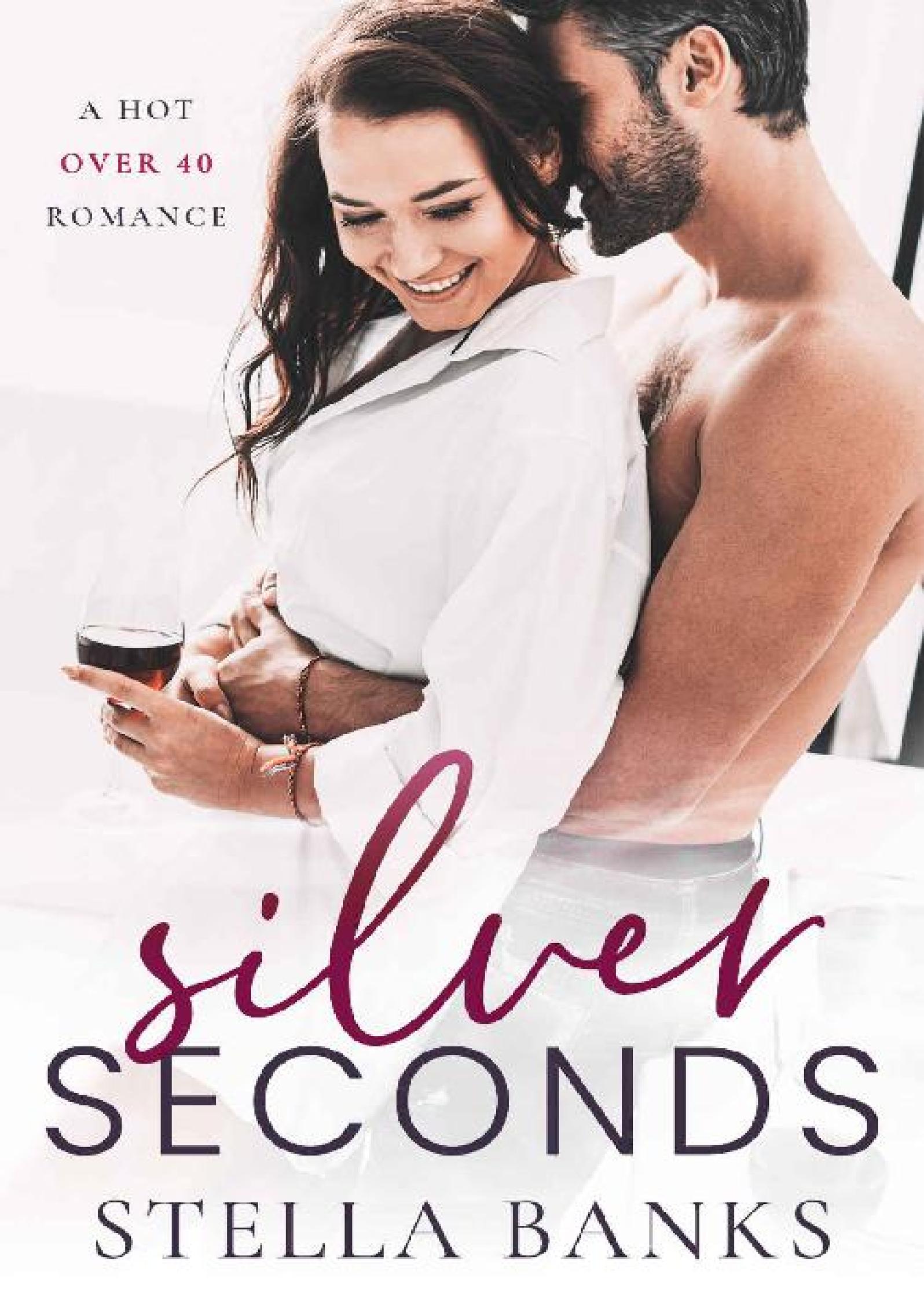


A HOT
OVER 40
ROMANCE

A romantic couple embracing on a boat. The woman, with long dark hair, is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and is smiling while holding a glass of red wine. The man, with a beard and short dark hair, is shirtless and has his arms around her. They are both looking down at something in the woman's hands. The background is a bright, overexposed outdoor setting, likely the deck of a boat.

silver
SECONDS
STELLA BANKS

Silver Seconds

A HOT OVER 40 ROMANCE

STELLA BANKS

Contents

1. [Denise](#)
2. [Brett](#)
3. [Denise](#)
4. [Brett](#)
5. [Denise](#)
6. [Brett](#)
7. [Denise](#)
8. [Denise](#)
9. [Brett](#)
10. [Brett](#)
11. [Denise](#)
12. [Brett](#)
13. [Denise](#)
14. [Denise](#)
15. [Brett](#)
16. [Denise](#)
17. [Brett](#)
18. [Denise](#)
19. [Brett](#)
20. [Denise](#)
21. [Brett](#)
22. [Denise](#)
23. [Brett](#)
24. [Denise](#)
25. [Brett](#)
26. [Denise](#)
27. [Brett](#)
28. [Denise](#)

[Steamy Bonus Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Stella Banks](#)

Copyright © 2023 by Stella Banks

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover design by Angela Haddon.

v.04

CHAPTER 1

Denise

“**H**appy Birthdayyy!”

The screamed words hit me as soon as I open my front door.

Two grown women are standing on my porch, hooting and hollering into the evening air.

They’re holding an armful of bags and balloons, shrieking like girls half their age getting ready for spring break.

“Oh my goodness, you *guys*.” A wave of warmth rises inside me as I hug each woman. “What are you two doing here?”

The blonde on the left gives me a beaming smile. It’s my younger sister, Sheila.

She’s still wearing her pink nursing scrubs and is holding a cake bigger than her head. “I know you said you didn’t want to celebrate.” She pinches me in the side. “But Lisa and I decided that you could use some cheering up. We wanted to make sure you felt celebrated.”

I laugh. “I’m sure the entire neighborhood feels celebrated at this point.” I cast a glance toward the quiet houses flanking mine on either side. “But who am I to stand in the way of your public service announcement?”

My best friend Lisa is standing beside Sheila, cackling. “I’m sure your neighbors won’t judge you for making a little noise on your birthday. And even if they do, we are way too old to care.”

