my interest in this hotel is sparked by the amazing memories I have of being here with my mother. With my family. That much was true. But my mother raised me better than to accept an ill-gotten gain, so I had to come clean with you. I’m sorry for misleading you, and I understand if you decide to go with Colin.” The air went out of him, and he collapsed back into the chair, bracing himself for whatever came next.

Stan blinked, looking between the two of them. His face was an impassive mask, until suddenly he barked out a sharp laugh.

“Well! That was the last thing I was expecting to hear today.”

Josh pushed two fingers back and forth over his hairline, his entire body on pins and needles waiting for more from Stan.

“Honestly...what can I say?” Stan leaned back in his own chair and steepled his fingers. A strange smile curled at his lips. “I’m quite impressed that you decided to come clean with me.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” Josh said, clearing his throat. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t.”

“You know, I was planning to find you later today anyway,” Stan said. “To let you know that I’d finally made my decision. And that I wanted Denton Hotels to be the new owner.”

Josh’s stomach cinched, awaiting the final blow.

“But now I’m even more certain of my decision,” Stan went on. “Admitting something like this takes a level of honesty and reflection that isn’t often seen in today’s world.” Stan’s smile curled even larger. “In fact, you’ve made me even more certain in my decision to choose Denton Hotels.”

Josh's eyes widened. This couldn't be real. With such a sordid confession, he'd been one hundred percent ready to accept the defeat he knew was coming.

He hadn't even planned for a response like this. Hadn't even thought it possible.

"Are you...sure?" Josh couldn't keep the disbelief from his voice.

"Oh, yes. Believe me, there are plenty of others I could pick for the new ownership. But none fully understand the vision of this place. Nobody else has the history with it. I have my own qualms about Forest Family's offer and to be honest, given your recent confession, I have my doubts about Colin's family."

Josh waved his hands to stop Stan. "I can say with certainty that really is his wife and kids, but this is the first time I've ever seen them all together."

"And right there, young man, you've just proved my point that you're the best man for the job, Josh. Even if you got a little caught up along the way."

Josh surged to his feet to offer his hand. Relief and excitement vibrated through him, and he wanted to kiss the man's feet. Stan stood as well to shake his hand, and Josh thanked him no less than five times as he wrapped up the meeting. Amelia looked just as surprised and happy as he felt, and once they were back in the lobby, he turned to her with wide eyes.

"I can't believe that happened."

She grinned at him. "I'm glad it did. Look at you, Mr. Cedar Grove Hotel Owner!"

He pulled her into a hug, and this time she didn't resist. All the frostiness between them over the past few days had thankfully melted. For now. But he needed to make sure it stayed that way.

"Let's go celebrate," Josh blurted. Her smile fell slightly.

"Where?"

“The bar. Right now. They have an eighteen-year-old Macallan on the menu. It’s my tradition.” He grabbed her hand and brought her knuckles to his lips. “And besides, the vacation has officially begun.”

This win was his in to Amelia again. And he wasn’t going to let it slip by.

AMELIA

Two glasses into their celebrations, and Amelia's body was buzzing with more than alcohol.

It was only noon, and she'd hit her limit for so early in the day. But even the minimal amount of alcohol had eroded the happiness of Stan's decision, leading her right back into the cyclone of doubts that had been plaguing her over the past few days.

She admired Josh's confession. She really did. But she was hesitant to accept it at face value.

Because what if this was another power play? What if this was Josh's attempt to make sure he didn't lose her to the competition?

Josh sighed, slapping his palms against the wooden bar top. "God, it feels good to be alive."

She smirked. "Says the most victorious man in the world."

"Yeah, but I don't quite have it all." Josh pushed his empty glass away. "Can we talk about us now?"

Her stomach shrank. She was hesitant to go there, but she didn't know why. Having these doubts about Josh felt like a betrayal to the man she'd secretly been in love with for the past two years. Like the real Josh wasn't as perfect as the version she'd created in her head. She didn't fully believe he was manipulating their time together. But she couldn't be certain.

“Go for it,” she said, also pushing her glass away. At least the Scotch would lubricate things slightly. It had taken the edge off her hesitation. It was just them in the bar and the bartender at the far end washing glasses. This was as good a time as any to dive into this sticky situation.

He turned to her on the bar stool, opening up his legs. He jerked her stool toward him, the legs scraping against the floor. She laughed a little, and his hands encircled her waist.

“This,” he said in a low voice, his eyes hooded. “I want this. With you.”

“You want me half-drunk in a bar three days before Christmas?” she teased, only because she didn’t know how else to move forward.

His jaw flexed. “Don’t play coy. We’ve got chemistry, MacTaggart, and I know you feel it too. I fucked up, but I want to make things right. Amelia, I want to be with you.”

His words were a balm to the slashes he’d caused inside her. And God, she wanted to fall headfirst into his words. Into his promises. Into this dreamy future that could be theirs if only she could shake her doubts.

“I...could want that too,” she said carefully, trying to walk that fine line between shitting all over his idea and being honest with herself. “I don’t want to play games anymore. I’ve learned a lot about you during this trip, Josh.” She laughed. “More than I expected, I’ll be honest.”

Josh’s gaze swept over her body, his hands coming to rest on her hips. And with his heat pouring into her, the reassuring firmness of his touch, the scent of him that filled her and sent her into a spiral...it was hard to want to pull away.

But these doubts were real. And she needed to be certain that she was making the right choice with Josh. That she wasn’t being used as a pawn in his game.

“I’m not playing games,” he insisted quietly.

“Honestly?” She licked her lips. Willing herself to say the words. “I need some time.”

He deflated a little. “How much?”

“I’m going to my parents’ house like I planned,” she said deliberately, allowing time for the plan to form in her head as she spoke. “And you planned on heading home to celebrate Christmas with your own family. So I think we should spend the holidays apart.”

His jaw flexed again. “Amelia.”

“I need some time by myself,” she said, running her thumb over the bone in his wrist. The heat she felt even there made her eyelids flutter. God, she wanted endless nights with this man. She wanted all the happiness and bliss she’d felt earlier in the week. But she wanted it only if it was real. “You make it hard for me to think. Because I see you, and I want you. I’m not going to lie. What you’re asking for is...big. It’ll change both our lives. Being in a relationship. And I just...” She trailed off. “I want to be sure.”

Josh surged forward, cupping her face before snagging her lips in a passionate kiss. She whimpered, receiving his lips hungrily. After days without a kiss from him, without feeling his touch, she was starved for him. Heat stormed her as they kissed again and again, only breaking when she needed to take a gulp of air.

“Jesus,” she muttered. Josh pressed his forehead against hers.

“Meelie,” he started, which made her laugh. She swatted his shoulder.

“That horrible nickname needs to die,” she warned.

“Fine,” he said, brushing his nose against hers. “But only if you give me a chance.”

Her stomach tightened—a signal she needed to retreat. “I think I’m going to go get my stuff packed and head to my parents’ house. Shit. We came in my car.”

Josh wet his bottom lip and watched her for a moment before nodding. “Okay. Yeah. Of course. And don’t worry about it. I’ll arrange for a car.”

She lingered there, facing him on the stool, hesitant to leave the intimate cocoon they'd created at the bar. But she steeled herself and scooted away.

"I'm not going with you because I'll just make sure you don't leave," Josh said, squeezing her hand.

It was thoughtful and respectful in a way, which made her smile. Because if she didn't leave now, she might never.

Leaning toward him, she lightly brushed her lips across his before jumping off the stool and heading back to their suite without another word.



Amelia made quick work of packing her things, stopping no less than four times to sit on the bed and reconsider her decision. But this was for the best. Because she needed to clear her head. Because she needed to be sure.

When she arrived at her parents' house that afternoon, both her parents were shocked that she'd come without Josh. In fact, when she sat them down at the table to reveal the truth, they insisted they wait for Josh before she told them her "big news."

"No, Mom," Amelia said, sighing. "The big news has to do with why Josh isn't here."

"What's going on?" her dad asked. "Did he have to go back to New York City?"

Amelia worked her jaw back and forth as she stared at the familiar wood grain of the dining room table. "I'm not sure actually. He has separate plans for Christmas."

Her mom frowned, and regret flashed through Amelia. "I thought he was going to be spending it here with us."

"No. Actually, that was never the plan." She tapped her thumbs against the dining room table. What a stupid position she was in...all because of Josh. "This isn't the best thing to hear but...Josh and I, well, we were never actually engaged."

Mom's frown deepened. "What?"

"We were faking it. It was part of his bid to win the Cedar Grove Hotel. But I've been secretly in love with him for...a long time. Without even realizing it. And we started to fall for each other on this trip. And he came clean about the ruse, except now he wants to be with me, and it's just..." She groaned. "It's a big, stupid Christmas mess, and I need some time away from him so I can *think*."

Her parents shared a look. Her mother reached out and squeezed her hand.

"I'm sorry to hear all this, honey. We really liked him."

"Can we still like him or does that need to change?" her dad asked.

Amelia laughed, surprised to find her throat tight with emotion. "I still like him. So, you can too."

They chatted a bit longer about Josh, how he'd still gotten the hotel despite starting the bid with a lie. By the time they'd been caught up on the turn of events, Amelia felt depleted and ready for a nap.

After all, her vacation was officially starting. She'd just assumed she might be more ready to kick back and relax and leave work behind.

But work was at the forefront more than ever. And she wouldn't be able to truly rest until she explored her options to the fullest extent.

Which meant paying Colin Forest a visit to find out if he truly was interested in hiring her or if it was nothing more than a powerplay like Josh had warned her.

JOSH

While Josh counted the minutes of his agreement to give Amelia time away to *think*, his father decided to fly to Cedar Grove personally to celebrate Josh's victory.

He arrived via private helicopter—his favorite mode of transportation—at a small, not-often-used helipad tucked away at the back of the Cedar Grove property. Plenty of people came out to witness the surprise arrival, including Stan himself. Josh stood back and watched as his father came out of the helicopter, waving at everyone like the damn president himself.

Mitchell Denton Senior was all smiles as he headed for Josh, his salt and pepper hair moving in the draft from the slowly chopping blades.

“Son! Merry Christmas!” Mitchell barked, hugging him briefly. Josh led him toward the small group of people gathered.

“Stan, please meet my father, Mitchell Denton.”

“What a pleasure.” Stan shook his dad's hand vigorously, looking at him as if he were meeting a celebrity. “I've long been an admirer of your chain of hotels. This is an honor.”

“We're happy to have your stunning property on board.” The three of them began a brisk walk back to the hotel. The path was powdered with snow that had fallen while they'd been waiting for the helicopter. “I'm sure Josh has told you what a special place Cedar Grove holds in our hearts.”

“Absolutely,” Stan said, and the two of them fell into a conversation about winter memories. Josh followed them on the path, thinking instead about Amelia. She’d been at her parents’ house for twenty-four hours, and it felt more like an entire week. This wasn’t a good sign.

Inside the hotel, after sending Stan off with a handshake, Josh led his father to the restaurant, where they’d planned to celebrate.

“Boy, I’m so proud of you. You really pulled it off.” His father adjusted his glasses, taking them off to inspect the lenses. “Let’s get one of everything to celebrate. And a shot of everything behind the bar.”

Josh laughed, unfolding his napkin over his lap. That was always the way his father proposed celebrations: with excess. If his arrival in a private helicopter wasn’t a good indication of his father’s tastes, then nothing was.

“I’ll definitely take one of every dessert,” Josh cracked, looking over the menu. The murmur of the conversations around him drew his attention, and he let his gaze drift around the restaurant. All he could think of was Amelia. And in so little time, even this place—where they’d dined a handful of times—had become linked with her.

The entire property now had her memory associated with it. Just like his mother. It seemed like a sign. That Amelia might really be the one.

“Josh?” His father looked at him with an arched brow.

He came to attention, realizing he’d missed what his father was saying. “What’s that?”

“You drifted off.” His father cleared his throat, lowering his own menu. “I said Mitch won’t be joining us this year.”

“Why not?” This didn’t surprise him though. His older brother was as much of a workaholic as the rest of them.

“He’s spending Christmas elsewhere. He didn’t exactly explain. When will you be coming back to the city?”

They had plans to celebrate Christmas together, but driving away from Cedar Grove during this tenuous time with Amelia seemed unwise. He didn't want to leave, because if he did, he feared he might never see her again.

"In a few days, unless...something comes up," he said cryptically, sipping his water. His dad searched out his son's gaze.

"Boy, what's going on here? We're supposed to be celebrating, but instead you're sulking like you didn't pull off the greatest acquisition of the year."

His father's words warmed him some, but they couldn't get past the deep freeze of Amelia wanting to leave.

"I'm happy. I am. Just having some...interpersonal problems, let's say."

His dad grunted. "Lady problems?"

Josh deflated slightly. "Yeah. You could say that."

But he didn't want to get into it, not now. Not when he was supposed to be happy. Because if he got into it again, he'd travel that same dark road that he'd been traveling the last twenty-four hours: toward the suspicion that Amelia was using the time away to figure out how to tell him, "Sorry, but no."

He and his father had a decent dinner, and by the time Mitchell was ready to fly back to the city, he'd managed to weasel a few more details out of Josh.

"Listen," his dad said as he shrugged on his long, wool coat in the lobby. "If you miss her so much, make sure she knows it."

"She said she needs some time apart."

"Yeah, and maybe she does. But that doesn't mean you can't reach out. Remind her why she fell for you in the first place. You know, one time in the beginning with your mom, I did something to piss her off real bad. I mean, she got *hot*. So what did I do? I didn't bring her flowers. Hell, no. Instead, I went to her daddy's house and told her parents how I'd messed up. Told them that I loved her. And asked for her hand in marriage on the spot."

Josh laughed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Dad, I don’t think that’s gonna work this time.”

“Well, it’s an idea.” He pulled Josh into a gruff hug before slapping his back. “I know I’m not good at showing it, but I’m proud of you, son. Both you and your brother. And I can’t stand seeing you mope like some lovesick teenager. So do something about it.”

Josh waved his dad off before wandering back to his suite, his morose gaze falling over everything with a sense of something lacking. This hotel, the suite, hell, even his future—all of it looked better with Amelia in the picture.

Maybe his dad wasn’t entirely off base with that story about his mom. He might not ask for Amelia’s hand in marriage, but he might do well to show up at her parents’ house and offer up even more of himself and his pride.

Because one thing was for certain. He wanted Amelia. Nobody else came close to making him feel this way. Never before and probably never again.

He’d give her one more day.

And then if by Christmas Eve, he hadn’t heard from her?

He’d be paying her parents a visit.

AMELIA

Amelia darted down Main Street at noon the day before Christmas Eve, feeling a lot like a thief on the run.

She didn't want to be seen. Not by anyone. Because every inch of her crawled at the thought of what she was on her way to do. But she needed to know the truth.

Did Colin Forest want to hire her for her skills or because he wanted to pull her away from Josh in some frustrating corporate power move that was never about her?

She'd taken a position at Denton Hotels right out of college and she'd been content to grow within the company, but after Colin had pressed his business card into her hand, she'd been plagued with what-ifs. What if there was a better opportunity out there? One where she could be on an even playing field with Josh career-wise? Obviously it wouldn't happen right away, but if Forest Hotels was expanding into new markets, it would be a great stepping stone for her.

Assuming it wasn't all BS. She needed to know.

Amelia walked into the downtown diner. The scent of burgers and coffee filled the air, and she immediately spotted Colin tucked into a booth in the far corner, his nose in his phone. He looked up as she approached and set his phone down on the table as she slid into the red high-backed booth, breathing heavily.

"Hi there." She tucked some hair behind her ears, drawing a deep breath. "Wow. I feel like I ran a mile or am betraying the person I'm closest to in the entire world. Maybe it's both."

Colin's cool smile didn't waver. "Betrayal is a strong word. Josh would understand if you took a competitor's offer based on sheer practicality. We pay more and offer better benefits, because we're a company that still values morality over corporate-level profits."

Amelia smiled up at a waitress who stopped by to offer a menu and a glass of water. "Just coffee, please." She handed the menu back.

"And furthermore, we don't ask our employees to lie. For any reason." Colin offered a small smile. "I heard about what happened with the Cedar Grove deal. I'm shocked Stan Lewis chose to reward that style of business negotiation, but I'm sure there was some sort of kickback engineered that I'm unaware of."

Amelia frowned. There had been no kickback. And Colin clearly missed the memo about Josh coming forward to admit his deception. But defending him right now was beside the point. She was here for the potential job.

"I can't imagine what would compel a man to lie like that to begin with," Colin went on, sounding more and more self-righteous. He sniffed, sipping his coffee. "You can rest assured that our deals are never underhanded."

"His mother," she blurted and then realized she'd spoken without meaning to. She cleared her throat, heat creeping up her neck. "He, uh...he has an attachment to the hotel because of his mother." She wouldn't say more, so she just offered a wan smile.

"Assuming that's the truth."

Self-righteousness was slowly building inside her as he dismissed her comment. "How are your wife and kids?" she asked him as she took a sip of too-hot coffee.

"Pardon?"

"When we had brunch the other morning, you'd mentioned that your youngest wasn't feeling well. But then we never saw any of them again. Are they okay?"

Anger flashed across his face before he masked it. “Sophie thought it would be a good idea to take the kids to Hawaii for the holidays. My oldest wants to learn to surf.” His knuckles turned white where he was squeezing his coffee mug.

Amelia felt guilty for poking at him because clearly there were problems that he was trying to hide. Before she could apologize, he launched into a rundown of the position he was offering: junior-level location scout for the newest New England division. She would remain based in NYC, working from home most of the time, with only occasional trips to Chicago required. The bulk of her work would be scouting new property listings online and assessing them for feasibility in long, complicated reports. The more Colin explained the job, the more she realized it sounded similar to what she was doing already.

Just a better pay level, with a more impressive title and the only travel she would be doing was limited to the area, returning home at night.

After Colin had gone through all the major selling points of the offer, he waggled his eyebrows at her over his mug. “So? What do you think? We can verbally commit here and now with a contract to follow. I don’t even care that tomorrow is Christmas Eve—I can have it in your inbox by tomorrow morning.”

The man seemed almost *too* eager to hire her and Josh’s words came back to her. *Power play*. At first she’d thought that Josh wanting to keep her on had been all about him not wanting to lose to Colin. But now? She sensed the same coming from Colin. That poaching her from Denton Hotels was an ego play.

Besides, Colin’s attitude about what Josh had done was way too much like the pot calling the kettle black, given that his wife and kids were off to Hawaii the moment Colin found out the Lewises went with Denton Hotels.

“I appreciate you meeting with me,” she said, sipping her coffee. She hadn’t wanted to trap herself here for an entire meal, especially if things went south. And now, she was grateful.

Because she wanted to get away from Colin.

“Do you have any questions?”

“No, I think I’ve heard everything that I need to hear. If you’ll excuse me.” She offered a smile as she scooted out of the booth.

Colin froze, staring at her. “So do we have a deal? We have a lot of fun at Forest Family Hotels. You won’t regret coming to join us.”

Amelia had a sinking suspicion that she would. Shouldering her purse, she squeezed the strap. “Here’s the thing, Mr. Forest. Other than the bump in pay, you’re not offering me anything I don’t already do now. Except I do it at a company I love working for. And while Josh might not have been truthful with the Lewises initially, you haven’t been either.” She started to walk away but then stopped and turned back around. “You know, if you truly are a family company, maybe instead of sitting in this diner trying to get one over on Josh, you should be on a flight to Hawaii to spend Christmas with your actual family.” She hurried out of the diner, gulping down the fresh air once she hit the cold day outside. As she walked down the sidewalk, hands jammed into her pockets, she added a bounce to her step.

She hadn’t intended to tell Colin Forest off, but his high and mighty response to her and Josh pretending to be engaged had pushed her too far. Yes, they were wrong to do it, but Josh had come clean and still got the deal. That said something for the caliber of man Josh was and Denton Hotels’ integrity as a company.

By the time she’d made it back to her parents’ house, her earlier elation had worn off and her heart felt heavy. Nothing felt right. And the more time dragged on, the more she wanted Josh.

There weren’t many days left until everything changed. She knew Josh would make good on his promise of a promotion. And yes, she was excited for that. But she didn’t want to go back to Denton Hotels without knowing that she and Josh still had a chance.

He wanted to try something with her. His words at the bar haunted her, were often the first thing she thought of when she woke up. Josh was right—their chemistry was real, and it was intense.

She'd be making a huge mistake not to act on it.

When her mom came into the front hall to greet her, the sight of her made emotion well. Fighting tears, Amelia said, "I think I made a mistake."

"What is it, honey?"

"Josh. I told him we should spend some time apart, but now I realize I was wrong, and he's back in New York, and I want him *here*." She stomped her foot, feeling every bit like a whiny little girl.

"Oh, honey." Her mom swept forward and wrapped her in a hug. "You did the right thing by asking for your space. And it's okay if you don't want it anymore."

"Maybe I can drive—"

Her mom held up a finger in a sharp but silent rebuke.

"None of that talk. There's a snowstorm on the way, and you are not missing Christmas with the family. We don't get enough of you as it is. If you go back to the city today, we won't see you until the Fourth of July."

Amelia sighed, knowing her mother was completely right. "Fine. I'll stay. But I'm going to act like a heartsick little girl until I figure out what I want to say to him."

"That's fine," her mother said, squeezing the sides of her arms. "Now let's go have some potato salad."

AMELIA

On Christmas Eve morning, Amelia awoke with a start in her childhood bedroom. Gray light filtered past the white curtains, and she looked around for a few moments, trying to get her bearings.

She'd been dreaming. That much was sure. But something else had stirred her to consciousness. She yawned, stretching. The clock on the nightstand read 8:15. This was the definition of sleeping in. As she turned over, enjoying more of the warmth of her bed, she picked up a bass undertone from a conversation downstairs.

Her eyes shot open, and she lifted her head a little, listening as hard as she could.

Her mother laughed.

More bass.

Parts of her dream came back to her. Josh had been there, speaking to her. She couldn't hear him in her dream though. It was like he was too far away or mumbling or something. She pushed up onto a hand as the voice continued, and then she could hear the tones of her father's voice.

Someone was here, that much was certain. But who?

It's probably just a neighbor or Rob. She rolled out of bed, tugging on clothes as she did. It was ridiculous to hope that it was Josh and even stupider to think that her dream had somehow been right.

She continued listening as she headed toward the bathroom. Searching out sounds of a toddler shriek—which would signal Rob and Rebecca—or the notable guffaw of their elderly neighbor, Mr. Jones.

None of that.

In fact, now? Total silence.

Still, Amelia hurried to wash her face and brush her teeth. When she headed downstairs, she noticed a foreign pair of shoes by the door.

Black leather boots. And very expensive looking.

She swallowed a knot in her throat as she walked down the hall. Nobody in the kitchen. As she rounded the corner into the living room, the sight there about stopped her heart.

Josh sat on a couch, facing both of her parents on the adjacent sofa. He had a grin a mile wide on his face, and when he spotted her his entire face lit up.

The way her heart started racing told her everything she needed to know. Tears immediately came to her eyes, and she drifted into the living room, unable to speak.

“Wh—”

“Oh, honey!” Her mother twisted around to see her. “Good morning! Your Christmas Eve surprise is here!”

Josh was off the couch a second later, making big, confident strides toward her. He was dressed in slacks and a button-down, his brown hair expertly styled and sexy. The second those icy blue eyes found hers, the strength in her legs disappeared. The intensity of his attention was enough to knock her over.

“Amelia,” he breathed as he wrapped her in a hug. She clung to him, wonder and disbelief cycling through her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, pushing against his chest so she could look up at him. To make sure he was real. “I thought you went home.”

He shook his head, running his fingers along the shell of her ear. “I was going to, but I didn’t want to leave you. Even though you wanted some time. I hope a few days was enough because that’s all I could manage.”

“Awww,” her mom cooed from the couch.

“Why didn’t either of you come to wake me up?” she demanded, peering around the gorgeous wall of man in front of her.

“We were talking!” her mom insisted.

“Your boyfriend here wanted to make sure we were all clear about what happened at the hotel,” her dad added.

Amelia couldn’t fight the smile. She narrowed her eyes at Josh. “My boyfriend, huh?”

“Their words, not mine.” He slid a hand along the slope of her waist, down over the small of her back, cinching her closer. “But I’m not opposed to the title.”

“I might have told him about our conversation last night,” her mother quipped.

Amelia dissolved into laughter, burying her face in his chest. She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed as tightly as she could. “Oh jeez, Mom!”

“Don’t worry. She only spilled most of your secrets,” Josh said, his breath hot at her ear. “Can we get out of here? I need to take you somewhere.”

She nodded, propping her chin against his chest. “Where?”

His sweet smile only grew bigger, white teeth against those lips that she wanted to feel against her own for the rest of time. “Go get changed and you’ll find out.”

Amelia raced upstairs faster than a kid toward Christmas day presents, and nearly toppled three times in her rush to put real clothes on. She’d managed to pull on a black sweater with skinny jeans, and in the bathroom she brushed on only minimal foundation and mascara. Downstairs, she was tugging on her black snow boots when Josh strolled out into the hallway.

“I’m almost ready,” she said, hopping on one foot as she struggled to pull on the left boot.

He smirked, slipping his boots on, and lifted his jacket off the hook by the door. Once her boots were on, he opened the front door.

“You got a rental,” she said, sliding into the front seat. She stroked the armrest as if it were the most unique and beautiful thing in the world. He could have brought a combine to pick her up in. She was just so damn happy to see him, to be near him. It was like a year had passed instead of three days.

And she never wanted that much time to go by without seeing him again. Because even when they were strictly colleagues, she’d seen him five—sometimes six—days a week.

They had a long history of seeing each other all the damn time. And now, she wanted to make sure they saw each other even more. Daily. Hourly. Waking up in the same bed. Going to sleep lost in each other’s embrace.

“So where are we going?” She laced her hand through his as he drove. He maintained that mysterious smirk and clucked his tongue.

“Can’t say. Sorry.”

“Are we going to the New Owner’s Suite at the Resort?” she asked.

“No further information at this time,” he said.

“Or maybe you’re stealing me back to New York?”

His smile stretched wider. “Keep trying.”

“Oh! I know. We’re heading back to Denton Headquarters for one last run as boss and assistant. I missed you and I’m totally down for a little roleplay.”

A laugh erupted from him, his white teeth glinting in the early morning light. “I like all these wrong answers. Keep going.”

“You’re taking me to a different hotel that we can rent by the hour just so we can take all these clothes off and celebrate Christmas Eve on our own?”

“Hmmm.” He squeezed her hand as he pulled onto Main Street. “Now I like that idea. We might have a change of plans.”

Amelia looked around as he pulled into a parking spot downtown. Wreaths hung from every lamp post, and ornaments dotted the well-manicured bushes outside the coffee shop.

“Okay. I’ll bite. Where are we going?”

Josh didn’t say anything but instead offered his arm. She took it and walked alongside him, staring up at him in wonder.

“I’m still not certain this isn’t a dream.”

“If it was a dream,” Josh said, looking down at her, “would you be able to feel this?” He dipped down and pressed his lips to hers, cupping her face between his hands. She pushed up onto her tiptoes, deepening the kiss, clutching at him as if he might disappear if she didn’t hang on tight.

When they broke for air, she felt like she could float into outer space.

“No more of that here,” Josh said, leading her farther down the sidewalk. “Not until we reach our destination.”

She giggled. Which only proved this man was for her. She was back to giggling. “Our destination. How mysterious.”

He rounded the corner onto Jackson Street, and that’s when the horse-drawn carriage came into view. She sucked in a breath, and the way his smile gleamed only proved that the carriage was their destination.

“Shut up,” she said, though he had said nothing.

“Come on.” He tightened his arm around her. “We have a very important date with this horse.”

“A Christmas Eve horse-drawn carriage ride!” She laughed into her palm as they approached the driver, who talked to Josh like he’d been expecting them. Josh helped her inside first and then followed. They settled back into the ultra-comfy leather seat tucked into the gilded red and silver wooden carriage. Josh pulled a heavy wool blanket over their laps.

Once they lurched forward, one majestic chestnut horse pulling them, Amelia turned to him.

“Now that we’ve reached our destination, can we make out like teenagers?”

In lieu of a response, Josh surged forward, his warm lips claiming hers. They kissed as the horse clip-clopped down the street, then turned down a pine-lined avenue leading out of town.

“I haven’t even had a chance to explain anything,” Josh said, running his thumb over her temple once they’d broken for air.

“Oh. Sorry.” She brushed her nose against his. “Go ahead.”

He wet his bottom lip, eyeing her hungrily. “Maybe I don’t want to now.”

He dove in for more kisses, which she accepted eagerly. The feel of his lips against hers satisfied something she couldn’t define, much less understand. Like no matter where life might take them, Josh would always be the one for her.

The carriage took a turn up a gentle incline. The downtown scene slowly transformed into trees and untouched woods. He kept his arm tight around her.

“This is so beautiful,” she whispered to him. “I’ve never done this before, even though the carriage is always here during the holidays.”

“So you don’t even know that this isn’t the normal route?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Nope. Had no idea.”

“I paid off the driver. He’s taking us someplace off the beaten path.”

Amelia nestled into his side, and the two of them enjoyed the scenery as they wound deeper into the woods. After about a half mile, the driver hung a right onto a heavily wooded property. A single-lane wound through the trees. Tiny snowflakes started falling as soon as they crested the new path. As if God himself knew that they were entering the romantic phase of the trip.

“Do you know where we are right now?” he asked, once they’d gotten a little lost in the woods around them.

“Definitely not.”

“We’re on the Cedar Grove Hotel property.”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“I like that I’m showing you new things in your own hometown.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “My mom would love it too.”

Amelia buried her face in his chest.

“That’s why we’re coming to this spot specifically. Because it was my mom’s favorite spot on the entire property.” The end of the path was in sight, and the driver slowed the horse as they came upon an outlook.

Sprawling in front of them, for miles and miles, was pure, untouched nature. Bare trees stretched as far as the eye could see, a small river cutting through the expanse. Josh sighed softly as he looked at it.

“She always liked coming here in winter,” he said slowly, “because she said you could see the Earth’s secrets that way.”

Amelia blinked, emotion tightening her throat. Whenever he talked about his mom, this happened.

“My mom grew up in a small town, and she always wanted her sons to appreciate the joys of nature, even though we lived in the city. She never wanted us to lack that heart that comes from having a tight-knit community.” He paused, turning to look at her. “And that’s what I love about you. You have a big-city spirit, but you’re from here. And it shows. You have a small-town heart and you somehow manage to stay grounded. And you help me stay grounded.”

Tears were welling in her eyes now, and her voice had totally disappeared.

“You’re amazing, Amelia,” he whispered, brushing his nose against hers. “I’m sorry I tried to hold you back. I was being selfish. From the beginning, I wanted you for myself, but I

didn't realize it at the time. But I don't want to promote you anymore."

She blinked, confusion breaking through the overwhelming emotion. "What?"

"You can still have it if you want," Josh started, that mysterious smile returning to his face. "But I want more for you. I called a friend who works in the Urban Planning Department at Grayson International Development, the sustainable development policy think tank, and told him all about you. Your skills, your smarts. I told him how perfect you'd be for the position of Manager of Global Research and Strategic Planning that just opened up. You have an interview in January if you want it."

Amelia's mouth hung open, and she could only stare at him.

"The job would involve a lot of travel around the world," Josh went on, his grin turning mischievous. Like he knew just how perfect this opportunity was for her. "Making recommendations based on your research and findings. I don't know. Sound like something you might be interested in?"

Amelia started laughing then. Deep, belly laughing. This was almost too good to be true.

But it wasn't. It was her reality. Her new reality, with Josh at her side.

"I love you," she murmured, melting into him, her lips landing on his.

"You beat me to the punch," Josh said through their kiss. "That was going to be my next point." He grinned once he broke the kiss, holding her chin between thumb and forefinger. "Amelia, I love you. And please say you'll be mine."

"I have been," she murmured, resting her head on his chest. "Since I started working for you. Except neither of us knew it."

Josh pressed a kiss to the top of her head, and they watched as the snow fell over the bare trees in the valley.

This was the best Christmas of her entire life.

EPILOGUE

FIVE MONTHS LATER

“Over there!” Josh barked out the command, pointing to an unfinished mound of landscaping near the hotel. “This one needs to happen first. Then we can start the last cul-de-sac.”

Amelia laughed to herself, trying to keep her heels from clicking too loudly on the brick path. She’d flown in that morning from France, where she’d been working for the past week. Her new job was the dream she knew it would be, and the past few months had flown by in a challenging but amazing haze.

She’d been worried when she first started traveling. Worried about the strain it would put on their relationship given how new it was. Worried that Josh would grow frustrated with so much time apart, but he’d been nothing but supportive. She loved her new job at Grayson, and her director had told her that once things settled down, her travel schedule would become easier, with more time spent in the home office or working remotely, if she preferred, since most of her meetings were held via Zoom anyway.

Josh had taken to working remotely, often flying out to meet her, no matter where she was in the world, so they could spend time together.

And now she had flown to Cedar Grove to surprise *him*.

Once she was within arm’s reach, she hurried forward, throwing her arm around him. Josh stiffened, but gasped once

he realized she was there. Laughter whooped out of him as he pulled her into his arms, as if they hadn't just seen each other five days ago in Paris.

"Meelie!" He still used that nickname sometimes, but it didn't bother her as much. "What are you doing here?"

"Wanted to drop in on my favorite head gardener." She grinned up at him, propping her chin against the plain gray T-shirt he wore. It was only mid-May, but it felt like summer already. She knew Josh had been working hard to get things renovated and ready for the upcoming busy holiday season. He'd adopted the Cedar Grove property as his pet project, even though he could have outsourced it to one of about a dozen employees.

"Aww, babe," he murmured, lifting his sunglasses. She melted against him once she could look into his baby blues. She might never tire of looking at this man. Of getting lost in his gaze.

"You smell like the fresh outdoors and manly sweat," she said, squeezing her arms tighter around his waist. "You got a room we could use real quick?"

He laughed, looking around. "I've got about thirty or so at our disposal. Which is perfect, because I wanted you to see the newest renovations."

They walked hand in hand toward the hotel, Josh gazing down at her.

"God damn, I missed you," he murmured, bringing the back of her hand to his lips.

"Me too." She rested her head against his shoulder as they walked inside the hotel. He led her past the ballroom, which had been renamed The Amelia Room in her honor. Then to the top floor, where all the suites were. He slid a keycard into room 515, which had been their suite the first time they'd stayed here together.

"Wooooow," Amelia breathed as she checked out the newest changes. He'd updated the carpet and removed the wood paneling. The bathrooms were being overhauled with raindrop shower heads and lots of stony-looking tiles.

“Your brother has been a huge help,” Josh said, leaning against the doorframe as she checked out the bedroom. “He’s already been promoted once.”

Amelia beamed over at him, feeling the rush of love and passion fill her, as it often did when she looked at this man. “I’m so happy to hear that.”

“But there’s one more big thing,” Josh said, straightening suddenly. He led her over to the bay window overlooking the back of the property. Together they looked out the window, until Amelia noticed he’d started breathing faster.

“Josh—” she started, unsure if he was okay.

He suddenly dropped to one knee, taking her hand in his. He pressed kisses to the back of her hand as Amelia stared in wonder.

“Babe—” He fished a tiny black box out of his pocket. “This is where it all began. Your hometown. This special property that means so much to the both of us. But it also began right *here*. Room 515.” He grinned, then popped open the ring box. A gasp ripped out of her as she saw the enormous diamond waiting there.

This was an engagement ring—no question. Tears immediately came to her eyes, and she clamped a hand over her mouth.

“I’d been thinking about what ring I’d get you since Christmas, and when I saw this ring in the window of an amazing little jewelry store in Paris, I knew it was the one. I picked it up just this morning after having it sized locally. Originally, I’d planned to propose next Christmas, to make it sentimental and all, but dammit, I can’t wait any longer. Amelia, my love. I want to travel the world with you, love you, and grow old with you until the day we die. Will you marry me?”

A laugh rocketed out of her, and she jumped up and down a couple of times, squealing. “Yes! Of course! Yes!”

Josh surged to his feet, his lips against hers faster than the first tear could spill from her eyes. The tenderness of his proposal

swept through her, the thoughtful touches making her even more emotional. The unplanned nature of it. The location. The fact that it was here, in the room where it had begun for them as a couple.

This man was made for her.

And she'd go anywhere, do anything, as long as she was by his side.

**END OF THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CHRISTMAS FIANCÉE**

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES BOOK ONE

THE
BILLIONAIRE'S
Sudden Christmas Baby

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES: BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLURB

Plans for the perfect Christmas didn't include falling in love...

Jules Cardwell is in trouble. After her boss suddenly leaves, Jules finds herself in charge of planning the legendary Denton Hotel Christmas gala. Now, she must prove to her new billionaire boss, Mitch Denton, that she has what it takes to pull off the impossible. Which means she can't allow herself to get distracted by how handsome he is—all brooding charm in a well-tailored suit.

Mitch knows that as the freshly appointed CEO he'll be judged by the success of the hotel's most ambitious Christmas gala ever. The last thing he needs is a newbie event planner—especially not a gorgeous one, like Jules. He can't afford to let his growing feelings for her derail his future.

But when the two discover a real baby inside the hotel's nativity scene, they'll have to team up to look after the adorable infant as the gala looms. Forced together in the hotel's luxury penthouse with a storm bearing down, Mitch and Jules are about to discover that all they want for Christmas...may just be each other.

MITCH

Sunday

Emergency Alert: The National Weather Service has issued a winter storm warning for portions of New York City, which is in effect from 1 PM Sunday to 1 PM EST Wednesday. Expected accumulations to reach 5 to 6 feet in some areas with higher amounts possible. Impacts: Roads and bridges will become slick making travel hazardous. Snowfall may be heavy at times. Exercise extreme caution if travel is necessary.

Mitch Denton stared at the emergency alert on his phone and fumed. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“Pardon, sir?”

He looked up to see Patrick, his assistant general manager, standing in front of him, and he shook his head, frowning as he scrolled through the complete weather alert. “Looks like we’re in for another storm. Anyone who has family or must get home should leave now.”

“Most already have or they’ve called in,” Patrick informed him, scrolling through something on his iPad. “Unfortunately, that means only about twenty percent are still on the clock. Do you want me to call around to see if anyone else can make it in?”

If Patrick had asked Mitch's father the same question, he would have told him that everyone was to come in or they could consider themselves unemployed. But that wasn't how Mitch worked. Shaking his head. "Not yet. If the weather doesn't clear as planned, then we'll need to make some phone calls. For now, we'll do what we can. But what about you? Won't your husband be worried about you?"

Patrick smiled. "Lance is in Connecticut with the twins visiting his mother this weekend. I've already texted him, and he agrees that it would be best if I stayed here instead of taking the train as planned. So I'll be sticking around."

Mitch didn't try to hide his relief. He would never expect any of his employees to stay and work given the potential intensity of the incoming storm, but the hotel was busy with guests arriving for the holidays and he needed as many people working as possible.

"Thank you. Please make sure we have enough rooms set aside for anyone who might not be able to make it home after their shift."

"Already done." Patrick's iPad pinged and he looked down at it. "If there's nothing else?"

Before Mitch could dismiss him, a loud crash followed by a screech echoed across the lobby. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"What the hell was that?" Mitch looked at Patrick, who was already trying to figure out where it came from. Another loud crash followed by something breaking. "Sounds like the ballroom where they're supposed to be setting up for the gala. Let's go."

Mitch and Patrick followed the noise and came across two women wearing shirts with "Big Apple Events" emblazoned across them. Other than the matching shirts, the two couldn't have been more different. The one holding her hand against her chest was all softness, and the way her curves filled out her clothes made his mouth dry. The other stood there stiffly with her hands on her hips. Based on what was coming out of her mouth, she was the one making all the noise.

“Why are you doing it like that? I told you what I wanted,” she screeched again, apparently not caring how well her voice was carrying.

The curvy woman spoke quietly as she reached for a binder that had colored sticky notes as tabs down the side. “I was going off the master plan that was approved by the client.”

“I don’t care. I want you to do it my way.” The woman grabbed the binder, yanking it from the woman’s hands, and flung it across the floor.

“Ma’am, if you would please lower your voice,” Patrick said and she turned on him. Fury was rolling off her in waves and she stomped her foot.

“Do not tell me what to do! I’ve had it with incompetent workers.” Her phone rang, her ringtone as shrill as she was. Pulling her phone from her—bra?—she answered it. “What? No, Clarissa, you can’t leave. That is unacceptable. Of course I know there’s a snowstorm coming, but I pay you to take care of my boys and I expect you to do as you’re told. Just put on an extra sweater and take them for their walk.”

What the hell? Is she talking about kids or dogs? Please let it be dogs, Mitch prayed.

She shoved her phone back in her bra and turned back to her employee. Just as she was about to start screaming again, Mitch intervened.

“Ladies. While I realize this is a stressful time for everyone, can I please ask you to keep your voices down? We can hear you on the other side of the lobby.” And that was the wrong thing to say.

The loud woman got in his face, and her finger would have stabbed him in his chest if he hadn’t taken a step back to avoid contact. “Look, I don’t know who the fuck you are or why you’re bothering me, but you need to back away. You’re in *my* personal space.”

The woman continued to advance on him, so he stopped moving and she got within inches of him as she continued to

shout. Patrick stepped up right behind him and said quietly, “I’ve alerted security. They’re on their way.”

“What did you say?” the woman demanded.

Mitch ignored her, sidestepping her stabby finger so he could see what was going on while Patrick attempted to speak with her. Big Apple Events hadn’t been his choice of vendor for the gala, which meant his father had overridden his decision and in typical Mitchell Denton Senior fashion, hadn’t bothered to tell him. He should have expected it but given that this year’s event was to include a big announcement, he was annoyed that his father had brought in someone new. He’d lay odds that it was too late to hire someone else.

Looking around at the mess, Mitch could see that only half of the traditional decorations used every year had been brought up from the basement and he could already tell that the life-size nutcrackers that would normally guard the entrance to the ballroom had sustained some damage.

The other woman, who also decided to ignore the screechy one, was attempting to reshape what had looked like one of his mother’s favorite angels, which would hang over the nativity scene. One of the wings was no longer attached and she gave him an apologetic look.

She spoke quietly. “I know this looks bad, but these are amazing decorations and I’m sure most of this damage is fixable.”

“But it won’t be by you. You’re fired.” The screechy woman yanked the angel from her hands and tossed it to the ground. Before the woman could say more, her phone rang again and she tapped to answer the call. “What is it now, Clarissa? No. I don’t care. Just do what I pay you to do.”

She continued to rant at the person on the phone while Mitch thought fast. He turned back to the other woman who looked as though she was fighting back tears as she reached for the angel again. He spotted the binder and picked it up off the floor where it lay open. Leafing through it quickly, he was surprised at how comprehensive it was. There were neat printouts of layouts of the ballroom along with the lobby and

the large rotunda that graced the entrance to the hotel. He practically salivated at the color-coded breakdown for the decorating along with a timeline for everything that would need to take place before the event.

Scanning the pages, he was impressed with all the work that went into it. He recognized the layout, which was what they used every year, but there were some subtle differences.

“Who did this?” he asked tilting the binder up. The screechy woman strode over and attempted to pull the binder away but Mitch wasn’t giving it up. Sidestepping her again, he held tight as she glared at him while still talking on the phone. He couldn’t believe that woman created this, which meant it belonged to the other woman. That gave him an idea.

Blowing out a breath, he fought his increasing frustration. Snapping the binder shut, he handed it to the other woman. “Hold onto this and don’t move.” Then turning to the woman on the phone, he calmly said, “Get off the phone. Get your stuff and go.”

She glared at him but had the sense to tell the person she’d call them back. Squeezing her phone, she advanced on him. “What did you say?”

“I said you’re fired. Take your stuff and get out. Your services won’t be needed.” He’d had enough of her behavior, and it ended now.

“What? You can’t fire me. Who the fuck do you think you are?” the woman screeched again. Apparently she only had one volume level, and Mitch wanted her out of his hotel before she gave him a migraine.

“Mitch Denton, and you’re in *my* hotel. Well. Not for much longer.”

The woman froze and Mitch knew right when she realized who she was screaming at, but then it was immediately masked by a fake plastic smile. “I wouldn’t be so hasty. Your father is the one who hired my firm and there’s no way you’ll be able to bring anyone else in before the gala. How about if we pretend none of this ever happened?” She reached out to

run her fingers down the sleeve of his suit jacket but Mitch shrugged her off.

Turning to the other woman, he pointed at the binder. “Did you do all that work?” At her nod, he smiled. “Good. How would you like to remain to oversee the setup for the gala? You’ll be heavily compensated for your time.”

She clutched the binder to her chest and smiled. “I’d like that.”

Rubbing his hands together. “Excellent.” Then turning back to the other woman, he said, “As you can see, I *have* replaced you.”

The woman looked like she would argue again, but then she got a malevolent look on her face. “Fine. I’ll leave, but don’t expect a refund on your deposit.” Turning to the other woman, she snapped her fingers. “Give me your shirt.”

The woman’s eyes rounded as she stared at her, pulling the binder tighter against her chest. “Are you kidding me? Miranda, I can’t take my shirt off here. I’ll drop it off at the office.”

Miranda’s eyes turned to slits as she smirked. “No. If you plan on staying here, you will not be representing Big Apple Events. Shirt. Now.”

“I can’t do that. Why are you being so nasty? This is over the top, even for you,” the woman told her, pleading.

“Give. Me. My. Shirt. Jules.”

“Okay. Fine.” The woman set the binder down, pulled the shirt from her waistband, tugged it over her head and tossed it to Miranda inside out before hugging the binder to her chest again. “Are you happy now? You’ve thoroughly humiliated me.” Mitch quickly pulled his suit jacket off and handed it to the woman who gave him a small smile. “Thank you.”

Before Miranda could say anything else, security arrived, and Mitch pointed to her. “If you would be so kind as to escort this woman from the premises.” Speaking directly to Miranda, he said, “We’ll send you a bill for the items you’ve damaged. You’re banned from all Denton Hotels and we will never do business with your organization again.”

The woman screamed, stomping her feet like a child and kicking things over. Security quickly stepped in and grabbed both her arms before escorting her away. She continued to kick and scream as she struggled to pull free. “Do you have any idea how many followers I have on Insta? I will ruin you. No one will want to come here ever again.”

Once she was gone, they all blew out breaths and Mitch worried that she might follow through with her threats. “Any idea how many followers she has on social media?”

Patrick was already tapping at his iPad. “Personally, ninety-six. Her company has more than five thousand.”

“I can live with that. Patrick, let PR know what’s going on and we’ll let them deal with it.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Patrick walked away, Mitch turned back to the woman who was still standing in the middle of the carnage. Holding his hand out, he smiled. “We haven’t been formally introduced. I’m Mitch Denton and you’re…”

“Jules Cardwell.” Her handshake was firm and she gave him a wan smile. Her eyes were still wet, but any sign of embarrassment she had moments ago had been replaced with what looked more like relief.

“Jules. Let’s go find you something to wear and then I’m hoping you can help me salvage my Gala.”

JULES

Leaving the ballroom, Jules followed Mitch over to the gift shop still in shock over what happened. Miranda had always been hard to work for but her rage level had been over the top. She couldn't help smirking at how quickly Mitch Denton had checked her attitude, and she sincerely hoped that her former boss learned something from this expensive lesson.

They stopped in front of the closed gift shop, and he reached for his master keycard and let himself into the shop before looking over his shoulder at her with a too attractive smile, considering she was half-naked under his jacket.

“One of the perks of being the boss, even when we're short-staffed because of the snowstorm.” Turning on the lights, he pointed to the side wall where they sold hotel wear. “Pick something out.”

Jules didn't question him and reached for a polo in her size with the hotel logo on it. Looking around for a dressing room, she didn't see one and decided that expediency trumped modesty. Pulling his jacket off, she slipped the shirt on before handing his jacket back. “Thank you for lending this to me.” She was not going to mention that his cologne reminded her of a trip she'd taken to the mountains or that his suit jacket was nicer than some of her better formal wear.

“My pleasure.” Frowning, he told her to turn around and snapped the tag off her shirt.

“You can deduct the cost off my final bill,” she told him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Pocketing the tag, he gestured to the exit. “Let’s grab a seat and discuss our options.”

Directing her over to the closed coffee cart, they took seats across from each other.

“So, Ms. Cardwell—”

“Jules. After everything that’s happened, call me Jules.”

“All right. Jules. Thank you for agreeing to stay on. I have to confess that I’m in a bind now…” He gestured toward the ballroom. “We’re a week away from one of the biggest events of the season. Well, the biggest for Denton Hotels. My father, the current CEO, wants this year’s gala to be the best yet, and between this snowstorm and a skeleton crew for who knows how long, I’m hoping you can perform a miracle.”

“Mr. Denton—”

“Mitch.”

Jules could feel her face heat in a blush but she nodded and kept speaking. “Mitch. There was supposed to be a whole team working on the setup in the ballroom. I don’t know how you can expect me to get everything set up on my own.”

She looked around feeling increasingly overwhelmed. When Big Apple Events got the contract for the gala, Miranda was excited. The Denton Hotels Christmas Gala had a long history as one of *the* premier events for most New York City socialites, and having their name attached to it would be a major accomplishment. Miranda had immediately started eyeing both Mitchell Dentons, who often appeared in the society pages with mentions of their wealth and single status.

Jules had been leery of taking on an event of this size, but Miranda had insisted they could do it, knowing that it was a major stepping stone for bigger and better events. Except that the owner of Big Apple Events had a temper and had no qualms about taking her anger out on anyone who might be in her way.

“Uh, Jules?”

She startled, realizing he'd been talking to her. Feeling the heat on her cheeks flare, she stammered. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

He reached out to tug at the binder that she was clutching against her body like a pool float. "I'd like to see the changes you mapped out for the gala."

"Oh! Of course. Here." She opened up the binder and flipped to two different layouts. "Okay, here's the seating layout you normally use." Mitch slid his chair closer to hers and they ended up touching shoulders as he looked over her shoulder.

"And what's wrong with it? It's the way we've always done it."

Jules was pleased he didn't sound angry. "You're right, you have. But I was looking at reviews and comments from previous galas and some of the complaints could be easily alleviated by adjusting the flow of traffic. And look, if you move these tables, you'll open up the space better." She spent the next thirty minutes going over her suggested changes and when she was finished, Mitch sat back.

"That's amazing. And correct me if I'm wrong, but with the band set up over here, that will also help with the sound?"

Nodding hard, she reached out to squeeze his hand. "Exactly. And if you keep those doors shut, you won't get hit with the added noise from the lobby." When she realized what she was doing, she pulled her hand away, but he caught it and gave her a return squeeze.

"I was serious when I said I wanted you to handle all of the details."

"But I'm only one person. Miranda at least had a staff to help with the setup and tear down. I can't possibly do this all on my own. Maybe there's still time to bring someone else in." As much as Jules wanted the gig, she knew she had to be realistic. This was too big of an event for one person.

"Anyone who can be taken off their current duties will be reassigned to you when you need them." Tapping her binder.

“You have a great plan outlined and I’m prepared to do whatever it will take to make this happen.”

“I—” Jules bit her lip. This was the biggest event she’d ever participated in and now, she’d be leading it. Was she even ready for something like this?

“And Denton Hotels will compensate you for your time. We’ll pay you what we originally intended to pay Big Apple and there will be a bonus at the end, assuming everything goes well,” which surprised her and she had to shut her mouth. “I have to tell you. My father is planning to make a big announcement at the gala, but he hadn’t told anyone what it is, even me. I’m hoping he’ll be announcing his retirement and naming me the new CEO. So, I want the gala to be spectacular. What do you say, Ms. Cardwell. Will you do it?”

Jules sat back. Could she do it? He said she’d have help. She looked back at her binder. When she’d first found out about the gala, she’d set up two files. One mimicking what had been done before and one with suggested changes to improve the overall experience for everyone. But could she actually make it happen?

