



SECOND BITE

A Tilly World Holiday Novella

S.J. TILLY

Second Bite

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Second Bite

A Tilly World Novella

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*This book is dedicated to the winter of 2021, when I spent way too much time
binge watching GBBO and obsessing over the P. Hollywood gaze.*

Chapter 1

Alice

“PLACES, EVERYONE!”

Oh god, oh god, oh god.

“We’re going live in three... two...” The man behind the camera holds up a single finger.

The big light in the front of the room flashes red.

And my heart stops.

Oh, sweet Santa, my heart has stopped.

I shove my fists into the pockets of my dress, not wanting my trembling hands to be the first thing that millions of viewers see.

“Hello and welcome to *Second Bite!*” a voice I recognize as Joey’s, the show’s good-looking host, calls out. “Thank you for joining us for what I’m sure will be an amazing holiday special.”

Handsome in a boy-next-door kind of way, Joey is the reason that lots of people watch *Second Bite*. But he’s never been my reason. Just like he’s not the reason that my pulse is galloping through my veins.

“Before we introduce you to the contestants, let’s bring the judges out here.”

Holy crap, it’s happening!

The judges are the reason for my current state. Or rather, one judge, in particular, is the reason for... everything.

The reason I get up in the morning.

The reason I’m here.

The reason I freaking breathe.

My fingers squeeze around the lucky silver dollar in my pocket in a vain attempt to center myself.

Calm down, Alice.

Joey's standing with his back to me and the other contestants at the front of the large room, so we're the backdrop for this live introduction.

The room is half stage, half warehouse, with bright lights glaring down on the four individual baking stations. And on TV it looks cozy. Intimate. But being here on set, it feels like a whole different world. A terrifying, over-lit, nothing-to-hide-behind world.

I hear Joey introduce Pamela, the sweet female judge in her seventies who rarely has a negative word to say to anyone and almost always has a glass of wine in her hand. And I try to focus. I really do. But now, seconds before seeing the man I've been in love with for years, I'm rethinking every single decision I've made in my life. Starting with this dress.

With my hands still in my pockets, I try to pull it down, just a little bit more.

My cousins said this dress was cute. That the pink and red striped wrap dress was festive without being too *on the nose*. But I'm starting to think that my cousins are idiots. After all, they're the ones that signed me up for this nightmare.

Meet your hero! Bat your lashes at Chef Kesso! Throw your panties at Chef Kesso!

They kept trying to tell me how great it'd be to meet him, as if I needed any convincing of that. No, it's the actual performing and competing part that adds a whole new level of stress to an already nerve-racking introduction.

But he doesn't know that you're obsessed with him, I remind myself for the hundredth time. He won't know that you're slipping into cardiac arrest just because he's close.

Joey claps once. "And here's the Scrooge himself, Mike Kesso."

My eyes snap up to the front, and this time my heart really does stop. Because standing there, just a few feet away, is world famous Pastry Chef Mike Kesso.

Be still, my soul.

He's here.

But I don't think of him as Mike. Ever since that *Meet the Judges* episode aired a few seasons back, I've only been able to think of him as Michael. All because he made an off-hand comment about how only his work acquaintances call him Mike and that his close friends and family call him Michael. So, in my fantasies, that's what I call him.

Michael.

Only this isn't a fantasy. This is real. He's real, and he's so close I want to wrap my arms around him and feel his body heat just to make sure.

Joey is saying something, but I can't tear my eyes—or attention—away from Michael.

He looks exactly like he does on TV—dark eyes, dark hair that's graying at the temples, and wearing his signature black shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. And with his arms crossed over his chest, I can see just enough of his sleeve tattoos to have my thighs pressing together.

My mouth starts to salivate, and I tug down on the material one more time, wanting to hide my legs as they try to squeeze the growing ache away.

Wearing a dress was a bad idea.

A very, very bad idea.

Chapter 2

Michael

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?” I growl into the phone, not caring that we’re going to start airing any moment.

“Look, Mike, I know it’s not what you wanted—” my manager tries to placate me.

“Not what I wanted? This is so far from what I wanted it’s not even funny.”

“I know, but New Year’s in Canada isn’t so—”

I cut him off. “If you don’t want me to fire you, you won’t finish that sentence.” He wisely stays silent. “I told you I wanted a break. I told you I didn’t want to do any of these fucking holiday specials. And now you have me shooting some live stream bullshit over the next three days—which is gonna be a goddamn nightmare, and then instead of going home to re-fucking-lax after this circus, you’re telling me I need to go to Canada and do it all over again.”

“I know, I’m sorry. But after this, I promise you’ll have two months off.” He pauses. “One at least.”

I almost laugh.

“If you’re lonely, we can arrange to have some of your family meet you in Winnipeg, or I can always have a, um, a *lady* waiting for you.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Did you seriously just offer to send me a Canadian prostitute?”

“She doesn’t have to be Cana—”

I hang up the phone.

How? How have I surrounded myself with such idiots?

But I know it’s not just the schedule that’s getting to me. It’s... *fuck*.

I heave out a breath.

It's the loneliness.

I don't want a random hook-up. I don't need a *professional* to meet me in Canada. I need a life. A real life with real people and a real relationship.

We all grow up romanticizing fame, thinking it's the pinnacle of success. And sure, it can be. It's validating, and my money and fame have opened a lot of doors. But they've closed just as many.

"We're going live in..."

I sigh.

Time to get my head out of my ass because I have a job to do. And angry or not, I won't just walk away.

My palms smooth out the front of my shirt.

Might as well throw myself into work. I have nothing else to do. Even though I won't meet the love of my life on Second Fucking Bite.

Chapter 3

Alice

THEY'RE at the second table. The judges and the host are at the second table doing the contestant intros, and I'm dying. I'm absolutely dying.

Michael has looked a little upset since he walked onto the set, and it's only adding to my stress.

I mean, he always looks kinda pissed. That's his demeanor. But this is different. Like maybe something bad happened in his personal life. And I don't like that. I want to help him, make him feel better. Maybe give him a hug.

The idea almost makes me laugh. Pretty sure if I tried to hug *The Mike Kesso* he'd whip out a spatula from some hidden pocket and slap it against my forehead, holding me out of reach.

I shift on my feet as they move to the back row of baking stations—*my row*—heading to my neighbor's table first.

Her name is Mikayla, and she's beautiful. Thin where I'm... not. Smooth chocolate-colored hair to my messy blonde curls. Wearing a skin-tight ribbon red dress that you might see in a lawyer show rather than my girly, flowy one. She even has heels on. *Heels!* Already inches taller than me, they make her almost the same height as Michael. Where I barely come up to his shoulder in my little white tennis shoes.

If I thought I was worried about what Michael might think of my appearance before, that worry has turned into a full-blown phobia.

Not like I thought he'd take one look at me and hearts would fill his eyes. But next to her... well, next to her, I feel hopeless.

Seriously, it's like they lined us up this way on purpose.

Right in front of me in the first row is an older, kind-faced gentleman,

Hugh. And next to him is a polished, pushing thirty, man named Brent. I heard something about him being an executive assistant for some big wig, and it must be true, because he looks the part.

Basically, we've been put into a grid. Look at us one way, and it's men then women. Or turn us on our axis and you have frumpy then sleek.

Nerves shot to hell, I have to force my hands out of my pockets when I see the trio start to turn my way.

I try to devote glances to Joey and Pamela, but my attention is all on Michael.

Except he's not even looking up. His eyes are lowered, one hand reaching across his broad torso to adjust the chunky watch on his opposite wrist.

"Our last and final contestant, Alice Hatter," Joey introduces me, making sure not to step in front of the cameraman following him around.

Smiling my response—since words are hard—I shake his hand, then Pamela's.

Not sure if I'm supposed to or not, I hold my hand out in Michael's direction.

But he's still not paying attention.

My hand wavers in the air.

"So..." Joey's voice is overly bright, clearly feeling the discomfort of Chef Kesso's inattention. "I hear you work in IT."

My cheeks heat. *IT? Did my cousins seriously fill out my application saying I worked in IT?*

My head gives a slow nod, because what else am I supposed to say? *No, sorry. I wasn't actually the one who applied to be here, and working a soul-sucking job as a telemarketer is hardly IT. Even if it was, the company went under last week, and I've finally accepted that my last three paychecks that bounced are never going to be replaced. And since I can't afford rent without my shitty job, I'm moving out at the end of the week and into my traitor cousins' basement. But yeah, I work in IT.*

Joey clears his throat. "And that someday, you'd like to own a bakery." Joey fills the awkward silence.

I almost snort. Bakery? I don't even own a reliable car.

"Yeah, I'd like that." My voice comes out quiet, and I realize I'm still holding my hand out like a fool.

I start to lower my hand and then miss whatever Joey says next, because Michael raises his eyes. And when they meet mine, I freeze.

Chapter 4

Michael

“I’D LIKE THAT,” the feminine voice spears into my chest and my eyes snap up.

Holy Holiday Heaven.

Standing before me is a lush-as-fuck angel with evergreen eyes, berry-red lips, and a body I’d write to Santa for.

Her hand is retracting as though she’d given up reaching for me. Before I can consider the consequences, I dart my own hand out, clasp her palm in mine. And the second we touch, a volt of awareness rockets down my spine.

Startled by my sudden movement, she lets out a small gasp, and I swear I feel her inhale deep in my balls.

“What’s your name?” I growl, tightening my grip.

Joey clears his throat next to me. I’m sure he already said her name, but I wasn’t listening. That last contestant was trying to openly flirt, and it annoyed the shit out of me. So I came over here with my head down and my inner voice grumbling, and I regret every second I’ve wasted not looking at this wonderful woman. But I don’t want to hear Joey tell me her name. I want to hear it from her mesmerizing lips.

I flex my fingers and her mouth pops open.

“I’m Alice.”

Her whispered voice is all the confirmation I need. This woman is mine, and I’m gonna find a way to keep her.

Chapter 5

Alice

HE'S TOUCHING ME.

Michael Kesso is touching me. Holding my hand. And it feels as sensual as if his hand was down my panties.

"I'm Mike," he introduces himself, as though I don't have his photo next to my bed and his entire bio memorized.

"Hi," I breathe the word.

"Hi." His simple reply goes straight to my core.

Hi.

I'm going to hear his voice in my sleep.

I don't know what I thought would happen when we met, but... touching him? Direct eye contact? I didn't prepare for this.

So, I do the only thing I can do when my crush is standing in front of me, holding my hand. I smile.

Then I stumble forward.

I bump into my workstation, slapping my free hand down on the countertop to catch my balance.

Michael lets go of my hand and the people around us startle at my flailing.

And that's how I die.

Embarrassment manifests as a Lake Placid-sized crocodile, and it swallows me down whole. I disappear. The crocodile eats the cameras. And no one ever witnesses *The Stumble That Ended Alice's Life*.

With burning cheeks, I drop my eyes and I do my best to ignore the other contestants' snickering.

"Alrighty then." Joey claps his hands together. "Let's get this show on the

road!”

Keeping my head tipped down, I nod.

That’s a great idea! Let’s add high-stakes competition to the garbage fire of emotions already blazing in my stomach.

I watch the trio walk to the front of the room, and as Joey explains the first challenge, I glance down at my empty hands. Because I could’ve sworn that Michael pulled me toward him.

Chapter 6

Michael

HE'S TOO FUCKING CLOSE.

My jaw flexes.

If he doesn't back the fuck off I'm going to—

A cracking sound reaches my ears and I loosen my grip on the wooden spoon I'd absently picked up.

If you break it in half, the jagged edges could work well as a shiv.

I drop the spoon onto the judges' table and stride down the aisle between the contestants' stations. Toward the camera crew. Toward Alice.

These competitions started out fun. Then they got a little monotonous. And now, today, I'm experiencing a level of stress I never knew existed. It feels like anxiety, excitement, dread, doubt, and impatience all rolled into one.

It's been so long since I've been anything other than completely sure of myself, and I don't quite remember how to deal with it.

I want this woman. Correction, *need* this woman. And if the flush in her cheeks and sparkle in her eye is any indication, she wants me too. I just need to make her need me. Make her burn from the inside out, incinerating whatever walls she might have, and allow me access to every part of her being.

My heavy footfalls don't go unnoticed, and I feel the other bakers watching me walk past.

Don't fuck this up for her.

Reluctantly, I slow.

I need to listen to the small voice of my conscience, for once, and wait. I don't know what Alice's skill level is, but no one makes it on this show if

they don't deserve it. And if I make it obvious that I desire her, if I get her underneath me before the competition is done and ruin her chances of winning, or taint her win with rumors, I'd never forgive myself.

By the time I stop in front of her counter, I've made up my mind. I'll treat her like any other contestant. I have to. Because with these cameras live streaming everything, there's no editing. I can't mess up. So, usual prick personality it is.

"Chef Mike." Joey angles his body, giving me room to fit between him and Pamela. "Perfect timing. Alice here was just about to tell us what she's making."

Her wide green eyes meet mine and, for a long second, I wonder if throwing her over my shoulder and walking out of here would really be that big of a deal.

She blinks at me, her hands stilling over the bowl of unmixed ingredients. "Are you ready?"

I clamp my teeth together, trapping a groan in my throat. *Yeah, Baby Cakes, I'm fucking ready.*

Joey chokes, then pats himself on the chest. "We're ready, darling."

I throw a glare at him before focusing back on the angel in front of me. If Joey thinks he can give her pet names and win her affections with his fake-ass charm, he's gonna be thinking differently when I shove a whisk down his smarmy throat.

"Okay." Alice licks her lips, and I feel myself leaning forward. "I'm making a red velvet, white chocolate swirl cake, topped with peppermint vanilla cream cheese frosting."

Joey rubs his stomach. "That sounds like a sugar rush!"

She smiles at Joey, and it makes me want to punch him in the face.

"It's sweet." Alice lifts one intriguing shoulder. "But I'm of the belief that desserts should be sweet. And I think the combination of flavors gives the palate enough to focus on without leaving time to worry about sugar."

All heads turn to face me, waiting for my input. And I clasp my left wrist with my right hand and hold them in front of my groin. I'm sure I look disinterested, but I need to cover my growing cock before anyone notices.

"Sounds interesting." I nod to Alice, then turn away. Forcing my focus onto anything else and away from the blood rushing to my dick.

Too sweet indeed.