Ever the trendsetter, Lisa sports a playful polka-dot dress, perfectly offsetting the glistening bottles of Prosecco in each hand. “Now, let’s celebrate!” She waves the bottles like maracas. “You only turn forty-five once!”

I chuckle as Lisa and Sheila push past me into my bungalow, a rush of salty sea air following in their wake. The familiar scent calms me, and I can’t help but linger on the porch for a moment.

I used to think it was cliché how people said the sea is therapeutic. But now that I live on the beach, I’ve found it profoundly true. The scent is like a lullaby, bringing comfort and tranquility. It’s a smell I’ve come to love, as much a part of me as the freckles on my skin or the laugh lines around my eyes.

After a few seconds, I reluctantly shut my door and walk into my living room. And when I do, I can’t help but frown.

When I bought my bungalow a year ago, the small space felt fun and eclectic. It’s a two-bedroom, one-bath with a wonky layout, but it has great bones, large windows, and tons of natural light.

I decided to buy it because it felt homey. And at the time, there was nothing I wanted more than to feel at home. But now that I’m working so much, all my mismatched furniture and piles of clutter feel...chaotic.

“Sorry for the mess, ladies,” I say sheepishly as I walk into the kitchen. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

Lisa gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t sweat it, honey. You know I didn’t come all this way to see your house.” She moves a stack of mail and sits on one of the barstools surrounding my kitchen island. “I came here to see *you*.”

Lisa and I have been best friends since we were freshmen at Texas A&M - almost twenty-five years. She’s divorced, like me, and still lives back in Houston, where she works as a legal secretary.

“You know I don’t have any room to talk,” Sheila chimes in as she sets three plastic glasses on the granite countertop. “I have a husband and four kids. My house is one messy, revolving door. Speaking of which, Lisa is staying with me this weekend.”

Lisa pops open the Prosecco and starts pouring generously. “I hope that’s okay. We didn’t want to ruin the surprise, and I figured you would be busy most of the time.”

“Of course, it’s okay.” I grab a glass and take a generous gulp.

Lisa gives me a sympathetic look while Sheila shakes her head and tops off my glass.

“Things at the bakery still that bad?” Sheila asks.

I sigh and take another sip, although this time more slowly.

I took over as the owner of the Sugar Breeze Bakery last year after my mom passed away. Sugar Breeze is famous for its cupcakes, which my mom used to say were “as sweet as a summer breeze.” To everyone’s surprise, she left the bakery for me alone to run.

Since I was going through a divorce at the same time, and my only daughter, Sophia, was heading off to college, I figured that taking over Sugar Breeze would give me the fresh start I needed.

But things haven’t exactly worked out that way.

Running a bakery is the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life.

From the unpredictable hours to the stress of managing a staff, it’s way more work than I anticipated. I’ve been working around the clock to keep Sugar Breeze going. But I just haven’t had the success that my mom did.

The only saving grace is that I’m back in Barton Beach. It’s a tiny little Texas town on the Gulf of Mexico with sandy beaches, charming shops, and friendly locals. And after everything that’s happened, I can’t imagine living anywhere else.

I also love having my sister Sheila and her family close by. And with Houston being only a four-hour drive away, I can still make day trips to see Lisa and my other friends.

“I wouldn’t say it’s bad, just... challenging,” I reply, swirling the Prosecco in my glass. I offer them a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. “But I’m managing. It’s all a process, right?”

Sheila gives me another concerned look. “Have you been able to reopen yet?”

I sigh. We had to close the bakery last week due to repair issues. And thanks to my tight budget, we still haven’t reopened yet.

“Hopefully we’ll be able to open tomorrow.”

Lisa leans in. “Well, at least you have the Tinsley Simon thing to look forward to.” She takes another gulp of her wine, her gaze not leaving my face. “Designing her wedding cake would be a game-changer for Sugar Breeze, right?”

Tinsley Simon is a pop star who is getting married to a hockey player named Ford Augustine in a few months. Ford is a Barton Beach native and has been very public about wanting to get married in his hometown. Since their engagement was announced, they have been actively searching for a local cake designer.

“I haven’t heard back about the cake tasting yet,” I remind her, setting my glass down on the counter with a little more force than necessary. The liquid inside sloshes dangerously close to the rim. “I sent in my proposal, but it’s just a waiting game now.” I force a brave smile, trying to project confidence I don’t feel.

A devilish smile plays on Sheila’s lips. “Well, I think I know just how to take your mind off this waiting game,” she suggests casually.

“And what might that be?” I ask, bracing myself for whatever scheme she’s cooked up this time.

Sheila glances at Lisa, who grins broadly in agreement. “A girls’ night out,” they chime in unison, their eyes sparkling

with anticipation.

I groan. “No way. It’s getting late, I’m tired, I smell like cupcakes, and in case you’ve forgotten, I’m old.”

Lisa rolls her eyes. “You’re not old. You’re just getting started. And besides, there’s nothing like a little distraction with good company to ease the stress, right?”

“There’s a cute new bar that just opened up near the beach,” Sheila says, nudging me playfully. “So, how about it? A few drinks, a little dancing? I think we should check it out.”

It’s true that I could use a distraction. And if I’m being honest, it would be nice to have some time with my friends to blow off some steam.

“We heard the owner is hot, too,” Lisa chimes in with a smirk. “Rumor has it that he’s a silver fox around our age.”

I feel my stomach start to churn nervously.

Although it’s been over a year since the ink dried on my divorce papers, my romantic life has been as barren as a desert. Lately, Sheila and Lisa have been encouraging me to put myself out there again. But to be honest, the idea of dating is frightening.

I’ve been out of the game for so long that the prospect of dressing up and the scrutiny from strangers feels overwhelming. It’s not just the physical act of going out. It’s the emotional burden of feeling like I have to have it all together when, in reality, I’m a hot mess and barely hanging on.

But then again...one night out won’t change anything, right?

I bite my bottom lip. “Even if I wanted to go, I don’t think I have anything to wear.”

Sheila flashes Lisa a knowing smirk and nods to the hot pink gift bag on the couch. “You will after you open your birthday present.”

I eye her suspiciously as I walk over to the couch. And when I pull the dress out of the bag, my jaw drops.

