

BRANDI BLISS

FALLING

FOR

Mr.

BOSSY

PANTS



Falling For Mr. Bossy Pants

Brandi Bliss

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Epilogue

THANK YOU PAGE!

Chapter One

Lacey

“**B**eth, you ready?” I shout down the hall hoping to leave on time this morning.

“Coming! I just need to find my keys. Have you seen them?”

I roll my eyes as I stand at the door with my keys, laptop, and sweater all neatly tucked in my bag like a responsible human being. I take a quick glance around and see Beth’s keys lying in plain sight on the dining table.

“Yes! They’re right here on the table. Let’s go! I can’t be late for my first day!”

Beth comes racing out of her room frantically making her way to the door I am holding open.

“Okay, so you’re good covering the bakery?”

“Lace, yes. I’m good. Really.”

“Right. I just feel bad leaving you there all day while I go to my boring job.”

“I know. But Ashley will come in for a few hours to help up front so I can concentrate on things in the back. It’ll be totally fine. Really.”

I hate leaving Beth to run the bakery while I go into my corporate day job. I know Beth is more than capable of handling things. She’s smart, great with the customers and a good baker. I think I just hate that I can’t be there doing what I love.

“It’s all good Lace. You’re keeping us afloat; you shouldn’t feel bad about anything. You’ll be back full time baking your macarons and those little pie things in no time.”

“Tarts, Beth. They’re called tarts.”

“Right. Tarts. Whatever. They’re delicious and everyone loves them, and you make them far better than I can. I’m just going to stick to brownies and cookies.”

I stand on the sidewalk and watch the bus crawl to a stop. As I climb aboard, I feel nervous energy pulsing through my veins. I have no idea how I even landed this job at Whitmore Tech. It is the biggest company I have ever worked for. I have an accounting degree but haven’t really used it in the corporate world in several years, but they must have needed to fill this senior financial analyst position badly because after only one interview they offered it to me.

“How’s your feet Lace?” Beth asks gently swaying with the bus’s movements hanging on to a grab bar.

“Ugh, they hurt already and I’m not even at the office yet.”

Hurt is an understatement. I haven’t worn heels to work since my first job out of college over ten years ago. After that job I spent years working in food service without ever having to wear heels. Those were glorious years, and I desperately miss my flats.

After ten minutes the bus stops outside Whitmore Tech. It’s hard not to be in awe of the building. It’s sleek and mirrored and completely out of place in Littleford, but it’s also Littleford’s claim to fame built by the town’s most well-known family.

I turn and give Beth a quick hug. “See you later. I’ll text you!”

“Sounds good! Watch your feet!” Beth shouts at me as I make my way to the front of the bus. I almost look back to roll my eyes, but I can’t help appreciating her in the moment. Fifteen years of friendship is something to be proud of. We never grew apart, instead we have grown closer. We are like sisters really. Being roommates through college and now living together in our small apartment to make ends meet will do that to a relationship.

Arriving at my floor I make eye contact with the receptionist. I remember her from my interview, and I am happy to see a somewhat familiar face.

“Good morning. I am supposed to be meeting with David.”

“Sure thing. Lacey Paxton right?” She asks, clearly knowing my name and probably my entire day’s schedule already.

“Yes, I am the new senior financial analyst on David’s team.”

“Well welcome! I’m Dani. Nice to meet you and he’ll be out in just a minute to get you acclimated.”

“Thanks so much.”

As I stand waiting, I stare down at my feet. They are already looking a little swollen. Why the heels?

I sigh at my choice of three-inch pumps with a sudden distaste for anything tall which inflicts pain.

Figures. Heels are like men. I smirk. There was truth in that thought. At least for me. I let my mind wander to the last interaction with my most recent break-up. Chris was tall, handsome, and successful. He had been a great boyfriend until about a year into our relationship when all he wanted to do was play video games and ignore me. A thirty-five-year-old man playing video games in all his free time was not what I had in mind for a partner. The only person surprised by the break-up was him. That was three years ago. I haven’t dated since. As I ponder that thought some more, I sense someone coming my way. I glance up to see David walking towards me.

“Lacey, good morning. Great to see you again. Come on in, and we’ll get you set up and ready to go.”

“Thanks David. Excited to be here,” I say keeping my tone bubbly. I have no idea if I can even do this job, but now is not the time to show my nerves.

“I’m going to take you to HR first, so you can get all your paperwork done. Let’s go drop your things in your office.”

“Oh, I have my own office?” I ask trying to suppress my surprise as best as I can.

“Yes, it’s small but I think it’ll be fine.”

As we walk down the aisles of cubicles and offices, I can’t help feeling some excitement. Maybe it’s just my first-day nerves, but the place seems to buzz. Everyone I walk past has smiles on their faces and gives me a polite nod. Even though this job isn’t exactly what I want to be doing, I get the sense this will be okay. It has to be.

As we enter my office my eyes light up. If this is the definition of small, I can only imagine what the bigger offices are like. It has that all too new carpet smell with tasteful art hung on the walls. My desk is large and already situated with two monitors, a keyboard, mouse, and phone. There are two wooden bookshelves in the corner and a few tall potted plants sitting on the floor. I reach out and touch the leaves surprised that they are real.

“Oh, these are real. I hope I don’t kill them,” I say. My record with keeping plants alive is a staggering zero. Even cactuses seem to shrivel into themselves when they are put in my care.

David looks over at me with a smile. “Don’t worry. We have people that come and care for all the plants in the building weekly. I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

I know Whitmore Tech is a multi-billion-dollar company but somehow the fact that they have people that come and care for the plants makes it even more fancy, which suddenly swirls my insides like a well shaken cocktail. This place is the real deal. This is not some company where I can go unnoticed. I need to put on my big girl pants and find a little shred of confidence that I can do this. *I can do this.*

David nods as I place my bag under my desk. “Okay, let’s get you to HR and I’ll get IT to your office while you’re doing that and this afternoon, our team has a big meeting with the bossman. Don’t worry, you can just meet everyone and soak it all in.”

I glance around the office and inhale deeply. “Okay sounds great. Off to HR then?”

I follow David down a long hall and pass a kitchen area that from a quick glance looks spotless. I can see a counter area, sink, water cooler, refrigerator, microwave, and a few small tables. We pass the restrooms and take a right down another long hallway. This place seems endless. We come to a door marked ‘Human Resources’ and David opens the door for me.

“Alright. Amanda will get your paperwork for you and then I’ll meet you back in your office. Do you think you can find your way back?”

I think about the question. I'm not sure, but I am not going to tell him that. "Of course. Thanks."

I follow Amanda into a small conference room where she places several folders on the table. She clearly has her things organized and ready for me. She sits down and motions me to do the same.

"Okay Lacey, so we have all your new hire paperwork ready to go for your review and signature. This packet is all about your benefits," she says reaching across the table handing it to me.

As Amanda goes through her papers I thumb through the packet. There is generous medical insurance coverage, a great 401k plan, more paid time off than I remember ever getting and even tuition reimbursement.

"Wow. Whitmore Tech is pretty generous," I say looking across at Amanda.

"Yeah, we are. Mr. Whitmore prides himself on keeping the employees happy. You won't see a lot of turnover. People like to work here."

The Mr. Whitmore she speaks of is Jared Whitmore. Everyone in the town knows his name because the Whitmore family gives to charity, and funds many community events so I was surprised that all I could find when I Googled Jared Whitmore was a brief article from Harvard several years ago where he did an alumni interview about how he started up Whitmore Tech. I also came across a few photos of him at local charity events. He is brutally handsome, but in all the

photos I saw he barely had a smile on his face. It was more like a slight upturn of one corner of his mouth, his lips always closed wearing a mask of seriousness. But even with his flat demeanor, his tall stature, dark hair, and light eyes suit him well.

Amanda proceeds to give me each form one by one, explaining each as she slides them across the table. After signing them all I stand ready to go back to my office to meet with David.

“Let me make your copies. I’ll be right back.” Amanda leaves the room as I stand looking over the benefit package in more detail. As much as I wish the bakery could offer all these benefits, I know Beth and I are far off from making that happen. We can barely pay Ashley for the few hours she works up front each week. Beth and I are working ourselves into the ground and though we love it I just hope I can keep it up now working a full-time corporate job on top of going into the bakery in the evenings and weekends.

In the doorway someone stops and peeks in. “Oh, hi there. I’m looking for Amanda,” she says.

“Oh, she’ll be right back. She just went to make a few copies for me.” I quiet for a second when I realize I should probably introduce myself.

“I’m Lacey. This is my first day. I’m the new senior financial analyst.”

“Oh, hi dear. I’m Diane. I’m Mr. Whitmore’s executive assistant. Welcome!”

Diane reminds me of my mom. She is older, maybe in her late fifties with hair just starting to gray. She is well put together wearing a black pant suit with a colorful blouse and gold jewelry. I immediately get a sense of warm energy from her.

“Very nice to meet you Diane. Do you like working for the big boss?” The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. Why did I just say that? Great job being unprofessional on day one.

Diane chuckles. “Oh, it’s a pleasure. I’ve been Mr. Whitmore’s assistant since he started this place, so almost ten years now. This is a great company and he’s a great man.”

I smile noticing Diane wink. Did she just wink at me? Maybe she has something in her eye. My brain is overloaded. I’m sure I’m imagining things. Amanda appears in the doorway with my copies and holds out her hand to me.

“Here you go Lacey. I see you met Diane? Diane is the best executive assistant on the planet, and possibly one of the best humans you’ll ever meet.”

I look over at Diane who is blushing. “Oh, stop it now. You are just as wonderful Miss Amanda. And you Miss Lacey. I have a good feeling about you.”

I smile and chuckle. “Thank you. That’s very nice of you to say.” I forgot what office culture is like. As much as there were always coworkers that could drive me crazy in my past jobs, there were always a few that became friends. Amanda and Diane remind of the latter. I begin to relax a little knowing

that I potentially just made two new work friends and I haven't even finished day one.

“Well I guess I should head back to my office. I think David has an agenda for me today and I have a lot to get started on.” I make my way to the entrance as the two women follow behind. As I approach the main office door, they both stop as I reach to open it.

“Lacey, feel free to stop by anytime. I am right inside the door of the CEO suite. It's just down the hall to the left. You can't miss it.”

“Thanks Diane. And thanks Amanda. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around.”

I leave the HR suite and head back to my office walking by the kitchen area once again. This time I see a few people pouring cups of coffee and eating what looks like donuts. The smell of the coffee fills my nostrils and I decide to make my way over to the coffee bar. The coffee and tea selection are impressive. I stare contemplating what I am in the mood for.

“Caffeine is key here.” A voice comes from behind me. I turn to see David grabbing something from the fridge.

“I'll never say no to coffee or tea.” I grab a mug from the dish rack labeled ‘clean mugs’. I look over to see a sign on the wall. *Place dirty mugs in the dishwasher. They will be run each night by the cleaning crew. Please don't leave dishes in the sink!* I nod to myself. I like this place's style.

David smiles. “Well, we tend to be fast-paced here and caffeine will be your best friend. Let’s head back to your office and we can go over the rest of the week’s orientation and make sure your laptop is all set.”

“Sounds good,” I say as I reach over and grab a packet of honey to add to my fresh cup of Earl Grey.

I enter my office and see IT has already placed a laptop on my desk. It’s open and looks connected to the monitors displaying a Whitmore Tech screensaver. I notice a sticky note on the monitor. *‘Welcome! Josh from IT will be by at 10:00am to give you an overview and get your security set up.’* This might be the most organized place I’ve ever worked for. I like attention to details.

I turn to David. “Well looks like IT is coming by at ten. I appreciate everyone’s thoroughness.”

“Yeah, that we are. Why don’t we review our team’s meeting schedule and some policies for now. Then IT can do their thing and by the time they’re done it will be time for lunch. I’d offer to have lunch with you, but I have to be in a meeting.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you, but I’m sure I’ll be going over some things at lunch anyway.” That is my plan. I have so much information to digest that I am going to grab the protein bar in my purse, some water and read. I need to make sure I understand everything about this place and my role. Then when I’m done with that I plan to go throw some cold water on my face in the bathroom because I’m sure my nerves are going to be flying high. *I can do this.*

David and I spend the next hour reviewing the team's initiatives, schedules, standing meetings and projects. There is a lot going on but surprisingly I don't feel overwhelmed. There is even some excitement in my blood. It's been a while since I worked with a team and had the feeling of contributing something positive, but with David's support and the warm welcome I already received I am feeling optimistic.

Before I know it, it is time for lunch. I have exactly one hour before I need to be in the big meeting with our team and the CEO. I pull out my phone to check in with Beth at the bakery.

Me: Hey! How are things going today?

Beth: Hi! Good. It's been a very busy morning. I'm making more cookies and muffins now. They are loving that new pistachio muffin you created. Don't change it. They all sold!

Me: That's great!

Beth: How's your first day going?

Me: Good actually. I'm feeling a little better. Less nervous. Though I am joining my team in a big meeting with the CEO in an hour.

Beth: Look at you getting all fancy on day one meeting the CEO!

Me: I don't think I'm actually meeting him. I think he's just in the meeting. Should I introduce myself if no one introduces me?

Beth: Um, yes! Duh. You want to be on his good side! Make friends. lol

Me: You're probably right. I'll make sure I introduce myself. Thanks for taking care of the bakery! I'll see you later!

Beth: Sounds good! Don't thank me. This is what I love to do. Talk later!

I put my phone on my desk and start reading all the information Amanda gave me earlier. Then I turn my attention to the binder that David left me. I'm about halfway through scanning the information when I hear a gentle knock on my office door. I look up to see Diane smiling. "Hi there! I thought I'd swing by and show you where the meeting is."

I look at the clock. The hour has flown by and I have exactly five minutes to be at this meeting. I close my eyes briefly, internally thanking the powers that be for sending Diane to my office as I realize I have no idea where this conference room is.

"Thanks so much Diane. That would be great." I stand grabbing a notepad and pen and follow her out the door.

"So how's the first day going?"

"Honestly great. Everyone is so nice here. And I appreciate that things are so well organized."

Diane lets out a soft laugh. "Organization is Whitmore Tech's strength. Mr. Whitmore is very particular. In a good way."

I can't help noticing she looks me in the eyes and smiles as she makes the statement. Within a minute or so we arrive at a medium-sized conference room with tall windows on one side

and a large wall with a whiteboard and a projection screen. The conference room table is sleek wood with modern chairs tucked underneath.

“Wow this is a great conference room,” I say, somewhat embarrassed at how enthusiastic my words come out.

“You should see the board room,” Diane says as she looks at me with wide eyes clasping her hands in front of her. “Okay, well everyone will be piling in here in a minute. You enjoy your meeting.”

I turn to Diane feeling a sense of abandonment. “Oh, you’re not staying?”

“Oh, no dear. I have other things that need attending to. Mr. Whitmore will be here with your team though.” She glances over at the whiteboard and makes her way to the door smoothing her hand on the top of each chair as she goes. She pauses in front of me. “Just soak it all in. You’re going to be wonderful,” she says reaching out gently touching my arm.

“Thanks Diane.” I watch her leave appreciating her kindness. No one has ever been this nice to me at a job. I return my attention to the table and chairs. Should I just pick a chair? I notice other chairs neatly pressed up against the wall away from the table. I decide to sit in one of those not knowing how many people will be at the table.

I look out the door and see people walking towards the conference room. Two younger looking men and one woman come in and take a seat at the table. They glance in my direction. The younger woman makes eye contact with me.

“Hi. I’m Leah. Are you new?”

I smile. Leah looks like a fresh out of college type of girl. She’s dressed very professionally with a modern flair. I can see the edge of a tattoo peeking up on her neck from underneath her mock neck sweater. She’s wearing large clear rimmed glasses. Her curly blonde hair is cut short into a perfect bob. I don’t recall ever looking that put together when I was in my twenties. I lived in sweatpants, hoodies and a pair of jeans I still have to this day.

“Hi. Yes. It’s my first day actually. I’m Lacey. The new senior financial analyst.”

“Oh cool. So I’m an intern on the team. So are Jonathan and Adam.” She nods acknowledging the two young men who are in conversation with each other. “We are seniors at the university. You should come sit at the table. There will only be a few more people. Our team is big, but only a small portion of us will be here today.”

“Right. Thanks.” I stand and make my way over to the table and sit next to Leah. I turn to see David and few other people I don’t know enter the room. David introduces me to them, but my focus is immediately drawn to the man who enters the room after them. He’s tall wearing a navy suit that looks like it was sewn just for his body. His face is clean shaven, eyes light in color, and I can’t tell if they’re blue or gray, but I can tell they’re intense. His jet-black hair is short but long enough to need a comb run through it. As he walks past me to the front of the room, I get a whiff of something intoxicating. Pine?

Sage? I don't know exactly what it is but it's making my heart beat a little faster. I quickly become aware my mouth is dry. Water. Isn't there water in here? I swallow hard. As he makes his way to sit at the head of the table, I realize this is Jared Whitmore. Pictures do not do this man justice. The pictures I saw didn't capture the light in his eyes or his complexion. He seems taller than in the pictures. His body is perfectly proportioned. Handsome is an understatement. If there was a calendar for drop dead gorgeous CEOs he should be the picture for every month.

I catch my foot tapping uncontrollably under the table and rest my hand on my leg to settle myself down. I look down at my notepad then look up and take a quick glance at him. He's looking down at his phone typing away. He stops and raises his head slightly, catching my eye. My heart starts to pound in my chest, and I can feel heat run up my neck. He gives me a gentle nod and says, "I don't believe we have met?"

Mayday. Mayday. Sound the alarm! The CEO is talking to me.

I smile and make eye contact. "Hi. I'm Lacey. It's my first day here...", I stop my words as he stands and makes his way towards me. I'm pretty sure I look completely overwhelmed, but I manage to roll back my chair and stand hoping that's what I'm supposed to be doing.

"Lacey. Nice to have you here," he says as he reaches out his hand.

I reach out and shake his hand. His hands are like butter. They're slightly warm and incredibly soft. He holds my hand for a few seconds when I can feel my body turning into a puddle. What is going on? I've worked with attractive men before and never reacted this way. *Pull yourself together.*

"Thank you. Nice to be here." That's it. Those are all the words I can muster. Thanks brain. I watch as he turns and goes back to his seat at the head of the table. I sit in my chair just as I feel goosebumps erupt on my arms. I rub my arms discreetly under the table, grateful I put on my cardigan before coming to this meeting. I inhale deeply to gather myself.

Mr. Whitmore stands and goes over to the windows then starts to pace. "David, do we have everyone here?"

David glances around the room. "Yes, I believe we can get started. The floor is all yours."

I hold my breath preparing to hear this man's voice. He gives off an air of authority but not in a condescending way. I can tell he's well respected by the people in the room. He exudes confidence. I find myself completely engaged even though he hasn't said a word. I slowly click my pen ready to take notes because I need to focus on something other than this man's face. His chiseled jaw is making my stomach flutter.

Mr. Whitmore places his hands behind his back and heads to the whiteboard. Even his walk is attractive. How is that even possible?

"Alright everyone. Thanks for being here this afternoon. I called this meeting to discuss a new project. It's an expansion

project and I'm going to need all of you to be working on it."

For the next hour I listen intently to every word coming out of his mouth. His delivery to the team is somewhat matter of fact. There are no smiles or jokes thrown our way. He's all business.

The meeting ends and Mr. Whitmore exits the room. As I flip the pages of my notepad, I see Leah closing her laptop. I take a mental note to bring my laptop next time because apparently that's the cool thing to do. I'm about to stand when Leah leans in and whispers, "He's a bit intense but he knows what he's doing."

I raise my eyebrows, "Who?"

Leah softly chuckles. "Mr. Whitmore. You get used to it. I don't think he realizes he comes off kinda grumpy."

"I didn't even notice."

I sit for a second as everyone else stands. Apparently, people think the CEO is grumpy. I on the other hand think he's charming but no one needs to know that.

Chapter Two

Jared

Some days as I walk through this building, I am still surprised that all the hard work and planning paid off. It's been over ten years now, but each day I come to my office I am reminded that this company would not have gotten off the ground without the dedication and hard work of its employees. Teamwork is what I like best about business.

I enter my office suite and say hello to Diane. Speaking of teamwork, Diane might be the single most dedicated, loyal employee I know. I'd be stranded without her. She also likes to feed me things and at least a few times a month she'll look at me and say, "*you look thin, you need to eat.*" She's not wrong. There are long days and nights being the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company. Food is never a priority, but when Diane brings in anything, I immediately remember how much I enjoy home-cooked food.

I walk down the short hallway to my office and see Shane looking out the window. He turns to me and says, “Hey. How’d that meeting go?”

“Good I think. David has a talented team and I know they’ll get it done. How are you feeling about it with the Operations team?”

“Great. We had a meeting yesterday and everyone is on board and excited about the project. I just hope finance can make the numbers work.”

I watch as Shane puts his hands in his pockets. Being old college roommates and having worked together since we started this company, I know his mannerisms well. I watch as he starts to chew on his bottom lip rocking back and forth on his heels. This is my cue. “What are you concerned about?”

“Concerned? I’m not concerned. I just want everything to run smoothly. This is a big project with a lot of complexity.”

I nod as I sit on the top of my desk. “Well, I hate to break it to you, but being the Chief Operational Officer there’s a lot of this is riding on you.”

Shane guffaws. “No kidding Jared. I am aware. We’ll get it done.”

Shane turns to me and crosses his arms. “So, what’s going on elsewhere? We haven’t caught up in a bit.”

I let out a sigh as I think about his question. My life is the same each day. I get up. I workout. I come to the office. I leave the office either picking up take out or putting in a frozen

dinner when I get home. I then work some more and then try to sleep for a few hours. Rinse. Repeat. This has been my life since starting Whitmore Tech and I don't know any other way to exist.

“Nothing really. Work is my life with the occasional dinner with Rachel and my parents.”

“How is Rachel doing with baby? I can't believe she has three kids.”

My younger sister is an amazing woman. She teaches kids all day long and comes home to three little ones all under the age of seven with nine-month-old Danielle rounding out the crew. I admire her and her husband. Jeff owns his own construction business and builds custom homes. They just make it all work somehow. They always seem happy and fulfilled. Between her life and how we were raised by our own parents, I definitely have the picture of family perfection to look at if I ever need tips. Right now though, I can't imagine myself as a dad or even a husband at this point and it makes me a little uncomfortable to admit it.

“She's good. Hoping to get together with her soon. How are things with you?”

Shane sits in the chair across from my desk and shrugs. “I can't complain. Seeing a new girl this weekend. She seems interesting.”

I nod as I wonder about the last girl he dated. Stephanie? No. Sandra? No. I can never keep track of Shane's dating life. If anyone were to be called a serial dater it would be Shane. He's

been the same since college. Every week he showed up with another girl latched on to his arm. I wouldn't consider Shane a player though, he never led girls on and from what I know he never dated more than one at a time. He's just quick to date and assess if there's a connection worth pursuing. Frankly, his tactic isn't half bad, but I do wonder what his standards are at this point having dated more women than any other man I know.

Suddenly the last girl's name comes to me. "Wait. What happened with Stacey?"

"Oh, Stacey was great, but we just didn't click. There was no spark."

"Sorry to hear. Well maybe this new girl will turn out to be something great."

"I hope so. Speaking of dating, you should get out there. You haven't dated in what? Two years? Three? The last girl I remember you even talking about was Chrissie and that was like an eternity ago."

I clench my jaw. Shane is almost correct. I haven't dated anyone in four years. Chrissie and I only lasted eight months because I was in another relationship. With my job. I look at Shane and shake my head. "Why should I take advice from you anyway? You have dated more women in the last six months than I have in the last six years."

"You're probably right, but at least I have a better chance of finding 'the one' because I'm actually out there rolling the dice."

I look down at the carpet. I don't even know if I want to find 'the one' at this point in my life. I should want that, but those months with Chrissie were stressful. I know I played a huge role (okay it was more like all my fault) in our break-up, and I just don't know if I even have the capacity to be in a relationship. Sometimes I think there are people that are not meant to be with someone, and I might be one of them. I close my eyes briefly, only to be hit with a memory. One night after working late at the office I met Chrissie for a drink. When I walked up to her sitting at the bar, she had given me a look of pure disgust. When I asked her what was wrong, she shook her head then proceeded to tell me I was over thirty minutes late (which was true) and I didn't call her to tell her I'd be late (which was also true) and me scrolling through my phone as I walked in the door and continued to scroll as I walked up to her was rude (that was fair). Her words to me as she left still ring in my head. *"Jared, you're un-dateable. You have no idea how to be with someone."*

Chrissie's words are not untrue. Work was and will continue to be my priority, and I don't think I have the appropriate amount of time to give to someone. Which is why I am beginning to stress about tonight. I sigh and lean my head back, deciding to tell Shane my news.

"Well, you'll be happy to know I have a date tonight."

Shane looks at me and furrows his brow. "You're just saying that."

“No for real. My insurance agent has been trying to set me up with this woman he knows that lives in his building. He’s been asking me to call her for months now, so I finally said yes to get him to stop asking me.”

Shane gives me a smirk. “So this isn’t a date. It’s just a favor.”

“No, it’s a date. I am meeting her at Lossaro’s. You don’t have dinner at Lossaro’s unless it’s a date or special occasion. I’m meeting her at seven.”

“Right. So what’s her name?”

“Melanie. And before you ask me what she does, she’s an education professor at the university.”