With a big smile, she stuck out her right hand. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Mr. Denton.”

He smiled back as he shook her hand. “Excellent. Now, should we go see what we have to work with?”

JULES

Jules felt every click of her heels against the tile floor of the lobby as she walked with Mitch back to the ballroom. Since arriving at the hotel this morning, she hadn't had a moment to herself and she desperately wanted to give herself a high five for holding it together this long because, holy shit! She was *the* event planner for one of the biggest parties of the season.

Her! Jules Cardwell.

While she'd learned the trade working for a fab wedding planner, she'd hoped to really dig into the industry and start gathering more contacts working for Big Apple Events. But working for Miranda had been problematic from the start. The woman was a Bitch with a capital B and while Jules wasn't sorry to see her go, her head was still spinning over the turn of events.

"Walk me through your ideas for changes," Mitch said before they reached the double doors.

Jules opened her binder and pulled out her proposed map for the event. "Since this event is open to all ages, my thinking is if we move the check-in and entry over here," she indicated, pointing to another set of doors that was currently blocked by boxes, "then we can set up the kid zones away from the different food stations, to avoid potential accidents."

"And I see you've separated out the food stations. Why?"

She was surprised at how interested Mitch seemed in everything that was going on. "Most people don't want to

walk through an entire line if they simply want to grab one type of food. Separating it out makes it easier for everyone to get through the different stations and it'll be easier for the servers to refresh the food and keep the area clean.”

“What about the dessert station? Denton Hotels is known for our chocolate cake. My mom loved to bake, and our dessert menu takes pride of place in her memory.” Mitch smiled as if he was thinking about a different time.

“There will be two dessert stations. One will be geared toward the younger attendees, and for the other, I'd intended to provide miniature renditions of three or four of the more popular dessert items in two-bite size.” She flipped over to the menu page. “Your mom's chocolate cake, a seasonal fruit tart, your vegan carrot cake, and your newest addition, the lavender cake.”

“That sounds perfect. Chef Chris will be delighted to find out we'll be serving two of his creations.”

“Chef Chris? *The* Chef Chris? He created those desserts? The lavender is my favorite, but I could eat that carrot cake for breakfast any day of the week.”

Mitch laughed. “Chef Chris, or Chris Denton as we call him. He's my cousin, and he revamped all our menus in the different hotels. He designs all our seasonal menus and works with the onsite chefs to make sure everything is perfect. We're lucky to have him, and everyone benefits when he's in the mood to experiment.”

“That's amazing. I don't know why I didn't put it together that you're related, given the last name. I watched him on a recent competition and tried to make his winning recipe.” Jules laughed. “I made such a mess of the kitchen, it's the first time I've ever contemplated moving just so I wouldn't have to deal with the cleanup.” She shivered dramatically and was pleased when Mitch chuckled. Wait. Why was she pleased? This wasn't the time to think of her client as anything other than HER CLIENT, even if he was gorgeous. *Get it together, Jules!*

Flustered, she tried to redirect her thoughts back to the urgent matter at hand. The gala. As she continued to outline the plans

and explain why her suggested changes worked better, she could no longer control her awareness of Mitch. Was his voice suddenly sounding huskier? Was his smile warmer? Was that a twinkle in his eyes?

“...not a fan of the man bun.”

Jules jumped realizing that he'd been talking to her and she'd completely tuned him out. “Sorry. I was thinking of something else. Man bun? Oh! You mean the Santa?” She laughed, feeling flustered that she was allowing her thoughts to get away from her. “Hipster Santas are all the rage right now, and the guy I have scheduled to work the gala is amazing. You won't be disappointed. He's great with kids and women.”

Mitch crossed his arms, and Jules felt like he was going to veto Hipster Santa. “If you think it's too much, he can also rock the traditional Santa role and wear a wig.” *Please don't want that. Please don't want that.*

He uncrossed his arms and turned away from her to study the room. “We've always used our traditional Christmas decorations, some of which date back to the mid-1900s. Will Hipster Santa seem too out of place?”

“Not at all.” Grabbing her phone, she pulled up Hipster Santa's Instagram to show the different outfits he'd worn and handed Mitch her phone. “He's surprisingly versatile, and I can guarantee that he's well liked.”

Mitch scrolled through the photos before handing her phone back. “I'm going to trust you on this. I don't have time to micromanage the gala, even if I wanted to.”

They continued to go over her ideas, and Jules was happy to see that Mitch was on board with everything else. Every few minutes, they were interrupted by his phone, but he was quick to take care of it before returning his attention to her. “My executive assistant would normally handle these calls when I'm in a meeting like this, but she was one of the ones who didn't make it into work today.”

“I'm actually surprised you're spending this much time with me, and on a weekend. This seems beneath a...future CEO.”

His answering smile gave her butterflies that she needed to stop.

“Not at all. Well, maybe.” He rubbed his face before shoving his hands into his pockets. “I cannot stress how important this year’s gala is to me, and with the weather refusing to cooperate and being short-staffed, everyone has to help out, including me.”

Jules squeezed his arm. “Well, with you helping out, this gala will definitely be the best yet.”

Mitch appeared to blush at that. “I wouldn’t go that far.” He rubbed the side of his face and she could see him visibly trying to get it together.

Did he think she was flirting with him? *Was* she flirting with him? Jules knew she was excited about the job, but was she coming across too strong?

“Right then,” he went on. “Most of the Christmas decorations for the public areas were set up over Thanksgiving weekend, which just leaves the additional decorations we add for the gala. Should we check to see what’s left to do? I know the tree for the lobby was delivered over the weekend, but it hasn’t been decorated yet with the Children of the World ornaments. And the manger was set up yesterday.”

“Oh, really?” Jules perked up. At least that was one thing she could cross off her list. “I didn’t see it.”

“They moved it this year—it’s right inside the main doors.” Mitch led the way back through the lobby, past the huge—and real—Christmas tree. Lights and ribbons draped the tree along with oversized silver and blue balls. Boxes were stacked next to it and someone dressed in a hotel uniform was digging through them. Mitch stopped at the tree and gestured to the open boxes. “Each year, we choose a different children’s charity to showcase, and Denton Hotels matches the donations given at the gala and any others received through the end of the year. As a thank you, every donor will be able to pick an ornament off the tree.” He reached into the box and pulled out an ornament and handed it to Jules. “Each ornament tells a different story about a child helped.”

Jules took the ornament, which had a picture of a smiling toothless little boy waving at the camera. Turning it over, she read his brief bio, which included his favorite things to do and country of origin. “This is such a great idea, and everything looks so festive.”

This was her favorite time of year, without exception. The decorations, the crisp New York mornings, the flurries, and even the snowstorms—she loved all of it.

Something about Mitch at her side made her feel a little dreamy too. He had *presence*. Strong and tall and safe—not to mention drop-dead gorgeous. His dark brown hair looked expertly styled yet somehow like he’d spent most of the morning tugging at the front of it. A Manhattan socialite wrapped up in a bachelor billionaire package was how the tabloids described him.

Exactly the sort of man her mother had always warned her about.

“We’re trying,” Mitch said, sending her what looked like a genuine smile. “This was always my mom’s favorite time of year, so we try to go big.”

“Go big or go home,” she joked, without even meaning to. On the inside, she grimaced—*what a dumb thing to say!* But Mitch laughed.

“Exactly. Sort of our ethos around here. Which would explain why we never go home.”

Jules smiled to herself, the crisp winter air hitting her in a whoosh when the lobby doors opened. Just inside the main entrance, in the vestibule, sat the nativity scene, which looked as though it was nestled in a winter wonderland with the falling snow outside the huge window behind it. Mitch strode quickly toward the creche, which featured a miniature stable and figurines that came up to her hips.

“This is our star decoration,” Mitch said. “It’s always the first thing to go up. Nothing else can happen until the nativity is out.”

Jules peered down at the Mary and Joseph statues. She tilted her head, examining Baby Jesus.

“You always use *these* statues?” Something about Jesus seemed very...lifelike.

“Yes. Since probably the early eighties. Before I was even born. They’ve gotten some facelifts over the years, but it’s always the same.”

Jules’ chest tightened as she knelt. She could have sworn Jesus had moved. “This baby looks very realistic. Is it supposed to move?”

“Does it?” Mitch stepped closer, and the two of them leaned forward to examine the scene. “I’ve never really noticed.”

The blankets around Baby Jesus shifted.

And then his arm moved.

Jules gasped. “I think that’s a real baby in there.” She surged forward, feeling inside the wooden manger. Her stomach sank to her feet when her fingertips connected with a soft, warm body. “Oh my god, it is a baby.”

MITCH

“Please, tell me you’re kidding. Who would do something like that?” Mitch asked. He watched as Jules scooped up the baby and unwrapped the wool blanket that had been disguising its presence.

“There’s a note pinned to the baby’s jacket,” she said as she made soft cooing noises.

“What does it say?”

I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore. Please help her find a better life and give her a better Christmas than I ever could.

Emotion clamped Mitch’s throat, as he looked from the baby to Jules, her own eyes wide with disbelief.

“Mitch...” Her voice came out in a whisper.

He watched, as she held the baby close in her arms, her body swaying as the baby nestled against her chest. “Who would do something so horrible as to abandon a baby like this? There were other places that would have been safer. What if no one had seen her?”

Mitch had his phone out and was dialing 911. “I’ve no idea, but I’m calling emergency services.” When he got a fast busy, he disconnected the call. “Well that didn’t work. I got an ‘all systems busy’ message.”

She joined him. “What are you going to do?”

“Come on. Let’s go someplace warm,” Mitch said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and urging her back into the

lobby. He looked around, hoping to catch Patrick, but he wasn't there and the front desk was busy.

Heat blasted over them as they re-entered the hotel. Mitch guided her toward a small alcove overlooking a central courtyard, which was dappled with evergreen bushes. Outside, the sky had turned a bleak gray as snow continued to fall. Looking at Jules, she looked as stricken as he felt. He watched her swallow hard, while looking down at the sleeping baby in her arms.

“What should we do?” she asked. Her voice cracked on the question and he could see her swallow again, as if she was trying to push down something distasteful.

Mitch wet his bottom lip, his icy blue gaze sweeping up to meet hers. He was trying to wrap his brain around why someone would leave a baby at a hotel when there were other places far better equipped to help. What the hell did he know about a baby?

“We'll figure this out,” he said in a low voice. “Just give me a second.”

The hustle and bustle of the lobby ratcheted up to a commotion. And it wasn't because of the baby—nobody else knew or noticed that they'd discovered a real live *infant* abandoned in the manger out front. Mitch's head spun as he guided Jules to sit down with the baby in her arms, his brain in overdrive.

He searched for an available staff member to recruit. Every single person was in a different state of losing their cool on a phone call, with a guest, or both at the same time.

“I'll be right back,” Mitch said to Jules before heading toward the front desk. The air in the lobby felt pulled tight, as if it might snap at any second. He strode toward the desk but stopped as some guests nearby sighed loudly.

“I don't think we're going to be able to stay here, but we can't leave either,” one of them was saying. Mitch paused, feeling the customer service side of him leap into high gear.

“Hi, I’m Mitch Denton, owner of this hotel.” He offered his hand to the frazzled-looking man and his wife. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I don’t know.” The man raked a hand through the sparse field of hairs left on his head. “We were about to leave for the airport, but we got word that our flight was canceled because of the snowstorm. We can’t keep our room for another night because it’s been booked.”

Mitch led them toward the front desk, intent on resolving this. He made sure that the first desk clerk who hung up was tasked with their rebooking issue.

Which meant that it took some time before someone was able to tend to *him*. Mitch made sure all his guests were helped before he took his turn. The customer always came first—that was the family motto. When he glanced back at Jules, her brows were drawn together as she looked down at the baby in her arms.

They needed to figure out whose baby this was, stat.

“Hey. I need to know if any of you saw any suspicious activity near the manger scene today,” Mitch said once a lull had hit the lobby.

The four ladies shook their heads.

“It’s been too busy to see much of anything, with this storm coming in,” Lisa, the team lead, commented.

“Rebookings galore,” another sighed.

Mitch’s stomach jolted as he glanced back at Jules and the baby. They needed help. Gesturing to one of the phones, Lisa lifted it up and turned it toward him. Grabbing the receiver, he tapped 9 for an outside line, and then entered 911. There was a pause filled with dead air before he got a fast busy.

“Dammit!” He hung up knowing he wasn’t going to get through even on a landline and pushed the phone back toward Lisa. “Check to see if Patrick is still here, and then please reach someone in security for me. We have an issue that needs addressing urgently.” He hesitated over whether to raise the alarm that would surely accompany *abandoned baby*. Best to

wait until all their bases were covered. “Send them my way ASAP. And I mean *now*.”

Lisa nodded and picked up the phone as another group of guests approached the front desk. Mitch hurried back to Jules and the baby who had just started fussing.

“Can you hold her for a second?” Jules nibbled on her lip and held the baby out. Mitch bent awkwardly to receive the precious package, her little head feeling surprisingly limp against his arm. “Support her head. Yeah, like that. There you go. I’m going to run to the restroom and be right back.”

“Now? Can it wait? I’ve never done this.”

“Well you could have fooled me. You look like you know what you’re doing.”

“Well I don’t. Maybe you should take her with you.”

Jules squeezed his arm, chuckling quietly. “I won’t be long. Promise,” she told him before taking off, and once she had disappeared around the corner of the lobby, Mitch looked around, the weight of this situation finally hitting him.

Here he was—an expert bachelor, heir to the Denton hotel empire—holding this baby whose only caretaker in life right now was...*him*.

And Jules. He hurried to remind himself that it wasn’t only him calling the shots. Jules was in this with him even though they’d just met. And it wasn’t as if they had parental rights. Soon enough, the baby would be turned over to the police or child services, and once the police were finished making a mess of his lobby and interrogating everyone who was here, this little girl would be out of their lives without a second glance.

Except for some reason, it felt like this was *their* situation to handle. His and Jules. Stumbling upon an abandoned baby forged a sort of unifying bond. They might be strangers, but they were strangers with a baby who needed their help.

As if on cue, the baby started fussing and wriggling inside the pink blanket she was swaddled in. She didn’t look like a newborn to him—not that he had a ton of experience

identifying a child's age, or anything to do with babies. He rocked her, shushing her gently. Jules had said "her," when she'd read the note, but he knew she hadn't fully unwrapped the blanket to be sure while he was at the check-in desk. Still, the pronoun felt right—he would have bet this hotel their foundling was a girl. Her little cheeks went pink as a scream ripped out of her. Mitch gasped, then started pacing the far wall of windows overlooking the street. Panic streaked through him—what was he supposed to do with a crying baby?

He could negotiate the living hell out of a business deal and spend twelve hours in a cramped space flying halfway around the world. He could even gamble millions of dollars in a risky new venture without batting an eye.

But this baby? This wriggling little bundle was the type of challenge he had no experience with. No preparation *at all*.

Jules raced up to him a moment later, stroking the girl's cheek. "What happened?"

"Nothing. She just started crying." The baby hiccupped and then continued crying. "Doesn't rocking help? I thought I'd rock her."

"Maybe lift her up and pat her back," Jules suggested. "She might have gas or something."

Mitch lifted her carefully, trying to support her head. She dipped a little to the left, and he went rigid, propping her against his shoulder.

"Just tap her back," Jules guided him.

Mitch patted the baby's back like she said, and her cries turned into gurgling, which then turned into a very wet eruption.

All over his shoulder.

Jules laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. "Aww, her tummy was upset."

Mitch stopped breathing for a moment as he craned to look at the damage. "Did she—" He paused, horrified by the milky

white splash of *vomit* on his shoulder. A little bit even dripped down the front of his suit jacket. “Did she *puke* on me?”

Jules rolled her lips inward, but she shook with silent laughter. “Poor thing. We should go get her cleaned up.”

“And *me*,” he reminded her. Jules reached for the baby, and Mitch carefully handed her over. “Let’s go to my office. Come on.”

He glanced around the lobby as he led her down the side hall. Their quick steps tapped on the shiny tile floor.

“Don’t worry,” Jules said. “I don’t think anyone saw her spit up all over your nice suit.”

He glanced back at her as he pushed through the office door. She looked like she was fighting a grin.

“I don’t care if anyone saw...” Having a baby spit up on his thousand-dollar suit was not the way he’d seen this day going. He just didn’t know how to say it without it sounding exactly the way it sounded. That he was more concerned with the state of his clothes than the state of the child. He softened slightly, sighing. “Fine. I’ve never been puked on before. Not even in college.”

Jules snickered, swaying slightly as she held the baby. Her brown hair swept over her forehead as she smiled down at the bundle in her arms. “There’s a first time for everything. I think you’re initiated now.”

He paused in the middle of slipping off his jacket, sideswiped by the sight of Jules standing there. So beautiful, but also now so tender as she held the little girl. He almost forgot what he was doing until Jules looked up at him.

“You better get to it before it sets,” she said.

“Right.” Mitch cleared his throat and laid his jacket down over a clear section of the desk and hurried into the small, attached bathroom to snag some paper towels. When he came back out, Jules grimaced.

“I think she got your shirt, too.”

He looked down, and sure enough—a small damp area right beside the breast pocket stared back at him. He bit back a complaint.

“I guess I should be happy she feels better,” he said with a sigh. “At the expense of my clothes.”

“Exactly.” Jules still swayed where she stood. It seemed the baby had fallen asleep again. “She wasn’t feeling good, and now she feels *great*.”

Mitch worked on removing the bulk of the spit-up while Jules walked around the office, gently rubbing the baby’s back. Whenever she crossed through his line of sight, it was hard not to stare. There was something so elegant, so soft about her right now. Unlike the woman he’d met earlier. The transformation nearly stole his breath, but he couldn’t even say why.

Jules is the event planner, and you’re trying to find out where to send this baby. He frowned as he scrubbed at the stain.

Why was that so hard to remember?

JULES

Jules had a sleeping baby in her arms for less than a half hour and already she felt like she belonged to *her*.

You can't adopt the first orphan you find, Jules. It doesn't work that way. Certainly not legally. The words were so ridiculous she hesitated to even think them. It wasn't like she planned on having children—not *yet*, anyway, and certainly not as a single mom. She'd thought that someday she might settle down, find a great guy, start a family the old-fashioned way.

But for some reason, this baby in a manger seemed like a test of that idea.

Or was she falling victim to the Christmas season and the incredibly sexy man in the room?

Jules struggled to keep her eyes off him as he unbuttoned his shirt. It was almost like he'd forgotten she and the baby were in the room, since she'd been standing by the windows while the baby slept. When the shirt crested his shoulders and she caught a glimpse of pale skin and sturdy, rippling shoulders, she gasped.

Like an idiot.

Mitch whipped around, confusion on his face. "Sorry. Should have warned you." His shirt hung open, revealing washboard abs and the absolute perfect dusting of chest hair. He offered a lopsided grin. "I'll go into the bathroom."

"No, no," she blurted, unable to stop her gaze from careening over the creamy expanse of his chest. Damn, she'd give a lot

to see the rest of him. Like the whole rest of his body. “I just... I noticed it’s snowing harder.” Her gaze jerked to the window, at the gray sky threatening black. “That’s all. This is your office. Do what you need to do.”

Her heart stayed in her throat as he headed her way, brows drawn together as he assessed the outside world through the window. “Oh, wow, it’s really coming down now,” he murmured. The cedar scent of his aftershave reached her, the masculine scent nearly sending her to her knees. It had been long—far too long—since she’d been with a man. And she had never had the pleasure of being with someone who looked like Mitch.

She’d been so focused on her career and so jaded by the dating world in New York City that the majority of her male interactions were with clients and the occasional hanger-on at the bar. On the rare occasion she even went out with her girlfriends.

Truth was, she didn’t expect much in the way of love. Her mother had drilled that into her from a young age. Watching her mother in one disastrous relationship after another left them both jaded and taught Jules that there was no such thing as a happily ever after. So, why bother looking for something that didn’t exist?

“Weather reports weren’t exaggerating. This really is going to be a bad storm,” Mitch said, raking a hand through his hair. The shirt shifted, and she caught a glimpse of his dime-sized nipple. She was blatantly staring now. “I’m going to call Patrick so we can have security meet us in here and then figure out where—”

A knock interrupted him. They both swung around to look at the door just as it cracked open.

“Mitch. You wanted to see me?” The same man she saw Mitch with in the ballroom poked his head in, then stopped short with a little “Oh!”

“Patrick, it’s fine, come in.” Mitch waved him in, heading toward a wardrobe on the other side of the office. “I was hoping you were still here. Did your assistant make it in

today? I need to send some things for dry cleaning and I could use some assistance with a few other things. Rose is off because of the storm.”

To his credit, Patrick didn't blink at the sight he'd stumbled into and Jules had to bite back her laugh. To go from her in nothing more than her bra and slacks in the ballroom to Mitch in much the same state of undress now along with a baby. A little snicker escaped her, and Patrick narrowed his eyes at her as he took everything in.

“I sent her home,” he began, walking into the office. “But I spoke with security before I came here and they're checking video footage of the front of the hotel to see if they can figure out who left the baby in the manger.”

“That's great. I know with the storm, we're short-staffed, but I can't believe no one saw anything. How is that possible?” Mitch was partially obscured by the open wardrobe doors as he shrugged off his shirt. A hanger clanged as he reached for a different button-down. When he shut the doors, he was fully clothed again, buttoning the last button on his shirt. Jules tried not to feel disappointed.

“Well you're not going to like this,” Patrick said, referring to something on the iPad he was holding. “I managed to catch someone at Children and Family Services, and she said the soonest she could get someone over here to pick up the baby is Wednesday. Assuming we're not buried in snow by then.”

Mitch frowned as he adjusted the cuffs of his shirt. “What do you mean, Wednesday? Isn't protecting children their job?”

Patrick smirked at that, shaking his head. “Evidently that only applies when the weather cooperates and it isn't so close to Christmas. I tried calling the non-emergency number for PD and got a recorded message.”

Jules turned back toward the windows. The flurries from a few moments ago got heavier and there was already accumulation on the street. Her heart raced as she looked back at Mitch. What were they going to do about the baby if no one could come for her?

Mitch started rubbing his forehead and moved to his desk. “The lobby was already a mess when we were out there just now. Flights getting canceled, people needing to rebook, and now this. We need to be business as usual despite the circumstances, but Mitchell Senior will have an epic fit if we end up having the cops crawling all over the place in addition to the cranky guests. And that’s assuming none of this impacts the gala.”

Mitch fished a remote control out of a desk drawer and pointed it at the far wall. A picture frame slowly slid down to reveal a television. She blinked. So *this* was what rich guys spent their money on.

“Let’s find a weather report, shall we?” Mitch flipped through a few channels, then set the control down and pressed his palms to the desktop.

Jules should have watched the news program, but all she could watch was Mitch. His power pose yanked at her typical sense of calm. She hadn’t met a man in recent times who really set her ablaze, but Mitch was the exception. Even the furrow of his brow was somehow sexy.

“...*Expected to reach upwards of six feet in some areas. Exercise extreme caution if travel is necessary,*” the news reporter was saying.

Patrick sighed, shaking his head. “The predictions are getting worse. I should check in with my husband to make sure they’re okay.”

“Do that, and if you need to leave, go,” but Patrick was already shaking his head, which earned him a smile from Mitch. “I appreciate that, but if you do need to go, I’ll understand. In the meantime, anyone who can stay and work needs to. We need to prepare for a hell of a lot of rebookings and we may want to call over to some of the nearby hotels to find out if they have any vacancies in case we need to refer anyone to a different location.”

Jules swallowed hard as the circumstances began to sink in. The snowfall had turned thick. *Shit*. She’d taken a rideshare to the hotel today but doubted she’d be able to get one in a timely

fashion now that the city was probably in a collective panic over this storm. Since she hadn't planned on walking outside, she hadn't thought to bring any winter shoes in case she needed to walk to the subway.

And now *she* was panicking too. Because she still had no idea what to do about the baby.

Where the hell were her parents, and why had she been abandoned today, of all days? Another wave of confusion and heartache crashed through her, and she looked back down at the little girl and her perfect button nose.

"Here's the plan." Mitch straightened, a hard edge sounding in his voice that made her straighten as well, like Patrick had. "Jules will be spearheading the gala setup based on her redesigned plans. But since she's on her own for the duration, anyone who can be taken off their present duties will be asked to help. We still have time and hopefully the snow will let up midweek, as predicted, and we'll be fully staffed again. Come Christmas, the gala will be a happy memory."

"Is your father still planning on announcing you as the new CEO?" Patrick asked, and Jules perked up at that.

Mitch shrugged. "He did say he had a big announcement this year. But it is my father we're talking about. He likes to keep his plans secret until the last possible moment."

"Well you have my vote," Patrick said with a smile. "Now, about this baby."

"Right, the baby." At that, Mitch looked to Jules.

"I still don't understand why someone would abandon their baby like this. I mean, look at her," Jules said. She stroked the little girl's head. "If she were mine, I'd never let her out of my sight until she was eighteen."

Patrick snorted in response. "Well, since I'm the only one here with kids, I can say that being a parent isn't all snuggles and cuteness. Sometimes, life gets so overwhelming that giving your baby up is the best solution for both the parent and the child."

“But leaving her in a manger?” Jules shook her head. “There has to be a better alternative.”

Mitch turned off the TV and tossed the remote back in his drawer. “That’s a question we may not get an answer to. In the meantime, what do we do with her until someone can come over here to get her?”

Jules spoke up. “I was thinking I could take her home with me, but...”

Mitch shook his head. “Not with all this snow on the way. How could you even make it back to your place? Besides, I’m sure you don’t have anything for her right now and who knows how much longer the stores will be open.”

Jules deflated a little. He was right. She had nothing for a baby, no accommodations, no *nothing*. Not even formula.

“Honestly, I think our best bet is to stay right here and ride out the storm. And that includes you, Jules.” Mitch propped his hands on his hips. The way his blue gaze swept over her sent a chill of excitement through her. Snowbound with this sexy man? She couldn’t say no to that. But she needed to do exactly that.

” I was planning on commuting back and forth while I was working on getting the ballroom set up for the gala.”

Mitch shook his head. “In this weather? No. It’d be safer if you stayed here at the hotel. Plus, you’ll have everything you might need here.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to imagine how that might look.

“The hotel is equipped with cribs, blankets, formula, and more,” Patrick said.

“Great. It’s settled then. Can you call for some of... everything? Have it sent to the penthouse.”

Patrick nodded and started to leave, but Mitch snapped his fingers. “Ah. Almost forgot. Could you send someone up from housekeeping to pick up these clothes for dry cleaning?”

“I’ll take them with me,” Patrick said as he reached for the clothes. He wrinkled his nose. “I definitely don’t miss the

baby puke stage with the boys.”

Once it was just her and Mitch and the baby in the office, Jules sent Mitch a stricken look. “What now?”

“Let’s go up to my penthouse. We can get settled in there with the baby.” Mitch led the way down the hall to an unmarked elevator door. He punched in a code and then shoved his hands in his pockets. “I insist that you stay here as well.”

“At the hotel?”

“Mmmm. Unless you’re against it, I have a guest suite in the penthouse that you can use. You’ll be more comfortable than in one of our rooms. Assuming we have any availability.”

She blinked a few times, letting the news settle into her. The elevator doors swept open, and he ushered her inside while the proposition cycled through her.

Sleepover with the hottie billionaire during a freak snowstorm and an unexpected baby?

Yeah.

Why the hell not?

JULES

The elevator doors swept open twenty floors above the lobby and Mitch gestured for her to step through.

But she couldn't move—not right away, at least. The sight of the penthouse in front of her stole her breath, and all she could do was stare. A white, glittering foyer greeted them, a wide hallway leading toward enormous floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Manhattan.

She'd lived in this city her entire life, but she never tired of seeing it from high up. The view was gorgeous. The suite was gorgeous. This *man* was gorgeous.

“Come in, please,” Mitch urged, snapping her out of her trance. She drifted forward, gaze bouncing off all the interesting facets of his penthouse. The sleek steel accents against the black countertops she glimpsed walking past the kitchen. The blue and gray rug in the living room, which matched the blue and gray blanket lying messy on the couch, as if he'd spent the night there watching Netflix.

After being warned away from rich men and the trappings of wealth for most of her life, her mother would have been dismayed to learn that she was here, of all places. Smack dab in the middle of a billionaire's penthouse, actively being swept away by his trappings of wealth.

“Your place is incredible,” Jules breathed, hating that she sounded as awestruck as she felt. Mitch didn't even act self-conscious. Why should he?

“Thanks. I love it here.” He led her toward the windows, where a small cluster of slate-gray armchairs nestled around a low wood table. “Please sit. Make yourself at home. This is your home, too, as long as you need it to be.”

Jules was about to thank him when a buzzing noise sounded through the penthouse. Mitch hurried around a corner, and a moment later she heard the dull undertones of another voice and then footsteps. A hotel employee appeared a moment later, rolling a crib behind him. Mitch carried a wooden changing table, which he set down in front of the windows.

“Where did he...?” Then the baby started fussing, as if she could sense that her necessities were here.

“There’s a service elevator off the kitchen,” he explained, arranging the changing table while the employee made another trip to get more baby things.

“Wow. So your workers can just stop in and make a surprise visit?”

“Oh no,” he said. “There are very strict rules for the use of the service elevator. It will never open unless I allow it.”

“Interesting,” she said, unable to fight the grin as she looked around. This was like being on a different planet altogether. This was a modern-day Victorian mansion, Manhattan style. “I clearly don’t live in a penthouse attached to a hotel, so please forgive my ignorance.”

He grinned, a dimple flashing. “Most people don’t. And I get it. It’s a little weird. But it makes the most sense since the corporate offices for Denton Hotels is here as well. I’m always on-site to handle problems, and who better to live in the hotel than the hotelier’s son himself?”

The baby’s wriggling and fussing escalated into a full-blown cry. The employee re-entered a moment later, dropping off a big case of baby items—wipes, diapers, even some Denton-branded onesies. Who knew if they were her size, but it was better than nothing at this point. Mitch slipped the employee a bill that looked a lot like a hundred, and the service elevator buzzed a few moments later.

“Wow.” Jules wasn’t even sure what she was commenting on at this point. Everything was impressive, from the décor to the quickness with which his demands were fulfilled to the fact that he had this freaking *view*. She set the baby down on the new changing table, her gaze snagged by the sprawling city before her. The Hudson river wound through the city, while the snowfall blanketed the concrete and the parked cars lining the streets below.

Mitch came over to the table, swiping his thumb over the baby’s forehead. “Does she need a diaper change or a bath or something?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” Jules grinned down at the infant.

“I have to admit that I know nothing about children and wouldn’t have the first idea how to change a diaper. I don’t mean to make an assumption that you do simply because you’re a woman.”

Jules laughed. “Well, you’re in luck. I worked as a nanny to help pay for college, so I do happen to know a thing or two about kids. But I have to admit, she’s a lot younger than the kids I’m used to.”

Jules undid the swaddle and found the baby in a tattered onesie and a diaper, which looked way too small for her. Her heart sank. Maybe her family was poverty-stricken. Maybe dropping her off at the front doors of a hotel really was the best decision.

She might never know.

“Oh, honey,” Jules murmured, carefully opening the bloated diaper. “Can you pass me some wipes, please?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Sure. Just, uh...” Mitch poked around in different bags until he finally lifted a package. “Are these wipes?”

“Sure are.” She smiled as he tugged out a few wipes and then placed them carefully along the side of the changing table. Like this was his way of really *helping*. “Now I need you to see if you can find a size two or three diaper in there.”

“Size two or three?” he repeated, sounding uncertain as he assessed the boxes of baby things. “How will I know?”

“It should say on the package, or the diaper itself.” Jules carefully wrapped up the full diaper, cooing down at the girl as Mitch continued his search.

“Ah ha!” A moment later he delivered a small white diaper and looked proud. “Here it is. Size two. Got it.”

“That’s great. How about something clean for her to wear? I thought I saw some onesies in the supplies.”

“Onesies?” Mitch was sifting through the bags. “Like this?” He held up a onesie that said “I love Denton Hotels” and Jules nodded.

Warmth spread through her as he set it down on the changing table. She hadn’t ever really imagined what starting a family might be like, much less imagined the guy she might start one with. But this right here—playing new parents with a successful hottie like Mitch—was more fun than she’d anticipated.

“Do you want to change her diaper?” she teased as she slid the new one under the little girl’s butt.

“I should watch you at least once before I attempt it,” Mitch said, his brows drawn together as he watched her movements.

“Have you ever changed a diaper before?” Jules fastened the diaper and then carefully removed the tattered onesie.

“Will you be absolutely shocked if I say no?”

A laugh rocketed out of her. “I’d be absolutely *not* shocked. There probably isn’t much time for diaper changing while running an international hotel chain, is there?”

“That and a startling lack of babies in my family.” Mitch gave her a warm smile, one that sent heat flashing through her. The man was too good looking. Too easy to be around and talk to, even with an orphaned baby and lots of unmade decisions between them. “I’m not married, and my brother hasn’t had kids yet. I can’t even remember the last time I was around a kid that wasn’t the child of a hotel guest.”

“And your parents don’t want grandbabies?”

He shrugged. “My mom would have loved them, I’m sure. She passed away years ago, and my father, well...he’s always in business mode.”

Jules grimaced. This was supposed to be the fun, get-to-know-you portion of the evening, but she’d already stuck her foot in her mouth. “Sorry. I mean, about your mom. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s fine. You wouldn’t have known. Unless you freakishly follow my family in the papers or something.”

Jules laughed again, running her fingers up and down the baby’s legs. “No stalker here. Just your run-of-the-mill event planner.” Besides, she would have been lost if she’d known about Mitch Denton years ago. He was the type of man you fell for and never came back from. A game-changing crush. The type of boy she could have fallen for in high school and never forgotten about.

“Run-of-the-mill.” He wore a strange smile as he brushed past her. “Right. Let me show you where you can stay tonight, and then I say we settle in for the storm.”

“Settle in?” She finished getting the baby dressed, wrapped the blanket around the baby again and scooped her up into her arms. “Does that mean room service and a hot tub?”

Mitch looked over his shoulder at her, a smile so slick that her core tightened. “If you want it to, absolutely.”

MITCH

Mitch sat in the living room, the baby in his arms, while Jules freshened up in the guest suite. The whole situation still seemed surreal to him—bombshell house guest, tiny defenseless baby without any parents, and now the storm. The world beyond those thick glass planes overlooking the city had turned into a white sheet in just the short amount of time Jules had been in her room.

When she came back out to the living room, she gasped.

“Oh wow!” Her gaze was fastened on the falling snow, but Mitch’s gaze slid to that delectable curve beneath her slim-fit pants. He wet his bottom lip, unable to stop his thoughts from turning south.

“So the forecasts were right,” she concluded, heading over to the couch. As she sank back into the cushions, he remembered they were probably in for the rest of the evening and night. Which meant she had no clothes to speak of.

“Since you’re trapped here, I can lend you clothes,” he offered, yanking his gaze off her body. The longer he watched her, the more he wondered what he might find underneath those sharp clothes. “Something to sleep in. Whatever you need. Or I can have something sent up from the giftshop if you’d prefer something new.”

“Can I get a Denton Hotel onesie too?” she joked, nodding toward the baby. They’d added a small pair of sweatpants to match the onesie and some oversized socks they’d found in the box of baby things. “After my unexpected stay here, I can rep

the brand with confidence now for both infants and adults.” She pointed to the black polo she was wearing.

Mitch laughed, enjoying the scent of her amber-laced perfume that drifted his way as she relaxed nearby. He watched the baby for a few more moments. She’d drifted off to sleep again after he’d given her a bottle, which felt like a small victory. He could handle the baby thing, sort of. As long as Jules was here, at least.

“What do you think her name is?” he asked.

Jules snorted. “I wish her mom or dad had left that little detail on the note. Maybe we should name her.”

Mitch nodded. “That’s a good idea. We can’t just keep calling her ‘girl’ or ‘baby.’”

“Right.” Jules fell silent and nibbled on the inside of her cheek. “The note said that she wanted her to have a better Christmas. So maybe we should call her Noelle.”

“Noelle.” Mitch watched as the girl’s chest rose and fell softly. “I think it’s beautiful. And very appropriate.”

“Good.” Jules smiled wide, leaning closer to look down at the baby. The warmth in her face was hard to look away from. “It’s nice to meet you, Noelle.”

“A true pleasure,” Mitch added, directed toward the baby. He gently laid Noelle down on the couch, where she continued snoozing.

“She’s really passed out,” Jules said. “She even slept through her naming ceremony.”

“That’s okay. We can celebrate on her behalf, right?” Mitch pushed to standing, heading toward the small bar in the adjoining room. “Do you prefer wine, whisky, or rum?”

“Um...whisky?” Jules said.

“You don’t sound very sure,” Mitch called out as he pulled out a bottle of Scotch.

“I like all of them. And, well, isn’t it a little early to get drunk?”

“We’re not getting drunk. Simply having a toast.” He poured them each a finger of whisky and brought the tumblers back over to the couch where she sat. Jules had lined the couch with pillows so the baby wouldn’t tumble over the edge...not that she moved all that much. “Now’s as good a time as any. Since Noelle is asleep.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jules received the tumbler gratefully. Mitch raised his glass.

“Here’s to the strangest day of my entire life,” he said, and Jules dissolved into laughter. She looked up at him in a way that made him feel like he’d known her for years instead of hours. Like this woman held her own secrets as well as his. “To rescuing children, to planning parties, and to weathering the storm.”

“Hear! Hear!” Jules agreed, and they clinked tumblers gently. Mitch tossed his back in one gulp while Jules took delicate sips.

“This stuff is *good*,” she said.

“That’s why it only comes out on the most special days.”

“Yeah. I guess this day is pretty special, huh?” Jules fingered the leather seam of his couch, her gaze turning shy as she looked up at him.

His chest went tight, and he couldn’t say why.

All he knew was that it felt a little too right to have the two of them here.



He and Jules whiled away the evening between diaper changes, feedings, and preparing the most lavish feast they could with the scant ingredients in his fridge and pantry. Though Jules was horrified by how empty his kitchen was, he reminded her that he was a bachelor living inside a super-stocked hotel—which meant a certain co-dependence on the amenities of the main floor.

Despite a fantastic and surprisingly fun evening together playing house, they both went to bed early. Jules offered to keep Noelle's crib in her room that night, and Mitch had to bite his tongue against the suggestion that they share a bedroom. He'd known this woman for less than a day. They'd broken a lot of unspoken rules by sharing his penthouse on the first night of caring for this baby, and he didn't want to push the envelope too far.

But something about Jules felt familiar. The thought haunted him even through his sleep, showing up in the form of strange dreams and a sort of distant alertness, waiting for Jules to appear in his room or for the cry of the baby.

In the course of a day, he'd turned into a watchful surrogate father. That one night of sleeplessness was as close as he'd ever gotten to the newborn phase. Yet.

The next morning, he awoke later than normal and immediately wondered how Jules and Noelle had fared overnight. He also needed to check the weather. He pulled on pajama pants and a cotton T-shirt before wandering out into the penthouse. It was nearly seven, and the sunrise was just cresting. The entire penthouse was full of milky blue light, caught between night and dawn.

Mitch yawned, scratching at his chest as he headed for the kitchen, but stopped suddenly when he saw the swaying figure of Jules in the kitchen.

"Good morning," he said quietly. She turned to face him, Noelle's tiny body cradled in her arms. "Is everything okay?"

"She woke up for a feeding, and I'm just rocking her back to sleep," she whispered, but she looked tired. Really tired.

"Let me take her." He held out his hands so it wouldn't be a question, and Jules gladly passed her over, yawning as she did so. "You go back to bed. I've got her."

"You sure?"

Mitch nodded. Even though he wasn't entirely sure, he'd figure it out. Jules wandered off, and he kept rocking Noelle, who had her lips pinched into the cutest little pout. Her one fist

was clenched up by her face, and every so often she'd wriggle or twitch.

Mitch wandered toward the big windows in the hallway. The entire city was blanketed in white, and he stood for a long time looking out over the quiet, snow-covered city. Moments like these—bathed in the hues of dawn in mid-December, observing the city in one of its rare quiet hours—was part of what he loved most about living in this penthouse.

“If only you were awake to see this,” he whispered, looking down at Noelle. He smiled at her, but it faded quickly. Noelle might never see a dawn from a vantage point like this. Who knew where she'd end up, once Children and Family Services came to get her.

The thought stuck with him as he wandered into the living room and settled down with her in his arms. He kicked up his feet and settled into the cushions. With his baby-bearing arm propped on the armrest, he found a comfortable position easily.

He must have drifted off. A sing-song voice called out to him.

“Miiiiitch.”

He jolted awake. Noelle still slept in his arms, but Jules leaned over the back of the couch, smiling at him. She looked significantly more rested now, with bed-tousled hair and an easy grin.

“Hey. Hi. Wow.” He yawned, sitting up slightly. “What time is it?”

“Just after nine. You were sleeping like a baby. Like *Noelle*.”

He rubbed an eye, trying to orient himself. The weight of Noelle in his arms must have allowed him to drift off to sleep. Normally, he didn't sleep this late—much less go back to sleep after he was up for the day.

“How do you feel?” he asked, shifting Noelle to the flat couch and lining the side with pillows like he'd seen Jules do. “Rested?”

“Much better now.” She squeezed his shoulder. “Thanks for letting me tap out. I needed the morning nap.”

“No problem.” He pushed to standing and stretched out. “How’s the big bad snowstorm look?”

“From what I can tell from your eagle’s nest up here,” she teased, “New York is blanketed in a winter wonderland.”

Mitch wandered back to the windows to look down, and spotted cars completely covered in snow lining the streets. “Looks like the snowplows have been busy. I wonder if we can reach anyone with Child Services ?”

Jules nodded, running her fingers through her loose hair. Dressed like this—in his old Boston U T-shirt and his soft shorts—she made it hard to want to leave this sweet little cocoon. Even though they needed to get Noelle into the appropriate hands—especially if they weren’t willing to come to them—although a part of him just wanted to keep up this happy-family charade for as long as possible.

It was a nice counterbalance to the cold and lonely reality that normally filled this penthouse. A single workaholic bachelor, returning to an empty home every night.

“Let me get changed,” Jules said and hurried back down the hallway toward the guest suite.

While she changed and the baby slept, he placed a call to Child Services and was surprised to reach a human. The woman sounded harried and said if they could bring the child to them, they could take custody of her and begin looking into her family. Satisfied with that answer, Mitch got some coffee started and chowed down on a banana, saving half of it for Jules—since it was the only piece of fruit left in the penthouse. When she came back out into the kitchen, dressed in her black slacks and polo shirt from yesterday, it was hard to look away from her.

“I’m making us coffee,” he said and pulled out two mugs. “And I saved half of the last banana, in case you’re starving.”

She snickered and picked up the proffered banana. She took a big bite, chewed, and then said, “Can’t you just call room

service and have them deliver it in that fancy elevator?”

“Of course.” He served up two mugs of steaming black coffee, and then pulled out his almost-empty carton of creamer from the fridge. “But this banana is more immediate.”

Noelle started fussing then. They shared a stricken look, and Jules blurted, “You go finish getting ready so we can leave. I’ll take care of her.”

Mitch retreated with his coffee to his bedroom and got dressed for the day as quickly as he could. With the city shutdown, he chose a more casual look—gray slacks, a long-sleeve button-down and a sweater vest. Once he was ready and had rejoined Jules and Noelle—who was contentedly drinking from a bottle—in the living room, they started talking logistics.

“With most of the streets plowed, I can get us to Children and Family Services,” Mitch said, heading for the main elevator at the back of the penthouse, “and I’ve already called for a car seat.”

“You are so on top of things,” Jules murmured, slinging her purse over her shoulder as she followed him.

The comment warmed him, though he didn’t know why. Really, the two of them tackling this unexpected challenge together had gone off without a hitch. And Mitch was the type of guy to recognize things like that—the fluidity with which two people could work together. The inherent teamwork. The *unity*.

And he and Jules had it in spades. Discovering an abandoned baby together was no small occurrence, and they’d handled it with ease.

He grinned over at her as the elevator plunged downward.

He’d only known her for a day, but this woman was one of the best partners he’d ever had. He wondered whether they would have clicked so well if they’d met under more normal circumstances.

JULES

T his is for the best. This is for the best.

Jules had been repeating this line to herself ever since they'd rolled up to the office building housing the Children and Family Services office. The streets were strangely quiet making it seem more like a very early Sunday than Monday, midmorning in Manhattan. The sleek car idled at the curb as the driver waited while she and Mitch stepped carefully through the sloppy street. Mitch extricated Noelle from the car seat while she kept her long back coat tight around her. She teetered in her heels and she vowed to herself that she would never leave her apartment without making sure she wore weather-appropriate shoes again.

Dropping Noelle off with Children and Family Services *was* the best idea, she kept reminding herself. So why did Jules want to keep her around for a little longer?

“Ready,” Mitch said, holding Noelle’s extra-bundled body with ease in his arms. The sedan pulled away. Since the one thing they couldn’t procure from Denton Hotels was an infant-size winter jacket, they’d wrapped her in a blanket instead. Noelle fussed a bit against the bitterly cold air. Holiday garland lining the front door of the building moved in the whipping winds. Jules pushed into the building quickly, holding the door open for Mitch and Noelle.

“Here we are,” she murmured, her chest heaving as she acclimated to the warmer space and found the right office in the building. Compared to the quiet of the streets, the lobby

was pure commotion. Babies cried and fussed from all corners of the waiting room. Dour faces looked at them from every angle.

“Should we just...” Jules began, unsure where to start, or even who to ask.

“The service windows are over there. Well, make that service window as it only looks like one is open,” Mitch said, pointing, but he didn’t move. Next to them, a lady sighed.

Jules edged forward through the waiting people and spotted a little wheel of rip-off numbers. She grabbed one—number 3207. Her heart sank when the number above one of the reception windows clicked to 2918.

“Apparently we have three hundred people in front of us,” Jules murmured when she rejoined Mitch near the door. There were no seats left.

“They must have several more waiting rooms we’re unaware of because there’s not that many people waiting,” Mitch joked, which made her snort with laughter.

“Maybe the other ones are better.”

“If only they had VIP waiting rooms,” Mitch added. “I’d like to order a Perrier right now, but I’m not seeing the waiter.”

Jules clamped a hand over her mouth, laughter threatening to erupt. Her body shook as she struggled to contain it, and a few glares knifed their way.

A receptionist called out the number above the window when the person didn’t appear. She repeated it angrily one last time, and then the number above her flashed to the next in line, and then the next after that.

“Looks like a lot of people left without getting any help,” Jules whispered to him, leaning in close. The office was cramped, so of course this gave her the liberty to brush arms with him. She caught the scent of his cologne, and she took a deep breath enjoying the cedar scent. Between his tall and athletic frame, the easygoing smile he liked to send her way, and this *baby* in his arms, it was a constant fight to keep her head above water.

Little Noelle must have been more of a head trip than she realized, because with all these people jammed in around them, all she wanted to do was take Noelle and go back to the safety of Mitch's penthouse.

There was a loud commotion up front as someone shouted, "What do you mean, you're closing? I've been waiting for hours!" At the shout, everyone turned to see what was going on and Jules strained to hear the reply, but the other woman spoke too quietly. "I realize that it's snowing. I'm not an idiot!" came the same voice again. As one, people started getting up and heading for the door without waiting for instructions. Most didn't look happy, and Jules couldn't blame them. They'd come here hoping to get some help and now they were being turned away. So why wasn't she upset?

"Should we?" Mitch asked her. When he looked at her, there was no trace of joking.

She swallowed, looking down at little Noelle. The girl blinked lazily, looking around the room, occasionally yawning or stretching. Christmas was less than a week away and even if they were able to, the more time she spent in this drab building, the more the idea of leaving an innocent baby with a bunch of overworked, irritated strangers didn't sit well with her. Who would feed her? Who would change her diaper on time? Would she get the attention she needed? Babies her age benefitted from touch and human interactions.

The office was rapidly emptying out and Jules jerked her head into a nod, covering Mitch's hand with her own. "We can't leave her here if there's no one available to give her the care she needs, especially at Christmas. It would be too cruel."

"That's what I was thinking." Mitch glanced around the room, then jerked his head toward the door. "Let's go."

Jules buttoned up her coat and followed him out of the office as he placed a quick call to the driver. Frigid wind blasted them again once they hit the pavement. A few moments later, the sedan pulled up, and Mitch opened the back door. The sleek, leather insides were warm and toasty when they eased

Noelle into the car seat. She fussed a little as they strapped her in, but once the car was in motion she quieted.

“Wow.” Mitch raked a hand through his hair as he slowed for the first stoplight. “I’m not sure what I was expecting but that wasn’t it. And I’ll admit that I’m not altogether sure what we’re doing isn’t kidnapping.”

Jules froze at that. “Is it kidnapping if they’re closing and not offering assistance?”

Mitch had his phone out and was making a call instead of answering her. Holding up his finger for her to wait, he blew out a breath. “Donovan, Mitch here. I need to run something by you.”

Jules keyed in quickly that he was speaking with his lawyer as she listened to Mitch’s side of the conversation laying out how they found Noelle and attempted to bring her to Children and Family Services.

“Yes, I realize this is highly unorthodox, but what the hell do you want me to do? We weren’t going to abandon her again. Hold on, I’ll ask.” He paused and looked to Jules. “How old do you think she is?”

Jules looked down at Noelle. “Well, she can hold her head well, so I’d say maybe three months?”

Mitch nodded. “Did you hear that? Yeah. Three months give or take. Yes, of course. I definitely want to avoid being arrested for kidnapping. Yes. Got it. Thanks and keep in touch.”

Disconnecting the call, he huffed out a breath. “Well, the good news is that his sister works in family law, and he’s going to call her to see what we need to do to have temporary custody of Noelle until Children and Family Services can take her.”

“Okay. That’s good. Avoiding kidnapping charges would be ideal, but I still think we made the right decision. After all, the note said we should give her a good Christmas.”

“We can at least do that,” Mitch agreed, glancing over at her. There was something definite in his blue eyes, like they’d just shaken hands.

They'd take care of her for a little longer. Just until the weather cleared enough and the authorities could come get her. Silence fell over the car as Jules worked through what the next step might look like. She'd just spent the night at Mitch's penthouse, but that wasn't a feasible option for the long-term...even though she wished she could go back there and curl up in that luxurious king bed until the end of time. If that was the guest room, what was his bedroom like?

One night in his penthouse and she was willing to abandon her own life and fall into his lap of luxury. It wasn't just the amenities. Mitch was the type of man she wanted to know more about. Their night together was a blur of conversation and caring for the baby, but it didn't seem right for it to end now.

But it had to. Because soon enough, she'd return to her own life, in her own apartment, alone. But she'd remember their time together for years to come. At least until her mother found out. Then the lectures would begin. Rich playboys were never the right choice because it would always end in heartbreak, her mother would remind her. And meeting Mitch seemed like the capstone of this lesson she'd been learning her entire life.

Just because they'd stumbled upon Noelle together didn't mean they had to take care of her together.

It was time for her to go home.

"You know, I think I can handle things from here," she said. "I can take her back to my place and keep an eye on her. I know you've probably got a lot going on as the COO and being short-staffed at the hotel."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Between the two of us, I've got more experience with kids. So it'll be easier for me. I'll keep prepping for the gala, too. Does the hotel have a list of local sitters or nannies?"

"We do. I'll have it for you tomorrow. And I can send you whatever you need—"

She waved him off, feeling slightly disappointed in her own suggestion but knowing it was the right path. She needed to get back into her own orbit. No basking in his expensive cologne or ogling his impossible view. “We packed most of her stuff into the car, so I’ll take what’s there and figure out the rest.”

“You’re *positive*?”

“Yeah. I don’t live too far from here—you can just drop me off. I’ll work from home and send you drafts of any design changes and the proposed program, and then plan on returning to the hotel Thursday to supervise the actual setup in the ballroom.”

Mitch nodded, but doubt clouded his face. “Okay. Just let us know where to go.”