It's short, black, and clingy with a halter-style neckline and a hint of sparkle in the lace overlay. It's the kind of dress that I would have worn back in my early twenties.

It's also the kind of dress I would never have had the courage to buy for myself.

I feel a sudden surge of warmth flood through me, and I realize with amazement that it's not fear - it's excitement.

I'm looking forward to something for the first time in a while.

"See, Denise?" Sheila grins triumphantly. "Now you're ready for a night out."

Lisa wiggles her eyebrows. "Give up, birthday girl. You're coming with us."

I laugh. "I cannot *believe* you two bought me an outfit!"

Sheila's eyes twinkle mischievously. "Of course, we bought you an outfit. You didn't think we would let you off the hook that easily, did you?"

Lisa gives a little bow. "Just call us your fashion fairy godmothers." She stands up from her chair and shoos me toward the hallway. "You're going to snap necks in that dress. Now go try it on so we can get going!"

I shuffle to my bedroom like a teenager, groaning loudly even though I secretly love all the attention.

It's been far too long since I let myself enjoy life, and tonight is the perfect opportunity to break out of my comfort zone and celebrate. Forty-five years is a milestone worth acknowledging - and it's time for me to finally enjoy myself again.

Once inside my room, I shrug off my work uniform - jeans and a pink polo shirt - and watch them fall to the floor. Then, taking a deep breath, I slip into the dress Sheila bought me.

Instantly, I feel my confidence rising as the fabric hugs every curve of my body in all the right places. I turn around a few times in the mirror, admiring my reflection and wondering who this brave new woman is.

I've never been the most confident woman when it comes to my looks. I've always struggled with my weight, and it's only getting worse now that I'm working all day in a bakery. It also doesn't help that my ex-husband constantly commented about my appearance, telling me I needed to lose weight or get a facelift.

But tonight, I'm going to forget all of his cruel words and embrace my independence.

Tonight, I'm ready for a night out with the girls.

As I get ready to leave my bedroom, I spot my pink apron-shaped earrings sitting on my dresser. They were a gift from my mom, and I typically only wear them on special occasions. Since they are sparkly, like my dress, I decide to put them on.

A few minutes later, I return to the living room with my outfit complete. And when Lisa and Sheila let out a collective gasp, I can't help but feel a little proud.

"Denise, you look amazing!" Lisa exclaims, "That dress is perfect for you!"

I look at myself in the mirror, suddenly feeling shy. "I don't know. I think it might be a little short on me. And I've put on some weight..."

Lisa rolls her eyes. "Girl, that dress makes you look like a million bucks. Thick thighs save lives."

"I just don't want to embarrass myself," I admit to Lisa as I pinch my pillowy stomach. "Barton Beach is a small town, and it's been years since I've been to a bar. What if people see me and think, 'Wow, she really let herself go'?"

"Are you crazy?" Sheila snorts. "In that dress, you'll be making out at the bar with a hot hunk by 9 p.m."

I tug down the hem of my dress. "Sheila, I'm way too old to make out with a guy at a bar."

Lisa chuckles. "Honey, no one is too old to make out with a guy at a bar." Then she puts a hand on my shoulder. "Don't let your dumb ex-husband get inside your head. He was a jerk who didn't appreciate how amazing you are. And as for

anyone else's opinions, who cares? You're out here to have fun and celebrate your birthday. You deserve it."

I take a deep breath, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. Lisa's words are exactly what I needed to hear. "You're right," I say with a grin. "Let's go out there and show everyone how hot we still are!"

We share another glass of wine while Lisa and Sheila get ready. Lisa is wearing a royal blue jumpsuit that perfectly complements her dark hair and accentuates her athletic figure. Her gold hoop earrings glint under the room's light, matching perfectly with her strappy gold heels.

Sheila is wearing a short, red dress that shows off her curvy silhouette, paired with a pair of black stilettos. Her blond hair is curled to perfection, and a vintage silver necklace rests elegantly around her neck.

With everyone finally ready, I step back to look at our trio.

"Well, aren't we a sight for sore eyes?" I chuckle, looking at them.

Suddenly, a car horn honks outside, and I almost drop my wine.

"It's time!" Lisa giggles, setting down her empty glass on the coffee table. "He's ready!"

I frown. "Who's ready?"

Instead of answering, they shuffle past me and open the front door.

As if they've rehearsed it, the two women step aside dramatically like two sides of a curtain. Behind them, Sheila's family car is parked on the street. It's a rust-colored minivan, which looks almost burgundy against the sunset. A tall, burly man steps from the driver's seat.

"Oh my gosh!" I burst into a fit of laughter. "Is that Paul?"

"He volunteered!" Sheila sings, giving her husband a little wave. He blows her a kiss in return. "Paul's our designated driver for tonight."

“Still. Poor man.”

Paul grins as he tips his hat and gives a little bow.

“Come on, ladies,” he calls to us, opening one of the van’s sliding doors. “Your carriage awaits.”

Sheila squeals and loops her arm through mine.

“Well, let’s get on with it, girls! This night isn’t going to start itself!”

CHAPTER 2

Brett

Denise Lawson. That's the name of the day.

The name that is currently rattling around in my brain.

The car hits a bump in the road, and I almost drop my papers to the floor. I won't see her until tomorrow, so there's no real need to study this much. But for some reason, I can't bring myself to put the papers away yet.

I have all her information here. Everything except her photo, which my secretary accidentally left on the printer.

I know her middle name is Elizabeth. I know she's in her mid-forties. And I know she lived in Houston until about a year ago when her mother passed and left her the Sugar Breeze Bakery, a business she now runs herself. It's enough for me to complete the job I came out here to do.

And yet, it somehow doesn't feel like enough.

I got put on this bakery assignment at the last minute after one of our junior analysts screwed up royally. And if there is one thing the higher-ups at Westrock Investments don't take to kindly, it's screwups.

So even though I don't normally travel for work anymore — I'm way too senior for that — I figure cleaning up this mess will help earn me some goodwill, especially since I'm up for partner in a few months.

Plus, the bakery is in Barton Beach, where my brother lives. And I figure coming out for one weekend will give us a chance to catch up.