Shane cocks his head. “Okay, so she does sound legit. Do you know what she looks like?”

I scrunch my nose. “Kind of. We had a few texts, and her picture came up on my phone. It’s small though.” I pull out my phone scrolling to her contact. I click on her image and show it to Shane.

Shane takes my phone and squints. “Well, she appears to look normal. I don’t get any serial killer vibes from this photo.” Shane hands my phone back to me as he raises his eyebrows.

“Very funny. My insurance agent says she’s sweet and he hears classical music coming from her apartment when he walks by. That’s encouraging.”

“What that she listens to classical music? Would you change your mind if she was blaring Taylor Swift?”

I roll my eyes. “No, I’m just saying, it’s a good thing. That’s all.”

“Well it’s about time Jared. You have to get out there and live a little. You can’t always be in this office. We’re not getting any younger you know.”

Shane’s words make me cringe inside. If he only knew how much I have thought about that. Being thirty-eight and not settled down or even in a meaningful relationship does make me question myself. And if me questioning myself isn’t enough my parents and sister do it every chance they get to drive home the point. *“Jared, you need to find someone to settle down with. Don’t you want a family? Work isn’t everything you know.”* Those three sentences should be my family’s mantra. It’s just that work-life balance isn’t something I am good at. It’s always work and more work. I am used to being alone. I have spent my adulthood working and coming home to an empty apartment. Now, it’s just different because instead of a penthouse in the city I have an amazing home nestled in the valley, but every time I go in the front door, I am reminded how empty it is. There’s no sound. There’s no life. It’s just furniture and appliances that softly hum, making it seem more desolate somehow.

I run my hands down my face. “Don’t remind me. I know how old I am.”

“Well, listen, I hope you give your date an honest effort. Who knows, maybe you’ll really like this girl.”

Shane’s words strike a nerve in me. I can feel sweat forming on my brow. I haven’t wrestled with my dating anxiety in years, and I had thought it would have disappeared by now. Let’s hope I can get it under control before seven o’clock.

Chapter Three

Lacey

My first day at Whitmore Tech went well. Everyone was so friendly which made me feel more at ease. I know I can bring something to the table as a financial analyst because I basically run the business side of the bakery, so I need to remind myself of my capabilities. I take a deep breath in as I hop off the bus in front of the bakery. I can see Beth through the window bringing trays from the back restocking the front cases. I can tell she's tired but she's still smiling as she unloads some cookies into the display case.

I listen to the bell chime as I open the door and Beth shoots me a smile. "Hey Lace! How was your first day?"

"It was good. It went better than I had hoped. I'm glad to be here though. I love the smell of cookies."

"You and me both. Maybe too much. I think I gained like three pounds in the last month," Beth says with a small

grimace on her face.

I know that pain. People assume that chefs and bakers eat so well when the reality is just the opposite. Back in the day when I was working as a sous chef I ran around cooking and baking with five-minute breaks sprinkled throughout the day. And in those five minutes, I'm lucky if I could take a bathroom break and chug down some water.

"I hear you. Last weekend I had a fudge brownie and a sugar cookie for lunch while I was in the back. Let's try to get something other than sugar for dinner? I'll call The Happy Avocado and put in a taco order. Want the usual?"

Just as I ask the question Ashley comes out from the back with a tray of muffins. "Hey, Ashley, you're here late?" I ask. Usually, Ashley works a few hours during the week in the mornings when the shop is the busiest. I immediately get concerned thinking that she has probably been here all day and we are going to owe her for a full day's pay not just the three hours she usually works.

"Hey Lace! I just came back in to get some goodies for my girls' night. Just thought I'd help Beth while I had a few minutes."

My brain releases the tension forming in my head. "Oh, that's nice of you. Thanks. Girls' night sounds fun. What are you all doing tonight?"

"Well, I have a ton of food which includes three gallons of ice cream. We are all spending the night in our pajamas and

drinking my killer margaritas watching chick flicks. Do you and Beth want to come?”

Ashley says it sincerely, but as much as she’s being nice, I can’t see myself hanging out with girls ten years younger than me and not being a party pooper. I can barely keep my eyes open as is and my feet are already killing me from the heels I wore all day.

I sigh. “I think I’ll stay here, order some dinner and get some work done. But I hope you have a fun night.”

“Suit yourself. Beth what about you?” Ashley asks glancing her way.

“I’d love to, but I want to finish a few more things here and like Lace, I need to eat some real food.”

Ashley shrugs. “Okay, but both of you need to get out of here. Promise you won’t stay here all night? You’re here way too much, and not that it’s my business but don’t you have boyfriends?”

I stare at the wall. Ashley has been working with us for a few months now and I am surprised that this type of information hasn’t come up yet in general conversation.

Before I can even respond Beth blurts out “Lace and I are both single. Lace is *very* single.”

I give Beth a glare. “What is that supposed to mean? *Very* single?”

Beth shakes her head and raises her hands. “I’m just saying, I just got out of relationship like four months ago, I have some

time to officially call myself single. You haven't been in a relationship or even dated anyone in like two years. That makes you way more single than me."

"It's actually been three years," I state in a quiet whisper.

I can see Ashley's eyes go wide like she can't believe a woman in her mid-thirties would admit such a thing. "Well Lace, my uncle came in the other day when you were here, and he thinks you're quite a looker. Actually, I think his words were *"that woman with the long brown wavy hair is something to behold."*

I feel my cheeks flush as I retreat behind the counter. Beth stares at me, confused at my reaction. I'm uncomfortable and I don't know why. I know I appeal to some men. I'm blessed to have great hair and skin that behaves how I want it to. My hips on the other hand seem to have expanded in the last few years and my jeans fit a little tighter which the internet now tells me is because I have a 'muffin top.' Dressing this new body poses its challenges, and trying to find something to wear on a date is truly the least of my priorities.

Suddenly I feel a strike on my arm. Beth is glaring at me. "Stop being weird. Maybe you should consider going on a date. It's way overdue Lace. No pressure. Just a date."

I see Ashley looking intently at me. I'm sure she's thinking my hesitance is somewhat a reflection on her in some way. "Ashley, thank you really. I'm just not ready and I need to get my feet under myself with this new job and my time is going to be spread thin."

Ashley nods. "I get it. I think." She grabs the box of her items from the counter. "I gotta get going. Don't stay here too late!" She says as she turns and goes out the door.

I turn to look at Beth shaking her head at me. I know what she's thinking but I don't have the energy to entertain it. "Not now okay? Can we just order some dinner?"

"Yes, fine. But really Lace. You do need to think about dating. You can't be a hermit forever."

Why can't I be? I'm pretty sure there are plenty of women who love being single. I have made it through the last three years without a relationship or dating completely fine. I haven't crumbled or stayed in bed for days eating gelato. I am good single. I function well by myself. That's what I tell myself anyway. I'm grateful I have Beth, but not having any family around, there are days when being by myself feels like the biggest challenge. I would love to find that special someone and dare I admit have a family, but I've also come to accept that at my age it might not happen.

I decide to ignore Beth's last statement. "I'm putting in our taco order. The usual but I'm getting extra chips and salsa. I'm starving."

"Good idea. Hey, order some churros too," Beth says licking her lips.

"Seriously? We're surrounded by all things sweet and sugary, and you want churros?" I laugh and shake my head.

“Come on Lace. We don’t make churros, and it’s been a day.”

I can’t disagree. It has been a day. “Okay fine. I’ll order a few churros. Can you go pick up the order while I go in the back and do the monthly financials?”

Beth nods. “Of course. I could use the walk.”

Being on Main Street is convenient. Walking a few blocks you can find your choice of coffee shops, gift stores, pizza places, Tex-Mex and of course our bakery. Littleford is a small town and a great place if you don’t want the hustle of the city, but you want something larger than a backend woods kind of place.

“Thanks! I’m going in the back to change into comfy clothes and get the numbers done. See you in a bit.”

I head back to the small office that has way too much stuff in it. There’s a small desk with a phone and a laptop, but the rest of the room has become the spill over for extra supplies that don’t fit in our storage room. I toss my bag on the floor and pull out my yoga pants and sneakers. I sit in the chair thrilled that I’m in something stretchy and my calves can take a break from being in heels. I open the laptop and get to work.

After twenty minutes of compiling spreadsheets, I can see that our last month looks better than the previous, but it’s still not where we need to be if we’re going to keep this place open. I lean back in my chair and close my eyes. I have to make this all work. I know working at Whitmore Tech will provide me with more income so I can invest in the bakery. I

start reworking the numbers entering in the money I'll be investing. The new numbers improve but not nearly as much as I anticipate. I bite the inside of my cheek as the laptop screen glows casting a soft light around the room. I can feel my stomach churn as acid gets caught in my throat. I swallow it down and pull the hair elastic off my wrist and swirl my hair into a messy bun. This will work out. I have to keep telling myself that it will but as I sit and stare at the screen, I can't help but feel a little bit of doubt. I pause and let out a gruff moan because I don't know what it is I'm feeling now but the silence in the bakery has suddenly become deafening.

I stand up just as the front door chimes. "Food is here Lace!" I hear Beth shout.

I head out to the front thankful for the much-needed distraction.

Chapter Four

Jared

I stand and stare at the clothes in my closet. There's a sea of gray, black and navy Armani suits all staring back at me. I take a step into my walk-in and turn to the other side. Long sleeve button up shirts are neatly hung all showing the crisp lines of being dry cleaned and pressed. I raise my eyebrows as I notice that they're hanging in color groups. The blues are together, followed by various shades of gray, a few green and red then a large group of white. I don't recall being this particular. I open the drawer that houses my ties. I sigh out loud noticing they're grouped just like the shirts. It's amazing what the mind does subconsciously. Lossaro's isn't black tie, but you certainly can't show up to dinner in jeans. I decide on a dark gray suit with a white button down and skip the tie to bridge the gap of being too formal.

I stand in the mirror fixing my collar when a wave of jittery energy makes its way up my back. Dating has always triggered

my nerves. I can feel my throat start to narrow and I quickly head to the bathroom and press a cold washcloth to my face. I can't pinpoint why this happens. I'm not necessarily nervous around women, but there's something about making conversation with a stranger that makes me uneasy. I can talk about business until I'm blue in face, but if you ask me my favorite movie or what I do for fun I become someone who looks like they're being questioned by the police. Maybe it's because I don't even know how to answer those questions because I haven't watched a movie since I was in my twenties, and I couldn't even tell you any popular movies in the last five years if I tried. What do I do for fun? Well saying I work for fun isn't the sexiest answer but it's my truth.

I smack my cheeks a few times. I can shake these nerves off. I have years of practice, I'm just a little rusty. I shake my entire body as if I'm trying to get a spider off my arm. If anyone saw me right now, I'm sure it would warrant a laugh. I walk down the stairs grabbing my wallet and keys off the console table and head out the front door. I unlock my SUV and get into the driver's seat. The restaurant is only a fifteen-minute drive. Just enough time to get myself to fully settle.

I pull into the parking lot and head to the valet. As I make my way in the main entrance, I spot a blonde woman sitting on a bench near the hostess. She's wearing a black cocktail dress holding onto a small sequined clutch. Based on the tiny profile picture from her text, I think I can safely assume this must be her and make way over.

"You must be Melanie," I say in a gentle voice.

“Yes, and you must be Jared. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Yes, great to meet you. Are you ready to sit? I made reservations so I’m sure our table is ready.”

She smiles. “That sounds lovely.”

I give the hostess my name and we are directed to follow her to our table. Walking behind Melanie I feel a small bead of sweat fall from my brow. I quickly take the back of my hand and wipe it away. We sit and I watch her reaction as she looks around eyeing the large fireplace in the corner and the massive chandeliers hanging throughout the space.

“I have never been here, but I have heard great things,” Melanie says.

“Oh, Lossaro’s is an institution here in Littleford. The food is amazing. Everything is great on the menu.”

“Seems like you come here often I take it?”

If she only knew. Lossaro’s has been my go-to place for all sorts of important business meetings. I’d love to say that I have only taken dates here, but Melanie is actually the first. All the other times I’ve come here were for client meetings or coming with my parents and sister for a birthday or anniversary.

“I’m guilty. I have a lot of business meetings here.”

She nods at me then we take a few minutes in silence to examine the menu. I don’t need to look but I pretend I’m examining my choices. I’m getting the filet. Medium rare with mashed potatoes and seasoned green beans. It’s what I always

get and I could use anything that feels like a sense of comfort right now. The waiter comes to take our order then leaves us in awkward silence.

I scan my brain thinking of all the questions I should be asking a woman on date. Small talk and getting to know people on a personal level is not my strength. Luckily before I break out in full body hives Melanie starts the conversation.

“So, Chad is your insurance agent?” She asks, seeming mildly interested.

“Yes he is. We’ve known each other for years now,” I say, not sure if I should offer any more information.

She then tells me about how her and Chad met. Apparently, Chad was running on the path near their building and Melanie was sitting on the bench tying her shoe when Chad reached down to check his phone, not paying attention and ran right into her tripping himself and falling to the ground. I make sure I nod at intervals so she knows I’m listening then force a smile as she ends the story.

“That story doesn’t surprise me. Chad can be clumsy,” I say, completely making up my assumption on the fly. I have no idea if Chad is clumsy. I only ever have business calls or an occasional coffee meeting with him to review insurance. I’m just trying to do my best with small talk.

Melanie continues talking about her family and her job. And just as the conversation comes to a natural stopping point our food arrives. Everything looks perfect as usual, and I eagerly

dig into my filet. A minute passes and Melanie looks over at me.

“So, tell me about you. You run a huge successful tech firm. That must be exciting?”

I answer her question with basic cool comments making sure to keep it business focused. I don't see the need to tell her about the struggles I had getting the company off the ground or the fact that I invested every penny I had into it completely risking my livelihood. Then, her next question throws me for a loop.

“So, you must make a ton of money, right?”

I pause and look down at my food. I know people have a natural curiosity when hearing someone is a big time CEO or has their own business. I get it. But to blatantly ask someone you barely know this question is off putting. I take a sip of my water contemplating my answer. I can tell she doesn't think her questions is inappropriate, as she sits looking at me waiting for a response. Then it gets worse.

“I mean, you must make millions and have a swanky house. Living like that must be a dream.”

My stomach drops. I am no longer interested in the filet on my plate, and I am definitely no longer interested in this woman sitting across from me. My entire body begins to feel hot, and not in a good way. I love talking about Whitmore Tech, but talking about how much money I make is something no one needs to know. Heck even my own family doesn't know. I breathe in deep and decide my next action quickly.

I look over at her and say, “You know, I’m not feeling that great. If you would please excuse me, I think I’m going to go home.”

She stares at me with wide eyes. I know leaving a date is completely callous, but I can’t be here a minute longer. I stand, pull out my wallet and drop three-hundred dollars on the middle of table to cover our dinner and tip. I turn and head to the door grateful she doesn’t say a word, though she’s probably in shock now and I fully anticipate an angry text later.

As I wait for the valet I text Shane.

Me: Meet me at Paddy’s in fifteen minutes.

My phone vibrates.

Shane: Aren’t you on a date?

Me: I was. Just meet me there.

Shane: This can’t be good. I’ll be there as soon as I can.

I enter the local hangout spot scanning the room for Shane. Not seeing him, I head up to the bar and order a beer. The place is busy with its regulars and university students. The two main bars are almost completely full and all the high tables are taken. I glance back at the entrance and spot Shane. I raise my hand to get his attention. He nods at me and heads my way.

He shrugs at me. “Well, it’s only eight forty-five so I am assuming this date didn’t go so well.”

I take a sip of my beer while flagging down the bartender. “You assume correctly.”

“What happened man? It couldn’t have been that bad.”

The bartender comes my way and I order two more beers for Shane and myself. “It started off okay, then she wanted to know how much money I make.”

Shane purses his lips and nods. “Ugh. That’s not cool.”

I shake my head. “I don’t need someone interested in my money. I hate the feeling it gives me. I think everyone thinks I had my money given to me on a silver plate. If they only knew how you and I were almost bankrupt more than once.”

Shane leads me over to the wall with a long drink shelf and a few empty stools. “Look I get it Jared. I do. I’m sorry it turned out that way. But don’t let this ruin your dating life. Did you get to ask her any personal questions? You know about her family, friends, anything?”

I glance down at my beer rubbing my finger over the label sticker on the bottle. “Not really. I talked about the company mainly.”

Shane hits the side of my arm. “Jared, I’m not condoning her behavior, but if you don’t try to get know someone and all you talk about is business, they’re going to ask you questions about business assuming you don’t want to talk about anything else in your life.”

I stand leaning against the wall when my eyes catch movement in the corner of the pub and I see a woman with

long wavy brown hair playing pool with another woman. She looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place her. Her smile beams bright as she laughs with the other woman. I catch my mouth open and close it to swallow. I have half a thought to go over to her and see if I can salvage my evening. I stop my thought. It would probably go worse than dinner with Melanie.

"Earth to Jared," I hear Shane say.

I look over to see him eyeing me. "Sorry, just distracted."

"Look Jared. Just shake this night off. Don't let it ruin dating. We all have bad dates. You can move past it."

"Right," I say. I glance back over at the woman with wavy brown hair. She's taking a shot at the pool table and the ball goes in the pocket. She raises her hands in victory, smiling, doing a little dance. My heart beats a bit faster. What is happening? I look down at the ground and turn my attention to Shane. "Thanks for meeting me here, but I'm getting tired. I'm gonna call it a night and head home."

"Yeah. Sure." I can hear the disappointment in Shane's voice. I pat him on the arm telling him we'll have a guys' night out soon and make my way to the exit.

I drive home in silence. Tonight, has been mentally tedious but also strange. After Melanie's money questions and then the woman distracting me at the bar it's hard to even know what feelings I have. I'm annoyed that Melanie found it appropriate to ask me about money, but Shane's point leaves me more frustrated. I didn't think I talked that much about work and even if I did, I'm not sure that is an invitation for someone to

voice their assumptions about how much I make. Then at the bar I was completely distracted by the woman playing pool. Something about her intrigued me, but none of that matters seeing as I probably will never see her again.

I close the front door behind me and head to the kitchen. Just as I place my phone down on the counter my phone buzzes incessantly. My parents are trying to Facetime me. I throw my head back and sigh. I love them, but tonight is just not the time but I know if I don't answer it, they'll just try calling me until I pick up or text them.

I click. "Hey mom. Dad. It's ten-thirty. Seems a bit late for a call. Is everything okay?"

I see my mom look over to my dad. Their faces are taking up the entire screen and all I can see is a small sliver of the sofa they're sitting on.

"Jared, we haven't heard from you in a while. The only time we can talk is at this ungodly hour because you're always in the office."

I smile. "Right mom. So how are things?"

My dad leans in closer to the camera and now I just see his eyeball. "Dad, sit back on the sofa. You're really close to the screen," I say.

"Sorry son. Is this better?" It's not, but I can't bring myself to tell him. "Things here are good. Rachel has her hands full but we're babysitting as much as we can trying to help out. That's why we're calling. We want to give her a break and do

a family dinner soon. Can you make it?” My dad leans his ear into the camera like he’s waiting for my response.

“Of course. Just give me the date and I’ll put it on my calendar.”

I see my mom smile and clap her hands. “Great, I’ll text you once we have Rachel and Jeff on board. They just need to get a sitter.”

A few seconds of silence fill the space when my mom finally shrugs. “So, have you been seeing anyone?”

And there it is. My parents casually asking about my personal life. They mean well and I am grateful they have never pushed a blind date my way. I know they want me to settle down, but there’s no chance I’m telling her about my date.

“No mom. Just working,” I say nodding.

“Jared we love you. We are just looking out for you. We don’t want you to end up alone. You’re such a catch honey. You deserve a great woman.”

I feel my throat tighten and my breathing grow shallow. I need to end this call. “I know mom. We can talk about it another time. It’s late. I’ll talk to you later. Text me about dinner.”

“Okay dear.” My mom waves at me. “Talk later son,” my dad says.

I click off the screen and put my phone back on the counter taking a seat on a stool. I can feel heat rising from my stomach

as it makes its way into my chest, up my neck, landing in my cheeks. I grab a few pieces of ice from the freezer and press them against my face. Within seconds they completely melt, and water falls on the floor. I grab a paper towel, mop up the mess and make my way to my bedroom. I sit on the edge of my bed taking off my suit jacket. It feels like it's ninety degrees in here. I stand and take off my shirt and kick off my shoes, rubbing my hands down my face. The entire house is still and quiet and all I hear is my breathing. I have suddenly become hyperaware how alone I am.

Chapter Five

Lacey

It's only ten a.m. and I'm on my fifth cup of coffee. I sit at my desk going through emails, documents and spreadsheets. Our team is big, but we have multiple projects of varying sizes happening all at once. I am trying to keep up with all the requests and questions. I've only been here a few weeks and I am starting to feel a little overwhelmed. The bakery has been up and down. Some days have been slow, others busy. I am hoping the foot traffic becomes more consistent to help us reach our monthly goals. But right now, I am reviewing numbers for a smaller project involving deploying some new app that the tech team has developed. My fingers are busily typing when I hear David's voice just outside my door. I stand to greet him in the hallway. He's reviewing a paper in his hands and the look on his face is concerning.

"Hey David. Everything okay?" I ask quietly not wanting to draw attention.

He glances up quickly then back down. “Hi. So, Lacey did you submit that report to the sales team?”

I pinch my lips together trying to understand his question. “Sales team?” I ask.

“Yes, the one regarding the new project for the field sales reps.”

My breath stops. I vaguely remember David telling me about the project on Friday afternoon, but I was unsure if he needed something from me. I assumed he was just giving me information about the project but apparently by the look he’s giving me, I should have clarified.

“Oh, right. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I needed to get a report to them. I can work on it right now though,” I say hoping to redeem myself.

David breathes in heavily. “Don’t worry about it. I can take care of it. I know there’s a lot going on and there’s other priorities.”

“Are you sur–”, I stop midsentence and direct my eyes over David’s shoulder as Mr. Whitmore is walking our way. David sees that I’m looking over his shoulder and turns his back to me.

“Morning Mr. Whitmore,” David says cheerfully.

“David. Just who I’m looking for. Listen, I’ve been thinking, and I might need to select two leaders from your team for this expansion project. Just to be accountable and manage the team’s deliverables.”

I stand straight with my head forward trying hard not to show my nerves. Mr. Whitmore's presence makes all my senses go on high alert. And today, his black suit matches his hair, which showcases his light eyes even more. Today I can see they're gray. Like the light foggy gray that rolls off the mountains in the early morning. I swallow and feel my stomach warm. His suit is just like the navy one I saw him in. It's made for his body leading me to wonder if he has them custom made. He stands a few inches taller than David, and based on my calculation he must be around six-foot-two. His complexion is flawless, and his lips look soft. *Stop looking at him like he's a brownie that you're ready to devour.*

I look down at the carpet letting them speak to each other for a few minutes as I contemplate my next move. This seems like a good opportunity to at least reintroduce myself or say something intelligent. After they come to a pause in their conversation, I lift my chin smile.

"Mr. Whitmore if there's anything I can be of assistance with please just let me know," I say hoping that elicits at least some eye contact. He hasn't even noticed I am standing here the entire time he's been in conversation with David. My words apparently go unheard as he nods at David and gives him a pat on the side of the arm and continues down the hall. I stand frozen. That was not what I was expecting. David looks at me and I can tell he thinks I'm surprised by Mr. Whitmore's reaction or lack thereof.

"Don't worry about it. Mr. Whitmore can take a while to warm up to new faces. Don't take it personal."

I nod. “No, right. Understandable.”

I don’t know what to think. But before I let myself get too far into my own thoughts David motions for me to head into my office with him. I take a seat at my desk as he stands in the doorway.

“Look, based on what Mr. Whitmore wants right now he is going to have to select two people from this team to be project leaders. It’s a lot of extra work but it also pays extra. If you’re interested just fill out the project leader form on our shared drive. Everyone that wants a chance to be a leader has to submit one and he will make the decision. This could be a good way to show your initiative to the big boss too.”

I nod. “Thanks David. I will do that. And thanks for offering your help earlier.”

“No problem. I’ll catch up to you later,” David says as he exits my office.

I close my eyes. So the CEO who just ignored me is going to select the girl who has been here less than a month and who he just ignored? I snort in a breath. It’s a long shot to say the least. I take the last gulp of my coffee which has now turned lukewarm. I don’t even care because my mind is racing with a million thoughts, and I don’t want to stop and go refill my cup. I shut my office door, sit back in my chair sighing out loud. I pull out my phone to do a quick check-in with Beth.

Me: Morning! How are things going?

Beth: Slow. I'm going to send Ashley home early and then take stock.

Me: Okay. Sounds good.

Beth: How about you?

Me: Well, the CEO basically just ignored me.

Beth: What do you mean?

Me: I asked if he wanted my help and he literally ignored me.

Beth: I'm sure you're just imagining it.

Me: I've had five cups of coffee so I doubt it.

Beth: Slow down with the caffeine! Do you really care that he ignored you?

Me: Well yeah. It was rude.

Beth: I feel like you're not telling me something.

Me: Like what?

Beth: I don't know. My spidey-senses tell me you might like him.

Me: Like him? I don't even know the man. I have spoken two sentences to him since I started here.

Beth: Right. But I'm not an idiot. Jared Whitmore is well known in this town, and not just because of his contributions to the community.