Jules guided the driver through the streets of Manhattan toward her apartment. As they drove, she prepped herself for becoming a temporary single mom of an infant. Definitely not what she envisioned she’d be doing, and she really had no idea how long baby Noelle would be with her. Presumably a couple of days, at least. Long enough for her to become increasingly attached to her. That much she knew. Then she could go back to her regularly scheduled program. Single working woman with a small group of friends and the occasional night out for martinis and one much-needed vacation per year.

Great.

“It’s right here.” Jules pointed once he pulled onto her street and helped him find a place to double-park outside her walk-up. When the car stopped moving for more than a few seconds, Noelle started fussing.

“We’d better hurry,” Jules said, hurrying out of the car.

“She sure likes riding in the car.” Mitch frowned, shoving his hands in his pockets as he came around to the side of the car as she unstrapped Noelle. “We can keep driving around if it’ll help.”

“No. I’ve got it. She’ll calm down once we’re inside.”

“You two go on upstairs,” Mitch said, shooing her toward the front door. “I’ll bring up the stuff.”

“Okay. I’m on the second floor, first door on the left,” Jules said, and then hurried inside. Once she was in the calm hallway of her building, the familiar scents of caramelized onion and cleaning agent drifting through the hall, she counseled herself to be relieved.

This was home. Here she was.

And wasn’t she happy?

She looked down at Noelle, who looked up at her with clear and vibrant eyes. Big baby blues that zapped her to attention.

Like finally, Noelle was really *seeing* her.

Having the baby in her arms forced Jules to acknowledge that coming back to this place wasn’t returning to a safe haven. It wasn’t the home sweet home she wanted it to be.

But it was all she had.

And it would have to do.

MITCH

Mitch dragged his feet as he unloaded the car. His stomach had formed a tight knot, and he couldn't say exactly why, only that leaving Jules here with the baby seemed like a very bad idea.

It wasn't that he didn't trust her or that he didn't believe this was a safe place. No, she lived in a fine neighborhood. Jules was definitely the more capable one of the two of them, when it came to taking care of a baby, there was no denying that.

Still, it seemed wrong for her to do all the work while he got to go back to his life. Part of him wanted to be able to spend time with Noelle until she was officially out of their care. They'd discovered her together—they should care for her together.

It was some obscure ethical violation to shove all the responsibility onto Jules's shoulders.

He closed the trunk without removing the diaper bag and pack-and-play and hurried up to Jules's apartment. She'd left the door cracked, and he pushed inside cautiously. The place was homey but sparsely decorated. Spartan furniture dotted a small living room, and cardboard boxes lined the wall as if she'd just moved in and was still unpacking.

"Hey." He went over to the couch where Jules was unwrapping Noelle from the blankets. Jules glanced up at him.

"Where's all the stuff?"

Mitch cleared his throat, easing onto the couch next to her. "Listen. I have an idea."

“What’s that?”

He worked his jaw back and forth, wondering where on a scale from one to insane this suggestion might fall. But strange times called for stranger measures. And maybe this was just the unexpected way he could give Noelle the Christmas her desperate parent wanted for her. Not that she’d remember it at her age. But he would and a part of him wanted it far more than he was ready to admit.

While Mitch lived a life of privilege, there were some things he was missing in his life. After his mother died, they’d tried to maintain the Christmas spirit that had been so important to her, but as they got older, the little details that were once so central this time of year seemed to fall away.

His brother Josh had found the love of his life in Amelia last Christmas when he managed to acquire the Cedar Grove Hotel and Spa, and he was busy making new memories. Mitch would never confess it to him, but he felt envious of his brother’s happiness. Maybe what he needed was a little extra Christmas spirit. He knew just how to get it.

“I think you and Noelle should come back to the penthouse.” He ran his thumb over his knuckles as he met Jules’s gaze. Surprisingly, she wasn’t looking as shocked or horrified as he expected. “It’s a little unconventional, I know, but that way, we can *both* care for Noelle. And simultaneously work on the gala plans. Besides, I can give Noelle a good Christmas. Both of you, really.” He paused, scraping his teeth over his bottom lip as he awaited any sort of firm reaction from her. “What do you think?”

Jules cleared her throat, smoothing the swaddling blanket over Noelle’s chest. “Well...I don’t know.”

“We have everything at the hotel. Everything you could possibly need. And I have to admit, I wouldn’t mind spending more time with Noelle, since we won’t know how long she’ll be with us.” He ran his fingers over Noelle’s little arm as she punched a tiny fist up out of her swaddle. Clearly his swaddling skills weren’t the best if the baby could get out of it.

“It’s your call, but just think how easy your commute to work will be if you don’t have leave the hotel.”

A strange smile drifted over her face. “So you want me to be your roommate until the gala?”

He laughed. “Sure. Or after, if you wanted to stay through Christmas.” He looked around at her apartment, which looked sterile without any decorations up. “The hotel is far more festively decorated and our chef puts out an amazing Christmas dinner complete with my mother’s chocolate cake. What do you say? Want to be holiday roommates?”

“And nobody in the hotel will think it’s strange if a random woman and a random baby just start...living with you?”

“Not the strangest thing to grace the doors of my penthouse. Besides, a temporary but beautiful wife and child will make the holidays more bearable.”

The words popped out of his mouth before he could think better of them. Jules’s brow arched. “Upgraded already from roommates to wife and child? That was quick.”

Heat crept under the collar of his shirt. “You know what I mean.”

“So what are the stranger things that have graced the doors of your penthouse? If a sudden family isn’t the weirdest thing.”

He paused, tilting his head in thought. “Okay, this might be the weirdest thing. But my point still stands. We’ll be more effective working together. And if the weather continues to be cold and snowy, you won’t have to worry about commuting.”

Jules smiled and nodded. “You’re right. It does make sense. Let’s do it.”

A grin spread across his face, and warmth bubbled up inside his chest. This was absolutely the wildest thing he’d ever suggested—ever stumbled upon—but damn, it felt *right*.

As he waited for Jules to pack a bag and get the baby ready to go outside again, his mind swirled with thoughts. She brought up a good point about the temporary wife and kid living in his penthouse. People absolutely would notice—everyone took a

high interest in who and what came up and down the elevators to his apartment. It was only natural, he supposed. As a thirty-something eligible bachelor in Manhattan, his name came up frequently in the tabloids, and women often courted him aggressively.

He could have anything and anyone he wanted within the world of women, but he rarely indulged. That didn't mean he didn't sometimes dip his toes into the waters—but really, he was too busy for a proper relationship. Or even a superficial one, which he'd tried once. After that spectacular but beautiful failure with a woman he'd tried to keep around for public events and “being seen,” he realized that he needed to hold off on dating until he reached the pinnacle of his career. Family and relationship stuff could come after he reached the top.

And he was damn close to that top. Especially if his father made the announcement Mitch was expecting at the Christmas Gala.

Once Jules and Noelle were back in the car, anxiety started churning in his gut. Thinking about the gala always tied him up in knots. It wasn't about the event planning. He'd already seen Jules's plans and approved of them but rather, the cycling worry about whether his father was finally prepared to hand over the reins.

Mitch had been preparing for this position since college. And one of the hardest parts about his climb was his father Mitchell Senior. The man had exceedingly high standards, but not just in business. In every aspect of life. Since Mitch's mom had passed, his father had turned into even more of a hardass. And really, he could understand. The man was filling a void with work and perfectionism.

But that need for control impacted his family as well as it bled into every aspect of Mitch, his brother Josh, and their cousin Chris's lives. For Mitch personally, his father had always been extremely vocal about who Mitch allowed on his arm. It was Victorian-style classism; only the best and most-educated women could have a place in Mitch's life. Anything less than that was simply unacceptable.

Things were different for his younger brother Josh. He'd shown no interest in taking over the company. If anything, quite the opposite. Not only did he get the girl, but he also got his dream job and home in Cedar Grove, which at this time of year, looked like something out of a Hallmark Christmas movie. Then there was Chris. While he'd been raised alongside the brothers after his parents died, his cousin had never shown any interest in working for Mitchell Senior.

Not for the first time, Mitch thought about what it would be like to walk away from Denton Hotels and do something entirely different. He hesitated to imagine what the blowback would be from his father. As it was, once he found out what was going on, he'd be furious, and Mitch worried that he would pull back from his planned big announcement. Which meant that anything longer than temporary with Jules and Noelle would be positively disastrous.

Still, he wanted to allow himself this little respite from his regular life. Bringing in Jules and Noelle promised to make the holidays a lot more interesting. And even though he had it all—anything a person could want—there was one thing he was sorely lacking in life.

Warmth.

JULES

Tuesday

Jules yawned as she stumbled out of the bedroom in the bleary morning hours. This was day three in the penthouse—her second morning since deciding to become Mitch’s holiday roommate, or wife, depending on how you looked at it—and it still seemed unreal. Using this place as her remote office was one thing; cohabiting with Mitch the COO hottie was another altogether.

She walked around with a constant lady boner in this place. In just three days, she’d come to appreciate all his different phases. Work Mitch, who wore the impeccable suits. Relaxed, After-Dinner Mitch, who unbuttoned the work shirt and rolled up the cuffs of his sleeves. And then there was Nighttime Mitch. Her favorite one. The guy who wore those cotton tees and soft shorts and had an easy smile that lit her up inside.

All those Mitches were the man of her dreams, so it was hard to choose which one she was more attracted to. And each time she caught herself fantasizing about him, while feeding Noelle or working on the gala planning, she tried to stop herself.

But it didn’t stop her from masturbating in the shower each morning, thinking *exclusively* about what he might look like under those clothes.

Blue-gray light filtered through the huge windows overlooking Manhattan. Noelle had woken up for a feeding, and now Jules needed some water. On her way to the kitchen, she heard some strange grunting.

Ts....ts....nngh. Ngh.

She paused midstride, her entire body going rigid as she struggled to identify the strange noise. What the actual hell?

Nnngh....fff.

She whipped around, trying to determine where it was even coming from. At night, the penthouse had a sepulchral air, completely cut off from the outside world save for the stunning view of the city. It wasn't like most rooms in a hotel, where you could hear the showers of your neighbor or the hurried footsteps of children above or below your room.

In here, sound didn't seem to enter or escape. Which made this even stranger.

Jules tried to follow the noise, and it led her toward Mitch's side of the penthouse. She poked her head down the hallway to his bedroom, and the noises grew louder. Now there was huffing. Definite huffing. Light spilled out of an open doorway farther down, and she crept toward it.

She poked her head into the doorway, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the bright light filling the room. She stared directly into a floor-to-ceiling mirror stretching across the opposite wall.

And there was Mitch. Bent into a very awkward triangle pose.

Shirtless. Sweaty. And impossibly muscled.

Their gazes met in the reflection of the mirror, and shock crested his face. A second later, he tumbled out of his pose, landing on his ass. *Hard.*

She put a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggles. "Are you okay?"

Mitch sat up, draping his arm over a bent knee. He rubbed his face before dropping onto his back and groaning.

"I'm fine. Believe it or not."

"Were you doing *yoga*?"

A helpless laugh escaped him. "I was."

Damn. There was something endearing about this perfect, rich hottie who *also* did yoga in his private gym—and sometimes failed at a pose. She bit her lip, trying to rein in her mind before she fell into the abyss of hopeless attraction. “I’m sorry for butting in. I didn’t mean to interrupt or make you fall over. I just—I heard some noises, and I wasn’t sure...”

More laughter shook out of him. “Oh god. I can only imagine what you were probably thinking.”

That it sounded like you were masturbating? Heat scorched through her cheeks, and she tried to push the thought away. That probably was not what he was getting at. Still, now that her mind had gone there, it was nearly impossible to reel it back in.

“No, no, I just...I was...” She had nothing available as an excuse or recovery. “I wanted to make sure everything was okay. You know, it could have been the neighbors...” Better to stop while she was ahead. Divert. *Divert*. “You looked good. Your form, I mean. The form of your body...like, the posture.” God, this was getting worse. More embarrassing by the second. “Like, your teacher would be proud, you know?”

Mitch propped up on his elbows and looked at her with a curious smirk. His abs popped out in hard ridges sitting like that, and she couldn’t rip her gaze off him. Not even if a bomb exploded in the kitchen.

“Do you do yoga?”

“Yeah. Sometimes.” She shrugged. “Mostly when there’s wine involved.”

He laughed again and pushed to standing. He grabbed a white towel on a nearby rack and ran it over the back of his neck as he approached her.

When he got close enough, she remembered that she was here. Like physically present in her just-woken-up glory. Mitch’s perfect form had been so distracting that she’d forgotten all about herself. Dressed in booty shorts and a skimpy tank top—one glance in the mirror confirmed the embarrassing reality. Her nipples had hardened into two obvious points beneath her

shirt. She might as well just spread herself out now and ask him to mount her.

“Do you work out other than that?” he asked, tilting his head.

Now her cheeks were flaming; they had to be. She crossed her arms over her chest and affected the most casual stance she could muster. “Uh, yeah...well...I mean not really.” Her brain was officially dissolved. He stopped a few steps away from her, his hands on his hips, that little white towel dangling over his shoulders. God, this man was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

“That’s surprising.”

“I know, I know—a Manhattanite who doesn’t work out.”

“No, I mean, you have a killer figure. I thought you hit the gym all the time.”

She jerked her gaze to his in shock. He couldn’t be serious. “Wh—” She shook her head. “You’re kidding right?”

His brows drew together. “No. I’m serious. Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately?” He swung around, pointing at their reflections.

She caught her deer-in-headlights look and straightened, trying to wipe some of the shock off her face. “Well...thanks. My overworked and underfed lifestyle must be really paying off.”

He smirked. “Don’t tell me you’re the type of woman who only orders salad at restaurants.”

“Salad as a *starter*,” she clarified. “Which may or may not be followed by an enormous steak.”

The smirk blossomed into a grin. There was something cocky about him now. Like catching him in his own oasis, messing him up and making him fall, had cracked something open between them and now the truth could pour out. He thought she was hot. That’s all she’d heard—that’s all that mattered.

And now her curiosity—as well as her vanity—was aroused.

If he thought she was hot, what else might happen?

“You could have told me. I wouldn’t have gone out of my way trying to arrange those vegetarian masterpieces the past two

days.”

It was true—Mitch had made a big deal about bringing in healthy food from the hotel kitchen.

“Hey, everything has been delicious. I have no complaints. None at all. But I wouldn’t mind a healthy slab of meat once in a while.”

He laughed, his gaze raking boldly over her. “I guess that’s what I get for trying to impress you.”

Now her entire body prickled with awareness. That gaze of his might as well have broken skin.

“Impress me?” His attention made her bold now. That undercurrent of attraction wasn’t only on her end; this morning confirmed it. “Why would you have to impress me? I’m just your little ol’ holiday roommate.”

He scoffed, taking another step closer. Beads of sweat rolled down his chest, and the very sight of him was like something from a fever dream. “Trust me. There’s plenty I need to impress here.”

Now her cheeks were flaming. They had to be. Her pussy clenched from wanting him nearer, wanting him *on her*. Like she’d imagined in the shower yesterday morning...and the morning before that, if she was being honest.

“I don’t know about that,” she said, her voice coming out shaky. “If there’s anyone who needs to do some impressing, it’s me. You look like a Gucci ad. I’m more of a Target ad. A *clearance* Target ad.”

A laugh rocketed out of him, and he closed the distance between them. “If you’re a clearance Target ad, then you’re the deal of the century.”

She laughed, but the knot rising in her throat knocked the sound sideways. He caressed the side of her arm with his fingertips. But not in a friendly way. Not in a hey-we’re-just-making-jokes-in-the-weight-room way. No, his touch told her that he wanted things to go further.

Jules got lost in his gaze. His caress was a command, and hell if she'd disobey it.

She pushed onto her tiptoes, urged forward by lust and the early hour and his near nakedness, and then their lips were touching. His mouth covered hers hungrily, eagerly, as if he'd been thinking about this kiss for days, too. They kissed again and again. His big hands cupped the sides of her face, and then a little whimper escaped her, unbidden, uncontrollable.

The scent of him, the feel of him against her, it was almost too much. She'd never been kissed like this, and she could hear her mother in her head screaming that it was the trappings of luxury that had her floating in space.

But no. This man's lips, which he parted so that his tongue could slip through—they were velvet and heat and confidence. When the kiss broke and he pulled back, his eyes were clouded with lust. She recognized that look, because it was the same thing that swirled through her—drugged by what just happened.

"Holy..." she managed.

He wet his bottom lip, his gaze stuck on her mouth. "Mm-hmm."

"I've never been kissed like that," she whispered, then regretted admitting it. "At seven a.m.," she hurried to add.

"Me neither," he said. "And I should add, *you* kissed *me*."

She laughed but stopped short once she caught the tones of a wail. Noelle. Probably screaming her lungs out, if she could hear it this far away from the bedroom.

"Oh no! Noelle! Hang on." Jules rushed out of the weight room, heart in her throat as she hurried to check on the baby. Back in the bedroom, Noelle was wriggling and fussing, so Jules scooped her up into her arms. Mitch entered a moment later, looking concerned.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Just crying. Not sure." She lifted her up and patted her back, in case it was gas. Almost immediately, the cutest little burp

erupted from her.

“That was it,” Mitch said, reaching out to stroke Noelle’s cheek. “Now she’s a happy baby again.”

He held out his hands, and Jules passed Noelle off, grinning as he rocked her and cooed at her like any loving daddy would. As always, her chest went tight as she watched him. He would make a great dad someday, if he ever had kids.

Hell, the two of them would be great parents together. They’d already proven their teamwork and excellent cohabitation skills. It was only three days in, but it seemed promising. Maybe this was a sign—she and Mitch were a good fit.

Except she needed to stop thinking these crazy thoughts. Intense, early-morning kisses and three days of sharing a penthouse didn’t mean anything. She was here to work and share the responsibility of caring for Noelle.

That was it.

Why was that so hard to remember?

MITCH

Mitch felt as though he was being reprimanded by the school principal as he tried not to squirm during the Zoom call with his lawyer and his family law expert sister, who was presently enjoying a cruise with her family.

“Mr. Denton, you are damn lucky Children and Family Services is so backlogged or you and your friend Ms. Cardwell would probably be arranging for bail,” Jenna Miller told him as she scowled at him from where she was sitting.

Mitch cringed outwardly knowing his father would have a fit if that happened. “We did reach out for help but we either couldn’t get through or they were closing.”

Jenna held up her hand. “I get it. I do. But the law is the law and if they wanted to go after you, they could have. They *still* can,” she emphasized.

“Well, shit. What do we do?” While he didn’t regret bringing baby Noelle back to the hotel, he also didn’t want to go to jail.

“Well, as luck would have it, the director for CFS is an old friend. I’ve already spoken with her, and they’ve agreed to allow the baby to remain in your custody while they try to track down any family she might have. I understand you’re cooperating with the police?”

Mitch nodded hard. “We have. We’ve provided them with CCTV footage of the front of the hotel where the nativity scene is set up and I’ve instructed security to cooperate immediately if they need anything else.”

The lawyer turned at some noise at her end and muted herself while she appeared to have a conversation with someone off camera. Turning her audio back on, she told him. “Excellent. The baby will need to remain at the hotel until her family is located or alternate accommodations are arranged. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a vacation to enjoy.”

Mitch started to say thanks, but she’d already left the meeting. Sitting back in his chair, he blew out a breath. “Wow, Donovan, your sister. Tell her thank you when you next speak with her.”

“She’s good, isn’t she? All right. I’m out. Try not to find any more children, Denton,” Donovan said before leaving the meeting.

Mitch closed his eyes and took several long, deep breaths. Given the dressing down he’d just received, he knew he was damn lucky things turned out the way they did. And he probably shouldn’t be so ridiculously excited that Noelle would be sticking around a bit longer. That little girl had grown on him in such a short amount of time that his penthouse was going to be much too quiet once she left.

He looked up when there was a knock at his door. “Come in.” Mitch smiled when Jules walked in.

“How did the call go?” she asked as she set down her laptop and binder.

“Better than expected. She called in a favor or three and Noelle will remain here while they try to find her family or arrange other accommodations for her. Oh and we won’t be arrested. Yet.”

“Well, that’s good, because I look terrible in orange,” she told him as she set up on the other side of his desk.

Mitch couldn’t help chuckling as he looked at her dressed in black again. “I’m pretty sure you would look amazing nude.” He froze before blurting out, “Shit. What I meant to say is that you’re so beautiful, you make the clothes. The clothes don’t make you.”

“Nice save, Denton. Now tell me more about how you think I’m beautiful,” she said, lifting her eyebrows and giving him an expectant look.

He could feel his face flushing as he suddenly found himself tongue-tied. “Uh. I mean. Well. You do know you’re incredibly beautiful, right? I mean, you must be every guy’s wet dream and I really need to stop talking now. Where’s Noelle?” He paused again and looked at her, sure that she would be pissed at him for talking about her like that. He was relieved when he saw her laughing.

“First. I am not every guy’s wet dream, but thank you for the compliment. And second, she’s with Angie in the hotel daycare. So how about we pretend you didn’t just say all that and we get to work?” Her grin was contagious and Mitch found himself smiling as he agreed with her.

They spent the next few hours hammering out the last of the details for the gala. Well Jules was. Mitch kept finding himself daydreaming.

He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the kisses they’d shared in his weight room that morning or the fumbled flirting he did here in his office, which made concentration difficult. Every time he glanced up at Jules, all he could see were those perfect pink lips. The way they’d smashed against his like she was *starving* for him. Naked, of course. Because he’d opened his big mouth in an attempt to respond to her self-deprecating comment and ended up putting his foot in his mouth.

He was thankful to be sitting behind his desk because his cock had remained at half-mast since this morning, and even threats of arrest weren’t enough to calm down his simmering arousal. Not with her so near.

He cleared his throat, trying to snap himself out of the Jules fog. He tapped his foot, brushing something, then caught Jules’s shy gaze flit his way.

“Sorry,” he said.

“I thought you were playing footsie.”

He grinned, then brushed his foot against hers again. A blush stained her cheek. Man, this made his work day a lot more fun. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

Not like finding an abandoned baby and asking a stranger to move in with him had ever been on his to-do list before.

"Careful there," she warned.

"Or what? You'll kiss me again?" His grin widened, and he sought out her foot, brushing it intentionally along her heel.

"Exactly," she warned, her pretty lips puckering. Then someone knocked on the door.

"Mitch?" his assistant Rose asked, poking her head in. "Oh, good. No new babies this time."

Mitch laughed, waving her in. "See what you miss when you can't make it into the office because of a storm? What's up?"

"We have a problem." His heart sank when she said that. Rose knew him and his approach to work better than anyone, and over the years she'd come to be his right-hand woman. So when she said they had a problem, usually it was serious. "The toy shipment for the Children of the World exhibit for the gala just arrived, but a lot of it is...how do I say it? Unfinished."

Mitch furrowed his brow. "What now?"

"The wooden toys are just...*blank*. It's the damndest thing." She shook her head and sighed.

"Let's go check this out, shall we?" He stood, looking pointedly at Jules before heading out of the office. The most recent shipment had been set aside in the delivery bay at the back of the hotel. The box had already been opened, most likely when Rose checked it out, and sure enough—nearly half the toys were completely bereft of a design. Just naked wood objects.

"What the hell?" Jules asked, picking up a very large red top in one hand and an unfinished top in another. "And nobody noticed this?"

Mitch chewed on the inside of his lip as he thought about what to do. The gala was this Saturday. Sending this back in

exchange for another shipment was out of the question. The company they'd chosen for this task required a three week turn-around on all orders, and he suspected a replacement order would be the same.

"I'm definitely getting a refund," Mitch said. "But returning the toys is out of the question because we won't get them replaced in time. So the question is how to rectify the situation."

Jules picked up a few other toys—a horse, a house, and a cow—and said, "Why don't we just paint them ourselves?"

Mitch was quiet as he considered the idea. She picked up another finished toy. "Most of the painting is really basic. Two, three, maybe four colors max." She shrugged, looking up at him. "I think we could knock these out ourselves. Or, worst case scenario—set up a toy painting station for the older kids to occupy themselves. One of the staff could oversee it, just to make sure nobody goes around painting walls or dresses. What do you think?"

In an instant, all his tension dissipated. She was right—and more than that, he was excited about her ideas. "That's great, Jules. Let's see how many unfinished toys there are first, then we can decide which direction to go." They unpacked the box, laying out all the toys according to their level of completion. They counted one hundred fifty unfinished toys.

"How many kids are we expecting for the gala?" Jules asked.

"Probably fifty or so. Not many. And usually never little ones like Noelle. I'd say, ages five and up."

"Perfect. So let's paint about fifty of these ourselves and leave the rest as a fun activity station for the kids." She assessed the laid-out toys, nodding, like she'd internally confirmed the decision.

"So that would be a hundred unfinished toys we're leaving," he said.

"Right. Which means that some kids can paint two or three. You never know which kid is gonna want to paint one of each shape. It's a thing, I promise."

Mitch looked over at her, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms. Not here in the loading bay, where everyone would see them. Back in his office...maybe. But up in the penthouse? Definitely.

He was so relieved he could have skipped back to the office as they had a dock worker haul the toys on a cart behind them. Not because the toy problem was resolved. No, the wooden toys were honestly the least of his worries.

It was the fact that he had a problem solver at his side. It felt good to have someone around him, willing to get creative and find a path forward. He was used to operating solo, with just Rose beyond his office door and his father dropping in with demands or requests.

Having Jules at his side felt like having a partner in the messy business of running an empire. The toys were inconsequential. It was her attitude that really got him.

Mitch called for supplies and sent out a call for other staff members to help with the painting. He divvied them up into piles of twenty, and instructed managers to hand out the tasks to their willing employees. When the paints and tarp arrived at his office, they got to work painting their selection of toys. The first ones were a little shaky—unsure lines, uneven eyes on the horse, a very weird grimace on the nutcracker—but by the time they hit their rhythm, the toys were coming out just as professional as the originals.

Better, even. Because they were made by them, right here in his office, amid laughter and jokes and plenty of references to those steamy kisses that morning in the weight room.

Once they were finished and it was almost quitting time for the day, Mitch noticed Jules had a streak of paint on her face. He reached over to wipe it off, but only spread more blue paint over the bridge of her nose as a result.

He laughed. “Oops. Messed that up.”

She feigned insult and twisted around to look in the mirror near his desk. He could see himself in the reflection, and he

crept closer to her over the tarp they'd laid out on the carpeted floor.

She gasped when he came up behind her, their gazes locking in the mirror.

“What is it about us and reflections?” she asked. When she turned to him, he didn't waste time. He surged forward on his hands and knees, capturing her lips in a kiss. She made that whimper noise again, the one that told him she wanted it as much as he did.

They kissed eagerly, sloppily even, until Mitch pulled back. This needed to progress to the next level.

“What—”

He pulled her to standing, covering her mouth with his once more as he guided her backwards toward his desk. He tried to push some papers out of the way but couldn't spare the attention. He hoisted her onto the desk. Something fell over, but he didn't care. She laughed through the kiss, though it faded when he pushed his hands over her knees and up the sides of her thighs. His fingertips slipped over the smooth skin of her legs. She'd worn a sharp black wraparound dress and equally sharp heels. All of which he was eager to tear off her.

Immediately.

He paused, breaking the kiss to search out a response in her gaze. His cock pulsed hard and seeking, trapped beneath the belt of his pants.

Her chest heaved, her lips kiss bitten. “Why did you stop?”

That was all the answer he needed. He grunted, jerking her by the hips, her legs splaying open and waiting, which was the final push.

They were doing this. Right here. Right now.

Mitch didn't break the kiss as he jerked his shoulders out of his suit jacket and tossed it toward his chair. It crumpled to the ground a moment later, and Mitch ran his hands over the dip in her waist, seeking the flimsy ties of her dress.

“Oh, Mitch,” she breathed out with a moan. He tugged at the knot once, then again. It came undone, and the front of her dress spilled open, revealing the gorgeous landscape beneath. He finally pulled himself away from her lips, but the view was worth it. He pushed the ends of her dress farther open. Creamy curves greeted him in matching black panties and bra. Lush thighs. Breasts that nearly spilled out of the cups of her bra. He cupped one in his hand, meeting her gaze.

“Should we...you know...*here*?” She swallowed, gaze darting all over his face. “In your office?”

A knock interrupted them, and she jolted, grabbing for the ties of her dress. Mitch swore under his breath, raking a hand through his hair before scooping up his jacket. He had just slipped it on, Jules standing nearby smoothing down the front of her dress, when Rose poked her head in.

“Still no babies,” Mitch joked. He could hear the strain in his voice. The strain of being interrupted while Jules’s legs were wrapped around him. “Come in.”

“Another delivery needs your signature,” Rose said, pointing at him. “And the front desk needs you to come look at their toy painting contributions, because apparently, someone got a little slap-happy with the emerald green.”

Mitch clenched his jaw. He glanced at Jules, finding the same contained heat in her gaze. A wave of understanding shivered between them.

They’d finish this later.

JULES

As soon as Jules arrived at Mitch's penthouse that evening with Noelle in her arms, the buzz of the service elevator rang through the apartment.

Mitch poked his head into the foyer, where she was just setting down the diaper bag.

"Don't move," he said, holding up a finger as he breezed toward the kitchen. Jules froze, not like he'd be seriously watching her to see if she moved a muscle. A moment later footsteps scuffed through the penthouse, and a feminine voice trailed behind Mitch's booming greeting.

"Here she is," Mitch said, gesturing toward her and the baby. A smiling employee stepped into the foyer after him—the same ruddy blonde who had watched Noelle yesterday with the hotel's babysitting services.

"Oh." Jules offered a smile. "I just came from the babysitting services."

"Angie's going to stay up here while we go out," Mitch said, waving her forward. When she stepped close enough, he pressed a kiss to Noelle's forehead. Jules found Mitch's gaze, and the heat there made her breath evaporate. For a moment, it felt like he was going to kiss *her* too. Or maybe she was just hungry for another one of his kisses.

"Where are we going?" she forced out past the confusion.

"Out." Mitch's smile turned mischievous. "I'll take the baby, and you go get ready."

“But what—”

“There’s a package waiting for you on the bed,” he said, easing Noelle into the crook of his elbow. He sent her a wink, and Jules drifted forward, feeling like she was floating on air.

The nanny was here. Her pretend husband and baby daddy had the baby safely in his arms. And now they had a mysterious night “out” together.

She felt like a pauper-turned-princess in one of those corny Christmas movies. Like Mitch had swept her away in his carriage and now they were about to meet the King of England or something. She hummed to herself as she indulged in the fantasy, just for a little bit. Even though the rational side of her was reminding loud and clear—*don’t get used to this. Rich men never stay around. You’re just a plaything to him.*

A large white box sat on her neatly made bed. Excitement prickled through her arms, and she ran a finger over the corner. A stamp in the middle read *Elle’Gance* in a swirly font. She pulled off the top, finding a neat nest of tissue paper inside.

Her heart started racing, but she didn’t know why. She’d never gotten a gift like this before. The excitement was almost too much to bear. What could it possibly be? And how could he possibly know anything about what she liked?

She pushed her hands inside the tissue paper, fingertips meeting something silky below. She tugged the fabric out of the box, gasping as an elegant evening gown presented itself. Mossy green and delicate, and probably the most expensive thing she’d ever touched.

A simple tag was pinned to the strap of the dress, emblazoned with the store’s name and nothing else. Of course there was no price tag, though she was dying to know what something like this cost. She turned it over in her hands a few times, admiring the scooping neckline, the slight ruching below the waist. Mitch knocked softly on the door.

“What do you think?”

“I think I’m not worthy.” She laughed, holding it up again.

“More than worthy. Trust me—I know these things.” He cocked a grin. “Put it on and let’s go. I want to take us out to dinner. To celebrate our hard work and not being arrested today.”

She smiled, her throat clamping shut for some reason. Mitch excused himself, and she slipped out of her work clothes. The dress settled with a soft *shush* over her shoulders. Somehow, he’d known her size. Maybe from sight alone. Or maybe one of his minions had come to spy on her clothes here in the guest bedroom.

With this type of luxurious lifestyle. Who knew what Mitch’s motives were. What sort of excess he truly had at his disposal.

Oddly, the thoughts didn’t settle as strangely as she’d been bred to expect. Even with her mother’s bad experiences whispering in her ear, it was hard to say no to this. What was the harm in having a little fun? Just dipping her toe in silky comfort and a night out on the town?

Jules hurried to dress, her heart racing as she touched up her makeup, curled her hair into soft waves, and slipped her feet into a pair of peep-toe heels. When she came into the living room, freshly spritzed with perfume and feeling every inch an elegant woman, Mitch was making faces at Noelle.

He glanced up at her, a smile on his face. “Come over—oh, wow.”

She fought a shit-eating grin. Yeah, she felt like *oh wow* on legs. “You like it?”

Mitch blinked a few times, his gaze stuck on her. “Like is an understatement.”

Heat crept into her cheeks. This would be a very fun evening of make-believe. “It’s so lovely. I absolutely adore it. Thank you.”

Angie beamed at Jules from her spot on the couch. “Seriously beautiful dress. Little Noelle and I will be here when the two of you lovebirds get back.”

Jules replayed those words in her head no fewer than a hundred times as she and Mitch went through the motions of

leaving. Finding her purse, slipping on her winter coat, calling for the driver to meet them out front. Once the two of them were alone in the elevator, Mitch's gaze turned to pure fire.

"I knew this dress would be a test."

"Oh yeah?" She inched closer to him, and he caught her by the waist. "What sort of test?"

"A test of how long it will stay on you."

His words scorched through her, and the space between them shrank. When he spoke next, his breath tickled her lips. "I intend to finish what we started today in my office."

A weak laugh escaped her. "So, this is just a ploy to get into my pants?"

"Only if you want me there."

She melted a little bit, and he took the opportunity to capture her lips in a kiss. Hot, needy kisses erupted from the first one. She whimpered as his mouth claimed hers over and over again. By the time the elevator dinged at the first floor, her panties were soaked and she wasn't sure she could make it through dinner without getting what she needed first.

Mitch awakened something in her that she didn't quite understand. It wasn't the trappings of luxury—though those were nice. Something about his presence, the masculinity that rolled off him in waves, drove her wild. Every kiss spurred the need for ten more. Every touch of his fingers to her skin made her desperate for him to wrap his arms around her.

He made her needy and primal. Eager to submit to her baser desires.

The elevator doors whooshed open, and they breezed out, the epitome of refinement. They didn't hold hands as they strode through the lobby, though her fingers itched to find the heat of his hand. She fought a grin the whole way as they walked past guests and wove around families oohing and aahing at the enormous Christmas tree, which was now fully decorated with all the special ornaments. This felt like a secret. Like a game that only they were playing while the rest of the world was none the wiser.

Had her mother played like this with her rich suitors? This didn't seem so bad. In fact, it was *fun*.

Until you find out about his secret wife and kids halfway across the world.

Her mother's voice slammed through her, jostling her out of her great mood. When they stepped out into the frigid air of downtown Manhattan, all her thoughts blew away in the wind. She wrapped her coat around her, sliding into the backseat of the car with Mitch behind her. Once the toasty car was on the road, she snuggled into Mitch's side.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

She scoffed. "You and your surprises."

"They're one of life's great pleasures." His mysterious smile warmed her, and looking up at him in this moment was something she wanted to remember forever. Maybe it was the sparkle in his eye. The promise of a great evening. Or maybe it was the promise of what might simply exist between them. Where this make-believe mommy-and-daddy time could lead.

She didn't like thinking about the future with him, because she knew it was a reckless idea. This thing between them—it was just convenience. It was for the holidays. It was because of *Noelle*.

So why would she think that anything more could exist? After Christmas, they'd be back to their normal lives. Normal routines. Sans baby, the gala behind them. That's all this was. A holiday dalliance. Something to pass the time and excite the senses.

She needed to remember that.

Ten minutes later, the car pulled up to the front doors of a little restaurant named GLOW. Mitch held the door open for her, and a cozy brick and steel-beam space awaited them.

Except the entire place was empty. Every single table bare, not even set or waiting for guests. A hostess greeted them a moment later, leading them toward the back of the restaurant.

“Is this place like, not open yet?” she whispered as they followed her.

“I bought it out for the evening.”

Her eyes widened. Now there was another significant bump to an already-expensive evening. First the dress, then the private rental of an entire restaurant? Her mind spun as the hostess seated them at a small table near a crackling fireplace. On the other side of the room, a musician was just sitting down at a baby grand piano.

“Oh my god,” she hissed as they eased into their chairs. “Did you hire him too?”

His mischievous smile told her everything she needed to know.

And at this point? All she could do was soak it up. It was all so outrageous, so over the top. Maybe this was what dating a billionaire felt like. And if that was the case, she’d have a lot to get used to.

Except no. She wasn’t dating a billionaire. This was temporary.

Nothing more than a bit of fun.

But as she looked up into Mitch’s warm blue gaze, she wasn’t so sure temporary was going to be enough.

MITCH

Dinner blurred by with soft classical music and exquisite plates of gourmet food. Six courses, two bottles of wine, and one amazing evening. By the time they left GLOW, Mitch felt like he himself was glowing.

And Jules sure was. He'd never seen her so loose, so alive. Sure, the wine probably helped that. But they'd burst out into raucous laughter more times than he could even count. They were on a date because he'd made it happen—because he'd brought her here. But he suspected they would be having an equally great time almost anywhere in the city.

Even if they'd decided to stay in the penthouse and order in.

The ride back to the hotel was spent in a perma-kiss, Mitch's hands pushing the flowy hem of her skirt higher and higher up her thighs. By the time the car reached the front of the hotel, his hardon was embarrassingly obvious.

"I might need to sit out here for a while," he said, wetting his bottom lip as his gaze dragged over the width of her hips. He could practically feel those legs wrapped around him again. And he was dying for it. "But I can't look at you for another second or I'll have to do something about it."

Jules giggled, her gaze darting toward the driver. "We should go inside."

Mitch heaved a sigh, reluctant to let her out of his sight. But it was for the best. "Okay. Yes. Let's go inside."

She sent him a private smile and stepped out of the car, letting in a cold blast of air. Mitch ground his jaw, unable to watch anything other than the sway of her ass as she strutted toward the front doors. Once she was inside, he pushed out of the car and hurried after her. She had him feeling like a teenager again. One sexy look would have him covering his crotch in public.

Jules waited for him with a sly smile in the lobby, and he quickly caught up with her. He made sure to keep his distance as they walked toward the penthouse elevator.

But not because he was worried about what her touch might do to him.

Because he couldn't let spying eyes see. The infrequent staff members who came to his penthouse were one thing. They were sworn to secrecy and paid for their discretion. But the rest of the hotel staff? They loved to gossip about him, and more than a few incriminating things had leaked from his own hotel to the tabloids in earlier years. So now, he knew better than to flaunt his personal life.

The worst part wasn't even the tabloids.

It was his father.

Mitch tapped his foot as they awaited the elevator, deciding to stuff his hands inside his coat pockets, lest they wander too close to Jules. Once the doors slid open, he nearly pushed her inside. She giggled as he cornered her against the glass wall. The elevator lurched into motion.

“What would you say,” he began, running his thumb along her jawline, “if we had a little fun in here?”

“Like...get it on in the elevator?” Her voice came out a squeak.

He nodded, and her eyes went wider.

“That would be...I mean...are you sure we *can*?”

“This is my elevator,” he said, brushing his lips against hers. “My hotel. My penthouse. We can do whatever we want.”

Those words must have been the key to unlock her, because she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a hungry kiss. He backed her up against the elevator wall, hands seeking the soft lines of her thighs beneath the dress to hoist her up. When he had her cradled between his body and the unyielding wall of the elevator, a sigh escaped him.

“Enjoying this?” she mumbled through a kiss.

He grunted. “Enjoying is an understatement.” He groped behind him, fingers seeking the panel near the elevator doors. He finally ripped himself away to find the STOP button and pressed it. The car ground to a halt.

Jules giggled. “I’ve never been so naughty in an elevator before.”

He smoothed his lips along her jawline, relishing the taste of her, a mixture of sweetness and spice. “Me neither.”

“That surprises me. With this elevator at your disposal and all.”

He grunted, lifting her again, his hands getting lost in the shimmery depths of her dress. His fingertips found the warm surface of her ass cheek, and he dug in. Desire rippled through him, completely overtook him. He shifted against her. The hard ridge of his cock must have hit the right spot because her eyes fluttered shut and she moaned.

“Yeeesss, Mitch.”

Her voice was a plea he couldn’t ignore. He reached between them to undo his belt, which took longer than normal because of arousal assaulting his system. He could barely think straight with her trapped between his legs. This heady combination of lust and satisfaction would entirely undo him.

“You want more of this?” He ground his pelvis against her, and her breath hitched. Her fingernails dug into his arms as she arched against him.

“Please.” Jules squeezed her thighs around him. “Give me *all of it.*”

He fished a condom out of his pocket before pushing his pants down. They crumpled around his ankles.

“Ohhh my god.” Her hands trailed down the front of his chest, undoing the buttons along the way. Her small hands slipped inside the fabric of his shirt, and the contact of her fingertips against his skin sent chills up and down his spine. He couldn’t hide the shiver.

“*Mmm.*” A sly smile curved her lips, and just the sight of her swollen, kiss-bitten lips nearly sent him over the edge. Jules drove him wild in a way that he could barely explain. She was more than a gorgeous woman. Jules felt inexplicably like a partner. If he had stumbled upon Noelle with anyone else, where would that person have ended up?

Probably not backed up against the penthouse elevator wall.

Mitch pressed his groin against hers, his cock finding the damp crease of her panties. He sucked at his teeth, the surge of pleasure nearly toppling him. Jules moaned low.

“Please,” she breathed, her eyes fluttering shut. “I need it, Mitch.”

He tugged aside her panties, his cockhead immediately sliding into place. He could feel how wet she was. How hungry for it she was. He grunted, easing himself inside her just an inch.

“Ooooooh.” Her head dropped to his shoulder, her moan reflecting the same tension inside him. She was hot velvet around his cock, and he gritted his teeth as he sank into her. She threw back her head and it thudded against the wall, her mouth agape.

“Fuuuuck,” Jules said, but all he could manage was a groan in response.

He sank farther, until he could claim no more space inside her, and then he eased back out. All the air in his lungs disappeared in a whoosh. His mind blank and buzzing, pinpricks already crowded together along his arms and legs. Sure, it had been a while since he’d gotten laid. But with Jules, this was something else.

Their connection sent him into the stratosphere.

“You feel so...fucking good,” he breathed as he eased himself inside of her again. She pinched her eyes shut and nodded hard.

“I can’t...I can’t even...”

He wet his bottom lip, lassoing enough attention to bring his mouth to hers. She tightened her thighs around him, which increased the pressure around his cock. He grunted, stilling for a moment. He needed to get his head in the right place, or else this would be over before it even began.

“Jules,” he growled, gripping the curvy mounds of her ass. He smashed his lips against hers in a sloppy kiss, easing back out. “How am I supposed to last when you feel like this?”

She giggled lazily. “I already came three times.”

He pressed his tongue into her mouth, which sent another jolt of pleasure through him. When the kiss broke, he asked, “Really?”

“No, but fuck, I’m close.” She bucked against him, and he sank into her again. He steeled himself against another wash of pleasure, pushing him toward the edge. Mitch nibbled along the line of her jaw as he thrust in and out, each upward stroke met by her tightening muscles. Her breath came out in soft gasps at his ear as he drilled into her, all of his muscles tense from the strain of beating back his orgasm.

Her pussy clenched tight around him. A warning sign. He buried his lips in the hollow of her neck, his breath making the dip between neck and collarbone damp.

“I’m close too.” He grunted, burying himself inside of her again. His vision went spotty, the precursor to the orgasm threatening at the edges of his composure.

Jules released a gritty moan, something halfway between feminine and animalistic, and the noise undid him. When he thrust inside her again, the rushing and brightness of his orgasm flooded him. Drowning him in a sea of ecstasy. He gave his own guttural cry and stilled, his abs going rock hard as he filled the condom with his release.

His hips jerked as the residual pleasure drifted through his limbs. His lips found Jules's in a sloppy, sated kiss.

"*Mmmm.*" She was grinning through the kiss, and she was damn near dead weight in his arms.

"My thoughts exactly." He slipped himself out of her but didn't hurry to lower her to her own two feet. He liked the weight of her in his arms. Liked this messy spread in the elevator.

"One down," he said, nuzzling her neck.

"Speak for yourself," she said, her words slow like she was drunk. "I really did come twice."

"Am I that good?" He'd felt the powerful clench of her pussy around him as he came. But he wouldn't have suspected that she'd come twice.

"Mm-hmm." Her eyes drifted shut, the smile on her face a perma-grin. "First time was when you buried yourself inside me. Second time was when you came."

He swirled his tongue over the ridge of her collarbone, his cock already pricking to life again. "Well. Why don't we get upstairs and make it three, four, and five?"

Her eyes snapped open, and the sexy glint he found there was the only answer he needed.

JULES

Wednesday

Mitch had meetings most of the day, which meant that Jules had the penthouse to herself.

She hummed as she drifted through the living room, headed for the little desk facing the floor-to-ceiling window. This was her work nook—she'd christened it as such on day one—and whenever this holiday reverie ended, she'd be extra sad to give *this* aspect up.

Although now, there were a few more aspects she was hesitant to give up.

Mitch's gravely moans in her ear being one of the major ones.

A shiver ran up her spine as she recalled their epic fuck-a-thon from the night before. What had started in the elevator—once the nanny was dismissed and the baby quietly asleep in her crib—progressed from living room to kitchen to workout room to Mitch's bedroom.

And that dinner the night before? She'd never felt so doted on.

So she wanted to surprise him. Like a thank you gift, except nothing handwritten or involving a registry.

Jules planned on thanking him the only way she knew how—through cozy Christmas decorating and cooking.

Since she'd taken up residence in the penthouse, it wasn't hard to use free moments gala planning to turn her attention toward the apartment. With Christmas days away, Mitch showed a

startling lack of decoration. A place this big and amazing deserved to look *spectacular*. And with so many resources at his disposal, Mitch had no excuse not to dive headfirst into the Christmas spirit.

So Jules did some investigating, made some calls to different assistants in the hotel, and got the gears in motion. First up: a real tree. Rose had mentioned there were extra trees left from the lobby displays that they'd yet to find homes for. Then? Ornaments of all shapes and sizes, the leftovers from the lobby decorations. Once the tree was up, dressed, and lit, the place still didn't seem quite finished.

She arranged for any and all extra decorations and garland to be sent up in the service elevator as well. And sure, maybe her workday had been *primarily* spent tracking down these decorations and finding appropriate places for all of them, but it was a worthwhile surprise, one that would pair very well with the chicken roasting in the oven alongside a full tray of vegetables.

Jules knew how to make a home even homier. And that was the best gift she could give to Mitch right now.

Noelle arrived home first in the arms of the nanny. Jules received the yawning, sleepy-eyed girl with a big grin. "How was she today?"

"A breeze, as usual, but I noticed she's a bit sniffly. She might have a cold coming on."

Jules thanked the nanny, heading to the couch to give Noelle her bottle and hum her a song. Once she'd been burped and her diaper changed, Noelle's eyes drifted closed. Just as Jules was swaying her to sleep, the front door opened.

A moment later, Mitch came into the living room with wide eyes, looking around like he'd stepped into the wrong house altogether.

"What—"

"Shhh." Jules grinned, jerking her chin toward Noelle. "She's about to fall asleep."

Mitch clamped his mouth shut, setting his briefcase on the couch before heading their way. Something warm shone in his eyes, and he didn't take his gaze off her. Not for a second.

“What is all this?” he asked in a softer voice.

Her grin spread so wide her cheeks hurt. “What is what?”

“Don't play coy. My penthouse looks like a magazine ad for Christmas itself.”

“Good. Then my work here is done.” She swayed away from him, flirtation bursting to life between them. He tilted his head, wetting his bottom lip as he looked her up and down.

“You're cooking something.”

“Correct.” Now her ears hurt from smiling so hard. She hadn't known it was possible.

“What are you making?”

“I have a sleepy baby to tend to,” she said, turning away from him slightly. “You're just going to have to wait and find out.”

She sashayed away from him, feeling his questions and amusement burning in the air behind her. The walk to the bedroom had allowed Noelle to drift off to sleep, so Jules set the sleeping girl in her crib and came back to the living room. Mitch had removed his tie and undone the first few buttons of his shirt. He was pouring a tumbler of whisky just as she entered.

“Wow. So early?”

Mitch sighed, bringing the glass up to his lips. “Sometimes, I need something to mark the transition into the evening.”

“Sounds like you had a rough day.” She came up to him, overcome by the urge to care for him. To erase the stress showing in his face and the weariness that clung to him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him, shocked by how natural the gesture felt.

Sure, they'd had plenty of sex the night before. But was this sort of intimacy welcome, or even allowed? This type of

intimacy had them moving from sex-with-abandon into tell-me-all-your-woes territory.

Mitch downed his drink, then sighed through a grimace as he set the glass down. His big hands smoothed over her shoulders and then ran down her back. A shiver raced through her.

“That’s sweet of you to say.”

Not the reaction she’d been expecting. She couldn’t tell if he was touched by her insight or just politely sidestepping her interest.

“Want to talk about it?”

His jaw worked back and forth, his gaze distracted but bright as he searched her face. “Wouldn’t even know where to begin. Complaints from guests who were frustrated that it snowed earlier this week and they weren’t able to go do touristy things because everything was closed.” Jules rolled her eyes at that, which made him chuckle. “My father, of course, wanted an update on the gala, which I gave him. The reservation software we use decided to glitch, so I had to place a call to the developer. He was able to connect remotely to upload the updates to get us back up surprisingly fast.”

“Well that’s good news,” she told him.

“It was. Although Gabe Elkin wasn’t particularly happy with me calling him at 5 a.m.” He chuckled at that before adding, “His company just had a successful product launch and he’s been putting in late hours and had only been asleep for a couple of hours when I woke him.”

“Oh well, lucky him, he got to sleep in,” she deadpanned, and Mitch grinned at her.

“That’s exactly what I told him; although he didn’t see the humor in it. He did warn that he would be adding a PITA fee to his invoice.”

Jules frowned. “Pita fee? He wants you to send him bread?”

Mitch shook as he laughed. “Now there’s an idea. I’ll have to mention that next time. No. PITA stands for ‘pain in the ass,’ since I called him rather than his company’s tech support line.”

She snickered. “So does this mean my surprises are well-timed?”

He hugged her, smiling—the one that made his dimple flash. “Yeah. More well-timed than you could have realized.”

“Come here. Let me show you around.” She took his hand in hers and started a slow walk around the penthouse, showing off all the different touches and accoutrements that she’d added. They stood for a long time at the tree, admiring the different ornaments: the golden baubles, the dangling, icicle-like tendrils, the sparkly tinsel draped over the evergreen limbs. Because of the tree’s height, she’d added a mix of twinkle lights and larger lights, which cast the room in a soft glow. She’d draped the evergreen garlands across the mantel and around the doorways, complete with large ribbons and more twinkle lights. A train tooted its horn, and he looked down to see the train making its way around the base of the tree.

“Oh wow.” He squatted down and watched as it made a turn around the track. “I haven’t seen this since we were kids. My mom always set it up like this, and when we were little, my brother, our cousin, and I would send things to each other via train. Where did you find it?”

“In storage in the basement. I’d asked for help finding decorations, and it was in one of the boxes that was brought up.”

“Everything looks so beautiful. Thank you for doing this,” Mitch said, rising and sliding his hand over the small of her back.

“Well, Christmas is my specialty. And I can’t believe you didn’t have this done already! Christmas is coming up soon.”

Mitch’s smile slowly faded, his brows drawing together. “But your place wasn’t decorated either.”

Her mouth parted. “Right. But you have *this* place. This place deserves to be decorated.”

“And yours doesn’t?”