“We’re almost there, sir,” the driver says from the front seat, and I know it’s time to pull myself together.

Slipping my files back into their folder, I tuck everything into my briefcase. “You’ll stay in the neighborhood and wait until we’re finished?” I ask.

“Yes, sir,” he answers promptly. “I’ll go get dinner while I wait. You have my number. Feel free to call me over when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.”

The car slows to a stop outside the bar.

The Silver Coop, as my brother decided to name it. I told him it was a risky name, that it would make people think of farms and chickens before thinking about the pun on our last name, Cooper.

But my brother has always loved putting on a show. Naming the bar after himself was a logical next step in that lifelong need for performance.

When I step into the bar, it’s a lot more packed than I expect. About three dozen people are crammed into its small space, most of whom seem to be young college-age women. Despite the number of people, the mood is relatively calm. Although, the longer I look, the more I realize that’s not the right word. More like enraptured. Hypnotized.

Because, of course, they’ve all crowded around *him*.

The numerous heads of the patrons part long enough that I can finally spot Bash at the head of them all.

He’s behind the bar, pouring shots and mixing margaritas. And all the while, he’s cracking jokes and winking at women. And unlike me, the grayer his hair becomes, the more dashing women seem to find him.

Perhaps “The Silver Coop” isn’t such a poor choice of name after all.

Making my way through the crowd, I realize how out of place I am in this small town turned growing city. The women are all dressed in jean shorts or little dresses, while the men

wear country plaids. I even see a cowboy hat or two. In my suit and dress shoes, I look like Fred Astaire thrown into the middle of a John Wayne classic.

Finally, I get around the crowd and up to the little swinging saloon door that leads behind the bar. Pushing my way through, I sidle up next to Bash awkwardly. Lucky for me, he's too engaged in one of his old baseball stories to notice me coming.

“—said we'd never win the game at this point,” he continues. “We were too far gone, the coach said. So, I told him to just let me out there, and I would do the rest. Gonzales, the pitcher on the other team, was a real piece of work. He could throw balls faster than a car and curve them like a fish hook.”

He brings his hands up next to his head in a mime of holding a bat, and the crowd's eyes grow wide as they watch him tell a story I've heard him tell at least five dozen times.

“Gonzales looks at me from the pitcher's mound and spits into the grass—I swear I saw the green sizzle a little. He was so full of acid just looking at me. They wanted their win and would pummel it out of me if they had to. So, I took a deep breath, tapped the plate, and prepared myself for the worst. He threw up his leg, wound up his pitch, and—!”

“And you got hit in the head so bad it took you five days to wake up,” I finish.

He freezes at the sound of my voice. After a moment, he turns to look at me, and as recognition fills his eyes, his mouth forms an enormous, shining smile.

“Brett!” he shouts, pulling me in for a rough hug. “I didn't know you were coming down here!”

“I had some business in the area and thought I would come in early to surprise you.”

“Well, let me introduce you to everyone,” He announces. “My brother from Houston, everyone!”

Some start clapping as he shakes me in his arms, squeezing me around the middle so tight I think I might crack a rib.

The crowd laughs with him, and I wrestle out of his grasp. As I brush off my suit, he starts to chuckle again.

“Nice tux.”

I snort. “It’s a suit, not a tux.” Glancing around at the prying eyes, I ask, “Actually, could we talk privately for a few minutes?”

“Sure,” he replies with a grin.

He leads me back out from behind the bar and down a short hallway and bangs on a door labeled with an “Employees Only” metal sign.

“Tucker, break’s over! I need you to cover for me!” he shouts through it.

There’s only a groan from behind the door, but Bash seems satisfied enough by that response. He waves for me to follow him down to the end of the hall near the bathrooms. He unlocks a door with no label, which leads into a little office.

I get a good look at the place as he shuts the door behind us. I can’t help but shake my head.

Papers are strewn across his desk haphazardly, showing off his private finances for anyone wanting to see them. And there’s an odd hole in the wall filled with a baseball as if to patch it over. Or maybe the ball caused the hole in the first place, and he just left it there.

He gestures for me to sit in the chair in front of the desk as he walks around to the other side.

I sit across from him, and he grins. “Comfy, huh?”

“The chair?” I shift against it, trying to settle into the thin cushion. “It’s fine.”

He laughs like I’ve made some great joke. “Yeah. I don’t take many meetings here, so I don’t get many people to try it out. But for taking naps during breaks, it’s pretty great.”

“Taking naps at work?” I reply with a chuckle.

Bash rolls his eyes and plucks a baseball from his desk drawers. “It’s not work if you love it.”

Tossing the ball, he bounces it off the wall and easily back into his hands. He starts to do it almost rhythmically, and I watch the ball fly back and forth across the room, threatening to take out his framed pictures each time it flies.

“So, you’re here for business, huh?” He throws the ball into the air again. “You trying to buy me out?” He winks before catching the ball again.

I can’t help but smirk. “In your dreams.”

“But you *are* buying someone out?” Bash presses.

“Yeah, but not you. You can keep this hellhole all to yourself.”

He laughs once again. “Then who are you here to buy?”

“The Sugar Breeze Bakery.”

The ball lands in his hand roughly, but he doesn’t throw it again. He turns to look at me, his face fallen, and his smile gone.

“Really?”

“You’ve heard of it, then?” I ask.

“Of course, I have. All of Barton Beach has heard of it. It’s the best bakery in town.”

“Good.” I nod to myself before leaning down to grab my briefcase. Pulling out the papers on the bakery again, I review the details. “So, you know Denise Lawson?”

Bash glares at me.

“That’s what you wanted to talk to me about?” His voice is laden with disappointment. “You just want to weasel out the details for some shitty deal you’re working on?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Really? Because right now, it sounds like that.”

I sigh through my nose. “Bash, if I get Denise to sell, I’ll get the promotion of a lifetime.”

“It’s always about the promotions with you. Why not try to enjoy your life? You only get one.”

“I enjoy my life just fine,” I say, feeling my teeth clashing together as I talk. “And besides, you didn’t let me finish.”

Bash waves his hands in a gesture that suggests the stage is all mine before crossing his arms firmly over his chest.

“I came out a day early so we could hang out. You know, catch up.”

He frowns, but I can see his stiff posture is easing up. “What do you want to do?”