Chapter 7

Alice

MY HEART PLUMMETS to my feet, and my movements freeze. Or mostly freeze, because I'm staring down at clouds of flour as they plume over the edge of the measuring cup in my shaking hands.

Interesting.

I know what that means. *Interesting* means he thinks it sounds bad.

I look at the half-started batter and feel my shoulders slump.

A utensil elsewhere clatters against the floor, and I glance up, finding one of the camera guys still standing in front of my counter. Camera aimed right at my face.

The color drains from my cheeks, and I drop my head back down, feeling defeated before I've even really started.

And what was with that introduction? Am I just reading into it because I have the biggest crush in the world on him? Or was he acting... different.

I exhale. The test batches turned out well.

Trust yourself.

I roll my eyes. Yeah, *trust myself*. Because that's gone so well in the past.

But there's no changing my plan now. Michael might not like what I make, but it's too late to come up with something else.

Shaking off the bad feelings rolling around in my shoulders, I dump the rest of the flour into the bowl and get to work.



“Thirty minutes left!”

Okay, focus, Alice.

“Ten minutes left!”

Almost there. You can do this.

“One minute left!”

Oh, holy shit! Hurry!



Staring down at my platter of mini cakes, I worry my lip.

They don't look as pristine as I'd like, but they're still pretty clean. The frosting is holding its shape, and the pulled sugar bows—that I made right up until the last second—don't look terrible. All-in-all they look like the tiny presents I'd intended, and I feel semi-confident that the judges will like them.

I probably should've listened to the judge's reactions toward the first two bakers, since they're already on the third, but the adrenaline pumping through my body made that impossible.

A high-pitched giggle yanks my attention to the contestant next to me.

Mikayla has her head thrown back, her long, lean neck stretched out for the cameras. For the host. For Michael.

I slide my hand into my pocket, letting my fingers brush over my lucky coin, while I remind myself that this isn't a beauty contest. I've watched enough episodes to know that the best baker always wins. And I've watched enough of the past bakers on the show attempt to flirt with Michael to know that he never reciprocates.

But maybe that's just because those episodes have all been edited? Maybe in real life he... acts differently.

I clutch the coin in my fist.

You're here to compete for a baking title. Not a husband.

Lost in my own unraveling thoughts, I once again miss their feedback and find it's suddenly my turn.

As the three staples of *Second Bite* walk my way, I take a few deep, slow breaths.

You got this.

It's just like bringing dessert to a family dinner.

And having that family be brutally honest about it on live TV.

“Remind us what you made here.” Joey nods his head toward my display.

I do my best to not think about the cameras looming close and I keep my voice as level as possible as I walk through the recipe one more time. I gesture, smile, make eye contact with everyone but Michael... totally normal stuff.

I feel like I'm actually doing great. Then I point to one of the cakes, bumping it with my finger and putting a small dent in the frosting.

"Ope!" I jerk my hand back like I touched flames instead of whipped sugar.

Without thinking, I shove my fingertip into my mouth, sucking off the frosting. And of course *that's* when I finally look at Michael and lock eyes with his crackling gaze.

My lips pop open, creating an O, and I withdraw my finger.

"Sorry!" I squeak and repeat the apology, "So sorry!"

Michael—*Mike, you need to call him Mike*—works his jaw before plating two of the mini cakes for himself and Pamela.

Great, this is it—zero hour—and you've already offended your celebrity crush with your lack of hygiene.

"Promise I didn't lick those!" I joke, but Pamela is the only one who humors me with a laugh.

Shoving my hands back in my dress pockets, I clamp my lips together and hold my breath.

They pick up their forks, both adjusting the small plates until they're centered in front of them.

My eyes dart between the two judges.

Why is this taking so long?

Does it always take this long?

Pamela lifts her bite first and lets out a sound of surprised appreciation while giving me a nod.

Exhaling, my nerves settle the smallest amount. Until, just like before, my eyes are drawn to Michael's.

He keeps his gaze on mine as he parts his lips and slides the forkful of cake into his mouth.

The move is so carnal a tremor rolls through my body.

He's about to do it.

Michael Kesso is about to taste me.

My eyes widen.

Cake! He's about to taste my cake!

Chapter 8

Michael

FUCKING HELL, if this woman doesn't tamp down her reactions, I'm gonna do something to embarrass us both.

A riot of flavors bursts across my tongue, and I'm forced to look away from Alice's wide eyes as my own drop to the plate.

I reach out and fill another forkful, getting more of the cake this time.

I wasn't expecting to like this. I was certain it'd have too many overbearing flavors. But all the elements combine perfectly, embodying the holiday treat we asked for.

My co-judge is talking about balance and notes of vanilla, but I'm still too busy licking my fork off to comment.

I'm pulling the utensil from my lips when a small sound leaves Alice's mouth from across the counter, causing my body to go rigid.

Jesus Christ, did she just fucking whimper?

Because she was watching me?

I clear my throat as I set my fork down. "It's very nice."

It's better than nice, and I see the glances people are giving me and the fork I just set down. But it's not quite *that* good. Not *Second Bite* good. But it's damn close.

I hosted a special on the Baking Network years ago before this show was created, and after trying an amazing cake, I picked my fork back up to take a "second bite." It's a misnomer since I take multiple bites when I'm trying something to get the full experience. But if a creation is so good that I pick my fork back up to take another bite, it gets the Second Bite label. People liked it, so the name stuck. So when the idea for this show was laid out, it seemed like the obvious title.

“Okay,” Alice murmurs in reply.

Her exhaled word stabs me in the chest. *It’s very nice*, isn’t feedback. It’s crap.

I clear my throat. “The amount of peppermint is just right. Subtle enough that it doesn’t overpower, but still distinct.” The memory of her licking the frosting off her finger springs to mind, and I try to think of something else to add. “Could be cleaner.”

The bright look of pride that had been growing on her features halts.

Fucking hell.

Alice presses her plump lips together and nods her head, not looking sad, just contemplative. Like she’s memorizing every word I’ve said and filing it away for later.

I shift my weight.

I can’t leave her with a negative comment. I just can’t.

My chin dips, and I tip my head toward the remaining cakes. “Good job.”

Before I can make this any more fucking awkward, I turn and walk away from Alice’s station.

Good job? That’s the best I could come up with?

Chapter 9

Alice

HE THINKS I DID GOOD.

Michael ate my cake—put it in his mouth and swallowed—and said it was good.

My heart is hammering inside my ribs. I'm tempted to try and hold it in by pressing my hands to my chest, but Joey's standing just in front of my little counter, addressing the cameras for the end of the episode, and I don't want to be caught acting like a total fool on TV.

It's stressful to have the cameras here, especially since I know it's all airing live, and there's no chance for an edit or a redo. But as the afternoon went on, I found myself getting kinda used to them. Probably because all the people carrying the cameras are really nice and good at making me feel welcome. But right now, with Michael's words rattling around in my head, I don't know what to do with myself. It's like one little compliment has made me completely forget how to act normal.

Needing something to do, I start to organize my workspace.

In the normal in-season episodes, there's clearly a break between when the timer goes off and the tasting because the workstations are always pristine. But people cleaning isn't really something the network wants to live stream, so all the stations are in a bit of disarray.

And I'm glad because it gives me something to do with my hands. *Stack dirty pans? Sure!* Anything to keep myself from happy crying over an arguably underwhelming compliment. Or worse yet, tearing my dress off and climbing the unsuspecting Michael like a cat on a Christmas tree—all claws and no finesse.

Chapter 10

Michael

THE WHISKEY SETTLES on my tongue, and I let the warmth fill my senses before I swallow.

Alice, my Christmas Aphrodite, is sitting so close I can almost smell her sweet sugar scent. But no matter how near she is, she's still out of reach.

I tip my glass back, draining the rest of my drink.

The whole crew is staying in the same hotel, so we're all having a late dinner in the same hotel bar.

It's a nice place, and it's attached to the St. Paul Convention Center that we're using to shoot this special, so it makes everything easy. I might be considered a big shot by some, but I'm not one of those famous stuck-up types that require fancy-ass accommodations or a certain brand of bottled water. And now more than ever I'm happy for that fact, because it means I'll be sleeping under the same roof as my Alice.

I shift in my seat, trying to give my dick some breathing room.

A chorus of laughter from the other side of the bar makes my jaw tic.

Most of the crew is over there with the contestants, including Hot Shot Joey.

There aren't many rules for us on the show—since it's usually low drama—but, while we're shooting, the judges are supposed to stay away from the contestants during any downtime. So no eating dinner together. No drinking together. And, sadly, no getting naked together.

I hear more laughter, but when I narrow my gaze, I notice Alice isn't one of the people laughing. She's sitting back in her seat, cradling the same glass of white wine she started with, softly smiling as she glances around the table.

She's the prettiest creature I've ever seen, and I can't fathom why anyone

would let her out in public alone.

If she was mine... that thought trails off.

Does she already belong to someone?

She wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I'm sure of it.

I didn't specifically look, but I'm sure I would've noticed.

My head gives a slow shake.

No, there's no one else.

If there was another man, he's done now. He let her out, let her cross my path, and that's his own fault. Because if she was mine, I'd keep her tied to my side. Literally, if necessary.

I swirl the ice in my glass, wishing I had more alcohol to dull the pounding urge to claim her.

How I'm managing to keep myself from dropping to one knee, and demanding for her hand in marriage, is beyond me.

Pamela nudges my arm while she's saying something to the producer sitting across the table from us, and I nod like I'm listening. But I'm not listening because now Alice is biting her bottom lip. She's biting her lip, and she looks so goddamn fuckable I need to have her.

I'm sliding my chair back from the table before I even register what I'm doing.

What're you gonna do? Just walk over there and ask if she'd like to sit in your lap? Ask to hear what's on her wishlist?

Alice's teeth let go and her lip plumps back into shape, making me groan.

Bed. I need to go to bed.

"You okay?" Pamela asks, mistaking my sound for one of pain.

"Ye—" My answer cuts off when Alice's eyes suddenly lift to meet mine.

She jerks her eyes away, but not before I see the shock covering her features. And the guilt tinting her cheeks.

She was looking for me.

I set my glass down a little harder than necessary and get up.

"See you tomorrow," I grumble to Pamela, pretending it's a proper goodbye, and stride out of the bar.

I need to be alone. In my room.

Chapter II

Alice

“HE’S EVEN BETTER in person, eh?”

I startle at the question, nearly spilling my wine.

“Sorry.” Brent chuckles, bumping his shoulder into mine. “Didn’t mean to scare you. But you know I’m right.”

Unbidden, my eyes flicker toward the now empty seat at the judge’s table.

He’s not wrong, Michael is even hotter in person, but the fact that Brent caught me looking is mortifying. Though it’s still not as bad as a second ago when Michael himself caught me.

I sigh and slump in my seat. “You’re right.”

Brent laughs, clinking his wineglass against mine. “No harm in looking, darling.”

With Brent’s words rattling around in my brain, I sip the rest of my wine and excuse myself the moment the first person gets up to leave.

I know it’s an all-expenses-paid weekend, but I rarely drink, and there’s no way I can get through tomorrow if I’m hungover. And even though most of the people are friendly, I don’t feel super comfortable with strangers, so the solitude of my room sounds perfect.

Walking out into the lobby, I wave at Pamela when she waves at me, then I hurry my way onto the elevator.

The doors are sliding shut behind me when my purse starts to vibrate with a call.

Smiling, I pull my phone out, not surprised to see it’s a FaceTime call.

The elevator’s empty, so I answer, “Hey, Suzy.”

“Alice!” My cousin, Suzy, and her sister, Sam, cram their faces together

to fit on screen. “You were on TV!”

I shake my head, their energy making me feel a little lighter about the stressful day. “Crazy, right?”

“Crazy awesome!” Sam shouts, causing Suzy to wince.

“Chill, woman.” Suzy rubs her ear as she leans closer to the phone. “Where are you?”

The elevator doors open to reveal my floor, punctuating her question. “Almost to my room.”

“Ooo, give us a tour.”

I know they’re just wasting time until I’m behind closed doors to ask me the real questions, but I gladly take the reprieve. Moving slowly, I give them an elaborate tour of the hallway, the door to my room, a detailed viewing of my suite...

When I have nothing left to show them, I drop down onto the bed and squeeze my eyes shut. “Okay, tell me how bad it was.”

Suzy scoffs, “Bad? It wasn’t bad at all.”

I crack one eye open. “I tripped standing still. How is that not bad?”

They both cackle in response and I groan, “See?!”

Sam shakes her head. “It was hilarious, but it was also cute as hell.”

“Cute? Really?” I lift a brow, skeptical.

“Really,” Suzy answers. “And when you licked that frosting off your finger...” She fans her face. “I could feel the sexual tension from across the city.”

I bolt upright. “Sexual tension? What do you mean?!”

“She means...” Sam smirks, “The off-the-charts goo-goo eyes you and Chef Mike were throwing at each other.”

“But- What- I—” I fall back, slapping a hand over my eyes. “Oh my god, this is so bad!”

“What, why?”

“Because,” I whine. “If you can tell that I *like* Michael, then other people watching the show can probably tell too.”

“And that would be bad because...?”

I keep my eyes covered. “Because I’m going to look like a pathetic, love-sick loser, and everyone will either pity me or hate me.”

“Alice.” Suzy’s using her stern voice, so I part my fingers to peek out at her.

“What?”

She rolls her eyes. “Did you not hear the part about you two making goo-goo eyes at *each other*?”

Sam nods. “Big time. That man has the hots for you.” Then she purses her lips. “So, you’re right, most women will probably hate you. But not because they think you’re pathetic. They’ll hate you because they’ll want to be you.”

I drop my hand away from my face completely. “What are you talking about?”

Sam taps the screen. “Is this on? Can you hear us?”

“I can hear you talking nonsense! I don’t know what you think you saw, but he was not looking at me like”—I wave my hand around—“*that*. I mean, he said my cake was good.”

My cousins fan their faces. “What a sweet talker.”

I groan. “Shut up. You know that’s a compliment coming from him.”

“I know what you’d rather have... coming from him.”

“Oh my god, you guys are the worst!” I laugh despite myself. “I gotta go.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go get your beauty sleep.” Suzy blows me a kiss.

“And wear that green skirt tomorrow!” Sam grins.

“Fine.” I roll my eyes. “Love you.”