Me: Ok?

Beth: Lace. He's a seriously good-looking guy. Not like I haven't seen his picture.

Me: He's handsome. So what.

Beth: You can be attracted to him. Just say it.

Me: I'm not attracted to him.

Beth: I call bull.

Me: Whatever. I'm not attracted to him. I'll talk to you later. Gotta get back to work!

Beth: *eye roll emoji*. Who's ignoring who now!? We aren't done with this conversation!

I laugh and put my phone back in my bag and go download the project leader form David told me about then I tab over to my inbox that now has twenty new emails. I'm not sure if I can handle the extra responsibility if I'm chosen to be a team leader but I know I have to try. The extra money alone would be worth the stress. And if it means I might get to see a super handsome CEO a little more, then that's just an added bonus.

Chapter Six

Jared

It's six o'clock and I'm in my office looking out the window down at the people below. I think back to this afternoon. I did notice Lacey as I was talking to David. Her name came to me about five minutes after I left her and David in the hallway. Then as I walked back to my office it struck me that she was the woman playing pool the other night. I was sure of it. Even in her casual clothes that woman had the same hair and figure. *A very nice figure.*

The sound of shuffling takes me away from the window. I glance down the hall and see Diane gathering her things. I step out and walk down the short hallway to her desk.

“Diane, this is the second night you're here late. Is everything okay?” I ask, hoping there isn't something I need to sign or return to her that is making her late. I try my best to get everything back as fast as possible but if I'm honest sometimes the day gets away from me and I forget.

She smiles at me. “Oh no Mr. Whitmore. I’m just getting a head start on tomorrow. Are you heading out soon? Don’t forget to eat.”

And there’s the real reason Diane is sitting here late. She’s making sure I don’t stay too late and that I have a plan to feed myself. A part of my chest aches. I don’t want anyone worrying about me, especially my assistant.

“You’ll be happy to know I’m meeting Shane for dinner in a half hour,” I say.

Diane’s face beams at me with delight. “Oh good! I’m so happy to hear that. Well you have fun and I’ll see you tomorrow Mr. Whitmore.”

I’ve tried over the years to get her to call me Jared. After ten years of being my assistant I hate that it still feels so formal. But she refuses to do so, so I don’t push the subject anymore.

“Thanks Diane. See you tomorrow.”

Shane and I get in my SUV and decide where we are going to eat. We need a place that’s not too noisy so we can talk about the new project.

Shane looks over at me from the passenger seat. “Let’s go to the other side of town. There’s that great Tex-Mex place over on Mountain View. I haven’t been there in ages and tacos sound really good right now.”

“I’ll never say no to tacos.”

I drive through the busy streets and cross over the bridge to the west side of town. It’s not as busy over here but there’s a

good array of shops and a few places to eat that warrant attention. The Happy Avocado being one of them. I sometimes totally forget about this place, but once you have their guacamole it never leaves you. I slow as we turn on the street looking for a place to park.

Shane and I stuff our faces with more chips, tacos and guacamole than any person should. It was great to toss some ideas about the new project with Shane at the same time eating food that didn't taste like a boxed frozen dinner. As I turn the corner and slow to a stoplight, Shane points to the right up a few blocks.

“Has that place always been there?” I see him squint trying to read the sign. “*Baked and Sugared*. Huh. Must be a bakery or maybe a cake place of some sort right?”

I don't recall the name of the shop, but it's painted bright pink distinguishing itself from the other shops on the street. A bakery seems like an obvious answer.

“Pull over. Let's stop in and get something,” Shane says motioning to an empty parking spot just outside the building.

Shane has always had a sweet tooth. When Diane brings in cookies, she purposefully brings in an extra tin just for Shane. She puts his name on it and everything. At Christmas his brother sends him a box of assorted candy from a store near his hometown back on the East Coast. He generally eats it within days. How his body functions with all that sugar is beyond me.

We get out and Shane opens the door. A soft bell chimes and I am hit with the aroma of freshly baked cookies. My stomach growls. We look down at the cases. They are full of various pastries, cookies and brownies. Everything looks perfect as each item sits on a little paper doily and is organized in a neat straight line. A woman emerges from the back wiping her hands on a towel. I do a double take. It's that woman again. I blink a few times as my brain snaps into gear. *Lacey*.

She glances at us looking just as surprised. "Oh, hello Mr. Whitmore."

"Hi. Lacey right?" I say knowing that is her name but wanting confirmation anyway.

"Yes. The new senior financial analyst," she says.

"Right. We were just driving by and Shane couldn't resist," I say, looking at Shane who has been eyeing each case a little too eagerly.

"Have you met Shane?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't remember. I mean, I've met so many people since I started, it's hard to keep track."

I nudge Shane. "Shane is our Chief Operations Officer."

Shane breaks his brownie trance and gives Lacey a smile. "Hi there. Nice to meet you. I'm sure we'll cross paths more at work. So, what do you recommend? Everything looks amazing."

Lacey laughs. "Well, thanks. Um, if you like chocolate I'd go for the ganache brownies, if you like peanut butter the

deluxe peanut butter cookies are great, or um, if you like fruit the linzer cookies are one of my specialties.”

I can see Shane starting to salivate. I’m guessing everything she just mentioned Shane would eat.

I turn to Lacey. “How about you give us an assortment. You pick,” I say hoping to hurry this along. I can feel my palms growing sweaty as I stand watching her box up our items. My mouth feels a bit dry. I should have had some water with dinner instead of that beer.

“How about some iced coffee to go with this?” Lacey asks looking my way.

I swallow, feeling my throat scratch. “Oh, that’d be great. Just black for me.”

“Same for me,” Shane says.

I pull out my wallet and I can see Shane doing the same as Lacey heads to the register. She hands me the box over the counter and then our coffees. I shuffle through my cash pulling out twenties. I can feel her eyes on me which is making heat crawl up my legs into my gut.

“Oh, no Mr. Whitmore. Really. This is on the house.”

I stand unsure what to do. I’m no stranger to people sending me free things or giving me discounts, but for some reason this strikes me differently.

I look over to see Shane furrowing his brow. “Oh, no, it’s okay. We wouldn’t want to get you in trouble,” Shane says.

She gives us a half-hearted smile. “Well seeing as I’m the boss of this place I’m pretty sure it’s okay.”

I pause as I pass Shane his coffee. I’m not sure if she’s just kidding around or serious but either way it’s not my place to pry. Shane motions for us to go to the small table sitting empty in the corner. We sit and Shane immediately opens the box putting his nose close.

“Mmmmm. I’m totally going for one of these brownies.”

I sit appalled as Shane scoops up the brownie and takes a huge bite. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen Rachel’s kids have better manners than this. Shane eyes my disapproval and smiles at me. “What? I’m still hungry. Jared, you have to try something. This brownie is amazing.”

I stare at him for a moment shaking my head. I take the plastic knife Lacey left us in the box and cut a piece of a cookie. I’m not even sure this should be called a cookie because it’s larger than the palm of my hand and thicker than a piece of bread. It smells like it has peanut butter oozing out of it. I casually place it in my mouth, and it immediately begins to melt on my tongue. I can taste the peanut butter, brown sugar and I’m pretty sure a hint of vanilla. It is the best cookie I’ve ever had.

I glance over at Lacey behind the counter where she’s busily wiping down the cases. She stops abruptly as another woman comes out from the back giving her a quick hug then the woman makes her way to the door and exits. I look at Shane

who has stopped eating his brownie; his eyes following the woman's moves.

“Seriously?” I say.

“What? I'm just looking.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Look at your brownie instead.”

Shane chuckles and dives back into the box of pastries. I decide to walk over to Lacey because I'm certain I didn't thank her for her generosity. I'm also feeling a bit guilty I didn't interact with her earlier in the day when I was talking to David. The least I can do is thank her.

“Lacey, thank you for the coffee and box of pastries,” I say as she raises her gaze to meet mine.

“Oh, no problem Mr. Whitmore. I'm glad you are enjoying them.”

I clear my throat and look down at the ground. I should walk away now but something about her presence behind that counter is making me stand still. I glance around realizing that Shane and I are the only two customers that entered the shop in the last twenty minutes, which piques my curiosity.

“Is it usually this slow?” I ask.

Lacey pulls a smile and cocks her head. She pauses before answering which makes me even more curious. I would think this should be an easy question to answer.

“Well, every day is a bit different. The mornings are generally busier but we, we meaning me and my co-owner

Beth who just left, can't seem to find a consistent stream of traffic. We are still trying to figure it all out. That's why I'm working at Whitmore Tech, so we can get some extra money to make sure we can keep this place open."

I nod surprised at how much information she tells me including the fact that she is an owner of this place. I feel an immediate sense of a connection to her statement. When Shane and I started Whitmore Tech we both took on a bunch of consulting jobs on the side so we could make enough money to get the company started. There were months of sixty-hour work weeks just trying to make it all happen. It was exhausting but in the end it all paid off. I can't help wanting the same for Lacey.

I give her a small smile. "I see. Well, like I said. Thank you. Enjoy your night."

Lacey gives me a smile as Shane walks up to join me, he tells her "*thank you*" and we exit the shop. I drop off Shane and drive home deciding to take the longer less traveled route. The sun has fully set now, and the trees are casting shadows along the road in the moonlight. I stop at an intersection and look to my left then my right. There are no cars in sight giving me the feeling like I'm driving through some abandoned town. A few more minutes driving down the side road I spot my mailbox and the entrance to my driveway. I turn down the driveway when a sense of not wanting to be home fills me. I park in the garage and sit for a moment listening to the silence. I clear my throat as I head into the kitchen and plug my phone

into my speakers. Looks like Vivaldi is keeping me company tonight.

Chapter Seven

Lacey

The weekend was over in a flash. Most of which I spent at the bakery wondering if Mr. Whitmore would come back in again. I almost fell to my knees when he came in the other night. His presence standing there looking at the pastries made my skin itch. I don't know what I was expecting, but in my fantasy that I replayed over and over in my head, he takes a bite of a double chocolate brownie and tells me it's the best thing he's ever had. With a grin. Not like a little smile, but a genuine ear-to-ear grin. Granted, he did smile a little that night which was just enough for me to notice something else about the man. He has dimples. I mean could he possibly have any more endearing physical characteristics? It should be a crime. I just hope he didn't catch me staring because I practically had drool coming out of my mouth.

I pour myself another cup of coffee and sit at the dining table. I can hear Beth getting out of the shower and I look at

the clock on the wall. We've adjusted easily to our new morning routine. Beth gets out of the shower at six-fifteen, gets ready then cleans the kitchen. While she's in the shower I make the coffee and go through the mail sorting bills and junk mail. I get in the shower at six-thirty, and by seven-thirty we are on the bus.

As I'm in my bedroom getting dressed Beth stands in my doorway. "Knock much?" I say sarcastically.

"Oh please Lace. Like when has that ever been a rule in this place," Beth says shaking her head. "So do you wanna talk about it?" She says to me with her eyebrows perching to her forehead.

"Talk about what?"

"Oh c'mon. You have been in a daydream state all weekend. Don't think I didn't notice. My guess is it has something to do with the fact that your boss came into the bakery the other night."

I look at her with my mouth open. "Well you're wrong. I was just tired. That's all," I say trying to hide the lie.

"Mr. Whitmore is one good-looking man Lace. It's okay to admit you think he's attractive."

"Yeah, okay. So he's attractive. I think every woman in this town would say so too."

Beth squeezes her lips together and stares at me. "Yeah but there's a difference in thinking he's attractive and *being* attracted to him. I can tell you like him. I think you want a

little piece of him for yourself,” she laughs sitting on the edge of my bed.

I stand at my closet shuffling the clothes hangers trying to pick out a pencil skirt. I find my favorite charcoal gray skirt and unhook it from the hanger grateful designers have decided to put spandex in everything these days.

I know there’s no reason for me not to tell Beth the truth. She sees right through me and it’s more of a chore for me to hide it than just tell her what I’m feeling.

“Look. I don’t know what it is. He’s kinda mysterious. I can’t help but want to know more about him. And not from the internet. The night he came in I felt like he wanted to have a conversation with me but for some reason kept it short. It’s hard for me to imagine a man like that doesn’t have much to say.”

“Well, you’re probably right. I say next time you see him gently touch his arm. See how he reacts.”

“Beth, I can’t do that at work!”

Beth stands at the foot of my bed and nudges me. “Whatever you say Lace. I’d do it. Just for fun if nothing else.”

I shake my head and finish getting ready. Beth’s idea is a great way for me to either instantly get fired or have a sexual harassment complaint filed against me. The thought of even touching Mr. Whitmore sends goosebumps down my arms but I need to focus on work because today I should know about who gets to be team leader.

I've made some headway on multiple projects over the last week, and I am feeling good about my progress. I glance down at my empty cup and decide it's time for more caffeine. I'm pretty sure at this point I could send a rocket to the moon with all the coffee I've had. I select a dark roast then press the button. As I wait for the coffee pot to brew, I see David enter the room.

"Morning David," I say with a smile.

"Good morning. Hey, I just sent you an email. We are meeting with the big boss at one o'clock in the conference room."

I swallow. I assume he means our whole team. I'm sure it's just a follow up meeting about the expansion project.

"Oh, okay. I'll be there." I resist the urge to ask for any more details. I'll know soon enough.

I head back to my office and look at my inbox. I accept David's meeting invitation. It's almost time for lunch so I grab my phone and check in with Beth.

Me: Hey-was the morning busy?

Beth: Not really. I mean it was ok. I'm going to send Ashley home early though.

I sigh out loud at my desk. We have to figure out something to get more traffic in the doors.

Me: Ok. Well I have a meeting with Mr. Whitmore at one.

Beth: Oooo. About what?

Me: Not just me. My team I think. At least with David. Anyway, I'm not sure. There's no title on the invite.

Beth: You think it's announcing the team leads?

Me: Maybe. It just seems weird. I don't see any other people on this invite.

Beth: Well it's almost one now. You'll find out! Text me after!

Me: I will.

Beth: Oh, and touch his arm.

Me: You are seriously unreal sometimes.

Beth: You love me.

Me: I do. Even though you're nuts. Talk later.

I head to the conference room and sit at the table tapping my fingers on my notepad. No one else is in the room with me and I feel out of place. After a few minutes David enters and sits across from me at the table. He seems relaxed which makes me settle in my chair. I place my hands in my lap conscious of my tapping habit.

“Good afternoon, David and Lacey,” I hear before I turn to see Mr. Whitmore enter the room. I can barely contain my surprise as he's not wearing his suit jacket or a tie. His blue button-down shirt is neatly tucked in and it is well fitted to his body. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows which let me get a view of his muscular forearms. This man has no idea how he

makes my head spin. Shane enters the room just after him and greets us. Mr. Whitmore sits at the head of the table with Shane in the chair next to him. My leg starts bouncing up under the table and I press my palm into my knee, taking a slow breath hoping no one notices.

“Okay, I know everyone’s time is short, so let’s just get to the point,” Mr. Whitmore says.

I can’t help noticing his demeanor seems slightly different. His face has an almost cheery quality and looks less serious than when he addressed the team.

“You are both here because you are going to be the team leaders for finance on the expansion project.”

I feel my eyes go wide as I look at David across the table. He’s gently nodding his head and seems reserved in his reaction. No one says anything for a few seconds which is making me question if this is really happening. I know Mr. Whitmore said “both” so he clearly means me too. Right?

I clear my throat as my cheeks redden. I know I have to make eye contact, so I lift my chin and direct all my attention to Mr. Whitmore. “Wow. Thank you so much Mr. Whitmore. I’m very excited about this project.” Making eye contact with this man should be an Olympic sport. His stormy gray irises are some sort of superpower. I can only hold his gaze for three seconds before my stomach flips. Across the table I see David come to life as a short grin forms on his lips.

“Yes, Mr. Whitmore. Really thank you. I thought you’d choose another team member, not necessarily myself for this

project,” David says.

“Well we considered that, but I think this one really needs you David. We might add another team leader down the road if necessary, but your track record with things like this is needed right now.”

As Mr. Whitmore is talking to David I suddenly wonder if this was a mistake. I have like a tenth of the experience as some of my team members. Maybe no one else applied for the role? Maybe there’s a reason no one else applied? My mind begins to do circles when Mr. Whitmore stands.

“So, I don’t have much else to offer right now, but Shane will be sending out an email tomorrow with some specifics. Thank you both.”

I see Shane walk over to David and start talking about something that I can’t quite hear. Mr. Whitmore starts his way to the door when I feel the urge to say something to him.

“Mr. Whitmore?” I softly call out.

“Yes. Lacey.”

His voice shudders through my head into my toes. I walk over to him being sure not to crowd him but close enough where I can smell his cologne. It’s something pine. I’m sure of it now and it’s completely distracting. *Focus.*

“Um, again, really thank you for this opportunity,” I say with a smile.

“You’re welcome Lacey. I’m sure you’ll do great. And really, it was Shane who pushed for you to be a team leader.

You should thank him.”

I pause. That is not a piece of information I was expecting. I can't think of any words to say. What is wrong with my brain? I reach out my hand and he places his soft hand in mine. His skin is warm and flawless, and I can barely keep my knees from buckling. I shake his hand once uncurling my fingers slowly then stretching them out slightly letting them slide down the inside of his wrist. Oh my goodness what am I doing? I blink hard to bring myself back to reality. “Right. I will do that. Thank you again.” I'm aware I just repeated myself, but I can't fix it now. I'm sure I'm digging myself a bigger hole with each word I say so I turn away from him as he turns to the door and makes his way into the hallway.

Before I can process anything else David heads my way and congratulates me. His words are soft and his face expressionless. I begin to wonder if he's sincere or just as surprised as I am that I was chosen. I nod and thank him. I go grab my notepad off the table and see Shane busily texting on his phone. Not wanting to interrupt him, I begin to head towards the door.

I'm only a few steps away from the door when I hear Shane call out, “Hey Lacey...”

“Yes?” I look over as he pockets his phone and walks towards me.

“That woman that left the bakery that night I was in the shop. That's your business partner right?”

I form a curious smile. “Yes, her name is Beth. She’s my business partner and best friend. We’re like sisters really,” I pause wondering why I feel the need to identify Beth in more ways than one.

“Right. So if you don’t mind me asking, is she single?”

I hold Shane’s gaze. I can tell he’s serious. “Um, yes, she is.”

Shane smiles. “Great. I might be popping in sooner rather than later then.”

I chuckle and start towards the door with Shane near my side. “You’re welcome any time Shane. I’ll make sure she knows to give you a brownie on the house.”

Chapter Eight

Jared

I'm sitting at a stoplight when I realize I am in silence. I press the playlist button and Bach flows out from the speakers. There's something calming about classical music. It's not all I listen to, but when I'm driving, I like to think, and classical music seems to help me do just that. I take the turn into the parking lot where I'm meeting my parents and sister for an early dinner. Don't get me wrong, I do enjoy our family dinners, but I know I'm going to get asked questions about my social life, so before I get out of my car I pause and lean my head back and take a few deep breaths as I prepare for my responses to their questions. I generally have a set of responses that are always the same. *"No, I'm not seeing anyone."* *"My last date didn't work out."* *"No I'm not interested in anyone right now."* The last one makes me stop for a moment. I can't say I like anyone, but I will admit (only to myself of course) that Lacey has piqued my curiosity. She's interesting. She's

smart. She's attractive. So I might be a little curious about her, but that's about as far as it goes. I think.

I head into the restaurant and spot Rachel waving to me from a corner booth. I walk her way noticing that Jeff isn't sitting beside her. "Where's your husband?"

Rachel taps her hands on the table. "Well, the sitter cancelled last minute so he offered to watch the kids so I could come have dinner with you guys."

I sit next to her and put my hand on top of hers. "Well, tell him thanks, because I'm glad to see you. It's been too long. How are my nieces and nephew doing?"

"Oh, they're driving us crazy. But in a good way. Max and Sara are doing great in school and Danielle is sleeping through the night, thank goodness."

"Glad to hear it. We'll have to have a kid-friendly dinner soon," I say.

"Jared you can stop by any night and have dinner with us. It's a fantastic time. There's usually someone having a tantrum, food all over the table, a tummy ache announcement and it usually ends with me sitting at the table drinking wine."

I laugh. I know my sister is kidding, well, somewhat. She really does take it in stride, and her kids have two amazing parents. I could only wish to be as good a parent. Speaking of parents, we both look up and spot ours entering the restaurant. Rachel waves making sure they see us. My mom waves back

at us and starts to walk faster. You can tell she's excited to see her two kids. As they sit down, they both beam smiles at us.

"Well hello my dears," my mom says.

My mom is the sweetest woman. She loves nothing more than her kids and grandchildren. She's active in the community and volunteers at the animal shelter. As a retired kindergarten teacher, she's still involved in her old school helping with school events. Her heart is as big as they come. I look over at my dad adjusting his glasses. He looks just as happy as my mom.

"Well Jared, I'm glad you could make it. How are things with the business?" My dad asks.

"Good dad. Starting an expansion project soon, which I'm hoping will pay off in the end."

My mom reaches her hand across the table to rest on mine. "Oh honey of course it will. You are so smart. It will be amazing, I'm sure."

My mom has always been a supportive woman. I'm pretty sure I could have told her I wanted to shovel dirt for my career, and she would have bought me the shovel. When I graduated from Harvard you would have thought I won the Nobel prize and when Rachel told her she wanted to be a teacher my mom cried with joy. I'm not jealous that Rachel and my mom have a super close relationship. I would expect that as they share stories about teaching and of course there's the grandkids. Sometimes though, I wish I could give my mom something else.

I smile. “Thanks mom.”

We sit for a few minutes as Rachel tells us funny stories about the kids. We all look at pictures on her phone astonished at how fast they are all growing. My parents seem less surprised, but of course they see them every week, and I’m lucky if I see them once every few months.

We all order our dinners and continue chatting about my mom’s book club, then my dad’s bowling league. It impresses me how active they both are in retirement. There’s a pause in the conversation when I make eye contact with my mom. I can already tell what she’s about to ask.

“So Jared. Anyone new in your life these days?” She asks in the sweetest way possible.

Here’s the thing. I know my mom is not trying to meddle. I give my parents credit for that. Even my sister. No one has ever tried to push a blind date on me or worse a ‘someone-they-know’ date. They all want me to find someone on my own and I know they wish I would date more.

“No mom. But I did go on a date a few weeks ago. It just didn’t click though.” I say, hoping that she’ll see I at least made an effort.

“Oh, well, that’s too bad. There’s more fish in the sea,” she says smiling at me.

My sister nudges my arm. “Yeah, but Jared you can’t date like once a year. You have to get out there more. It’ll take you twenty years to find someone the way you’re doing it.”

My dad chuckles and points his fork at me. “Rachel is right son. Go on more dates. You need to increase your odds.”

My dad was a math teacher and loves to throw math related lingo into any conversation. It still makes me smile.

“You’re right dad. I know. I just have to make some time. That’s all.”

After we finish dinner, we all head out together. We say our goodbyes in the parking lot when I notice Rachel following me to my car.

“Do you need ride?” I ask.

“No you idiot. You’re parked right next to me.”

I look over and see her SUV parked next to me. I’m not sure how I missed it when I pulled in. It’s red and has a bumper sticker that reads “*Honk if a kid falls out.*” My sister’s sense of humor is unique.

“I miss our sibling banter Rach,” I say rolling my eyes.

“I know. I can tell Mr. Serious.”

I shrug my shoulders. “That seems uncalled for,” I say.

She laughs. “Jared c’mon. You’re all rigid and stuff. I get you have a lot on your plate with the business and this new project, but you have got to loosen up a little. Just sitting next to you I could see your jaw clenching. When’s the last time you did anything fun?”

I stop for a second and lean my head back. “Rach, work is fun.”

Rachel crosses her arms and gives me a stern look. “Jared. Work is work. You can like your work. But you have got to get out more. Talk to people. Talk to some *women*.”

I sigh. “Okay. I get it. I’m in my late thirties and I’m not married so I’m a failure,” I say surprising myself and Rachel. I look over and see her eyes getting glassy.

“Jared you are hardly a failure. And be glad mom didn’t hear you say that. You are a super successful guy. You are a great package for any woman. We just want to see you have something you enjoy other than work. You know?”

I nod. “I do. I promise I’ll make more of an effort.”

Rachel leans in to give me a hug. “Talk to you later okay? And seriously, stop by sometime. It’s not like we live that far.”

“I will. Tell everyone hi at home,” I say as I open my car door.

I pull out of the parking lot and head across town. My thoughts veer to the expansion project. I’m not really sure why I pushed for Lacey to be on it, and if I’m honest it was a bit impulsive of me. I know she has the ability to handle it and with David’s support I’m sure she’ll do really well. There’s something about her that is making me root for her. I want her to succeed. I sigh as I pull to stop at the redlight. Instead of going straight to head home, I decide to cross the bridge and take a left onto Main Street. The bright pink *Baked and Sugared* sign stands ahead of me and I pull into a spot on the street. It’s still early and I didn’t have dessert at the restaurant. A deluxe peanut butter cookie sounds delicious right now.

Chapter Nine

Lacey

After Beth and I finish our quick dinner, we begin to clean the counters and get a count of needed items for tomorrow. Today was busy and we sold out of a few things before I got here, and with only a few more hours until we close, I suspect we will have a few hungry late night sweet-toothed customers. Something about cookies and brownies after dinner seems to lure people in. Just as I am writing down the brownie count, I see Shane enter through the door. His blond hair and oversized glasses make him hard to miss. I can hear Beth singing in the back doing some dishes, so I pop my head through the door.