I shrug. “I figured I could crash at your place tonight. Grab a few beers. Find out how life is way out here on the beach.”

He narrows his eyes like he’s trying to sniff out the lie.

“I’m serious, Bash,” I say earnestly. “It feels like it’s been years since I’ve sat in the same room as you. I’m technically here on my company’s dollar. But I still want to catch up.”

After a moment, he caves. “Fine. I’ll tell you about Sugar Breeze, and we’ll grab a drink. I’ll get Tucker to cover for me.”

“I don’t want a drink from here, though,” I say, smirking. “We’ll go somewhere where the drinks are good.”

He pretends to throw the baseball at my head, and I duck, laughing.

“Now, tell me what you know about the Sugar Breeze Bakery.”

“Well,” he says, pensively. “Like I said, it’s a popular place around here. Used to be owned by her mom, though I don’t remember her name.”

“But she died, right?”

“About a year ago, yeah.”

“What can you tell me about the new owner?” I ask him, my chair squeaking beneath me as I lean forward. “Denise Lawson.”

“I’ve been there a few times, but I’ve only seen her about half of that,” Bash admits. “She always seems out of breath,

like she's just come back from a five-mile jog. I'm guessing she stays pretty busy in that place."

"People like her? They think she's doing a good job?"

He frowns again. "Now, that's not fair. She's only been doing this a year."

"It doesn't matter. What do people think about her?"

"They mostly think she's okay but not as good as her mom."

I nod, etching this into my notes. "What do people think about her desserts? Are they good?"

"They're fine, I guess." He sees the look in my eyes before bowing his head. Looking guilty for even thinking it, he finally says, "I bought some donuts from her once. They were pretty good. The icing was a mess, though."

I nod again and add this as well to my notes.

Bash shakes his head. "So that's the angle you're going with? That she's not fit to run the place?"

"It's the best angle I have so far."

"What makes WestRock interested in a place like that, anyway? It's just a local bakery."

My eyes stray to the files again, to that name. Denise Elizabeth Lawson. In many ways, I see Bash's point. She seems perfectly nice, just trying to follow in her mother's shoes and struggling to do it. For a moment, that familiar feeling of guilt washes over me.

There's something about this woman that I find so intriguing, something I can't quite put my finger on. The more I read her file, the more I want to know about her.

And the worse I feel about potentially hurting her.

Still, this is the world of business as it is.

To climb that ladder, you have to be willing to get your hands dirty and to do whatever it takes to earn your place among the highest rungs. That's what I've done all these years.

I've worked my way from the bottom, from the dirt itself. And now, here I am, at the cusp of something great.

Denise didn't build this bakery from the ground up. She inherited it. I keep telling myself that taking it from her will reset her back to her old life. In the end, there will be no actual harm done.

My hands grip the paper. I'm not hurting her by doing this.

I'm not.

Taking a breath, I look back at my brother, putting Denise and her plights out of my mind. There's no point getting invested in a woman I only intend to know for an hour or two.

There's no point in treating her as anything more than an asset.

"My client cares about the bakery," I answer. "I've been hired to acquire it. That's what I do."

Bash looks at me in silence for the longest time. Right into my eyes as if trying to read my soul. And for that moment, he looks sad. Like something important has been irreplaceably lost.

But before I can say anything, he's already set down his ball and stood up from his chair.

"If that's everything you wanted to know," he says shortly, "I'll go tell Tuck I'm taking the evening off."

He leaves the room, and I think about that look on his face in his absence.

However, I don't get very long to think about it.

From the central part of the bar, there is suddenly the crash of breaking glass and a series of gasps and squeals. I hop up from my chair and dash out to see the crowd looking at the man behind the bar.

Bash is guiding him out through the swinging door, and as they get closer, I see the man—Tucker, presumably— is gripping a washcloth to his hand. White but dotted with growing red spots. Bash looks up at me, looking harried.

“Hey, uh, B-Brett?” he stutters.

“Don’t worry,” I say, my fingers skittering across my phone. “I’m texting my driver. He’ll be here in a few minutes and get you to the hospital faster than your old truck.”

Though he’s sweating, Bash smiles gratefully. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem. I’ll close up while you’re gone.”

Tucker groans again, and Bash shakes his head, rushing his employee to the door.

“Thanks, Brett!”

And before I can say anything more, he and Tucker disappear around the corner.

Feeling a little lightheaded, I glance at the patrons still standing around the bar. All of them are looking at me now, their faces pale and some of their jaws agape after what just happened. And Bash has left me in charge of damage control.

Shit.

CHAPTER 3

Denise

“Sheila, are you sure this bar is even open?” I ask.

Sheila frowns and stops to look down at her phone.

“I mean, it should be open.” She bites her lip as she swipes at the screen furiously. “Yeah, the website says they’re open until two a.m.”

It’s a little past eight, and Paul has just dropped us off at the Silver Coop. It’s on the corner of the Barton Beach Boardwalk in a converted warehouse building. And although the boardwalk is pretty busy for a Friday night, the bar is eerily empty for some reason.

Lisa walks ahead of us and looks around. “Wow, Sheila. You did good. This place is fancy.”

I can’t help but agree. It’s a nice bar, especially for a tiny tourist town like Barton Beach.

Large, industrial-style windows in the main seating area give a stunning view of the beach. Plush leather furniture is strategically placed. Baseball memorabilia adorn the brick walls, complete with vintage posters and signed baseball bats. Soft music floats atmospherically from hidden speakers.

And at the center of the room is a giant bar, its counter gleaming under the warm overhead lights.

Where in the world is everyone?

Suddenly, I hear a deep voice behind me.

“Sorry, ladies, I was just about to put a sign on the door.”

Lisa turns around first, squealing with glee as she grabs my arm.

Sheila looks over her shoulder next and does a double take. Her eyes grow wide and reckless as her lips curve into a smirk.

Finally, I turn toward the voice. And when I do, I almost swallow my tongue.

The hottest man I have *ever* seen is standing behind the bar.

He's 6'4 and built like a Greek god, with broad shoulders and chiseled abs that I can see through his shirt. He looks about my age, with pepper-black hair flecked with salty gray, the front perfectly smoothed and swept to the side. His fitted black T-shirt shows off his bulging biceps while his dark blue jeans hug his perfect ass in all the right places.