They chorus their love back to me as I end the call.

I wonder what they meant by all that sexual tension talk. He can’t possibly...

My fingers twitch to search for today’s episode, but I really don’t want to see myself on camera. Or at least not until the whole thing is done. If I watch it now, I’ll for sure hate the way I look on screen and then I’ll be self-conscious about it for the rest of the weekend. So, no watching.

Dropping my phone onto the bed, I decide my best plan of action is going to sleep. I can’t make any bad decisions if I’m asleep.

Chapter 12

Michael

I SPIT into the sink and rinse off my toothbrush.

Go to bed.

Just go to bed and go to sleep.

Flipping off the lights as I cross the room, I yank the sheets back and drop onto the mattress.

Close your eyes.

I stare up at the ceiling, thinking back over the information I just read on the *Second Bite* website.

Alice Hatter, lives in Minneapolis, works in tech, and is 30 years old.

Thirty to my forty-five.

Just go to sleep, you pervy fuck!

My hand slaps down on my nightstand, picking up my phone.

It only takes a few taps to find what I'm looking for. A screenshot of Alice sucking that damn frosting off her finger.

You're a disgusting man.

But even my inner voice can't stop my body's reaction to Alice. To the sight of her lips circled around the tip of her finger. The invitation in her eyes. The way her small hand felt in my larger rough one.

Keeping my eyes on the screen, my free hand shoves down the waistband of my pajama pants.

This is fucked up.

I grit my teeth as my palm connects with my dick.

Mine isn't the hand I want to feel. I want her soft, warm fingers wrapped around my hard, hot length.

I want her wide green eyes blinking up at me.

My hand pumps.

I want her kneeling before me, lips parted, pretty pink tongue peeking out to lap at the glaze dripping from my cock.

My grip tightens.

I want to grip her glossy golden hair and hold her still while I shove my dick deep into her willing mouth, bumping against the back of her throat. I want to see the wide-eyed look of surprise when she realizes just how deep she can take me. Just how much of me she can swallow.

A loud groan rips from my chest as I give a final stroke, my release coating my stomach.

Chapter 13

Alice

FLIPPING ONTO MY STOMACH, I yell into my pillow.

My limbs flail and I let out as much frustration as I can.

But it's not enough.

With my eyes squeezed shut, I boost myself up onto my knees, my shoulders still on the mattress. Then, shifting my weight, I reach a hand down between my legs.

Wet. I'm soaking wet just from reliving the few embarrassing interactions I had with Michael in my mind.

Good god, what would it be like to have his hands on me?

To feel *his* hand sliding down my belly.

To feel *his* fingers work their way into my panties.

To feel *his* fingers brush against the slickness of my sex.

Would he gasp? Groan? Growl?

Would he tease me? Running his fingers up and down my slit?

Or would he plunge in, stretching me around his thick fingers?

Would he play with my clit while whispering dirty things to me?

His sexy lips brushing against my skin.

His breath feathering across my neck.

My body seizes with the first waves of an orgasm, my pussy clenching around nothing.

With thoughts of Michael dancing in my mind, I collapse back onto the mattress, where sleep finally takes me.

Chapter 14

Alice

“THIRTY MINUTES LEFT!”

My heartbeat flutters at Joey’s announcement. But I can’t allow myself to lose focus. And no matter how much I want to open that freezer door, I won’t. I need every extra second on the clock for my ice cream to set or else it’ll never hold its shape.

Taking a deep breath to steady my hands, I go back to my piping.

So far, everything is going to plan. My dyed-black gingerbread came out of the oven on time, and the pieces are fitting together perfectly to make a cute little top hat.

As slowly as I’m able, I use gold icing to draw a buckle onto the front, completing the hat.

With the eyes and mouth pieces already done, I just have to finish making the fondant carrot, then I can start assembling.

In the freezer is a round spring-form pan holding my vanilla chai ice cream, filled with a gooey cinnamon center. And then I have another tray cooling in the freezer that’s holding my Jell-O, which will serve as the final decoration.

If it all goes to plan, the ice cream will freeze solid. When I take it out of the pan, I’ll cut a thin slice off one side, so the circle will stand upright. Then, I’ll decorate the vertical surface with button eyes, a carrot nose, and coal bricks for a mouth to make a classic snowman. And I’ll complete the look with a gingerbread top hat and a red Jell-O scarf.

It took me forever to figure out how to make the scarf. But by using one of those snaking “only edges” brownie pans, I’ve been able to make a long continuous piece of Jell-O that makes a decent approximation of a scarf. And

if I have time, I'll add some white frosting stripes over the shiny red surface. But that'll depend—

“Ten minutes left!”

My head jerks up to the large clock at the front of the room.

How did so much time pass already?!

My fingers tremble as I press in the final groove on my little carrot, then set it aside.

“Okay,” I say under my breath. “Just like you practiced.”

With a spot ready on my island for the assembly, I hurry over to my freezer and yank open the door.

I'm so focused on getting my ice cream out that I don't notice anything is wrong until it's in my hands. But when I look down, I almost scream.

Instead of seeing a smooth white surface dotted with flecks of chai, I'm staring down at a homicide scene.

“Oh no,” I whisper.

Bright red splotches cover the entirety of my cake.

My eyes fly to the shelf above where I'd put the ice cream and I fight down the urge to vomit.

I don't know how it happened, but the Jell-O tray must've sprung a leak. Or I bumped it when I put it in. Or something...

“Oh no,” I repeat.

Whatever happened, it looks like the entire Jell-O mixture spilled into my ice cream.

I swallow against my rising panic as the din of the room comes back to me, and I realize I'm out of time. Speed is the only thing that can help me now.

Leaving the cursed Jell-O tray in the freezer, I rush over to my counter and free the ice cream from the spring mold.

I'll just slice off the top layer, and it'll just be a skinny snowman.

Pulling away the spring-form sides, my spirits sink. It's not just a thin layer that's been ruined. The red has seeped farther into the cake than I thought.

Okay, just flip it over. Hide the disaster. The snowman doesn't need to stand up.

Grabbing a serving platter, I quickly flip the ice cream cake onto the new plate.

And decide I want to die.

Somehow the Jell-O melted rivulets all the way through the cake.

Why did I put the ice cream on the lower shelf!?

I want to slap myself in the face. But I can't. I need to present something. And I need to ignore the camera person that just moved closer to stand beside me.

Working as fast as I can, I stick with the original plan. If it's going to be a disgusting mess, then it's going to be a standing mess. And I need the decorations to be as good as possible.

My movements are frantic, and my hands are shaking so bad they look blurry.

"One minute left!"

I let out a squeal as I shove the last eye into the softening surface of the ice cream.

I look up at the camera guy with pleading eyes, hoping he'll tell me it looks great. But he's biting down on his lip. Hard. Trying not to laugh.

It's a fucking disaster.

Joey calls time, and I step back from my twisted creation.

"Alright, contestants"—Joey claps his hands—"to mix it up, we're going in the opposite order from yesterday."

All gazes turn to land on me.

With every step the judges take, my face pales a shade, until I'm sure I look just as dead as my snowman.

When the group stops in front of me, I can't even look at Michael.

He hardly said a word to me earlier when they came around to hear my plan. And now... well now, I'm more embarrassed than I've ever been in my life and the judgment hasn't even started.

"Alice, tell us about your..." Joey's cheerful voice trails off as he takes in the sight before us.

"Oh, dear." Pamela's sentiment says it all.

As a collective, we all stand and stare at the atrocity of a snowman that I created.

The round circular face isn't a pretty speckled white. It's a jagged, splotchy mess of mottled snow flesh with streaks of gore. The button eyes and coal mouth look menacing and evil. And the black top hat is the literal icing on top of my monstrous creation.

And as we all watch, the carrot nose falls off the snowman's face and the gooey cinnamon filling oozes out of the newly formed hole.

“Oh no,” I croak.

Chapter 15

Michael

MY MOUTH OPENS, but for the first time in the history of the show, I'm speechless.

The thing in front of me is... bad. Like really fucking bad. So bad I'm struggling for words to describe its badness.

We all stand still for a moment.

"It's—" Pamela starts.

And when she trails off, I finish, "An abomination."

My eyes are glued to the demonic snowman, the melting process making it more horrific with each passing second, so I miss whatever expression crosses Alice's face at my proclamation. But when I look up, she's looking down. Her hands are twined in the green fabric of her skirt, and I can see the tension in her features.

Joey clears his throat. "Alice, would you walk us through your, uh, creation?"

Alice's hands twist in her skirt more, pulling the top band down just a fraction of an inch.

The off-white silk blouse she's wearing is tucked into her waistband, and my mind wanders to thoughts of undressing her.

How much tugging on that skirt would it take to expose a strip of flesh around her midriff?

Is she wearing stockings?

What would it be like to have my face up under her skirt?

Her lyrical voice floats into my awareness and I hear her say something about *gingerbread* and *chai* and *cinnamon*.

Pamela steps closer to me to examine Alice's ice cream, and it snaps me

out of my daydream.

Shifting my stance, I adjust the two empty plates in front of me and pick up the knife.

The mini top hat slowly slides off the snowman's head, plopping down onto the counter—leaving a trail of pinkish slime in its wake.

“I'm so sorry,” Alice's whisper has my eyes snapping back up to her face.

She looks pale, and I want to reassure her, tell her it's all gonna be okay. But when I look back down at the melting mess, I know there's no reassurance to be had.

With the tip of my knife, I press against the snowman's forehead, tipping him back until he flops down onto the plate with a wet slap.

“It'll be easier to cut this way,” I explain as I carve out two slices.

With both plates ready, I'm deciding where to take my first bite from when Pamela asks, “What's the red stuff?”

Yeah, good question. What is the red stuff?

Alice murmurs a reply, but I don't catch it.

“A little louder, please?” Joey coaxes.

His tone is too friendly. Too familiar. And I want to shove my fork into his arm.

Instead, I fill my fork and shove it into my mouth.

“It's Jell-O.”

Alice's sentence takes a second for my brain to compute. And at that same time, my taste buds start cataloging the flavors.

Warm vanilla and sweetness. Cardamom, ginger, and cloves of chai. Cinnamon. A tangy flavor reminiscent of processed fruit.

My mouth automatically opens, and my body bends forward, letting the un-swallowed portion fall out and onto my plate.

There are a few gasps. A few chuckles. But all I can do is gape at the woman across from me.

“What the hell was that?” I point at the mangled corpse between us. “Explain.”

Alice's eyes move everywhere except to meet mine. And I know I'm being a dick, but seriously, that was *bad*.

“Oh, come now.” Pamela scoops up a forkful. “It can't be that bad.”

I spare her a quick glance. “It's the worst thing I've ever eaten.”

A small, distressed sound squeaks out of Alice, and when I look back, I see that her shoulders have hunched forward, and her chin has tipped down

even further.

“T-the Jell-O was supposed to be a scarf.” Alice’s words are shaky but loud enough to be heard. “Something happened to the tray in the freezer and it spilled into my ice cream cake.” Her hands tug at her skirt some more. “It was just supposed to lay around the base of the cake as a decoration. Not...” She lifts a shoulder. *Not melt into this catastrophe.*

“What flavor is it?” I ask, not easing my tone. I can’t. This is the ugliest thing that’s ever been presented, and it tastes just as bad. And if I don’t react with my usual hard-ass personality, then I’ll be accused of playing favorites.

“It’s, um, it’s tropical punch.”

I stare at her, briefly forgetting that this is the woman I plan to make mine, and shake my head. “Tropical punch? What were you thinking? Even if your little scarf plan had worked, it’d still be terrible.”

She’s nodding her head, but I can’t see her face anymore—it’s turned down so far. “I’m sorry, Michael.”

She whispers it, but it hits me the same as if she’d shouted.

Michael.

The way she said my name was the strongest sort of aphrodisiac.

Pamela covers her startled noise with a cough, knowing damn well that contestants aren’t supposed to call me that.

Every muscle in Alice’s lush body tenses, and I know she’s realized her mistake.

I want to tell her it’s okay. That she can call me Michael, hell she can call me anything if she’ll just lift her head and let me see her sparkling green eyes.

But again, I can’t do any of the things I want to do. So I’m left with no choice but to be my brutally honest self.

“Each flavor on the plate needs to be intentional.” I slide the plate away from me. “It all needs to balance and complement. If you’d done that, it wouldn’t matter that your presentation was a disgusting mess, the flavors could’ve saved you. But now we’re left with an inedible pile of wasted ingredients.”

Alice doesn’t answer, she just keeps nodding her head.

Pamela sets her fork down without using it and picks up the little gingerbread hat. “The execution might’ve failed, but the idea was very clever. Had it turned out, I trust the snowman would’ve been charming.” She breaks off a piece of hat that hasn’t been touched by the ice cream and hands me

half.

With my eyes on the top of Alice's head, fingers twitching to touch her shiny hair, I put the gingerbread in my mouth.

It's flavorful. The texture is nice. It's a good cookie.

"Very nice." Pamela smiles before I can say anything. "You did a good job with the gingerbread."

"Thank you." Alice's voice cracks.

Aw, fuck.

I know I was being tough but—

One of Alice's hands releases its death grip on her skirt, and she reaches up to brush across her cheek.

My chest tightens.

Is she—

Alice snuffles.

And a jolt of pain shoots down my spine.

She's crying.

My Alice.

My beautiful Christmas Miracle is crying.

And I'm the cause.

Balling my hands into fists, I resist the urge to use my discarded fork to pry my own heart out of my chest as an apology.

But of course, I can't do that. I can't even tell her I'm sorry. I can only step back with the rest of the crew and pretend that walking away isn't tearing me apart inside.

Chapter 16

Alice

ANOTHER DRIP of reddish water splashes onto my shirt, and I have to press my lips together to stop the whimper that wants to come out.

Michael spit out my cake.

He said it was an abomination.

Terrible.

The worst thing he's ever eaten.

An inedible mess.

I sniff and wring out the cloth into a second bowl before dunking it back into the first one filled with warm soapy water.

Centering myself, I pull in a breath and scrub at another frozen Jell-O spot in the freezer.

I had to stay standing beside my horrendous dessert while the judges went to the other three contestants. But I couldn't repeat a single thing that was said about the other ice cream desserts. My ears were too full of shame to hear anything, and my cloudy gaze stayed rooted to the floor.