“Hey. Beth! I need you to focus,” I say loudly at the same time giving her a stare like something really important is about to happen.

Beth puts down the muffin pan she’s about to wash and takes off her dish washing gloves. “What? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, just come out front please,” I whisper.

I go back to the counter to properly greet Shane. “Hey Shane. Nice to see you. I’m guessing a brownie or an Oreo bar tonight?” I ask hoping he wants one of those as everything else is almost empty now.

“Hi Lacey. You read my mind. I can’t get that brownie out of my head,” Shane says laughing softly.

“I know. It’s all that French chocolate. It has that affect on people.”

I grab a brownie for Shane and place it in a paper bag. Beth comes through the back door and meets me at the counter taking a glance at Shane before she looks at me. Her eyes tell me good news already. She has the look of “*where did this good-looking guy come from?*” written all over her face.

I nod at her. “Beth, I’d like you to meet Shane. He’s the COO at Whitmore Tech, and apparently a brownie lover.”

Shane guffaws. “That’s an understatement. I’m a proud chocoholic and I admit I might have a problem.”

I watch as Shane reaches over the counter to shake Beth’s hand. Beth reaches out with eagerness, and I can tell she is going all in. Beth isn’t shy when it comes to introducing herself to men. She has always willfully engaged in conversations even with men she wasn’t too impressed with, but right now her body language is telling me she is already interested. Shane is nerdy handsome and the exact type of guy I can see Beth with long term. I gesture to Beth to go around to

the front of the counter. Within seconds I hear them talking and Beth is already laughing. It's a genuine laugh and I can't help but feel some excitement for her. I go in the back to give them a little privacy and finish the dishes Beth started. I'm just about done when I hear the front door chime. I dry my hands and walk out front only to see Mr. Whitmore standing, assessing the situation. I swallow hard wiping my hands on my apron.

“Hi Mr. Whitmore. Nice to see you again,” I squeak out.

“Hi Lacey.” He turns and points to Shane and Beth who are completely engaged with each other and haven't even noticed Mr. Whitmore standing there.

I give him a shrug. “Shane just got here. For you know...a brownie.” I wink.

“Right. A brownie,” Mr. Whitmore says, rolling his eyes.

I almost die right there on the spot. He seriously just rolled his eyes better than a teenage girl. I smile hard. This is the most endearing thing I have seen from this man, and it just stabbed me right in gut and made its way into my heart. My cheeks are now flushed and I'm having trouble focusing. I look at what's in the cases. Cookies. Okay we have cookies. Focus. Offer him something.

“Can I get you a cookie Mr. Whitmore?”

“Actually, that's exactly what I came here for. A peanut butter deluxe if there are any left?” He asks with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

I quickly scan the case and see three left. Thank God. “Do you want the rest. I have three?” I ask.

Mr. Whitmore pauses. “You know what. Yes, give me all three please.”

I quickly package the cookies and hand them over the counter to him. He pulls out his wallet and I wave my hand. “No, really Mr. Whitmore. It’s on the house.”

He looks me in the eyes. I swear his eyes are looking into my soul or through me or maybe he’s just wondering if I’m serious. It doesn’t really matter because his gaze is setting my body on fire.

“Okay. Well, why don’t you come sit with me over at the table then?” He asks.

I practically run around the counter and walk with him to the empty table in the corner. I sit and place my hands in my lap away from his view. I can’t help but rub them over and over as nervous energy shoots through my limbs. Mr. Whitmore places his bag with his cookies on the table and leans towards me.

“Lacey, tell me about this place. What made you open a bakery?”

His voice is quieter than normal. I glance over at Beth who has taken a seat at another table with Shane. Things must be going well. I look down at my lap and bring my hands to the tabletop palms down. The cool wrought iron feels good on my palms. I steady myself and look at Mr. Whitmore. This is the

closest I've seen his eyes, his face, his everything. This man should be in the movies. It takes every ounce of concentration I have to organize my thoughts into comprehensible words.

“Well, growing up it was just my mom and me. And we baked every weekend. She loved it and we tried new recipes all the time. Baking makes me happy and now I feel like I'm honoring her,” I say in one long sentence barely stopping to breathe.

Mr. Whitmore's expression is hard to read. He leans back in his chair and softly nods his head as if to acknowledge my statement is some troubled past I'm still reeling with. The truth is my mom died of ovarian cancer when I was in college, and it did take me years to get over it. I'm still not over it, is anyone really? But my therapist helped me work through it and I'm in a much better place now. Baking reminds me of her every day in the best way possible. I just want to make her proud.

“Not many people can say their work makes them happy. That's something to treasure. You should be doing this full time,” he says.

Mr. Whitmore looks me dead in the eyes. I think for a split second I see his bottom lip tremble just slightly, but it could also be the fact that I'm barely holding myself together sitting across from all his handsomeness staring back at me. I hold his gaze and tap my finger on the table. “That's the goal. Beth and I are getting there. Just got to dig out of a little hole first.”

I can see Mr. Whitmore's jaw clench and unclench and wonder if this is just a habit or if it's his way of choosing his next words. I see his mouth open just slightly when I spot Shane and Beth walking to our table.

"Hey Jared," Shane says.

I hesitate for a minute as my brain processes that Shane just called Mr. Whitmore by his first name. I get that their close friends but hearing his first name makes me weak in the knees. It's just another reminder that Mr. Whitmore may be a CEO and a big name in this town but he's still human and has friends that call him by his first name. This is not helping me not be attracted to him.

Beth gives me a nudge in the arm. I look up at her as she directs her eyes to Mr. Whitmore, and I know what she's asking without saying a word. "Mr. Whitmore. This is Beth. My business partner and best friend."

I watch as Beth takes a step forward and shakes hands with Mr. Whitmore.

Mr. Whitmore smiles as he looks at me then Beth. "Nice to meet you Beth. You and Lacey are putting out some amazing pastries. I'm already hooked on the peanut butter deluxe cookies."

I can see Beth shoot him a smile and in one long sentence her words are out of her mouth. "Well, I don't know any man that doesn't like peanut butter. Unless you have an allergy of course. You don't do you? I mean, you would know that simply by the name of the cookie. I mean you wouldn't go eat

a cookie named peanut butter deluxe if you had a peanut allergy. Obviously. Duh.”

Oh boy. Beth is all doped up on adrenaline. That conversation with Shane must have gone well because I haven't seen her like this in forever. I smile and gently interrupt before Beth embarrasses herself. “So, can I get you both anything else tonight?” I ask, looking at Mr. Whitmore then at Shane.

Shane laughs. “I do want another brownie but I'm not going to get one. I don't want to be greedy.” Shane looks over at Mr. Whitmore and pats him on the shoulder. “So are you ready to meet some potential investors tomorrow?”

I stare up at Shane not sure what he's referring to as he looks at Mr. Whitmore. Mr. Whitmore returns his attention to me, and I freeze not sure what to say.

“Lacey, I was hoping you could join me tomorrow for a meeting with some potential investors for the new project. I could use someone who can run some numbers as we're meeting.”

My heart starts to race. The thought of having a meeting alone with Mr. Whitmore is overwhelming. I know we won't be *alone alone* per se, but just being with him and meeting some potential investors is a big deal. I bite my bottom lip trying to contain my fear and excitement.

“Oh, of course. I'd love to.” That's all I got. I can't even think any more about this or I'll throw up. Right here. Right on Mr. Whitmore's shoes.

“Great. I’ll send you the invite. We can drive to their offices together.”

Oh good. Now I’m going to be alone with him in a car. I feel Beth gently squeeze my shoulder and it takes all I have not to stand up, hug her and squeal like a teenage girl. I don’t know what has gotten into me, but Mr. Whitmore is becoming my workplace crush.

“Lacey, thank you, and check your email for tomorrow. I’m going to head home and dive into one of these cookies.”

Mr. Whitmore stands and gives Shane a pat on the back and nods to both Beth and I as he walks out the door. I can barely breathe but I know I need to hold myself together with Shane still sitting at the table. It’s quiet for a minute when I realize I never thanked Shane for pushing for me to be a team leader. I feel very fortunate that he did and after tonight I am feeling even more grateful.

“Hey, Shane. You were busy talking to David the other day in our meeting, and I didn’t get the chance to thank you for advocating for me to be a team leader. Thank you for that.”

Shane tilts his head at me and furrows his brow. “Oh, well you’re welcome. But it wasn’t me that pushed it. Not that I don’t think you are going to make a great team leader, but it was Jared who really pushed it.”

I sit still. This night has become even more interesting.

Chapter Ten

Jared

It's almost nine a.m. and I'm about to head down to the lobby to meet Lacey. We have a big meeting with some potential investors and while that doesn't make me nervous, I feel like my stomach is doing flips. It's probably because I ate one of those amazing peanut butter deluxe cookies for breakfast. I make a mental note to have a smoothie tomorrow morning. I down my last gulp of coffee and grab my briefcase.

I can see Diane typing away and I do a quick check-in with her. "Diane, I'm meeting some potential investors this morning and probably won't be back until after lunch."

Diane smiles and then reaches under her desk. This can only mean one thing. She is going to feed me. I can't say I'm not happy as my stomach churns with sugar and butter.

"Morning Mr. Whitmore. Here. I brought you some homemade banana bread." Diane hands me a small loaf that

feels heavier than a brick.

“Diane, what could possibly be in this that it weighs this much?” I ask, lifting it up and down in my hand.

“Well, I packed it with raisins, pecans and I used almond flour and unsweetened applesauce. So it really is much healthier than most banana breads. Just trying to keep you fueled. Maybe you want to take it with you and share it with Miss Lacey?”

I laugh and shake my head. I know Diane knows my schedule and meetings better than I do so it doesn't surprise me she knows Lacey is a part of this meeting. Diane seems to smile longer than normal though, her eyes giving me a look of...something. It's kind of like that look a friend would give you waiting for you to respond about what they just said.

“Good idea Diane. Thank you.” I grab the bread and retreat down the hallway to the elevator.

As I exit the elevator into the lobby, I see Lacey standing in my view with her bag on her shoulder. She's in a black pant suit with heels. A red satin shirt peeks out from her blazer. Her hair is half pulled back with waves falling just over her shoulder. I don't know if she wears makeup, but her face is glowing. She looks stunning and my mouth is starting to salivate. I swallow hard as I make eye contact.

“Good morning, Lacey. Ready to go?” I ask.

“Yes Mr. Whitmore. Um, I see you brought breakfast?” She asks staring at the loaf of banana bread in my hand which I

completely forgot about.

“Oh, yes. Diane brought this for me. Well for us. She thought we might need a snack on the way to the meeting.”

I can tell Lacey is somewhat surprised at the gesture, so I add, “Diane likes to bring me food for some reason. She feeds me more often than I care to admit. I never pass it up though because she is a great cook.”

Lacey gives me a look of approval. “Oh, that was so nice of her. Can’t wait to try it,” she says smiling at me.

Her smile is killing me at the moment. It’s sweet and perfect. Her lips are shiny but not too shiny. I have to focus. This meeting is a big deal. Maybe asking Lacey to go with me was a really bad idea but it’s too late now. I can’t even remember the last time I felt anything close to this. Maybe I *have* been out of the dating game too long. I quickly regroup remembering we are about to meet a bunch of people I’m trying to convince to give Whitmore Tech money to fund the next expansion project and this is not a date.

“Okay, let’s head to my car. I’m right out front,” I say, realizing that was a dumb thing to point out seeing as there is a parking spot right on the street marked ‘*CEO.*’

As we drive, I tell Lacey to unwrap the bread and take a piece. It’s a little messy, and without any utensils, crumbs are falling on the floor which normally would set me into a panic, but right now it’s like I don’t even notice. I see Lacey enjoying a nice chunk that she carefully broke off with her hands.

There's something about the way she's enjoying it that makes me want a piece right this very second.

“Lacey, break me off a piece would you please?” I glance over and see her pause just for a second then she goes in and carefully breaks a piece. My brain is starting to compute things that I didn't know it could, and before I can slow it down, I say, “just feed it to me so I can keep two hands on the wheel.” I start to sense beads of sweat forming on the back of my neck as my heart starts to race.

I glance at Lacey who looks like a deer in headlights. Who wouldn't? I, her boss, who she barely knows, just asked her to feed me a piece of banana bread. I need to abort this mission. But I'm not even sure what I'm trying to abort. Before I know it, Lacey's fingers are in front of my mouth with a piece of banana bread. I gently take the whole piece in one bite. I think I feel her fingers linger there a touch too long, but I'm not sure. I have no idea what's going on right now. I swallow the bread taking a second before I look over at her.

“Thanks. That is good banana bread. I mean, it's not a peanut butter deluxe cookie, but it is good.”

I hear Lacey softly laugh. “It is good. And thank you for liking my cookies.”

I need to change the subject. Fast. This is getting too... something.

“So let me tell you about these potential investors...” I start to say, when she interrupts.

“No need. I did some research on them already. Based on their annual report they have plenty of revenue to invest in something this big, and they probably should. They haven’t made any major investments in a few years, so my guess is this is perfect timing. They’re tech people. We make tech products. It’s a perfect fit if you ask me. I don’t know how much you want them to invest, but if I were you, I’d go big.”

My mouth opens. Everything Lacey just said lights a fire in me. I could reach over and kiss her right this second. I give myself exactly ten seconds to imagine kissing her before I feel my stomach churn and acid crawl up my throat. My breathing starts to become faster and I’m having trouble getting a full breath. I slowly pull over onto the shoulder and park the car. I can not let this happen right now, but I don’t seem to have much control at the moment. I try to think of some intelligent words to say when I see Lacey shift in her seat and face me. She directs me to look at her, so I do.

“Hey, Mr. Whitmore. You’re okay. Look at my fingers and pretend they’re candles. Now slowly take a breath and blow out each one.”

I stare at her completely mortified. I obey her because it feels like the right thing to do. When I am done blowing out her fifth finger candle, I can feel my heart begin to settle in my chest. I need to say something. She’s staring at me as concern spreads across her face. She needs to know I’m fine and nothing like this will happen during the meeting.

“Sorry about that. I just got a little overwhelmed.” I say, hoping we can just drop it.

“Mr. Whitmore it happens to everyone. I’m no stranger to anxiety, and it can creep up on you. I’ve read every self-help book on the market about coping strategies. Anyway, if you’re good, let’s keep going so we aren’t late to the meeting okay?”

I am taken aback by her response. The ease which she lets this go without further conversation leaves me feeling grateful because in less than twenty minutes we are about to ask for a lot of money from some very wealthy executives.

The meeting went well. Really well. And I have Lacey to thank for it. She not only had a bunch of numbers already calculated out for them, but she advocated why this would be a good project for them to invest in. That’s *my* job, but I wasn’t about to complain. She hit it out of the ballpark. This woman continues to impress me by the minute. As we turn down East Street I see one of my favorite restaurants. It’s near lunchtime and everyone has to eat lunch right? I did tell myself I would do better at eating, so this is the perfect opportunity to get some real food that’s not a cookie or banana bread.

“Have you been to The Flats?” I ask casually.

Lacey looks over to see the restaurant as we near. “Oh, no I haven’t. I hear it’s great though.”

“Well, this is your lucky day. Let’s get some lunch. They have a great menu and I’m hungry after all that talking.”

The truth is I'm not that hungry, but I know I'm not ready to leave Lacey yet.

Lacey turns to me. "Oh, that sounds like a great idea."

She seems reserved in her reaction. Maybe she's feeling the tension. Maybe I'm the one putting off the tension? I don't know. I can't tell. I just know I feel different around her and I need to try to figure out what the heck this is.

We sit by the windows and order our food. I get grilled salmon with a salad and Lacey orders grilled chicken with asparagus. The food is delicious and after talking about the meeting some more I decide to change the topic.

"So Lacey, are you from Littleford?" I ask, figuring it's an easy question to start with.

"No actually. I'm from Henderson. Nevada. Beth and I went to college together there and she dragged me back here to Utah because she's from here. I fell in love with the town, so I haven't left. What about you? Well, I mean I know you are because of your family name, but I guess what I'm asking is... I don't know... I... um..."

I stop her, though watching her facial expressions as she thinks is making my skin itch. "The Whitmore name right. Well, it's funny because it's really my grandfather who was the big businessman and gave a lot of his money to the community. But when he passed, he left my dad with a big trust and my dad just wanted to teach math so that's what he did but uses the trust to fund community projects and help out small businesses. He loves this town."

“Oh, that’s really generous of him,” she says.

She’s right. Most people who get a large trust probably wouldn’t give huge sums of money to their hometown or help out small businesses, but that’s exactly what my dad does, and I try to follow in his shoes. We spend the next half hour making small talk about everything from the weather to music (which I was surprised to learn that she loves classical music too). She answers everything in a cheery and positive light. Even when her mom’s passing enters the conversation, she handles it with grace.

On the ride back to the office there’s comfortable silence. It’s not awkward and I don’t get the sense either of us are itching to fill it. I’m not sure why it wouldn’t be comfortable. This certainly isn’t a date; even I know a work lunch doesn’t count as a date. Why am I thinking about this? I do not want to date. Do I? Before I can let my brain digest whether I want to date or not I pull into my spot outside the building. We head into the lobby and press the button in the elevator to our floor. I look at Lacey who gives me a partial smile hoping she enjoyed our lunch. As we climb to the tenth floor the silence starts to eat at me.

“Lacey, thank you for today. You were great, and I think we sold them on it,” I say in my most calm and professional voice as my body fights the urge to lean closer to her.

“Anytime Mr. Whitmore. I think we did great too. And thank you for lunch. I plan on going back there soon to get the salmon.”

The elevator chimes as the door opens. We step off and Lacey goes down the hall to the right. It takes every ounce of my being not to follow her, but I head to the left hallway and make my way to my office.

Today was a good day and I need to leave it at that.

Chapter Eleven

Lacey

If anyone asks me how my week was, I might answer with a larger smile on my face than normal. Not many people get to say they were a shining star in an important meeting with their boss or that they had a really nice lunch with their boss or the best one of all; *that they fed banana bread to their boss in their boss's car*. That day couldn't have been any better. I still haven't forgotten about Mr. Whitmore's anxiety attack on our way to the meeting, and for some reason I don't think it's my place to question it. I'm glad I could help him, but I hope for his sake it's not something that occurs frequently.

Being with him felt different that day. I got to know more about his family and the way he spoke of his parents and sister was sweet. They all clearly love each other and have a strong relationship. Being an only child and parent-less I couldn't help but feel a little jealous but also happy for him.

There was definitely some type of tension happening between us, and I wouldn't even know how to describe it. Suspenseful maybe. After I told Beth all the details, she decided to call it 'edge of your seat flirting.' Supposedly it's flirting that's just waiting to erupt into something more. I don't know if I agree with her, but I certainly wouldn't mind if something else were to happen, which is crazy because I am an employee, and he is the CEO. It's completely off limits so nothing is going happen. But all of that doesn't even matter right now because as I sit at my little desk in the back of the bakery, I'm doing our numbers. Things look better but not great. I need to come up with something else to bring in more revenue.

I can hear Beth putting pans in the oven. It must be brownie baking time. I decide it's now or never to have a conversation with her.

"Hey Beth—when you're done can you come here for a minute?" I say, casually trying to hide my trepidation. I'm not worried about having the conversation with Beth, I'm worried about not finding a way to make more money.

"Coming Lace. One sec. I just need to give Ashley this new batch of brownies to put up front."

I hear her wheel out the cooling rack to Ashley and as she makes her way to my office, I can hear her shoes squeak on the linoleum floor. Which reminds me the floor is just one of the many things that need replacing around here. It's chipped in places and it's not food service friendly. If I could put in

new floors, refresh the paint, get a new deck oven and a proofer we could double our baking. I'm just not sure I can make those numbers work.

“Hey Lace. What's up?”

“We're doing okay but not great. I think we need to think about something else we can do to increase revenue. I know you're doing great with all the marketing stuff, and that has helped. I was thinking of maybe offering a new product. What about artisanal bread? Supply wise it's cheap to make, but it would be tough with our limited oven space.”

Beth starts to chew on her bottom lip. She does this when she's thinking, and I know to give her a few seconds to soak in all the information. She starts to nod her head. “I say we try it. Want to do a test batch?”

I appreciate how easy-going Beth is, and with her limited knowledge of baking it's up to me to figure out what we're going to do, but luckily, I already have something in mind.

“I have this recipe for a hard crusted parmesan boule that I think would be great. They're easy to shape and they don't take too long to proof. I think we have most of the ingredients here already. Let me start a batch and if you like it, I'll show you the steps.”

“Sounds good Lace. I'm all for the bread idea. You know I love me some carbs.”

The dough comes together quick and with the temperature in the bakery being a million degrees it proofs much faster than it

should. Something I'll need to explain to Beth later. The bake time was just under a half hour, and I'm figuring with our oven space we can fit six loaves in at a time. I take out my test loaf and put it on the rack to cool. Its dark crust looks beautiful and the parmesan infused aroma is making my stomach growl.

I head over to the dish sink when I spot movement to my left. Beth peeks her head through the door then she takes a few steps in the back with her eyes wide like something is wrong. She's not saying anything, so this can not be good.

I lower my voice to a whisper. "What's wrong?" I ask completely trying not to freak out.

"Well, um. I was just saying bye to Ashley, when Shane and Mr. Whitmore pulled up. Looks like they're heading in."

The way Beth says it makes me frantic. I run back into my office, rip off my apron and smooth my shirt. I check my hair in the tiny mirror on the wall and grab some lip gloss from my bag. I smack my cheeks to get some color because I'm sure right now I look white as a sheet. Beth senses what I'm doing then comes in to do the same. We stop and face each other.

"It's good. We're fine. Everything is fine. Why are we acting like this?" I ask Beth as urgency fills my voice.

"Because there's two very handsome men coming into our store and I'm pretty sure we each like one of them."

I pause. Beth hasn't been totally forthcoming with her interactions with Shane. I haven't pushed it either because she hasn't pushed asking me about Mr. Whitmore.

I rush my words as any minute we need to be out front to greet them. “Wait, are you telling me you like Shane? Like you’re interested?”

Beth nods. “Lace, not now. Later. We have to go out there.”

We both walk to the front with smiles on our faces. Shane is scouring over the brownie case while Mr. Whitmore is eyeing the fresh cookies sitting on the cooling rack behind me.

“Hi Mr. Whitmore. Shane.” I say, happy my voice doesn’t squeak or crack.

“Hi Lacey. Beth. Shane and I clearly have developed an addiction to cookies and brownies.”

I see Shane turn to Mr. Whitmore. “Jared, speak for yourself. I have always had a chocolate addiction. This isn’t newly developed.”

Everyone laughs at Shane’s comment as I try to wrangle my nerves. My stomach gets fluttery hearing Mr. Whitmore’s first name again. I wonder what his name would sound like if I said it?

“Well, if you’re in the mood for something different, want to try the amazing bread Lacey just baked?” Beth asks, tapping her hand on the counter.

Mr. Whitmore turns his attention to me. “I would love to try it,” he says giving me a grin. His smile makes my mouth dry. I know I can’t, but the urge to touch him is driving me nuts. I hurry to the back and retrieve the loaf. I put it on the cutting board on the counter and slice everyone a generous piece. It’s

still warm so I grab a small dish of butter with a knife and put a little on each piece. I want to feed it to Mr. Whitmore just like I did the banana bread. *Get yourself together*. There are a few seconds of silence as everyone chews, then Shane stops mid-chew. “Oh my God. This is amazing. What is this? Parmesan?”

“Yes, it’s a parmesan crusted boule.” I say, as I take another bite. Not to toot my own horn, but it’s exactly how it’s supposed to taste. The crust is just hard enough, and the crumb of the bread is tender. It’s a winner for sure.

Mr. Whitmore looks back at me. “Lacey, this is incredible. Are you going to sell it? Because this would fly off the shelves.”

I smile at him. His face lights up as he puts another piece in his mouth. Then he licks butter off his finger. He has no idea what he’s doing to me.

I clear my throat. “Well, I think so. To do it right I need to get another oven and maybe a proofer. But that’ll require me getting a loan or maybe a grant.”

I see Beth out of the corner of my eye put her arm into Shane’s and walk him over to the table leaving me and Mr. Whitmore at the front. There’s something going on between them. I’ll have to squeeze it out of her later though because right now I have Mr. Whitmore standing in front of me looking delicious as ever. Yes. Delicious. This bread is going to my brain.

“Well, I’d say look for a grant first. I can help you write the proposal if you want?”

“Oh, thanks Mr. Whitmore. I might do that.” I’ll do anything at this point if it means I get to have more interaction with this man. He’s charming me, and he doesn’t even know it. I hold Mr. Whitmore’s gaze and I can tell he has something else to say. I wait patiently hoping it’s something I want to hear.

“Lacey, I did come with some good news. Those potential investors are no longer potential. They are in on the new project. And they’re having a dinner party with all their people and have invited myself and Shane.”

I beam up at him. “Mr. Whitmore that is great news! I’m happy that worked out.” I am so glad that the meeting went well. The amount of money Mr. Whitmore asked them to invest was substantial and I know with their backing he will only need one or maybe two more investors.

“Well, Lacey, I wanted to ask if you would join Shane and I? I mean, you were pivotal in that meeting’s success, and I think you should be there.”