"I'm afraid we're closed for the evening." He sets a few glasses on the shelf above the sink. "You'll have to come back another night."

Lisa narrows her eyes suspiciously. "Your website says you don't close until two a.m."

The Greek god gives us a sheepish look. "One of our employees had a bit of an accident earlier. We decided it was best to close up for the night so we could take care of that."

Sheila's face falls as she processes his words, her excitement fading into disappointment. "Bummer. We were looking forward to getting a drink from here." Her gaze sweeps over the bar, taking in the memorabilia and the comfortable ambiance. "The place looks great, by the way."

I don't know what comes over me after that.

Maybe it's the dress. Or the Prosecco I've had. But for some reason, I'm starting to feel...bold.

"Are you the owner?" I cut in suddenly with a flirtatious grin. Lisa and Sheila both turn to look at me like I've grown a third eyeball out of my forehead.

The Greek god chuckles as his blue eyes sweep up to meet mine. "Unfortunately, not." His gaze lingers as he takes me in.

“My name’s Brett. If you’re looking for the owner, that would be my twin brother, Bash.”

For a second, my head nearly spins at the thought of there being two of them. But quickly, I regain my composure.

“That’s a shame,” I reply. “Because I’ve heard some pretty interesting rumors about this place.”

Brett smirks and crosses his arms over his chest as he leans back against the bar. “Rumors, huh?” His bicep muscles flex against the fabric of his shirt. “What kind of rumors?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Sheila staring at me like she’s trying to figure out what I’m up to. Then she winks at me and says, “If you let us stay for a drink, maybe she’ll tell you.”

At that, Brett laughs.

It’s a deep, throaty sound that makes my skin tingle. His grin widens as his eyes flick between the three of us like he’s trying to decide what to do.

“Well, in that case, I think we can work something out.” He motions toward the barstools in front of him. “Ladies, my bar is your oyster. What’ll it be?”

Lisa puts her purse on the black granite counter and hops up on a stool. “I’ll have a gin and tonic, please.”

“An old-fashioned for me, please,” Sheila chirps as she sits beside Lisa.

I grab a laminated menu from a basket on the counter, my eyes scanning back and forth between the different drink choices. There are so many options it’s hard to decide.

Brett clears his throat. “How about for you, sweetheart?”

I look up and see him watching me curiously. My cheeks start to flush as butterflies take flight in my stomach.

“Um, I think I’ll take a strawberry daiquiri,” I say finally, my voice coming out softer than intended.

Brett gives me a panty-melting grin. “You got it.”

He pours three waters and sets a glass in front of each of us. “Drink these first. I make my cocktails strong, and we don’t need any more accidents tonight. Let me just grab a few things from the kitchen, and I’ll be back to make your drinks.”

As soon as Brett is out of earshot, Lisa leans over Sheila and pokes me in the arm. “Looks like *someone* finally figured out how to flirt. I knew that dress would give you superpowers.”

I shrug innocently. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I was just being friendly. I wasn’t flirting.”

Lisa rolls her eyes as she sips her water. “Oh please, you were definitely flirting with him.”

“And he was flirting back,” Sheila cuts in as she wiggles her eyebrows at me. “I almost got pregnant from watching you two talk to each other just now. The chemistry is there.”

Even though I’m trying to play it off, I can’t help but feel a spark of excitement in my chest.

What if Sheila is right?

Could the universe be throwing in a wildcard in the form of a Greek god-like bartender just when I’d least expected it? Or am I reading too much into things? After all, he’s just being friendly, right? But those glances, that chuckle, the way his eyes lingered...

Quickly, I brush away the thought, my cheeks burning as I shake my head. “Even if he was flirting, I’m sure he does it with every woman. He owns a bar, remember?”

“No, his *brother* owns a bar.” Lisa corrects me before turning to Sheila. “Speaking of which, you didn’t say anything about there being two of them. I call dibs if the other one shows up.”

Sheila smirks at her. “Why do you care? I thought you were in love with your grumpy boss.”

I smack Lisa playfully on the arm. “Since when are you in love with your boss? And why does Sheila know before me?”

Lisa glares at Sheila. "I'm not in love with anybody. And we can talk about it later. Mr. Handsome is on his way back."

A second later, Brett reappears from behind the corner, effortlessly balancing an armful of cocktail ingredients.

With a purposeful stride, he sets them down gently on the counter. As he turns to face us, a mischievous sparkle dances in his eyes, and a devilish smirk curls up the corners of his lips.

"Alright, full disclosure here - I'm not a real bartender. But I'll do my best not to mess things up. Now, who's first?"

Sheila gives me a playful nudge. "I think we should let the birthday girl go first."

Brett grins. "I agree." His eyes lock with mine. "Where I'm from, the birthday girl always comes first."

My face burns at the double meaning in his words, but I don't look away. His eyes are a deep blue color, almost navy, under the lights of the bar. My insides clench deliciously as I hold his gaze.

Brett takes a step closer to me.

"What's your name, birthday girl?" His voice is a little rougher this time, like sandpaper on my skin. I feel my mind go blank for a second, and I stare at him like an idiot.

Tell him your name, Denise.

Finally, I clear my throat and say the first name that comes to my mind.

"Sylvia. My name is Sylvia."

Lisa snorts into her water. Sheila's eyes snap up to meet mine, and she mouths, "What are you doing?" at me.

I ignore her.

"Sylvia." Brett smiles as he repeats my name slowly, like he's savoring the syllables on his tongue. "Well, happy birthday, Sylvia. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He extends his hand, and I take it, feeling the warmth of his skin as our palms press together.

After what feels like forever, he finally lets go of my hand and says, “Now, let’s get you that daiquiri.”

He turns to the counter and begins measuring ingredients, his movements surprisingly precise and practiced.

He’s an absolute joy to watch.

The way his hands grip the glass tightly but not too rough. The way his eyes watch the bubbles swim through the liquid haze. My eyes move up and down, admiring every inch of him. His chest and his hips. Lean but toned. Tall.

Sexy.

Wow. It’s been a while since a man has made me feel like this.

“I thought you said you’d never done this before,” I muse playfully.