No matter what happens tomorrow, I'm not winning. Not unless every other person commits a heinous crime tonight, ends up in jail, and therefore drops out of the competition.

"Uh, ma'am, you don't have to do that," a voice states from somewhere behind me.

"I know." I try to steady my voice. "But it's my fault."

They called a wrap on the episode a few minutes ago, but I couldn't in good conscience leave and make some other poor soul clean this up. Plus, if I'm being honest, I couldn't face the other contestants. They'll all walk back to the rooms together, just like yesterday, and talk about dinner and what time

to meet in the restaurant. And I just can't. I can't do small talk. I can't do dinner. I can't just laugh it off and pretend I'm okay.

It's not even about losing. Without my disaster today, there was only ever a slim chance of me walking away a winner, getting the prestige and several thousand dollars. I mean, the money would be great. It wouldn't keep me from losing my apartment or get me that dream bakery, but it would've helped my situation.

But that's only salt in the wound, or should the saying be *fruit punch in the ice cream?*

I snort, but my tiny attempt at a laugh morphs into a tiny sob, and I clap my free hand over my mouth.

Just finish cleaning this up, then you can go to your room.

Just make it through the next ten minutes.

Just pretend you didn't embarrass yourself in front of the man you've loved for years.

I press my hand down harder, a pair of tears rolling down my cheeks.

You're almost done.

I scrub at the last frozen puddle, pushing all my disappointment into the freezer, when a warm palm settles against my lower back. The heat seeping through my clothing, just above the waistband of my skirt.

"Don't cry." Michael's deep voice brushes against my ear. "It's just dessert."

Emotion swamps me, and instead of stopping my tears, his words send them flowing down my cheeks.

Michael is here.

Touching me. Comforting me.

Telling me it's just dessert.

My chest hitches.

Dessert is his whole life.

"Please don't cry, Baby Cakes." The pressure of his hand on my back increases. "I can't take you crying."

Chapter 17

Michael

SHE SHUDDERS UNDER MY HAND, and I want to punch myself in the face.

You're making it worse.

You came over here to try and comfort her. But now she's crying more.

Movement in my peripheral has me shifting my gaze from the side of Alice's pretty face to the crew member standing a few feet away. Camera in his hand. Lens aimed at us.

Years in the entertainment industry keep me from reacting.

Yanking my hand away from Alice, or snapping at him to stop recording, would only amplify the situation. So instead, I turn back to Alice and raise my voice to its normal volume, sure the microphone on the camera will pick it up.

"Thank you for cleaning. You can go now."

There's another snuffle, then she turns—away from me and away from the camera—and hurries off set.

Ignoring the camera myself, I shut the freezer and walk casually in the other direction. Pretending that every inch of me isn't clawing to chase her down and beg for her forgiveness.

Chapter 18

Alice

I CLICK off the bedside lamp, wanting to look out at the night sky over the city rather than stare at my reflection.

I know what I look like. Skirt on, shoes off. Thin camisole on, silk shirt and bra off. Hair messy from sulking on the bed. But enough is enough. I can only wallow in self-pity for so long. And while I wait for room service to bring up my dinner, I'm going to enjoy watching the big fluffy snowflakes fall from the sky.

Christmas Eve is the day after tomorrow. And gloomy mood or not, I love Christmas. I love the sparkly lights, the traditions, the food. And even though tomorrow is the last day of the competition—that I'm surely going to lose—it's also another day that I get to be in the same room as Michael Kesso.

Michael. Ugh, I'm not going to think about how I said his name out loud.

Pressing my palms to the glass, I remember the feel of his hand on my back.

He was so close to me. Talking to me like he cared.

Then he ruined it with his comment about cleaning, shattering my confidence all over again. But my cousins texted to tell me about the last clip of the show. How there was still one camera running while the credits ran. Probably just meant to pan around the set, but then he zeroed in on the scene Michael and I were making in front of my freezer. Zooming in on us, focusing on where Michael's hand was against my lower back.

And with that explanation, Michael's change in tone made sense. He'd gotten caught being nice to me. And that wasn't good.

I sigh, and my exhale fogs the glass.

It's just dessert.

Using my fingertip, I trace M + A into the condensation on the window, and feel a small smirk start to form.

If only.

A knock at the door pulls me away from my musing, and I cross the room.

I debate finding something to pull on over my revealing top, but I'm just going to take the tray of food from the server and scurry back into hiding, so I don't bother.

Without looking through the peephole, I open the door and smile.

Except the man standing in front of me isn't holding my dinner. And he's no server.

"Alice, I'm sorry. I..." Michael's voice trails off.

Michael's voice!

Chapter 19

Michael

MY EYES SCAN the bar for a certain head of wild blonde curls, but she's not here.

I clench my hands and take a seat at the bar.

Maybe she's on her way down.

It's not like I can really talk to her when she gets here anyway. I already crossed a line with how close I got to her earlier. Giving her more attention now would only throw out extra red flags.

The bartender stops in front of me long enough to take my order, and I keep my eyes on the entrance until he returns with my drink. Straight bourbon.

Sounds of chatter mixed with laughs drift over me from the crowded tables. I look around one more time, making sure I didn't miss Alice. But I didn't.

Touching her was a bad idea.

Getting close enough to smell the sugar cookie scent of her hair was an even worse idea.

I take a sip of my drink, and when I lower it from my lips, I watch a drip of liquid trace a path down the glass, causing images of Alice's tear-stained face to fill my mind.

If she's not here, she's in her room. Probably feeling terrible. Possibly crying. And I can't let her go the rest of the night thinking bad thoughts about herself. I just fucking can't.

Without giving myself a chance to overthink it, I lift the drink back to my mouth and down the rest.

Leaving a bill under my empty glass, I stride away from the noise and

exit the bar.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, intending to call my manager and have him get Alice's room number, but decide that will probably take forever.

Instead, I cut across the large lobby and aim for the woman working behind the front desk.

She spots me, and I can tell the moment she recognizes me. *Perfect.*

"Good evening, sir," she beams.

"Evening." I force a friendly smile on my face. "One of the contestants on my show left her phone at the table." I hold up my phone, the plain black case universal enough for anyone to own. "Would you be able to tell me which room Alice Hatter is in? I'll just drop it off on my way up."

"Oh, um..." She hesitates, looking torn.

I know this is against the rules. And I'm aware it makes me a total asshole to use my celebrity status to get her to break the rules, but I'm desperate. And I'm not going to be able to sleep until I've apologized to Alice for my harsh words earlier. Yes, her creation was horrendous, but it was also clever, and I owe her at least one nice compliment.

"She wasn't feeling well, so I figured I'd offer to bring it up rather than making her come back down. But if you can't..." I shrug, knowing that I'm famous for being a bit of a dick.

The woman makes a sympathetic face before glancing around. Seeing that no one is around to overhear, she clicks a few times on her keyboard before looking up. "She's in 612."

"Thank you." I tip my chin as I step back.

612. I let the number sear itself into my brain as I move toward the elevators.

I run over my apology in my mind, discarding options as soon as I come up with them.

I'm sorry I called your ice cream the worst thing I've ever tasted.

Sorry I spit it out in front of the whole world.

I step into the empty elevator cab and jab my finger against the 6.

I'm sorry for making you cry. I know you don't know a thing about me, but I'm pretty sure I'm half in love with you and I'd rather die than make you cry again.

Sorry I didn't just eat the whole disgusting cake. Because I will, if it'll make you smile.

The elevator stops and I step off onto Alice's floor.

Taking a few deep breaths to slow my suddenly racing heart, I stop in front of door 612.

No hesitating.

You didn't get to where you are by hesitating.

I knock.

And then I wait a thousand years for the door to swing open.

Not wanting her to slam the door in my face, I jump right into it.

“Alice, I’m sorry. I...” The rest of my sentence dies in my throat.

Holy Mrs. Claus, my Christmas wish just came true.

Alice is standing before me, eyes wide, hair mussed as if she’s just been well-fucked. That bright green skirt dancing around her knees and... I have to work to swallow so I don’t drool down my chin. *Sweet snowballs, her tits are amazing.*

I’m not sure if what she’s wearing can even be called a shirt. It’s so thin. And it looks so soft. And it’s doing absolutely nothing to hide her perfectly plump breasts.

I was just coming up to apologize, but if I make it out of here without sucking one of those nipples into my mouth, it’ll be a damn miracle.

Chapter 20

Alice

THE MAN of my dreams is standing in front of me, in real life, in front of *my* hotel room. And he's staring at my boobs.

My hands twitch, and I know I should cross my arms over my chest. Or step back and swing the door shut. But I'm stuck in place. Shock locking my muscles.

"I, uh..." He pauses before he glances back up to meet my eyes. "I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?" I'm so stunned by his presence that I'd almost forgotten about the humiliating afternoon.

"Yes, apologize." He seems to shake himself off. "I was cruel, and you ___"

His words cut off at the sound of the elevator door ding open. Voices drift down the hallway and it only takes one laugh for us to both recognize it as Joey's.

"Shit," Michael growls, taking a step toward me, closing the distance between us.

Our bodies collide, my breasts pressed into the hard planes of his chest. But Michael doesn't stop. He circles an arm around my back, and in one swift move, he lifts me, steps forward—propelling me back into the room—and kicks the door shut.

The sound of our heavy breaths fill the entryway of my room, drowning out any voices that might still be in the hallway.

Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod.

Michael is in my room.

His arm is around me.

*He can probably feel my nipples through his shirt.
His face is so close to mine.*

The room is dark, making the scene feel even more provocative than it is. And I try to listen to the reasonable part of my brain which is telling me that he's just trying to avoid us getting caught together. Since he's a judge, and I'm a competitor. And he's just here to apologize.

That's what he said.

Michael's chest expands on a large inhale, and his dark eyes search mine. "Fuck it," he growls, a brief moment before his mouth closes on mine.

Time. Stops.

Warm lips press against my own.

Michael Kesso is kissing me.

Me!

I gasp when my mind finally catches up to what's happening, and Michael takes full advantage, plunging his tongue between my lips.

Bolts of sensation zip through my body, sparking against every inch of exposed skin, and I stop thinking altogether.

With a moan, I lean into him, kissing him back.

One large palm cups the side of my face.

His hand feels so warm against my flushed cheek. Thick fingers brushing gently over that sensitive spot in front of my ear, the pads rough from years of use in the kitchen.

I squeeze my eyes closed tighter. Afraid that if I look too closely, I'll find this is all a dream.

A sound moves through Michael's chest, and my hands reach out, seeking the vibration.

His body is already against mine, but I grip at his sides, my fingers clutching at the smooth material of his shirt, tugging him to me.

I need him closer.

I need more of him touching more of me.

Like he heard my thoughts, Michael's arm around my back tightens as he rotates us.

Letting go of his shirt, I reach my arms up around his neck, letting him maneuver our bodies wherever he wants.

I still don't understand what's happening. But I'm not gonna question it.

Not yet.

If he dropped me on the bed right now and asked to have sex, I'd

willingly light my clothes on fire if it expedited the activity.

“Alice,” he murmurs my name against my lips.

My back bumps against the wall, making my eyes pop open.

Michael’s gaze is staring back at me.

“I’m so sorry, Baby Cakes,” he whispers, brushing his lips over mine again. “Forgive me.”

Before I can answer, he’s crushing his mouth back to mine. And I feel like I can taste his apology. It’s bourbon and ginger mixed with sincerity.

His hands tangle in my hair, drawing my head back, breaking our kiss.

Michael runs his mouth across my cheek, down my neck.

“Tell me you understand,” Michael rasps against my fluttering pulse. “Tell me you forgive me.”

“I forgive you.” My voice is hardly recognizable. Or maybe it’s just the lust buzzing through my body, blurring my senses.

He groans, rolling his body against mine, and I finally take notice of the stiffness pressing into my belly.

He does it again, and this time my groan mingles with his.

“Mi—” I catch myself.

He tugs on my hair. “Say it.”

My breath catches.

“Say it, Alice. Say my name.”

“Michael.” It’s barely a breath, but I know he hears it because suddenly the full weight of his body leans into mine. Pinning me in place.

The sensation of having Michael so close is vibrant. Decadent. Precious. It’s like a string of lights has been wrapped around me and plugged in, with no regard for safety. Like Christmas morning served up as a kiss in a man-sized package.

“Let me taste your tits.”

His words snap me back to the moment.

“Taste my—?”

“Please,” he begs against my throat. “Let me taste them. Say yes.”

My breasts are already throbbing, with an echoing response between my legs.

The hands in my hair release, sliding down the bare skin of my neck... my shoulders... to my sides.

His palms are warm against my ribs, his thumbs barely an inch below the bottom swell of my breasts.

My tits.

I nod.

His thumbs shift. “Use your words, Baby Cakes.”

“Yes, Michael.”

He drops his face until his forehead hits that spot between my neck and shoulder.

“Yes, what?” It sounds like the words were dragged out of him.

My face flames before I even say the words. “Yes. Please, Michael, will you suck on my tits?”

“Jesus.”

The way he says the word makes me feel like I should cross myself. Not that I’d even know how.

A loud rip fills the space a moment before cool air hits my bare skin.

“Fuck, Baby,” Michael’s tone is reverent as he takes a tit in each hand. “Goddamn perfection.”

I’ve always been a little self-conscious of my boobs. A touch too large. Not perky enough. Nipples a little too big.

But the look on Michael’s face matches the sound of his voice. And the sight of his big hands supporting my breasts has me feeling like the most desirable woman in the world.

I open my mouth to—say something—but then *his* mouth opens... and closes over one peak.

Even knowing that it was coming, I still startle, nearly choking on my indrawn breath.

This isn’t real.

A tongue laps at my stiff nipple.

This seriously can’t be real.

His hands knead and squeeze.

His teeth scrape and bite.

His mouth sucks and licks.

And I die, just a bit.

Chapter 21

Michael

THE SOUNDS COMING out of Alice go straight to my dick, and I close my teeth on her soft, supple skin.

She's perfect. Absolutely, undeniably, fucking perfect.

And I need more.

So I tell her.

"I need more, Baby. Let me have more."

Alice drops her head back against the wall, her hands locked in a death grip on my shoulders, bunching the fabric of my shirt.

"Take more," she sobs. "Take whatever you want."

Images of our life together flash through my mind.

Diamond rings. A white dress. Sunny beaches. Tiny babies.