I freeze. My knees suddenly feel weak. I step closer to the counter so I can lean against it. I am about to go to a dinner party for work with my boss. Okay settle down. Shane will be there too. It’s clearly a work thing. I’m okay with work things. I mean, I get to schmooze a bit with some well-known executives, and I get to see my boss. I can do this without puking. Maybe. I breathe in slowly hoping it’s not noticeable at how big of a breath I’m taking.

“Wow, that’s really nice of you. I would love to go. When is it?” I ask as coolly as possible because I can not come off as a giddy schoolgirl right now.

“Tuesday night. We can all just go together. Shane and I will pick up you and Beth around seven if that works?”

Did he just say Beth is coming? I glance over to see Beth nodding at Shane with a smile. She is so into him and she’s showing it. I catch her eye. She holds my gaze and waggles her eyebrows. This is her look when she has news to tell me. Shane must have asked her to this dinner. I’m now going to a work thing with my boss and my best friend, oh, and the COO. I don’t know if I should be excited or scared. This *is* just a work dinner thing right?

I make eye contact with Mr. Whitmore to make sure he knows I’m very into his invitation. “That sounds great. Seven will be perfect. We will see you then.”

I look down as he places his hand on the counter. I can’t tell if he wants me to reach out or not. Maybe he wants to touch me, but the counter is in the way? I have no idea. I short circuit and reach out and pat his hand like a grandma would. “Great. Looking forward to it.” *Smooth Lace. Real smooth.*

Mr. Whitmore smiles and then turns to Shane. They say their good-byes as they head out the door.

As soon as they’re out the door Beth runs over to me. “We are going out with two of the most handsome men in this town. You realize this right?”

I can't help but be excited. But this isn't a date. It can't be. It was clear this is work related. I mean, it might be a date for Beth and Shane, but for me and Mr. Whitmore this is strictly professional. This is a thank-you-for-investing-in-our-project dinner. That is all. I'm sure of it. Maybe.

Chapter Twelve

Jared

My decision to ask Lacey to this dinner party was somewhat selfish. She does deserve to be there, because without her quick thinking and number crunching, I'm not sure these guys would have invested. But my desire to simply see this woman has grown each day and what better opportunity than in the safety of a work-related event. It's not a date so there's no pressure for either one of us.

Shane seems cool as a cucumber sitting in the passenger seat playing on his phone. I wish I could say I felt the same way, but there's a prickly sensation taking over my gut.

“So, is this your first official date with Beth?” I ask.

Shane chuckles. “I don't consider this a date really. I mean it's work. We have to do the whole schmoozing thing and it's not like we'll have a ton of time to have any real conversation. But I think it's a good first step. What about you?”

“What do you mean? I’m not dating Lacey, and like you said this is a work thing that I invited her to because she should be there.”

Shane guffaws as he looks my way. “Please Jared. I know you’re into her. I can tell. It’s subtle but it’s there.”

“Shane, even if that were true, she’s an employee. We can’t date.”

“So you *have* considered it then? Remember, there are ways around it. Talking to HR and disclosing the relationship yadda yadda.”

I laugh. “Yeah, well, it’s not going there so we don’t need to worry about it.” I have thought about all of this already. Even if we did date and disclose the relationship, this would not look good for me or Lacey. It would cause a fair amount of stress and I can only imagine what her coworkers would say to her. I don’t want to jeopardize her job in any way, and I certainly don’t need any unwanted attention or scandals as we’re about to launch this project.

We arrive at Lacey’s and Shane texts Beth. We agreed they’d come down and meet us when we arrived. After a few minutes I see Lacey come through the front door of her building. My breath hitches. She’s in a black cocktail dress that cuts across her chest so her shoulders are bare. Her skin is giving off the faintest glow. The dress hugs her curves well. Too well. Her hips are mesmerizing. She has on a pair of silver heels, and I can see silver earrings gently hanging from her ears that sparkle in the late evening sun. Her hair is in loose waves

falling past her shoulders. She looks like a goddess. I take a glance out my window so I can turn the other way. I need to take a bigger breath.

Shane steps out of the passenger seat and offers it to Lacey. “Well, well ladies. You both look lovely this evening.” Shane says.

“Thanks Shane.” I hear Beth say.

I watch as Lacey climbs in the passenger seat. I see her hand firmly gripping her smooth leather clutch. She looks tense. I shake myself out of the trance or whatever it is she just did to me.

“Lacey. Beth. Nice to see you both,” I say while looking directly at Lacey. I see her fingers tapping on her clutch and I’m sure it’s nerves. I can’t say I blame her. It probably is a little weird going out to something like this with your boss. My attention is then brought back to my stomach. It’s fluttering, and now my nerves are starting to show. *This is just a work thing.*

I can hear Shane already conversing with Beth in the backseat. I look over at Lacey. “So, this should be fun right?”

The look she’s giving me is one of excitement and maybe a little trepidation? I want to reassure her somehow. I want her to know I’m feeling the same thing she is.

“Yes, I’m really looking forward to it.” Lacey finally says.

I resist the urge to reach over and give her hand a gentle squeeze. I can’t. Instead, I distract myself and turn up the

music just a little so as to not be too loud for Shane and Beth. Mozart starts to come through the speakers.

“Oh, I love Requiem. It’s a great piece,” Lacey says looking straight ahead.

I smile. What is this woman doing to me? We had established we both liked classical music at our lunch the other week, but her loving this Mozart piece is punching me in the gut. I want to know more about all her likes and dislikes. But I can’t. I shouldn’t. Me asking her will just lend this to look more like a date.

We arrive at the dinner party. It’s quite lavish if I do say so myself. There are large flower bouquets on the tables, two bars and waiters walking around with hours d’oeuvre. If I didn’t know any better this could be someone’s wedding reception.

I talk to *all* the people. I make sure I hit every one of the investors and have some one-on-one time with each of them. I need them to know I’m grateful for their faith in this project. Lacey stays by my side for a while then I see her go stand near Beth. I wish she’d stay near me. I like how I feel when she’s close by.

After a few hours of eating and talking I see Shane head my way. The look on his face tells me he’s bailing.

“Hey. I think I’ve made the rounds and had enough salmon and melon to last a few days. I’m thinking I’m going to take Beth out of here and head down to the café on First. So we can have some time to talk without all of this noise.”

I nod. “Yeah, I mean sure. That’s fine. How are you going to get home?”

“We’ll catch a ride share. Don’t worry about us,” he says as he slaps my back.

I watch as Shane goes and says something to Beth and Lacey. I see Beth smile and hug Lacey. Lacey then starts to scan the room. I’m guessing she’s looking for me. I hope she is. I raise my hand so she can see where I am. She sees me and crosses the room. As she walks towards me the tingling sensation I felt earlier has now multiplied. It’s traveling from my toes up my legs to the top of my head. My breathing is becoming shallow. I need to catch myself now before I make a scene. Lacey is almost to me, so I gesture for her to follow me. I make my way out through the side doors and onto a patio. There’s only one person out here and he doesn’t look like he’s someone from this party. Lacey meets me as I lean against the outside of the building.

“Hey, Mr. Whitmore. You feeling okay?” She asks so sweetly but I know she can tell I am not okay.

“Yeah, I am. It’s just a lot in there,” I say softly. I know it’s not that, but I don’t know what it is really that has me flustered. I’ve been fine most of the night, but when Shane left with Beth something inside me shifted.

She steps closer to me, and I can feel the heat of her body near mine. She places her hand on my arm.

“Mr. Whitmore—”

“Jared. Please just call me Jared. At least when we’re not in the office,” I say. I have been wanting to hear her voice say my name for weeks now.

“Oh, okay. Jared. It’s normal to get anxious. I’ve had my share of those moments. I think you made the rounds, maybe it would be best if we head out now?”

My name coming off her tongue soothes me. I can tell she genuinely cares for me at this moment. It’s taking all I have not to put my arm around her and pull her to me. I can’t even tell her what is happening. My anxiety doesn’t normally show itself in these situations. And by these situations I mean work gatherings. I give high level presentations to the board and pitch proposals to other executives all the time. I generally like doing those things because I’m good at it. Tonight, just feels different. I can’t possibly tell her that dating usually sets my nerves ablaze, because this is not a date and that won’t make sense to her. Instead, I meet her eyes and tell her getting out of here is probably a good idea.

She removes her hand from my arm and a part of me flinches. I don’t dare say that I liked it there. We start the short walk to the car and I open the passenger door for her. I watch as she gets comfortable in her seat before I close the door. I can’t help but eye her beautiful legs as they swing inside. I get in the driver’s side and start the car. I don’t know where we are going so I take a second to play with the radio.

“Ooo, Vivaldi. Let’s listen to this,” she says in the most perfectly cheerful tone.

I place my hand on the shift and head down the street not knowing where I am about to go, but I am not ready for this night to end.

Chapter Thirteen

Lacey

This night is crazy. First of all, I knew Mr. Whitmore...I mean, Jared. I'm going to call him Jared. We are not at work and I like his name. I knew Jared was going to look good because he always does, but when I saw him in his black suit, gray shirt and tie, I almost fainted. It baffles me how simple pieces like a black suit, a gray button up shirt and tie literally had me gulping for air.

The party was swanky but not stuffy. I did get to meet some business folks who might be good to know for the future. I stayed by Jared at first but then I figured I was being too clingy, so I moved over to chat with Beth. Beth and I were having a great time. Her and Shane really hit it off and I was glad they were going to get some alone time.

When I saw Jared wave me over, I couldn't help but feel excited, but I could also tell something seemed off. His anxiety wasn't as intense as it was in the car the other day, but

I can't help feeling maybe I'm part of the problem. But then when I'm with him he seems to settle easily. Maybe it's not me. I don't know but I certainly can't ask him. I think making our departure when we did was a good thing. Now I'm alone in the car with him and his scent is making it hard to breathe. I want to lean over and inhale him because he smells so good. I glance over as he's tapping his fingers lightly on the steering wheel to Vivaldi with a look of content. I start having thoughts about how to make him more content when I feel my cheeks flush. I need to stop pining over this man.

I realize I have no idea where we are going but we are not headed in the direction to my apartment, so I say, "Are we going somewhere else tonight?"

He grins in my direction. "How about a walk in the park? We can chat about your grant proposal for the bakery. Maybe I can offer some words of wisdom?"

A walk in the park seems romantic. I mean the park isn't a lover's hangout but it's a beautiful night with the stars shining brightly above. I don't know if I can handle seeing him in the faint glow of moonlight but there's zero chance I'm saying no to this.

We park and make our way down the walking path. The path is lined with streetlights and there are some people getting in their evening runs, and a few sitting on benches. The air feels brisk which I'm hoping will cool the flush in my cheeks. We walk a little way before deciding to sit on a bench. It's quiet all

around us with just the occasional rustle of leaves from the tree next to us.

“So, Lacey, tell me how you’re going to pitch this proposal for the bakery?”

Jared’s question throws me a little. I wasn’t ready to switch my mind into business mode but at least we’re talking and I’m almost touching him sitting on this bench. I close my eyes briefly to get my brain to change gears.

“Well, I did some numbers based on if we had the right equipment how much we could anticipate selling and increased that by three percent over the course of the first year. It’s a conservative number but it’s still profitable. And right now, I’m doing the numbers for the over the course of five years to show the growth potential. Bread is cheap to make so the inflation for the ingredients is minimal compared to other things. I hope it’s enough to show we’re a good candidate for the grant money. We have been around for a little while now and we give to the food shelter when we can, so I think that helps us too. I just hope it pays off.”

“I think it all sounds great. I would up it from three percent to five percent for your first year. It’s totally doable.”

I nod and glance over at him. He’s looking straight ahead with his arm up on the top of the bench. If I was sitting with my back against the bench his arm would be over my shoulder. My body shudders at the thought.

“Oh, are you getting cold?” he asks me.

I don't know what I am. My hands feel a little cool and clammy, but my face feels like it's on fire. If I had other symptoms, I'd think I have the flu. Before I can answer he stands and takes off his suit jacket. He holds it open insisting I put it on.

I stand and put my back to him and reach my arms out as he helps me slip on his jacket. The silk lining feels soft against my skin, and I can faintly smell his scent. It's intoxicating. I clear my throat and turn to him. There's barely any space between us and my heels are allowing me to be even closer to his face. I don't want to run, but I can't do anything else, so I just stand there frozen looking in his eyes. I sense movement and out of the corner of my eye see his hand come to my cheek. He rubs his thumb across my cheekbone then moves it to my bottom lip. My heart is beating so hard I am confident he can hear it. I watch as his eyes land on my lips. I part them slightly hoping he takes the invitation.

What seems like five minutes is probably five seconds when I feel his arm around my back pressing me into him. His lips fall softly on mine and it's a gentle kiss. Then his hands come up and cradle my face. He pauses the kiss for a split second and then starts to kiss me again, grazing my lips one second then forcefully kissing them the next. I hear a soft growl come from him as I wrap my hands around his neck pulling him in for a deeper kiss. He's really good at this and I don't want him to stop. We continue exploring each other's mouths when his hands dig into my hips and I grab at his belt to pull him closer.

I can't get him close enough. Then he stops and takes a step back.

I'm gasping for air, but I want more. He's not saying anything, but his body language is giving me the vibe that he wants more too. I take a step forward. He takes another one back.

"Lacey, I should get you home."

I stand in silence trying to process what he just said. Home? I do not want to go home. I want to continue kissing this man until my lips become numb and my heart full. I don't even get to respond before he starts walking towards the car. Feeling like I have no other option, I follow him. He doesn't open the door for me this time. I can tell his mind is preoccupied. The ride is quiet. I don't know what to say. This is uncharted territory. I have never kissed any of my bosses; is there protocol for this sort of thing?

When we arrive at my apartment Jared looks straight ahead as I get out of the car. I step out and place his jacket on the seat. He looks lost in thought. I look at the ground and say, "Thank you for a great night." I shut the door and head up to my apartment, my heart slowly sinking with each step I take.

I'm at my door when I feel a single tear fall down my cheek. I enter inside and see lights on. Beth must be home. I reach down to take off my heels and throw my bag on the table. The noise of me entering must've alarmed her because I can hear footsteps coming down the hall. I brace for impact.

"Lace! Oh my God, you're not even—"

Beth pauses as I come into her view. I'm trying hard not to fall apart but I can feel the tears swelling in my eyes. She must see it too because she runs to me and pulls me over to the sofa.

“Lace. What’s going on?”

Suddenly this scene seems all too familiar. I think back to college and my boyfriend Mike. We met in economics. We hit it off almost instantly and soon our relationship blossomed. We dated for a year then one night in my junior year we met in the quad in the center of campus. He said he didn’t think we should date anymore and walked away. Practically ran away actually, and I had no chance to respond. I went back to my dorm room and cried to Beth. I found out later he was dating some other girl while he was dating me, and he chose her over me. Maybe that’s what’s going on with Jared. I didn’t even think he might have a girlfriend. Ugh, I’m too tired to think about this. I let out a groan as Beth puts her hand on my knee.

“Lace. Tell me.”

And that’s all it takes. The flood gates open and I let it all out. I tell Beth about the entire night including Jared’s anxiety, the tension, the kiss in the park and the ride home.

“So, looks like I’m rejected once again.” I say, as I flop back on the sofa.

“Rejected? Lace. I wouldn’t call this rejection. I mean, okay he stopped the kiss. He didn’t say anything about not *wanting* to kiss you, or that he didn’t *like* you. If anything, this might mean he likes you a lot and he’s scared.”

I consider Beth's words. There's just not enough information to know how he feels and that frustrates me.

I let out a deep sigh. "I can't be thinking about this. We can't date each other. We work together. He's my boss!"

Beth leans against the back of the sofa and we both look at the ceiling, but all I can see as I stare into the white plaster is Jared's gray eyes staring back at me. "I have to get him out of my head Beth—I'm going to see him at work tomorrow!"

"Alright. Listen. I get this is a delicate situation. You know what this is like? It's like when we have to decide if the croissant dough needs more butter. It's a decision that can make or break all our hard work but we do it all the time. So, you need to make a decision. Are you going to add more butter?"

I look at Beth completely confused by her attempt at making an analogy. "Beth, I don't know where you're going with this."

"You know I'm not great with analogies. I'm just saying you can't just forget this happened. I'm sure he's not. So you need to make a move. Add something to this situation and not let it fall flat."

I shake my head. "And what do you suggest I add exactly?"

"From what you're telling me he's only seen the subdued Lacey. The calm Lacey. Let him know this kiss has shaken you up in a good way, and he can't just ignore it. He owes you an answer."

I pause suddenly distracted Beth is even here sitting next to me. “Wait, why are you home? Didn’t you and Shane go somewhere?”

Beth smiles. “Yes, we went to a café. We talked for a while and then we took a walk. When we got back here, he walked me up and kissed me goodnight.”

“Beth! Annnnd?”

“What? It was nice. Really, really nice,” she says. I know she’s more excited than she’s letting on and I can only assume she’s downplaying for my sake. I let it go for now.

“Well, I’m so happy for you. Shane seems like a great guy.”

“Yeah, he is. It’s still early, but I’m feeling things.”

I playfully smack her with a throw pillow. “Yeah, you’re feeling things alright.”

“Shut up. C’mon let’s get into our comfy pjs and head to bed. It’s late and it’s only a Tuesday night. We can decide your move over coffee tomorrow morning.”

Beth is right. It’s almost midnight now. We go our separate ways and head into our rooms. I lay in bed wishing for some type of sleep fairy to come and lull me to sleep. I have to get a handle on this situation with Jared, but first I need to figure out what I want from him. I knew at first it was insta-attraction, but now having spent a little time with him, I want to know him more.

I just need to know where he stands.

Chapter Fourteen

Jared

I didn't sleep much last night and as I sit at my desk sipping my coffee all I can think about is the kiss with Lacey. I shouldn't have done it for so many reasons. It was amazing though. Kissing her felt way more intense than I could have imagined. It sent electricity through me. But it also sent fear through me. I hear a soft knock on my door and tell whoever is on the other side of my door to come in.

When Shane enters my curiosity spikes. It's early for Shane and I know we don't have a meeting for another hour. A meeting with David and Lacey of all things.

"It's eight a.m. I'm guessing there's something important going on?" I ask.

"No actually. Well not work related anyway. I'm just checking on you. How was the rest of your night?"

I let out a sigh. I had contemplated telling Rachel about my situation with Lacey, but she's so busy I didn't want to bother her. But if I was going to tell anyone else it would be Shane.

“You know I like to get right to the point Shane. So here it is. My anxiety reared its ugly head again, but Lacey was there to calm me. Then we went for a walk in the park, and I ended up kissing her.”

Shane smiles. “And?”

“And what?”

“Jared. How was the kiss? Did she kiss you back?”

Shane and I have never been the type of friends to share details of our relationships, but I think this situation warrants some additional input. “The kiss was incredible. Lacey seemed very into it. But I stopped it.”

Shane looks confused and puts his hands up. “Wait. You stopped it? Why?”

“Shane, I can't do this. She's an employee. I'm the CEO. It would cause all sorts of issues.”

Shane sits in the chair at the front of my desk. “Jared, you know there are ways to do this right. Work wise. Sure it could cause a little talk at first, but just like anything else it will fizzle and you guys could date. I'm guessing there's something else going on?”

I tap my hand on my desk. “I am not dateable Shane. I'm in a relationship already. With my job. I have anxiety when it

comes to dating. And...I just don't think I want..." I trail off not sure where I'm going with this.

"Don't think you want what Jared? To be with someone who actually might be interested in you for *you*? Someone who gives you a sense of calm? You're not making sense right now."

"No, I don't want to be rejected." There I said it. It felt like fire coming out of my mouth but it's out there now.

Shane pauses. I can tell he's surprised. "Jared, Lacey isn't Chrissie."

I nod. I know he's right. But even if Lacey is interested in me now, who's to say she still will be after we get to know each other. Like *really* know each other. My work travel schedule, the functions, the late-night meetings can be a lot to handle. My life is just easier if I'm on my own.

I see Shane glance at the clock. We need to head down to the conference room to meet with David and Lacey about this project. I want to see Lacey, but I know this is going to be awkward.

"We need to go meet with Lacey and David. Let's just talk about this later," Shane says to me as he stands.

"There's nothing more to say anyway."

Shane gives me a look. "Right. Okay. Let's go."

When we get to the conference room David and Lacey are already sitting at the table. Lacey doesn't look up at me when I

enter the room. She's putting off an icy air and I can't say I blame her.

We go over the next steps for the new project now that we have some investors onboard. Lacey takes notes the entire time never looking at me once. She makes eye contact with Shane a few times, and asks questions directed to Shane and David. She's purposefully ignoring me, and I don't like it at all. I resist the urge to ask her anything directly. We adjourn the meeting and Lacey is the first one up and out the door without even a glance in my direction. I know she's upset, but this behavior isn't what I was expecting.

I head back to my office feeling annoyed. I'm not sure what to do in this situation. I created it, so I need to fix it. I stare at my laptop when my desk phone buzzes. It's Diane.

"Hi Diane. What can I do for you?" I ask rushing my words. I adore Diane, but right now I don't want to deal with anything.

"Mr. Whitmore, Lacey Paxton is here looking to meet with you. Regarding the project."

I hold my breath for a second. I guess her coming to see me about anything at this point is better than not talking to me at all. "Sure. Send her in Diane."

Within seconds I hear a knock at my door.

"Come in," I say, my voice cracking.

Lacey enters and shuts the door behind her. My eyes rove over her soaking in her beauty. Her blazer fits her like a glove.

The pencil skirt she's wearing highlights her hips in the most magical way possible. Her v-neck blouse showcases the freckles on her neck. This woman has no idea what she does to me. I make my way up to her eyes and they're looking as big as ever and I can tell there's anger behind them.

"Lacey, nice to see you. What brings you by?" The words come out before I can take them back. I know why she's here and I'm guessing my question is just going to upset her more.

"Mr. Whitmore."

Her voice is cool and calm. The tension is building with just those words, but I don't say anything, giving her the opportunity to continue.

"I realize what happened with us was unexpected. I won't ignore it though, and the fact that you're ignoring me is not okay."

"Lacey—"

"I'm not done."

I can see something flick behind her eyes. There's anger for sure, and some hurt, but there's also fire and it's heating up my chest as I watch her pace my office.

"Pretending like nothing happened won't fix this. We need to talk about it. Why would you kiss me if you were planning on just ignoring me?"

The question throws me, and a surge of annoyance ripples up my spine. I stand from behind my desk and make my way a

little closer to her so I can stand in front of her looking her in the eyes.

“Ignoring *you*? Did we not just sit through an hour-long meeting, and you not once make eye contact with me? You barely acknowledged my presence, Lacey. The iciness coming from you could have cooled down this whole building.” My tone comes out harsher than I expected, and I can see her chest start to heave with fast breaths.

“You are unreal Mr.—”

I don't want her to finish her sentence. I step closer to her as heat runs its course up through my legs and into my head. I grab for her arm and pull her to me. I look down and see her eyes soften, so I reach behind her neck and gently pull her mouth to mine. She lets out a light moan that heightens all my senses. I walk her over to my desk never parting my lips from hers and grab her hips and place her on top of the desk. I start kissing her jawline then her neck. Her legs wrap around my waist, and I am about to lose it. I kiss her deeply letting my hands get tangled in her wavy hair. I feel her hand find its way under my shirt and press against my back. I'm about ready to push her blazer off her shoulders so I can kiss them when I hear my desk phone buzz. Lacey stops and places her hands on my chest.

“You better get that,” she says in a breathy whisper.

I let my breathing settle for a second then press the speaker button on the phone.

“Yes, Diane?”

“Mr. Whitmore- you have a call from one of the investors on line two.”

“Thank you Diane. Put him on hold for one second and I’ll take it in a minute.”

Lacey hops off my desk and runs her hands down her skirt. She’s still catching her breath and I’m enjoying the fact that I’m part of the reason.

She gives me a soft smile. “I would say that shows you I’m not ignoring you.”

I grin as I tuck my shirt back in. “I think I can say the same Miss Paxton.”

Chapter Fifteen

Lacey

It's been a whirlwind of a week and after kissing Jared in his office I'm on emotional overload. We still haven't figured out how to navigate work and dating. We agreed that it's very new and not at a point where we need to disclose anything to HR. We've only been texting each other and haven't even gone on a real date yet. There's so much going on with work and the bakery I don't have much time to even consider if dating Jared is a good idea.

I hear my laptop chime and see a new email. Shane has been emailing David and I with all sorts of requests for the new project. It's overwhelming but a good challenge. Today he's requesting that I rework some numbers assuming a new investor jumps onboard. I know that he and Jared are strategizing about how much they're going to need versus how much they're going to ask for to get this project one hundred

percent funded. It's a math game and I'm the one doing all the math.

I open up my spreadsheet and start looking at the most recent data. I start a new column, enter in my formulas and begin the slow process of figuring out this latest request when I look up to see David enter my office.

"Hey Lacey. Did you see the latest email from Shane?"

"Yup. I'm starting on it right now actually."

David's tone sounds like he's questioning my ability. He has been a little aloof the past few days, but I know he has a lot going on too. I try to ignore it, but he continues to stand in my doorway.

"Is there something else David?" I ask hoping there's not.

"Um, no. Not really. It just seems like you're getting a lot of specific requests for things. I can work these figures too. I'm used to fielding these requests, and I know how they like to see the data."