Brett pours the concoction into a glass. “I said I wasn’t a bartender.” Then he gives me a cocky smile as he sets it down in front of me. “I didn’t say I had never done this before.”

Suddenly, Lisa groans loudly.

I look over at her, and she’s staring down at her phone, shaking her head and muttering under her breath while typing furiously.

Sheila reaches over and pats Lisa’s arms sympathetically. “Mr. Grizzly strikes again, huh?”

Brett chuckles as he slides Sheila her old-fashioned. “Mr. Grizzly?”

“It’s what we call him,” Sheila replies matter-of-factly.

Brett quirks an eyebrow. “Call who?”

“Her grumpy boss.”

“I swear, this man doesn’t know the meaning of boundaries,” Lisa grumbles as Brett hands her a glass. “He’s

so freaking possessive all the time. I'm his secretary, not his servant."

"Tell you what, honey," Sheila says soothingly as she takes Lisa by the arm and slides out of her seat. "How about you and I go sit at the booth over there—" she nods to the furthest booth away from the bar. "—and plan our next text to Mr. Grizzly?"

I burst out laughing. "Am I ever going to hear this story? Or have I officially been demoted from best friend?"

Sheila waives me off. "Maybe later." Then she looks up at me, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "Brett, you'll keep our birthday girl company, right?"

Brett gives Sheila a mock salute. "Absolutely, commander. You can count on me to keep our precious Sylvia entertained," he declares.

I press my lips together to keep myself from smiling.

The slight nerdiness of Brett's comment somehow makes me like him even more. I've always found intelligence to be the sexiest trait a man can have. There's something incredibly appealing about a guy who can challenge my thoughts.

Before I know it, Sheila ushers Lisa into a booth in the far corner. And now, I'm alone at the bar with Brett.

"So, Sylvia, tell me about these rumors," Brett says as he leans forward on the counter. "What are all the locals saying about my baby brother's new bar?"

I raise an eyebrow at him. "I thought you said the two of you were twins."

Brett shrugs. "I'm older by two minutes. Now, you were saying?"

I stir my drink. "Well, I've mainly heard the usual things. The wild parties, the incredible drink specials..." I give him a coy smile, "The hot bartenders."

Brett chuckles and smooths out his shirt, "Well, at least one of those rumors is true. Although, like I said before. I'm just filling in for my brother tonight."

“I see,” I say slowly. “What do you do when you aren’t filling in for your brother?”

“Well, I don’t usually find myself behind a bar, I can tell you that much. My day job’s a little...different. I work for an investment firm in Houston. I’m only in town for the weekend.”

I give him a flirty wink. “That’s still kind of like bartending, though, right? Blending portfolios instead of cocktails?”

For a second, an unreadable expression flashes across Brett’s face.

“Yeah. I guess so,” he muses absently. “And, what about you? No, wait, let me guess.” He taps his chin and studies me for a moment. Finally, he says, “You’re...a chef?”

My cheeks flush pink, and a wave of embarrassment washes over me. I knew I smelled like cupcakes.

“Uh, yeah. Something like that.” I laugh nervously. “How could you tell?”

Brett gives me a warm smile. “Your earrings.”

To my surprise, he reaches across the counter and gently cups my face in his hand. Then, he brushes my hair back with his thumb and tilts my cheek to the side so he can get a better look at my ear.

“These little aprons are cute,” he murmurs.

His touch sends a pleasant shiver down my body, and I can’t help the cheesy grin that spreads across my face as he dips his head dangerously close to mine.

“Thanks,” I say softly. “They were a gift.”

“I like them.”

I’m acutely aware of Brett’s hand still cupping my face, the heat of his skin seeping into mine, his thumb lightly tracing my ear lobe. My heart is pounding in my chest like a wild drum. It’s disconcerting, this sudden influx of feelings, but at the same time, it’s thrilling.

He's thrilling.

It's been a long time since I've allowed myself to feel this, to let myself be vulnerable. But with Brett, it feels different. It feels safe. It feels right.

I see his gaze drop to mouth. And then he whispers, "Got any plans later, birthday girl?"

CHAPTER 4

Brett

For the record, I don't normally do this sort of thing.

Growing up, I was never the type to flirt with girls. I was always more focused on my grades and proving that I was the smartest person in the room. When it came to the opposite sex, I was way too reserved and nerdy for my own good.

Even as I got older, it never really changed.

I've always been so busy with work that I never had the time for a relationship. Women have always found me attractive. And sure, I've had a few flings. But nothing ever felt...right.

These days, all the women I meet are too young or too immature for me. And at forty-seven, I prefer women my own age. As cheesy as it sounds, if I'm going to settle down, I want something real. And it always feels like no one can give that to me.

But tonight, everything is different.

It's like I've been hit over the head, my cocky inner alpha male coming to life. And all I can see is...

Her.

Bash told me to close up early and head back to his place. But when Sylvia and her two friends walked into the bar, and she told me it was her birthday, I couldn't say no when they asked to stay for a drink.

There was something cute about Sylvia's shy smile and the blush that crept up her cheeks when she caught me staring at

her.

Not that I could help it if I tried. The woman is fucking gorgeous.

She looks to be in her mid-forties and is wearing a tight black dress that shows off her curvy thighs and ample tits. Her sparkly heels make her legs look a mile long, and her curly brown hair frames her face perfectly.

And now, thanks to these adorable pink apron-shaped earrings she's wearing, I'm about two seconds away from hauling her into my lap and kissing the shit out of her.

"Got any plans later, birthday girl?" I whisper roughly in her ear.

Sylvia sucks in a breath, and a gorgeous blush blooms on her cheeks again. "Not really. But..." She bites her lower lip. "I sort of have an early morning tomorrow."

So do you, dumbass, I tell myself.

But then the words are tumbling out of my mouth before I can stop them. "What about tomorrow night? I'm busy in the morning but should be free after that. "

What am I even *saying* right now?

I don't do this. I just met this woman.

She isn't wearing a ring, but that doesn't mean anything. I'm sure she has a boyfriend, or two lined up somewhere. And hell, even if she doesn't have a boyfriend, there are still countless reasons why this is a bad idea.

I'm only in Barton Beach for the weekend.

I have an early morning, too.