His question made her think. Her house had always been her safe haven, until her most recent move to a smaller, more affordable apartment just made her uninterested in unpacking and really inhabiting the place.

“Fair point. But I haven’t lived there very long and I have to confess, I’ve had zero interest in unpacking the rest of my boxes. I know I need to because as I’m sure you saw, there’s cardboard boxes stacked all over the place. But…” She shrugged, not sure what else to say.

“It’s more fun decorating other people’s places?”

Jules nibbled at her lip, thankful he wasn’t pushing for more information. “It definitely is, especially when the place is as beautiful as yours.”

“Well, the place looks great. You’ve clearly got a knack for this sort of thing.”

“Thanks.” She smiled up at him, but something in her chest hurt. His words had cracked something open. She just wasn’t sure yet what it was. “You hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Great. Let me feed you now.” She squeezed his hand and led him into the dining room. After a stern command for him to sit his butt down, she got the plates and silverware out, and then loaded up a fancy white serving platter with the roasted chicken and vegetables.

Mitch’s gaze didn’t leave the food as she brought everything over. “Wow. It smells divine, but it looks even better.”

She swatted at his arm once the dish was on the table. “You’re just saying that. I haven’t forgotten about last night’s dinner, by the way.”

“That reminds me.” Mitch set aside his napkin and went to the wine rack in the kitchen. He returned a moment later with a bottle and a corkscrew. “A 2008 Malbec from Argentina. What do you think?”

“I think you should open that immediately.” She slid into her seat, trying to fight the same perma-grin that had strained her

cheeks earlier. Holy hell, this was a lifestyle she could get used to. Easygoing evenings after a workday, punctuated with surprises and warm embraces and fine wine.

Even though she *loved* Christmas, this was one time she wished it would never arrive. So she could extend this sweet little...romance? Fling? Something more, or something less? It was hard to know. Noelle made things muddy, but the passion between her and Mitch made things clear at the same time.

There was something real between them. But Jules couldn't tell if it was real in the way that lasted.

Once she'd filled their plates with food and he'd poured the richly dark wine, they clinked glasses and took appreciative sips. A moan escaped her.

"It's so good!"

"Sounds like you're on the elevator again," Mitch remarked.

She snickered, heat creeping up her neck. "I guess the sensations are similar. Enjoying excellent wine and being... *ravished*."

"Ravished." A cool smirk crossed his lips. "You make it sound like a romance novel."

"It sorta was. Just way hotter than any romance I've ever read," she said.

"It's good to know that I'm better than a book hero."

"Book boyfriend," she corrected him. "That's what they're called, and you're way better than a book boyfriend."

His smirk turned mischievous. "So, what you're saying is sex with me is better than everything else you've tried?"

Oh, he wanted to play this game, did he? She sat back in her chair and took a sip of her wine and stared at him, pretending to be deep in thought. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. That dinner we had last night was spectacular and this wine"—she held up the glass—"Is amazing."

"Well then, challenge accepted." Mitch sat back, mimicking the way she was sitting, drank his wine and watched her over

the top of his glass.

Jules could feel heat sweeping across her cheeks wondering if she was in over her head flirting with the billionaire sitting across from her. She sipped again, already feeling drunk, though it was impossible after so little wine. Really, she suspected it had more to do with the man in front of her than anything else. “We all need challenges to aspire to, even me, and I don’t run a hotel empire.”

He cut into the roasted chicken, his gaze flicking between her and his plate, as he became serious. “True, although I don’t technically run it.”

“But you will.”

“Yes. I will.” But his words didn’t sound confident. He stuffed a forkful of chicken into his mouth, his gaze growing cloudy. He looked out over the city as he chewed.

“You sound like you doubt it.” Jules was regretting saying anything because their playful banter had shifted over to something more serious.

He swallowed, gaze returning to the plate. “This is excellent.”

“Thanks. Did you hear me?”

“Yes. I’m just ignoring you.” He reached for his wine.

“Sorry. If you’d rather not go there, we don’t have to. I can talk instead about the roasting technique I used or the exact number of ornaments on the tree.”

“How many?” His sharp gaze cut up to her, and she sucked in a quick breath. She might never *not* be affected by those eyes.

“Forty-two.”

He nodded sagely. “Good number.”

“So why do you doubt your future running the hotel?”

His lips quirked up at the corners. “So you *don’t* take a hint.”

She chewed on a potato wedge, grinning over at him. “Not always. Sometimes, I like to ignore them.”

“I won’t be confident my father will hand the reins over until he actually does.” Mitch shrugged. “That’s all.”

“But why wouldn’t he?”

Mitch crumpled a little, but he straightened quickly. “My father is...enigmatic. To say the least. He’s always put a lot of pressure on me as the first child, pressure my brother never got.”

“What sort of pressure?”

“To act a certain way...to be seen a certain way.” Mitch shook his head, dabbing at his mouth with his napkin. “It was a lot growing up, and it got so much worse after my mom died. I never understood why he tried to control my life so much. I hated it so much that I even vandalized one of his properties when I was sixteen. He told me I couldn’t date the girl in my music class, so I lashed out.”

Jules blinked. “Wow. Did he ever find out?”

Mitch shook his head. “And I’ve never told anyone. So... congratulations. You’ve got information for blackmail.”

“I solemnly swear I will not share this tantalizing vandalism tidbit.”

“Good.” Mitch stuffed another forkful of chicken in his mouth. After he chewed, he said, “Now you have to give me some blackmail tidbit.”

“Do I?”

He nodded. “It’s the rules of the penthouse.”

She hummed as she thought, tipping her head back and forth. She didn’t quite have anything as illegal or urchin-like as vandalism. But she did have something that called her whole stint as Noelle’s caregiver into question. “Fine. I’m not as capable of a caretaker as I probably seem.” She folded up her napkin, surprised by the way her chest tightened as she readied to spill the beans. “I worked as a nanny to help pay for college, and one of the kids I was watching fell and broke his leg on my watch.”

Mitch blinked. “And?”

“He went to the hospital, and I quit being a nanny.” She reached for her wine.

“That’s not blackmail worthy.”

“It is. Because I made it seem like it was his fault. But if I had been watching more closely—if I had been closer to him...”

He smirked, shaking his head. “No way. That stuff happens. Kids fall. It’s part of life.”

She sighed. “Well, you weren’t there. And honestly, the stress was too much. I’m constantly wondering if I’m going to hurt Noelle somehow.”

Mitch scoffed. “You are *wonderful* with her. Trust me—you are a hundred times better with her than I am.”

His words were sweet, but she still waved them off.

He was undeterred. “Have you ever noticed how fast she falls asleep in *your* arms compared to mine?”

“Yeah, but that’s different,” Jules said.

She had nothing to follow it with when Mitch asked her, “How?” He smiled. “Just admit it. You’re great with her, and one child falling off a jungle gym does not make you incapable.”

Jules fought a grin as she forked some more vegetables into her mouth. He had a point. But more than that, she was touched by how deftly he’d fought to lift her spirits.

It had worked. And that sort of investment in her wellbeing was almost sexier than anything else about him.

JULES

Once dinner was cleared away and Noelle was up for another feeding and some playtime, Jules was buzzing with warmth and happiness. She hadn't counted on loving these moments so much. The routine of waking up with Noelle, coming home to her after a day of work, and spending the evening in...a family.

Because for all intents and purposes, that's what Noelle and Mitch were to her right now.

Her family, during the coziest, most family-oriented holiday time of the year.

Jules's own mother lived in upstate New York, and they rarely spent the holidays together anymore, not since her mother had taken a job at a nursing home and usually spent the holidays working so those with families at home could enjoy the time off. Not that Jules minded very much. As much as she loved her mother, the idea of spending the holidays listening to her complain about everything from who Jules was or wasn't dating, where she lived, or that she didn't call her mother enough got old quick.

Beyond her mother, she had no other living family. Sure, she had plenty of friends, but those friends had their own families. Their own celebrations. Their own warm and cozy nooks to get back to.

Noelle and Mitch entering her life was incredibly well-timed. And her heart was thankful for it. The idea of enjoying a spectacular Christmas this year without all the parental angst

that often went along with hers was a dream come true, and she couldn't think of anyone else she'd want to include other than Mitch and Noelle.

Once the baby was back in her crib, Mitch led her by the hand through the penthouse. Jules followed him in a floating daze, unable to rip her gaze off the half-unbuttoned work shirt or the well-trimmed stubble on his jaw each time he glanced back with those smoldering eyes.

This man was a fantasy. Better than a fantasy, even. Because in the dreamily tinted stories that little girls fell for, it was only for a handsome man of no substance.

Mitch was all substance. Solid and sturdy and successful. Not to mention sexier than sin. The type of guy to build her up *and* back her up against the elevator wall.

He kicked the door shut behind her with his foot, leaving the bedroom bathed in moody golden light from the city beyond the window. He didn't use curtains, preferring to rise with the daylight, and the Manhattan glow filled the bedroom. Even at night, the city was bright enough to light their way as his mouth covered hers and they started a slow stumble back toward the bed.

Mitch's warm hands cupped her face. She whimpered through the kiss, the mix of his heat and his tongue seeking hers and the solid steel of his body against her creating a vortex of desire she could only get lost in.

"Fuck," Mitch mumbled through their kiss. When they reached the bed, she fell backward onto the soft comforter. He paused, fishing his phone out of his pocket.

"Baby monitor," he whispered, swiping through screens. Once he opened the app that would alert them if Noelle started fussing, he tossed it farther up the bed, where it settled near the pillows.

"I'm glad you're clear-headed enough to think of these things," Jules joked, desperation swarming her. Her hand drifted between her legs, pussy pulsing with eagerness. She wanted him more than anything, but right now, she needed

something. Her clit throbbed from wanting attention, and Mitch was moving too damn slow.

He undressed in the dim lighting of the room, his hands moving with methodical precision as he unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off, then moved on to his belt and his pants. The amber glint of Manhattan beyond illuminated his biceps and the ridges of his abs as he undressed. Jules slipped her hand inside her panties as she watched him.

A smile curved his lips. “*Mmm.*”

Her middle finger swiped over the stiff peak of her clit, causing a jolt through her body. “What?”

Mitch eased onto the bed, tugging at her pants until they crested her hips. He pulled them off and tossed them aside, bringing his lips to her belly.

“That’s my job,” he growled, dragging his teeth over the swell of her hip. Goose bumps spread across her skin under his hot breath. She wriggled in his grip, unable to form words as his head dropped between her legs. He tugged at the scrap of fabric still covering her hips, his lips brushing the sensitive nub there. She inhaled sharply, legs splaying open of their own accord.

He pushed aside her panties, his lips instantly wrapping around her clit. His tongue flicked back and forth over the tight nub while his hands made hot trails up and down her legs. Jules melted back against the bed. Unable to move or speak or even buck her hips.

How long had it been since she’d had a giving lover? Her mind spun with excitement and elation and raw passion as Mitch slurped and suckled at her. He pressed a finger into her, and then another, starting a slow but steady rhythm as he fingerfucked her. Her pussy tightened around him. Yes. Yes. This man knew what he was doing, and he did it *well*. She arched backward, reaching for something. Anything. Her fingers found the top of his head and she fisted his hair, tugging lightly. He pushed his fingers inside her deeper, adding a third.

“Ooohhh, Mitch,” she moaned, her thighs tensing in advance of her growing orgasm. She’d never come so quickly or so often with someone. And she’d known this man less than a week. How was it even possible?

He grunted in response, not breaking his rhythm. His tongue swiped and slid against her slippery clit, and finally the pleasure tightened until it exploded, and she was coming, coming so hard. She cried out, locking her thighs around his head, her entire body jerking with the hot rush of her orgasm.

“Fuck,” she moaned as the pleasure receded. “Holy...what the...”

Mitch moved gently, pressing a kiss to her thigh before he bent down to get something. He stepped out of his briefs, cock standing tall and proud in the low lighting. He rolled a condom on, and a moment later he was back on top of her. He pressed a sloppy kiss to her lips, the juice of her own pussy still staining his lips, and they kissed so hard that their teeth collided.

Mitch nestled between her legs as they kissed, easing himself inside of her until he was buried to the hilt. The gentleness of it, the sweet slide of him filling her, was so welcome that it made Jules’s throat tight.

She hadn’t realized she was missing intimacy like this. Hell, she’d never had intimacy like this with anyone. Mitch was on a whole different level.

They started a slow and deep rhythm. One that was punctuated by their soft grunts and the slick sounds of their sex as he flexed his hips, moving in and out of her. Mitch cradled her as he fucked her, something tender in the way he drilled into her. She pinched her eyes shut, feeling another orgasm quivering on the brink.

This man. This man was everything she’d always wanted. The secret hope she’d held in the back of her mind was that he felt the same way about her.

“Oh, Jules.”

Her name on his lips was an aphrodisiac. Her throat went tight, emotion swirling inside her from head to toe. How could she not fall for this man? This nurturing foster father to Noelle; the thoughtful, successful businessman; the giving lover who had driven her to more orgasms in two days than she'd had in a year.

Her heart squeezed as his lips found hers again. It was the kiss that did it. The tender caress of his lips while he filled her, deeper than anyone had ever filled her before. It was official. She was head over heels.

Her orgasm burst through her again, and she cried out. Mitch flexed against her, his gaze intense as he watched her. He gave a gruff cry and stilled, his hips jerking as he came. They lay in sated silence for a few moments, their heavy breaths the only sound between them.

His forearms bulged as he braced himself against the mattress and then rolled off her. He immediately scooped her into his arms, bringing her body flush against his.

She giggled, sinking into the spoon. Now this was nice.

He buried his face in the back of her hair. "Mmmm."

"Mm-hmm." Words were still beyond her. With this level of satisfaction pulsing through her, it might be a while until she could string words together.

"Mrghhh."

"Mmrrrm."

Mitch kissed the top of her head. "That settles it then. Best sex ever."

Her eyes drifted shut, that perma-grin back out to play on her lips. "Definitely."

JULES

Friday

Jules's memories of her epic orgasms were one of the few things keeping her going today. That along with way too much caffeine and an overindulgence in chocolate.

Children and Family Services had had no luck yet in tracking down Noelle's family. Someone from the police department had stopped by to get her footprints with the hopes that they might be trackable through hospital records, but they'd yet to hear back. And no one seemed particularly interested in placing the baby with a different family, which was partly to do with the fact that the little girl was officially sick with a cold, which meant she couldn't join the hotel daycare and the only nanny available went home sick. So Jules spent the last two days fretting over the sick little girl, every little cry or whimper jerking her focus from any task at hand.

At least the gala planning was almost complete. The tables were already set up and the seat assignments were finalized. The chef had put together a tasting sampler of the planned menu and Jules, along with Rose, Patrick and a few other employees sat down with her to taste all the food, but a couple of the dishes weren't quite right and Jules couldn't explain why. Then a younger man, who looked a lot like Mitch, showed up. He introduced himself as Mitch's cousin Chris. Jules had been shocked to meet *the* Chef Chris. He'd agreed with her assessment and popped into the hotel kitchen and a few minutes later, came out with an alternative selection of

appetizers and an amazing vegetable side dish that Jules had fallen in love with, it was so tasty.

As appreciative as she was for his help, she was missing Mitch. He'd been leaving the penthouse before she awoke, only returning in the late evening after both Jules and Noelle had headed to bed. Both Rose and Patrick told her this was typical for the future CEO, which probably explained why the man didn't have a family beyond the temporary one currently residing in his penthouse. A family he'd spent very little time with the past two days.

By six p.m. on Friday, she was craving another slow, intimate night with him so badly she could cry. But Noelle was as fussy as ever and only wanted to be held, so the romantic sex-a-thon would have to wait.

"Oh, honey." Jules patted Noelle's back after her latest bottle. Her little nose was stuffed up and she couldn't breathe very well, which only frustrated her more. Jules sank back onto the couch, a sigh escaping her as her eyes fluttered shut.

Maybe, if Noelle calmed enough, they could both snag a nap.

That would be wondrous.

Almost too wondrous to imagine.

The front door opened, and Jules perked up. It had to be Mitch, which signaled sweet, sweet relief. She could hand over fussy Noelle, and either sleep or get some work done. Probably sleep, if she was honest. Oh, how lovely that would be.

"Anybody home?" Mitch walked into the living room a moment later, a big smile on his face. It dimmed slightly as he approached them. "You okay?"

She groaned, dropping her head back on the couch. "So exhausted. It's been a rough day."

Mitch frowned, reaching out to run his fingers over Noelle's head. "She still sick?"

"Not getting any better. And I need to sleep. At least for an hour. Are you ready to take her?"

Mitch's frown deepened. "I can't. I just stopped back to change for my next meeting. I've got an investor arriving in fifteen minutes."

Jules ground her teeth, unable to stop the annoyed sigh from bursting past her lips. "Seriously? You've been unavailable for the past two days. I thought we were in this together."

"We are," Mitch insisted. "But this stuff is non-negotiable. I can't bail on this meeting to play with the baby."

"To play with the—" she stopped herself before her acidic tone turned into even more acidic words. "Noelle is *sick*, and she needs to be *cared for*. Whatever. I'll take care of it."

Mitch headed for his bedroom, his voice growing more distant as he walked away. "Call the nanny. I'm sure she can help out for a few hours."

"You think I haven't tried that route?" Jules spat, feeling more frustrated than ever. She couldn't get past what he'd said. *Play with the baby*. Like this was all fun and games. "There's no nanny available tonight because they're busy with all the other guests' children."

But of course he couldn't hear her, because she was muttering angrily to herself in the living room. When he reappeared a few moments later, wearing a Henley shirt and casual slacks, the sight of him softened her frustration for a moment.

"This is a meeting?" she asked.

"Yeah. Casual, though. Per the investor's request."

She sighed. "Well, as I was saying, there's no nanny available tonight. So make it quick. Because I might not make it past nine p.m."

He came over and pressed a kiss to her forehead and then Noelle's. "Promise."

The front door clicked shut a moment later, and she was left in irritable silence once more, her own frustrations and to-do list and sense of aloneness boiling over, ready to drown her.

So this was mom life in the early months. Now she got it. She sighed, settling Noelle into a safe spot on the couch before

getting up to pour herself a glass of wine. It was six thirty. This was allowed.

Noelle fell into a fitful nap, which allowed Jules to open her laptop and stare distractedly at her screen while thinking about the interaction with Mitch.

It had felt like they were working together so well as a team, but now? All this just reminded her that she'd been in some sort of blazing bright foster babymoon. Tinted by the holidays and the great sex and a healthy, sleeping baby. Now Jules was dealing with sleep deprivation and deadlines with half the help and support she'd grown accustomed to.

If Mitch couldn't be counted on to help during a few stressful days during their time as a makeshift family unit, then what could she count on from him in a relationship overall?

And why was she even thinking that a relationship with him was a possibility?

Yes, she'd fallen head over heels for him. Even now, when she wanted to throttle him for leaving her with a sick baby for the second day in a row, she still *wanted* to spend time with him. To listen to him talk about his day and for Jules to share hers. To be on the receiving end of one of his smiles or the butterflies that danced inside her when he leveled her with one of his *looks*. But what did he feel about her? Was he even thinking about what might happen after the holidays?

Because if Jules had her way? Playing the role of heroine in a Hallmark Christmas movie, she'd take up permanent residence in this penthouse. She'd already imagined moving her things here, thinking how convenient it was that she hadn't fully unpacked at her apartment. What an unwitting foresight that would make life easier once she decided to make the move over here! And little Noelle would of course become theirs, and probably would take the Denton name. And if Jules was lucky, so would she. Since Mitch would most likely—probably definitely—ask her to marry him within a year.

All these thoughts felt ridiculous and dangerously hopeful, yet she couldn't avoid them. Despite her mother's constant warnings not to grow too attached to men. That the richer they

were, the less likely they would stick around when they were needed most. Dammit, he made her *excited* again for a life she'd only ever wished for and never thought she could have.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a brash ringing. Something between an alarm clock and a tornado warning, ringing repeatedly from...somewhere. Jules leapt to her feet, trying to track down the source of the offending noise. Her first thought was the service elevator—maybe there was an issue with it and someone was stuck inside—but the noise was softer over that way. She wandered through the kitchen, following it until the sound rang the loudest.

The mahogany buffet in the dining room seemed to be the culprit. She frowned, tugging open the small drawers in the piece of furniture until she spied the offender.

Something suspiciously similar to a fitness tracker blared, and she picked up the thin black wristlet, turning it over in her hands. The accessory had startling volume for being so small, and no amount of pressing buttons made it shut up.

Her chest tightened as she struggled to turn it off, but the alarm continued ringing.

The failed attempts made a baby headache spring to life, and she swore under her breath. After enough frustrating attempts, she tossed the thing against the wall. As if this would help, or maybe prompt it into shutting off on its own accord.

But no. *Reeeeeep. Reeeeeeep. Reeeeeeep.* The end-of-times step tracker continued its death wail.

Jules huffed with a sigh and headed for her phone. Now that she'd spent so much time hating the thing, it was all she could hear, even as she put distance between herself and the accessory. She tapped out a quick text to Mitch, but the waiting grew unbearable.

So she called him. It rang seven times and then clicked over to voicemail.

She called again. And it went to voicemail again.

“Dammit.” She pinched at the bridge of her nose, her blood pressure pitching upward. Sleep deprivation and sick baby was

one thing. Add a shrieking device on top of everything, and she was damn near meltdown mode.

Noelle stirred on the couch, and then she let out a wail.

“Oh, hell no!” Jules stomped her foot and looked between baby and device, unsure which to attend to first. Maybe she could break the thing with the meat tenderizer she’d found in the kitchen the other day. If it didn’t stop ringing, she couldn’t be held accountable for her actions.

But Noelle needed comforting first. She scooped up the baby, trying to stop the crying. While she shushed Noelle and tried to get her calm, Jules drifted back toward her phone. She called Mitch again. No answer.

But she couldn’t stay in here. Not with the alarm beeping at her.

So she headed for the hallway to check herself out in the mirror. She was presentable enough—at least for a quick trip to the bar where she knew Mitch was having his meeting.

She could steal him for a few minutes to resolve this problem, and all would be well.

She pasted a fake smile on her face as she slipped her flats on and went to the penthouse elevator, readying herself to enter the world below with a fussy baby in her arms.

Yeah.

Everything would be fine.

As long as Mitch stopped the damn alarm.

MITCH

Mitch gnawed at the inside of his lip as he waited for Sara to return.

His meeting with the investor was casual at her request, but he hadn't expected it to be *this* casual.

Sara had shown up to the hotel bar in a form-fitting red dress and sky-high heels. After a quick hug and plenty of giggles, she'd suggested they start the meeting with shots. Like they were in college again, she'd laughed.

And of course Mitch had gone along. Taking a shot didn't sound like a horrible idea, especially after the day he'd had. With his dad breathing down his neck to get everything in order for the gala and secure the investments for the next level of Denton's expansion, he had enough on his plate to warrant having a drink or two.

But he felt like an asshole for leaving Jules and Noelle in the penthouse, and no amount of alcohol could prevent his thoughts from returning to his girls upstairs.

"Okay. I'm back." Sara sent him a toothy grin as she slid onto the bar stool at his side. Her floral perfume settled in a cloud around him, something he remembered from the last time they'd met like this. She was one of their primary investors, but more than that, she was an old family friend. The daughter of another wealthy family in the New York area, she and Mitch were on equal footing when it came to wealth and inheritances.

She was also Mitchell Senior's number-one pick as the ideal daughter-in-law.

"What do you say to another shot?" She laughed, waving down the bartender. "I mean, we don't have anywhere to be, right? And hell, if we get too drunk to go home, it's not like you don't have a thousand rooms at your disposal." She winked, and Mitch could see through to the real meaning of her words. Sara was not quiet about the fact that she wanted Mitch. She probably would be thrilled if their parents encouraged an arranged marriage for them. Even if the very idea of it made his skin crawl.

Sure, Sara was gorgeous. She was the definition of a fun-loving, single professional. With bursting cleavage and a sexy pout, she always found a reason to touch him. Like she was just waiting for him to make his move.

Hell, a month ago, he'd been considering what life might be like with Sara. She seemed like a safe enough choice. Looks and business and success all rolled into one. Except the spark wasn't there. Not that he necessarily needed it...probably.

But now that Jules and Noelle were in his life? He didn't want to consider Sara as anything more than the business acquaintance she was. And Sara didn't know it, but her flirtations were only making the knot in his stomach worse.

Over Sara's shoulder, Mitch could see part of the entrance to the bar, which looked out over the western edge of the lobby. He kept glancing there, though he didn't know why. Maybe planning his escape route at the earliest possible juncture. The bartender arrived with their shots, and Sara lifted hers, urging him to do the same.

Tequila. Ugh. Didn't matter how expensive it was, who did shots of tequila past the age of twenty-one? Evidently, Sara did.

"Come on. Here's to more successful ventures. Including ones we haven't officially started yet." Her grin glinted mischievously as she reached over and caressed the side of his face.

He clinked his shot glass against hers, forcing a smile and resisting the urge to swat her hand away, even as he tilted his head to put some distance between them. As he tossed it back, he swore he caught a glimpse of Jules out of the corner of his eye. But that was impossible. She was upstairs with the baby. Once he'd downed the amber liquid, he searched the bar again. Just to be sure.

No Jules.

He was imagining things. Probably because he was feeling guilty and eager to get back up there and help her. He should have canceled this meeting. Insisted on having it during regular hours in his office. This felt wrong in a way he couldn't articulate. Mitch needed to steer it back to business and wrap it up quickly.

"Did you have a chance to look over the latest projections for the new properties?" he asked her, pushing his now empty glass to the side.

"No. I thought we could discuss them." She gestured to the bartender for another round, but Mitch shook his head before he could refill his glass.

Frowning, he pressed his hands down on the bar. "Since you don't appear to be ready to talk numbers, perhaps we should reschedule for another time when we can meet in one of our offices."

"Mitch. You need to lighten up." Sara brushed up against him. "Some of my girlfriends and I wanted to go grab dinner before we go to a new club later. What do you say? You should come. We can keep talking business." The air quotes she made around "talking business" made his stomach pitch to his feet and warning bells sound in his head.

He didn't even want to imagine Jules's disappointment in that choice. Nor did he want to entertain even the thought of an evening like that.

He needed to wrap things up here and now, before Jules declared him a lost cause and totally useless foster dad.

"I need to get back upstairs," Mitch said.

“Would you like some company?” She trailed her fingers down his arm as she practically purred.

Taking her hand, he placed it back on the bar. “Sara, I thought you came to talk business?”

“Oh, come on, Mitch! You know the investment is in the bag. If I’d had any questions, I would have called you during office hours.” She went to touch him again, but stopped when she saw the look on his face. She frowned briefly, before her expression morphed into something more sexual. “We’ve been dancing around this attraction to each other for years. Don’t you think we should act on it? I know it would make our fathers happy.”

A sigh escaped him. Mitch fished his phone out of his pocket, intent on calling for a car to take Sara wherever she wanted to go, so long as it was away from him. As he swiped the screen on, he realized he’d missed four calls and several texts. He stopped breathing for a moment, fearful he’d missed something urgent, since his phone had been on Do Not Disturb.

Jules had sent three texts: “*Hey are you busy I really need you to come up here*”; “*Are you getting any of my texts or calls?*”; and then, “*Never mind. I don’t need your help.*”

“Excuse me,” Mitch said, sliding off his stool. “I need to return this call real quick.” He stepped toward the front of the bar as he called Jules, counting the seconds until she picked up. It clicked over to voicemail, but a text from her arrived almost simultaneously.

“*Going to bed. Everything’s fine.*”

That was a relief, at least. But he still needed to get out of here. His phone pinged again and he checked the message, surprised to see it was from his dad.

“*I know you’re meeting with Sara Osterman. Don’t disappoint me, son. We need their investment if we’re going to break ground on the Colorado properties in spring.*”

Blowing out a breath on a huff, he returned to his post at the bar, where Sara waited for an answer.

“So what do you say?” Her eyebrow arched. “At least have dinner with me and we can tell our fathers that we actually talked business and we can close this deal.”

His father’s demands cycled through him as he looked down at her hopeful eyes. She’d said it herself—this was the route to closing this deal. A lot was riding on Osterman Investments funding the new project that his father had managed to snatch out from under Colin Forest. Including his potential next role as the head of Denton Hotels.

“I’ll go to dinner,” Mitch finally conceded, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

Going to dinner didn’t equate to going to a club.

He could still seal the deal and get home at a decent hour. And wasn’t that the definition of the work-life balance?

Still, he couldn’t shake the gnawing sensation as he accompanied Sara out of the bar. Something was off. He just couldn’t tell what.

JULES

Jules stood staring down at Noelle, finally sleeping peacefully in her crib, for what felt like an hour. Even though she'd buried the alarm under five pillows in Mitch's bedroom and shut the door—an appropriate present for him to come home to—she could still hear the shrill ring in her memory.

Damn that thing. But maybe she should be grateful for it.

Because that annoying little device had jostled her out of this crazy reverie in which she and Mitch were heading for something big and back down to reality.

Jules heaved a sigh, finally turning from Noelle and heading for the living room. Even though she had plenty of work to do and plenty of sleep to catch up on, she would be doing neither of those things.

No, right now, she needed to call her mom.

The phone was ringing before she even sank into the couch. Her mom picked up on the third ring.

“Honey!” she exclaimed. The familiar rasp of her voice made Jules smile. However difficult her childhood had been with her hypercritical mother, she was the only mom she had. And sometimes, Jules needed her.

“Hi, Mom.” She sighed, wondering where to begin. “You got a minute?”

“Of course I do. I was just sitting down to watch *Grey's Anatomy*.”

Usually they'd watch that together whenever Jules visited. It was something they started when Jules was in college and it gave them something to bond over. Jules didn't have many memories of her father, who'd decided he wasn't father material while she was still in diapers. She had a vague memory of a fun day at the zoo followed by ice cream, but that could have been any one of the many boyfriends her mother had latched onto over the years. And since Jules had her mother's surname instead of his, she couldn't even be sure of his last name.

Over the years, she'd contemplated doing one of those DNA tests to see if she could track down her father or someone from that side of the family, but she knew it would hurt her mom, who would think that she wasn't good enough. Still, having more family—to spend time with, to share major events with, to know that she wasn't alone—often pressed at her thoughts when she was feeling down.

While her mother wouldn't admit it, she felt the same. Except she sought those connections via a revolving door of rich boyfriends, intent on living the ultra-rich, ultra-luxe lifestyle. Surprisingly, none of that wealth had ever transferred over into her daily life or Jules's upbringing. In fact, now that her mother had finally given up on the rich boyfriend life goals, her life was plainer than ever.

"I've sort of...found myself in a situation," Jules began. "Something that might come as a bit of a shock." She took a deep breath and spilled the executive summary of the story. The more she spoke, the more absurd everything sounded. Playing house with a billionaire while they watched over a child that wasn't even theirs? Who was she kidding?

After her hurried summary of the situation, her mother tutted.

"Jules-y," she started, disappointment already straining her voice. "I thought I told you those rich men are never good news."

"I know, I know."

"You're only gonna get hurt. You already *are* hurt," she added.

“I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve just been going along with what I feel is best, but...” Jules’s gaze drifted to the couch. But the truth was, Mitch was a free agent, and so was she. They’d not talked about taking things beyond Christmas and once Noelle left, would they have anything to unite them? Finding him in the bar, being caressed by that gorgeous woman while they raised shot glasses, told her everything she needed to know.

She just hadn’t expected it to *hurt* so much. A lightning bolt of feeling crushed, followed by a disappointment that made her limbs heavy. Still, an hour later.

And the worst part was that Jules wasn’t sure who she was more disappointed in: him, for stringing her along in this fantasy, or herself, for believing it in the first place.

“I just thought we sort of had something going,” Jules went on. “We have a connection.”

“You *thought*,” her mom interjected.

“He’s a great guy,” Jules said.

“Uh huh. Sure.”

Jules sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. This was what she needed. Perspective. A hard kick to the ass to remind her that she was being foolish. And there was no one better than Mom for that.

“You know my own track record with those wealthy types,” her mom said, and through the phone Jules could hear the *flick flick flick* of the lighter. Her mom didn’t smoke much anymore, unless she was stressed. And clearly, this conversation was as stressful for her as it was for Jules. “They’re all the same. He might seem nice, but do you know how easy it is to seem nice when you’ve got billions tucked away? This guy can buy anything or anyone. He can create any reality he wants by throwing money around to the right people. And at the end of the day, the only thing that matters is what he wants. Don’t forget that.”

Jules ground her teeth. Her mom was right. It was easy to forget everything she’d always warned her against while

bathing in luxury itself. But now she needed to figure out her next steps. Because she couldn't stay here. She'd see the gala project through to the end so she could get paid. Afterward, she needed to get back to her own apartment. Her own life. The money she was getting paid for the gala would allow her to have some downtime before she had to find another job. Or who knows. Maybe she'd start her own event planning business. With all the people attending the gala, surely she could network her way into gaining some new clients.

"You're right, Mom." Jules sighed, picking at the stitching on the leather couch.

It might hurt to walk away but it would hurt even worse to get sucked into an illusion and lose years of her life, in love with someone who couldn't return the feeling.

MITCH

Mitch paced the foyer of the penthouse in his formal suit, checking and re-checking his watch even though he knew what time it was.

They were on time. Hell, they were early.

But still, anxiety had him wound tight.

This was the big night. The gala, complete with the Christmas display, the events, and the announcement. Jules was still getting ready, which meant Mitch had ample time to fester in his own thoughts.

Jules had been distant ever since he'd left her upstairs with Noelle to have dinner with Sara. Thankfully, the woman had realized that he was not interested in her romantically and they'd managed to get through dinner before she took him up on his offer of a car to drop her at the club. And before he'd made it back into the hotel, he'd gotten a message indicating that she'd signed the electronic documents and the investment plans were approved, which made Mitchell Senior deliriously happy. Except for the fact that Mitch had zero personal interest in Sara.

Mitch had tried to engage Jules in conversation about anything but the gala plans, but she would stubbornly steer it back. He gave up and apologized to her repeatedly for leaving her in the lurch like that, but she never snapped out of it. He figured it was stress with the upcoming event. After all, she'd been working on it for the past week. The reason for the season, in

both of their worlds, and they were about to see the results of all her hard work.

But he couldn't deny that Jules lack of her warmth disturbed him in a major way. Mostly because he felt like he was missing something that he needed.

Which meant that he needed Jules.

At least Noelle had recovered from her cold, which allayed some of the household stress.

Jules finally breezed down the hallway, dressed to kill in a long, shimmery black evening gown with teardrop pearls in her ears. Her hair was swept back in a fancy updo, prepared by a stylist Mitch had brought to the penthouse exclusively for her hair and makeup.

"Wow," Mitch said, his heart thumping in his chest. He couldn't pry his gaze off her if he wanted to.

She glanced at him through the mirror as she inspected her lipstick. "What?"

"You look...stunning."

She pursed her lips into a little smile. "Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself."

Jules headed for the door, but he caught her by the waist. She stiffened at his touch—yet another new development of the past couple of days.

"The dress looks better than I could even imagine," Mitch murmured, bringing her closer. She avoided his gaze. "But I'm really curious to see how good it's going to look on the floor."

Jules snorted. "Come on. We need to go."

"One kiss." He brushed his lips over the shell of her ear, and she melted a little against him.

"I can't," she protested weakly. But she tipped her head back to look at him finally, and confusion shone in her gaze.

"Why?"

She swallowed, searching his face. “Because it’ll mess up my lipstick.”

He heaved a sigh. “Fine. Later then, when we can mess it up all we want.”

She didn’t reply, just continued her walk toward the door. Mitch followed her, a frightening cocktail of emotions boiling inside him. Things were fine with Jules—or were they? Tonight would be amazing—or a dismal failure. He’d either be named the new CEO of Denton Hotels—or be presented with some dismal, embarrassing award for service.

There was so much buildup toward tonight that he could hardly put one foot in front of the other.

“Everything is going to be fine,” Jules said once they were in the elevator heading downstairs.

“I know.”

“You’re white as a ghost and grinding your teeth.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. Okay. So I’m a little nervous.”

“Same here. But one of us has to keep it together,” she mused, crossing her arms. “I guess it’ll be me.”

He cracked a grin, fake knocking her chin. “That’s why we work so well together.”

She stared at him for a moment, the smile slowly fading from her face. Finally she jerked her gaze away from him as the elevator hit the lobby, which only confirmed Mitch’s suspicions. Jules was unhappy about something, but he couldn’t figure out what.

Except now was not the time. Not with the doors sliding open and the immense sweep of the lobby greeting them, filled with people dressed to the nines. Before they even stepped out, a few people called his name, waving at him.

Whatever was bothering her would have to keep bothering her until after the gala.

As soon as they stepped out of the elevator, everything else melted away. The anxiety, the stress, the horrible sense of not knowing and wondering. He was in business mode, which meant he compartmentalized all the negative emotions until later.

Everyone who was anyone was here. Everyone in the Denton empire and their families, which was normal, but this year they'd opened up the guest list to include the media and industry bigwigs. Mitchell Senior had wanted to go big, so Mitch gave him what he asked for.

"Wow," he breathed, squeezing Jules's hand. "This looks better than I could have imagined."

All her hard work was obvious, from the neatly arranged Christmas displays to the trendy Santa posing for pictures with his white man bun and aviator sunglasses. Surprise and excitement shone in the eyes of the guests. A banner hung above the Santa display, encouraging attendees to use the #MerryDentmas hashtag. When he glanced over at Jules, she was watching everything with bright eyes and a small smile on her face.

"You should be proud," he whispered to her, wrapping his arm around her waist.

"I am," she said, looking up at him. For a moment, whatever barrier she'd erected between them had dissolved. He dug his fingertips into the softness of her waist, suddenly desperate for a kiss.

"I want to ruin your lipstick right now," he confessed.

"Mitch—"

Her response was interrupted by the booming voice of his father, strolling toward them with his hands outstretched.

"Son!" His laughter almost hurt the ears if you stood too close. Because his father, as a veteran hotelier, knew exactly how to turn on the charm and gregariousness for public events. He pulled Mitch into a quick hug. "Look at this damn place. I told you to go big, and you did."

“Of course, Dad.” He laughed, clapping his father on the shoulder. “We owe it all to this lady.” He stepped back, gesturing toward Jules. “Jules, meet my father, Mitchell Denton, Senior. He’s clearly impressed with your work.”

“Impressed? I’m bowled over.” He surged forward to offer his hand, which Jules shook firmly. “Mitch, you found the best damn event planner on the planet. Now, let’s go mingle. I saw Sara Osterman over there. I was happy to hear you secured the deal.”

His father stopped when he realized Mitch wasn’t following him. Panic streaked through Mitch’s limbs. He felt torn between two worlds. The sweet, tender world that he’d been creating with Jules...and now the harsh reality of being his father’s son.

It was easy to forget it, up there in the penthouse. Their lofty dreamworld, safe from judgment or prying eyes or his father’s narrow-eyed inquisition.

“Mitch?”

“Hang on, Dad.” He turned to Jules, looking for some sort of answer there. His mouth parted, but no words came out.

“What’s the matter?” Jules asked.

It felt like cement had filled his throat. He couldn’t find words, much less force them out.

“Mitch, let’s go,” his dad barked, looking at his watch.

“I’m here with Jules,” Mitch finally said, turning toward his dad. That was simple. That was enough. Even though saying the words made him feel like he might puke a little.

His father’s brows formed a dark line. “What do you mean?”

“She’s my date.” Mitch forced a bright smile, slipping his hand over the small of Jules’s back.

His father blinked. “The event planner.” It wasn’t a statement as much as a veiled question. Only Mitch could hear the *are you fucking serious?* buried beneath his words.

“Yes.” Mitch hadn’t planned on outing them like this, much less immediately. But for some reason, it felt necessary.

“It’s been a dream to work with your son,” Jules spoke up, her voice light and sonorous. Her smile strained at the edges. “And your flagship hotel is just...marvelous. I’ve never held an event in such an elegant space before.”

Mitchell Senior nodded slowly, still looking Jules up and down.

“And if it helps, I’m not *just* an event planner,” Jules went on, her words becoming rushed.

“Did you meet my son at Boston University?” his father asked.

“No, actually, I went to Barnard.”

“And what did you study?” his father asked.

“Business, with a minor in fashion design.”

His father gave a humorless laugh and nodded, looking around. Mitch knew the sign well. He was done with this conversation.

“Anyway, spending the holidays with Mitch and Noelle has been a blessing,” Jules went on. Mitchell Senior blinked dully at her, his hands propped on his hips.

“Sorry?”

“Noelle.” Jules cast Mitch an uncertain glance. “Didn’t Mitch tell you about—”

“Jules, that’s enough for now,” Mitch said in a low voice.

“So you two are together?” his father asked, swinging his finger between the two of them.

Mitch’s eyes fluttered shut. He didn’t want to be dealing with this right now. Hell, he hadn’t even had the conversation with Jules yet. He didn’t know how to respond to that—because what if he said *yes* and she begged to differ?

“Dad, don’t worry about it,” Mitch said. “You don’t need to worry about a thing.”

“Worry? Shouldn’t I worry when the reputation of my business is at stake?”

His throat clamped. Dammit, this was getting tense. Jules took a few steps back, looking between Mitch and his dad.

“I’m going to powder my nose,” she said, her tone clipped, and then spun on her heels. Mitch watched her go, paralyzed with indecision.

“You can’t be serious,” his father said. He spoke through clenched teeth. “An event planner.”

And for a moment, Mitch wasn’t sure of anything—what was going on between him and Jules, much less what his father might expect of him. But one thing was certain.

He couldn’t let Jules walk away from him after that exchange without at least trying to make things right.

He ran after her, as fast as he could.

JULES

Jules didn't know where she was going. She couldn't see a damn thing through the veil of tears blurring her vision, but it didn't matter. She needed to get away from that man and his horrible father.

If you weren't sure before, now you know for certain.

The words ran through her head like a marquee. Confirming all her doubts, canceling all her dreams. Mitch had seen her as a plaything. Not someone to *be with*. Not a partner. Just a pretty girl to tag along, someone to disown when his father came sniffing around.

She hated how much it hurt. She thought she'd started the painful dislodging process after discovering him at his "business meeting" with that beautiful woman, but apparently she still had some dislodging to do.

This was what she got for playing house with a gorgeous man who could get literally anything he wanted in the world. Hurt. Broken-hearted. Cast aside.

Footsteps sounded behind her. "Jules! Wait!"

Mitch's voice echoed down the hall. Relief sizzled through her, but she tried to ignore it. She shouldn't be happy he was chasing after her. She needed to end things with him.

"Jules! Where are you going?" His voice was closer now. She swiped at her cheek where a few tears had fallen.

"Away," she said, her throat tight.

“Will you *stop*?” he shouted, his voice coming out sharper than she’d ever heard.

She stopped walking, waiting for him to catch up. When he did, he gripped her arms, searching out her gaze.

“Don’t leave,” he said. “I wasn’t ready to have that conversation with my dad, I’ll admit. But please—”

“Mitch, let’s not fool ourselves,” she said, her voice wavering as she spoke. She looked anywhere but at him. They were alone in this long, forgotten hallway, but the sounds of the party reached them faintly—violins and conversation and the occasional champagne bottle being uncorked.

“About what?” he asked.

“About this. What we’ve been doing.” She sniffed, wiping her cheek again. “And when I say this, I’m talking to myself. Because I was the one who fell for you, okay? I was the one who went all in, not realizing that you wouldn’t reciprocate. That’s my fault. But what’s between us is nothing. It can’t be anything. You’re you and I’m me.”

“We need to have this conversation,” Mitch said in a low voice. “But let’s wait until after the—”

“No! It’s happening now, whether or not it’s convenient.” Her chest hitched with a restrained sob. “And if you don’t want to, then I should keep moving along. I knew better than to hook up with a guy like you. I’m smarter than this.”

“Smarter?” Mitch cocked a brow. “What’s so wrong with a guy like me?”

“You seem like a nice guy, but you’re really not. You won’t stick up for me in front of your dad. You act like I’m...nobody to you. Hell, you’ll even go out for drinks with a woman and tell me it’s a business meeting. I’m not *stupid*, Mitch.”

Confusion etched itself across his face. “What? Drinks with a ___”

“Yeah, the other night, when I needed you. I came downstairs looking for you and saw exactly what your ‘meeting’ entailed. Bunch of bullshit. Whatever. I can see what a relationship with

you would be like anyway.” The words were tumbling out of her now, fiercer and faster than ever. She couldn’t stop the avalanche. “So why would I want to get in deeper?”

Mitch’s jaw flexed. “Jules, that *was* a business meeting. That’s Sara, one of our investors. She—” he paused, a sigh escaping him. “She’s a flirt and it’s no secret that she would like things to become more personal. But nothing happened. Since it was a business meeting, I went along with the investor’s wishes. Which included having a couple shots and grabbing dinner. But nothing happened between us and never will because I’m not interested in her. I’m interested in *you*. Because I want to be with *you*.”

“Maybe you do, but only in private. Only when you can keep it a dirty little secret.” She was sneering now, another wave of emotion welling up inside her, and the only way she could keep from crying was if she held onto her anger.

Mitch worked his jaw back and forth, staring at the floor. He reached for his phone a moment later and swiped it on.

“I’ll be there in a second,” he hissed into the phone, and then swiped it off.

“Is that your charming father calling?” Jules asked.

“Yes. He’s getting ready to make the announcement.” He dragged his gaze up to meet hers, and his eyes were stormier than she’d ever seen. “Is there anything I can say right now that will help this?”

Jules scoffed. “You had nothing to say in there. Why would out here be any different?”

Mitch’s phone buzzed again, and he swore, swiping it to silent.

“I’m going to take Noelle to my apartment tonight,” Jules said, her throat tightening again. This was it. The moment when she freed herself from continuing her mother’s history of poor decisions. “You don’t have to concern yourself with us any longer. Go do your thing.”

She steeled herself to walk by him, but he grabbed her arm in a vice grip.

“Do not walk away from me like that.”

“What?” she spat.

“You can’t—” His phone rang again, and he swore loudly. He swiped it on. “I said *hang on*,” he hissed into the phone. To Jules, he said, “Wait for me upstairs. I have to go now. You hear me? Wait for me. Please, Jules. Don’t leave like this.”

He sent her an intense look as he backed up down the hallway. She watched him as he turned and jogged away, her chest heaving like she’d run a marathon.

Wait for him. Fat chance of that. She scurried back through the lobby, darting between people and keeping her head down as she rushed toward the penthouse elevator. She didn’t dare look up, lest she see Mitch or his father anywhere. Cheers erupted from somewhere in the gala, and then the booming voice of Mitch’s father sounded over a microphone.

She shuddered, hurrying into the elevator. Her mind swirled with hurt and confusion the whole way up. When she got to the penthouse, she dismissed the nanny and got to packing, tears streaming down her cheeks the entire time.

She needed to hurry, because Mitch would be back, and who knew what would happen then. She had to get out of here—had to get back on her own turf—so she could *think* for a second. She needed a cool head and time to get her emotions under control.

Jules packed as much as she could into her bags before calling for a driver. She instructed him to meet her at the front door in ten minutes. Which meant the only remaining step was taking Noelle from the crib.

She hesitated, not wanting to wake the baby, but finally she scooped her into her arms. Noelle fussed a little, but Jules was able to rock her back to sleep. She struggled to pull the rolling luggage behind her, but she managed to get herself and Noelle onto the elevator without waking the baby *or* tripping over her ballgown.

Jules stared back at the penthouse as the doors slid shut.

Goodbye, Mitch.

A tear rolled down her cheek. This was the right thing to do.
So why did it feel so much like the wrong decision?



Mitch

Clapping filled the ballroom, and hundreds of happy faces shone back at him.

Mitch waved and smiled for what felt like the hundredth time since his father's big announcement.

It had happened. He was Denton Hotel's newest CEO.

But his smile strained at the edges, and his stomach sank lower with each passing second that Jules was out of reach. He couldn't bolt from the stage quite yet. But soon. Mitchell Senior slung his arm around his shoulders, turning toward another set of cameras.

"This is a dream come true," Mitch said into the microphone once the applause had died down slightly. He'd already given a short speech, and the Christmas Gala still had plenty on the agenda. But Mitch only had one thing on his new, edited agenda: hunt down Jules.

A jazz quartet sprang to life, signaling the end of the announcement. His heart raced, and he turned to his father. "Thanks, Dad. I have to step away now."

"Now? Just when the party's getting started?"

Mitch's brother Josh jogged up to the stage area, his fiancée Amelia in tow followed by their cousin Chris. They must have arrived during the announcement. Josh came up the small staircase and wrapped his brother in a hug.

"Good to see you, bro. I'm proud of you."

"Same here, Mitch," Chris said, reaching out to shake his hand.

Mitch grinned, but it faded fast. He clapped his brother on the back and waved at Amelia. "Thanks. I'm on my way out right

now. How long will you be here?"

"You're leaving?" Josh asked.

"Dude, we just got here," Chris said.

"I have something I need to take care of." Every passing second reminded him that he needed to make things right *immediately*. It already felt too late. "I'll be back. I want to catch up. You three look great." He was heading down the stairs now, pointing at his brother and Amelia as he tried to combine pleasantries with getting the fuck out of there. "We need to get lunch soon. And I want to hear about the renovations upstate. Bye, guys."

His father stepped into his path, grabbing his shoulder. "What is this about? That event planner? Come on. You need to enjoy yourself. This is *your night*."

"Yeah. A night that wouldn't have happened without her."

His father scoffed. "Event planners are a dime a dozen. *You* are the real star tonight. You've been working your whole life for this."

"Yeah, and what do I do that's so special? Believe me, I love my job. I love our business. But I'm sick of pretending I've got something special up my sleeve that nobody else has. Jules is the best woman I've ever met. She's selfless and dedicated and the first *partner* I've ever had. And you'd have me throw that away because she's an event planner?"

His father's nostrils flared. "So you'd throw all this away? Your future with the company? For her?"

Mitch froze as he stared his father down. Looked like tonight was the night for uncomfortable conversations. "What do you mean, exactly?"

Mitchell Senior huffed out a breath, crossing his arms. "I would think that would be obvious. You either want to be the head of Denton Hotels or you don't." At least his father had the good sense to have this conversation at his normal volume, but that didn't stop the cold fury from rolling through Mitch.

“For the record, Father, I’m happier than I’ve ever been and it’s all thanks to her. I refuse to lose her.”

“So that’s it? You’d walk away from everything for a woman who —”

“Has come to mean more to me than Denton Hotels? Yes, absolutely.” The words flowed more freely, now that he’d had a chance to grapple with the idea of losing her. “Jules is the first person I feel like I can really *share my life* with and I’ve fallen in love with her. If you can’t accept that, then I decline the position and I submit my resignation, effective immediately.”

“What? You can’t do that!” His father’s voice rose. “You need to think carefully about what you’re saying, son. This isn’t something you can come back from.”

“I mean it. While heading up Denton Hotels has been a dream for me, it pales compared to having Jules in my life. Excuse me.”

Mitch didn’t wait for his father’s reply and raced up to the penthouse. He didn’t expect her to be there, but he had to be sure. The place was empty. Noelle’s empty crib stung the worst, and his chest tightened as he fished out his phone to call for his driver. He wasn’t getting a response, so he found a backup. He was in the car within five minutes and pulling up to Jules’s building within fifteen.

His heart hammered between his ears as his gaze washed over the brick building. His breath came out in white puffs as he hurried toward the front doors and buzzed her apartment number.

After a few moments, there was no response. So he buzzed again.

Still nothing.

He swore, pulling out his cell phone and calling. It rang, rang, rang before switching to voicemail. Was it possible she wasn’t even here? Fear coiled inside him. She had to be here. Had to. Because he wasn’t going to let today end without his little, unlikely family being reunited.

One thing was certain—Noelle and Jules were unofficial Dentons.

Mitch walked back to the sidewalk, peering up at the building. He made a rough calculation of which apartment was hers based on his last visit. He tried to remember the hallway, how many steps he'd taken, whether the door was on the right or the left. Based on all that, he concluded her apartment had to be one of the darkened windows.