I don't need David's insecurities now, but I smile and say, "Oh, well, I'm sure they're just asking me because they figure I have some more time to give since I'm still somewhat new. I wouldn't worry about it. I'll come to you if I have questions."

David nods at me and exits my office. I'm feeling relieved as he leaves when my phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize so I swipe.

"Hello, this is Lacey."

“Hi Miss Paxton? I’m calling regarding your grant proposal for Baked and Sugared?”

My heart jumps to my throat. In all the work chaos I completely forgot about the proposal I submitted.

“Right yes. Did I get it in on time?”

“Yes. Yes you did. I’m calling to tell you that you have been awarded the money. The full amount asked for.”

I almost drop my phone. I lean over my desk making sure I heard the woman on the other line correctly.

“I’m getting the full amount for my bakery?” I ask, making sure they haven’t made a mistake.

“Yes. That’s correct. We will be in touch in the next few days as we get the paperwork together then you can come sign it okay?”

“Okay great. Sure. Thank you so much. Really. Thank you.”
I hang up then swipe to my messages.

Me: I have great news. Have Ashley stay until I get there okay?

Beth: Yeah, okay. What’s going on?

Me: I’ll tell you when I see you!

Beth: Lace, I hate surprises!

Me: You’ll love this one!

At five p.m. I head to the bakery. When I open the door Beth and Ashley are up front at the counter. They both look like they’re eagerly anticipating my news. I place my bag on the

small table to my right and open my arms wide. “We got the grant!” I shout as I start to dance.

“Seriously Lace!?”

“Yes for real! Time to celebrate!”

Ashley and Beth join me for a group hug. “I’ll be signing the papers soon and then we’ll be baking some bread ladies!”

“This is awesome Lace. I’m so happy for you. For us. Let’s grab some brownies and I’ll make some fresh coffee,” Beth says.

I wipe off the table when I hear my phone buzzing in my bag. I pull it out and see a text from Jared.

Jared: Can you do dinner tonight? I’ll pick you up in an hour?

Dinner? This would technically be our first date. I glance over at Beth who sees me looking down at my phone.

“What? Ohh, is Mr. Loverboy beckoning you?” Beth asks with a glint in her voice.

I don’t say anything. I don’t want to leave the girls after giving them such great news, but I really want to have a date with Jared. A real one.

“Lace. Go. Really, it’s totally fine. Ashley and I will eat all the chocolate and close up.”

“You sure?”

Then like two trained parrots they both shout at me. “Yes! Go!”

I look back at my phone and type away.

Me: Dinner sounds great. See you in an hour.

Chapter Sixteen

Jared

Work has been extra busy the last few weeks and though Lacey and I have chatted through texting, I really want to see her in person. I've only been to her office a few times, so it doesn't appear I'm around too much. Other than a few meetings we've had with the finance team, and some casual glances in the hall I'd say we are playing it low key. Until the kiss in my office. Without doubt that kiss could have sparked a fire right there on my desk. If we weren't at work, I'm not sure where that would have headed, and tonight, I want to spend time with her with no distractions. I thought it would be a good idea to head to some place casual but elegant and the new tapas restaurant in Morrisville seemed like a good choice. Morrisville is one town over and we'll be away from Littleford, which I also considered.

As I start the drive to her apartment, I'm surprised that my nerves seem tame. I text her when I arrive. She exits through

the door of her building, and I can't get enough of her already. Her white wide leg jeans paired with a soft blue sweater are what dreams are made of. Her hair is down with her waves cascading down her back, and her legs look like they're a mile long. She has on a strappy pair of heels that make me notice her ankles. Can ankles be sexy? I step out and open the door for her. She smirks at me which sends a lightning bolt up my back. I hop in and queue up the classical music. I thought about what to select before getting here so I press play and allow Chopin to fill the car. I look over at her to see how I did with my choice.

“Ah, Chopin. Fine choice Jared,” she says giving me smile.

I can barely contain myself hearing her say my name. I'm also beginning to think she knows more about classical music than she leads on. I might need to update my playlist to find some more obscure composers. I like a challenge.

I smile at her as I shift the car into drive. “Lacey, you look wonderful. As always.”

“Thank you. You look very nice too. I like the whole dark jeans and sportscoat vibe you have going on.”

I thought about what to wear tonight. The restaurant doesn't call for a suit and that's all Lacey has ever seen me in, so I decided on something a little more casual but still put together. Hearing her tell me that makes me feel good. I like that she notices.

Thirty minutes later we arrive at the restaurant. The ride over was comfortable with moments of silence but also moments of

conversation. As we walk into the restaurant, I place my hand on her lower back. I catch a scent of lavender and vanilla from her and gives me goosebumps. I feel her leaning into me which makes my stomach flip. I want to kiss her, but my thought is interrupted by the hostess.

“Good evening. Do you have reservations?” She asks.

“Yes, under Whitmore,” I say.

We are seated at a table by the windows overlooking the creek. It’s a great first date table if I do say so myself. We order an array of tapas which all look amazing. When we’re settled with our first plates, she looks at me and smiles.

“This is really nice Jared. I’m glad we could actually go on a real date.”

“I’m glad you like it. I think it was time we get together non-work related. So, ask me anything as long as it’s not work related,” I say.

Lacey smiles. “Well first things first. I have some good news to share.”

I cock my head intrigued. “Good news huh? Well let me hear it.”

“I got the grant for the bakery. The entire amount I asked for!”

I grin. “Lacey that’s incredible. I’m really happy for you.”

Her smile warms my chest. I love seeing her smile. I knew she would get the grant seeing as the foundation that awards

the grant is funded by my dad. I of course didn't tell her that, but I did put in a few good words and let my dad have a few peanut butter deluxe cookies. That's really all the convincing that was needed.

“Thanks. It's all really exciting. I got the call today, so I just have to go sign the papers when they give me the date. Beth is of course thrilled, and I think this will really help us turn things around. Anyway, back to our date. I like a little question and answer game. So I'll start. Tell me about where you live? Are you a city boy or a country bumpkin?”

“Well, I'd say it's a little of both. I spent a lot of my time in Boston through my college years, but I really do like being back home here in Littleford. I chose to buy a house on the outskirts of Littleford in the valley. I have some mountain views which is why I chose it. It's somewhat secluded and always quiet. Sometimes too quiet.” I'm not sure why I say the last part but I continue. “It's too big for one person really, but I like that I have spare bedrooms, an office and a gym space.”

Lacey looks at me like it's my turn to ask her a question. I pause for a moment because there's so much I want to know but I don't want to start with anything too personal.

“What's your favorite thing to bake?” I ask.

Lacey laughs. “Well, that's a hard question. I'd probably say lemon tarts because my mom and I used to make them all the time. But lately, it's peanut butter deluxe cookies.”

I grin. “Good answer.”

We continue back and forth until we've eaten every last bite of all our tapas. The conversation has been easy and fun. For the first time I haven't even thought about work, and being in Lacey's presence feels almost natural. The waitress comes to refill our water glasses when I notice Lacey tracing her finger in the condensation on the glass. "Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Oh, yes. I just have one more question. But you don't have to answer it if you don't want to," she says looking at me, her eyes anticipating my response.

"Of course. What is it?"

I can see her hesitate before she asks, "Do you know what triggers your anxiety?"

Her question is fair. Having been witness to two of my anxiety attacks I feel I should give her an answer, but the problem is I'm not entirely sure what that answer is.

"Not really. Well, sort of. Dating seems to trigger it."

Her eyebrows raise. "So, tonight, have you felt anxious at all?"

I think about her question. I haven't felt any intense anxiety, only the nerves that come with anticipation.

"Actually no," I say. I don't want her to think she is making me uncomfortable, so I reach my hand across the table, and she places hers in mine. I give it a gentle squeeze and tuck a stray hair behind her ear.

She tilts her head at me. "Well it's probably not triggered by dating then. I'm sure there's something else that you haven't

thought about yet.”

I nod. She’s probably right, but I have no desire to start looking deeply into my anxiety right now, so I change the subject.

“Why don’t we head out and try that little gelato place down the street?”

Lacey puts her glass down and smiles. “That sounds great.”

We make our way out the door to my SUV. We’re almost to it when Lacey’s heel gets caught in a crack in the pavement and stumbles. I’m close enough that I catch her, but her ankle rolls to the side and she cries out in pain.

“Lacey, are you okay?” I stand with my hand around her waist holding her up. I give her a second to respond.

“Ugh, I think so.” She pulls away from me to start walking to the car. She stops after a few steps.

“Lacey it might be sprained. C’mon let’s get you in the car and I’ll take you to my place and put some ice on it.”

I help her in the car and I start the drive to my place. I don’t know what made me think this was a good idea, but the thought of her being in my house sends shivers through me.

Her big brown eyes look down then back up at me without saying a word. Without hearing any objection, I start the car and head to my house.

Chapter Seventeen

Lacey

Tonight has been really nice. Nice until I miss stepping over a crack in the parking lot pavement and twist my stupid ankle. Of course it had to happen on my first real date with Jared. I don't think it's anything too serious; it hasn't started to swell but it's a little tender. When he said he was taking me back to his place my stomach dropped. I do want to see his house, because I think it'll tell me more about him. It's like his SUV. It's some sort of hybrid which tells me he cares more about the environment than driving an expensive sports car. I pay attention to these things as they're soft clues to a person's personality.

When we pull into his driveway, I'm struck by how the trees are perfectly lined on each side. Whoever planted these trees clearly had some sort of OCD. There's a gentle bend and as we come out of it, his house is in full view. It's not at all what I was expecting. It's large, with a three-car attached garage. It's

sided in light gray paneling with white trim. The yard looks freshly mowed. The trees have fresh mulch and I spot a birdbath beneath one of them. This feels like a house where a family of five should live, not a single man.

He pulls into the garage and helps me out of the car. We then walk into the kitchen. The vibe in the kitchen doesn't match the outside of the house. It screams single bachelor. The countertops are black granite, and all the cabinets are dark cherry wood. The appliances are all black, which normally I'd hate but for some reason it all works well here. There's a small fruit basket on the high countertop sitting next to a coffeemaker. Other than that, the counters are completely bare.

I peek in the living area when I hear Jared coming towards me. He's holding a bag of ice and tells me sit on the sofa and put my feet up on the ottoman.

I half expected him to have black leather furniture, but instead his sofa is an oversized sectional in a soft pale gray fabric. There's even a cream-colored throw blanket across the back. I sit in the corner near the ottoman and place my feet up. I reach down to unbuckle the straps of my heels when Jared rushes over.

“Stop. Let me do that for you Lacey.”

I stop. His voice isn't demanding but it commands my attention. I don't fight it. It makes me feel cared for which is something I haven't felt in a long time. He has me hold the bag of ice while he reaches down and undoes the buckle. His hands are warm which makes the skin on my legs prickle.

There's no way he can't see it and there's nothing I can do to cover it. I watch him as he carefully takes off my first shoe and places it on the floor. He rubs my foot for a second and I let out a soft groan. He looks up at me and then moves his attention to my left foot. He goes slowly taking my shoe off then places it next to my other. He gently rubs his hand down my shin to the top of my foot. I'm about ready to come out of my skin when he takes the ice from me and places it on my ankle. I let out a large exhale closing my eyes.

“Lacey, are you sure your ankle isn't getting worse?” he asks in a soft concerned voice.

“I think it's just tweaked a little. It's not swollen so I'm sure it's fine,” I say.

He moves up to the sofa sitting next to me. He peels off his sportscoat and unbuttons the first few buttons of his shirt and leans back on the sofa. He quickly adjusts his position and picks up my left leg and puts it on his lap. He begins caressing my calf. His touch feels even warmer than before, then I feel his hand tense.

I place my hand on his. “Jared. Are you nervous that I'm here?”

He gives me a small smile and clears his throat. “No. I mean, Lacey, you don't make me nervous. I'm just not sure I should be doing this.”

I'm genuinely not sure what he means so I ask, “Doing what? Being here with me? Dating me?”

He sighs and scrubs his hands down his face. “Lacey, my dating life has been pretty non-existent. I dated a few girls in college and grad school. Then a few years ago I was in a relationship with someone, but she broke it off.”

I sit completely stunned anyone would dump Jared. We all have flaws, but I have yet to find something so hideous that I’d want to dump him. I start to wonder if he did something to cause the relationship to end.

I turn to face him on the sofa. “What was the reason she ended it with you?”

He looks down at the sofa cushion then back up at me. “Lacey, my job is demanding, and I spend a lot of time in the office, sometimes traveling and having meetings outside of business hours. It’s a lot being the CEO, but it also means a great deal to me. I worked hard to be where I’m at, and that’s always been my priority.”

I nod, understanding what he’s saying. “So she couldn’t handle your work life?”

“To be fair to her, I wasn’t exactly trying my hardest to be a good boyfriend either. I don’t know why...I just didn’t focus on her or us, I could only focus on the company.”

I sit rubbing the sofa cushion next to me. Maybe this whole dating thing with Jared is a bad idea. I appreciate his honesty about his priorities. And as I look around, I don’t see anything that resembles a video game console so that’s a positive. I’d like to think I’m not needy in a relationship, but I don’t want to be an afterthought and I certainly don’t want to be ignored.

I glance up and hold his gaze. His eyes look even brighter in this lighting and as he looks at me, I can feel the air thicken.

He breathes in a long breath and as he starts to say my name, I lean in to kiss him. I don't want to use words right now; all I want to do is feel. He puts his hand behind my neck and the heat that was already building in me is now an inferno. I move to straddle his lap, the ice falling to the floor. I look down at him, his eyes raging with a perfect gray storm. He pulls my hips into him as I lean down and kiss him deeper. He quickly shifts his body, laying me down on the sectional. His heat is radiating through his shirt which I start to unbutton. His kisses are becoming more frantic now with my heart beating out of my chest. I rub my hand along the back of his neck feeling his goosebumps. I have never felt so much electricity in my life. We pause, both of us completely breathless. He tucks my hair behind my ear and then sits back.

He lets out a long breathy sigh as he runs his fingers through his hair and says, "Lacey, I can't do this."

I bite my tongue. I'm about ready to ask a thousand questions but I can see his internal struggle. His eyes look a little more somber, his body language defeated. I sit not knowing what I can do to help him, but before I can find any words, he stands and holds his hand out to me.

"It's probably best I take you home now."

Chapter Eighteen

Jared

It's been a few days since my date with Lacey. We've seen each other at work passing in the halls and shared a few text messages. I haven't asked her out again and she hasn't said anything about our date. I know I ended our date abruptly without any explanation and I don't like this feeling I have deep in my gut. It's questioning every move I make about her. It's wearing on me, but I also miss her when I'm not near her. I look at the clock above my desk then check my calendar and see I don't have any more meetings for the day, so I decide to head out of the office.

I take a right onto Main Street and like a moth to a flame I drive to the pink sign staring at me. *Baked and Sugared* has now become my new favorite place. I park and walk in to see Beth filling the cases. I look around half expecting Shane to be standing at the brownie case when Beth catches my eye.

“Hi Mr. Whitmore. You just missed Shane.”

I laugh. He really is a chocoholic or he's really into Beth. Maybe both.

“Hi Beth. Is Lacey here?”

Beth gives me a smirk. “Yeah, she's in the back. Let me go get her.”

As Beth goes in the back, I look at all the items in the cases. Everything looks so appealing it would make anyone's stomach growl. I can only hope the grant money allows Lacey to do what she really wants because there's something about this place that radiates joy.

I hear some noise coming towards me when I see Lacey appear from the doorway. Her hair is up in a messy bun on the top of her head and she's wearing an apron around her waist, black leggings and a long sleeve pink henley shirt. I don't know if the smell of cinnamon is effecting me, but she looks delicious.

I clear my throat just as my phone buzzes. I pull my phone out of my pocket and see that it's Rachel. I glance at Lacey and mouth *‘I need to take this.’*

“Hey Rach. What's up?”

“Jared. Listen, I'm about to ask you a big favor. Jeff's dad was rushed to the hospital, we think he's okay, maybe a mild heart attack, but we need to go be with his mom and I need a sitter. Mom and Dad are out for Dad's foundation dinner. Is there any chance you can come watch the kids for a few

hours? Danielle will be sleeping, and I can pick out a movie for Max and Sara to keep them entertained...I just—”

“Rach. It’s okay. Yes. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

I hang up and walk over to Lacey. “That was my sister. Emergency babysitting duty call. Um, look I want to talk it’s just now this is bad timing—”

“Do you need some help? I mean, I have babysat Beth’s nieces before, and I know it can be a lot. Having reinforcements can’t hurt.”

I smile and feel my shoulders relax. I want nothing more than to have her come with me. I have only been alone with my nieces and nephew for a few minutes at a time, and the thought of several hours is terrifying.

“Lacey, that’s really nice of you to offer. I’d love it if you could come.”

“Let me go tell Beth and I’ll be right out.”

It takes about two minutes before we are in my SUV heading to my sister’s house. All of the dating and relationship talk has been put aside as I tell her about my nieces and nephew. I fill her in on where Rachel lives and how the last time I was there Sara threw up all over the dining table. I figured I should warn her now for the possibility. She then tells me some stories of Beth’s nieces who are *‘troublemakers’* and how the last time she was with them the youngest drew on her face with a Sharpie. I’m pretty sure nothing like that will happen tonight

but at least I know she's aware of the dangers of babysitting children under the age of seven.

We pull in the driveway and head up the front porch steps when the door swings open. Jeff greets us and I introduce Lacey as my friend. I don't know if that's appropriate, and I don't want to upset Lacey, so I leave it at that. I see Rachel come towards us holding Danielle. She looks at me and glances at Lacey then back at me.

“Hi Rach. This is my friend Lacey. I figured I'd bring some reinforcements.”

Rachel smiles. “Hi Lacey. Nice to meet you. Well, you're brave for coming, and I'd love to chat some more but we really should get to the hospital. Good news is Jeff's dad is stable, but his mom is taking this kinda hard. So Sara and Max are watching a movie, I called in a pizza and this little one should be done for the night and sleep until we get back.”

Her words are all running together as she walks Danielle back to the nursery. I follow her into the room and stop as she places Danielle down in her crib. She turns to me with wide eyes, and I know the question she's about to ask.

“Rach, no. Not now. I promise we can talk about it another time. But you and Jeff need to go. We'll be fine. I'll text you if I need to.”

She punches my shoulder. “Fine. But we are going to talk about this.”

In a matter of seconds, she and Jeff are through the door and in their car. I walk into the living room and spot Lacey sitting on the floor with Max and Sara playing Legos with a cartoon movie playing in the background.

“Hey, I don’t get a hug?” I say, smiling at Max and Sara.

Sara and Max look at me at the same time and run to hug my legs. “Hi Uncle Jared!”

I can see the corner of Lacey’s mouth upturn. I give them each a kiss on the head and next thing I know they’re off down the hall into Sara’s room to color. Lacey looks at me with a skeptical grin on her face. “I should make sure they’re not coloring the walls.”

I laugh, but then pause. She’s right. She heads down the hall and I take off my suit jacket, roll up my sleeves and untuck my shirt. I stop at the kitchen island to grab some water. I hear footsteps coming down my way and see Lacey walking towards me. She gives me a small smile that sends my stomach into a knot.

“What?” Do I have something on my face?” I ask.

“No. I’ve just never seen you all messy like this. Untucked shirt? Who are you?”

I laugh. “Very funny. Are they okay in there?”

She nods. “Yeah, they are coloring in actual coloring books. Kids are so funny. They don’t even know me, and within seconds they wanted me to play with them. No hesitation.”

I take a sip of water. “Kids are good like that. Want something to drink?”

“No I’m good for now.” I see her pick up the baby monitor and hold it to her ear. “Sounds like a restful sleeping baby.”

Before I can even start to talk to Lacey, Max and Sara come screaming down the hall chasing each other, “Uncle Jared, will you wrestle with us?” Max says with a small pout on his lips. Wrestling has been his new obsession since he found it channel surfing one day. Not the college sport kind either, but the made-up fake kind. Rachel isn’t thrilled about it, but I’ve calmed her down some and we limit our moves to fake elbows and soft body slams on the sofa.

I grab Max and hold him up in the air, “Get ready little man because it’s time to go to the ring!” I carry him into the living room and hold him like a football and gently fake slam him into the sofa. “More Uncle Jared! More!” he shouts. Sara comes in between us and now she wants in on the action, “Uncle Jared, me now! Me!” I pick up Sara and do the same and as both kids lay on the sofa giggling, I look to see Lacey covering her mouth trying not to laugh. I can’t help but smile back.

The doorbell rings and Max and Sara fly off the sofa and run for the front door. “Pizza is here!” I hear Max and Sara scream as they start running down the hall. I go with them to the front door and grab the pizza and start putting it on paper plates as fast as I can. The kids are digging into their pepperoni and cheese when I notice Lacey isn’t in the kitchen. I turn down

the hallway to see Lacey emerge with Danielle in her arms. “She was fussing a little. I think all the noise woke her.” Something about her holding my niece leaves me breathless.

With the kids occupied I think of what I should say. I don’t know if this is the time to even start a conversation about whatever is happening between us. I want to tell her my fears. I want to tell her that I feel something between us and that I like it. I want her to know that I like being with her. But even if I said all of those things, I know being together with her wouldn’t be enough. I sit and stare at her with my niece in her arms which makes me wonder if I can give her what she needs, but I know Lacey deserves much more than I can give which is making my heart want to explode.

Chapter Nineteen

Lacey

Watching Jared with his nephew and nieces last night made me weak in the knees. He catered to their every whim, chased them around the house, played peek-a-boo with Danielle and cleaned up the kitchen after it looked like a bomb had gone off. When Rachel and Jeff returned, they seemed grateful there were no messes to clean up and though we only got to talk for a few minutes they both seemed like wonderful people. We were relieved to find out Jeff's dad didn't end up having a heart attack, they think he may have had an extreme case of heat stroke. So after a few lectures on hydration and some IV fluids they were letting him go home.

When Jared dropped me off, he thanked me for going with him. He didn't kiss me, but I sensed he wanted to. I know I can't last much longer with this back and forth. I need him to tell me he wants this. Or that he doesn't. I haven't texted him

this morning, but I'm about to get into the next piece of this project and I really need to focus.

I take a big sip of my coffee and open my spreadsheet. I need to review all these numbers one last time before I hand it over as final. I know these numbers are what will drive Jared and Shane to either seek out a new investor or try to cover the costs themselves. It's a big decision, and a lot is riding on this report. I'm about halfway done when David appears in my doorway.

"Hi Lacey. Have a second?"

I glance up wishing I could just nail down this report, but I can't ignore David. "Sure. Everything okay?" I ask, hoping for a short answer.

David pauses and shuts my door. I'm now a little concerned that this is a private conversation, but I roll my chair away from my desk as he sits in the chair to my side.

"Look, I'm glad you're a team leader for this project but you really need to run stuff by me first."

I blink rapidly. "Oh, I'm sorry David. I'm just trying to meet all the requests."

David sighs at me. "I get that, but it seems like you're having a lot of one-on-one time with Mr. Whitmore and not including me on some important things."

I pause and think back to the last few weeks. Jared and I have been good at keeping ourselves distant but there have been a few times we have been alone in the conference room

and when he's come to my office. I didn't think anyone noticed, but apparently, I was wrong.

I nod at David. "Okay. Sorry about that. I just figured going to Mr. Whitmore directly would get this done faster. I didn't mean to exclude you. I won't do it again."

David stands and walks to my door. He turns before he exits like he's going to say something else but instead he taps his hand on the door and walks out.

I sit and wonder if I should text Jared about any of this. I decide it's better if I don't. It'll be too distracting and this is a big week for the project. I return my attention to my spreadsheet when my phone lights up. I can see a text from Beth.

Beth: Hey-someone from the JW Foundation stopped by. Looking for you to sign papers about the grant.

Me: Oh, ok. I thought they were going to call. What did you say?

Beth: Told them you'd be in around 5:30. He said he'd stop by then.

Me: Ok. I'll be there by then. Thanks! How are things?

Beth: Good! Supplier dropped off the ingredients for the bread and I have a few quotes going for a new oven and proofer.

Me: Thanks for doing that. See you soon!

I haven't even had a chance to really organize the next steps once we have the grant money in hand. I just know we need some new equipment sooner rather than later. I pick up my coffee and take another gulp. I can't focus on the grant right now because this report is due to Shane in a few hours.

I gather my recommendations and tidy up the last of my report. I read it over one final time and hit 'send'. It's five p.m. now, and I need to get to the bakery to meet with the guy from the foundation.

I enter the bakery and inhale. The smell of all the sweetness comforts me. It reminds me of baking with my mom every time I enter this place. I wish she could be here to see it because I know she'd be proud. I also wish I could talk to her and get her advice on Jared. I'm pretty sure she'd say something like "*Lacey, men are stubborn-even the good ones. Don't waste your time on them but don't let a good one get away either.*" Deep in my gut I know Jared is a good one. He's attentive, caring and I've even seen his playful side. I'm doing my best not to put any pressure on him. I just hope he can figure out how he feels about me sometime this century.

Beth greets me up front with a grin bigger than I'm used to receiving from her. Her face is suspicious looking which gives me an unsettled feeling.

"What?" I ask, scrunching my face.

"Nothing. I mean. Okay, I didn't want to text you, so I waited until you got here."

"Beth? Seriously? You're killing me."