She doesn't realize what she's offering. What I'm willing to take.

But that comes later.

That's what I'll claim after.

I lower myself to my knees.

Letting go of her glorious tits, I drag my hands down her sides. Down her hips... the length of her legs... until I reach the bottom hem of her skirt.

Alice tips her head forward to look down at me. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't get enough to eat earlier." I feel the side of my mouth pull up in a smirk. "Why go hungry when there's a snack right here?"

"S-snack?"

Her face flames red and my smirk grows into a grin. "Lift your skirt for me, Sweetness."

As she stares, I reach down and grab one of her ankles.

"What—"

Before she can ask again, I lift her foot off the ground and slide my grip up her leg, still lifting. I don't stop until I've put her knee over my shoulder.

Her skirt drapes over her thigh and I turn my head so I can give her a gentle nip on the inside of her knee. "Skirt."

At my reminder, Alice reaches down and—with shaking fingers—she bunches the material, higher and higher, until I can see the holly berry-red panties she's been hiding underneath.

Mother of Christmas, this is a sight worth remembering.

I lean in, touching the tip of my nose to the soft red fabric, and press a chaste kiss against her panties.

She sways.

I pull back just enough to look up at her.

"Lean back against the wall."

She just blinks at me, so I say it again.

"Lean against the wall, Alice."

She does as she's told.

"Arms out."

"Arms?" she repeats.

I nod. "Spread your arms against the wall, Baby. For balance."

Her eyes are slightly glazed over, but she takes a second to tuck her skirt up into her waistband before she spreads her arms out. Her hands pressing into the wall.

"Good girl," I growl.

Then, making sure to keep us both steady, I hoist her other leg up and over my shoulder until she's suspended in the air, straddling my face.

Alice lets out a small shriek, and I hear something small drop to the carpet next to me, but I can't focus on anything beyond the sight in front of me. Specifically, the dark, damp spot on her pretty little panties.

"Are you wet for me, Sweetness?"

She shifts and moans, lowering her hands from the wall to clutch my hair.

I should go slow. I should lay her on the bed, not pin her to the wall. But I can't hold back. Not for a single second longer.

I hook my arms up around her legs, securing her in place, with my hands gripping the inside of her thighs. Inches away from her pussy.

Shifting closer, I hook one finger around the edge of her panties and pull them to the side. Revealing her glistening pink slit.

Her legs tense, trying to close.

But they can't. Because I'm here. And I'm not leaving until she comes.
"Delicious," I groan, leaning in.

Chapter 22

Alice

AIR HITS MY EXPOSED PUSSY, and I tighten my grip on Michael's hair.

This is happening.

I'm sitting on his shoulders. His face is inches from my vagina. And ohmygod this is happening!

My eyes dart over to see my silver dollar roll out of sight under the bed.

I was starting to doubt that talisman and the need to keep it in my pocket, but clearly, it works.

"Delicious."

My gaze moves back to Michael at the same moment a warm tongue licks against my entrance.

"Holy—" I suck in a breath as he laps at me. Again and again. "Oh god. Oh my god."

I tilt my hips, offering him more.

"Say my name," he grits out before licking again. "Tell me how it feels." He punctuates his statement by flicking his tongue against my clit.

"Michael. Michael!" I rock my hips against his face. "It feels so good. You feel so good."

His response is lost to me as the vibrations of his words travel through my core, straight into my wildly beating heart.

Hanging on for dear life, I close my eyes and arch into his mouth.

I don't question his level of talent. I just enjoy it.

I enjoy the feeling of his lips on my clit. His tongue pushing into my entrance. His moans against my flesh.

One of the arms he has holding me in place shifts away, and I hook my feet together behind his back, not wanting to tip over.

I can't fall off now. Not when I'm so close.

The suction against my clit increases.

"Michael!" I cry out, the first tremors of release rolling up my spine.

His tongue curls around my bundle of nerves, and just when I think I can't take anymore, two fingers press deep inside of me.

And I explode.

Chapter 23

Michael

HER PUSSY CONVULSES around my fingers, nearly sending me over the edge with her.

Alice shakes against me, her wetness practically dripping down my hand.

I want her.

I want to take her.

Withdrawing my hand, I help lower her off my shoulders until she's standing on her own two feet.

Leaning back, I look up at her.

Shirt torn down the front, heaving tits on display.

Skirt tucked up, exposing her panties and glossy slit.

Face flushed from an orgasm that *I* gave her.

She looks completely satisfied.

But then the shine in her eyes reminds me of why I came up here.

I came here to apologize. To tell her I'm sorry for making her cry *on my show*. The show that she's a contestant on.

Fuck.

Unaware of my spiraling thoughts, Alice looks down at my lap. "Do you need to...?"

Yeah, I fucking need to.

But I shake my head.

"I can't." I give my head another shake. "I've done too much already."

Her hands jerk up to her chest, covering herself.

"It's not like that," I try to explain, the sudden hurt in her eyes killing me. I ignore the pain in my knees as I push myself back up to standing. "I don't mean it like that, Alice."

She bites her lip and nods, but she won't look at me.

My phone rings from my pocket.

"Shit," I snap, sure it's my manager. He's the only person that calls me, and he'll keep calling until I answer.

Laughter filters in from the hallway, followed by the slamming of doors, then silence.

This is my chance to slip out of here unnoticed, and I need to take it—before I take *her*.

Feeling a piece of my soul rip free and jump toward Alice, I take a step back.

"This isn't over," I say, hoping she'll believe me. "This just can't happen *right now*. Tell me you understand."

She keeps her head tipped down, but I hear her whisper, "I understand."

Needing one more touch, I re-close the distance between us and press a kiss to her hair. "Sweet dreams, Baby Cakes."

Chapter 24

Alice

THE DOOR SHUTS behind Michael with a soft click, and I swear I feel it in my bones.

What just happened?

With my back still against the wall, I stare at the floor in front of me.

Did he...?

Did we...?

And then did he... just leave?

There's a weird twisting in my chest.

Breathe, Alice. Just take a breath.

My lungs fill, and I close my eyes.

It's all okay. This is all totally okay.

The cool air of the room drifts over my skin and I'm reminded of my destroyed shirt, the literal proof of what just occurred between us.

In a state of semi-numbness, I shuffle to my suitcase and find my pair of flannel pajamas.

I'm usually a very meticulous person, but instead of carefully removing and folding my dirty clothes, I strip them off and drop them on the floor.

I don't know how to feel about what just happened. I don't even know what part to focus on. The fact that Michael, *my Michael*, came to my hotel room to apologize for being his usual self on his show. The fact he kissed me. The fact he begged my forgiveness, then hoisted my entire weight on his shoulders so he could plant his face in my vagina.

With a shiver, I yank on the pants, then button up the loose-fitting shirt as I replay Michael's words.

I can't.

I've done too much already.

That twisting feeling amplifies until the center of my chest hurts.

It's not like that, he said.

I don't mean it like that, he repeated.

But how else could he mean it? There's not really a nice way to tell someone that giving them an orgasm was a mistake.

Maybe he would've said more, but then he got that phone call. At night. And he seemed determined to answer it.

I know more than I should know about Michael Kesso, but maybe he has a secret girlfriend. Lover. *Dear god,* maybe he has a wife.

I shake my head at the thought.

No. He doesn't have a wife. No way would he be able to do that without the press knowing. Secret short-term girlfriend, maybe. But not something like that.

This isn't over, Alice. This just can't happen right now. Tell me you understand.

I told him that I understood. But I don't. What's not over? The show? Us fooling around? Honestly, I have so little idea about what might be going on in his head, it's alarming. I thought I knew everything there was to know about him.

My inner voice snorts at me. *You didn't know what his kisses tasted like.*

A knock at the door startles me so bad I let out a little scream.

Did he come back?

"Uh, room service," the voice tentatively says from the other side of the door. A voice that is definitely not Michael's.

Surprised I can still feel embarrassed after everything I've been through today, I hurry to the door and take the covered tray from the server. Giving them a bigger tip than I can afford, I hope the extra cash will make up for my frazzled state.

Dropping down onto my bed with my burger on my lap, I think about the last thing Michael said and wonder how many ways I can interpret tonight's encounter before I have to see him again tomorrow.

Sweet dreams, Baby Cakes.

Yeah, right.

Chapter 25

Alice

“... have four hours, and your time starts now!” Joey calls out from the front of the room, and his declaration is immediately followed by sounds of bowls and pans clanking together as we all scramble to get our final cakes started.

I’ve spent the whole morning stressing over Michael. Over our kiss, the things we did, the fact that he left...

And I’ll admit that I’ve cried a few more tears over my ice cream Leatherface, knowing that I won’t be winning at the end of today.

I’ve accepted it.

But I’m choosing courage.

I’m going to work as hard as I can today to put something together that’s both beautiful and delicious in front of the judges. In front of Michael.

And when I’m finally forced to look at him, rather than avoid his gaze—as I’ve been doing up until now—I’m going to meet his eyes with a calm smile on my face. I’m going to pretend that there’s nothing weird between us and that my heart isn’t seizing in my chest.

Chapter 26

Michael

“... four hours and your time starts now!”

My gaze is locked on Alice as Joey lifts his arms, signaling the beginning of the competition.

The episode may have just officially started, but there’s a significant amount of prep time before the cameras start rolling, especially with this live streaming bullshit, and Alice has made sure to avoid my eye since the second she stepped on set. But she hasn’t avoided my attention. Not in that fucking outfit.

My hands itch to drag her back to her hotel room to finish what we started. But that’s not how this is gonna go, so instead, I keep my hands busy by shoving my sleeves up my arms.

Objectively this is the most conservative outfit she’s worn on the show. But in reality, every single one of her glorious curves is on graphic display.

She’s wearing high-waisted red pants that have some sort of big, loopy bow on the back, making her ass look like a literal wrapped present. And her top—I gulp, taking her in for the hundredth time—she’s wearing a short-sleeved turtleneck. Reserved-sounding on paper, but it’s skin-fucking-tight and made of some sort of shimmery silver material. And *holy jingle bells, I want to sink my teeth into her!*

Last night was... a lot of things. And I regret how I ran out of there, but I don’t regret a single second of our encounter.

I should.

I should feel bad about messing around with a contestant. But she’s not just a contestant. She’s my future. My Alice.

And I do feel bad that she won’t be winning today. There’s just no way,

not after that snowman—but honestly, it’s for the best. Because I won’t be keeping her a secret. I figure the whole world will know about us by New Year’s, so at least this way there’s no way anyone can accuse me of playing favorites.

But after tonight, she won’t need that seed money to build a bakery. I’ll give her whatever she needs. Whatever she fucking wants, her wildest dreams, it’s hers. Alice Hatter will want for nothing.

With half an ear, I listen to Hugh tell us about his cake. Then Brent. Then Mikayla prattles on, batting her lashes, leaning down to point at ingredients, knowing full well her low-cut shirt is gaping for the camera—and for me. But I’m not interested.

And I don’t care what my manager says. I don’t care if there’s already chatter on Twitter about the way I look at Alice, the way I touched her back yesterday when she was crying into her freezer... I’m not going to be “over-friendly” with the other bakers to “counteract the image.” Not now. Not ever.

Thinking about where I was when he started calling me last night, I nearly crack a smile. If he had any idea my face was still wet with Alice’s release when I answered the phone, he’d probably have a heart attack.

But I don’t pay my manager to be my morality police, I pay him to make me money. And I’d bet that ratings are gonna skyrocket when people find out that I found my wife on *Second Bite*. So, if anything, he should be thanking me for my *behavior*.

“Sounds quite ambitious. Good luck!” Pamela bumps me with her hand as she gestures to Mikayla, and I’m sure it’s on purpose.

I nod my head. “Use your time wisely.”

Mikayla’s smile dims a little at my even tone. But I’m not saying it specifically to be a jerk, it’s one of my standard lines.

A small voice in the back of my mind tells me that that’s probably why it bothers her. She’s clearly trying to get my attention beyond her skills as a baker, but I’m just not interested.

I hold out a hand for Pamela to walk ahead of me, and she takes the offer, moving to the final station.

It looks chivalrous, but I’m doing it so I get to stand in the spot directly in front of Alice.

Time’s up, Baby Cakes. No more avoiding me.

Chapter 27

Alice

I'VE BEEN TRACKING THE JUDGES' progress around the room and time it just right so that I'm mixing the wet and dry ingredients for my batter when they approach my table.

I wouldn't have been able to focus on measuring with Michael standing across from me, so I had to finish that part before they got here to stay on schedule, but stirring will give me something to focus on.

"Hello, Alice." Michael's deep voice rolls over my skin, sending a shiver through my body.

"H-Hi," I stammer like a fool.

Pamela gives me a motherly smile. "How're you feeling today?"

Oh good, she's referring to yesterday's disaster.

My cheeks flame to a color that probably matches my pants, and I fight the urge to go shove my head in my unlucky freezer.

I can't stop my eyes from flicking to Michael's, and of course, he's staring right back at me with a knowing smirk on his handsome face.

"It felt good." My eyes widen. "I mean, I feel good." My words come out like a squeak, and I hope everyone just assumes I'm still embarrassed about my catastrophic display yesterday and not that I'm suddenly thinking about Chef Michael's tongue on my clit.

"Glad to hear it," Michael responds as he steps closer to my counter. "Tell me what you're planning to do."

"What I'm planning...?" I repeat, my gaze automatically dropping to his waist.

Michael clears his throat.

My entire body bursts into literal flames.

I evaporate into dust.
And my humiliation is no more.

Chapter 28

Michael

CHRIST.

I clear my throat and shift closer to the countertop, blocking Alice's view of the front of my pants and hopefully blocking the cameras from getting a shot of my growing bulge.

I ask her what she's planning, and she looks at my dick.

Fuck me.

I'm planning that too, Sweetness.

Joey snickers at my side, startling Alice. Her whole body jolts and the bowl of ingredients she's nearly overmixed starts to tip.

Reaching out, I steady the bowl.

Alice closes her eyes for a second. "Sorry."

She takes a breath, and I watch her shoulders visibly relax.

When she opens her eyes, she focuses on Pamela. "Seems I'm still a little rattled."

"That's okay, dear. Happens to the best of us." Pamela pats Alice's arm. "Why don't you take a moment and tell us what you're making today."