And there was a fire escape leading right to that window.

He turned over the idea a few times in his head. If anyone saw him climbing the ladder, they'd probably call the cops, but it was a risk he was willing to take. He'd gladly spend the night in jail if it meant Jules would give him a second chance.

Taking a deep breath, he reached for the dumpster against the wall and pulled it closer to the fire escape. Grabbing the handle on the lid, he hopped onto the dumpster and jumped up to grab the bottom rung on the ladder and pull it down.

Climbing up, he made his way to Jules's apartment and sent up a silent prayer that it was the right one, because there was no way he was going to let his family spend a night without him. Ever.

JULES

Jules lay in bed tossing and turning. She'd turned her phone off to avoid having to speak to anyone and regretted it now, as she had no way to check the time without turning it back on.

As bad as it was for her, it was even worse for Noelle. The baby didn't seem to like her apartment *at all*. She'd fussed nonstop for a full hour after they arrived, which didn't even make sense because how could she really tell she was in a different place? But the baby knew, somehow, that this wasn't her home, which made Jules feel even worse. She'd not only woken her up out of a peaceful sleep, but she'd also forcibly removed her from her only safe haven at this point in her very young life.

The self-criticisms and anxieties were spiraling now that she was back in her own place. She'd thought that they would have lessened once she was back in familiar surroundings. After all, wasn't that the point, to come back to her own world? To find a clear head and her own two feet?

But now that she was here, she couldn't stop thinking about Mitch. She couldn't do this alone, and more than that, she didn't *want* to do this alone. She missed his steady presence beside her. The heat of him lying beside her in bed. His warm smiles and quiet reassurances.

Dammit, she'd made a huge mistake. She should never have walked away without letting him talk to her, but she'd been so hurt. She knew he'd spoken semi-regularly with his father and

she couldn't understand why he'd never spoken to him about her or Noelle. Were they some dirty secret not to be shared with his family? Was he embarrassed by them? By her? Her mother's warnings had flashed in her head, and Jules had known she had to get away from the gala or risk having her dignity completely shredded.

A soft tapping at her living room window made her jolt. She sat up, trying to orient herself in the darkness. It had been so long since she'd spent the night in her own apartment, much less on the couch next to a bassinet. Maybe these were the normal night sounds that she'd forgotten about.

A shadow moved outside her window, and her heart leapt into her throat.

Or maybe someone was outside her window on the fire escape. Seconds away from breaking in.

Her limbs turned to stone and she waited in deathly silence for any other sound. After a few moments, the tapping returned. And this time, it was *definite*.

She fumbled for her phone, turning it on. What was taking so damn long? "Updates? Now?" Taking a deep breath, she blew it out hard. "Calm down, Jules. It's probably just a drunk at the wrong window." It didn't necessarily have to be someone looking to rob her or worse. She wanted to go investigate, but with Noelle in here? She debated for a moment, and then decided she wasn't going to get any sleep without knowing who or what was out there.

She forced herself to walk over to the living room window and pulled back the curtain. A gasp rocketed out of her.

It wasn't a robber or a drunk person.

It was Mitch.

He cupped his hands around his eyes, pressing his face to the glass. "Jules." His voice came out muffled against the glass and left a foggy warm spot. "Will you let me in? Please? It's freezing out here and I'd really like to avoid getting arrested."

She could only blink in amazement, moving to open the window before she could even think. She lifted the lower sash

as high as it would go, and Mitch folded himself inside the apartment. She hurried to shut the window once he was in.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed.

“You didn’t answer my calls. Or respond to the buzzer.” He rubbed his arms and she realized that he’d come here straight from the gala. He looked around, his gaze landing on the crib. “Is she asleep?”

“Yes, but just recently, so keep your voice down.”

Mitch raked a hand through his hair, his intense gaze switching to her. “Jules, come back to the penthouse.”

Her chest tightened and she gripped the arm of the couch behind her. “Why? We lead different lives. And I don’t think there’s room for me in yours.”

Mitch stepped closer, searching out her gaze. “There’s plenty of room for you in my life. In fact, without you in my life, there’s a hole.”

Emotion clogged her throat, and she looked away.

“I was thinking about what the rest of my life might look like, now that my dad named me CEO.”

Her brows shot up. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It’s everything I wanted. At least, everything I thought I wanted. But then I turned it down.”

Jules gasped. “You turned it down? But this is everything you wanted. Why would you do that?”

“It’s everything I thought I wanted, but I was wrong.” He sighed, gesturing toward Noelle in the bassinet. “Actually, everything I want is here. In this apartment. I don’t want to envision a future without you and Noelle in it.”

She kept shaking her head. “I don’t understand why you would do that. I thought you wanted to be CEO?”

“I did but not if it means I’d lose you.”

Jules ears were buzzing with white noise and all she could manage was a weak, “What?”

“I told my dad that I was in love with you and if he couldn’t accept it, then I resign.”

Reaching up, Jules pinched her arm. She had to be dreaming. *Ouch!* She wasn’t dreaming. She was awake, which meant... “So, not only did you give up your dream job, you quit? For me?”

Mitch’s whisper faltered. “You are the only woman I want to be with, Jules.”

Jules covered her face with her hands, and Mitch swooped forward, wrapping his arms around her. She cried into his chest, clinging to him as he pulled her into a tight hug. It felt so right—so undeniably right—to be in his arms.

“Will you take a chance on me?” he murmured into her ear. “I promise that I will make sure you come first for as long as I live.” She squeezed her arms tighter around him, feeling the decision reverberate through her. She nodded, unable to speak or potentially ever leave his embrace.

Because there was one place she wanted to be, and it was right there. In his arms. Bathed in his scent. Right alongside him on this crazy journey they’d started together.

When she finally found her voice, she tipped her head back to look at him, tears shining in her eyes.

“I needed you to be an asshole,” she said quietly, “because that’s what my mom taught me all rich men are.”

Mitch snorted.

“But you’re not. An asshole wouldn’t climb a fire escape at midnight to profess his love. An asshole wouldn’t choose his new family over his dream job. An asshole wouldn’t...oh no, the gala.”

“I don’t want to be there if you’re not at my side,” he whispered, and then pressed his lips against hers for a kiss.

Happiness and certainty swirled through her, making her dizzy. But Mitch grounded her—his embrace and his solid heat kept her from floating off into space. Because that’s what

partners were for. They were the complements you didn't know you were even looking for.

"Just look at us," Mitch murmured. "We started as perfect strangers, and now we're a perfect family."

She dissolved into laughter, more tears escaping. Because it was true.

It was so, so true, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Before either of them could say anything else, Mitch's phone began to vibrate. A lot.

"I think someone is trying to reach you." Noelle began to stir, so Jules grabbed his hand and led him to the bedroom as he pulled his phone out. She watched as a smile spread across his face. "Good news?"

"Text from my father."

He was smiling, so clearly it was something positive. She smiled back at him. "Well? What does it say?"

Instead of answering, he turned the phone around so she could read it.

"You have balls, Mitch. I'll give you that. And I don't accept your resignation. The job is yours. So get the girl and get your ass back here in time for brunch tomorrow with the family."

"Oh wow. Are you going to take the job again?"

Mitch took his phone back and pocketed it. "Only if you're okay with it, because there's no way I will do the job without you by my side. So what do you say?"

Jules threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "Yes, of course I will. I'm so excited for you. Wait, does this mean we have to go back to the gala?"

He frowned, shaking his head. "Definitely not. If you're willing, we'll stay here tonight and head over there tomorrow morning. All of us. Together."

Jules liked the sound of that. "All of us. Together."

EPILOGUE

JULES

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Jules! Come here!”

Mitch’s voice boomed through the penthouse. She looked up from where she’d been playing with Noelle on the carpet of the living room. Their little squirmy eight-month old was more inquisitive and exploratory than ever, which meant Jules couldn’t turn her back on her for a second. She scooped her up and followed the sound of his voice.

Her brows shot up as she stepped onto the expansive balcony. A dinner table had been set up out here, complete with a highchair for Noelle. The table was set for two, with a covered dish in the center.

“What’s all this?” Jules asked.

“Just my secret service elevator missions while you were occupied in the living room,” Mitch said, a knowing grin on his lips. He took Noelle from her arms to get her settled into the highchair, and Jules looked out over the city. Her breath caught as it often did, beholding the incredible sight. She’d never tire of this city or this view.

Or this family.

“That’s my little love nugget,” Mitch cooed as he strapped Noelle into the seat. “Daddy cooked something very special for you.”

“He did?” Jules asked, easing into her chair. She’d been entirely unaware of this happening, but she blamed that

partially on being a little tired from Noelle's recent nighttime teething pain, and just generally getting lost in playing with the child-size xylophone their daughter loved.

"Oh, yes. But he did it secretly, in the kitchen downstairs, so as to not alert the family." He pressed a kiss to the top of Noelle's head, and then turned his attention to the table. "Behold!" He uncovered the plate in the middle of the table, revealing an array of cooked vegetables—asparagus, potatoes, purple carrots and more—alongside an incredibly juicy looking steak.

"This looks amazing," Jules said, gaze darting between the food and Mitch's apron. "Though I'm not sure what looks better. The food, or you in that apron."

"I'd understand if you choose the food. After all, I'm still wearing clothes."

Jules snickered, unfolding her napkin. Mitch settled into his seat, reaching over to Noelle to tweak her button nose. The baby giggled, slapping her hands against the highchair table.

"I got some news today," Jules said once they'd both filled their plates with food. "I'm getting a promotion at work."

Mitch paused, his eyes going wide. "That's amazing, honey. You've only been there for a few months."

Jules grinned as she cut up her steak into very tiny pieces for Noelle to try. "It is. But I turned it down."

His brow furrowed. "You did?"

"I did. I've decided I want to start my own business."

A grin crept across his face. "Do you now?"

"Yep. Learned some good business tricks from this guy I know, plus there's that whopping bonus I got for that Christmas event, so decided it might be time to take a stab at the ol' entrepreneur thing."

"I'm proud of you, Jules. Either way. You have my full support."

“I know.” She transferred the tiny bits of steak to Noelle’s tray, grinning over at Mitch. “And I love you for that.”

“I have some news for *you*,” Mitch said as he chewed. He leaned back in his chair, looking over at Noelle. The evening sun had just sunk low enough so that the entire balcony was bathed in red-tinted light. “I spoke with Donovan and Jenna, and Noelle’s biological mother has agreed to terminate all parental rights. We just need the judge to sign off on the adoption, and Noelle will officially be ours.”

Jules’s heart leapt into her throat. The police had no luck trying to track down Noelle’s biological family, and a social worker had arrived at the hotel prepared to take Noelle from them, but they’d been ready. Thanks to Mitch’s connections *and* money, they were able to cut through the typical red tape and gain temporary custody of Noelle. Then he’d hired a private investigator who scoured the security camera and surrounding CCTV footage from that fateful December day. He’d been able to find the young woman who’d left Noelle in the manger, allowing them to begin a formal adoption process.

“That’s amazing,” Jules said, but her voice betrayed the worry she felt down to her bones.

“But...?” Mitch prompted. After so little time as a couple, he knew her so well it seemed like they’d been together for fifty years.

“But...” She sighed, shaking her head. “What if the judge decides that we’re not fit to adopt her?”

“Honey, we are the fittest people to adopt this little bundle of energy.”

“Right, but you never know what could go wrong.” She wouldn’t rest until the entire process was over with. The constant waiting was driving her nuts. “I don’t trust bureaucracy.”

Mitch nodded, his jaw flexing as he studied something in his lap. “I know what you mean. And I’ve been thinking...” He fiddled with something in his lap, and then looked up at her,

his icy blue eyes filled with mischief and something more. “I know what will seal the deal.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Mitch stood and came around the table. When he towered over her, smiling mysteriously, Jules knew that her racing heart was a sign. She just wasn’t sure of what.

“I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Mitch dropped to one knee, fishing something out of his pocket. He presented her with a ring—a diamond engagement ring.

“Now do you?” he asked, his smile spreading ear to ear.

Jules gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. “Are you serious right now?”

“Jules Cardwell. Event planner extraordinaire. Top-notch mother. The only lover I ever want in my bed. The perfect partner I never knew I needed.” He paused, wetting his bottom lip. “Will you be my wife?”

A laugh-sob wracked her body. Holding back the tears was hopeless. A few trickled down her cheeks as she nodded. “Yes! Of course! Oh my god, why wouldn’t I?”

Mitch laughed, pulling her into a hug. She clung to him, her tears dampening the shoulder of his shirt, knowing down to her bones that this was the only man for her.

This was the only *family* for her.

In the background, little Noelle clapped her hands and gurgled happily.

Their perfect family was about to get a little bit better, and she couldn’t wait.

**END OF THE BILLIONAIRE'S
SUDDEN CHRISTMAS BABY**

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES BOOK TWO

THE
BILLIONAIRE'S
Second Chance

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES: BOOK THREE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLURB

Things are heating up in the kitchen...

Mara Lancaster's future depends on her winning a local gingerbread house competition. Nothing can get in her way, especially not a super-hot, billionaire celebrity chef whose heart she broke years ago. But she can't forget how sweet Chris Denton was before he became a famous bad boy chef. And the more she tries to resist him, the harder it is to ignore the wildly inappropriate attraction she feels...

Chris only trusts one thing—his ability to cook. He can play it cool and pretend Mara is just another obstacle in the way of his skyrocketing career. But the memory of seeing her kiss another boy back in high school still cuts deep. Being around her again now is stirring up all those old feelings. A heaping cup of passion. A pinch of jealousy. And smoldering sexual tension. Ingredients that are a recipe for disaster...one that just might leave them both burned.

CHRIS

Flashes popped and burst as Chris Denton's limo slowed to a stop in front of the Glenford Community Center. The press was here, because they were *always* here. Not at this exact place, per se, but wherever Chris went, the cameras were sure to follow. He chuckled at his own joke before getting his game face on.

As a celebrity chef, it was hard to sneeze these days without the press catching wind.

And honestly? On days like today, he didn't mind it one bit. His smile grew wider the closer the photographers swarmed in anticipation of his arrival.

Eat it up, guys. Your hometown hero is back.

Once the limo stopped, he pushed the door open and stepped into the fray.

"Chef Chris! Chef Chris!" Shouts pierced the air, and security hired by the network carved a path for him through the people. "How are you feeling about the competition? Are you worried that your show's ratings might fall if you don't win?"

He smiled tightly as the questions rained around him. Not winning wasn't an option, hometown niceties be damned. Now in its fiftieth year, the Glenford Annual Gingerbread House Competition was locally famous, and this year, it was going international. All because Chef Chris had agreed to participate, lending his fame to the holiday event.

Which meant the pressure was on.

“Chris!” A familiar voice broke through the din as he strode through the double doors of the community center. The early-December air was crisp and cold, but inside the heat made him eager to shrug off his expensive overcoat. In New York, he fit in with all the other rich celebrities. But here, back in his hometown? He already stood out like a sore thumb.

Chris’s assistant, Damon, wove toward him through the crowd. The only familiar face from New York City that he’d be seeing over the next two weeks of filming this competition reality show.

“There you are. We need to get you into the staging area. Everyone’s ready to go.”

Damon led him through the humming front hallway and toward the auditorium where the meet-and-greet would happen in advance of filming. Tucked into the back of the center was a multipurpose room where they’d be doing the bulk of the filming. Chris kept himself alert and smiling as he followed Damon into the auditorium. Who knew who he might see here, who he might need to be “on” for.

There was one person he already knew he’d be running into, and his entire body prickled with anticipation over it. Coming home to Glenford was one thing. But coming back here to face off against his first love—and first heartbreak—Mara Lancaster? That was unexpected, and he hoped competing against her wouldn’t be awkward given how they’d parted. If anything it would add an interesting dimension to the next two weeks of his life.

It wasn’t as if he could say no to this opportunity. When the network found out he was from Glenford, they’d reached out to the organizers and offered their production crew and a prime-time slot if they would allow Chef Chris to participate. They eagerly agreed, and plans were already made before his producer informed him about the competition.

His agent told him that he’d need to blow the competition out of the water as part of the network’s efforts to expand his demographic and take his success to new levels. Admittedly, Chris couldn’t figure out how beating home bakers on their

own turf would elevate him, but he wanted to please the network, because he had plans of his own for his career, and they involved the network executives saying *yes* to whatever he proposed.

The auditorium was almost completely full by the time he entered, and Chris hadn't taken three steps before he saw her.

Mara lingered near the stage, leaning against the small stair railing as though she didn't have a care in the world. Back in the day, he used to joke and called her Ginger Sinner—a nod to her fair complexion and strawberry-blond tresses and her total disregard for any propriety when it came to making out behind the bleachers during football games.

But now? She was pure Ginger Stunner. Taller, somehow, and more elegant, as though the ten years since high school graduation had only served to refine her into a sharper, more breathtaking version of herself. Chris gritted his teeth as Damon led him closer to her.

Why did she have to be the one to win the Glenford baking contest? He'd asked himself this question a thousand times. The television network thought that the premise was infallible—hijack the local annual gingerbread house competition for Glenford residents so that they could find the best of the best to square off against Chris. It had the right amount of small-town charm, boosted by the Christmas spirit and everyone's favorite vice these days—baking shows. It was already trending on all the socials and they hadn't even started filming.

Mara straightened as he approached, her moss-green eyes shifting into a glare. Electricity shivered through him, and he could feel the frown settling onto his face.

He still hadn't forgotten how she'd broken his heart in high school. And sure, they were damn near thirty years old, but that didn't mean his heart wasn't racing at seeing her again, and he had to swallow all those unspoken words and unresolved sentiments that he never got to share.

Damon cleared his throat and Chris realized he'd been staring at Mara, while she stared right back. Dammit, he needed to focus. His assistant gestured toward an open seat in the front

row, and Chris made a big display of folding his coat over the back of the auditorium seat. Anything to kill time and not focus on Mara.

“We love you, Chef Chris,” was shouted by someone behind him and then others picked it up. Turning, he waved to the ones shouting, making sure to keep his smile in place as cameras flashed around him.

“Let’s get started, everyone,” Paul Michaels, the director of the competition, called out, clapping his hands for quiet before he began his introductory spiel. But it was all white noise, because Chris couldn’t take his eyes off Mara as she took a seat farther down his row. While she’d been frowning when they first saw each other, she had nothing but smiles for the people sitting nearby. Every inch of him was curious if she still smelled perpetually of strawberry lip gloss. Surely, at almost thirty, she didn’t hold the same habits as her sixteen-year-old self.

Or did she?

Chris’s nostrils flared as he shoved the thought from his mind.

“And that brings us to our competitors! Mara Lancaster of Sweet and Savory catering, here in Glenford, began her career training under a local baker before moving on to work in the only Michelin-starred restaurant in the area, eventually working her way up to pastry chef. Two years ago, she took a chance and started her own catering business, so if you like what you see during the competition, be sure to check out her socials for all the amazing dishes she’s made.” Polite applause filled the auditorium as the director introduced her. Chris clapped along with everyone else, reminding himself that he wasn’t going to let her get under his skin.

But when the attention turned his way and the director began the introduction about his famous show, *Cooking with Chris*, and all the recent accolades and touring and the third cookbook he was set to release, it was hard not to glance at her.

To see if she gave a damn. If she was impressed. If she even remembered who he was.

Mara's moss-green gaze sizzled on him, and for a moment, Chris forgot where he was. What he was doing. What this was all about.

He swallowed a knot in his throat, jerking his gaze off her once the applause around him died down.

This baking competition was a piece of cake—literally. Well, cookie. Lots of cookies.

The real challenge was going to be having Mara within arm's reach again, twenty-four seven, for the next two weeks.

A challenge he wasn't sure he'd be able to overcome.

MARA

M ara kept clenching her fists.

Every few minutes she'd look down and find herself doing it again. She'd relax and take a deep breath and force her jaw to loosen slightly. She'd have to be careful once she was mic'ed up so the audience wouldn't hear her grinding her teeth during the competition.

She tried to think happy thoughts, but with Chris Denton in her presence, it was nearly impossible to do anything other than watch him.

"I really think we're going to have an amazing competition, and I can't tell you how excited I am to return to Glenford," Chris was saying, standing at the front of the auditorium as if he were giving an Oscar acceptance speech. He'd been talking for a full minute and didn't show any signs of slowing.

She was stuck somewhere between lost puppy and resentful bulldog. More bulldog than puppy, if she was being honest. Chris Denton was a certifiable celebrity asshole. He strutted instead of walked; he smirked instead of smiled.

Despite all that, he still was the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on and she felt her lady parts clench at the sight of him. But she refused to let his chef-y hunkiness derail her.

Winning the gingerbread house competition was the first step in an important line of goals, which would lead to her dream of opening her own bakery, thanks to the sizable winnings the network was offering this year. Competing against Chris was

just the unfortunate consequence of making shit happen for herself.

She just hadn't thought he'd be so celebrity arrogant so *quickly*. He'd only had the show for four years, after winning a head-to-head competition on the Food Network, but evidently some people let their celebrity status go to their head faster than others.

"And hey, whatever happens in the competition," Chris said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his gleaming, pressed slacks, "I think we can all agree that giving Glenford a little boost, in the economy and in the media, is good for everyone." His gaze swung toward her but only for a glance. Like a warning slap. "No matter who wins."

Applause erupted ferociously, filling the auditorium, and she forced herself not to tense up again. She'd known she'd be competing against a celebrity chef and was expecting this level of response to whoever turned up to compete. But knowing it and experiencing it were two different things. And the fact that it was Chris Denton, Glenford's hometown hero, according to all the hype put out by the network, the response from the eager audience was...annoying. He was just a chef with a TV show for fuck's sake. It's not like he saved a family from a burning building or stopped an out-of-control train from running over someone's puppy. He cooked for a living, just like she did. The only difference was he did it in front of cameras.

When the director of the competition finally kicked the prima donna out of the spotlight, Mara sighed audibly. Finally. *Relief.*

Though for how much longer? This was a gingerbread house competition, sure, which seemed innocuous enough. But it was a *reality* baking competition, which ensured some amount of drama, manufactured or otherwise. And with Chris strutting around like a New York City peacock, she could only imagine the sort of annoying obstacles he'd come up with to attempt to derail her.

After introductions were made and everyone was on the same page with the schedule, the camera crew, set hands, and makeup artists started the trek toward the kitchen to begin familiarizing themselves with the setup. The multipurpose room had been converted into two enormous separate kitchens where each contestant could safely bake, alongside their respective teams of three assistants each.

Cameras had been outfitted at various points along the ceiling, as well as the standard cameras set up along the front and sides of the set to capture every bit of drama and gingerbread unfolding. The director pointed out their individual stations, and as Mara went over to her spacious, gleaming industrial kitchen space, she couldn't help but notice that Chris stood directly across from her in his own.

Watching her with those crystalline blue eyes.

A shiver coursed through her; she wished it hadn't. It was impossible to prevent, apparently. Her body had other ideas when it came to Chris Denton, but she could rest assured that it was strictly a physical reaction. It didn't mean she forgave him for what he did, or even liked him. She *definitely* didn't like him.

Chris had proved just how much of an asshole he really was when they were in high school. Sure, she had been the one caught kissing another guy at the school dance. But she hadn't kissed him first—he'd stolen the kiss from her. Chris had just never cared enough to even hear her side.

Instead, he'd made up his mind and that was it. After he'd moved to New York City, he'd fallen off the Glenford radar. At least *her* radar. Mostly. Dammit, not really. She'd never admit this aloud, but she followed his career, a tiny bit jealous at how quickly it took off, but she always made sure *not* to like any of his posts.

“Okay! So are we ready to start filming for our great gingerbread competition?” The director's harsh but jovial voice boomed through the set, and both the camera crew and baking participants rumbled their agreement. As part of the competition, they were to choose their baking assistants from a

pool of students from the Glenford Culinary School, and Mara had made sure to pick the best and brightest of the recent grads. There were still plenty of qualified candidates to choose from, but Mara liked to think her choices would give her an advantage. She had no idea if Chris had hand chosen his assistants or if that had been the job of his PA, who was either following him around like a lost puppy or had his eyes trained on his phone as he furtively typed away. Chris's laugh floated toward her followed by a flurry of female titters, as if he said something hilariously funny. She rolled her eyes. He was just using Glenford, it was painfully obvious, by playing the small-town-hero role to the hilt. In fact, if she'd known that he was going to be the celebrity chef the network had in mind when she'd auditioned for this competition months ago, she might have thought twice.

No, scratch that. She would have done it anyway. That's how badly she wanted to win.

Mara washed her hands vigorously in the shiny new sink and got to work directing her assistants. Today would be a short filming day, but with how agitated Chris's mere presence made her, she knew she needed to stay more focused than ever.

"Mara."

A deep bass jolted her from her thoughts, and when she looked up, Chris stood right in front of her. He wore an intolerable smirk, one that screamed *I'm the top dog here*.

"Yes. That's me." She cleared her throat and reached for a paper towel. Chris held out his hand...for a handshake. She blinked, staring at him as she dried her hands. "Uh, don't you remember me?"

Chris narrowed his eyes, lowering his hand. "Vaguely, yes."

"Right." She tossed the paper towel, hackles raised. All it took was one word to her face to make her realize just how *away* he'd gone from that young man she'd fallen in love with in high school. "Thought you might have remembered just how well we used to know each other. But I can't expect you to keep so many names and faces straight now that you're a

celebrity chef. I mean, hell, you all but forgot about Glenford. I'm shocked you even came back for this."

Chris's eyes narrowed to slits, and she could tell that he'd abandoned whatever game plan he'd shown up with. "And why wouldn't I come back for something like this? My memories of Glenford are *mostly* positive, and nothing would please me more than to support the community where I grew up. I would think that you, of all people, would appreciate that."

She felt her shoulders creeping up to her ears and forced them down with a shrug, using a nearby rag to wipe the countertop to avoid looking at him, even though it was far from dirty. "Thought Glenford was beneath you now, you know? I mean, you don't even come back to visit your own parents."

"I've been to the cemetery, if that's what you're asking."

Mara froze, and her eyes flashed to his and all she saw was anger. "Oh shit, Chris. I knew that. I can't believe I said that."

"Save it. You don't need to concern yourself with my family."

Gnawing at her lip, she wanted to apologize again, but instead, she found herself saying, "Don't worry. I won't."

Chris worked his jaw back and forth as he turned to leave. But then he whipped back to face her. "I originally came over here to say good luck, because you'll need it. I fully intend to win this competition."

"Will I?" Mara scrubbed at a perfectly clean spot on the countertop, unable to control the snark flying out of her mouth despite her already putting her foot in it. If there was one thing that rubbed her the wrong way, it was arrogant assholes. She was in too deep at this point, and the baking portion of the competition hadn't even started. She really needed to shut up. And yet. "I've seen your show, and I know how you bake. You really could have spruced up the fondant in that wedding cake episode, by the way. But you're not a baker. You wouldn't know."

Chris's jaw flexed. "You watch the show? I take it you're a fan."

She rolled her eyes. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? No. I’m not a fan. I’ve just had the misfortune of being trapped in a few waiting rooms while your show was on, and I couldn’t help comparing what you were doing wrong to what I do right.”

“You might not be a fan, but fifty-five million other Americans are. That’s not even counting international ratings.”

“I’m sure those numbers help you drift off into a restful sleep each night,” she shot back, feeling herself tumble headfirst into the tunnel of snark. “And with numbers like that, why are you even here? I mean seriously. You can’t possibly care about this gingerbread competition.”

She stopped scrubbing at the countertop, her elbow suddenly aching. Wouldn’t that be great—if she’d given herself tennis elbow simply from the pent-up frustration of being around Chris Denton?

“Why am I here?” The acid nearly dripped from his tongue. “I go where I’m needed. That’s what my career is about. And clearly, this competition needed an experienced hand to liven things up. Everybody loves me, Mara.”

“Not everybody,” she shot back.

His grin turned sardonic. Like he’d been waiting for her to go there. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Chris turned on his heel and strutted away, and all she could do was gape after him. The remark felt out of left field, but she also felt called out. Like he could somehow peer into her head and see just how hot her blood was running at the sight of him.

That didn’t mean she loved him. Even though she had once, she didn’t anymore.

She was *not* still in love with Chris Denton.

She blinked, repeating this to herself as she busied herself in her kitchen again.

A decade was more than enough time to get over someone and move the hell on.

Wasn’t it?

CHRIS

“Places!”

The sharp voice of the director cut through Chris’s brain fog. He always woke up at six on the dot, espresso by 6:20 and at the studio by eight ready to start work, but something had been throwing him off from the moment he arrived today. As his gaze landed on Mara’s stony face, he had an idea of what it was.

“Are we ready?” The director, Paul, looked around the room. Both Chris’s and Mara’s teams were assembled in the network-provided aprons emblazoned with the competition’s logo. The first day of filming was about to finally start, and the only thing more nerve-wracking than competing against Mara was not knowing what her gingerbread plan of attack was.

Chris hated to admit it—so he never would out loud—but Mara was right. He wasn’t an amazing baker, but what he lacked in prowess he made up for in ingenuity. He could still bake circles around most people in the industry, but by the way she directed her assistants around the kitchen and arranged her equipment, he could tell that Mara knew what she was doing.

While Chris had an early interest in cooking, he didn’t remember Mara showing any interest, let alone baking, but judging from the brief bio Paul had included in their introductions, clearly she had an interest in the field.

What else has changed since then? He glanced at her hands, curious to see if there was a ring there. All fingers were bare.

Not like she'd wear a wedding ring during a baking competition. But still. Maybe there was someone she called her boyfriend...or more probably, her husband.

And what if she was still seeing that asshole, Dan? Anger flashed through him, a sucker punch from the past. He hadn't expected to be affected by high-school drama, but maybe that was a natural consequence of being back in Glenford. The memory of taking Mara to the winter dance popped into his head. She had looked amazing in her dress. He'd only left her alone for a few minutes, but when he got back, she was on the dance floor making out with Dan. It didn't help that his parents had died shortly after when a drunk driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and hit them head-on. Moving to New York City to live with his cousins, Josh and Mitch, took him away from everything he knew, but it'd helped with his grief. It just didn't stop him from stewing over finding Mara with someone else, and it'd been years before he let that go.

Or he'd thought he'd let it go. Now he wasn't so sure.

Filming began, and Chris fought to regain focus. He was used to high-pressure situations, filming schedules, and being surrounded by cameras for more than eight hours a day. So why couldn't he get his head in the game in Glenford?

His mind darted back to Mara, even though he kept his eyes off her. He directed his crew through the preparatory items on his to-do list for the day: setting up the different stations, prepping the mise en place, mixing dough, greasing pans, arranging the tools they would need. But Mara sizzled at his periphery. The more he tried not to look at her, the harder his thoughts about her accelerated.

Focus.

He scraped together the shreds of his concentration and powered through the day. Over the years, he'd finetuned his TV persona to such a degree that it became second nature. So much so that it didn't even feel like work—he could transform into his television-ready self at a moment's notice. And that happened on the set as well, knowing that the cameras were

filming, shouting and barking commands the way his audience had come to expect.

Cooking with Chris wasn't an international success because he was a good-looking guy. No, he'd crafted a fine cocktail of arrogance blended with intellectual know-how. He'd criticized more than a few guests for their sloppy kitchen manners and schooled even more experts on their weak areas. That was part of the appeal.

Which meant that *Gingerbread Head to Head* was relying on his infamous Chef Chris-ness. And he was going to deliver.

A slight commotion near one of the cameras caught his attention as he and the team brought out the first batch of cooked gingerbread. The director snapped his fingers.

“Say that louder, Mara.”

Mara glanced up at him, a smirk on her face. “What?”

“Say what you just said, but louder. We didn't catch it well enough the first time.”

Mara's smirk turned mischievous. “Chris wouldn't know a good gingerbread recipe if it was garnished with lavender.”

He flattened his lips. He loved garnishing with lavender. The lavender cake served in all Denton Hotels was his recipe and it was one of their more popular desserts, but hell if he'd let her know how annoyed that made him.

One thing was clear—the woman had shown up to compete. He'd considered going slightly easy on her in the verbal arena, but now? All bets were off. He was going to treat Mara like she clearly deserved. As an absolute foe.

“You wouldn't recognize a good gingerbread recipe period,” Chris snapped back. He sent an accusatory glare over to her prep area. “Not even a culinary degree to speak of.”

“Your degree means squat when it comes to flavor,” Mara said without even flinching. “Everybody knows culinary school is just a way to overpay for presentation lessons. Spend a year in a good kitchen—that's all the culinary school you need.”

“Spend a year in a good kitchen. You might want to see what your helpers think about a comment like that given that they’re presently attending culinary school.” Chris lifted a brow and barked out a sharp laugh as he eyed the helpers. Some were grinning but a couple of the others were frowning. Directing his comments to them, “Trust me, going to culinary school will teach you what you need to step into most any professional kitchen.” Turning to the director, he said, “Can we call the competition already? I don’t have time for amateur hour.”

Pure sound bites, and the satisfied grin that spread across Paul’s face told Chris he was hitting all the right marks. More than likely they’d use that as a promotional teaser. If the cameras caught Mara’s darkened face in response—which surely they did, with the ten cameras positioned around the multipurpose room—then they were well on their way to a tense showdown and great ratings.

Hours chugged by, interspersed with bathroom and meal breaks. They were set to film until five, and at four thirty Chris was already craving the delicious smokiness of a good whisky, a drink preference he’d picked up from his cousin, Mitch. This first day of filming deserved a celebratory visit to the local watering hole. Not to get drunk—he couldn’t afford to have a hangover tomorrow—but to be seen and take the edge off after the intense first day around Mara.

A piercing scream echoed through the multipurpose room. It seemed everyone took a collective gasp.

“Holy shit! Guys, fire!” Davis, one of his team members, jumped back, pointing at the oven. The hair on the back of Chris’s neck stood up, and he raced over to the scene.

“Get the fire extinguisher!” Chris shouted, his heart pounding. *Fuck fuck fuck.* What a way to inaugurate the competition. A crew member appeared a moment later with the extinguisher in his hands, and a punishing plume of white dust enveloped the kitchen space. After a few moments, the fire was out, and Chris’s entire workspace lay covered in an inch of unappetizing gray residue.

“What the fuck happened?” Chris demanded, with his hands on his hips.

“I don’t know! I had just taken out the last batch of gingerbread and was about to put in the next...” Davis replied, rubbing the back of his head and looking around helplessly.

Chris ran a hand through his hair, surveying the absolute shitstorm around them. Frustration bubbled up around the edges of his composure. The most recent batch of gingerbread lay completely caked over with fire extinguisher innards. It was a disgusting mess.

“We need to get this cleaned up by five,” Chris said, checking the large clock hung between the two workstations. Turning to the director, he added, “And what about a replacement oven? I need to redo all of today’s work, and fast. What’s the game plan here?”

Paul worked his jaw back and forth as he came forward, inspecting Chris’s oven. “I’ll get a crew to determine if it’s salvageable. But until then, our best bet might be to share the remaining workspace.”

“Oh, hell no,” Mara interjected.

Chris shot her a glare. “Director’s orders. Unless you have a better suggestion?”

“I’ve already got everything set up here. I don’t have room for a second baker,” she said, crossing her arms.

Paul checked his watch. “How about we sleep on it? We can reorganize in the morning.”

“I can’t leave this unfinished overnight,” Chris snapped, tugging off his apron. Fire extinguisher residue had stained the edges, and he wasn’t risking getting any of it in his new workspace. “I’m staying to get resituated. Whether *she* likes it or not.”

When his team started to protest, Chris added, “You all can leave. This is work for me, anyway. I need my kitchen a certain way, so I’ll take the time to get it in place, and we can start fresh in the morning.”

“Are you sure? We can stay.” Shelby, one of his helpers, offered.

Shaking his head, he smiled at them. “Nope. I got it. You go enjoy your evening.”

His team dispersed, and Paul came over to him. “I’ll send in a crew to clean up the oven and scrub down the whole area to make sure all the powder from the fire extinguisher is cleaned up, so leave all that for them.”

“I appreciate that. I’ll take care of what I need right now.”

Mara stomped over to them. “There’s no space in my kitchen for him. He needs his own. Can’t you bring in a new oven?”

“Well, that *is* looking like the plan,” Paul said, in a carefully curated *duh* tone that Chris recognized well from his years in television. “But I can’t make one appear with the snap of my fingers. I need to order it, and it needs to be delivered and installed.”

“Don’t you have any extra lying around?” The look of incredulity on her face was almost amusing. Almost. “I mean, accidents happen. I thought you guys had backups for *everything*.”

“We operate on a budget like every other show in the country,” Paul said, shrugging. “Which means we don’t buy more ovens than we need. While I realize this is a competition, we do expect a certain amount of cooperation. I’m sure you can understand that, Mara. Right?”

She huffed and turned her cutting glare to Chris. “Then I’m staying too. I’m not going to let him ruin my setup and create more work for *me* tomorrow too.”

“Fine. Do what you want.” Chris headed for his ruined workspace and started picking out the most important items to clean and cart over. He went into hyper-focus mode, mostly because now he was a full day behind after a two-minute disaster. And because Mara’s presence began to burn at the periphery of his attention.

The camera crew and staff slowly cleared out. Once Paul called his farewell, only he and Mara remained in the

multipurpose room.

The buzz of the fluorescent lights far above was the only sound between them for a long time as Chris piled up his work equipment on the counters. But once he started spreading out, Mara cleared her throat.

“You can’t put your bowls there,” she said, blocking off the counterspace with her hand. “This is my candy prep area.”

“Well your candy prep area can go over there.” He jerked his chin toward the far wall of countertops.

“That’s where my dough prep station is.”

“Then move it.”

“No. I already set up my space according my to work flow, and I’m not changing it now.” She leaned closer, asserting her territory. It irritated him, as much as it was sort of cute. Her strawberry-blond hair, pulled back into a tight bun, looked like silk. Her cheekbones popped more now than they had in high school, which of course drew his attention down to her lips.

Those lush, full lips, which he’d kissed so many times during their junior year and thought of even more times since their break-up.

They hadn’t changed a bit, and now that his gaze was stuck on her mouth, he remembered why he’d made it a hard and fast rule not to look at her for too long.

“We need to share the space, so that’s what we’re going to do,” Chris said, moving his bowls beyond her hand barrier. She gasped.

“I told you,” she spat, picking up his bowls. “This is my candy station.”

“Put those down.”

“Okay. I will.” She smirked and marched over to the farthest point of the kitchen, setting them on a tiny sliver of countertop between her oven and one of the tall fridges. “Here. Right where they belong.”

“Jesus, Mara. Could you be more childish? It’s just for tonight. I’m sure Paul will have it figured out before we start filming tomorrow.”

She scoffed. Chris stormed back to his abandoned workspace and brought over the last load of utensils, all scrubbed and sanitized. As he got his whisks and spatulas arranged according to his system, he noticed that Mara had discretely pushed aside more of his pans and bowls.

“Mara, I swear to God, if you touch my stuff one more time —”

“What?”

“Just quit it. You don’t want to deal with the consequences,” he said, heat streaking through him as she sauntered up to him.

“What will you do?” A mischievous smirk crossed her face, and she pushed herself into his line of vision, seeking his gaze. “Come on, play it up like you do for the cameras. What’s big bad Chef Chris gonna do?”

A hint of her scent wafted toward him—vanilla and ginger from today’s baking—and washed over him like a caress. And then he was falling, falling into the past. Back when their barbs were laced with tenderness and every close encounter ended in the kisses and touches that he always craved from her.

Apparently, not much had changed. Just inches away from her, his heart pounded like he’d run a marathon, and his lips already tingled as if he’d kissed her.

“The cameras are off, Mara. The crew is gone. Besides, you’d like it too much,” he said, his voice coming out gruff.

Her eyebrow lifted, and the remaining space between them shrank. Chris gritted his teeth, both shocked and calmed by how much he missed having her in his life. Even after a decade apart and all this bad blood that still pumped between them.

“What could you possibly do that I would like?”

He could have sworn that she pushed herself up on her toes, as if proffering herself. Like she wanted to smash her lips against his as badly as he did.

Chris swallowed hard, feeling his last dregs of rational thought drift away. Fuck it. He was going for it. They were standing a breath apart in this vast kitchen. She had to be feeling it too. There was only one way to find out.

He captured her lips in an urgent kiss, his palm finding the back of her head. Her lips were velvet, so soft and hungry and warm. Kisses like these made him want to ensure they lasted forever. No matter the consequences.

MARA

Mara lingered there only a moment before pulling back with a gasp. She searched Chris's face, trying to pinpoint his motive. Was this revenge, somehow? Was this a tactic? Or was this him responding to the very real sexual tension rushing between them harder than Niagara Falls?

She couldn't tell. And hell, maybe she didn't want to know the reason. Every inch of her wanted those lips against hers again, even if it was the worst idea ever.

Mara grabbed at the collar of his shirt before she could think better of it. Their lips came crashing together a second time, this time in a punishing kiss. There was heartbreak and eagerness and confusion there, and the whole mess of it scorched beneath her skin and lit her up more than any single lackluster ex of hers ever had.

Goddammit, Chris. This phrase raced through her mind, over and over again, as they kissed, their lips and limbs seeking each other as if she'd been waiting the past ten years for this to happen again. Finally! The thought settled strangely inside her—could that be true? She sure hoped not. But there was only one way to find out if her high-school heartbreak could finally be laid to rest.

And it had a lot to do with fucking Chris in the middle of the show kitchen.

Mara tugged at his shirt, fingers seeking the hard planes of his body underneath. Chris grunted, and they broke their kisses long enough for him to rip her apron over her head and toss it

aside. Mara found his mouth again urgently, deliriously, as if the half-second she'd been away from his kisses had drained her.

There was no denying it—the man had something special about him. Sure, it was laced with arrogance and cockiness and heavily doused with asshole. But these kisses? These were the kisses of romance novels, and goddammit, why were they even better than she remembered?

“Oh, my God,” she mumbled through a kiss as Chris’s hands traced the curves of her body through her long-sleeved cotton shirt. When his hands reached her hips, he pushed his palms over the mounds of her ass and gave both her ass cheeks a good squeeze.

Her breath shivered out of her. “Jesus, Chris.”

“Mmm?”

“What are we doing?” Her lips left a trail of kisses along his jawline. He grunted again.

“I don’t know. But I like it.” He squeezed her ass cheeks again, and then one hand snaked around in front. He swiped his thumb over the crease of her pussy. Even though she was wearing jeans, the contact sent a jolt through her. She gasped without meaning to. Part of her felt like she could break into a million pieces from wanting him. But the rational part of her told her to woman up and step away.

Chris unbuttoned her jeans then and slid his hands into her pants. The heat of his palms cupping her butt prompted a long moan from her. Any doubts or questions about where she wanted this to lead were washed away.

She needed this from him. Now.

“You just want to fuck right here in the middle of the kitchen?” she asked, blinking away the fog of arousal as she tried to scope out the multipurpose room. Everyone had left for the day. They had the all-clear. She undid the buttons of his shirt.

“I don’t see why not.” A lazy smile crossed his lips, and for a moment he was still the charismatic, gangly teen heartthrob

from her past. The gorgeous boy she'd fallen for and made out with so many times behind bleachers and between classes. His pitch-black hair was mussed, his lips swollen from their overeager kisses.

Clarity returned to her in an overwhelming rush. "But what about the cameras? Are you sure they're off? They'll see us fucking. The entire country will know we got it on."

Chris shook his head, his eyes never leaving her lips. "This isn't *Big Brother*. Besides, even if one camera did happen to catch us, they would never air that for this show. It's family-friendly."

They shared a long, heavy glance. Chris squeezed her ass again, and she inhaled sharply. That had always been her weak spot. And he hadn't forgotten. Her panties went damp, and as her eyes fluttered shut, she knew her decision was made.

"Let's just be discreet," she murmured, undoing his belt with a severe look. Which meant keeping it quiet, keeping this under wraps. Sure, America might not find out, but the entire crew didn't need to know about their after-hours shenanigans tomorrow. They didn't need to scandalize whoever might chance walking into the multipurpose room tonight.

"Mmm." Chris took her chin between thumb and forefinger, then captured her lips in another kiss. She abandoned her quest to undo his pants, sideswiped by the intensity of their make-out session. Why was he the best kisser? It wasn't fair, and it wasn't right. Tears pricked her eyes for some reason, but she refused to dwell on that. She was so turned on she felt as if she might break into pieces. It was making her crazy. She just needed to get laid and be done with it. Then she could put him out of her mind and concentrate on winning.

Her resolve strengthened with the decision. Yes. Fucking Chris in the kitchen *was* the solution.

She resumed her work freeing his cock, pushing his pants down, and then slipping her hand under the fabric of his boxers. He moaned when her hand found the hot steel of his cock, already rock hard in her grip. She fingered the bulbous head for a moment, flashing back to junior year when his cock

had been *the first* cock she'd ever fondled. Then Chris pushed her against the countertop, his movement both fierce and measured. Like he was just barely containing the passion.

"These need to come off *now*," he growled, tugging at her jeans. They crumpled to her ankles a moment later, and then he hoisted her onto the counter. Her legs splayed open and he filled the space there. She couldn't fight the grin.

He settled between her legs, the bulge of his boxers pressing against the damp crotch of her panties. His chest heaved as he fished his cock out of his underwear and then pushed aside the scrap between her legs.

He froze, and she startled. "What is it? Did you hear someone?"

Shaking his head. "Nope. Almost forgot something important." Reaching down, he found his wallet and pulled a foil packet out.

"So, something I've always wondered. Do all men carry condoms around with them?"

Chris tore open the packet and rolled the condom on, making a hissing sound as he did. "Better safe than having blue balls. Now, where was I? Oh yes."

She gasped when his erection slipped over the damp heat of her crease. She locked her arms around his neck and arched, needing more of it. More of him. He wet his bottom lip, his cockhead nudging her throbbing clit. She cried out. So much for being quiet.

"Chris!" She locked her knees around him, urging more of it. "God, I need it. Please. Come on. Quit teasing me."

His breath came out in hot bursts at her ear. "Yeah? You want what I got?"

"Bring it, Denton." She dug her fingernails into his sides, jerking at his waist. He brushed his cock against her clit again, and she whimpered.

"I want to hear you beg for it, Mara. Like you used to. Those sweet cries you used to make were the stuff of fantasies." His

cock slipped along her damp folds, and she bucked against him desperate to have him inside her.

“Fuck you,” she said with a laugh. She felt almost delirious with need. Happy and eager and somehow relieved to be here with him now after so many years apart.

“Mmm. Fuck *you*,” he said and eased himself inside her with a lusty groan. “Oh...yeah.”

Her head tipped back, eyes fluttering shut as he sank in, inch by inch. So slowly that she wanted to scream, but she was too enamored with the sensations to do anything but moan at how good it felt. How good *he* felt.

Chris gripped her by the hips as he pushed himself deeper. When he was buried to the hilt, he took a shaky breath. The heat in his gaze told her everything she needed to know.

“God, Mara,” he whispered into her ear, flexing his hips against her even though there was no more depth to find. “You feel fucking divine.”

She moaned, nipping at his earlobe. “Back atcha.”

Chris rocked against her, finding a quick and pointed rhythm, one that left her gasping and gripping tighter against him. The harder he fucked her, the closer she came to the precipice of an amazing orgasm. She pushed her hands under the front of his shirt, seeking the warm steel of his chest. He moaned when she scraped her nails over his abs.

“Careful,” he hissed.

“What?”

“I’m close,” he warned and then thrust inside her again. “Like, really fucking close.”

He leaned down and captured her lips in a kiss, and she smiled lazily. “Me too.”

He drilled into her again, prompting a moan from both of them. Her composure was fuzzy at the edges, the warning signal that she was almost there. She arched against him and tossed her head back as he pushed himself as deep as possible. Electricity skated across her arms as she groaned, falling over

the edge in a liquid, languid dive. She clutched his arms, her nails digging in. An animalistic noise ripped out of her, and all she could do was cling to him as the waves of pleasure rolled through her.

Chris grunted and stilled, his eyes squeezed shut. His belly turned to stone, as he thrust against her one last time, his body shuddering in response to the pleasure rolling through him as his cock spasmed.

He breathed heavily for a moment, his icy eyes riveted on hers. And then he stepped back, sliding out of her and removing the condom. Tying it off, he tossed it in the trash, then grabbed for a nearby towel, wiping himself off before he tucked himself back inside his boxers.

Mara watched in a daze. Part of her even wondered if maybe it was a fever dream. Some sort of first-day-of-filming insanity that had pushed them both over the edge.

But the tendrils of lingering pleasure were all too real. And as she slid to the floor on wobbly legs and almost fell over, Chris's sturdy arms around her were *definitely real*.

"I might not be able to walk anymore." She laughed weakly.

"Same. My legs feel like I've just scaled a mountain or run a marathon."

She tugged up her pants and smoothed her hair, looking around at the kitchen workspace. The place was still a disaster from Chris trying to get set up, and now? The countertops were smeared with flour and a very obvious ass print from her own derriere.

"Oh my god," she groaned, clamping a hand over her mouth. "We made a real mess."

"We should probably sanitize everything," he said with a laugh.

She looked up at him, the humor in his gaze sparking a giggle fit.

This whole thing was absurd. But now that she'd gotten him out of her system, she could continue forward.

All the way to winning the competition.

CHRIS

Chris had returned to his rental last night still feeling and tasting Mara and ended up masturbating to fantasies of taking her again and again—on the set, in his condo, at her place—and even fantasized about roleplaying under the school bleachers like when they would make out in high school. As angry as he'd been with her all those years ago, being with Mara last night felt like coming home in a way he hadn't experienced since his parents were alive.

Showing up on set this morning, he had no idea what he was expecting but it certainly wasn't seeing Mara act as though the previous night's intimacy never happened. She'd arrived before he did and was already directing her team on today's activities. From the setup for her station, it was clear that sharing a workspace was going to be problematic. He frowned, watching her go about her day as though nothing had happened between them—like she hadn't gotten her ass absolutely caked with flour the night before. It irked him more than it had any right to.

A quick check of the kitchen area confirmed that they'd managed to clean everything up before leaving last night, and the counters were extra shiny this morning, more so than yesterday. Chris hoped the director would simply assume that the cleaners put extra effort into cleaning the work areas. His own area was clearly not functional. He still didn't have a working oven or any electrical, and from the looks of it, part of the counter area on either side was also impacted. He couldn't even work there and transfer the gingerbread to her

oven to bake. They'd still have to share a single work space among eight people, which was doable provided everyone was willing to cooperate. But judging by how his supplies had been pushed to the side again, it was going to be a difficult morning.

Paul called everyone together for a quick peptalk before shooting started. "All right, everyone, listen up. I know this isn't ideal for either team, but I'm asking everyone to act like adults and please cooperate with each other." He paused to look at Mara, who was looking downright mutinous, before he looked at Chris, who made sure to school his expression into what he hoped looked like a willingness to cooperate. "We've brought in some extra workspace for everyone to use, but you'll still have to share the appliances and the sink area." He paused for a beat and no one said anything. Clapping his hands, "All right. We begin shooting in ten, so let's get to it."

As Paul was walking away, Chris tried to catch Mara's eye but she was studiously ignoring him. Well that wouldn't do. Blowing out a breath, he stuck out his hand, making her startle.

"Good luck today."

She frowned, looking at his hand as if he were about to bite her. Then she carefully set down the binder she was holding and reached out to shake his hand. "You too." Her hand was cool to the touch, and Chris would consider it limp, at best. She quickly pulled away to answer a question from one of her helpers.

"Well, this feels awkward," he murmured loud enough for her to hear based on the scowl she gave him. Truthfully, he didn't know what he was expecting. For her to fall back into his arms after more than a decade and shower him with kisses and apologies? That wasn't either of their styles.

Granted, neither did he anticipate Mara acting as though last night's orgasms didn't happen.

He was enough of a pro not to let it bother him when they were filming. She wanted to play that game? Then he was more than happy to play it too.