Beth wipes her hands on a dish rag as she explains, “The guy that came in today about the grant. He told me his name was Jim Whitmore.”

I stare over her shoulder to the wall. I’m trying to process the information she’s giving me, but my brain is bogged down. Then without warning my brain goes into overdrive. Jared mentioned his dad’s trust and that he gives to local businesses. Why wouldn’t he tell me that the grant I was writing was for his dad’s foundation? I shake my head like I’m trying to get rid of cobwebs. I grab my phone because it’s time to Google.

Beth laughs. “Lace, I already did. It’s his dad. There’s no doubt.”

“Why wouldn’t Jared tell me? I mean, he told me his dad had a foundation and helped in the community, but he didn’t tell me the grant I was applying for was with his dad’s foundation?”

Beth smirks. “I don’t know. But get ready because Mr. Whitmore is about to come in.”

I turn over my shoulder to see a well-dressed older man who is no doubt related to Jared. He has his height and same gray eyes. It’s uncanny. When he enters, the bell chimes. I haven’t even placed my bag down yet, so I place it on the counter. He looks at me with a smile. His dimples are just like Jared’s. Or should I say Jared has his dad’s dimples. He pauses with a folder in his hand and looks up at me. “You must be Miss Lacey Paxton?”

His voice is sweet and soft. I can't help but smile back. "Yes, sir. I am"

"Oh, don't call me sir. You can call me Jim. Uh, so I have your papers to sign for the grant and I'm here if you have any questions as you read through the paperwork."

I reach out and take the folder from his hands. "Thank you, Jim. Can I get you some coffee or something else while you wait?"

I see Jim eye the display cases. "Oh, well I don't suppose a little snack would hurt. Hmm, Miss Paxton I must say everything you have here looks quite delicious, but I think I'll settle for one of those peanut butter cookies."

I close my eyes fighting back a laugh. "Sure thing."

I take a few minutes and read over the paperwork. Everything seems pretty self-explanatory until I get to the bottom where I see an extra section that reads: Additional monies granted: \$10,000. I read further and only see a few sentences: *The Foundation elects to award the grant in the original sum of \$50,000 plus add an additional \$10,000 per the Foundation's rights herein.*

I'm not sure what exactly I'm reading so I ask Jim to come over. "Jim, this says I'm awarded the \$50,000 but then I'm getting an additional \$10,000?"

Jim smiles as he chews a bite of his cookie. "Yes for each grant we award we can decide if we want to add additional funds. We have decided to give you an extra \$10,000."

I shake my head. I can't help but ask, "That's very generous of you, but can I ask why?"

Jim cocks his head. "Well, let's just say you come with a very high recommendation."

I look back down at the papers and tap my pen. I sign and place the papers back in the folder. I open my mouth and then close it. I stand and shake Jim's hand. He reaches over and places his other hand on top of mine as we shake. "Miss Paxton, I can't wait to see what you do here. Thank you for the cookie, and you can tell my son to bring me one of those anytime." He winks. "See you soon Miss Paxton."

Chapter Twenty

Jared

There's a lot of deliverables this week with the new project. Shane and I have been in more meetings than I'd like to admit, and I've been in the office well past seven p.m. most nights. Lacey has always been on my mind, especially after last night. Watching her spend time with my family left me feeling even more confused. For most of the night everything felt comfortable, then when I dropped her off, I couldn't think of anything to say so I simply thanked her and she went up to her apartment. I should've kissed her. I glance at the clock and see it's six p.m. I grab my phone and keys and head down the hall.

Diane is packing up her things as I make my way towards her. "Diane, have a good night."

She smiles then lifts her brow. "Everything okay Mr. Whitmore?" she asks.

I must be putting off some vibe because Diane's face looks concerned. "Yeah, Diane, I'm fine. Just a lot going on."

She nods. "There is. Just remember Mr. Whitmore. Take some time for yourself."

I give her a closed smile. "You're right. I will. See you tomorrow."

I don't feel like going home. After having Lacey in my house, it seems even more empty than usual. I head over the bridge and take a left down my sister's road. I really should visit them more often, and I know I'm going to have to explain why Lacey was with me last night to Rachel. I knock on the front door when Max peeks his head out.

"Uncle Jared!"

"Hey Max." I slowly enter in scanning to see if Sara is hiding behind the door.

"Hi Uncle Jared!" I hear a voice come barreling towards me. Sara tackles my legs.

"Hey Sara—" I say as I pull her into a hug.

"Are we going to wrestle again?" Max asks with hopeful eyes.

"Maybe later buddy. Right now I need to talk to your mom." I smile and continue into the kitchen to find Rachel getting a bottle ready for Danielle.

"Well, two visits in two days? What do I owe this pleasure?" Rachel says sarcastically.

“Funny. I just wanted to stop by since we didn’t get to talk much last night. How’s Jeff’s dad?”

“Oh, he’s good. He’s at home resting today. His mom won’t let him out of her sight. I’m just glad it wasn’t serious. Thanks for coming on such short notice last night.”

“Yeah, no problem Rach.” I pause thinking of the next thing to say, when I glance up at Rachel who is giving me a pursed half crooked smile.

“What?” I ask.

“Please Jared. You know what. Do you want to tell me about Lacey now or when I ask you a thousand questions over text?”

I lean my head back. I knew this is what I came for so I might as well start. “She’s a friend. A really good friend. Okay. We went on a few dates.”

“Jared. Spill. You brought her to my house. She’s obviously more than a friend.”

“It’s complicated. She works at Whitmore Tech. She owns *Baked and Sugared* across town. I pause. “She’s smart.” I pause again. “She’s attractive and I mean, I like her.”

“Why is it complicated then?”

“Because Rach. I’m the CEO and she’s an employee. It’s off limits.”

“Is it though? I mean, I know most companies have processes for it. Why can’t you just sign whatever you guys need to sign and make it official?”

I close my eyes for a moment. I can feel exhaustion creeping under my eyelids. I want nothing more than to lay down and have all the answers come to me through sleep osmosis. I hear Rachel clear her throat which makes me snap my eyes open.

“All I know is that you are telling me you’ve gone on more than one date with this woman, and you brought her to my house. This isn’t typical Jared behavior.”

“What does that mean? Jared behavior?”

Rachel guffaws. “Jared. C’mon. You never let any of us meet any girl you date. I think I saw what’s her name, Chrissie—for like a total of five minutes when you were dating her. Last night you brought Lacey to babysit. You don’t bring some girl you’re casually dating to do that.”

I don’t know if it’s my fatigue but something about Rachel’s tone makes me surrender. “Okay, I like her. A lot. But my job is my life. It takes up the majority of my time. I can’t give her what she needs.”

“Do you even know what she needs? Has she told you?”

“No, but I mean, no woman wants to be second to her boyfriend’s job.”

Rachel rests her hands on the kitchen island. “Jared. These are choices you make. Sacrifices. I’m not saying you give up your job but when you want to be with someone you make compromises. There’s give and take. It’s not all about you. If you like her, *really* like her, you’ll figure out a way to make it work without having to disappoint yourself or her.”

I feel my body start to itch. I stand and give Rachel a hug.
“Thanks Rach. I should go.”

“Fine. Just run out of here.”

“I’m not running. I just need to prep for some meetings tomorrow.”

I turn to head to the door when Rachel calls out to me,
“Jared. Don’t let fear run your life.”

I nod and open the front door and walk down the steps. Fear has nothing do with any of this, but I’m so tired that’s all I can think about my entire way home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lacey

This week has been completely stressful. I haven't seen Jared since that night at his sister's. I know his plate is overflowing with this project, and I've been working extra at the bakery making sure I have all our ducks in a row with this new grant money. When Jared's dad came in the other night it really threw me off. I wanted to text Jared, but I know I'd much rather see him in person to talk about it. I just got to find the right time. I put on my slippers and go to the kitchen to make some coffee. Beth is in the shower, so I sit with my empty mug letting my eyes drift. My phone's buzzing brings me out of my thoughts. I swipe and see a text from Jared.

Jared: Can you come to my office first thing this morning?

I read it again. It must be important if he's texting me this early. Or maybe he just wants to see me.

Me: Yes of course. I'll be there at eight.

Jared: Thanks.

The coffee pot beeps leading me to jump in my chair. Jared is never one to use emojis, but I can't help feel his text is a little underwhelming. I sigh and pour my coffee. I'm sure I'm just overreacting. This is a good thing because now I can talk to him about why he never told me about his dad's foundation.

I get to my office and drop off my bag, quickly making my way to Jared's office. I feel like my stomach could come up my mouth at any moment. Diane greets me when I enter, always giving me a pleasant smile. She tells me to head back to Jared's office as he's expecting me. For some reason this all strikes me a little formal, but I chalk it up to Diane's professionalism. I see Jared's door closed so I softly knock.

"Come in," I hear him say from the other side.

I open the door and see him sitting behind his desk. Shane is standing near his window, and I can tell by the look on his face something is wrong.

Jared stands and walks to the front of his desk and leans against it. "Lacey, please sit."

Somehow, I feel I've time traveled and I'm back in the principal's office of my elementary school. Back in fourth grade, me and another girl Laura played a prank on one of the teachers by putting chalk in her coffee. It really was just a stupid prank, but the feeling of being in the principal's office was something I will never forget. It made me instantly regret everything I ever did, and that's the feeling that's creeping up my spine as I take a seat.

“Lacey, Shane and I shared your report with the final investor we need for this project. They thought something was off, so they had their team do the numbers, and it turns out they were right. Our numbers were way off.”

I stare at Jared like I’m waiting for a punchline. “You’re kidding right?” Shane and Jared both deadpan. “I don’t know how that’s possible. I went through those numbers like four times. I know they’re right.”

Jared looks down as Shane takes a few steps closer to me. “Look, Lacey, everyone makes mistakes. I looked at the spreadsheet and they were right. There were errors.”

I feel heat rising into my cheeks. I have no problem admitting when I make a mistake, but I know those numbers I sent were right. I made sure of it. “You don’t understand, I know they were right. I even ran them through David to make sure.”

Jared looks up at me. I can see him blink and hold his eyes closed for a brief second longer than usual, then he says, “Lacey, I think it would be best if you took a break from this project.”

I freeze. I don’t know if I’m about to cry or scream. Jared must sense it and asks Shane to give us a few minutes alone. As soon as Shane is out the door I stand.

“Jared. Those numbers were right. I need you to understand that.”

“Lacey, they weren’t. Not on what I saw. I know it’s your first time on a project this size and you have a lot going on with the bakery. I think you should let David handle it from here. There’s plenty of other smaller projects that could use your attention.”

My eyes start to fill, but I blink rapidly before any tears can fall. “Jared. You’re not letting me explain.”

Jared glances at his watch then back at me. “Lacey, I need to go. I have to catch a plane and head to Vegas so I can meet with some other potential investors. I don’t have much time.”

I can’t even believe what I’m hearing right now. His words come out gruff and I can hear the disappointment in his voice. I have nothing more to say, so I turn and make my way to the door. Just as my hand touches the handle, I hear him softly call my name, “Lacey—”

I don’t wait for him to finish his sentence. I think I’ve heard enough today.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jared

I barely have time to head home, grab my carry-on and head to the airport. Shane did some fast thinking and after a few phone calls we were lucky these potential investors said yes to this meeting. As I sit at my gate, I look at my phone. I feel horrible at how things went with Lacey but pulling her off this project seemed the logical thing to do. We just can't afford another mistake when we are so close to the finishing line. I know there's nothing I can say at this moment that'll make her feel better, and I don't even know what I would say. I check my emails one last time before boarding the plane and shut my phone off. I'm feeling worn and I plan to shut my eyes for the flight.

I feel the plane skid and hear faint mechanical sounds. I open my eyes surprised to see we have landed in Vegas. Sleeping on planes isn't something I'm usually good at and the fact that I just slept through an entire flight unsettles me. I scrub my

hands down my face and pull out my phone. As it powers up, I see multiple notifications. I click on messages and see I've missed two from Shane.

Shane: Did you board yet?

Shane: I sent you an email but call me before you check it.

I make my way to the rental car thankful I have a gold membership. I was already texted by the rental agency the parking spot number for my car. I look up and see my name flash across the spot for confirmation. Thank you technology. I get in and call Shane before I leave the parking space.

He picks up on the first ring and I don't even let him greet me. "Shane?"

"Hey Jared. Glad you got there. Listen, there's something you need to know. This afternoon, a picture has been circulating."

I scrunch my forehead not having a clue where Shane is going with this. "Picture? What are you talking about?"

"Of you. And Lacey. It looks like you're at a restaurant holding hands and getting pretty cozy."

My breathing stops. I look at my phone and click my inbox and open Shane's email. Staring at me is a picture of me and Lacey holding hands at our first date dinner. We're leaning into each other and it's clear it's more than friendly.

"Shane. Where did this come from?" I say trying to hold back my rage.

Shane sighs. “I’m not sure. I have IT digging into it, but it was distributed to everyone at Whitmore Tech.”

I chew my lip and smack the steering wheel. I could say so many expletives right now, but I know it won’t help. I take a deep breath. “Shane, let me know if IT finds anything. Give me an update if you sense this can’t wait until tomorrow. My flight arrives back in Littleford tomorrow afternoon.”

“Got it. Look, Jared, I know it’s bad timing, but just focus on this pitch okay? We really need these guys to buy in.”

I lean my head back against the headrest. “Yeah, I know. I’m on it. Talk to you later.”

I drive to my hotel and check-in. I pull out my laptop to see the original email with the picture. The sender is blank and there’s no other context. This is not what I need right now and as I think about how I’m going to start dealing with it my phone chimes. I grab it off the nightstand to see Lacey’s name.

Lacey: Hi. I know you’re not in town right now. But you should know someone has circulated a picture of you and I from dinner. It wasn’t me that did it.

I didn’t once think that it would be Lacey. She has too much to lose doing something like this. My mind is so jumbled I’m not sure where to take this conversation.

Me: I know. Shane told me. I’m starting to handle it now. I have IT looking into it.

Lacey: Should I do something?

I sit back on the bed when it occurs to me, she's probably getting all sorts of looks and comments from people in the office.

Me: Has anyone said anything to you?

Lacey: No. Not yet. Just getting some interesting looks from people.

Me: Ok. Well, I just wouldn't say anything yet. I'm going to talk to HR, and I'll be back in the office tomorrow afternoon. I'll touch base then.

Lacey: Ok. I'm sorry Jared.

I let out a frustrated groan. I don't text back. I should tell her she has nothing to be sorry about and I'm the one who is sorry. This was all created by me. I should have listened to my head when it was telling me it wasn't a good idea to get involved with an employee. Then my heart squeezes like a vice; thinking of Lacey as just an employee doesn't feel right. My head is a mess. I stand back up and face my laptop. It's seven p.m. and I have to edit this pitch for my presentation tomorrow morning. I sit down, roll up my sleeves and get to work thankful for a distraction.

It's one a.m. when I close my laptop. I have all my talking points, and all I can do is just hope it all goes well. I brush my teeth and climb into bed knowing the chances of me sleeping are slim. I pick up my phone and go to my music app. I click on my newly created playlist that I have named *'For Lacey.'* I press play and place it on my nightstand hoping Handel can calm my mind.

I'm awake at six a.m. I think I slept for a few hours but I'm not sure. I do know I had a dream about Lacey, but the details aren't all there. I just remember her being in a pale-yellow dress looking beautiful and talking to me about planting flowers in my backyard. She looked happy. I was happy. I jump out of bed grabbing my phone. I go to my inbox but there's nothing new. I look at my texts. Nothing. I take a quick shower, get dressed and get on the road to my meeting.

The meeting starts off a little rough with everyone asking a thousand questions, but I field them all, giving the answers they want to hear. I know how this works. After two hours I wrap things up and head to the airport. I call Shane to give him an update.

I hear him pick up but before he even greets me, I say, "Hey, the meeting went well. I think they'll buy in. Should know by tomorrow."

I can tell by his silence he either can't talk or doesn't want to. "Shane?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Look that's great. Just come find me when you get in this afternoon okay?"

"Will do. See you then."

I hang up with Shane. A part of me wants to text Lacey to see how her morning is going. She's probably only been in the office a few hours fielding curious looks and comments. I hate being away from her right now, but I definitely don't want to

call her when she's in the office. I sit back and let out a frustrated breath knowing it's going to be a long day.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lacey

The last twenty-four hours have turned from bad to worse. After Jared pulled me off the project, I wallowed in my office with my door shut. Then after lunch I was making a cup of tea when several members of my team walked by me without saying hello. I let it go knowing everyone is working really hard on multiple projects, but when I saw David in the hall, I hurried to catch up to him and he dodged me by going into the men's room. Then I saw the email which made my heart drop and my stomach curl.

I spent the night with chocolate brownies and Beth by my side. Now I'm back at the office hoping Jared gets here fast. Within thirty minutes of being here I've had at least five people stare me down and multiple people avoid me in the hall. My email 'bings' and I see an invite from HR. It's labeled 'HR Discussion' and it's in one hour. I can't tell if Jared is on it but it doesn't matter because at this point we all know what

it's about and he's not even here. Not knowing when Jared plans to arrive, I send him a text. I feel I should at least keep him apprised of the situation.

Me: Hi. Just got an invite to meet with HR in one hour. I'll let you know how it goes.

I don't get a response, but that's not surprising as he's probably still in the air. I stay in my office until I have to go meet with HR. My walk to HR seems much longer than it should be. As I make the right down the hall my palms begin to sweat. I sit at a table with Amanda. She looks serious which is making me sweat even more.

Amanda can barely look at me, but she clears her throat and says, "Lacey, I know this situation is uncomfortable. But we are required to do an investigation of the recent email and picture that was sent. It's our policy during these types of investigations that the parties involved are suspended, with pay, until we conclude our investigation."

I sit still for a few moments. Suddenly, the reality of the situation hits me in my gut. I am being investigated. I can't even stomach the thought of this, and I know this is going to cause Jared so many problems. I don't want to do this to him. I feel my cheeks heat. I grab a tissue off the table and dab my eyes. I want to defend myself. I want to defend Jared. The fact that this is making me feel like I'm in trouble for simply dating someone seems absurd. I take a breath and blow it out slowly knowing what I need to do.

“Amanda. There’s no need to investigate. I’m handing in my resignation.”

“Lacey–” Amanda starts to say, but I cut her off. “No, it’s fine. It makes the most sense. I’ll send it to you in an email. I’ll leave today.”

I get up briskly walking to the door happy not to hear her call after me. I’m sure she’s sitting in shock but talking to anyone in this office right now is not what I need. I close my office door, type up my resignation email and send it to HR. I grab my few personal belongings off my desk and stuff them in my bag. I snatch my phone off my desk. This will be easier said in a text.

Me to Jared: Hi. Don’t worry too much about everything. I handed in my resignation.

By the time I get to the bakery my tears have dried but by the way Beth greets me I can only assume I look like a mess which is fitting because that’s how my insides feel. I’m not sure I’ve been on this much of an emotional roller coaster since my mom died. Beth hugs me as she takes me over to the table to sit. She brings me an iced coffee while not saying a word. This is when fifteen years of friendship comes in handy. She knows I’m not ready to talk about it yet. She goes in the back then waits on a few customers. After about twenty minutes she comes back to the table.

She puts her hand on my arm. “You ready now?”

I nod. “Yeah. I think so.”

I tell her about the HR meeting and my resignation. I know she understands why I did it but the uncertainty on her face is not making me feel any better.

“Beth, I had to do it. If you saw everyone looking at me, it was just awful.”

“Lace I’m sure. I get it. What about Jared?”

I stare at my iced coffee as the ice melts turning its dark color into a shade of caramel. “Jared? I mean, I know he’ll handle this, and with me out of the way it should be easier for him.”

Beth shakes her head. “No that’s not what I mean. You may have quit your job, but have you quit Jared?”

I put my head down on the table then spring right back up. “Beth, I don’t think there was going to be anything with Jared. We had chemistry, but he just won’t let me in. He’s built up a wall that I’m not sure I can break. If he was unsure of me before this whole situation, this I’m sure has made it worse. Not to mention, he also lied to me. He didn’t admit that he was the one who pushed me for the team leader position and then he didn’t tell me about his dad’s foundation.” I swallow fighting back my tears. “I’m not sure I want to be with someone who can’t be honest.”

I rest my head in my hands then notice Beth looking over my shoulder out to the main street. “What?” I say turning to see what she’s looking at. My eyes suddenly rest on Shane exiting

his car and walking towards the bakery. I can not possibly handle any more bad news today.

“Did you know he was coming?” I ask Beth.

“No. I mean not now. He usually stops by after dinner,” Beth says as she stands to greet Shane.

Shane gives Beth a hug and kisses her on the lips. Even amongst all the chaos I notice how much they complement each other. He’s a few inches taller than Beth and when they hug it’s like they fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. I am happy for them even if my life is in complete shambles.

“Lacey, hey,” Shane says softly to me as he takes a few steps forward. His cautious approach makes me feel like I’m a wounded animal.

“Hey Shane. Look, if there’s more bad news, I’m not sure I can handle it right now,” I say in one exasperated breath.

“Lacey, IT found the source of the email and picture.”

Those were not the words I was expecting to hear. I imagined Shane coming to tell me everything was going to be okay, or that he talked to Jared or that putting in my resignation was the right thing to do, but not this.

I lift my eyebrows. The unspoken question written on my face.

“It was David.”

My mouth opens. “What? Are you sure?”

“Yes. Positive. IT traced it down through some dark web IP address.”

“But why would he do that?” I say out loud not directing my question at anyone but rather into the empty space in front of me.

“Lacey, that’s not all. I confronted him, and he admitted to messing with your report and changing the numbers.”

I feel a sudden wave of anger fill my gut. “Are you kidding me right now Shane?”

“No. He seems remorseful, but I brought all this to HR. Jared just landed a few minutes ago. I called and told him everything too.”

I stand up knocking my chair over in the process and grab my bag. I look at Beth, “I’ll be back later.”

“Wait! Where are you going?”

“To get some answers.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jared

I'm sure the guy sitting next to me thought I was in some sort of existential crisis as my leg kept dancing up and down. His thought wouldn't be that far off either. Luckily, I was seated at the front of the plane and was able to grab my carry-on and get off the plane fast. Shane called me to give me an update on everything. To say I was surprised is an understatement. Then I read a text from Lacey telling me she handed in her resignation. I did not want this to turn out this way.

As I pull to a stop at a redlight my neck stiffens as I feel sweat slide down underneath my shirt. I pull off my jacket and throw it in the back. I look in the rearview mirror and see droplets forming above my eyebrows and I quickly grab a napkin from the glovebox to wipe my face. I have to get myself together. I continue down the road to the office when I realize I can't be there right now, my mind isn't ready for any

of this. I take a quick right turn, then another. Within a few minutes I'm in Rachel's driveway. Her car is parked outside and a small sense of relief washes over me.

I climb up her steps and enter without knocking. I rush in the front door and call for her, "Rach, are you here?"

Within seconds I see her emerge from the kitchen area, "Jared. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Well, no. I mean I'm not sure."

Rachel comes closer and grabs my arm and leads me into the kitchen. "Sit."

I glance around expecting to see Max and Sara knowing that school has ended for the day. "Where are the kids?"

Rachel hands me a bottle of water. "Mom and Dad have Max and Sara for dinner and Danielle is napping. Jared. What's going on? You're all sweaty."

I take a sip of water enjoying the coolness filling my belly. "I just got off a flight. Work trip. It's been a rough forty-eight hours."

Rachel sits across from me and reaches her hand out. "Spill it Jared."

I appreciate my sister's no-nonsense attitude. Even as a kid she was always blunt and told everyone exactly how she felt. There were never any filters, it was just pure Rachel all the time. I shut my eyes briefly then open them. I have nothing to lose in telling her everything.

I tell her about all the dates with Lacey, my anxiety attacks, me pushing for her to be a team leader, the grant and the most recent events. It all sounds like a movie plot, and I'm even still trying to process it when Rachel lets out a snorted laugh.

“Rach I find it hard to believe you think this is funny.”

“You're right it's not. I'm sorry. It's just. You're making this complicated. It doesn't need to be.”

I shake my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Jared. You love her. It's obvious. So tell her. Be with her. All this other stuff will work itself out.”

I lean back in the chair and cross my arms. “You think it's that easy? And I'm pretty sure I didn't say I was in love with her.”

Rachel reaches across the table and uncrosses my arms. “Stop being so stubborn Jared. You don't have to say it. I can tell by looking at you when you talk about her. Take the jump. Tell her your feelings. She can't read your mind Jared, and if you want to see her again, which clearly you do, you need to come clean with her.”

Rachel's words hit me hard. I know Lacey and I have chemistry. I know she's on my mind more than any other woman. I know she makes me laugh. I know we have similar tastes in music. I know I really like her cookies. Dammit. I now know I'm an idiot. I rub my hand over my mouth as I stand up.

“Rach, I gotta go. Thanks for this.”

“Anything for my big brother.”

I start to take larger steps than normal to the door when I hear Rachel call out to me, “Hey, you owe me one! Can’t wait to see her at the next family dinner!”

I smile to myself. I can only hope I won’t be alone for the next family dinner.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lacey

I'm standing on the side of the building in a hoodie with the hood over my head. If it wasn't raining, I'm sure I'd look suspicious. I'm making my best effort to stay out of view because I can't possibly tolerate any more glares or unwanted comments. Finally, after ten minutes I see David step out on the sidewalk, so I walk to catch up to him.