Alice nods, biting her lip for a second, before jumping into her explanation. "I'm making a traditional Norwegian Cream Cake as the base in honor of my grandmother. And for the filling, I'll be using a mixture of lingonberries and cloudberry for an added nod to Scandinavia."

"Ooo." Pamela's eyes widen as she looks at the bowls of produce laid out on the counter. "Are the cloudberry fresh?"

Alice gives her first non-forced smile of the day. "I'm using both fresh and preserved to get the right effect. They can be hard to come by, but I know a guy here in Minnesota that grows them indoors."

My mood darkens. “What—” I stop myself before I get the rest of the question out. Growling *what guy* on-air might be a step too far. “What’s your plan for the decorations?”

Alice’s eyes meet mine. “It’s a bit complicated.” She shifts, then moves her focus back to Pamela. “I’m going to attempt to make a Christmas-y snow globe. The cream cake will be the base. I’m using sugar cookies shaped and decorated like ornaments around the sides of the cake. There’ll be a transparent sugar dome over the top, and inside the *globe* I’ll have a Kransekake.” She glances at the camera and explains, “It’s basically a stack of cookies that get smaller as you go up. And with some colored fondant lights, I’ll hopefully make it look like a Christmas tree.” She sighs. “I might be biting off more than I can chew, but I’ll do my best.”

The look on her face is a mixture of determination and hope, and I find myself smiling. “I have confidence in you.”

Alice’s mouth pops open, clearly not expecting me to say that.

When she continues to just blink at me, I’m forced to bite my tongue to prevent myself from telling her to close her mouth or put it to use.

“Sounds marvelous!” Pamela claps her hands together, breaking the moment. “We’ll let you get to it.”

Reluctantly, I walk away from Alice’s table.

Chapter 29

Alice

“THAT’S HALFWAY! TWO HOURS LEFT!”
I glance down at my workspace.
I’m on track and feeling good.



“One hour left!”
Oh shit!
I’m not on track.



“Thirty minutes!”
Fuck, fuck, fuck.



“Contestants, you have ten minutes left!”
If I had a single second of spare time, I’d scream curses at Joey for reminding me of the time.
But I’m busy concentrating, trying my best to still my hand while I ice my sugar cookies.



“Five minutes left!”

Biting on my lip so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t bleed, I add the last detail to the last cookie and start pressing them into the side of the round, white-frosted cake.



“Two minutes left!”

The time of reckoning is here. I turn to my extremely fragile sugar dome.

Dear Mr. Kringle, please don’t let this break.

I can feel eyes on me as I gently lift the globe from its cooling rack. Blocking out everything around me, I hold my breath and slowly lower it.

“Time’s up in three... two...”

The bottom rim of the globe presses into the top of the cake, settling without a crack.

“One! Please step away from your cakes.”

Chapter 30

Alice

WITH MY HEART RACING, I step away from my masterpiece and absently reach into my pocket, only to remember that I never grabbed my silver dollar off the floor last night.

And just like that, the rush of the competition is mixed with memories of sitting on Michael's face, sending my pulse even higher.

Not now, Alice.

My fingers twitch, but I leave my hand in my pocket. The silver dollar is only worth a dollar, but it was given to me by my grandma and is important to me.

The luck may not have held out for yesterday's cake, but overall I'm happy with how the last few days have gone. I've done my best. I've done something outside my comfort zone. And I got to meet Michael in person. In a very personal way.

Heaving out another breath, I allow myself to look at Michael for the first time in hours.

He walked around the set, stopping to see everyone's progress once an hour, but I made a point to keep my head down. The camera crew probably hates me, since I'm not engaging well, but I couldn't let myself look at Michael. If I looked at him, I'd want to look at all of him, and I barely finished as it was.

But right now, Michael is preoccupied with Hugh at the table in front of me, so I take the opportunity to look my fill.

This might be the last time I see Michael in person. And if that's the case, I want to soak it in. Between the sight of him and the memories from last night, I should be able to sustain myself until my mid-70s at least.

Movement at the edge of my vision pulls my attention over, and my face pales.

A third camera person is standing off to the side, her lens aimed right at me.

I drop my gaze to my cake.

Well done, Alice. Way to look like a lovesick puppy until the very end.

A chorus of *good jobs* come from Hugh's table, and I lift my head, expecting to see them move over to Brent's table, but instead, Joey holds a hand out for the judges to move straight to my station.

Pamela beams. "Wow! This came out stunning!"

"Thank you." I smile back.

My nerves may feel like a bundle of sparking lights, but I'm proud of my effort today. And I'm going to keep my shoulders back.

And I'm going to make eye contact with Michael.

"Yes." Michael's voice sounds like pure sin. "Very beautiful."

I open my mouth to thank him and find his eyes on me instead of the cake, stealing my breath away.

I take a fortifying swallow. "I tried my best."

He nods, then turns his attention to the cake.

My lips press together as I watch him lift the clear sugar dome off the cake, then prepare plates for Pamela and himself. They each get a slice of cake, an ornament cookie, and one of the rings from the Kransekake cookie tree.

I try to watch both of their reactions, but my gaze keeps moving back to Michael's mouth.

He takes several bites of the cake, tasting the layers separately and together.

"Oh my," Pamela exclaims, eyes closing. "This cream cake is absolutely divine."

I pick up the hand towel on my counter so I have something to twist in my grip. "Thank you."

They both set their forks down and move on to the cookies.

Time seems to drag.

Pamela makes little noises of enjoyment as she eats.

"Is there orange in these?" she asks, holding up the sugar cookie.

I nod. "Orange zest and vanilla bean."

"It's brilliant with the cake." She nudges Michael with her elbow. "Don't

you agree?”

Michael grunts, moving to taste the next item.

I tip my head toward the partially demolished cookie tree. “I added a little bit of lemon to the Kransekake to stick with the fruit and citrus theme. I know they aren’t necessarily traditional holiday flavors, but I felt like they fit. And citrus somehow makes a dessert feel lighter. So you don’t mind eating it even if you’re stuffed,” I try to joke but just end up making an awkward gesture.

Both judges finish tasting everything, and I grip the towel tighter.

“Well…” Pamela starts but trails off.

I follow her gaze to Michael’s hand as he reaches for the fork he set down earlier.

He isn’t..

Michael grabs his fork and scoops up a large bite of the cake. The ambient sound in the room dropping to pure silence.

He is.

My eyes stay glued to his hand as it lifts. Up and up until I’m staring at his mouth, watching his lips part.

Holy shit, he is!

Michael puts the forkful of cake into his mouth for a second bite.

Pride swamps me.

Michael Kesso just took a second bite of my cake.

A Second. Fucking. Bite!

My legs suddenly feel like the Jell-O that turned on me yesterday, and I have to reach out to brace myself against the countertop.

I watch his throat work, expecting him to say something. But instead, he takes another forkful of the cake, and another, until he’s finished off the entire slice from his plate.

Pamela chuckles and pats him on the shoulder. “I take it you liked it?”

My gaze finally leaves his mouth to meet his eyes.

He’s shaking his head. “Not like. Love.”

My heart squeezes.

“Fucking delicious.”

One of the camera techs chokes on a laugh, and I hear a gasp come from somewhere else in the room, but I can’t even think about the implication of Michael swearing on live TV. I’m too busy being stunned.

I got a Michael Kesso Second Bite.

Tears fill my eyes, but it’s for a whole new reason today.

Instead of embarrassment and shame, I'm filled with an immense sense of happiness and pride.

Pamela clicks her tongue. "Language, Mike."

He lifts one shoulder in the most *I don't care* shrug I've ever seen. "Alice is worth the fine."

My mouth goes dry.

Did he just say?

Pamela shakes her head, looking at the ceiling in exasperation. "Alice's *cake*"—she emphasizes the word—"is worth the fine."

Michael doesn't reply, refusing to confirm her statement. He just stares at me as he scrapes the last bit of cream cake off his plate.

When he places the fork in his mouth a final time, closing his lips firmly around the cool metal, an embarrassing sound crawls up my throat.

One of the camera guys moves closer to me, and I watch as Michael's eyes snap to him, pinning him in place with a murderous glare. The camera guy stops, then takes a step back.

"Well." Joey throws his arms out as he comes around the counter to stand beside me. "Talk about a turnaround."

"Thanks," I reply, trying to remember that this is a show and that I need to act like an actual human. "I'm glad I could create something good today."

The corner of Joey's mouth tips up into a smirk right before he drapes an arm around my shoulder.

"Not just good, freaking delicious. Remember?" He winks, but it's not me he's looking at.

Michael's eyes are narrowed at the spot where Joey's body is touching mine and he slams his fork down on the counter. "We're done here."

Confused but happy, I watch as they all walk across the aisle toward a pouting Mikayla.

Chapter 31

Alice

MY NERVES ARE at an all-time high as the four of us stand in a line waiting for the judges to tell us their decision.

I shouldn't be nervous. Even with my "Second Bite" final challenge, I know it's not enough to put me in the running after yesterday's inedible ice cream cake.

Looking around at what's left of the cakes displayed at the front of the room, I wish I'd paid more attention to what the judges said to the other bakers. I think we all did pretty good the first day. I have no clue how anyone did yesterday because I was fighting off sobs instead of listening. And today, I was distracted by Michael both before and after my judging. So, needless to say, I have no idea who the winner is going to be.

Across the room, Pamela and Michael sit at a small table, discussing the competition and who's gonna win. From years and years of watching this show, I know exactly how their conversation is going. *So and so did well here. Different person did a good job here. And that one person bombed X challenge so bad they're out of the competition all together.*

Brent bumps my shoulder with his from his spot next to me in line. "It's been fun baking with you. If you're ever downtown and want to grab a latte, let me know." He winks. "I'll make my boss pay for it."

"Deal." I smile up at him.

Then we give each other a look when Pamela lifts a hand to wave Joey over.

This is it.

They've decided.

Squaring my shoulders, I focus on breathing while trying to keep a serene

look on my face.

I did it.

I came onto Second Bite. I finished every challenge. I got the only Second Bite of the weekend. And tomorrow is Christmas Eve, the beginning of my favorite holiday.

With measured steps, the judges and Joey come to stand in front of our little lineup.

“You all did an amazing job over these past three days. There were some big highs and some low lows.” He smirks at me, and everyone chuckles.

I guess we’re joking about that now. Cool.

Joey takes a deep breath. “But unfortunately, only one of you can be champion of the *Second Bite Holiday Special*.” He pauses for dramatic effect, and I force my gaze to stay on him. “And it’s my great pleasure to tell you the winner is...” His eyes catch on each of us before they stop on the beautiful woman at the other end of the row from me. “Congratulations, Mikayla!”

Chapter 32

Michael

MY EYES STAY LOCKED on Alice as Joey announces the winner.

I hate that it's not Alice.

I hate that I have to stand here and watch her lose.

And I hate that there's nothing I can do about it.

The thought of my girl feeling even the smallest amount of heartache makes me want to rip this entire set down.

But as soon as this is over, as soon as we do all the post-challenge interviews, I'm going to pull Alice aside and tell her she's mine.

I just need to be patient for a few more hours.



“Fine!” I snap, cutting off my manager. “Just do what I asked, and I’ll make the flight tomorrow morning work.”

Not waiting for an answer, I hang up the call and rub a hand down my face.

Usually this wrap-up process is quicker, but since it's all live, they had to do the interviews one at a time, talking to each contestant, talking to each judge... Then getting all the bullshit handshake photos for promos. It's been draining. And a producer somewhere must've said something to someone, since not once was I put anywhere near Alice, which only infuriated me even more.

But we're officially done now. And I'm done waiting.

I'm stomping back into the room from where I took my call in the

hallway when Pamela stops me.

“Want to join me for a drink? I’m going out with some of the crew to this historic speakeasy in the basement of a place called The Syndicate Hotel. I’ve heard it has a shady history.” She widens her eyes, and I know that’s just the sort of place she’d love.

“No, sorry,” I tell her.

“Are you sure?”

“Thanks, but I’m sure.” I glance around. “I need to find Alice.”

“Oh.” Pamela touches her hand to her chest. “She left a while ago.”

“What?”

“I thought you saw. They did her interview first and had her leave not long after.”

“Shit!” I clench my fists, pissed at myself for missing that.

Pamela’s expression softens. “I’m sure you’ll find her.”

“Oh, I’ll find her,” I growl before turning and striding out of the room.

In a matter of minutes, I’m getting off the elevator on the sixth floor of the hotel.

The entirety of my game plan consists of shredding those fucking red pants and tossing her on the mattress. But that plan dies an agonizing death when I see that her hotel door is currently propped open with a cleaning cart.

“No, no, no,” I mutter to myself as I reach her room.

Stepping past the cart, I startle a housekeeper who’s carrying a bundle of towels out of the bathroom.

“Oh, hello.” She smiles, and I can tell she recognizes me.

Calming my roaring nerves, I force a smile onto my face. “Sorry to bother you, but did the woman in this room checkout already?”

Everyone got their hotel room booked through tonight. Even knowing tomorrow is Christmas Eve, I hadn’t considered the fact that she might leave early.

The woman nods. “I got the call on my walkie about an hour ago that the room was clear.”

“Dammit,” I sigh, letting my eyes flick over the spot where I kneeled last night.

I start to turn, but the housekeeper stops me. “If you know her…” She trails off as she drops the towels into the basket on her cart and lifts something off the top shelf. “I found this just under the bed.” She holds the large silver coin out to me. “I don’t think it was meant to be a tip since she

left cash on the end table. So I'm thinking maybe she dropped it."

My fingers close around the coin, and I'm soothed by the weight of holding something that belongs to Alice. "Thank you. I'll make sure she gets it."

Chapter 33

Michael

CURSING UNDER MY BREATH, I lift my hand and knock on the hollow-sounding door.

I can't believe she lives here. My Alice. My world. Living in a dangerous unsecured building like this... no. Not now. Not ever.

I knock again, louder.

It took me way too long to get her address out of my manager. Strictly speaking, he probably broke some sort of law giving it to me. But he knows the deal, if I don't find Alice, I don't go to Canada. Simple as that.

But now I'm here, and she's not answering.

"Alice!" I shout, pounding my fist on the door. There's no way she can't hear me. She could probably hear my heartbeat through this shitty door.

The door across the hall opens.

"Hey man, you just missed her," a sleepy—or stoned—voice says to me.