Even though part of him wanted to cast the game aside and just get back to that sizzling connection he and Mara had always shared.

When they paused filming for the midday break, he was pleased at how much they'd been able to accomplish. His team had arrived prepared to work, and they'd managed to get caught up on everything they'd lost with the fire, which didn't put them that far behind. Before they could eat, the director herded him and Mara toward the lobby for a mini press conference. A few reporters hovered near a long table, where both Chris and Mara took a seat.

The questions started immediately, and most of them had little to do with the competition. Chris smiled wide as one question after another came his way, covering everything from what his main show's schedule would look like in the coming year to whether or not he still planned on opening his own bakery in Brooklyn, as he'd once mentioned years earlier. One journalist even asked him if he had any comments on his cousin's epic annual Christmas gala scheduled for December, the one that Mitch's new wife Jules had personally helped send into the stratosphere since she'd joined the family the year before.

A late arrival jerked at his attention, a man in a bomber jacket and trendy sunglasses. As soon as the journalist approached the table and took off his glasses, Mara gasped. The newcomer beckoned for her to step aside and greet him.

Chris was mid-answer when she stood up and went over to receive the newcomer, but he didn't interrupt his sentence. He watched as she glided toward the journalist, arms out, and then hugged him. *Hard.* Chris swallowed once he'd finished his thought, leaning back in his seat before another journalist jumped in with a question.

Mara was flushed as she returned to the table, still smiling over at the newcomer. Chris watched as he took his place among the journalists, and then something about his beady eyes and stupid smile clicked into place.

Dan Montey had arrived.

Mara's ex-boyfriend who had been the whole cause of their falling out at their high school dance.

Chris rolled his head in a slow circle, forcing himself to look away from him and focus on the incoming question. Finally, someone had asked something that included Mara, all for the better. He needed to figure out why his neck had gotten so hot and why his hands were balled into fists.

It wasn't like Dan mattered. Clearly he and Mara were seeing each other for the first time in a long time, so that answered the whole: *Did she marry that idiot?* question. But still—maybe they had something going on anyway. Mara wasn't the type of woman to greet just *anybody* with a big hug and a flushed smile.

Dan eased his way into the journalist flow and stepped forward for a question. "Mara, once you win, what are you planning on doing with the earnings from the competition? Have you thought about that yet?"

Mara quirked her lips into a private smile, and Chris felt himself scowling.

"I've got some big plans," she finally said, shrugging. "I don't want to talk about them quite yet, but the earnings will be going to a very exciting project."

Chris's head flooded with thoughts about the secret on-again, off-again relationship that Mara and Dan had been maintaining over the past few years. The weekend trips he'd make from wherever he lived, the scandalous getaways they'd probably been having. Hell, Dan was probably married with kids and kept Mara as a side piece. That seemed his speed. Especially with that bomber jacket and his general cockiness. Seriously. Who dressed like that? Did he think he was some sort of maverick?

Jesus, this is over the top, even for you. Okay, Chris knew he was letting his imagination run rampant, but when it came to Mara, he couldn't seem to help himself.

Once the question-and-answer session was over, Chris stormed away, more than ready for his lunch break. He'd originally

planned to eat with his team, but after that display, he needed some alone time.

Dan meant nothing. Not to Chris or his career.

So why did that asshole still bother him so much?

It was something he thought about for a full hour as he cruised Glenford in his car and ate a chicken burrito in the park. Coming home spurred a whole host of emotions, a lot of which he hadn't been counting on. But Dan and Mara? That shouldn't bother him.

Not if he was being rational about things.

Which meant that last night had officially pushed things over into irrational territory. Chris had somehow let his feelings get mixed into the batter, and now he had the hard task of cleaning himself off and continuing forward.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized this could be one of Mara's revenge tactics after he'd embarrassed her all those years ago. Except. She'd done more than embarrass him when they were in school. Chris had been in love with Mara Lancaster and had been fantasizing about what their life would be like once they were out of school. Until he'd found her kissing Dan while they were at the dance together. He'd stepped away to get them both something to drink and when he returned, she was in a lip lock with Dan. He'd been so surprised, he'd dropped their drinks. His anguish at the discovery that she didn't reciprocate the feelings he had for her hurt more than he wanted to admit.

He sat there dwelling on their shared past and jumped when his phone rang. Assuming it was someone from the show telling him to get his ass back to the set, he answered without looking at the caller ID.

"This is Chris." His answer was clipped, and he was already gathering his trash to toss before returning to his car.

"Oh! Chef Chris, you're so dreamy," came a male voice followed by laughter.

"What the—?" He looked at his caller ID and laughed. "Chase Elkin. Staying out of trouble?"

“Barely. But then what’s the fun in that?” was his friend’s reply. Chase was the same age as he was, and the two had managed to get into their fair share of trouble when Chris used to visit Elk Lodge with his family. “How’s the gingerbread baking going? A competition like that seems beneath you.”

“Wait. How did you know about it? I don’t remember telling you about it.” It wasn’t that he was embarrassed by the competition, but he wasn’t one to call or text his friends to announce his activities.

“Dude, you’re all over the place. Twitter, Insta. I even saw a TikTok video with a montage and an ode to your ass.” Chase laughed as he said that. “Shit, don’t you keep track of what’s said about you online?”

“Well, I don’t, no, but I’m sure my assistant does or the PR team for the show.”

“Wow. That’s sort of refreshing or possibly ignorant. Seriously, you should set up alerts to notify you when you’re mentioned. It’s good to keep ahead of things before they explode and bite you in the ass.”

“Talking from experience, I take it?” Chris asked. He knew that Chase had been a hothead when he’d been competing professionally and had gotten himself in a number of entanglements that might have seen him canceled. Or worse. But then he’d gotten into that career-ending accident.

“You know it. Actually, I did call for a reason and not just to give you shit. That was extra. Potato salad.”

Chris had been walking to his car and paused. “What now? Potato salad? Can’t you just Google that like you do your name?”

“Ha ha. I thought you had a recipe.”

Frowning, he tossed his trash and then hit the key fob to unlock his car. “I don’t. Wait. Do you mean the one Amelia’s mom makes?” His cousin Josh’s new mother-in-law was the keeper of her family’s decades-old potato salad recipe that had been rumored to bring feuding families together over a shared love of roasted, not boiled, potatoes with dressing. Chris had

to agree it made for a tasty side dish, and he'd tried to make some adjustments to it, but the one her mother makes was damn-near perfect.

"That's the one. Don't suppose you can share it with me. Tana is having cravings, and I want to see if she'll appreciate it as much as I do."

Laughing, he slid behind the wheel and put his seatbelt on. "I take it things are going well between you two?"

"Dude, I am so in love with her. She's, just, yeah...." Chase got quiet, and then Chris could hear him talking to someone else. Chris took the moment to put his phone on speaker and pull up the recipe to send to his friend. "Sorry about that. Duty calls. So any chance you can hook me up?"

"Already done." They could both hear Chase's phone ping.

"You rock! Thanks, man. I'll let you know what she thinks."

Chris drove back to the community center where the competition was being filmed. It was a pity the grievances he had with Mara couldn't easily be solved with a double helping of potato salad and maybe some chocolate cake for dessert.

Parking the car, he looked around and didn't see anyone else in the parking lot, so he took a few deep breaths. He needed to get his head on straight. Whatever had happened between him and Mara last night was a one-off. He was here to compete and win, and Chris had no intentions of settling for anything less.

MARA

M ara spent the rest of the second full day of filming feeling like a disjointed string puppet. Nothing clicked into place no matter how hard she tried. Things kept slipping out of her hands. The camera lenses seemed to sizzle on her instead of merely focus.

And Chris's barbs had gone from snark to venom. And boy was he on a roll, much to the delight of everyone but her. Every time she made a mistake or fumbled something, he was quick with a comment, and she could feel the heat of his barbs and her embarrassment making her already red and sweaty face that much worse. It'd gotten so bad that during brief breaks, the makeup artist popped up in front of her with a smile and a powder puff to "tame the shininess."

When she'd failed to secure the paddle before turning on the mixer, Mara had ended up covered, once again, in flour. She would have normally laughed it off and attributed it to nervousness, but Chris was quick to catch her mistake, calling her Casper, much to everyone's glee.

It was like their sex the evening before had merely solidified his resolve to be an asshole to her.

In a way, it was good. Because it helped her not get moony eyed about their incredible sex on that very countertop over there. If she squinted, she could still see the outline of her butt cheeks in the flour. If only the cameras *had* been on, so that they could have immortalized one of her only insanely enjoyable sex experiences in life.

Sad but true. Chris was, and continued to be, the only man who'd ever gotten her off. Even after trudging through her twenties and dating as many respectable men as she could get her hands on, it seemed Chris was the only one who'd gotten the memo about female pleasure. And the asshole was damn good at it too.

Whether or not it involved white flour was an entirely different matter.

She rolled her lips inward to stop a laugh. This was not the time to break into laughter about their secret fuck fest the night before. Nobody had said anything to them about it, so maybe they were in the clear. No scandalized janitor tattling to the director or hints at impropriety showing up on social media. It wasn't like Mara was going to share the information freely. Perhaps, in all his infinite celebrity wisdom, or malice, Chris had already taken care of it.

It was hard to tell with him. This was his world, truly. She was just a lone baker competing in it in order to make her dreams come true.

"Damn. Your foundation is looking good."

Mara snapped her gaze up to find Dan standing in front of the countertops, smiling down at her first layer of gingerbread. "You think? It's still pretty basic."

"Nah. Nothing about what you make is basic." Dan flashed her a toothy grin. The man was just as handsome as he'd been back in high school. But the time apart had left her feeling dull about him. Yes, it was nice to see him again, to see a friendly face in a sea of Chef Chris worshippers. But her heart didn't skip a beat when his gaze flashed her way.

"I appreciate your confidence." She sighed, propping her hands on her hips as she surveyed her totally-encroached-upon workspace. Chris was shouting orders to his team just a few feet away, and his barking bass made it hard to concentrate. "It's nice to have somebody believe in me, honestly."

"Oh, come on. This competition is in the bag for you." Dan stuffed his hands in his pockets, glancing around before taking

a step closer. “What are you doing later?”

She blinked, focusing on the gingerbread seam she’d been doctoring. *He’s asking you out.* The realization made her throat tighten. “Uh...”

“I want to take you out for dinner. So we can...you know... *catch up.*”

Something in his tone made it clear that “catching up” had more to do with sex than recounting where the last ten years of their life had gone. Probably a lot like the way she and Chris had “caught up” the evening before.

But that was too much catching up with one too many men. If she caught up with anybody...dammit, she still wanted it to be Chris. Besides, at least as of ten years ago, Dan had firmly been in the camp of *unsure about female orgasms.*

“I’m going to be working late during the entire competition,” she said, grimacing. It was true. She just omitted the part about not wanting to “catch up” with him. “Maybe some other time?”

Dan frowned, shaking his head. “I’ll be heading back to New York City as soon as this is over for my next assignment. I only came out for this and another piece.”

Mara sighed and tilted her head back and forth as if she were trying to find a solution. “Well, that’s too bad. Why don’t you look me up when you’re back in town, and maybe we could do something then?”

Dan sent her a smile and rapped his knuckles on the countertop. With a hard glance at Chris, he headed toward the far edge of the multipurpose room where some of the other journalists congregated watching all the action.

Mara sank into thought as she collected the baked pieces of gingerbread prepared by her team. Saying no to Dan was easy, but she didn’t like how ready she was to say yes to Chris again. Not that he’d asked her—not that he even wanted to.

It was better that he was being cold to her today. Mara didn’t like mixing business and pleasure. Last night had been a weird fluke, spurred by her recent dry spell, and seeing Chris again

dredged up all her old feelings for him. But that was it—nothing more. She needed to keep this what it was—a competition with a clear winner and a clear loser.

And nothing would be clear if they started having regular sex.

A few journalists lingered on the sidelines for a little while as Mara and Chris continued working. Every so often, she'd hear a sharp swear word from Chris, or a condescending "*Come on.*" It was like he was getting sourer by the minute, and when they bumped into each other, back to back, Chris unraveled.

"Jesus Christ, watch where you're going," he spat.

"Excuse me! It's not like this is my space or anything."

"Yeah well, it's not like I intentionally set the oven on fire so eight of us could cram into this one kitchen area," Chris returned.

"Must be hard for you to concentrate and watch where you're going," Mara said. "With all the cameras and journalists here. All that attention makes you jumpy. Mr. Will Do Anything For Media Coverage."

Chris sneered. "Sure. Looks like you have your own fan club in attendance. So let's see who'll do anything for the media, okay?"

He stormed away, and Mara only stared after him, his words cycling through her. That had been a not-so-subtle reference to Dan, which incited a strange cocktail of emotions. Part of her was almost flattered that he noticed Dan paying attention to her. That meant...something, surely.

But what?

Chris stood at the far line of counters, inspecting some of his team's work. She tried not to watch, but she could hear the undertones of his anger coursing through the multipurpose room. Gazes snapped his way from all around the room.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Chris asked, leaning in closer to his helper to really look her in the eye. "This is a gingerbread competition. Not a school bake sale. If you don't know how to ice the gingerbread, then I need you to get the

fuck out of my kitchen. Do you hear me? I don't have time or room for idiots.”

The multipurpose room quieted a bit after that outburst, and Mara could see the journalists craning their necks. A few of them even had phones poised.

Mara went about her work, unwilling to let Chris distract her further. Everyone in the room knew he was an asshole, and she needed to stay focused. For all she knew, it was a distraction tactic and she was in on it. Who knew with this guy?

When she looked up again, she saw Chris rubbing at his face. And then he placed his hands on the woman's shoulders and murmured, “I'm sorry, Cora. That was out of line. Let's start over.”

But within the hour, one of the crew members showed her the consequences of Chris's temper. A video was already circulating the internet; one of the journalists had captured the tail end of it, F-bombs and all. The headlines touted everything from “Overheated Cook” to the crew member who got the “*serrating* of her life.” But none of them mentioned, or probably were even aware of, the fact that Chris had apologized directly after. Granted, apologies rarely went viral.

Mara couldn't help but follow the drama—especially since she'd been present for it. She peeked at her phone on occasion, checking comments and looking at the hashtags trending around the *Cooking with Chris* world. Chris himself looked dour for the remainder of the day once his assistant had shown him the video. And knowing that he knew about it, yet had barely flinched? It just made her even more curious about what his celebrity life really was like.

This was probably par for the course. People twisting things out of context. Only publishing his worst moments.

So much for focus. When the director called a halt to filming for the day, she breathed a sigh of relief. And as everyone started to file out of the multipurpose room, her curiosity got the better of her.

“Hey,” she said, once Chris had stored the last of his dough. She crossed her arms, studying the ground as she prepared herself to make the offer better left unsaid. “You want to come grab a cup of coffee with me?”

Chris turned to her, looking a little startled, but mostly suspicious. He studied her for a few moments, and then he blurted out, “Let’s go.”

CHRIS

The whole point of the competition was a slight brand adjustment on the part of the network.

That's what they'd pitched to Chris when they first informed him that he would be participating. The plan was to reach a new, broader demographic who placed greater emphasis on family values and comprised much higher purchasing power.

And what better way to do that than return to his hometown and win a baking competition?

Except returning to his hometown was way more work than he'd bargained for. And now he had a serious problem—his little bitch fest that afternoon had gone viral, and everybody and their grandmother was sharing his blow-up with their social networks. If he'd been trying to ingratiate himself with the family demographic, spewing f-bombs at a woman half his size wasn't helping things.

One of the journalists had captured it and spread it—probably Dan—and unfortunately, the show contract allowed for little dramatic slips like these under the Teasers and Previews clause. Really, this was exactly the sort of thing they wanted, in theory.

But things felt more precarious than ever. Because the only route to truly achieving what he wanted—an international cooking tour that the network still hadn't greenlighted—would only come on the heels of giving them what they wanted: an ultra-family-friendly baking competition with high ratings.

Chris followed Mara out of the multipurpose room. Once they were bathed in the cool quiet of the hallways and heading toward a small lounge where coffee and snacks were on hand all day long, he finally let a sigh escape him.

“I’m surprised that you’re letting it bother you,” Mara said, a few paces in front of him.

“Why wouldn’t it bother me?” He clenched and unclenched a fist in his pocket.

“You’re a hardened celebrity, Chris. This is your world. Aren’t you used to it by now?”

“I know it might be hard for you to believe,” he said carefully, trying to strike that balance between firm and condescending, “but I’m still a person. So yeah, I’m used to it in some ways. Doesn’t mean it’s still not a bitch to deal with.”

Mara watched him for a few moments, her long, dark lashes brushing the tops of her cheeks as she studied him. They stopped just outside the double doors to the lounge.

“I don’t get it.”

“Well, you wouldn’t.” Chris breezed past her and pushed into the lounge. “But thanks for asking, I guess.”

He went to the coffee station, happy to see the Mocha-Meister he’d requested was there. His cousin Mitch was an absolute whisky snob, but Chris’s snobbery came out around coffee. Everything from the coffee bean plantation to how and when the beans were roasted. Then there was the type of coffee maker and water used. If he was going to be subjected to the added BS that came with his outbursts going viral, he was going to get through it by drinking some of the best coffee out there.

Pouring two cups, he handed her one, and regret slashed through him when he saw her face was wrought with confusion. This whole thing was confusing, and he’d never been good at managing his temper, which had gotten worse once he became popular. But he was fucking trying. And dammit, most people didn’t understand the push and pull of

celebrity and network negotiations and having your personal life on display *constantly*.

Besides, Mara had always been there for him in high school, making sure he was okay—just like this. But this was present day, not high school. She shouldn't give a shit about him. There was no way this concern of hers was genuine.

“Sorry. Let's just call it work stress. Cheers?” He handed her the paper cup of coffee and they tapped their cups together.

“I can't imagine what it must be like,” Mara murmured, staring down at the coffee in her hands. She took a tentative sip. “Wow, this is amazing. The community center coffee is never this good. Did the network provide it?”

“I did. With the amount of time I spend prepping for and working on my show, I need access to copious amounts of tasty coffee, so I always make sure it's in my contract for the network to keep certain coffee beans on hand and a decent maker. Since I technically volunteered for this competition, I bought everything so we could all enjoy it for the two weeks we're here with the intent that everything would be donated to the community center once we leave.” He grinned as he sipped his drink. “My assistant Damon already warned me that the mayor had set her sights on one of the coffee machines for her office.”

“One of?” Mara looked around, really taking in what was there. Admittedly, Chris probably went overboard bringing in the commercial Mocha-Meister, one espresso machine, and two for regular drip, but with the number of people working on the competition plus all the visitors, he wanted to make sure coffee and tea would always be available to anyone who wanted it. He watched as she inspected the machines. “I remember seeing this one in a commercial catalog. It's almost twelve hundred dollars.”

Chris finished his coffee and poured himself another cup. Holding up the carafe, he gestured to her cup but she shook her head. “That's for the base model. This one has a grinder attachment and lets you set the water temperature. So it was a bit more.”

“Of course it was.” A smile ghosted her face for a moment before disappearing. “So what’s the game plan? Just ignore what people are saying?”

“Yeah.” He raked a hand through his hair. Truthfully, it wasn’t often that he got caught up in the gossip mill for stuff like this. Which made this incident even more frustrating. He had been working at curating his image better. And now... “I mean, my publicist will probably have a few action plans in place after this. I’ll recover. I just wish I knew which one of those bastards leaked it.” He sipped his coffee, seeking Mara’s gaze. “I’m thinking your good friend Dan probably had something to do with it.”

Mara cocked her head, eyes narrowing to slits. “My good friend Dan?”

“Yeah. You two look pretty cozy.”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Hardly. And I have no idea if it was him. But who it was doesn’t even matter. You need to not let it bother you.”

“Kinda hard to do,” he said before downing the rest of his coffee. “There’s a lot of eyes on me now. Always, actually.”

She stepped closer, forcing him to meet her mossy green gaze. “And so what? If it’s always like that, then what’s new? You always get through it, right?”

He clenched and unclenched his jaw a few times, trying to figure out what her angle was. It didn’t make sense. She was his competition. She should want him to get distracted and go down in flames. “Why are you trying to help me through this?”

Her nostrils flared, and she took a step back. “Just seemed like you were upset.”

“You should want me to fail. I don’t get why you care.”

Mara frowned. “I don’t want you to *fail*. I just want you to... lose this competition. There’s a difference.”

Her admission was somehow charming. It even made him smile. “At least you’re honest.”

“Like you don’t want to win?”

“I *have* to win,” he clarified, feeling some of the stress return to his shoulders. “There’s a difference there, too.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek and then took another sip of her coffee. “Well, yes. But I’m just saying, gossip dies down. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t influence your actual work.”

Chris wanted to correct her, but as his gaze washed over her strawberry-blond tresses and that button nose, it was hard to say anything. Really, he just wanted to stay here and bask in her essence. Like he had in the old days. Mara had always been his pillar, and he shouldn’t be surprised that she was showing up as a pillar yet again.

Even if he hadn’t asked for it.

“Thanks.” He drained the last of his coffee and tossed the cup. “Well, we should go clean up, right?”

It was a test. Leaving the decision in her hands. Now that they were tucked away and out of sight, desire hummed through his veins, even amid the confusion and irritation. He wanted to touch the silk of her hair again, feel the warm curves of her flesh beneath his fingertips. He wanted to bury himself so deep inside her she made that noise that was part woman, part animal.

His cock twitched in his pants. Mara lifted a brow.

“What else would we do?” she asked, voice turning slightly husky.

“Oh, I don’t know.” He took a step closer, his gaze on her lips. They were the perfect mix of plump and soft. He could kiss them for the rest of his life and still want just one more taste. When they’d first broken up, he’d thought that he might be scarred by her kisses, that he’d never find anyone he shared so much chemistry with. But then as he whiled away his twenties in New York and found success and found even more women to distract him, he eventually forgot about these lips.

But now? He realized that she *had* scarred him.

Nobody else’s kisses came close.

Mara smirked, and Chris knew this was his chance. He leaned forward, cupping the sides of her face in his hands as he coaxed a soft kiss from her that made his cock go from half-mast to rock hard.

She whimpered, clutching at his hands on her face as they kissed.

A movement behind her made him jolt. Through the viewing pane of the swinging lounge door, he saw a crew member approach.

“Someone’s coming,” he whispered, and then snagged one last quick kiss. “One for the road.”

She giggled, pushing at his chest before heading out of the lounge. Chris waited a moment for her to make it down the hallway, smiling at the crew member who came into the lounge after her.

He wasn’t sure what was going on and knew even less if he could trust her.

All he knew was that the chemistry between them was alive and well.

And it was damn-near impossible to say no to that.

MARA

By the end of the first week of filming, Mara had the majority of her gingerbread base complete. Her secret plan, which was becoming more obvious the more she completed, was an entire gingerbread village. Roughly thirty-five individual gingerbread cottages, set in an idyllic scene that looked a helluva lot like the wooded areas of Glenford.

It was sure to be a hit, because this was all about supporting Glenford. That, paired with her expert skill as a baker, would make sure she won this competition.

Thankfully, Chris's work area had been cleaned and the oven and one countertop replaced. She was sure it probably could have happened much sooner and the eight of them wouldn't have been bumping into each other for four days, but she suspected the network was enjoying the sparks that came with so many people working in a confined space.

Looking over at Chris's assembly area, his vision remained unclear, and it didn't seem to be very far along. Something that looked like a gingerbread skyscraper was slowly growing on his prep table, but she couldn't tell if he was making a building or an elevator shaft. Time would tell.

What his gingerbread design would become wasn't the only thing time would tell. Each day, Mara wondered if they'd steal another kiss or have another furtive meetup in the hallway or, God forbid, on a work surface. Chris hadn't made a move, so she decided that she wouldn't either.

She knew better than to follow that path. Especially during such a cutthroat competition.

Yet his kisses still lingered in the back of her mind, and each night alone in her bed, she replayed the images from their lovemaking while her hand worked overtime down the front of her panties.

Filming wrapped around seven on Friday, and they had the weekend off. Good thing, too, because Mara needed some downtime. A chance to *not* stare at Chris's perfect face and hands each day, so that she could remember what her life had been like before he'd returned to Glenford like some sort of prodigal son.

She grabbed her coat and purse before leaving and then remembered she'd left her phone on her work station. As she swept into the multipurpose room to get it, she decided to take one last glance at her gingerbread village before leaving. It was already her pride and joy, and one of the most intricate projects she'd ever undertaken. If she didn't win, then the competition was rigged.

"Staying late?" Chris asked as he slid off his apron.

"I'm in a rush to go, actually. Just wanted to make sure everything looks good." She offered him a tight smile, still unsure of what the rules were for whatever they had going on. Rivals but also lovers. Long-lost sweethearts but also strangers.

"Where you heading?" Chris asked as he slid on his winter coat.

"Downtown for ice skating with my sister and parents." She rolled her lips inward as she slid the tray where her village assembly had begun out of the tall fridge. "Family tradition."

"Ah. That's right. The annual Lancaster family Christmas season should be in full swing. Do you guys still do the after-Thanksgiving group trip to pick out a tree?"

"You know we do." She smirked as she assessed the village. But when she got to the church, the latest structure to be assembled, she gasped. "*Fuck!*"

Mara carried the tray carefully over to the workspace, her heart pounding. The two largest walls of the church were sinking, damn-near collapsing inward. Closer inspection revealed the sad truth.

The church walls were shit, and the entire structure had to be redone.

“Dammit,” she hissed, covering her forehead with her palm. She wracked her brain for possibilities. She’d personally overseen the construction of this church. Nothing had gone wrong. So what on earth...

“What’s the problem?”

Chris’s smooth voice behind her made her jump. He’d entered her space without her realizing, peering over her shoulder at the sad truth.

“My church is collapsing.” It was hard to keep the panic out of her voice. She couldn’t leave it like this for the weekend. She needed to get to work *now*, so that things didn’t totally derail come Monday. “We spent all day working on this, and it’s fucking ruined.”

“What’s your plan?” Chris sounded more like a surgeon assessing his next patient than a world-famous chef.

“Stay here and redo it,” she said with a sigh. “What other choice do I have?” Disappointment crashed through her as she fished her phone out of her pocket and made a quick call to her sister. She nibbled on her lip as the phone rang.

“Hey, sis,” Kaitlyn said in her trademark bubbly voice.

“Hey. Listen, I have bad news.”

“You got in a car wreck.”

Mara paused. “Well, no. Worse news. Or maybe better. I’m not sure.” She drew in a deep breath. “I have to stay on set tonight to deal with a setback. My gingerbread church collapsed, and I have to redo it. You guys will have to go ice skating without me.”

“Awww but, Mar-Mar!” Kaitlyn’s little sisterly whine was perfectly honed throughout the years, and she brought it out in

full force now.

“I’m sorry. We’ll have time to go before Christmas. But with this competition going on, I can’t mess up. You know this. I love you, and I’ll talk to you later.”

Mara hung up before she could get any more blowback from Kaitlyn. Her sister understood, but Mara didn’t want to deal with the familial disappointment. Family holiday traditions were important to the the Lancaster family, and Mara was always happy to participate—but right now, this competition was more important.

She pocketed her phone and slid off her coat. When she turned to drape it over a nearby chair, she noticed Chris taking off his coat too.

“What are you doing?”

“Staying to help you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’ve got nothing better to do. Besides,” he jerked his thumb toward the collapsed church, “that’s going to take a while. You need the help if you want to get out of here before midnight.”

Mara tried to fight the smile that threatened to take over her face. She was touched by the offer—maybe a little too much. She practically floated over to the cabinets to get the ingredients ready.

“Well, all right.” She brought out the flour and butter, as well as the appropriate mixing bowls and the other ingredients she would need. “If you want to and are offering, I won’t say no. Are you sure you’ll be okay taking orders from me?”

The cool smile that covered Chris’s face threatened to undo her resolve to stay away from him during the competition. Because with looks like his, it was practically criminal to say no. And right now, while his blue eyes crinkled at the edges and took her in, all she wanted to do was melt back into his arms and get another taste of those kisses.

But no. This needed to stay work. Even if she’d continue to fantasize about him every night of the competition.

“Yes, chef,” he told her snapping to attention before he looked around. “How about if I get started on the dough while you get the mold ready.”

She nodded, handing over the utensils. “Great idea. And thanks.”

The two of them worked seamlessly for the next couple hours as the gingerbread baked and they tried to salvage the best parts of the current church. Once everything came out of the oven, it needed to cool and harden overnight, so they wouldn’t be able to assemble the actual church that evening. But they made real headway and saved her a significant amount of work come Monday morning.

Once they’d cleaned and stored everything again for the evening, they high fived.

“Thanks, Chris.” Mara beamed up at him, feeling a little giddy. Probably because it was almost nine p.m. and she was *still* at work. “You really helped me out. I didn’t get a chance to be with my family, but at least I’m not going to be behind by an entire day next week.”

Chris checked his phone, and then a smile lit up his face. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Can’t say. Just follow me.”

He strode to his coat and jerked his head toward the door. She hurried to grab her things and followed him. Except when they left the multipurpose room, he didn’t head for the main doors heading out to the parking lot. Instead, he hung a left down the long corridor leading to the back of the community center.

“Where are we going?”

He shook his head, keeping his fast pace toward the side exit. When they burst through the doors, the chilly December night air sent a shiver through her. She tightened her coat around her, resisting the urge to nuzzle into his side.

“Are we heading into these darkened woods? Seems like a great time.” She snorted as he led her down a winding stone

path.

“Just wait and see.”

Their steps crunched over the brittle leaves littering the pathway. Through the bare limbs of the trees, lights twinkled up ahead. As they neared, she saw strings of lights lining a long glass half-wall. When she realized what she was looking at, she gasped.

“The community center ice skating rink!” She grabbed his forearm, looking out at the small icy arena happy to see a few people were still skating. In all the stress of the collapse and remaking of her church, she’d completely forgotten that they could get there via the woods. “This is great! Are they still open?”

“For another half hour,” Chris said, showing her the time on his phone. “I figured if you couldn’t skate with your family, you could at least skate *a little*.”

She tried to hide her grin behind the collar of her coat, but it was hopeless. She was smiling like a fool. This was impossibly sweet, but she was hesitant to admit it.

“We never come to this one,” she said, practically skipping alongside him. “It’ll be nice to try a new spot.”

She reached out for his hand automatically, as if it were the most natural gesture in the world. They held hands for a few paces before Chris looked over at her, which jarred her awareness.

“Oh.” She dropped his hand as they came up to the rink. A few tall light poles placed around the perimeter made the rink as bright as day but caused the surrounding woods to fade into obscurity. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I didn’t say you had to stop.”

A nervous laugh slid out of her, and she directed her attention to the small booth for skate rentals. “What size are you?”

“Eleven.”

She lifted a brow, though he couldn’t see it. So many inappropriate responses came to mind, and every single one of

them had to do with the huge package between his legs. She requested their sizes from the attendant, who also asked for a selfie with Chris, and a moment later they were sitting on a steel bench booting up.

“Size eleven, huh?” She couldn’t keep it in after all.

“What?”

She rolled her lips inward, trying to keep in a giggle. “Your dick is size eleven too.”

He smirked, eyes flashing. “And you’ve loved it every time you’ve had it.”

His smooth response sent heat curling through her. God, she couldn’t deny it. It was as true now as it was back in high school. But his response reminded her of her own resolve. However fine his dick was, getting back on it was not the goal.

Keeping work and pleasure separate was.

Even though ice skating was sort of blurring the lines.

This is just a nice thing he’s doing. And after spending so much of his time as a huge asshole, it’s okay to let him be nice for once. The rationalizations flowed freely as she laced up her skates and they wobbled their way into the rink. *Besides, it’s not like this means anything. You’re just two work colleagues blowing off steam after work. This is fine. Everything is fine.*

Mara pushed off into a steady, straight line. Within ten seconds, Chris was flat on his ass, looking up at her with one eye pinched shut.

“Damn. You fell on your butt so soon?”

“I haven’t skated since I lived here and I’m out of practice. Very out of practice.” He held up his hand to request help, and she tugged him to his feet. This time when he skated, she stayed by his side.

“Better?”

“Mostly.” He wavered a little, palms out to his sides for balance. “God, how do you make it look so easy and why don’t I remember it being this hard?”

“Twenty-eight years of annual holiday skating.” She blew on her nails and sent him a sly look. “I know you’re jealous.”

“You should try out for the Olympics with cred like that,” he cracked.

“Already did.” She snorted, shoving her shoulder into him. “Just kidding.” The small gesture threw him off balance and a moment later he toppled to the ice. His body shook with laughter, which caused her to crumple beside him.

“Okay, you *really* suck,” she admitted.

“I’m going to embarrass myself further, but would you believe my parents paid for lessons?”

She pulled back to look him in the eye. “Bonnie Baker’s classes?”

“The very ones. I could never keep my feet under me, and I’m pretty sure she ended up refunding my parents the money they paid for my lessons.”

Mara laughed. “She was in the same year as my parents, so when she opened her school, they signed both me and my sister up.”

“Let me guess—you’re the best?”

She thought about lying but then told him, “Nope. My sister, and she’s never let me forget it.”

He shook his head, chuckling. “How is Kaitlyn?”

“As bubbly and cheerful as ever.” For some reason, she didn’t want to talk to him about her very adult and very single sister.

She climbed to her feet and helped him up again. Once they were both moving forward somewhat steadily, she said, “So you’re not good at everything.”

“Did you expect me to be?”

“Well, you certainly act like you are.”

“It’s called confidence.” He smirked, some of his black tresses falling over his forehead. “Fake it till you make it or something like that.”

Mara took a deep breath of the crisp night air, smiling out at the wooded area and the crystalline night sky. This was lovely, even if it went against tradition. Even if it was with her ex and professional rival right at her side.

“Thanks again for helping me tonight,” she said, looking over at him. He wobbled and she grabbed his hand. “You didn’t have to, considering we’re competing against each other.”

“Yeah, well, we all need a little help sometimes.” He squeezed her hand, and heat flooded her body.

“You don’t ever seem to need help,” she pointed out. “Except on an ice rink.”

“Trust me, I’ve needed and received help,” he said. “Back when I was first auditioning for my cooking show, I got really sick the night before the last interview. I roped my cousins into helping me do some of the vital prep, but I never told anyone.” He squeezed her hand. “Maybe I got the show because of them, ya know?”

Josh was closer in age to Chris than Mitch, who had already finished college and was working for Denton Hotels when she had started dating Chris. “Let me guess, they’ve never let you forget it?”

“It comes up every once in a while,” he admitted, his smile fond.

She got lost in his gaze for a moment, not watching where they were going until they ran headfirst into the glass wall.

“Oh!” She gripped the edges, a laugh rocketing out of her. “Didn’t see that coming.”

“Come on, Olympian.” He squeezed the sides of her waist, prompting a shriek.

“Don’t tickle me!”

“I have to, now that you know my deep, dark secret.” He pinched her sides again, his blue eyes twinkling. “I’ll tickle you until I’m the better skater.”

Giggles turned into belly laughs as Chris tormented her under the inky black sky. This wasn’t a night she could have

predicted, but damn, it was one of the best impromptu nights out she'd ever had.

If she closed her eyes, she could almost fall back into the past. Back when they were young and in love and giddy as ever. That spark was still there between them. It pulsed and throbbed on the ice rink, as though the connection had never disappeared.

And really, maybe it hadn't.

They'd just temporarily suspended it.

Waiting for their second chance.

CHRIS

Thirty minutes flew by and the attendant was waving everyone in. Chris was happy to have regular shoes on again. One of the other skaters asked him for an autograph, which he gave along with smiling for a couple selfies. All the while, Mara was grinning at him. She actually blushed when someone asked for her autograph and picture as well, but she happily gave it.

As they walked back toward the community center, she asked him, “Is it always like that? With people coming up to you for pics and autographs?”

“Depends on where I am and how hard the network is pushing my image and show. Being a TV chef is a lot less glamorous than being an actor even if parts of the show are scripted. But *Gingerbread Head to Head* is a household name around here, so it makes sense that more people might be interested.”

They walked in silence and had almost reached the parking lot for the community center when Mara heaved a long sigh.

“We always would close out ice-skating night with hot chocolate,” she said wistfully, as if she hadn’t seen her family in years instead of probably hours. “Too bad it’s too late to go to Sweet Stuff. They have the best.”

“Hot chocolate, huh?”

She nodded, looking up at him with a sweetness and mischief that nearly split him in two.

“All right. Let’s make our own then.” He slipped his arm over her shoulders as they walked, and she fit in the space perfectly. “I’ve got all the fixings back at my place. We can have a replacement hot chocolate tasting, to see if it surpasses Sweet Stuff’s legendary concoction.”

“Oooh!” Her eyes lit up. “A hot cocoa tasting. I am so in for this.”

He led the way to the parking lot, and she stopped as they neared the few remaining cars.

“Should I follow you? Where do you even live?”

“I’m in a short-term rental down the street. I walk here every day, so maybe you can give me a ride?”

She snorted. “You really are a New Yorker now, aren’t you?”

“I am officially a card-carrying New Yorker. But I do have a rental while I’m here.” He followed her to her car, and they slid into the front seats. The car smelled like her, hints of ginger and vanilla, which made his eyes flutter shut. The more time he spent with her, the more he wanted. It was both infuriating and intoxicating at the same time.

Inviting her back to his place was a big no-no. Helping her avert a crisis and ice skating after work was one thing. Both of those hovered on the boundary of *simply friendly*. But bringing her into his space, where his bed sat mere feet away, was asking for them to take things back into flour-on-the-ass territory.

And hell, he didn’t mind that one bit. Even though he *should* mind and was actively *trying* to mind and not even remotely succeeding.

“It’s here.” Chris pointed out the brick condo tucked into a lit square in downtown Glenford. It was the most expensive place he’d found on the home share app and worth the extra money. Rooftop jacuzzi with a view of the picturesque town, which was all decked out for the holiday season, a fully stocked kitchen, and a king-size bed in a huge room with skylights. When the property manager had found out who would be staying there, they’d gone all out making sure he was

comfortable. It was maybe half the size of his place in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, but he found it comfortable and he loved not having to drive to the show.

“Ooh. I’ve always wondered what this place looked like on the inside.” She parked, and they meandered toward the entrance, not speaking, just sending each other flirty looks.

This was the sort of shit he didn’t have back in New York. This innocent but totally sultry back-and-forth. Not to mention the history and connection that he had with Mara. Nobody else had ever come close to burrowing in like she had, not in nearly a decade of subpar dates and underwhelming television-industry hookups. Which made their reunion even more confusing.

And at this point? He wasn’t sure whether he was supposed to love or hate her. He flashed to a memory of his parents dancing in the living room to the Pretenders singing “Thin Line Between Love and Hate.” Whenever his parents would argue, which was rare, after they made up, his dad would put this song on and they’d dance around the room, singing along with Chrissie Hynde. He smiled at the memory, realizing that he hadn’t thought about his parents in years. He’d been truthful when he’d told Mara that he’d been to the cemetery, but he hadn’t truly thought about their life together in a very long time.

Once he pushed inside the condo, Mara turned into a gaping, cooing mess, and even though he’d had zero input in the interior design, he couldn’t resist showing her nearly every inch of the industrial chic condo, complete with exposed brick walls and a ridiculous number of potted plants. The tour ended in the kitchen, where he got to work on the next phase of the evening: preparing the perfect hot chocolate.

Mara slid onto the bar stool facing the counter as he arranged his ingredients. She was grinning like a kid.

“Why are you watching me like that?” he asked. She’d been resting her chin in her palm for too long, giving him doe eyes.

“I feel like I’m watching your show,” she said, and then giggled. “I don’t know. The apartment kind of looks like your

set, doesn't it?"

He looked around, realizing she was right. The condo did resemble the set of *Cooking with Chris* at least distantly, with the steel appliances and bright but industrial chic backdrops.

"We can film the grand hot chocolate making, if you want to make it even more authentic," he cracked.

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away. Tension sizzled between them for a few moments before he added, "Are you going to make another size eleven joke or should I?"

She snorted, swatting at him. "No more of those, okay?"

"Fine. If you say so." He whisked the milk and cream in the saucepan and then added espresso powder. She arched a brow.

"Espresso, eh?"

"Hey. This is *my* cooking show." Without breaking his stride, he reached for the bar of dark chocolate he'd set out. He broke the squares into the saucepan one by one, stirring rhythmically.

"Well, you've already won best hot chocolate, so don't worry. I'm pretty sure Sweet Stuff uses a packaged mix."

"Ha!" He pumped his fist. "Victory is mine."

Mara sent him a curious smile. "Always have to win, don't you?"

"Not all the time, but most of the time. I mean, I was always competitive, but when I moved in with my cousins, things got heated, especially with Josh." He clicked off the heat and poured two dark and creamy cups of hot chocolate. He topped them off with handmade whipped cream and mint chocolate sprinkles, then handed her a mug before picking up his own. "Let's go enjoy it in the other room."

He led her to a sitting room filled with bookcases and low sofas. They settled into opposing sofas, and they took turns blowing on their mugs and sending flirty looks.

"Is it weird to be back?" she finally asked.

"Yeah. I've stopped in Glenford over the years to swing by the cemetery and pay my respects, but this is the longest I've been

here. And it's a weird trip down memory lane."

"Yeah." A frown slowly tugged at her lips. "Like when Dan showed up."

The mention of his name was like being covered in ice cubes. He rolled the mug back and forth between his hands, unsure what to say. It had been nice pretending the past didn't matter anymore. Like maybe they could just be friends and something more now.

"You know, that night at the dance—"

"Mara, you don't have to bring that up," Chris interjected, feeling suddenly stupid. Here they were, almost thirty years old and still rehashing shit that happened in high school.

"No, I want to." She sighed, fluffing up a pillow behind her. "When Dan and I kissed, it ruined everything between you and me. And I felt so bad about that. You had every right to be mad, you know? But you went off the deep end afterward and never even heard my side of things."

Chris tilted his head slowly back and forth. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"Doesn't it?" A sharp laugh escaped her. "I've seen you glaring at him, which tells me maybe it does."

Damn. *Busted.*

"I guess I'm just trying to say that the night it all happened, it wasn't some big, secretive cheating scandal. Dan kissed *me*. I didn't kiss *him*. While you'd gone to get drinks, he'd asked me to dance. It was that song by Katy Perry I liked and I really wanted to dance. I didn't realize that he wanted us to give it another shot. I reminded him I was with you. He said, 'let me convince you then,' and he kissed me in the middle of the dance floor. I regretted even letting him get close enough to try. Maybe I could have pulled away sooner. I don't know, I just—"

Chris was gripping the mug so tightly he worried he might break it. He set it down on the table beside the couch.

“You were so mad, and you broke up with me so quickly. It made my head spin.”

“So dating Dan immediately after that night was the only option you saw?” he asked, unable to stop himself.

She wilted a little. “It wasn’t the best choice, I know. It was just...the *easy* choice. I was sixteen and you were being a major dick. I knew you’d never forgive me. And then your parents died at the end of our junior year and you moved in with your uncle and cousins and I never saw you again.”

Chris reached for his mug again. He usually liked to avoid thinking about that time of his life, especially with the loss of his parents in the mix, but hearing Mara’s side of things did help. Maybe she hadn’t been cheating on him the entire time they were together, as he’d believed all these years.

Mara slurped at her hot chocolate and let out a low moan. Chris snapped his eyes up to her. The sound traveled straight to his cock, and hell if he wasn’t ready to forgive and forget immediately.

“This is *so. Good.*” She said, pinning him with a look.

“Thanks. Kind of like your pussy.” He flashed a grin.

She choked on her cocoa and had to set it down as she laughed. “I have to say, no one has ever compared how I taste to hot chocolate, so, um, thank you?”

“Just stating the facts, ma’am,” he countered.

She tilted her head, a smile twitching on her lips. “Fine. Then here’s another fact. The only way to put the past to rest is to kiss and make up.”

He forced himself not to blurt out a *yes* and instead, pretended to think about it. “Hmmm, you might have something there.”

“Oh, I do. So what do you say, should we put Dan behind us and finally act like adults?”

“So this is a coming-of-age hot chocolate? I had no idea it was *that* good,” he said, setting the mug down again.

She snickered. “Well, you did say that it tastes as good as my pussy, and that is a very adult thing to say.”

The grin on his face spread ear-to-ear. There was a reason he’d fallen for this girl the first time, and it looked like she hadn’t changed a bit.

“I agree. It is a very adult thing to say and do.” He gestured at her with his hand. “So, come and get it.”

Mara set down her mug and nearly bolted over to his couch. She settled beside him, looking up at him with a gaze that sparkled as much as it sizzled. And then she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him forward so that their lips came crashing together.

A small *oomph* escaped him, but he quickly recovered and met the brutal pace of her desire. They kissed heavily, sloppily, and with abandon. Because now, unlike at the community center, there was no chance of someone walking in on them. It was just them in the cozy silence of the condo—and their small moans and heated breaths as they made out as if their lives depended on it.

Chris guided her backward onto the couch laying her back onto the cushions. He eased himself on top of her, pinning her between his arms and legs. His cock settled between her legs, and when he bucked his hips, she moaned.

“God,” she cried out. “I didn’t think we’d progress *this* fast.”

He laughed throatily, nipping at her earlobe. “Are you new here? Have you met us?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” she croaked, her legs splaying open to welcome him. “We did fuck on set the first day of filming.”

“Thank you.” Chris sat back on his heels and undid his shirt. Mara untucked it while he worked on the buttons, then she shoved her hands beneath the cotton.

“You didn’t take your shirt off last time,” she complained, actually pouting. “That wasn’t fair.”

“Neither did you,” he shot back. “Guess we’ll just have to remedy that this go-around.”

She giggled, smoothing her hands over his chest once he tore his shirt off. Her gaze sizzled across his pecs to his biceps. She tugged at the tuft of hair on his chest.

“You still have chest hair.”

“Of course.” He dipped down for a slow, thorough kiss. “Where would it go?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered into his ear, locking her thighs around him. “Aren’t celebrity chefs legally required to be hairless for their sexy calendar shoots?”

He smirked, grabbing handfuls of the flesh above her hips. “Hey. I only did one sexy calendar. And yes, they shaved me.” He snagged a juicy kiss, then broke apart to level her with his gaze. “So you bought the calendar?”

“I didn’t buy it,” Mara whispered, rubbing her pelvis against the trapped ridge of his cock. “A friend had it in her house, and I just looked at it.”

“Hm.” Chris smiled through another kiss, squeezing her ass cheeks as hard as he could. “Defiant.”

“I didn’t want to support your career, but I couldn’t not look,” Mara laughed.

“Thoughts?”

“The real thing is way better.” She clutched at his biceps. “Take those pants off *now*.”

It was hard to say no to that. Chris stood and hopped from one foot to the other as he shimmied out of his pants, grabbing a condom and setting it within easy reach. “Oooo. Commando. I like it.” Mara sat up, tearing off her shirt and bra. Chris inhaled sharply, easing back on top of her before covering her breasts with his hands. Her head tipped back, and she moaned.

“I agree one hundred percent,” Chris said. He swiped his tongue across each rosy nipple, turning them pebbly, before he tugged down her pants, followed by her panties. He buried his

face between her legs, scraping his teeth against the stiff peak of her clit.

“Ohhh, lord.”

“Mmm.” He got to work moving his tongue back and forth over that hard nub. She locked her thighs around his head, and he shifted, wedging his shoulder to keep her from smacking her legs against his ears. His chest heaved as he slurped and licked at her, eager to send her over the edge before they’d even begun.

“Chriiis.” She bucked her hips, knotting her fingers in his hair. He growled and slipped two fingers inside her, probing her silken heat. His eyes fluttered shut, and he took her clit between his lips. Yes, he wanted her to unravel first. And then again. And again.

Chris worked his fingers in and out, sucking and nipping at her clit until her whole body went tense and she tossed her head back. She squeaked out, “I’m close—” before her pussy started convulsing around him. Her orgasm prompted a guttural cry from her. He swiped his tongue back and forth over her clit a few more times for good measure enjoying the tremors that wracked her body.

When she lay panting and trembling on the couch, he pressed a kiss to the inside of her thigh and then eased himself down on top of her. She looked up at him with wild eyes.

“Got energy for one more?” he teased, wiggling his hips so that his straining cock found the damp crease of her pussy.

She swallowed hard and nodded. “God, yes. I want you inside me right now.”

That was all he needed to hear. Grabbing the condom, he tore off the wrapper and quickly sheathed himself. Then he dipped down and caught her lips in a kiss. He rocked his hips in a slow circle before his cockhead slipped inside her. Mara groaned, hooking her arms around his neck, and he sank deeper. The tops of his shoulders prickled as he eased into her velvety heat, bliss washing over him.

This. This right here. The electric heat of Mara filled him from the inside out. The sizzling contentment that sparked anytime she was near. After the evening they'd shared, and now being buried deep inside her again, it was hard to remember why she shouldn't be the one for him.

Chris groaned, his lips skating over her jawline as he rocked into her, over and over again. Mara melted against the couch, clinging to him, little whimpers mixed with gasps. Her breath against his ear sent shivers down his spine and pushed him even closer to the edge. He scooped her body into his arms and sat back on his heels. She locked her thighs around his waist, eyes flashing as they assumed the new position.

"Mmm." A throaty laugh escaped her, and she rocked her hips against him. The new angle provided even more depth. His abs tightened in preparation for what came next.

"That's right. Ride me, Mara." He palmed her ass cheeks, jiggling them a little until she giggled. Her head lolled back, and she started a slow but intense rhythm on top of him. Her breasts jiggled in his face each time she slammed down on top of him.

"Oh, God," he croaked, after she claimed his cock yet again. He tightened his arms around her waist, smashing their bodies together. Burying his face in the crook of her neck, he held tight as she rocked against him again, bucking her hips just as he thrust upwards. A surprised cry escaped her, and her thighs tensed around him.

She was coming. Again. Chris grunted and drilled upward into her, which allowed his own release to come barreling forward. His orgasm exploded, sticky sweet and raging, filling his limbs with heat and prickles and relief. He held onto her for dear life as the waves of pleasure pummeled him. When he could finally think again in the languid aftermath, he looked up to find a lazy grin on her face.

"Wow." She blinked slowly, as if she might fall asleep on top of him.

"Mm hmm." He buried his face in her neck again, reassured by the scent of her. It would still be a minute before he could

form words.

She sighed, running her fingertips back and forth over the wide planes of his back and rested her head on his shoulder. For a long time, nobody said anything. This was a sweet lull. The type of dreamy aftermath he'd missed without even realizing. He and Mara had always made magic together. And now, even after so long apart and so many lost years between them, it looked like they were right back to doing the same.

Mara was the magic he was missing in life.

And this time, he didn't want to let her get away.

MARA

Mara woke Sunday morning to sunshine streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows in Chris's condo, letting her know that it was at least mid-morning. She moved slowly, trying to extricate herself from where she was tangled with Chris without waking him up. She almost succeeded and was just lifting his arm from where it was wrapped around her hip when he tightened his hold.

"Don't," he grumbled at her before burying his nose in her neck and going back to sleep.

She couldn't help grinning at his gravelly voice, but she really needed to pee. Rubbing his hand, Mara tugged gently on his wrist and then cringed when he tightened his hold. Yep, it was now urgent.

"Chris. You have to let me go. I gotta pee." He flexed his hand where it lay, and she felt an increase in pressure against her bladder. "Seriously. Unless you want to pay an extra cleaning fee, you *really need* to let me up."

He grumbled but did release her, rolling over and pulling the blanket up over his shoulder.

Now free, Mara practically leaped out of bed, rushed naked to the ensuite bathroom, and sat down on the toilet groaning in relief. Much better.

After washing her face and brushing her teeth, she looked at herself in the mirror while she brushed out the giant tangle that was her hair. Her eyes were bright, despite just waking up, and she looked like a sexually satisfied woman. Mara stifled a

giggle so as not to wake Chris, and her cheeks hurt with her wide smile. If she wasn't careful, she could get used to this.