"David," I call out hoping my voice doesn't draw any unwanted attention.

David turns and as I pull down my hood so he can see it's me, he pauses. I walk closer to him, "David. I know what you did. I'm upset about it, but I really just want to know why you did it."

David grabs my arm and pulls me under the overhang on the opposite side of the building. "Lacey. Look, I'm sorry. Truly I am. I just...ugh, well I was jealous. I didn't like that you and

Mr. Whitmore were working so closely. And even though I suspected there was more going on, I really didn't care—it wasn't my business, but when he and Shane were impressed by your reports it just struck a nerve in me. I'm used to being the person they rely on."

David's voice sounds sincere but I look down because I can't look him in the eyes when I ask, "How'd you even get the picture?"

David frowns. "I go to that restaurant all the time. I live two blocks from it. I just happened to spot you two through the window and I snapped a picture with my phone. Lacey, I wasn't spying on you, please believe me."

"I believe you," I say, but still, I somehow feel violated and more hurt than anything else.

"David, I handed in my resignation, which I'm sure you know. I do appreciate you giving me that job. I learned a lot and if anything, it's made me more confident in my abilities. I know I'm good at what I do."

David gives me a small smile. "Lacey, you are great with numbers, and I was impressed with you from day one."

I nod. "Thanks. One other thing you should know. Jared and I weren't fooling around or anything. We were or are dating. I don't know what we are at the moment or why I'm telling you this. I just want you to know that I have feelings for him, and this wasn't some ploy for me to make my way up the corporate ladder."

David nods. “I never thought that, but thanks for telling me.”

I turn to walk away, feeling only slightly better when David calls to me, “Lacey—”

I stop but don’t look back when David finishes his sentence, “You’ll be good for him.”

I don’t turn around, instead I walk faster through the rain because I need to go find the other person I need answers from.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jared

Of course it starts to pour when I leave Rachel's. I pull over about halfway to the office. I know I need to get to the office and talk to HR, but right now there's a more important conversation I need to have. I roll up my sleeves and look at my face in the rearview mirror. I look rough, but I don't care. My adrenaline is pumping hard, so I shift into drive and pull a U-turn.

I probably went way faster than I should have in this rain, but when I see the pink *Baked and Sugared* sign my stomach reaches my throat. I don't know if Lacey is going to want to hear what I have to say, but I have to try. I park across the street and dash to the door. I'm not exactly quiet when I enter and as I stand dripping wet I make eye contact with Shane.

"Jared!" Shane calls out to me.

I stand, my eyes darting behind the counter then back over to Shane and Beth. “Hey, where’s Lacey?”

Beth stands and rubs her hands together. “I don’t know. She left a while ago saying she needed to go get answers. I figured she was trying to find you.”

I sigh and look around. I pull out my phone ready to make the call when the door flies open. Lacey steps through completely soaked and I have never seen someone more beautiful in my life.

I run over to her wanting to pull her into my arms. I stop a few inches from her as I look into her misty eyes.

“Lacey—”

She puts her hand out to stop me from moving closer. “Jared. Stop. We need to talk.”

I hear movement to my left and watch as Shane and Beth make their way to the door. Shane gives me a nod as he and Beth leave knowing Lacey and I need to be alone.

I return my attention to Lacey. She peels back her hood of her white hoodie. Her wavy hair falls to her shoulders frizzy from the dampness. Her cheeks are wet and even her eyelashes have droplets of rain falling from them. She looks like an absolute dream. I stand in silence unsure what to do. She wipes the hair back from her face and as she looks over my shoulder she says “Jared. I need you to listen.”

I nod. “Okay. I’m listening.” My heart completely sinks. The fact she won’t even make eye contact is killing me. I want her

to look at me, so she can see how much I want to be with her.

“Jared, I’ve loved spending time with you. And while I can appreciate the things you’ve shared with me, you have a wall that’s closing you off, and I’m tired of trying to break it down. I want you to let me in, but I’m not going to beg you.”

“Lacey—”

“No. Just wait. This might take a minute. I have a lot to say.”

I smirk but her face remains serious. Her eyes land on mine only for a brief second but it sends chills up my spine. A small wave of panic runs through me hoping whatever she’s about to say still gives me a chance.

“Then you took me off the project and didn’t even let me explain. You didn’t stick up for me or even try to listen. I felt ignored and worse of all I felt like you didn’t believe in me.”

My heart sinks so far down inside of me I think I might puke. I feel like the biggest jerk. I never want this woman to ever feel hurt by me ever again. My heart starts to race and I run my fingers through my hair. Lacey looks at me and closes her eyes. When she opens them, I see a single tear fall down her cheek. I can’t take it, so I take a step closer and brush it away with my thumb. She gently grabs my hand and returns it to my side. The dismissal of me touching her is breaking me. I see her swallow and I know she’s preparing for more, so I stay still.

“Then Jared, you lied to me.”

I tilt my head in confusion. I wrinkle my forehead trying to scan my brain for what she might be talking about. When I look at her, I can tell she's surprised by my expression.

“Jared, why didn't you tell me that *you* were the one that pushed for me to be a team leader? And the grant? Why didn't you tell me the grant was from your dad's foundation?”

I open my mouth but close it. I never thought about these things until right at this moment. I didn't intentionally lie to her, and now as she says it, I'm an idiot for not realizing how it looks to her.

“Lacey, I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to think I was doing you favors. I just wanted... I just wanted to see you succeed. You deserve to succeed.”

As soon as I say it, I know that's not exactly what I mean, but before I can backtrack Lacey shakes her head and says, “I appreciate that, but—”

I can't let her go on any longer. I'm bursting at the seams. “Lacey, just hold that thought—”

I take another step closer to her. She stands still. “Lacey, I did those things because...because I'm in love with you.”

I watch as her mouth drops open, and in a whisper she asks, “What did you just say?”

I can tell her mind is going at warp speed, but not hearing her say anything else, I take it as my invitation to continue.

“Lacey, I've been in love with you since the moment you fed me banana bread in my car. I just didn't let myself believe it. I

love your smile, your determination, your drive, and your hips make my mouth water.” I see a small upturn in her top lip, so I keep going. “I’m so sorry I put up a wall, I’m tired of having that wall up too. It’s just I, I don’t want to fail and I’ve come to realize that failure drives my anxiety, but I also realize you calm me. You’re my antidote.” I wipe a tear from my eye and give her a light laugh. “You’re my love pill.”

I watch her eyes search mine then she chuckles. “Love pill. Let’s not use that as a nickname okay?” She says apparently grateful for some levity in our conversation. “Jared, you’ve done more wonderful things for me in these last few weeks than any man I’ve been in a relationship with. If you just let go of the fear we can make this work. I’m sure of it.”

“Lacey, you’re my person, and I want to be your person. But you have to promise me that if I get all wrapped up with work, or you think I’m shutting you out you have to tell me. I don’t ever want to do that to you.” I reach out to touch her cheek. She rests it in my palm. I freeze this moment in my memory. I can never let this woman go.

“Lacey, I’m all in if you’ll have me.”

Her eyes burrow into my soul. “I’m all in too.”

She takes a small step closer to me and reaches her arms behind my neck. I reach behind her back and eagerly pull her into me. I kiss the top of head, then her cheek, then I brush my lips on hers. I pause on her mouth hoping she allows me to show her all my love. Her lips part and I feel her tongue brush on my bottom lip. I move my hand to her neck to deepen this

kiss. She lets out a soft moan and all my senses fire off. This woman has officially sent my walls crumbling.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lacey

Kissing Jared this time feels completely different. I feel like I'm kissing someone new, someone who is letting their guard down. The chemistry we have is fierier now that it was our first kiss. I sigh into his chest, and I can feel his muscles relax as I rub his back. We stand holding each other for a few minutes with the warmth of his body melting away any last piece of my doubt. His wet hair is complimenting his gray eyes more now than ever, and as I look deep into them my heart feels full. Even with all the chaos I'm more certain about my feelings for him. I put my hand on his chest and with my eyes searching his I say, "Jared, I'm falling in love with you too."

He responds by pulling me in even closer and kissing me with such veracity I lose my breath. Somehow, he notices and breaks away then smiles. "I didn't realize I could take your breath away Miss Paxton."

I smile and shake my head. “Mr. Whitmore you have taken my breath away the moment I laid eyes on you.”

He kisses my cheek then holds me back so he can see my face. “We should head to HR and get all this straightened out.”

I pause and then walk to the counter grabbing a few dishtowels from behind. I hand him one and start to wipe the dampness from my face and neck. “Jared, I’m not going to come back to Whitmore Tech.”

I can see the surprise in his eyes, but he doesn’t respond. “I’ve been thinking, I really want to make this work. Here. At the bakery. And I need to be here full time. I know it’s going be tight, but I can get the finances to work—” I’m becoming more animated as my hands start to operate unwillingly, when Jared comes over to me and holds my hands.

“Lacey, I know you can make this work. I have no doubt, and if that’s what you want to do then I support you one hundred percent.”

“Knowing I have you by my side is all I need,” I say smiling up at him.

He gently pushes some wet hair off my face and kisses my forehead and says, “I do have to go to HR still. So let me go explain everything to them, then let’s plan dinner together. Just stay here until I get back. Don’t move.”

I wrap my arms around him and kiss his cheek, “Yes sir, Mr. Bossy Pants.”

I feel his body shake with laughter as I grab the dish towel from him hesitating before I say, “Jared before you go, you should know I talked to David. He didn’t mean what he did, and he regrets it. I’m not saying he shouldn’t be held accountable for his actions, but maybe he shouldn’t be fired.”

Jared cocks his head at me, “You really are one incredible woman.”

I put my arm on his, “You should go. The sooner you get back, we can get dinner, and I’m starving.”

“Now who’s being bossy?” he says giving me a sly grin.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jared

I wanted to stay with Lacey in the bakery kissing. I never felt more alive than when I'm with her, but I know I need to get to the office. It's nearing five p.m. when I make it up to the floor and head out of the elevator. It's fairly quiet as most people have left for the day. I make a detour to my office hoping Diane is still there. I open the door to see the light on and Diane's bag resting on her desk. Taking a few steps in I call out to her, "Diane, you still here?"

I hear a door shut and see Diane heading down the hall to me. "Mr. Whitmore—nice to have you back."

Seeing Diane's smile is a comfort and if there's any one person other than Shane that I trust in this office it's her. "Diane, I need you to cancel my meetings for tomorrow."

Diane sits down at her computer and starts clicking. "Sure Mr. Whitmore. I'll do it right now. Is everything okay?"

I grin from ear-to-ear, “Yes, everything is wonderful actually, but I could use your help.”

Diane raises her eyebrows intrigued by my plea for help. I tap my finger on her desk and clear my throat. “Can you book a reservation at Lossaro’s for tomorrow at seven p.m. Make it for six people please.”

Diane returns her attention to her computer pressing her lips together. I can tell she’s trying not to smile. She looks at the computer and back to me. “Sure can. Investor meeting?”

I let out a small laugh, “No, family dinner.”

I can tell she’s doing the math in her head as she’s made these reservations for me plenty of times before. I give her a few moments when she asks, “Oh, extra company this week?”

I nod. “Yes, I’m taking Lacey with me.”

Without warning Diane stands, walks to me, and wraps her arms around my waist for a hug. I let out an audible ‘*oompgh*’ which brings her arms back to her side as she steps away.

“Sorry Mr. Whitmore. I’m just so happy for you. I knew you two were going to be right for each other.”

Diane’s words warm my chest. “Thank you. I’ll see you Monday morning. Enjoy the weekend.”

She nods but holds up her finger giving me the sign to wait a second. I tilt my head curious at what she’s doing as she rustles under her desk. Within seconds she rises with a neatly wrapped package in her hand. “I made you another banana bread. Hopefully you liked it the first time?” she asks.

Oh, if she only knew. I reach out and take the bread from her hands. It weighs just as much as the first one but this bread has good memories already attached to it.

“Diane, this is the best banana bread I’ve ever had. Don’t change a thing about it.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, I’ll keep it just the way it is. Be sure to share some with Miss Lacey?”

I stifle a laugh deep inside. “I most certainly will.”

I leave my office, banana bread in hand and walk into HR. I sit with Amanda and go through all the details of Lacey and I dating, the project and David’s involvement. It was exhausting to explain, but as I finish getting it all out, a huge sense of relief washes over me. I sign my written statement and make the recommendation that David stay on as an employee. I thought I’d be more upset with him as I told the story to HR, but none of it matters now, because I have Lacey.

I can’t get back to the bakery fast enough. It has finally stopped raining and as I make my way across the bridge, I can see a rainbow streak across the sky just above the mountains. The perfect symbol for a perfect day.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lacey

I am both mentally and physically exhausted. I wait on a few customers that have braved the rain but as my legs start to ache, I take a seat at one of the tables. I want nothing more than to have dinner with Jared but thinking about the process of getting ready to go out is not something I'm in the mood for, so I grab my phone with a thought in mind.

Me: Hey! Have you and Shane had dinner yet?

Beth: Nope! You? Are things okay?

Me: Things are really good. Jared is coming back to the bakery and we were going to get dinner. But I kinda don't want to go out. I'm exhausted.

Beth: You know what that means right?

Me: Well, I was hoping...

I can't finish my text before Beth's comes in.

Beth: We'll get tacos and all the fixings from The Happy Avocado and we can eat at the bakery. See you in thirty minutes!

Me: You are the best.

I rest my phone down on the table and look up to see Jared making his way in. His shirt is still damp from the rain and clinging to his defined chest. Suddenly I don't feel so tired and rush to him as he enters. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss his soft lips.

"Mmm. I really like being greeted this way," he says with a throaty moan.

My cheeks flush as my stomach growls. "About dinner. I hope you don't mind, but I'm beat, so Beth and Shane are getting all of us tacos from The Happy Avocado and making their way here."

Jared leans into me. "That sounds perfect." He pauses and looks away then back at me. I give him a questionable glance thinking something isn't right.

"How did your meeting with HR go?"

"It was fine. I made my statement which at this point is just a formality. I also recommended that we keep David on."

I look at him, still not convinced that's all he has to say. "Jared, what's going on? You seem uneasy."

He tucks my hair behind my ear, his touch sending whole body shivers through me. "Lacey, I hope you don't think it's too much too soon, but I cancelled my meetings for tomorrow.

I thought we could have brunch then take a ride through the mountains.”

“That sounds like a great idea. I can’t wait.”

He stares at me intently and then says, “That’s not all. I made reservations for dinner tomorrow with my family, and I really want you to come.”

My stomach puts itself in a knot. I do want to have dinner with his family. I haven’t even thought of the *word* family is such a long time. Being the only child of a single mom who was also an only child, holidays and gatherings were small to say the least. Spending any amount of time with Jared and his family that I know he loves gives me a giddy feeling.

“You realize, I’ve already met your sister and your dad right?”

Jared moves his hands to my hips. “Oh, I’m aware, and they have been pestering me about you since they met you. And my mom is going to adore you. But that’s no surprise, you’re an easy sell.”

I smack his arm. “Oh, so I’m some project you need to pitch?” I say jokingly.

“You are definitely not a project. You’re my girlfriend, and I want everyone to know it.”

I kiss him gently when I hear the door open. Shane and Beth have their hands full, so I run over to help them.

“You guys, how many tacos did you get?”

Beth laughs. “Well, Shane insisted on getting extra chips, guacamole and salsa, so two of the bags are just those things.”

I place everything on the table, and we all dive in like we haven't eaten in days. We talk and laugh, but the best sight is watching Jared have a permanent smile on his face the entire time. I lean my head on his shoulder as he rubs my back. Beth looks up and gives me a smile. There's something about the four of us being here together at this moment that makes me feel like this is exactly how it's supposed to be, and if this is a sign of the future to come, I am going to be one very lucky woman.

Epilogue

TWO YEARS LATER

Lacey

It's been so busy at the bakery the last few weeks and I'm starting to feel it. Maybe it's just the July heat of southern Utah, but I swear my body temperature feels hotter than the sun. I've been awake since five a.m. going through all the orders we need to fulfill and it's more than I bargained for. After signing contracts with several restaurants in the area for bread deliveries our revenue has taken a dramatic upturn. I have Ashley working double the hours she used to, and Beth and I have even considered leasing the extra space next to us. I'm also trying to keep Beth as stress free as possible. Her and Shane are getting married in less than three months, and being her matron of honor it's my duty to help as much as I can.

When Jared and I married last fall, Beth and Shane were amazing, and Jared and I are doing our best to reciprocate. Beth took it all in stride when I moved out and moved in with

Jared. Now she's permanently packing up her things in the apartment and getting ready to move in with Shane in the house they just bought. The best thing about their new house is that it's ten minutes from me and Jared. Total score in my book.

I head in the back to check on our flour supply. Ashley is busy taking fresh brownies from the oven and the smell of all the chocolate is overwhelming. I head back out to the front and pour myself some water and sit at an empty table. I hear my phone buzz in my pocket and pull it out to see a text from Beth.

Beth: Hey...do you want the little pink elephant planter?

I can't help but smile. The little pink elephant planter was something we purchased at a flea market years ago. We were trying to find some cool and chic accessories for what was then our new apartment. The planter was just the right size so we took it home and planted a tiny Christmas cactus. When I moved in with Jared, I took all my personal things, but I left all the items that felt like they belonged to both of us. The planter being one of them.

Me: Yes I'll take it if you don't want it!

Beth: Ok. I'll put it aside.

Me: How are things? Do you need help?

Beth: No. I'm ok.

I see more bubbles. Then they stop. I can sense something is going on with her, so I text back not even asking a question.

Me: Why don't I come by for a few and help you pack.

A minute goes by with nothing, so I get up, my back aching and my stomach feeling miserable. This heat is really getting to me.

“Hey Ashley? Are you good for a few hours by yourself?” I ask into the air as I can't see where she is at the moment.

I glance behind the counter and see Ashley emerge from the back. “Yeah, I'm good. Everything okay?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I'm just going to go help Beth pack. I think she's feeling stressed with moving and the wedding.”

“Sounds good. Tell her hi for me!”

I nod to Ashley grabbing my bag when my phone buzzes again.

Beth: Yeah. That would be good.

As I climb the few flights of stairs to the apartment, I stop on the landing slightly out of breath. I pause and inhale. I should really drink more water in this heat. I continue up the last few stairs and knock on the door. I'm not sure why I knock seeing as I still have a key, but at this point, it's Beth's apartment not ours.

She flings the door open, and tears are coming from her eyes. I hesitate for a second then burst through the doorway, shut the door, and pull her into an embrace.

“Beth, what's going on?”

“Nothing. I mean, I can’t wait to marry Shane. And I love our new house. But this is it. Like you and I will never be in this apartment again.”

The truth hits me in the gut. I hadn’t really considered that once Beth moves that I’d never see the apartment again. My eyes start to get glassy, but I fight back the tears.

“I know. But it’s all for good reasons, right?”

Beth nods and wipes her nose with her hand. “Yeah, it is. We just have so many memories here.”

I feel a cramp in my side and quickly sit at the dining table. I really hope I’m not getting the dreadful summer flu.

“Lace are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think I’m just dehydrated and tired. But I’m fine.”

Beth goes into the kitchen and then hands me a bottle of water. I open the bottle and take two small sips letting it cool the back of my throat. Then without warning as it hits my stomach a pang of nausea hits me. I grimace as I put the cap back on the bottle.

“Lace you’re not fine. How long have you been feeling like this?”

I pause and think back. “A few weeks maybe?”

“Weeks? Lace that’s not good. Tell me your symptoms.”

I take a deep breath and tell her about my fatigue, feeling hot all the time, and the recent nausea spells. When I finish I look

at Beth. Her eyes are wide a small smile is forming on her lips as I continue to stare.

“Um, have you considered you might be pregnant?” She asks me while grabbing my hand across the table.

Suddenly my heart races. No, I haven’t considered it. I’m still on the pill, so I don’t even see how that’s possible. “No...I mean I’m on the pill.”

Beth’s eyebrows perch. “Well sometimes it’s not foolproof. Oh my god, can you do a pregnancy test here? Now? Please!”

“Beth, I doubt I am, and I don’t feel like going out to get one.”

Beth lurches up from the table running down the hall. I see her fly into the bathroom then emerge and make her way back to me. “You don’t have to. I have one.”

I push my head forward with my mouth open. “Why do you have a pregnancy test?”

Beth snickers. “I had a false alarm a few months ago. But enough about me, will you please do it? It can be our one last final memory in this apartment.”

I close my eyes. It feels unnecessary, but I want to make Beth happy, so I agree. “Fine.”

I head to the bathroom and when I’m done, I leave it sitting on the bathroom counter. I return to Beth at the table.

“Do you want to talk about it. You know, if you are?”

I shake my head. “Beth, I’m not. I just need to drink some water and get more sleep. Or I might have the flu, who knows.”

We continue arguing about if I am or if I’m not when the timer goes off. I look at her from across the table. Neither of us move. Finally, Beth says, “Do you want me to look?”

For some reason I don’t want to look. I’m not allowing myself to even consider the possibility, but something is making me feel uncertain all of a sudden. I clear my throat. “Yes, you look.”

Beth pushes back her chair and runs down the hall. I don’t hear anything for what seems like eternity, so I get up and make my way down the hall. I step into the bathroom and see Beth holding the test with tears in her eyes. I grab the test from her. My eyes look down then at Beth then back down. “How is this possible?” I ask, tears starting to fill my eyes.

Beth hugs me tightly. “Lace, you’re going to be the best mom!”

I wrap my arms around her and squeeze her. “I am. I will. I can do this right?”

Beth pulls away and laughs. “Of course you can! And I’m going to be right here with you the whole time. And you’ll have Jared right there too. He’s going to be a great dad.”

My stomach lurches. Jared. Oh my God. How am I even going to tell him. We had only talked briefly about having kids. Both of us being in our late thirties, and Jared hitting

forty in a few months we never shut out the idea, but we also weren't trying. I don't think I ever spent a lot of time thinking about being a mom, but when Beth just said the word to me my heart skipped.

"I know. I know you're right. I don't know what to do? What should I be doing? Beth, tell me!"

Beth grabs my hands. "First you need to calm down. I think you should sit for a second and let's think about how you want to give the news to Jared."

After a few minutes with Beth my heart settles. She brings me ice which for some reason goes down better than water, and I start to let myself think about all the things. A nursery, a baby shower, all the toys, diapers, strollers. Then an image of Jared holding our baby crosses my mind and my heart swells.

"Beth. I love you. Thank you. I need to go. I have to get home; Jared will be home soon."

Beth gives me another hug. "Sure. Of course. Here." She hands me the test. "Take this. Go tell your man!"

When I burst through the front door, I hear nothing but silence. How soon this is all going to change. I go upstairs and take a cool shower and throw on a yellow sundress with some flip flops. The shower has made me feel somewhat better, so I sit on the edge of the bed with the test in my hand. I glance at the clock as it shines four-forty-five p.m. Ever since Jared and I officially became a couple, he promised to be home by five p.m. unless of course there was something important, which he

always told me about beforehand. I get up and go downstairs, grab the wireless speaker and head out back to the gardens.

When I moved in with Jared, he already had some great greenery but no real flowers, so I took it upon myself to plant an array of colorful flowers along the back edge of the property. He loves that I like to garden, and every now and then I find him out here walking along the edge of where the flowers meet the tall shrubs. I set the speaker down and connect my phone. I hit play and let my classical music playlist fill the air.

I walk down the row of cardinal flowers when I spot movement to my right. I look to see Jared heading my way. My stomach flips as I see his smile. This man is already a wonderful husband and I know he's going to make an amazing dad.

As he nears me, he grabs my hand and makes me twirl. "I love this dress on you. You look like a garden goddess," he says. Nothing this man says to me can ever grow old.

"Thank you," I say, my face feeling flushed. I kiss him on the lips then grab his hand and continue to walk with him for a minute. He stops looking perplexed. "Wait, are you playing classical music to the plants? Because it looks like you put this speaker pointing in their direction deliberately."

I laugh. "You're very observant. Did you know they did a study where when they played classical music to plants, they grew twenty percent faster?"

Jared raises his eyebrows. “Huh. That’s interesting, so I take it you’re wanting to add some growth to this flower bed?”

I pause then I reach in the pocket of my dress and pull out the test. “You could say that. And it looks like our family is about to grow too.”

I stand with the test in my hand, carefully watching his reaction. He looks down at the test. Then takes it from me and examines it. He looks up at me searching my face for confirmation. I nod. “Yes, it’s positive. We are going to have a baby.”

He drops the test to the ground and pulls me to him planting a fervent kiss on my lips. “Lacey, I can’t even...I can’t believe it.”

I smile. “Are you happy?”

He grabs my hand and kisses my knuckles. “I can’t even tell you how excited I am. I’m scared too, don’t get me wrong, but you’re going to be such a good mom. And I know with my sister and parents and Shane and Beth this baby is going to be loved so much.”

“Jared, you’re going to be a great dad.”

I see his eyes begin to fill. He puts his hand on my stomach then turns me to face the house. We start walking a few steps when he stops.

“Let’s go pick out which room will be the nursery. Do you want to find out the sex of the baby? What about colors? Is

pink still in for girls? We could paint the room pink? If it's a boy we could do blue, or what about green?....”

His excitement warms my entire body. I can't wait to take this journey with the best man I know.

THANK YOU PAGE!

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