I turn around, finding my anger torn between the fact that I missed her and that her neighbor looks like he belongs on a professional football team.

Needing the information, I tamp down my jealous irritation. "Do you know when she'll be back?"

He shakes his head. "Nah, I mean you *missed* her. Alice moved out."

My head jerks back as if the man just struck me. "She moved? Today?"

"Yeah. Well, I guess she's been moving stuff out for a week or so. She wanted to be done before..." He tilts his head and snaps his fingers a few times. "Wait a minute! You're the guy! The one she's obsessed with!"

This is a turn of events I wasn't expecting.

I hold my hand out. "Mike Kesso."

He takes it, his handshake firm. "Harrison Danvers."

“Now, when you say obsessed...” I arch a brow.

Harrison leans against his doorframe. “I mean, she had a photo of you next to her bed and blushed her face off when I asked her about it.” He must see my expression change because he waves me off. “It wasn’t like that. I just offered to help her carry some of her boxes out the other day, and I saw it. Well, saw *you*,” he snorts.

“So you and her?” I can’t stop myself from asking.

He smirks. “I don’t think I’m her type.”

Chapter 34

Alice

“THANK YOU.” I smile, taking the steaming mug of peppermint tea from Sam.

“You’re welcome.”

Suzy puts an arm around my shoulder in a side hug, careful not to jostle my tea. “Go get your rest.” She smacks a kiss on my cheek. “Tomorrow you’re telling us *everything*.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I sigh. “I owe you guys.”

Sam flicks at one of the buttons on my pajama shirt. “You don’t owe us shit.”

I run my free hand down my front, smoothing out the tiny present-shaped button. “Okay, fine. I’ll live in your basement forever and never thank you again.”

“That’s more like it!” Suzy laughs.

Shaking my head, I move out of the kitchen, past the little entryway, and open the door to the basement.

Suzy and Sam inherited this house from their grandfather—on the other side of their family—last summer. It’s a little two-bedroom rambler in an old part of town, with a tiny yard and an unfinished basement.

Being nearly as broke as me, they’ve been doing the renovations themselves, little by little, but the bones are there, and I know they’ll make it into something special.

My descent slows when I notice the glow at the bottom of the stairs.

There are a few small, uncovered windows lining the basement that let in light from the streetlamps outside, but that’s not what this is.

When my feet hit the bare concrete floor, I have to press my lips together to stop my chin from trembling.

Strung across the exposed floor beams above me are strings of multi-colored Christmas lights.

I need a second to steady myself before shouting up the stairs, “I love you!”

“We love you, too!” my cousins chorus back before I hear the floor creak as they walk away from the stairs.

The main area of the basement is piled with old furniture and stacks of boxes, but in the center is a little clear spot that I call home.

Carefully, I lower myself onto my mattress that’s resting on the floor.

With my nightstand next to me, it’s really not much different than my old apartment.

I left everything in my nightstand when I packed it into my car earlier today—having gone back to grab the final things after the show wrapped up. So, when I open the top drawer, a familiar shoebox greets me.

Setting my tea down, I drag the box out and set it on my lap.

I pause for a moment before opening the lid.

Now that I’ve met Michael, it feels a little creepy to have this. A little bit serial killer. A lot a bit stalker. But I justify my collection by telling myself there’s probably lots of people out there who save Chef Mike Kesso articles.

But I bet those people haven’t had his face up their skirt.

I flip the lid off.

Magazine articles, interviews, and one signed photo stare up at me.

I always thought of this as my inspiration box. A way to motivate myself to follow my dreams, just like Michael did.

I don’t need an empire like he’s built, but just one bakery would be nice. One thing to call my own. A way to put my stamp on this world.

But now... I bite my lip. Now I wonder if this is more of an obsession box.

I use the tip of my finger to nudge the photo into view.

I won this as a part of a gift basket from a food blogger I follow. And it’s been my most prized possession ever since.

I nudge it back under an article.

“Get a grip, Alice,” I mumble out loud.

What we did was... fun. But it was a moment.

A moment I’ll remember for the rest of my life. But just a moment.

And moments pass.

I set the box on the mattress next to me and flop onto my back.

It's time for me to figure out what I'm going to do with my life. I feel too old to be this lost. This unsure.

Staring at the lights above, I try to imagine my perfect life. What would make me happy.

Michael.

Okay, what would make me happy but is also realistic, I correct myself.

Blinking against the feeling of loss that's trying to overwhelm me, I take another slow breath.

Habit has me patting the empty pocket of my pajama pants, wishing I'd remembered to look for my lost coin.

When they finished my interview, the director, or whoever she was, told me I was free to go. I didn't want to. I wanted to stay and find Michael. Talk to him. Maybe hug him. Tell him how much he's meant to me over the years. How he's inspired me to be a better baker and to find my happiness.

But when I craned my neck past the director to look for him, all I saw was his back as he hugged Mikayla.

The rational part of my brain told me that he always hugs the winner. It's a part of every episode—the judges hugging the victor—but the sight of it went straight through my heart. And in an emotional panic, I half-ran to my room, cleared out my things, and left.

Biggest mistake of my mistake-riddled life.

I groan and rub a hand over my eyes.

A loud knock at the front door has me jolting up into a sitting position.

I don't have a clock set up, but I know it's late. Late enough that no one should be dropping by.

Creaking floorboards tell me that one, or both, of my cousins, are on the way to answer when the doorbell chimes.

"Geez, we're coming!" Suzy yells a moment before I hear the front door open.

A low voice joins my cousins', but I can't make out what's being said.

Standing, I take a few steps toward the stairs.

There's the unmistakable sound of Sam squealing in excitement, followed by the front door closing.

I wonder what—

The basement door opens above me, and I open my mouth to ask what's going on when I freeze.

The figure silhouetted at the top of the stairs is not Sam. Or Suzy.

My breath catches in my lungs as the form takes the first step down, closing the door behind him.

It can't be.

Frozen in place, I stare as the glow from the Christmas lights slowly illuminates the man before me.

Black leather shoes. Dark wash jeans. And the same form-fitting black shirt I'd recognize in my sleep.

"Michael?" I whisper his name.

With a final step, he stops right in front of me. The soft light highlighting the strands of silver in his hair.

His eyes are on mine, and he looks... angry.

"What are you doing here?" I'm still whispering, too stunned to do more. Too stunned to even worry about the unflattering candy cane striped pajamas that I'm wearing.

His jaw flexes. "You left."

"I..." My mouth opens and closes. "I was told we were done."

Michael shakes his head. "We're not done."

"We're not?" My voice trembles.

He takes a step toward me, closing the distance between us. "Baby Cakes, we're never gonna be done."

"Michael." I breathe his name again, only this time, there's no question.

He's here.

Michael is here... for me.

Chapter 35

Michael

THE NEEDY WAY she says my name is all the confirmation I need.

My arms circle Alice, pulling her into my body as I crash my mouth into hers.

My Alice.

My girl.

Sliding my hands down, I cup her sweet ass and hoist her up my body.

Alice's legs instinctually wrap around my waist. The warmth of her pussy settling over my already stiff dick.

"Never run from me," I growl between kisses. "Don't ever run away from me again."

"I won't," she whimpers.

Tightening my hold, I use my grip on her ass to drag her up and down my length. "Promise me."

"I promise." She's panting now. The heat of our need lighting us both on fire.

"Damn right, you fucking promise." My teeth catch her lower lip before licking the bite away. "You're the star on top of my tree." I kiss her again. "I'm incomplete without you."

"I'm sorry for leaving," she half sobs into my mouth. "I thought—"

"Shh." I take the few steps to her mattress and drop down so my knees are on the edge, lowering her gently onto her back. "I don't need your apologies. And I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner."

She stares up at me. "You're here."

"I'll always be here. Because I need you by my side. I need you to be where I am."

Alice nods, her hair spread across the bed. “I will. I promise I will.”

Her soft promises slither down my spine, making me harder than I’ve ever been before.

Deepening the kiss, my tongue slides against hers.

Her hands claw at my shoulders, my back... tugs at my hair.

I angle my head, wanting more, and she lets me.

She tastes just as sweet as I remember. Everything I’ll ever need to sustain me. Everything I’ll ever need to please me.

Her hips rock up against me, and we both groan.

“Fuck, Baby. Are you ready for me? Will you let me in?” My voice is so low I hardly recognize it.

“God, yes.” Her eyes are glassy when she looks up at me. “I need you.”

I press my weight into her.

“You deserve gentle. You deserve tender. But that’s not what you’re getting tonight.” I rock my length against her. “You scared me today. When I couldn’t find you—” I cut myself off and slide my mouth over to her ear. “Good girls get sweet things. Naughty girls get it rough. And you’ve been very naughty.”

The moan that rolls out of her chest makes my balls ache.

“You like that?” I lick her neck. “You want what I’m going to give you?”

“Yes! Michael, yes!”

Sitting back on my heels, I smirk at her cute as fuck pajamas. Then I grip the fabric and rip the front open. Her pretty little buttons flying in every direction.

Alice’s gasp turns into a moan when I close my mouth around one of her peaked nipples. My own rumbling satisfaction drowns out the thudding pulse in my ears.

My Alice is warm and willing and so goddamn delicious.

With my mouth occupied, I shift my weight and use one hand to tug her pants down her hips.

“Christ, woman, you’re perfection,” I groan when I drag my mouth away from her tits.

Leaning back, I yank her pants all the way off, and she takes the moment to shimmy out of her torn top.

Standing, I yank off my shirt as Alice’s breasts heave with each inhale.

My hands are undoing my zipper when my eyes catch on the open box next to Alice.

She sees the direction of my gaze and reaches for it, but I'm quicker.

Alice lets out a strangled sound as she throws her hands over her face, covering her eyes but leaving the rest of her naked form on full display.

It takes me all of a second to figure out what this box holds. Because it holds me.

All of my best interviews. All of my favorite accomplishments. All of the causes that are closest to my heart.

A huge smile pulls across my face as I set the box down on the floor, removing my pants and boxer briefs in the process.

"Sweetness, look at me."

Alice shakes her head, her tits jiggling with the motion.

I grip my dick, giving it a firm stroke. "Open those mistletoe eyes, Alice."

Slowly, she moves her hands, and her eyes widen as she takes in the sight of me. Nude. And hard.

"Does it look like I'm upset?"

She doesn't reply, only shaking her head again.

Another stroke. "Words, Baby."

"N-no, you don't look upset."

"That's right." I keep my hand on my cock as I kneel between her spread legs. "That collection of yours makes us even."

"Even?" she asks, her eyes darting all over my body.

"Yeah, Alice. Even." I line my dick up with her entrance. "Because it means you're just as obsessed with me as I am with you."

Thrusting my hips forward, I sink myself into her heat.

Chapter 36

Alice

PLEASURE EXPLODES inside me as Michael fills me with his entire length.

My lips part to release a cry, but before sound can come out a large palm closes over my mouth just as Michael's body drops onto mine. His weight pins me to the mattress.

"We gotta be quiet, Baby." His cock throbs inside me. "Those sounds are for my ears only."

His words grate against my skin, and I clench around him.

"Fuck, Sweetness," he groans. "This pussy was fucking made for me."

I nod my agreement, his palm still preventing me from speaking.

And when he drags his cock out before slamming it back in, I'm thankful that he's still muffling my cries. Because I can't hold back.

"So slick."

His hips meet mine.

"So hot."

Another thrust bounces my body beneath his.

"So tight."

His hand slides away from my mouth to cradle the back of my head.

Michael looks into my eyes from inches away, and a physical roll of emotion sweeps through my soul. A tremendous feeling of *rightness* rests over my heart. And I know this is it. This is the man I'm going to spend my life with.

With trembling fingers, I place my hands on his face and pull him closer.

His hips slow. His eyes show understanding. Like he's feeling the same thing I am.

"My Alice." His quiet claim brushes over my lips.

“I’m yours,” I reply.

His mouth claims mine. His tongue matching the motion of his thrusts.
His whole being filling me.

Michael. He’s mine. Truly mine.

I roll my hips to meet his. “My Michael.”

A shudder rumbles through his body.

Fully seated inside me, he pumps his hips, pushing even deeper.

“Say it again,” he grits the command in a harsh whisper.

My hands scratch down his neck until my palm is flat over his thumping heart. “You’re my Michael. No one else’s.”

The hand not behind my head slides over my side, and he pulls back enough to slip it between us.

“Tell me the rest,” he demands.

His fingers flex against my belly as they inch lower. And lower.

When his thumb brushes through the moisture between us, I close my eyes. And when he presses against my clit, I arch my back and moan.

Michael’s other fingers tangle in my hair. “Tell me the rest.”

“The rest?” I blink my eyes back open.

I can hardly think.

His thumb traces a small circle.

What was the question?

His thumb starts to rub harder as he pulls his cock out until just the head of him is still inside me.

“Tell me what you feel.”

My eyes slide shut again, “I…”

He pushes back inside me.

“I…” Joy fills every one of my cells as my orgasm starts to spark beneath his touch.

“Tell me, Baby.”

“I love you.”

My eyes pop open in panic. I didn’t mean to say that.

Except Michael’s not pulling away.

He’s not holding back at all.

His hips slam into mine.

“Say it again,” he growls. Each thrust sliding us farther up the mattress.

“I love you.” I cling to his neck, and I feel tears fill my eyes.

He presses his forehead to mine. “I love you, too. So goddamn much.”

I lose the battle against the tears. The intensity of the moment is too much. Too overwhelming.

“Say it again,” I choke out my own demand.

“I fucking love you, Alice Hatter.” Michael’s own eyes are glassy. “I’m gonna love you forever.”

His thumb brushes over my clit once more, and I combust.

Sobs mix with moans of ecstasy as I pulse around him. Pulling him in as close as he can get.

“Alice,” he chants into my neck. “My Alice. My Sweetness. I’m so close.”

“Let go, Michael.”

He starts to withdraw, but I hook my feet around the back of his thighs. “Come inside me. I want you to come inside me.”

I can feel every muscle in his body tense, and I hold him tight against me as he roars his release.

Chapter 37

Michael

COLLAPSING, I pull Alice with me as I roll to the side, not wanting to crush her.

We're a tangle of hot and sweaty limbs as we work to catch our breaths, but I still pull her into my side, not ready to lose contact.

"I'll clean you up in a minute." I kiss the top of her head. "But not yet."