But should she? Once this competition was over, Chris would be moving on to other things. *Cooking with Chris* was filmed in New York City. She lived in Glenford. The commute would be horrible and expensive. Plus, she had plans, dammit, that required she stay here.

She needed to be realistic. Once the winner was declared, Chef Chris would move on and continue to do chef-y things and Mara would pretend that everything was fine while she nursed her second broken heart thanks to Chris Denton.

In the meantime, she could enjoy their time together and get as many orgasms as possible before it was time to say goodbye. With that decided, she exited the bathroom to find Chris had rolled over and was sprawled across the bed. The sun's rays blanketed the bed, giving him an angelic look.

As quickly as that thought hit, she snorted. If the last thirty-six hours told her anything, it was that Chris Denton was anything but angelic. She briefly debated climbing back into bed, but her stomach growled. Nope. She had a better idea. Grabbing the T-shirt he had on yesterday, she pulled it over her head before heading into the kitchen to get breakfast started.

She had the batter for pancakes mixed and the bacon in the oven, and was enjoying her coffee from another snazzy coffee maker when Chris exited the bedroom, wearing a loose pair of sweatpants and a tee with his show's logo on it. Grabbing the mug she had waiting for him, she poured him a cup of coffee and slid it across the counter so he could reach it.

His butt hit the bar stool under the counter with a thump and he closed his eyes while he sipped his drink.

"It smells amazing in here," he finally said. "I didn't realize I had bacon in the fridge."

Mara checked on the bacon before adjusting the remaining time, and they both took a deeper smell while the oven door was open. "It's the good stuff too, from Glenford Hoof and

Claw. They source everything from small local farms. There's even a farm that's producing American Wagyu beef now."

"Have you ever tried Olive Wagyu? When I was in Japan for a publicity event for my first cookbook, I was invited to tour one of the cattle ranches, and Chef Ishhii created an amazing meal serving up a ribeye. It's one of those experiences you have to try at least once, but I know I wouldn't want to eat it every day."

"Too rich?"

Chris rubbed his hand up and down his chest and stomach, distracting her enough that Mara almost overcooked the first round of pancakes. "Very. It was a great treat. It had that nutty, grassy taste that olives have and the fat and meat just melts in your mouth. He'd paired it with some locally grown root vegetables. The presentation was minimalistic, but the taste was anything but."

Mara flipped the next set of pancakes onto the plate and covered it to keep them warm while she finished cooking the scrambled eggs. "That sounds amazing. Will it make me sound like too much of a small-town girl if I admit that I've never left the country?"

Standing up to pour himself another cup of coffee, Chris leaned across the counter where Mara had set down the bacon she'd just pulled from the oven and snatched a piece. Popping it into his mouth, he smacked his lips before answering her. "When we were in high school, we'd talked about traveling the world. How come you never did?"

Mara began plating the food to give her a moment to figure out how to word her answer. Scooping the scrambled eggs out of the pan, she added some coarse salt and fresh ground pepper along with some finely sliced scallions before adding bacon and the pancakes. Setting it in front of him, she slid the cutlery toward him along with the maple syrup bottle she'd had sitting in a warm water bath before joining him at the bar with her own plate.

"I'd like to say money, which I know was never an issue for you. But truthfully, I'd started working in Dizzy's Diner over

on Lincoln right after high school, and I got so swept up in learning how to bake, and then cook, I think I was twenty-five before I even stopped to take a vacation, and that was to attend a culinary convention in New Orleans.”

“We used to eat there on Sundays after church. They made the most amazing bread and oh! Those pickles that sat on every table were always so crunchy and fresh tasting. Whatever happened to them? When I drove past coming into town, there was a discount store there.”

“Dizzy died, and his son decided he didn’t want to run a restaurant. He sold the property and moved out of state. We haven’t had a decent bread baker in this town since.”

They both dove into their food, and it was silent for several minutes while they ate. Mara was hungrier than she thought, and she kept pace with what Chris was eating. When her angry stomach pangs stopped, she slowed down. “Dizzy is the person I credit for getting me interested in baking. I started working there as a helper in the bakery, and I fell in love with it. He was an amazing teacher, and he was happy to teach me.”

“So that explains your comment on our first day about spending time in the right kitchen to learn everything you need to know.” He elbowed her and gave her a smile.

Mara cringed. “Yeah, that was a bitchy thing to say to a bunch of culinary students. But.” She held up her hand to emphasize her next comment. “With the right teacher, it is a great way to learn.”

Chris reached across the counter to snag more bacon and set two more slices on her plate. “True, but culinary school offers other skills that you might not get working in a kitchen with a limited menu.”

Chomping on the bacon, Mara swished the last of her pancake in the remaining syrup on her plate before eating it with the bacon. “Where did you learn how to cook? From your mom?”

He shook his head, and Mara felt him tense a bit before forcibly relaxing. “I got interested the summer after I moved in with Uncle Mitchell. I was angry and feeling lost and there

was only so much he and my cousins could do. There were days I just couldn't stand to be in my own skin, so I'd wander around the hotel, where we lived, and eventually found my way to the kitchen. The head chef saw my anger and got me interested in cooking and it took off from there. By the time I graduated high school, I'd decided to enroll in culinary school. My excitement and love of cooking took off from there."

They finished eating, and Mara grabbed the plates to put in the dishwasher, and Chris jumped up to help, reminding her of their first day of shooting. Or to be exact, *after*. She could feel her cheeks heating as a blush came on but thankfully, he didn't notice.

"I'm stuffed," he said, breaking her out of her thoughts. "I'm thinking Netflix and chill. What about you?"

Mara laughed, shaking her head. They'd had more sex in the last thirty-six hours than she'd had in three years. Not that she was counting. Except she was totally counting. "Well, I'd entertain Netflix, but any sort of chill will have to wait until my stomach settles. More than likely, it will be Netflix and nap."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head, which did things to her stomach. Good things. "So nap now, chill later. Got it. Why don't you grab the throw blankets in the bedroom while I cue up a movie."

"Just so long as it's not a horror movie." Mara grabbed a couple of pillows and the blankets, and when she joined him back in the living room, he had a movie queued up. When she saw the title, she chuckled to see it was about cooking.

He looked at her, excited. "Have you seen it?"

Shaking her head, he clicked play and they settled down to watch the movie. About an hour into it, they were well into the nap portion of their day.

MARA

When Monday rolled around, she left the condo early so she could go home to change her clothes and do her makeup before heading to the competition for the day. Being away from Chris felt unnatural at this point. After spending forty-eight hours together without leaving the condo, she already missed him, and it'd barely been a *half hour*.

That was troubling. But also...somehow just right.

Mara whipped herself into camera-ready shape as quickly as she could and headed for the community center. She was already excited to see him. Already excited to see how the rest of this week might unfold between them. And, amazingly, already missed the weight of him between her legs.

She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat as she hurried up the sidewalk to the community center giving a wave to the people waiting in line to take their seats to watch the filming. A smile overtook her face as her mind drifted back to the weekend they'd shared. Could there have been a more perfect weekend? She'd come more times than she thought humanly possible and she didn't want to contemplate where he'd learned all those tricks in the intervening ten years since she'd last seen him. His brash behavior on set was nonexistent, and she hoped to see more of that beautiful man who was so very intoxicating when he turned on the charm.

But one thing was clear. It had to be behind closed doors only. Because while they were in public, they needed to keep this

thing—whether fling or romance or full-blown second chance—out of the competition.

“Mara!”

She turned to find Dan jogging toward her. He waved his reporter’s notebook in the air.

“Hey, Dan! I didn’t know you’d be showing up again. I thought you were headed back to New York.”

“Yeah, well my boss wanted me to stick around until the announcement of the winner.” His cheeks were pink as he caught up to her. “Turns out, all of America is obsessing just over the teasers, so we need to have full coverage.”

She grinned and started to walk toward the front doors, but he reached for her wrist.

“Wait a second.” Something serious overcame him. “I need to ask you something. Are the rumors true?”

She blinked, searching his face for some sort of clarity. “What rumors?”

“That you and Chris are together.”

His words slammed through her, both exciting and uncomfortable at the same time. The words *you and Chris together* were oddly titillating, but how the hell did *Dan* know?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A strange cocktail of emotions washed over Dan’s face. Part relief, part confusion. He was laying something out here—Mara just couldn’t figure out what it was.

“The network said there might be a little romance brewing between competitors.”

“I don’t think that’s anyone’s business,” she said with a tight smile. She started walking toward the doors.

“You might want to make sure Chris is on the same page,” Dan called out after her. She pulled open the door, a gust of heat whooshing out. Inside the community center, the front lobby was buzzing with journalists. The network had spaced

out the media days so that each channel and news outlet could get their turn at different points of the competition.

And at the start of the day, with a handful of press conferences under her belt already, she'd felt confident. She and Chris weren't fighting anymore. They'd kissed—sexed, rather—and made up.

But now? Dan's comment made her doubtful and tense.

Chris was already seated at the long table facing the reporters when she breezed inside. She hurried to hang up her coat and joined him in the seat next to him. He sent her a warm smile, and she returned it tightly.

Dan had said the network knew about a potential romance brewing between competitors. And how else could the network know if Chris hadn't told them?

Her mind spun as she settled into her spot and tried to make sense of where the information could have come from. They'd been seen ice skating, and Chris had stopped to talk to some fans. Maybe someone had spotted her going into Chris's condo. But Glenford was a small, tightknit community. She couldn't imagine someone selling her out so quickly. Who on earth could have seen them and already alerted the network? Nobody here had the bigwigs on speed dial.

The most logical answer was Chris himself.

The realization thudded through her, making her morning coffee churn unpleasantly in her gut.

Conversation murmured around them as the dark realization seeped through her. Chris slung his arm over the back of her chair, and she sat forward. She needed to put distance between them. He cleared his throat, and she could sense him seeking her attention.

But he wouldn't get it. Not right now.

The press conference began and the questions for Chris came fast and furious, as always. He retracted his arm and rested his elbows on the table as he answered a few questions about the role he plays shaping the seasonal menu offerings at all the Denton Hotels worldwide and how he varies the recipes to

account for seasonal and local harvests and whether he planned to continue his famous cooking show forever. Mara had to fight from rolling her eyes.

Toward the end of the press conference, one of the journalists finally dared to ask the question. “Is it true that you two have been dating since before the competition?”

Mara stiffened, glancing over at Chris. She tried to keep her face neutral, since she didn’t want to provide some meme-worthy reaction that would go viral somehow, somewhere. Everywhere. But what the hell could they say? *We’ve only boned once in his condo, and technically “once” refers to an entire weekend, and once down the hall, so that’s hardly a relationship thankyouverymuch.*

“Mara and I have been friends for a long time,” Chris said slowly, as though he was measuring his words. He glanced over at her, and she caught something playful in his gaze that only deepened her confusion. Maybe this really was all a game to him. Probably he’d pursued her just to get a ratings bump. She’d been the perfect pawn in his superficial ploy.

“We knew each other in high school,” Mara added sharply, adding a tight smile. “That’s all.”

“So Chris isn’t your celebrity crush?” another reporter asked.

Mara’s nostrils flared. Of course the only time the attention would turn to her was in relation to Chris. If she was dating him. Fucking him. They only cared about her in terms of sex with Chris. She was over this circus.

“Definitely not,” she said, her voice clipped. “We’re competitors, nothing more.”

Chris steered the questions away from their potential budding romance, and the press conference ended soon after. Each time she attended one of these, she felt like the overlooked rookie in a room full of star football players. And wasn’t that how it actually was? Chris the celebrity commanding all the attention, all the advertising dollars, all the millions of households.

And here she was, a regular woman trying to open a damn bakery once the dust from the competition settled.

She excused herself as quickly as possible from the press conference and headed to the multipurpose room. Dan caught up with her in the hall, grabbing her arm.

“Hey. You okay?”

She stopped walking, softening as she turned to him. They might not have seen much of each other over the years, but Dan was a good guy. He seemed to care.

“Yeah. Thanks for asking.”

“I think you handled it well. Just so you know, I didn’t ask any questions because I didn’t want to add to the fire. I could tell you were uncomfortable.”

She grimaced. *Uncomfortable* was an understatement. *Sold out* was closer to the truth. One weekend with Chef Chris, and he himself had sold them out to the tabloids. Unbelievable. But maybe she shouldn’t be surprised. She’d gotten caught up in amazing sex. This was also her fault.

She glanced back toward the press table and saw Chris get to his feet, his gaze sizzling on her and Dan. Anxiety spiked inside her, and she offered a smile to Dan.

“Everything’s fine. But thanks for checking.” She breezed past him intent on reaching the multipurpose room. Everything *wasn’t* fine, but it would be soon. Once she got to work and started focusing on what really mattered.

Winning this damn competition.

CHRIS

Chris knew something was off.

It had been ever since the press conference that morning. Mara would barely look at him, and the frosty way she'd responded to the insinuation that they were together told him everything he needed to know.

Mara didn't want to be with him, at least not publicly.

And maybe it was better that way. After all, what could he offer her other than a couple of weeks of sexual pleasure and excellent hot chocolate? The thought lurked inside him as he and his crew worked on the gingerbread creation for that day. They'd finally gotten the primary structure complete—a New York City-inspired gingerbread skyscraper, complete with the Statue of Liberty in the white-frosted harbor—and now it was time for the excruciating detail work.

Which meant he had ample time to stew and overanalyze what exactly was going on in Mara's head after their exceptional weekend together.

Despite how well they'd left things that morning, jealousy still streaked through him whenever he saw Dan near her. The fact that she'd not only entered the building with him on her heels but *also* gone directly to him after the press conference? It turned his stomach into a peach pit.

They were close to the end of filming for the day. Mara wiped her hands on her apron and headed out of the multipurpose room, but Dan intercepted her. They chatted near the doors for a few moments, and Chris couldn't look away.

Was it so wrong to still hate Dan? His nostrils flared as he beat back the urge to storm over there and physically remove him from Mara's personal bubble. Dan placed a hand on the side of her arm, and Chris frowned.

That did it.

He was going over there.

He tore off his apron and headed for Mara and Dan. He pressed a hand to the small of her back once he got close. "Mara, can we have a word real quick?"

She looked up at him, surprised. Dan's gaze flitted between the two of them.

"Uh, sure."

Dan sent him the fakest smile he'd ever seen. "Great. Mara, I'll be in touch. Can't wait to connect about this."

Dan wandered away, and Chris strode toward the hallway, Mara lagging behind. Once they were alone, Mara crossed her arms.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing. I just wanted to see how you were doing." He cleared his throat, sniffing as he jerked his head toward Dan's retreating figure. "He's been extra friendly today."

Mara lowered her head, her green eyes growing stormy. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He can't seem to stay away from you."

"I'm shocked you even noticed," Mara spat. "With how much time your press pandering has taken up today."

"My press pandering?" Chris scoffed. "Oh please. I've been right alongside you in the kitchen all day."

"Yeah, you have. Making sure this is, and stays, the *All About Chris Show*." Mara's nostrils flared. "I can't even talk to Dan without you freaking out. Are you really that insecure?"

"I'm not *insecure*," he hissed, stepping toward her. "But I am *confused*. What you said this morning at the press conference

—”

“About our ‘relationship’?” She used exaggerated air quotes. “You know, Chris, I’m wondering who even told the network about us. Could it have been you? Are *you* the one leaking this to the press? Hmm?”

He watched her for a moment, taken aback by the vehemence behind her words. He hadn’t leaked it to the network, but the director had. They had told Chris that hinting at a romance would be a great ratings boost, so of course Chris had agreed. The bigger the audience and ratings, the bigger the payout for Glenford. Besides, it wasn’t like they’d be able to hide it for long. The director had caught on early enough, and these shows could tease anything they wanted out of the footage, which they’d both agreed to when they signed the contracts to compete on the show.

In a flash, the fight went out of him. He pinched his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead.

“Listen, can we start over?” He dropped his arms to his sides and sighed. “I’m sorry. This is getting messed up. I want to take you out tonight so we can talk things over.”

She studied him stonily.

“We’ve had a lot of late nights, so we deserve a night out to just have somebody else cook while we drink all the expensive wine.” He offered a smile. “You know? Let me take you out.”

Mara seemed to be considering it, judging by the way she chewed on her lip. Finally she nodded, glancing away. “Yeah. Okay. That’s fine.”

“Six o’clock?”

“I have a meeting tonight, actually, so let’s do a little later. Pick me up at my place around seven?”

“Done.”

They shared a tentative look, and Chris fought the urge to wrap her in his arms, but if she was uncomfortable admitting that there was something between them, he didn’t want to make it worse. He’d figure out what was up at dinner.

“See you later.” Mara hurried away before he could even reach for her hand, and he watched her head back into the multipurpose room. Things didn’t feel as good between them as they had last night, but Chris was sure he could smooth everything over, given the chance.

Because one thing was certain.

He needed Mara in his life for the rest of this trip. He wasn’t sure what came after the competition, so he wanted to lap up every second of this sweet hometown bliss.

As he was about to return to his assigned station, his phone pinged, and he checked his messages.

“Dude! You’re back with Mara? She broke your heart.”

Chris frowned looking at the message from his cousin Josh.

“Yes. No. Fuck, no clue. The director figured out that we have a history and leaked it to the press for a ratings boost. I found out after he did it.”

“You were an asshole for months after you broke up with her, and I don’t want to ever see that again. You’re barely tolerable now as it is.”

“Ha. Ha. Appreciate the concern.”

“Chris, you’re wanted on the set,” the assistant director told him, and he pocketed his phone and followed him back into the multipurpose room.



Mara bolted out the door of the community center right at five p.m., leaving her team to do the bulk of the cleanup and storage for the day.

She didn’t like to outsource tasks like that—she was of the mindset that every worker was equal, and she would never expect them to do all the work—but today? She had a very important meeting she couldn’t afford to miss.

The bakery of her dreams was still a distant fantasy, but this competition was one tangible step closer to realizing that dream. The prize money would be her startup funding, which was why winning wasn't just nice, it was necessary.

Dan's mom, Julia, was the realtor she was scheduled to meet downtown. The perfect location had come onto the market, and Mara called her the second she'd spotted the *FOR RENT* sign in the window. And of course, Julia had told Dan that they were meeting that evening. He'd been asking about her plans for the space right when Chris barged into the conversation, which made her clam up. Because Mara still didn't want Chris to know about her bakery plans.

Dan knowing was bad enough. She didn't want word to get out. Because, if she failed, *everyone* would know instead of just one or two people. She needed this to stay quiet until at least the end of the competition, when she'd know whether she had the startup capital to launch the bakery of her dreams.

She met Julia outside the cute brick-faced building just after five. The front door was painted white, and she could still read some of the window paint from the former tenant, a little sandwich shop that had just never taken off. The small café that had been in the space before the sandwich shop had done quite well and was popular, so Mara knew the problem wasn't the location.

"Oh, Mara, just wait until you see this place!" Julia's eyes sparkled as she unlocked the front door. The door creaked open, and they stepped into a hardwood-floored sitting area where two little tables still remained. A glass case divided the seating area from the service area. A narrow doorway led into the mostly empty kitchen, though the previous tenants had left behind one standing refrigerator for drink storage.

"If you decide to go with this, whatever they left behind can be yours too if you want it," Julia added once they'd done a walk-through.

"This place is so cute," Mara said. It was hard not to let the dreaminess take over. Imagining what this place could really look like if she got her hands on it. Christmastime was her

favorite time of year, and she wished she could have it up and running for this year already. A cozy nook by the windows overlooking the sidewalks, the brick fireplace crackling softly while customers ate their baked goodies and drank hot chocolate next to the totally white and sparkling Christmas tree. A shiver ran down her spine. Maybe Chris would even contribute his hot chocolate recipe.

No. She couldn't think things like that. Because she needed to be smart about what the future held for her and Chris, and the likely answer was *nothing*.

How could the answer be anything but? He was Chef Chris and he had one clear love: his career. This morning's brush with the rumor mill only proved it. He would leak anything to his benefit. So even if they started something nice, it wouldn't stay nice that way for long.

"It would absolutely be perfect for what you want to bring downtown," Julia said. Mara had given her a brief overview of what she intended to do here.

"How much is the rent each month?"

"One thousand."

Mara's stomach twisted. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't horrible. But it was more than her own mortgage payment, and the thought of making double payments every month—lease, electric, water, and more—on her current catering income was a punch to the gut.

But you'll have the prize money to count on. That's going to be the investment you need.

"I'm not sure there are any other spaces downtown that are quite so ideal for the type of business you're looking to open," Julia went on. "There are some spaces that came onto the market recently, and I know of one other that will be going up for rent soon, but all of those would require renovations to suit your needs. This, however..." She swept her arm back toward the kitchen. "All permits and licenses were approved once already this year, so I don't imagine you'd have any problem getting a new one approved."

Mara nodded, nibbling on her bottom lip. She needed to take the plunge. *Fake it till you make it.* “Yeah. I’m in. I want to move forward with this.”

Julia explained what she’d need in order to formalize the paperwork. But for now, the place could be hers with a deposit of the first month’s rent. The suggestion made Mara’s heart race, but she nodded anyway. Even if she ended up not being able to go through with it, losing the deposit was the only risk she’d face. Her future bakery was worth it. She had to at least try.

Mara scribbled out a check to Julia and handed it over, her heart pounding.

This was it. The first step on the journey to seeing the bakery for real, instead of just a tantalizing dream on a private Pinterest board.

Once they wrapped up their appointment, Mara was ready for a small celebration. She still had an hour before she needed to meet Chris, so she swung by the downtown coffee shop for a chai latte. When she breezed back out onto the street, a brand-new Mercedes Benz was just parking in front of the coffee shop. The car glistened black, practically sparkling. It was hard to look away.

The man who exited the car looked slick and rich—perfectly styled blond hair and an ear-to-ear grin. She couldn’t tell if he was about to hit on her or sell her insurance.

“Mara, right?” he asked.

She blinked, looking around discretely. He had to be talking to her...but how did he know who she was?

“Uh, yeah.”

The man stepped forward, his long overcoat reaching past his knees. He offered a black-gloved hand. “I’m Ryan Casewell, one of the network executives behind the gingerbread competition. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

She blinked a few times, timidly offering her hand. Part of her didn’t believe him. The other part wasn’t surprised that she

could tell from first glance that he was some sort of big-city industry type. “Wow. Nice to meet you.”

“Enjoying the competition?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s...” Her mind went blank. “It’s been a real experience.”

“So what’s it like to compete against a celebrity like Chris?” That smile kicked up a notch, glimmering and smarmy. “I bet you’re the star of your family now, huh? Small-town girl going up against Chef Chris?”

Her lips thinned, and she couldn’t tell if her plasticized smile had melted into a grimace. “Oh, you know. It’s just been so thrilling for all of us. What a joy it is to be in the vicinity of Chef Chris!” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of her voice. “Every day I ask him for a new autograph to add to my growing collection.”

Ryan smirked just as a second car pulled in next to his. Someone else got out, followed by Chris. She chewed on her lips as she watched him. His face lit up when he spotted her.

“Mara!” He jogged over to her. “I was about to call you. They asked you to be here too?”

“No, no.” She waved her hand dismissively toward Ryan. “I just ran into him on my way home.”

Chris squeezed her arms, making her forget, momentarily, how annoyed she’d been. “How did your appointment go?”

“Very well.”

“I want to hear about it. But I think I have to miss dinner.” He frowned. “Don’t hate me. These guys showed up on a whim today to talk business, and they want to talk over dinner. Can I come over after?”

She tried not to feel disappointed as two more slick businessman types joined Ryan on the sidewalk. She offered a small smile to Chris, trying to put her feelings aside. She understood—she just wasn’t so sure she’d be willing to receive him later, whenever that was.

“Text me when you’re done,” she said. He squeezed her wrist before walking away with the other men. She watched them go for a moment, feeling Ryan’s words reverberate through her.

Maybe he was right.

She was just the small-town girl in the shadow of a celebrity.

She needed to wise up before it was too late.

CHRIS

Chris hummed to himself early the next morning as he worked on the smaller details on his gingerbread skyscraper. He'd woken up in an excellent mood. Better than excellent, actually.

He'd woken up in a stellar mood. Because everything was on track, and he was about to get the show of his dreams.

The surprise arrival of the network executives always spelled either celebration or disaster, and in rare cases, both at the same time. But last night had been pure celebration. Based on the pilot episode of this competition and the rave response from test audiences to the holiday-themed competition, the execs were giving his globetrotting cooking show the green light.

Exactly what Chris had been gunning for all these years. And finally, it would be *his*.

He started whistling as he pumped out tiny green dots across one of the windows of the skyscraper. He'd hated canceling on Mara the night before, but he was sure they'd make up for it, and *soon*. It would have been sooner if he'd had his way, but when he texted about going over the night before, she claimed she was already in bed and not feeling well.

So tonight would be the night. It had to be. Because he was just shy of breaking out in hives from wanting to spend another night with her.

He paused to check his phone. Odd. It was almost nine thirty and Mara wasn't here yet. She was always early, just like him.

He glanced around the room. Mara's team was hard at work on whatever task list she'd left them with, but no Mara.

Chris dropped the pastry bag and rolled his neck in a slow circle. It was time for a break anyway. This sort of meticulous, detail-oriented stuff was his least favorite part of baking and decorating, and he'd much rather delegate it to someone else, but that wouldn't look good on camera if he wasn't equally involved in all the different tasks.

He washed his hands and then floated out of the multipurpose room, humming yet again. Damn, he couldn't wait to get started on the globetrotting culinary show. This had been his brainchild a full three years ago. Something he'd been working toward. Something that he was positive would become his dream job.

It wasn't that he disliked his cooking show. He'd been excited when he got the offer, and when he shared the news with his family, his cousins had both been quick to congratulate him. Even his Uncle Mitchell had told him he was proud of him. On his first day of filming, both Josh and Mitch came to cheer him on. Josh had jokingly called him Chef Chris in front of the director, and the moniker stuck. But the show and occasional cookbooks only went so far. He wanted something more. He was pining for the open road. For something *different* and *distant*. This competition had been the means to achieve that goal.

And now, the end was in sight.

An impassioned conversation drew his attention once he was in the hallway. One of the voices sounded like Mara's. He followed the sounds, and when he rounded the corner into the lobby, Mara and Dan were just stepping into the building and shrugging off their coats. Dan pressed a hand to the small of her back as they headed for the hallway while Mara chattered happily.

Jealousy spiked inside him while the remaining puzzle pieces clicked together. She showed up late. With Dan. After throwing Chris off her trail the night before.

Yeah. They were fucking.

Chris's forearms tensed as they approached. Mara's gaze swept up and landed on him, and she gasped, stopping mid-stride.

"Chris!" She laughed nervously.

"I better go," Dan said, cocking a finger toward Mara. "But let me know when you need anything, okay?" He trotted off the other way down the hall, leaving Mara and Chris standing there awkwardly in silence.

"I was actually just about to call you and make sure you were okay," Chris said, feeling foolish. He ran a thumb over his knuckles, all the happiness of his good news dissipating. Mara could still deliver the worst gut punch of them all. "You're late. I was worried."

"Yeah. I'm late. But everything is fine. You don't have to worry." She stepped closer, nervousness written all over her face. God, he'd caught her red handed. And the thought of Dan waking up in her house when Chris still hadn't even set foot inside it—that burned most of all. Who knew how long they'd been dating? He'd been right to doubt her all along.

He just hated having proof of it.

"It was weird. You're never late." He clenched and unclenched his jaw a few times, mulling over his next words. "Was there something that made you late?"

Mara's mouth parted, and her eyes slowly narrowed to slits. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, just admit it, Mara," he said in a low tone. "You and Dan have been fucking. I get it."

Mara's gasp sliced through the air, and she glanced around. She glared and pointed behind him down the hall. "Come on. Follow me. We're going to talk about this."

On the inside, he rolled his eyes. What else was there to talk about when she was still fucking her ex from high school? Honestly, her spending the weekend with him was probably a revenge tactic. Well, he'd fallen for it. And now here they were. In the last week of the competition and everything that

had been beautiful between them was now broken and shattered once more.

He followed her anyway. She stormed down the hall and into the lounge. It was empty. Once the door clicked shut, she turned to him with hands on her hips.

“I can’t believe you think that I spent the night with Dan.”

He scoffed. “Why wouldn’t I? Every time you show up here, it’s with him. Every time I look around, you’re talking to him. Either you guys have been banging since high school, or this guy is on the hunt.”

“He *is* on the hunt,” Mara spat. “But I turned him down the first day of filming. Not like you care to hear the *truth*.”

Chris narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

“And you know what? It doesn’t even matter.” Mara clutched at the sides of her face, looking up at the ceiling as she took a few steps away from him. “I can’t handle this anymore. You never trust me. It doesn’t matter what I tell you, you’re always gonna think Dan and I are hooking up.”

“Well, you haven’t given me many reasons to trust you,” Chris countered.

Mara’s eyes widened and she turned to him in slo-mo, the way haunted dolls do in horror movies. “Excuse me?”

“You act like you’re hiding state secrets when I ask about your appointment yesterday. And now this. I guarantee you weren’t going to tell me why you got here late.”

Mara’s gaze darkened. “I don’t know why it matters.”

“Because *you* matter! Christ, Mara. I’m trying to get to know you again. I thought we were, I don’t know, *doing something* here.” He laughed incredulously.

“Yeah. I thought we were too.” Mara’s lips thinned. “But you keep your own secrets, so it doesn’t even matter.”

“My own secrets?” Chris barked out a sharp laugh. “Like what?”

“Like the fact that you outed us to the network before we ever had a chance to talk about things?” She threw her hands up. “Like you thought I’d just be okay with that?”

Chris massaged his forehead, shaking his head. “I didn’t out us to the network. It was the director. He picked up on what he referred to as ‘tells’ between us, and evidently, one of the cameramen caught me watching you and put it together. I couldn’t deny it when he showed me the video.”

“So you wait for me to find out from the rumor mill of journalists?”

Chris ground his teeth. “I’d just found out that morning and I didn’t have a chance to warn you.” But before he could say more, she barreled on.

“I don’t believe you, and I can’t trust you. And that’s why I’m not telling you what’s going on—because I don’t trust you.”

“Are you serious right now? *You’re* the one acting untrustworthy.”

“Well, this is how trust works.” Mara crossed her arms, her lips curving downward. “You have to believe me when I tell you that you have nothing to worry about. Dan and I have nothing going on. Got it? Our first day of filming was the first time I’d seen him since graduation.”

Chris scoffed.

“But I guess you’re too busy being Chef Chris to hear anything I have to say,” she spat.

That comment stopped him in his tracks. He blinked a few times, his hands curling into fists. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Your career,” she said with a teenage-grade *duh* tone to her voice. “That’s all that you care about.”

“Of course my career is important to me,” he said slowly, as though explaining basic math. “I’ve been working toward my dream for a long time now. Or don’t you have any dreams to work toward?”

Her throat bobbed, and he knew he'd overstepped. He hurried to add, "I didn't mean that. I'm just saying, we both have important career goals that we're working on, so why am I wrong to go after mine?"

"I'm not saying you have to sacrifice anything," she said, her voice low and wavering. When she dragged her green gaze up to him, the rawness almost split him in two. "I just want you to believe me when I tell you that you have nothing to worry about."

Silence thudded through the room then. Chris raked a hand through his hair, a confusing cacophony of emotions and thoughts storming him. Mara had a point. But so did he. And if they were going to have any chance at a future, it needed to involve a lot more honesty from both of them. That much was certain.

He shifted, weighing his words before he spoke. "You should know something." He avoided her gaze, the words almost failing him. Until now, he'd been elated about the news and eager to get Mara back to his condo to celebrate. But something about this confrontation felt raw...felt *final*. It was waking him up to something he'd spent plenty of time looking past.

"I'm not supposed to say anything about this yet," he said. "It's very new. But the network gave me the globetrotting cooking show I've been wanting. I'll probably be leaving to start filming right after the New Year."

Her mouth parted, and the air in the room hollowed out, as if the space between them had become a vacuum. She didn't say anything for a moment.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'll be living and working abroad starting in January." His voice stuck to his throat, and he could barely meet her gaze. This was harder than he expected. Mostly because she looked more devastated than he'd bargained for.

She looked exactly how he felt on the inside. Which meant that in a very short time, something intense had developed

between them. It had felt right all along...until now.

“How long have you known?”

“I told you, it’s very new—”

“I mean how long have you known that your probable next step was going to be a move abroad?” she snapped.

Chris drew a cautious breath. “This has always been a long-term goal, but up until yesterday, it had only been a dream. The whole point of this show was to prove my brand to the network so that we could pull off something new at a higher level of success.”

She tightened her arms, her fingers digging into her skin and turning her knuckles white. “So if all went well and you won, you would be leaving no matter what.”

“Well...yes. That *was* the goal.”

“Okay. Good to know.” She clucked her tongue, studying the ground for a moment. “So this was never going to work out anyway.”

Chris watched her, wanting to say so many things: *But it still can work out. Don't you feel what's between us? Distance doesn't have to mean anything.* But nothing made the leap past his lips.

Because logic always won against hope. If he was having a hard time dealing with Dan now, what did he have to look forward to while he was halfway around the globe? If it wasn't Dan, then it would be somebody else. He could count on it. Mara was a beautiful woman who wouldn't sit idly by waiting for him to visit between shoots. She had her own life she needed to live.

He'd allowed himself to get swept away in the passion and the lust and the incredible sex. But it would come to an end no matter what, and his jealousy and newest show offer had only hastened it. In a way, he was doing himself a favor.

It was easier to stay away, to not let this develop into anything more.

Even though he craved it.

“I don’t know how it could have,” Chris said in a low voice, feeling a lot like he’d just lowered the hammer for the final blow. But the hammer wasn’t crashing down on her. It was coming down on him.

This was the dose of logic and reality that he needed.

“Believe me...I want it to,” Chris added, but his words were swallowed by the vast gulf that had cracked open between them. “But when I’m shooting my show, I have a rigid schedule to adhere to and now with the added travel, it’s... demanding, to say the least.”

Mara nodded, rolling her lips inward. “Right. Yeah. Of course.” She sniffed, and for a second he couldn’t tell if those were tears shimmering in her eyes. “Well, congratulations on the show. And uh, let’s just stop this game we’ve been playing and finish the competition, okay? It should be easy enough, since you were never looking for anything long term anyway.”

Mara flashed him a tight smile. One that reminded him of their first day on set.

She turned and rushed out of the lounge, leaving him in a thick, bitter silence. One that had him rethinking every second of their conversation.

One that had him ready to chase after her and undraw every damn line he’d drawn in the sand.

MARA

The next few days blurred into an indistinguishable stream of hyper-focus. Mara needed to win the competition, but almost more than that, she needed to keep her damn mind off Chris.

The competition ended on Friday with the judging, and every day she woke up with a lump in her throat. Remembering that Chris had chosen his career—and jealousy—over something sweet and real with her. Wondering how the competition would pan out. Dreading the possibility of having to back out of her new bakery space because she lost the competition.

But as the hours edged closer to Friday, doubts and desperation crowded her. How could she win anyway? Would the network even allow it? Now that her small-town gingerbread village was complete except for the finishing touches, and Chris's gingerbread New York skyline was towering and intimidating, it seemed obvious that the judges were going to pick him. While her village screamed Christmas with all the little details, Chris's was an architectural marvel rendered completely in food-grade materials. He'd even included King Kong holding on to the side of the Empire State Building. It was bold, not at all Christmassy, and utterly Chris.

Ryan's comment earlier that week only reinforced her suspicions. They all saw her as some sort of small-town underling. The butt of a joke that only they could hear from the fortieth floor in some sparkling Manhattan tower. This competition, which meant *everything* to Mara, was a

throwaway act for Chris so he could climb the ladder even higher.

Sometimes she thought too much about it and her insides started to hurt. Because beyond the competition, beyond the delicate past of her and Chris, she'd actually been excited about the prospect of *something* with that man. Jealousy and ladder climbing aside, in her most secret, private moments, she'd already started envisioning what their life together could look like. His enthusiastic support of her bakery, weekend trips to New York City.

None of those dreams had included a global cooking show. No, in her mind Chris had always been mere hours away by car. Not a full day via plane. And knowing him, the man wouldn't fly out to Dubai or Istanbul or Beijing with any intentions of returning to Glenford. He was the sort of man to come home for Christmas...or gingerbread competitions.

That was it.

Still, it was hard to convince the romantic girl inside her to calm down. Part of her still wanted to fight for it—for *them*. But she couldn't fight for them if Chris himself wasn't also willing. And the man had made it clear earlier that week. Pursuing something with her wasn't what he wanted to do.

He didn't want her. Didn't need her.

And if there was anything she deserved in life, it was a man who would fight for her.

Friday morning, Mara found it hard to keep her eyes off Chris. This felt like their last real chance to be around each other. After three full days of stony silence between them, it might also be her last chance to tell him anything.

But what did she want to say to him, other than *screw you*?

"All right, people," the director called out. "We'll break for lunch and film the judging process after we eat. Almost done, folks!"

There was something jovial in the air today, the same way high school classrooms got during the last week of school. This was it. The actual end of the competition. No more early

mornings in the Glenford Community Center. No more gingerbread mishaps and triumphs. No more furtive glances at Chris, wondering why she still craved the feel of his lips against her collarbone...

“Chris! This way!” The director barked for Chris to head out of the multipurpose room, and he complied instantly, shucking his apron. Mara resisted the urge to follow him, instead arranging her things with care in her workspace. This was going to be the last time she used the annoying red spatula with the blade that always fell off mid-stir. Hell, it was probably rigged that way by the network. They loved gobbling up those ridiculous moments of wits’-end frustration.

She couldn’t ignore her curiosity for long, though. Eventually she wandered out of the multipurpose room, and instead of heading for the lounge where their buffet lunch awaited, she followed the low undertones of the director’s voice.

She found them in the auditorium, just Chris, the director, and a man she didn’t recognize. Their voices carried in the expansive space, and she eavesdropped enough to overhear that it was a reporter from the *New York Times* here for an interview.

Mara lingered at the doorway. She shouldn’t stay to listen; she didn’t want to risk being spotted, or worse, being taken for curious about anything having to do with Chris’s fabulous life.

Even though she was curious. Far too curious for a woman who’d been recently “let go” from her lover. Sure, she’d been on board with the decision, but it also felt right to lick her wounds a little, too. She needed to mourn, and eavesdrop, and stew, and then finally let go of it all with a warrior cry and a well-timed wine night.

That was the process she figured might have the best chance of curing her, at least.

“This new show promises to be *really* big,” the reporter was saying. “I mean, mega. America has been hungry for something like this since Anthony Bourdain, may he rest in peace. Are you prepared to fill the shoes of a legend like him?”

Chris chuckled, crossing an ankle over his knee. “I’ll never be Anthony Bourdain. That’s for damn sure. But I’ll always be Chris Denton. That’s all I can really give to people, you know? I’m just...the man that I am. People have seen me for years on television. That’s what they’re going to continue to get. I see this new show being a little rougher around the edges, though. Anthony liked to spectate. I’m planning on getting right up in these kitchens next to the chefs and being their prep cook. Really, we should name the show *Global Prep Cook*. That’s what I’ll be doing. Assisting other chefs around the world.”

Mara listened in until her stomach started grumbling too loudly to ignore. She skulked off toward the lounge, anxiety streaking under her skin. The New Show Train was officially in motion. Chris would probably forget about this little competition as soon as they announced the winner. Probably forget all about *her*.

Dark thoughts tormented her through lunch as she glumly ate a turkey sandwich and Caesar salad. She needed to be prepared for the end of this show, because it would mean the definitive end to this back-and-forth with Chris. Soon, he’d not only move on, he’d move across the world. Mara would become a blip in his romantic past. And she’d be here, baking cookies and wondering what could have been.

She sniffed, cleaning up her lunch waste before straightening her back. Enough of this pity party. The spurned-lover shit ended today.

Once the lunch break was over, she marched into the multipurpose room, ready for the judging. Along the far wall, they’d assembled the judges’ table, where three celebrity judges would be assessing and considering their work. They needed three, despite outnumbering the contestants, to prevent a tie. Plus the judges’ comments and debates would feature heavily in the last episode, which was set to air the week before Christmas.

Mara paced her workspace, her team assembled along the countertops. The gingerbread village was done, and perfectly so. The church bell glistened with sparkles. The gingerbread rolling hills were topped with white frosting. The Christmas

tree in the center of the town—not gingerbread, but actually a tiny decorated plastic tree—made her smile every time she looked at it. She'd never created something so elaborate. This had taken a full two weeks to complete, and every bit of her and her team's hard work showed.

As did Chris's, of course. She swallowed hard as she glanced over at his monstrosity for what she told herself would be the last time that afternoon. Partly because she didn't want to be seen gawking...but also because every time she looked at his gingerbread masterpiece, she also saw *Chris himself*. And it was better to avoid seeing him until this could all be over and she'd go back to her regular life here in Glenford.

Single, baking, and masturbating alone in her bedroom.

She sighed loudly, checking the wall clock. Every second trudged past. This waiting was intolerable.

She tried to keep herself occupied, mostly by compulsively checking her email on her phone, and talking to her team about anything and everything. The judges eventually stepped into their places and spent a lot of time poring over each gingerbread creation. She wrung her hands, standing safely to the side, as they pointed out aspects of her village and murmured quietly among themselves.

When they called her up to join them, the cameras rolling, they had some additional questions for her. Why the village? Why not a gingerbread tree? Was the city layout a direct representation of Glenford? She answered the questions as best she could, being sure to play up the small-town love aspect, since it didn't hurt to hit the viewers in the feels at the end. She even pointed out where her favorite fictional bakery would be—not mentioning she planned it to be hers one day—as well as Lover's Lane and the schoolyard where she'd played as a child.

The judges nodded and smiled and moved on. She exhaled loudly once they'd moved on to Chris's station, shaking out her hands like she'd just given a TED talk. There was nothing else to do but wait.

She tried not to eavesdrop as the judges assessed Chris's creation, but it was hard to ignore the raucous laughter coming from all of them. Of course Chris was making them laugh. Working the crowd. Connecting with his *celebrity brethren*. She huffed, crossing her arms. It was probably better that they didn't end up working out, because she wasn't sure she'd be able to stand seeing him act like that all the time.

She made the mistake of glancing over at them, and she caught the tail end of Chris's sparkling gaze. Her stomach shrank. He might as well have come right over to her and punched her in the face with that searing look. It just served to remind her that no matter how much of a schmoozer he was, he excelled because he was genuinely good at what he did. Cooking. Networking. Keeping people engaged.

There was a reason he was at the top. Why he was one of the most well-known chefs in America. And dammit, his cookbooks were good. The recipes were original, and the stories he included about some of the different recipes were charming additions. And there was no way she would ever tell him she owned them all. In hardback.

Mara sipped water and checked her phone until the judges made their way back over to their table for the final testing. They also needed to taste the actual flavor of the gingerbread—to compare quality and subtleties. Both Chris and Mara were invited to face the judges' table as they went one by one tasting the cute little cookies she and Chris had prepared that morning, more of an afterthought than anything. Only she and Chris knew the shapes that they personally had made. It was a blind tasting for the judges, but knowing whose cookies elicited more satisfied hums and fluttering eyes felt like a silent victory for Mara.

The cameras recorded everything from all possible angles. After what seemed like an eternity of deliberation and plenty of redos of filming as the cameras sought the perfect shot of the judges, both she and Chris were called up to the red carpeted space facing the judges' table.

“Chris. Mara.” The lead judge, a perky singer named Tarina who was famous for her high-pitched vocals *and* a fascinating

array of reality TV endeavors, beckoned them to step closer to the table. She was flanked by the other two judges, a famous pastry chef and a former pro football player turned amateur chef. “You both have created stunning work. And inspecting both creations has been one of the most interesting moments of my year so far.”

All the judges sounded off about what they loved about each contestant’s work. Tarina loved Mara’s choice of the village, whereas both of the other judges cooed endlessly about the gingerbread skyscraper and its ingenuity while chuckling over King Kong. The pastry chef was enchanted with Mara’s use of accent flavors in her gingerbread recipe, offering so much praise that even Chris looked visibly uncomfortable. After a harrowing hour of conversations with the judges, filmed and re-filmed for maximum footage, they were finally down to the wire.

“And the winner is...” Tarina grinned at both of them, receiving an envelope from the director. She took her time opening it and then stared at the postcard with a blank face for what felt like *far too long* for Mara’s tastes.

Finally, her eyes snapped up, and she looked at each of them in turn before her perfect ruby lips curved into a smile.

“Chris Denton.”

CHRIS

The day ended with a triumphant flurry. Another press conference. More interviews. Camera crews everywhere. Chris had been given the greenlight to formally announce his upcoming globetrotting cooking show, which he mentioned with aplomb.

But once he realized Mara had scurried off and the fanfare began fizzling, the truth settled around him...less like snow flurries and more like a lead blanket.

Chris headed to his rental alone and sat quietly on the leather couch for almost an hour. This didn't feel right. None of it felt right. The only thing that did feel right was the new cooking show. But before that happened, something else needed to happen.

He just couldn't figure out what it was.

In lieu of dinner that evening, he decided to head to the bar. Really, he wanted to go to Mara's house, but what good would that do? One last intimate night before they never saw each other again? That was if she even let him inside the door. At this point, *he* wouldn't let him inside the door.

So getting drunk was probably the best way to handle things right now. A hangover seemed like the perfect way to end his time here in Glenford.

Chris chose the closest and smallest bar in town. He didn't want to deal with running into people he knew, much less any gawkers or overly drunk and friendly locals. He just wanted to wallow in peace.

Ironic that he'd be wallowing on the best day of his career. But it was better not to think too hard about that. At least not until the alcohol was flowing.

Rupp's was the closest hole-in-the-wall he could find. Inside, about seven men lined the bar, perched on stools. And the first person he noticed when he went inside was Dan.

The guy was impossible to avoid. And at this point, it seemed more like a curse than anything else. What else was left but to face it head on? Chris sighed and headed straight for Dan, who lifted his beer as a greeting.

"Fancy meeting you here," Chris muttered as he waved down the bartender.

"This was my dad's favorite watering hole," Dan said with a grimace.

"Did he pass?"

"Yeah. A few months ago."

Chris tapped a knuckle against the wooden bar, frowning down at the grain. "Sorry to hear that. Let's drink to him tonight."

The bartender arrived, and Chris ordered two whiskys, neat. When Dan lifted a brow, Chris said, "One for your dad, remember?"

Chris clinked his tumbler to Dan's beer bottle and downed the whole thing in one gulp. He slid the empty tumbler across the bar, grimacing.

"That's the shit," Chris said, then reached for the second tumbler and swirled the amber liquid around.

"I take it you're out celebrating," Dan said.

"Sure. Celebrating." He hefted with a humorless laugh. "Or whatever."

"You won the competition. What's not to celebrate?"

The fact that winning the competition brought about losing Mara. "The future looks bright. I'm as happy as any miserable

New Yorker could be, I guess. So at least there's that. Oh, this is off the record, by the way."

Dan cracked a grin. "Of course. Everything that happens in Rupp's is off the record. So what do you plan on doing with that prize money? Be honest."

"At the press conference, I announced that I was donating it to the Glenford Community Center in my parents' name."

Dan narrowed his eyes. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Why not?" Chris shrugged, taking a swig of his second whisky. "I don't need it."

Dan studied him for a moment, his expression growing unreadable. "You know, Mara had big plans for that money if she'd won."

The tops of Chris's shoulders went hot at the mention of Mara's name. "I'm sure she did. Not that she was willing to share that with me."

"My mom's a real estate agent. She told me that Mara put down a deposit on a little place not far from here. She's planning on opening a bakery. Or *was*, at least. I think she was going to use the prize money to fund it."

The news settled strangely inside Chris. He focused on his breaths for a few moments, trying to figure out the best response. "She never told me she was planning on opening a bakery."

"She didn't tell anyone, except my mom, but Mom has never been good at keeping secrets, and she told me. Mara swore me to secrecy, but I guess it's okay to mention it now since it probably won't happen."

Chris studied his glass for a moment, thinking back on all the questions she'd dodged about what she'd been doing and why she didn't want to tell him. He still didn't understand why it was such a big deal to share the information with him, of all people. But the more he thought about it, he could guess why she might not want to.

It took guts to start a new business venture. And in the shadow of someone like Chris?

“I wish she had mentioned it.” Heat prickled through his body, and suddenly the synapses were firing. Gears turning. Ideas sparking to life. His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he slipped it out to see the caller. His cousin Josh.

Chris tapped out a quick text message—“*Call you back in a minute*”—and decided to finish his drink and leave. Getting blind drunk was no longer the course for the rest of the evening.

“Well, she at least got lots of coverage from the show, so I think whatever she launches next will have a good shot at making it,” Dan went on.

“I know it will.” Chris took another sip from his glass. “She’s the hardest worker I know. She ran laps around me in that kitchen. And she makes killer gingerbread, apparently.”

“We all saw that,” Dan teased.

Chris laughed, even though part of him wanted to give him shit for the comment.

“So.” Dan spun the bottle in front of him, catching it easily and taking another sip. “I owe you an apology. I should have done it years ago, but I was an asshole teenager who didn’t like to lose, especially to American royalty.”

Chris frowned trying to make sense of what he was saying. “What now? Royalty?”

Dan shot him some side eye. “Dude, your family owns Denton Hotels. You probably went to birthday parties for Paris Hilton.”

Snorting at that comment, Chris told him, “Actually she’s quite a bit older than me. But her younger brothers used to throw some amazing house parties.”

Dan elbowed him. “That’s what I’m saying. I was so jealous, I couldn’t see straight. I know that’s not why Mara dated you, but you getting the prettiest girl in school on top of all your money and connections was like salt in the wound. It was my

fault you broke up with her. I wanted you to catch us kissing. That was a dick move.”

“It was.” What else could he say? His tension about Dan was melting away and puddling at his feet. In fact, finding him here tonight had been something of a blessing. For whatever reason, Dan was helping things click into place. “Water under the bridge, man. That was a long time ago. We all made our share of bad moves back in the day.”

“When do you head back to the city?” Dan asked.

“In the next couple days. I have meetings with the planning team for my new show. There’s still a lot we need to do to get everything set up before we shoot our first episode.”

“Sounds like a helluva commute, constantly flying out of the country.”

“Not as much as you might think. The plan is to stay in the field while we film the first eight episodes for the first season. I expect to be gone for at least six months.”

There it was again—that painful jolt in his gut. The same one that had accompanied his win in the gingerbread competition, all throughout the press conference, and the second he’d spotted Mara stride through the community center doors and out of his life.

“Sounds like the job of a lifetime.” Dan offered him a smile and raised his beer bottle in a toast. “Make us all proud back here in Glenford, okay? Tell the world about us. Make sure they know about our little slice of upstate heaven.”

“Promise. And here’s to your dad.” Chris clinked his tumbler to the bottle and downed the rest of his drink. He settled his tab with the bartender and then clamped his hand on Dan’s shoulder. “Good luck, Dan, and Merry Christmas.”

He let himself out into the chilly night of downtown Glenford. As soon as he began the trek back to his rental, he slid out his phone and called Josh. His cousin answered on the third ring.

“There you are! Congratulations! My extra-famous cousin is about to become even more famous!” His cousin whooped with laughter. In the background, Chris could hear cheering.

“You’re on speaker. Amelia, Mitch, and Jules are all here too. We wanted to call to help you celebrate the good news.” Chris had sent both Josh and Mitch a quick “I won” text, with strict instructions to share it with *nobody* outside their inner circle. The network would have killed him if the results leaked early; all the reporters had to swear to abide by the information embargo to be permitted into the final press conference.

Chris laughed, pressing the phone to his ear. “Oh, come on. I’m not *extra* famous. Just normal famous.”

“Once news breaks about this win, you’ll be in high demand. I can’t *wait* to see what you do with this cooking show. It’s going to be so great. Are you excited?” Josh had always been supportive of Chris’s aspirations and the first to try anything that Chris came up with in the kitchen. Having grown up, initially, as an only child, he’d had to adjust to living with other guys his age, but his cousins became a huge support to him after his parents died. They’d been as tight as siblings ever since.

“I’m *thrilled*,” Chris clarified, his steps scuffing lightly over the sidewalk as he strode toward his condo a few blocks away. And it was true. But he was also confused and a little bit anxious. He had a lot to figure out before he headed back home. “I just wonder if it’s a little...soon.”

“It’s never too soon to achieve your goals,” Josh quipped.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Chris heaved a sigh, unsure if he should say more. The situation with Mara was burning inside of him, but maybe now wasn’t the right time.

“Okay. Something’s going on. What is it?” Josh demanded.

Chris couldn’t help but smile. “You can always tell when I need your brotherly advice.”

“It’s my specialty. What’s going on?”

Chris took a restorative breath before launching into the situation with Mara. Her winning the local contest only to be paired against him. Their electric reunion, flour imprints and all. The epic weekend in his condo, followed by the recurring jealousy issues.

“Turns out,” Chris concluded, “She’s been keeping some business plans from me. She wants to open a bakery and was going to use the winnings to do it.”

“You could give that money to her in a heartbeat,” Mitch said.

The mere words caused his own heart to start beating faster. “I know. Exactly. I just wish she’d told me what was going on. I’d already announced that I was giving the prize money to the community center in my parents’ name. But she was so damn tight-lipped about it all.”

“Well, she wasn’t sure how it would pan out,” Josh chimed in. “Plus, you were competitors! It’s not like she was going to goad you into losing just for the sake of her future business.”

Josh’s words thudded through him, and that’s when he realized his cousin was sort of right. If he’d known that Mara was planning on using that money to invest in the startup of her dreams...he might have considered approaching the network executives to ensure that he lost and Mara won.

“We had an awful falling out,” Chris said, stuffing his free hand into the pocket of his coat. “Things had been going *really* well, and then...I got the new show. And I realized that we won’t be able to make it work.”

Josh laughed. “Oh, you can’t?”

“Not anymore. She wants nothing to do with me.”

Mitch made some sort of garbled noise that was partly a laugh. “Yeah, been there, done that. It’s not as hopeless as you think, I promise.”

“How would you know?” The emptiness pinged through him again, this time stronger than it had been over the past few days. Winning the competition had made it shriek inside him. He was tired of being successful everywhere but in love. He wanted someone to come home to. He wanted *Mara*.

“Because we’re all Denton men,” Mitch responded simply. “We’re all hard-headed until the right woman comes along.”

Chris mulled over the words for a moment, and then he broke into laughter.

“It’s true,” Mitch went on. “My priorities changed completely once I fell for Jules. Sometimes you have to take big risks if you want to chase the things that matter most.”

The cousins chatted a while longer, and by the time they hung up, Chris had reached his condo. Pacing, pensive and alone.

His cousins had given him plenty to think about.

Now he just had to figure out what to do from here.

MARA

Mara called Julia's office early the next morning to cancel her deposit on the space. Dan's mother was understandably upset at the decision, but she honored Mara's wishes even though she encouraged her to take some more time to think about it.

"And this isn't because I want the commission from this," Julia said before they hung up. "I want to see you go after your dreams."

"I will," Mara promised, her throat tightening. "I just have to adjust my timeline. That's all."

She repeated those words to herself the entire rest of the morning as she took a shower, headed for the community center, and met up with her sister Kaitlyn to pack up her gingerbread village. She'd promised the piece of art to a local charity for their Christmas party. She and Kaitlyn worked at sectioning the village as quickly and carefully as possible.

"So what will happen with Chris's giant dickscraper?" Kaitlyn asked with a snort. Her sister knew the gist of what had gone down between them.

"Who knows? He'll probably throw it in the trash." Mara felt her frown deepen. On its way to becoming permanent.

"Would he waste something like that?"

Mara sighed. "Probably. I don't know. I don't know anything anymore." The confusion and despair had layered on so thickly that it formed a crust around her. She wanted Chris and

at the same time she was glad to be rid of him. But even those feelings were tempered with more longing. She felt lost inside her own head.

Life with him seemed foreign and impossible, but life without him seemed off too.

“I probably should have told him that I was gunning for the bakery,” Mara murmured a long while after their conversation had died down. Kaitlyn sent her a sharp look.

“You think that would have solved everything?”

“It wouldn’t have hurt,” Mara grumbled. She set the church on top of parchment paper inside its own box.

“It wouldn’t have solved his trust issues though,” Kaitlyn pointed out, shaking her head. “That man was dead set on suspecting you of *something*. It probably would have continued to be a problem.”

Mara sighed and tried to latch onto that as the final word in the matter. But it was hard. Because every time she came across a different part of her village that Chris had helped set up or decorate, her mind flashed back to him. Back to those tender, real parts that she’d seen during their time together. The parts that she’d fallen for, once upon a time. The parts that she’d fallen for again, so quickly. So easily.

The real Chris was still in there, and she’d found him.

But the real Chris doesn’t want to hear you out. Not that she’d given him much of a reason. She had been secretive and mistrustful of his motives, and she’d assumed the worst about him before he’d arrived back in Glenford.

They were both to blame. Not that there was anything she could do about it. He was off to travel the globe and Mara would remain here. Alone. And that was that.

Kaitlyn and Mara transported the gingerbread village to the local charity with care. Once it was safely deposited and setup in its new home, Kaitlyn gave her sister a hug before darting off to a dinner date as she announced that this was their third date. Mara watched her go, smiling wistfully.

Thinking of Chris yet again.

The only option was to get busy. In the wake of her reality show loss, *busy* meant diving headfirst into her catering business. She got to work getting her receipts in order for the end of the year, spent some time communicating with customers about upcoming events, even fielded a few new client calls now that her name had appeared in local papers and online. People were interested in what she had to offer. Losing to Chris wasn't all bad. Maybe her dream of opening a bakery wouldn't have to be pushed too far back.

Chris was a distant memory. Even though he crossed her mind no less than thirty times each day as she wondered where he was, whether he was halfway to Dubai, and whether he still thought of her even half as often as she thought of him.

When a knock sounded on her front door Wednesday afternoon, she jolted from her desk in the front room. She approached the door hesitantly. She wasn't expecting anyone, that was for sure. She peered through the peephole, her mouth parting at the sight beyond.

Mara clamped a hand over her mouth.

Chris stood on the other side of her door. Tall and handsome as ever, his dark hair expertly styled. Those blue eyes focused right on the peephole, as though he could sense her looking through.

She brought a shaky hand to the doorknob and slowly cracked the door open. She peered through the slit.

“Can I help you?”

He held up his hands, showing off the wreath he carried. It was an enormous green monstrosity, decked with holly and a huge golden bow. It was the type of Christmas gaudy that she *loved*. “Hey. I noticed you don't have a wreath.”

She blinked a few times, letting his odd intro settle into her. Then suddenly, a laugh burst out of her.

“Uh, you're right.” She opened the door a few more inches, tucking some hair behind her ear. She was definitely in work-from-home mode, which meant leggings and an oversized shirt

with no bra. Not at all like the glossy New Yorker before her. “Is that why you came over?”

He shrugged, eyeing her door. “Want me to hang it?”

“Sure.” There was already a hook on the door, one of the pre-Christmas preparations she’d managed to get done, without any of the decorations that should follow. Chris delicately lined up the hook with the metallic coil behind the wreath, his tongue poking out as he arranged it just so.

“There.” He offered a small smile, his gaze shifting to her. “Now you have a wreath.”

She rolled her lips inward, feeling awkwardness blossom between them. This was...strange. But it wasn’t unwelcome. “I haven’t gotten to the decorations yet. I keep meaning to, but I’ve been so busy catching up...”

“Is your tree up?” Chris asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Can I see it?”

She eyed him a moment, unsure of his angle. Coming to her house for a pre-Christmas decoration inspection? It seemed like a plot to get inside her house, and if it was, well...she was a willing victim. “Sure.”

She stepped aside, welcoming him in. His leather shoes clicked on the wood floor of her foyer as he stepped inside, looking around. This was the first time he’d been to her house...and come to think of it, she wasn’t even sure how he knew where she lived.

“How’d you get my address?” she asked quietly.

“Your mom.”

“Hm.” Mara nodded as she headed for the tree in her living room. When she turned to look back at him, his gaze sizzled over her. There was so much unspoken between them. So much yet they had to say.

“I thought you would have headed back to New York by now,” she said, her voice sticking to her throat. Damn, it was hard to

hang on to her hurt when he was facing her. When he was mere feet away after a painful five days apart.

“There’s been a change of plans.” His gaze dropped for a moment as he ran his thumb over his knuckles. “Mara, I’m sorry.”

She tried to force a smile and brush it off, but her cheeks only twitched. “For what?”

“For everything?” He laughed softly, but it faded quickly. “For not trusting you, mainly. For not fighting for you.” His jaw flexed as he studied her, something clouding his eyes. He reached into his pocket suddenly, and when he brought his hand out, he had a slip of paper there.

“Take this,” he said.

Mara blinked, stepping forward to examine what he was offering her. A check. She took it from his fingers and read it over. It was addressed to her, from Chris’s own bank account in New York. The sum was for two hundred fifty thousand dollars. What? She looked again and her hand shook.

“What is this?” she asked slowly.

“It’s my prize money.” He stuffed his hands back into his pockets.

“Your prize money?”

“Well, not exactly. I’d already agreed to donate my prize money to the community center along with another donation from Denton Hotels. So, I don’t know. Consider it an investment in your future.” He pulled his hands out of his pockets and then put them immediately back.

“My future?” Why was she repeating what he was saying?

“I ran into Dan and he told me what you intended to do with the money, and honestly, I want to see you achieve those dreams. Your dreams are important. Besides, I can’t think of a better way to thank my hometown than by investing in a business as amazing as yours will be. And since I work in the biz, I know how crazy startup costs can be. I don’t want you to stress over it or feel like you have to settle.”

Mara's bottom lip trembled as she stared at the check. Her entire body had gone hot, and all she could think of was calling Julia to reverse her decision from earlier that week.

"Are you...serious?" she whispered.

Chris nodded. "Way serious."

A laugh rocketed out of her, and she wiped away a tear that had spilled. "You don't need this for...Dubai, or whatever?"

Chris shook his head. "Definitely not. And if for some reason it's not enough, please let me know. I'd happily write you another check for whatever amount you need. As to Dubai. That won't be happening for a while. Not until I give *them* the greenlight."

She sniffed, wiping away another tear. "I don't understand."

"I'm not leaving right away. I met with the executives again to hammer out a new plan. One that involves me heading abroad when I'm ready." His gaze darted away from her briefly. "It's going to be on my terms. And my terms for this show include giving me all the time I need to beg for your forgiveness."

More tears bubbled up, and soon she was wiping them away from both cheeks. "I—I don't...forgiveness?" She was doing it again.

Chris stepped closer, a smile teasing at his lips. She caught a whiff of his scent and it nearly sent her to her knees. This man was a magnet for her. He always would be. And God help her, she didn't want to ever be away from him.

"I know I've got some apologizing to do. Some kisses to dole out." He ran his fingertips up her arm, which sent a shiver down her spine. "A *lot* of hot chocolate to make."

She laughed through the tears. "A metric ton, at least."

MARA

“A metric ton. Got it. But how about I start with that apology.” He took her hands in his and gave them a light squeeze. “So where should I start? The most recent or the first?”

This was happening! “Let’s go back to the beginning so we can put it behind us.”

“High school, then. I was an asshole to you. You’re right. I didn’t give you a chance to explain when I saw you with Dan and that was wrong. You didn’t deserve that.”

Mara shook her head to clear the tears before shifting to wipe her eyes with her shoulders because she didn’t want to let go of Chris’s hands. “And I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have danced with Dan. I don’t know. I think part of me was flattered that you were both interested in me even though I only wanted you. I know that’s a dumb excuse, but I was sixteen, dammit.” She tried to pull her hands out of his but he only tightened his hold.

Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. “I know you were sixteen. I was seventeen. And I talked to Dan. He told me what happened. That he’d timed it so I would see because he knew I’d get mad. Should I keep going?”

Mara started to nod but stopped. “Wait. First. About me dating Dan.” She dropped her head and stared at the floor.

“Yes?”

“It was totally to get back at you for breaking up with me. It was all so sudden. One minute, we’re dating and the next, you won’t even look at me. Dan asked me out again and I said, yes. Then your parents died and I didn’t want to make things worse by telling you. Then your house sold and you moved to the City and I never saw you again. In person that is.” Mara sucked her lip in, worrying at it with her teeth.

Chris’s body began to shake and she froze. Looking up at him, she was relieved to see that he was laughing. Wait. Why was he laughing? “Is there something you want to share?” She tried to frown but his amusement was contagious and she found her heart lightening.

“I forgive you for all of that.” He kissed both her hands and Mara’s heart began to pound.

“And I forgive you for being a jerk to me in high school and not listening to what I had to say.” He kissed her hands again, mouthing thank you, and Mara had to lock her knees because she had the sudden suspicion that she might collapse.

Chris began to tick things off as he said, “And I’m sorry that I allowed my erroneous thoughts about our past shape my opinion of you in the present. I should have trusted you. I should have been upfront with you with what my intentions were and what my plans were. I should not have been an asshole to you, again. I should have fucked you more.”

Mara grinned at that. “I forgive you for being a jerk to me but I don’t think I can forgive you just yet for not fucking me enough. I think you’re going to have to offer some sort of restitution and we really should take care of that *right now*.”

Chris’s face grew serious and I worried that I’d gone too far and before I could apologize, again, he dropped his shoulder and scooped me up in a fireman’s carry. Mara shrieked and smacked him on his butt. “Dammit, Chris. Put. Me. Down.”

His voice remained serious as he demanded, “Bedroom!”

“Down the hall on the left.” As he walked, she reached down and slid her hand under his waistband to grab his butt cheek.

He faltered and practically growled at her, “That’s enough, you’ll get yours soon enough.”

He tossed her down on the bed and Mara laughed as she bounced toward the center. “I feel like I’m dreaming. Maybe you need to pinch me,” she confessed.

Chris put one knee on the bed and braced his arms on either side of her. Leaning forward, he said, “I’d rather kiss you,” and he did just that. Gentle and cautious at first, she opened to him, inviting him to do more and he intensified the kiss making her moan. Pulling back, he asked her, “Still feel like a dream?”

Mara frowned, biting her lip to keep from smiling. “Maybe a little. I think you should kiss me again, just to be sure.”

“Good plan.” He shifted, so he could stretch out on his side and tugged her down, so she was lying next to him. Leaning up on one elbow, he began kissing her face. Starting on her forehead and slowly working his way over her face. Each kiss felt like a zap to her heart and she felt all of the anger and angst start to break apart and float away. When he finally got to her lips, she was reaching for him, unable to keep her hands away. They kissed for what felt like hours and she felt herself falling deeper in love with him.

They paused, both of them taking long, deep breaths and she asked him, “Why is it always so damn good with you? The sex is phenomenal, but these kisses...they’re like biting into the perfect brownie only to find out the baker added a secret ingredient and suddenly, it’s that much better. That must sound weird.”

Chris kissed her nose, smiling at her. “Not at all. So what ingredient am I? Are we talking espresso?” He kissed down the side of face to her neck. “Creamy and sweet with a slight bite or more like chile, bold and complex?” Mara laughed at that and then gasped when he bit down on her neck, sucking slightly before releasing her.

“I...both?” She moaned and slung her leg over his hip, pulling him closer. “Definitely sweet, providing a great balance, but also intense with a deep, full flavor.”

He hummed against her neck, his hand already under her shirt and cupping her breast. He rubbed her nipple with his thumb, making Mara moan again. “I like the sound of that, but we left out the most important ingredient.”

Mara tugged at his shirt, sliding her hand under it to stroke across his abs and up to his chest. Her fingers danced across his nipples enjoying his answering shudder. “We did? What? Cinnamon? Orange blossom?”

“Love.”

Her hand stilled and she stared at his chest, unable to look up. “Love?”

“Mmm hmm. The most important ingredient in any recipe is love.” He lifted her shirt and was kissing his way up her stomach. When he reached her breasts, he laved her nipples.

Mara tangled her fingers in his hair encouraging him to keep going while trying to keep track of what he was saying. “I’m not so sure a professional chef infuses everything they make with love.”

Chris stilled. Lifting his head, he looked at her and Mara was expecting amusement or maybe even lust. Not... *Oh!* She cupped the side of his face and he turned his head to kiss her palm. *Oh! Oh my. Did he? Was he?* Her hand trembled and he reached up to press it against his cheek.

“Well, if you’ll let me, this professional chef fully intends to infuse absolutely everything that has to do with you with love.”

Her tears from earlier were back and Mara didn’t know what to say. Did he mean what she thought he did? She choked back a sob. “Chris...I—”

He squeezed her hand in his before placing her palm over his heart. “You don’t have to say anything, not if you aren’t ready. But when you are, know that my heart beats for you. I was madly in love with you when we were teens and seeing you again made me realize that I’d never stopped. I love you, Mara Lancaster, and I always will.”

Chris rolled to his back, pulling her into his arms. She melted against him, her body trembling. He stroked her back in long soothing motions.

“Mara, I want to see your dreams come true. And if you’ll have me, I want to be there every step of the way.”

Mara wrapped herself around him, burying her face in his chest as she cried. Dammit, she hadn’t been prepared for this level of emotion today. But this was the only thing that made sense. Chris in her life, at her side, loving her as much as she loved him.

They’d spent too much time apart. Now they needed to spend every second together going forward.

“I love you too. Pretty sure I never stopped either. So, yes,” she blubbered, wrapping her arms around his torso. She relished the heat and solidity of him beneath her. She’d never grow tired of that feeling...never take it for granted. “For God’s sake, it’s about time!”

Chris laughed, squeezing her into a tight hug before rolling so she was lying beneath him. He pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that stopped time.

Because finally, they were right where they were meant to be.

Together.

EPILOGUE

One year later

Mara rushed around Mitch and Jules's penthouse above Denton's flagship hotel in New York City. Tonight was the big Denton family dinner, and she'd offered to create the dessert display. Thanks to Chris's generosity and the popularity of last year's gingerbread house competition, Sweet and Savory Treats was a rousing success from the day they opened and they were discussing possibly expanding to include mailorder to accommodate fans who lived out of state.

And boy, were there a lot of fans; particularly thanks to her sister. Kaitlyn was responsible for the bakery's social media and they'd developed a huge following thanks to her sister's TikTok videos and Instagram pics. Of course it helped that her sister often included pics of a shirtless Chris, which fans of Chef Chris ate up. Mara didn't mind. Chris belonged to her and she belonged to him and she loved showing him off when she could. He was hot when he was in the kitchen wearing an apron, but he was scorching when he was walking around half-naked.

She inhaled deeply taking in the calming scents blending in the kitchen. Chocolate mixed with cinnamon and chiles. The citrusy scent of orange blossom mixed with vanilla. Then there was the fresh strawberries embellished with basil and balsamic vinegar. Her treats were almost ready, but she felt a level of stress she hadn't even felt during the gingerbread competition.

This was somehow more intimate. More important. Even after a year as Chris's girlfriend, she still felt like the new girl in the Denton clan. She got along amazingly well with everyone, but she wanted to impress them as much as possible. Make them see that she deserved a spot in the family just as much as everyone else.

Because the Dentons had some pretty huge shoes to fill.

"Good lord, *what* is baking in here?" Amelia swept into the kitchen, sniffing exaggeratedly. "Everything smells amazing, I think I want to skip dinner and eat nothing but dessert."

"I'm guilty of doing that all the time," she said with a chuckle. "I can't wait for everyone to try these. The brownies and the orange and vanilla meringue tarts sell out faster than we can make them at the bakery. But the shortcake parfaits with strawberry, basil and balsamic vinegar are new and I'm anxious to see what everyone thinks."

"We've been trying to make it to Glenford," Amelia said, just as Josh breezed into the kitchen. "But it's been so hard with how busy we've both been with work. Denton Hotels keeps expanding, and I feel like I'm constantly on the move at Grayson International."

Josh paused at Amelia to kiss her cheek, then grinned at Mara. "Everything smells amazing," he confirmed.

"I've already told her," Amelia said.

"What the *hell* is that smell?" Mitch's voice boomed through the penthouse, and he appeared a moment later, two-year-old Noelle giggling as he carried her over his shoulder. Jules trailed behind, their newborn in her arms.

"Oh, Mara, everything smells amazing. I can't wait to try them to see which ones we'll be adding to the menu in the hotels," Jules said with a smile. They all gathered around the kitchen island where she'd taken out her desserts to let them cool. She still needed to assemble the parfaits, but the bite-size brownies and meringues were finished. The Christmas cut-out cookies, using her gingerbread recipe, were already on a rack to cool. She'd made a variety of snowflakes, snowmen, and Christmas

trees to commemorate her first Christmas with the Denton family.

But hopefully not the last.

“Where’s Chris?” Josh asked, checking his watch.

“He said he was checking on the food downstairs,” Mara said, wiping her hands on a towel. She didn’t want to mess up her gray scoop-neck dress, which would highlight *any* frosting mishap should that occur.

“That’s weird,” Mitch said. “He knows the food is going to be delivered here when its ready.”

Mara caught Jules slapping his arm, though it seemed furtive, like it was supposed to be a secret message between them. She watched as Mitch sent her a quizzical look.

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” Josh said pointedly, looking at his brother.

As if on cue, the front door to the penthouse opened, and Chris came in a moment later. He was rolling a food cart with him, eyes shining.

“Ahh, here he is!” Mitch went to help him roll the cart into the kitchen, where they all got to work bringing out the various trays of food. “I know you’re not in the city much anymore,” Mitch went on, “but we do have employees who can do this work *for you*.”

Chris smiled mysteriously. It seemed his gaze hadn’t left Mara since he’d come into the kitchen. “I know. I wanted to check on things since I was overseeing the dinner prep.”

“Ah, right,” Josh said. “You’re a chef, aren’t you.”

Chris playfully shoved Josh’s shoulder. “Real funny. Actually, I only play one on TV.”

“And across the globe,” Amelia added.

Chris’s grin widened. His globetrotting cooking show had turned into something of a cult hit. Turned out that people really were hungry for more Bourdain-like material. And Chris

struck the balance perfectly between charming and soul-searching and informative.

Better yet, the network agreed to Chris's demands to film in blocks, instead of everything all at once. So what would have been a six-months-straight absence was only two months at a time. And often, Mara was able to fly out to meet him somewhere on the road, now that she had a great staff at home. In fact, Mara had been included in a couple of the episodes and the network was hinting that they'd like to see more.

It was a life beyond her wildest dreams. The type of reality she couldn't have even imagined coming true a mere year ago.

But now, they were living their most successful and happiest versions of themselves. Together. And Mara couldn't get enough of it.

"What's this?" Jules asked, rocking the newest addition to their family, Clara, as she jerked her chin toward an unopened box, which looked like a Chinese take-out container.

"Ah. This was a special treat." Chris covered it protectively, his gaze sliding to Mara. "I want you to see what's in it first."

Mara received the box from him. She unfolded the flaps and peered inside, finding it strangely devoid of the Chinese noodles she'd expected.

Instead, there was a small, slate-gray box. She picked it up out of the container, staring quizzically at it.

In front of her, Chris sank to one knee.

When she put two and two together, she gasped. And that's when she noticed his cousins and their families gathered behind them, wearing big grins.

"Mara, babe," he began, and those words alone prompted tears to start welling up in her eyes.

"Oh my God." She sniffed, and then popped open the box. Inside, an enormous rock glittered on a gold band. "Holy shit, this thing is huge!"

Chris beamed at her, reaching for her hand. His blue eyes were crystalline and imploring. "Babe. Ever since I pushed you

away in high school, I felt like I was missing something. Like I'd ruined something not just important, but *necessary*."

Tears were flowing now, ruining the makeup she'd spent nearly an hour on for tonight's dinner. But it didn't matter. Because *this* mattered more.

"Then when we found each other again?" His voice gave out, and he paused, as if swallowing the same knot of emotion that was in her throat. "We both knew. Right away. Our connection had never gone anywhere. And when I pushed you away the second time...well, you can only be an idiot so many times before you lose the love of your life, right? I don't want to lose you again. Not now, not ever. And I want to make sure that I can hold onto you forever. Please, Mara. Will you make me the happiest man out there and consent to become my wife?"

More tears spilled over and she collapsed downward, slinging her arms around his neck. She landed on his knee, finding his lips with her own.

Needy, hungry kisses emerged. The type of kisses that told him exactly what her answer was. What the answer would always be.

They kissed a few times before Mara finally pulled away, wiping her eyes.

"So is that a yes?" Josh asked.

A laugh rocketed out of her, and she nodded, getting lost in Chris's gaze once more. "Yes! Of course I'll be your wife!"

The group cheered while Chris squeezed her into a tight hug. They kissed more, indecently, while the family cheered and laughed and clapped. At one point, a champagne bottle opened. And then another. When she and Chris finally came to their feet, a whole row of champagne glasses awaited. Chris scooped one up, holding it in the air while he pulled Mara into his side.

"To the newest future Mrs. Denton!"

Jules and Amelia whooped, raising their glasses.

Mara beamed at the warm faces in the kitchen. She'd never felt so full. So loved. So absolutely at peace with everyone and everything in her life.

So this was what true love could do to a person.

She pushed up onto her tiptoes and captured Chris's lips in yet another kiss.

It healed the past and opened up their future, and Mara couldn't wait to see what came next.

**END OF THE BILLIONAIRE'S
SECOND CHANCE CHRISTMAS**

CHRISTMAS WITH THE DENTON BILLIONAIRES BOOK THREE

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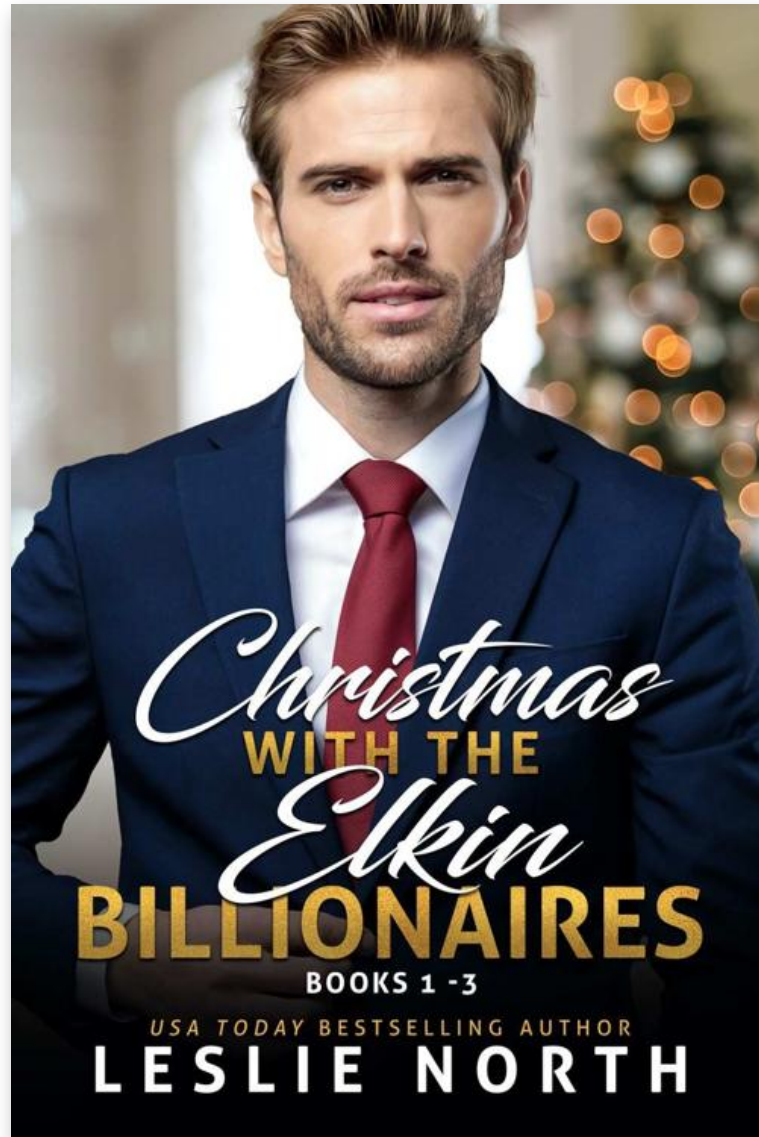
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EXCERPT

Chapter 1 – Chase

American Alpine skier and two-time Olympic medalist, Chase (aka Ace) Elkin, was injured on the giant slalom course at the Beijing Olympics when he violently crashed one gate from the finish, fracturing his left femur vertically and fracturing both his patella and tibia. One of the youngest Alpine skiers to ever compete in the Olympics, Ace qualified for the American team at seventeen and went on to compete on the Olympic team, consistently earning medals throughout his career....

“Well, that’s enough of that,” Chase mumbled into his pillow. He wished the radio in his head had an off switch so he could silence the replay of every news report about his accident. They were always loudest in the mornings. Sighing, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, wondering if he had time to take a shower. His phone beeped with an incoming text

and he didn't have to look at it to know it was from his brother Jonas reminding him he had a morning appointment and to get his ass out of bed.

Unable to stand the mystery, he checked when his phone beeped again. "Yep. Jonas." Not bothering to reply, he rolled to his side and sat up, wincing at the stiffness in his leg. More than a year after his career-ending injury, he knew it would take time for the muscles to loosen up and the stiffness to subside and a hot shower would definitely help. The decision made, he headed for the bathroom.

He spent too long in the shower pretending he wasn't back at Elk Lodge, and as he was getting dressed, he heard his phone ring with Jonas's ringtone. He tapped the answer button. "Dammit! I haven't forgotten." He didn't bother to listen to anything his brother might have said before disconnecting the call and tossing the phone on his bed. He dressed quickly hoping there would be coffee in the lobby so he could grab a cup before he headed upstairs.

Pushing through the double doors into the lobby, he waved to Helen and Aimee, who were busy checking people in, and headed over to the hot drinks station that had been a staple in the lobby since his grandparents first opened the lodge more than fifty years ago. A woman was shepherding two kids as they eagerly helped themselves to what looked like more whipped cream than hot chocolate while she attempted to retrieve the can before it was emptied.

"Joanie, you shouldn't have that much sugar before your lesson. Sammy, don't fling that at your sister. We do not throw food. Wait! No-no-no." The woman's panicked voice reached him just as Sammy or Joanie whirled around and upended the contents of their cup all down the front of his sweater. Everyone seemed to gasp and the woman lifted her head to make eye contact, an apology already tumbling out of her mouth. "Oh no! I am so sorry." She grabbed a wad of napkins off the table and began to frantically press them against his sweater while continuing to spew out apologies and telling the kids to apologize as well.

It was way too early for this. Stopping the woman, he gently took the napkins from her and tossed them in the trash. She seemed downright distraught over what had happened, since she frantically continued to fuss. Chase finally had enough.

“Hey. It’s fine. No harm, right? Looks like you have your hands full with your children, so why don’t I just get out of your way.”

“Oh. Oh! These aren’t mine. They’re my students. I didn’t birth them or anything. Not that that’s a bad thing.”

Her face turned a pleasing shade of pink and under different circumstances, he would have loved to stick around to tease her and possibly see what else might happen, but as it was, his phone was beeping again. Jonas. It had to be him.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your non-birthed children.” Chase’s phone beeped and he looked at the drink station, the whole area now covered in hot chocolate and whatever else was in those cups and sighed.

He diverted his path to swing by the reception desk, pulling his sweater off over his head as he walked.

“I’m late for a meeting with Jonas, or I wouldn’t do this,” he said to Aimee. “Could you send this out to be cleaned for me?”

“No problem, Chase.” She turned and poured him a cup of coffee from the receptionists’ personal coffee maker. “Still take it light?”

“Yes, ma’am, and thank you.” Smiling, he took a long sip and smacked his lips. Aimee patted him on the arm, and he resumed his walk to the bank of elevators. When the elevator car chimed, he stepped on and pressed and held the DOOR OPEN button as he watched the woman finally manage to wrangle the kids and herd them toward the side exit that would take them to the ski rentals. She paused at the exit and turned, catching his eye, and the smile she directed his way lit up her features. His finger fumbled on the elevator button, and the doors closed before he could react fast enough to stop it.

Chapter 2 – Tana

Tana Birch jumped as the door closed right in front of her. She'd been so intent on staring at the hottie Sammy had bumped into that she hadn't realized how close to the door she was standing until it almost smacked her in the face.

He looked familiar but she couldn't place him. In the short time she'd worked here, she'd run into a few celebs, so maybe that was why.

"Give it to me! Miss Tana! Sammy took my hot chocolate!"

Whirling around, Tana reached for the cup that Sammy had stolen from Joanie but he bounced out of the way and finished off the drink with a grin. Frowning, Tana held her hand out for the cup, but the little boy merely dropped it on the ground and continued to torment his younger sister, which resulted in Joanie letting out a high-pitched scream that could easily cause an avalanche. Time to stop this right now.

She crossed her arms and tilted her hip up as she stared at both kids without saying anything. These two had been an absolute thorn in her side from the moment they arrived here, often not listening and talking while she was attempting to teach them how to ski. Their parents had dropped the kids off with her early and then vanished inside, probably to enjoy a quiet breakfast without the squabbling pair.

She couldn't blame them, but at the same time, she was a ski instructor and not a babysitter. With a huff, she sat down on the bench and began to loosen up the buckles on her boots. Finishing the right boot, she shifted to the left but before she could finish, two sets of feet appeared in her vision.

"Miss Tana?" Sammy asked. "I thought we were getting lessons today."

With her head down, Tana smiled before pasting on a more serious expression. Lifting her head, she frowned at them. "Well, we were, but it seems that you'd much prefer to tease your sister than ski today, so I decided to take my boots off. Was I wrong?" She stared at the older boy, who couldn't have been more than eight, as he shuffled uncomfortably in front of her.

“Nooooo.” His answer came out more of a whine.

Joanie, who was five, crossed her arms and frowned at her brother. “Momma’s gonna be mad at you if Miss Tana doesn’t teach us. She doesn’t want us skiing without lessons. You know what happened last time.”

Well, this was info she needed. “Um, what happened last time?”

“Sammy tried to do it on his own and ended up falling down and breaking his arm before we got to go on the bunny slope. Dadda had to take him to the doctor and then we had to go home because he had a cast that covered his whole arm. He promised he’d behave this year.” She frowned at her brother who was now looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“Oh Sammy. That’s dangerous, as you found out.” Tana sat back and put on her best thoughtful expression. “How about this...” She paused, waiting to make sure she had their full attention. “How about you pick up that cup you tossed on the ground and put it in the trash over there where it belongs. Then, once the others arrive, I’ll teach all of you how to ski down the bunny slope. Deal?”

Joanie was already nodding her head and making small noises to get her brother to agree. Tana was worried that they’d end up in a standoff and he’d refuse. He surprised her when he picked up the cup and tossed it in the trashcan before agreeing to the deal.

“Good choice, Sammy.” As Tana tightened the buckles on her boots, she could hear the excited chatter of her other students headed their way. “Now, come on, let’s go meet the others and get our skis on.”



Tana stood tall on her skis at the top of the bunny slope, her students now all arrayed around her in a ragged semicircle. The clear, sunny morning made everything look like an ad in an adventure magazine. The bunny slope might not be an

adventure to *her*, but it sure was for the kids in the beginner group for the five- to eight-year-olds.

“Okay,” she called, watching five pairs of eyes behind goggles in a rainbow of colors snap up to meet hers. Green. Red. Pink. Blue. Purple. It was a sight to see against the white snow. “Let’s remember to do big curves on the way down,” she said, demonstrating by moving her hips side to side. “If you want to slow down, what do you do?”

“Make a pizza!” The children shouted out the answer with a wild enthusiasm that made her heart beat faster. A few of them pointed the tips of their skis together to show her.

Giving them a thumbs up, she knew they were ready to go. “That’s right. Let’s head out.”

Tana waited for the gaggle of children to get level with her before she tipped forward and pushed off with her poles. They were catching on quick, but not *too* quick. One of the girls shot out ahead of the pack and Tana reacted without thinking. She straightened her skis and sped down the hill. It was a very long hill—the longest bunny slope she’d ever seen—but the first lesson she tried to teach the kids was to *stay in control*.

She came up alongside Sadie, who didn’t look uncomfortable in the least. Her poles were pointed straight back, and with a perfect bend in her knees, the girl continued down the hill.

“You’re doing awesome, Sadie,” Tana called. “Now show me your side-to-sides.” She took a deep breath to calm herself. “If you ever race, you’ll have to know how to do the slalom. Side to side.”

It worked.

The little girl slowed her pace and made a wide loop to the left.

Tana stopped and looked back up the hill. The other four kids in the group were cautiously making their way down through the snow. Plenty of proper pizza stances. It had been, all in all, a good lesson. Joanie, as the youngest in the group, was moving the slowest, and Tana was surprised when Sammy slowed down to ski next to his sister.

She waited for them in the middle of the hill where she could also keep an eye on Sadie. Man, she'd lucked *out*. Taking the ski instructor gig at Elk Lodge had put her right where she needed to be to make a better life for her daughter. And she didn't mind the work—another bonus. She liked the kids and most of their parents, the pay was decent, and the hours were good.

But Tana wanted more. And this winter, she just might get it.

Elk Lodge was hiring a new ski program director, and Tana had put her name in for consideration. The new position was on her mind as she turned and went down the hill with the last of the group. Speculating on what might happen wouldn't do her any good, but she couldn't help it. The director job would be *a perfect fit* for her. And she would be so great for it. With the full-time salary and benefits, she'd finally be on the right track.

She came to a gentle stop with the kids on their skis chattering happily around her. "Great job, everybody. Remember—make big turns, side to side, and make a pizza. Those three things will get you down the hill when you're out on the slopes with your parents, okay? What should you remember?"

"Side to side and make a pizza!" The kids shouted the phrases in a burst of glee.

Grinning, she watched them scatter in different directions. Their parents stood in various places by the entrances, most of them waving enthusiastically as their children approached. The job definitely had more highs than lows.

Tana pushed forward with her poles and moved smoothly toward the lodge. She'd make sure all the kids met up with their parents or nannies and then take her break. With another lesson coming up in an hour, there was just enough time to get a cup of cocoa and take her boots off for a few minutes. As much as she loved teaching ski lessons, it *was* taxing on her body. Another silver lining—she'd be in great shape when she got the program director's position. *When*, not if. That was the attitude she needed for this application.

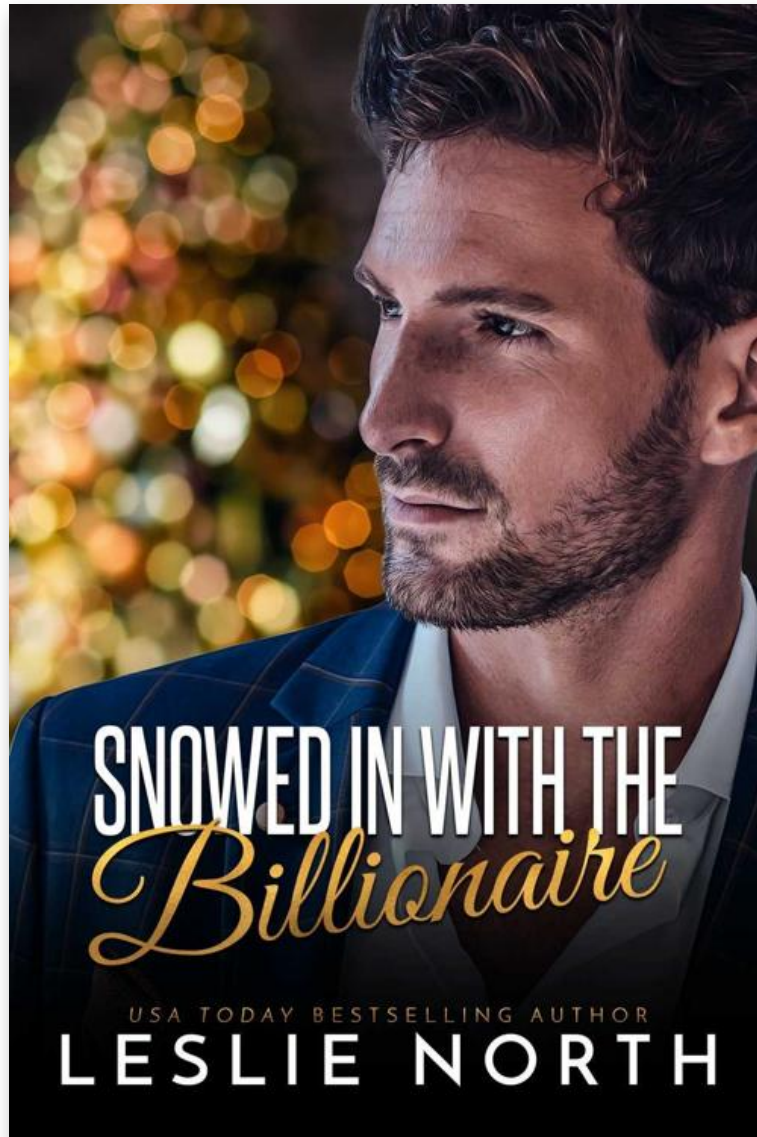
A flash of color out of the corner of her eye brought her up short as she watched a man approach. He crunched through the snow on winter boots, the sound reminding her of her daughter Lindsey chomping on cornflakes with an open mouth.

“I’m Ace,” he called out when he got closer.

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BLURB

Will a Christmas surprise make both their dreams come true?

Brea Nelson is used to her family's prickly attitude, but she's determined to spend the holidays with them. Unfortunately, a major storm and serious car trouble complicates her plans.

Stranded in the middle of nowhere, she finds herself knocking on the door of the infamous George Clark, a cutthroat CEO whose name is all over the news. Brea is pleasantly surprised by his muscular body and striking good looks. But his cold, rude demeanor promptly douses what's left of her holiday cheer.

Business always comes first for billionaire George Clark. But a near-death experience has forced him into hiding on Christmas Eve. When his solitude is disrupted by the shy but beautiful Brea, he's less than thrilled at the interruption. But he can't deny there's something special about this plucky woman... Something that cuts through his arrogant exterior, and warms his cold heart.

One night may be all it takes to ignite a spark between these two strangers. But will a Christmas miracle be enough to keep them from going their separate ways?

Grab your copy of *Snowed In with the Billionaire* from

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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Brea slouched forward in the seat, squinting through the blinding snowfall that had taken over her windshield. How could the forecast have been so wrong? They were supposed to get nothing more than a couple of inches with some light wind, yet here she was, inching her way through a literal blizzard. The muscles in her shoulders were tense, and her back was sore from leaning into the windshield as she strained to see the lines on the road. And she was cold. So cold. She'd fought with the heater before she'd pulled out of the parking lot, but the trickle of air emerging from it was lukewarm at best. Her fingertips were numb despite her gloves.

The road was empty, making it obvious that everyone else had gotten the memo about the change in the forecast but her. She was also the only one foolish enough to volunteer to work on Christmas Eve, knowing that she still had traveling to do. As the first flakes fell, she had considered scrapping the trip home, but if there was any chance of her making it to her parents' house then they expected her to be there, snowstorm or not. Thanks to their demands, she was fighting through the start of what seemed like the snowstorm of the century in a

dinosaur of a car that could barely get her to and from work on a good day.

Her windshield wipers weren't keeping up with the snowfall, and the fact that she couldn't defrost her windows wasn't helping with visibility. Brea worried about that ice narrowing her field of vision. Was the snow changing over to sleet? Her teeth were chattering, her nose was frozen, and she still had at least two more hours of this ahead of her before she'd pull into her parents' driveway. She reached a shivering hand over to the small knob and turned the volume up on the radio. It was one of the few things that still worked in the car.

Brea bopped along to a few songs before the commercials started. She hated listening to the advertisements and was tempted to switch the station, but as soon as she reached for the dial, the car swerved for a moment on a particularly icy patch of road. She was able to regain control before her tires left the road—barely. In the aftermath, she decided that listening to commercials wasn't such a big deal after all. She had to keep two hands on the wheel.

The station switched from ads to updates. It was one of those "traffic and weather together" programs, and Brea felt her stomach drop as she listened to the reports. The roads were a mess and getting worse, and the storm wasn't even close to over. If she had known how bad it was going to be before getting on the road, she'd have just stayed home. But it was too late now. She was closer to her destination than her starting point, so it wouldn't do her any good to turn around. And in weather like this, she doubted she'd have any luck trying to find a vacant room in one of the motels along the way. Nope, her only option was to push forward and hope for the best. After the official reporting, the DJ and his partner riffed about the storm and then moved on to gossip.

"Now what do you think of billionaire playboy, George Clark?" the female host asked.

"I have a lot of things that I could say about Mr. Clark, but I need to keep it clean for our audience, which doesn't leave me with a lot of options," the guy replied in an annoyed voice.

“Jealous, are you?” she teased.

Brea listened closely, waiting to hear the latest in adventures from the not-so-mysterious rich boy. He was always finding himself in the spotlight, and the entertainment from his exploits seemed to be endless.

“I’m not a fan, that’s all. He seems like a jerk.”

“Don’t be so hard on him.” The woman laughed. *“He’s young, he’s hot, he’s single, and he’s still figuring things out.”*

“Wait, you’re not one of Georgie boy’s groupies, are you?” he joked with his cohost.

“Why wouldn’t I be? You have to admit that he’s a good-looking guy! Even you can’t deny it.”

“Oh, he’s good-looking, sure. The problem is that he knows it, and it’s left him with a huge ego.”

“I’m sure something about him is huge,” the woman said with a giggle. *“Anyway, I have a feeling that our favorite bachelor is going to have an interesting holiday. Check this out: Earlier tonight, Georgie was leaving his annual charity Christmas Gala—with some mystery blonde on his arm, of course—”*

Brea rolled her eyes at the guy’s predictability. She wished she could switch the station because she didn’t give a shit about George Clark.

“And? That’s not news.”

“No, there’s more! Someone took a shot at our boy!”

The woman paused to let the words sink in, and Brea let out an involuntary gasp. She was certainly not following the CEO’s every move, but she didn’t want him dead, either. She’d rather he just get a hard dose of reality and grow up a bit. She thought it was disgusting the way that women threw themselves at his feet and he just tossed them aside as he pleased. Was one of those discarded women the shooter? Brea would never wish harm on anyone, but the man’s behavior must have been pretty horrible for someone to come after him like that.

“Someone took a shot? Are they crazy? Do people not realize how powerful George Clark is?” he asked incredulously. “Any ideas on who the shooter is?”

“Not yet, but there are rumors floating around that it’s a business partner who was hung out to dry. George wasn’t harmed. His security team rushed him away before the crowds even understood what was going on.”

“And now that the news is out about the attempt on his life, I’m sure the internet just broke with the overflow of women who are devastated over the near loss.”

“You can’t blame us for being a bit starstruck by him,” the woman chided. “He’s got a glamorous lifestyle. What I wouldn’t give for a night or two with him!”

“Well, where’s Clark now?” the guy asked. “You said he was ushered away, but to where?”

“There are only rumors as to where he is,” she replied. “Some say he’s in a safe house; others have guessed that he is in protective custody. He hasn’t been seen since the incident, which was about two hours ago. By now, he could be anywhere.”

“For your sake, and for all the lonely housewives of the world, I hope old Georgie boy is okay. Wouldn’t want your holiday ruined.”

“Yeah, I hope he’s okay, too,” she replied. “But I can’t imagine he’s going to let this little run-in ruin his holiday, either.”

He laughed. “I bet he’s holed up with some supermodel getting creative with his candy cane.”

Brea rolled her eyes. It was just getting annoying now—so much so that she took the chance to quickly reach over and flip the knob to the off position. She couldn’t concentrate on the road with all the chatter. Besides, she had no desire to keep up with the George Clark gossip.

With the radio off, she realized just how strained the engine was sounding as her car putt-putted through the snow. Gears were grinding, and she was beginning to wonder why she was putting herself through this trip in the first place. It wasn’t like

her family would truly miss her if she was a no-show. At least, not her parents.

They only wanted her there so they could point out how much of a failure she was and how she'd messed up her life. But then, not showing up would only give her mother more ammo to use against her on the next visit. That alone was incentive enough for her to push forward. She might be the family scapegoat, but she never stopped hoping that *something* would change. If her parents remained distant, she was going to find her own fairytale family, even if she had to force it the entire way.

The car skidded unexpectedly, hitting another patch of ice and jerking Brea out of her thoughts. She took her foot off the brake and tried to steer out of the fishtail that was nearly pulling the wheel from her hands. She overcompensated and slid off the road to the right with the front of the car landing into a ditch packed with snow.

“Shit!” she exclaimed, slapping a gloved hand onto the steering wheel. She stepped on the gas, smashing the pedal to the ground, only to hear that depressing whir that made it clear she was only making the situation worse. Climbing out, she immediately sunk half a foot into the snow, the damp soaking in around her calves through her jeans. She'd not bothered to wear snow boots because she'd thought she'd be in her car the whole time. Now she cursed herself for not being better prepared.

Circling around the car, she saw that her back driver's-side wheel had lifted all the way off the ground, and the car sat crooked in the embankment. She sighed, knowing that she wasn't going to be able to get it out by herself. She dug a hand into her jacket, searching for her cell phone, then yanked off her glove and called her mother.

She knew that her mother wasn't going to be thrilled with the call or her cry for help on Christmas Eve, but she had no choice. Brea could already hear her mom suggesting that she needed to find her own way out of this predicament, but who else was there for her to call? The phone was silent. After

several frustrating seconds, she realized that she had no service and that her call hadn't gone through.

Brea slid back into the seat, the leather having turned icy in the few moments she'd been outside. The car was still running, but with the heat barely working, there was no point in leaving it on. The storm raged on, but she knew that she was going to have to go out in it and try to find help, or at least a safe place to wait out the storm. If she stayed here, she would freeze by the time someone drove by. Besides, it wasn't much colder outside than it was in the car anyhow, and someone had to live *somewhere* around here. She knew from her previous trips that there were several homes scattered through the trees, visible from the road when there *wasn't* a driving snowstorm reducing visibility to zero.

Reluctantly, she pushed open the driver's-side door. Yanking her purse from the passenger seat, she slammed the door and locked it, though she was sure that even if anyone were to come across it, they wouldn't find anything worth stealing.

She climbed up onto the road so that she could at least have a bit of stability under her feet as she marched. Her tennis shoes threatened to slide on the ice as she fought to keep her footing. She huddled in her coat and pulled her scarf up to cover her ears. The icy sleet sliced at her eyes, making them burn. She could barely see through what had surely turned to blizzard conditions, but she pressed forward. She needed to find refuge.

She narrowed her eyes to try to see through the haze of snow, searching for a glimpse of something: lights in the distance, smoke from a fireplace, the out-of-place color of a car in the distance. She'd walked maybe half a mile, but her entire body ached as if she'd walked for ten, exhausted from battling the wind and the cold. She was beginning to worry that she would lose a few toes. At this point, she'd vowed that if she came across an empty house, she wouldn't think twice about breaking in. Let them arrest her. At least a jail cell would be warm.

Brea's feet only moved out of will; she was no longer truly aware of the ground beneath her. She stumbled to her knees and caught herself on her hands, feeling the snow seep through

her thin gloves. She pushed up, and as she regained her balance, she saw a shimmer of hope to her left. There was a driveway leading up to a large cabin that she could only glimpse through the wind and snow. Brea took off running towards it, slipping on the ice like she was a fawn on newborn legs.

Relief coursed through her when she finally reached the door. It was solid, with an old brass knocker, which she wrapped her stiff fingers around to pound on the door. She waited impatiently as she heard someone getting closer. Another long moment, and the door creaked open. A gush of warm, slightly smoky fireplace air greeted her, instantly comforting her despite the storm at her back. But when she took in the person standing in front her, her jaw dropped open.

It was *him*.

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