Alice snuggles her cheek against my chest, making a sound of contentment.

I kiss her hair again, the twinkling lights above us casting a colorful glow on her golden locks.

I can feel her smile on my skin. "Did you say I had *mistletoe* eyes?"

"Uh-huh." I stroke my hand down her back. "They're green, like mistletoe." I palm her ass. "And I want to kiss everything below them."

She shakes her head, letting out a snort of laughter, and we settle into each other further.

Her hand splays over my stomach and I feel her back rise, like she's inhaling to speak, only she doesn't say anything.

I close my free hand over hers. "What's going on in that beautiful brain, Baby Cakes?"

Her fingers shift until they're entwined with mine. "What does it mean?" Her shoulder lifts in a little shrug. "Are we dating now?"

A chuff escapes me, and I feel her tense against my side.

Before she can pull back, I drag her over my body until she's sprawled across me.

"Look at me." I wait until her vulnerable eyes meet mine. "I'm yours. And that wetness leaking out of you, soaking my cock, that marks you as

mine. There's no one else. For either of us."

Alice blinks, and I know she can feel the truth in my words.

"So yeah, we're dating for the next few days, or however long it takes me to find you the perfect ring. And after that, you'll be my fiancée. Then, if I have my say, I'll be calling you wife by the time the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve."

Chapter 38

Alice

PEACE like I've never felt before wells inside me, and I find myself shedding tears of happiness for the second time tonight.

"I think I can live with that." The side of my mouth pulls up in a soft smile.

One of his large hands grips my ass. "Good. Because I can't live without you."

I shake my head at the ridiculousness of it all. "People are gonna think we're being irrational. Or that we're faking it."

He pulls me higher, so my mouth is aligned with his. "Let them think what they want. We know the truth. That's all that matters."

I brush my lips over his. "There's still so much to talk about."

"We have all the time in the world." He shifts his hips, and I feel him harden beneath me. "Starting with our flight to Canada tomorrow."

"We're going to Canada?"

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow?" I ask.

"Yeah, Sweetness. Tomorrow." His lips graze against mine. "Anywhere I go, you go, too."

Proving his point, Michael seals his lips to mine, then rolls us over. Sinking back inside me.

Epilogue

Alice

“BE SAFE.” Sam’s arms tighten around me while we stand on the front step in the cold.

“I will,” I sniff, hugging her back.

Suzy, who just got done crushing my ribs, wipes at her eyes. “Don’t start crying again! I don’t want to have red eyes all freaking day!”

I smile through another sniff, stepping back from my cousins. “I love you guys so much.”

“We love you too,” Sam says with a watery grin as she glances behind me.

I know what she sees, a handsome as sin man, waiting for me to climb into the back of a hired SUV with him and head to the airport.

Honestly, I think my cousins were less surprised than I was when we came up the stairs this morning and announced that I’d be leaving with Michael to go shoot a *Second Bite New Year’s Special* in Canada.

Canada!

My mouth pulls into a broad smile. “I’m going to Canada.”

They grin back, Suzy reaching out to shove at my shoulder. “I told you it wasn’t a waste to get your passport.”

“You were right,” I agree.

I’ve always wanted to travel the world but have never had the opportunity, or means, to leave the country. It was a completely random desire that had me filling out the paperwork last summer. Wanting to be prepared, just in case an opportunity arose. And I’m glad I did.

“I’m sorry I’m missing Christmas,” I whisper, causing them both to roll their eyes at me.

“Alice, if Santa gave me a gift like that for Christmas, I’d ditch you both in a freaking heartbeat,” Sam states, making Suzy snort.

“You guys signing me up for *Second Bite* was truly the best present I’ve ever received.” Looking over my shoulder, my heart softens when I lock eyes with Michael.

“You ready, Baby Cakes?” His voice is gentle, and I fall in love with him even more.

The girls snicker at the use of his nickname for me, but I still give them one more hug before I turn away and walk toward Michael. Toward my future.

Epilogue II

Michael

“TERMINAL ONE,” I tell the driver, settling back against the seat.

Snowflakes start to fall as Alice waves out the window to her family, and I’m hit with a wave of immense honor.

She’s chosen me.

She’s chosen to drop everything in order to spend time with me.

I unbuckle my seat belt and slide into the center of the bench seat, putting myself against her side.

Alice grins up at me. “What are you doing?”

My hand grips her thigh. “I was too far away.”

Her head shakes, but her fingers close over mine. “I guess you can stay, but you need to put a seat belt back on.”

One-handed, I find the center belt and click it into place. “You worried about me, Baby?”

She slides her hand over to my thigh. Her little fingers gripping the broad muscle, mimicking my grip.

“You’re mine now, Michael Kesso. I’ll always worry about you.”

My heart squeezes in my chest.

This girl.

Alice blinks up at me with her pretty eyes, and I suddenly remember...

“I almost forgot.” I shake my head at myself. Leaning back in the seat, I reach my hand into my front pocket. “I think this is yours.”

Alice’s smile freezes on her face when she sees the large silver coin in my palm.

“Oh, Michael!” One hand covers her mouth as the other reaches out to pick up the item. “Where did you find this?”

“In your hotel room. I went looking for you after the show wrapped up, and housekeeping was already in there cleaning. They gave it to me, assuming you’d dropped it.”

Alice nods and I hear her snuffle.

I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her into my side.

“I’m okay,” she whispers.

I’m worried I might have ruined our morning, but then she tips her head back and looks up at me with a smile bright enough to inspire a Christmas jingle.

Smiling back, I brush a thumb over her cheek, wiping away a stray tear.

“My grandma gave me this coin.”

“The one who inspired your cream cake?” I ask, my mouth watering just thinking about it.

“Yeah, she taught me to bake.” Her lips quirk. “She was pretty feisty, and I think she would’ve liked you.”

“Damn right, grandparents have always loved me.”

Alice rolls her eyes. “Sure.”

I lower my forehead to hers. “We have a long flight. How about you spend that time telling me all about your grandma? I’d love to critique her recipes.”

Alice playfully swats at my stomach. “You wouldn’t dare.”

With a sigh, she leans farther into me. “This feels like a dream.”

“It’s not a dream, Baby Cakes.” I trace my thumb along her jawline.

Her hand closes over my wrist, holding me in place. “I’ve loved you for so long.”

I pull her closer. “I’m jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Jealous of the extra time you got.” Her grip on my wrist tightens, and I feel it in my soul. “I have so much lost time to make up for. It almost feels unfair. But I’m going to make it up to you. I may not have the words to explain to you just how much I love you. But I promise to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much you mean to me.”

Alice’s eyes swim with happiness as she arches up, brushing her lips across mine. “I love you, too, My Chef.”

The way she calls me that has my balls tightening.

That’s something to explore.

Closing the rest of the distance between us, I smile.

This is gonna be a Christmas to remember.

The End



For now...

ALSO. Eat the cake.

Acknowledgments

Happy holidays to all my readers. Chances are you're reading this sometime between November and December and you've probably spent a lot of time around family and/or co-workers and friends... and you probably needed a break from it all. (Like for real. The holidays can be a lot for a lot of reasons.) So thank you for taking some of your valuable time to join me in a Tilly World adventure. If you've read Smoky Darling and/or Latte Darling hopefully it was a nice little treat to get to see some "behind the curtains" of the Second Bite TV show.

As always, I need to thank my mother, Karen. Thank you for all your hard work beta and alpha reading. And for your help editing. And for listening to me ramble and complain. But also for instilling me with a love of the holidays. Christmas always meant family, food and Santa. And there was only that one time when *he* left a bag of rocks in my Santa Sack because apparently I'd been extra bratty that year. (I know readers, it's hard to imagine!) (Also, a Santa Sack is just a giant stocking with a drawstring. Don't make it all fucking weird.)

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And lastly, thank you to my grandmother, the origin of the Tilly name, for all your Norwegian baking. Christmas hasn't been the same without you and without your homemade Krumkake. These cloudberry are for you.

About the Author - S.J. Tilly

Hi friends! As you can probably guess from my books, I live in Minnesota. Born, raised, and still residing. I currently live just outside the Twin Cities with my husband and our herd of boxers. I spend an unhealthy amount of time with my face buried in books, either reading or writing. And if I'm not nose deep in text, or harassing my dogs, (and it's not the dead of winter) you can probably find me playing with my plants, pretending I know how to garden. Even if my yard is a hot-flowery-mess, at least the bees are happy! If you've gotten this far, THANK YOU for giving me a chance to entertain you! You can find all my links at sjtilly.com and follow me on Amazon so you don't miss any new releases!

Books By This Author

Sin Series **Romantic Suspense**

Mr. Sin

I should have run the other way. Paid my tab and gone back to my room. But he was there. And he was... everything. I figured what's the harm in letting passion rule my decisions for one night? So what if he looks like the Devil in a suit. I'd be leaving in the morning. Flying home, back to my pleasant but predictable life. I'd never see him again.

Except I do. In the last place I expected. And now everything I've worked so hard for is in jeopardy.

We can't stop what we've started, but this is bigger than the two of us.

And when his past comes back to haunt him, love might not be enough to save me.

Sin Too

Beth

It started with tragedy.

And secrets.

Hidden truths that refused to stay buried have come out to chase me. Now I'm on the run, living under a blanket of constant fear, pretending to be someone I'm not. And if I'm not really me, how am I supposed to know what's real?

Angelo

Watch the girl.

It was supposed to be a simple assignment. But like everything else in this family, there's nothing simple about it. Not my task. Not her fake name. And not my feelings for her.

But Beth is mine now.

So when the monsters from her past come out to play, they'll have to get through me first.

Miss Sin

I'm so sick of watching the world spin by. Of letting people think I'm plain and boring, too afraid to just be myself.

Then I see *him*.

John.

He's strength and fury, and unapologetic.

He's everything I want. And everything I wish I was.

He won't want me, but that doesn't matter. The sight of him is all the inspiration I need to finally shatter this glass house I've build around myself.

Only he does want me. And when our worlds collide, details we can't see become tangled, twisting together, ensnaring us in an invisible trap.

When it all goes wrong, I don't know if I'll be able to break free of the chains binding us, or if I'll suffocate in the process.

Sleet Series

Romantic Comedy

Sleet Kitten

There are a few things that life doesn't prepare you for. Like what to do when a super-hot guy catches you sneaking around in his basement. Or what to do when a mysterious package shows up with tickets to a hockey game, because apparently, he's a professional athlete. Or how to handle it when you get to the game and realize he's freaking famous since half of the 20,000 people in the stands are wearing his jersey.

I thought I was a well-adjusted adult, reasonably prepared for life. But one date with Jackson Wilder, a viral video, and a "I didn't know she was your mom" incident, and I'm suddenly questioning everything I thought I knew.

But he's fun. And great. And I think I might be falling for him. But I don't know if he's falling for me too, or if he's as much of a player off the ice as on.

Sleet Sugar

My friends have convinced me. No more hockey players.

With a dad who is the Head Coach for the Minnesota Sleet, it seemed like an easy decision.

My friends have also convinced me that the best way to boost my fragile self-esteem is through a one-night stand.

A dating App. A hotel bar. A sexy-as-hell man, who's sweet, and funny, and did I mention, sexy-as-hell... I fortified my courage and invited myself up to his room.

Assumptions. There's a rule about them.

I assumed he was passing through town. I assumed he was a businessman, or maybe an investor, or accountant, or literally anything other than a professional hockey player. I assumed I'd never see him again.

I assumed wrong.

Sleet Banshee

Mother-freaking hockey players. My friends found their happily-ever-afters with a couple of sweet, doting, over-the-top in-love athletes. They got nicknames like *Kitten* and *Sugar*. But me? I got stuck with a dickhead who riles me up on purpose and calls me *Banshee*. Yeah, he might have a voice made specifically for wet dreams. And he might have a body and face carved by the gods. And he might have a level of Alpha-hole that gets me all hot and bothered.

But when he presses my buttons, he presses ALL of my buttons. And I'm not the type of girl who takes things sitting down. And I only got caught on my knees that one time. In the museum.

But when one of my decisions get one of my friends hurt... I can't stop blaming myself. And him.

Except he can't take a hint. And I can't keep my panties on.

Darling Series

Contemporary Small Town Romance

Smoky Darling

Elouise

I fell in love with Beckett when I was 7.

He broke my heart when I was 15.

When I was 18, I promised myself I'd forget about him.

And I did. For a dozen years.

But now he's back home. Here. In Darling Lake. And I don't know if I should give in to the temptation swirling between us or run the other way.

Beckett

She had a crush on me when she was a kid. But she was my brother's best friend's little sister. I didn't see her like that. And even if I had, she was too young. Our age difference was too great.

But now I'm back home. And she's here. And she's all the way grown up.

It wouldn't have worked back then. But I'll be damned if I won't get a taste of her now.

Latte Darling

I have a nice life - living in my hometown, owning the coffee shop I've worked at since I was 16.

It's comfortable.

On paper.

But I'm tired of doing everything by myself. Tired of being in charge of every decision in my life.

I want someone to lean on. Someone to spend time with. Sit with. Hug.

And I really don't want to go to my best friend's wedding alone.

So, I signed up for a dating app, and agreed to meet with the first guy that messaged me.

And now here I am, at the bar.

Only it's not my date that just sat down in the chair across from me. It's his dad.

And holy hell, he's the definition of Silver Fox. If a Silver Fox can be thick as a house, have piercing blue eyes and tattoos from his neck down to his fingertips.

He's giving me Big Bad Wolf vibes. Only instead of running, I'm blushing. And he looks like he might just want to eat me whole.

Tilly World Holiday Novellas

Second Bite

When a holiday baking competition goes incredibly wrong. Or right...

Michael -

I'm starting to think I've been doing this for too long. The screaming fans. The constant media attention. The fat paychecks. None of it brings me the happiness I yearn for.

Yet here I am. Another year. Another holiday special. Another Christmas spent alone in a hotel room.

But then the lights go up. And I see *her*.

Alice -

It's an honor to be a contestant, I know that. But right now it feels a little like punishment. Because any second Chef Michael Kesso, the man I've been in love with for years, the man who doesn't even know I exist, is going to walk onto the set, and it will be a miracle if I don't pass out at the sight of him.

But the time for doubts is over. Because Second Bite is about to start - "in three... two... one..."