I need to focus on prepping for my meeting at Sugar Breeze tomorrow. My career literally depends on it.

But then Sylvia's cheeks get even pinker, and her eyes twinkle under the dim bar lights. "Tomorrow night could work. I should be off by five."

Even though I know this is probably the worst idea I've had in a while, I say, "Great. Let me grab my phone, and you can give me your number."

Reluctantly, I remove my hand from her face and step back. But I don't miss the little pout she makes when I let her go and the way her eyes linger on mine.

Fuck me.

My insides are humming with excitement, and I can't help the huge grin plastered on my face as I walk into the back office to grab my phone from Bash's desk.

This is fine, I tell myself.

Healthy, even.

It's perfectly normal to flirt with an attractive woman at a bar and ask for her number. Hell, my coworkers have flings on work trips all the time.

Tomorrow, I'll go to Sugar Breeze and convince Denise Lawson to sell me her bakery. Then, I'll take Sylvia out on a date to celebrate.

And whatever happens between us after that happens.

I walk back to the bar, my footsteps echoing through the dimly lit room. As I approach, I see Sylvia waiting for me, her phone in hand, the soft glow illuminating her face. She looks up, a smile playing on her lips as she hands me her phone.

"You're just in time," she says as a sleepy little yawn escapes her lips. "It's almost time for me to turn into a pumpkin."

I swear this woman is so fucking cute I can barely stand it.

"Well, text me when you get home, princess." I chuckle as I take the phone from her and type my number into the contacts. Then, I text myself from her phone, so I'll have her number, too. "I'm guessing you and your friends don't live too far from here. But I'd like to know your carriage made it home safe."

Sylvia laughs at my joke. “Don’t worry. We have a separate driver for the carriage tonight.” She tucks a wispy gray stray strand of hair behind her ear. “How much do I owe you for the drinks?”

I wink. “Drinks are on the house.” I walk around to her side of the counter and help her off her stool.

She slips her small hand into my much larger one, and I savor the warmth and softness of her skin. Then I press my lips to her ear. “Just promise not to tell my brother.”

Sylvia laughs again and squeezes my hand. “I won’t.”

“Good.” I reach out and tug her into my chest, wrapping her in a hug.

This is my first mistake.

Sylvia feels amazing in my arms, her soft curves fitting against me perfectly. She smells sweet, too — like vanilla and strawberries — and I instantly want to bury my face in her neck. It takes all of the restraint that I can muster to pull back. But a tiny part of me still doesn’t want to let her go just yet. So, I decide to lean in and kiss her cheek.

This is my second mistake.

Because as soon as I start to move, Sylvia turns her head a fraction of an inch too far.

And before I know it, my lips brush against hers.

The kiss starts off innocently enough. Her lips are soft and warm against mine. But then, neither one of us pulls away. She wraps her arms around my neck and sighs against my lips. And before I know it, I’m licking my way into her mouth.

Someone behind us clears their throat loudly.

We both jerk apart, breathing heavily as we turn around. Sylvia’s two friends are standing behind us, purses in hand, grinning like Cheshire cats.

“Almost ready to go, *Sylvia*?” the brunette friend says, drawing out Sylvia’s name for some reason. “Paul is waiting for us outside.”

I look down, and Sylvia looks dazed, her lips still puffy and swollen from our kiss.

For some reason, the thought of her getting picked up by another man suddenly makes me bristle, and I have to force myself to swallow down a question about who Paul is.

So, instead, I grab her hand and murmur, “Let me walk you out.”

Sylvia gives her friends a sheepish smile and smooths her hair with one hand. “You guys go ahead. I’ll be there in a second.”

“No problem, hon,” the brunette friend replies with a knowing smirk. “It was nice to meet you, Brett,” she calls over her shoulder as she walks toward the door.

“Yeah, the drinks were delicious,” the blonde friend echoes in a sing-song voice. “Tell your brother we’ll be back.”

I chuckle. “I’ll be sure to let him know.”

Sylvia clears her throat as she grabs her purse from the counter. “Sorry about that. Those two can be a little bit much sometimes.”

“No need to apologize,” I say, giving her my best disarming smile. I can tell she feels embarrassed, but I don’t want her to be. “My twin brother played professional baseball. I’m well-versed in ‘a little bit much.’” I gently guide her towards the exit, noting how easily she fits into my side.

We walk through the double doors, and there’s a red minivan parked in front of the entrance. Relief washes over me as I see a tall, burly man in the front seat, who I’m guessing is Paul, get out and kiss Sheila’s blonde friend before helping her into the back seat.

Once she’s inside, he narrows his eyes and looks back and forth between me and Sylvia. I give him a friendly wave.

“You okay, sis?” He calls out.

“I’m fine,” Sylvia replies before turning back to look at me, a question in her eyes. “So... I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I wink. “Of course. I’ll text you tomorrow with the details.”

At that, she smiles and gives me a little wave before getting into the minivan.

“And would you look at that,” the blonde friend says triumphantly as the sliding door closes. “Nine p.m. on the dot.”

I LOCK UP AT THE SILVER COOP RIGHT AFTER SYLVIA AND HER friends leave. I’m still buzzing from the adrenaline and decide to walk back to Bash’s place instead of taking a taxi or calling Mar. It’s only a five-minute walk, and I could use the fresh air.

Bash lives in a penthouse condo that overlooks the Gulf, and it’s the height of luxury. The building is sleek and modern, with glass walls that reflect the moonlight. I take the elevator to the top floor, and when the doors open, I’m greeted by a stunning view of the ocean.

The condo is spacious and open-concept, with a minimalist design and a gigantic chef’s kitchen. I walk into the living room and see Bash sitting on the couch, watching a baseball game. He greets me with a smile and says, “What took you so long?”

“Sorry, closing up took longer than expected,” I reply, sinking onto the sofa beside him. “How’s Tucker doing?”

Bash sighs and pauses the TV. “Well, his arm is definitely broken. And the gash on his forehead is pretty gnarly. But the doctor says he should be fine once he’s all healed up.”

“Well, that’s good, at least,” I say absently as I stare out the window.

Bash gives me a strange look but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he just shakes his head and turns the game back on.

I also try to watch the game, but I get distracted as I think back to Sylvia. Her name echoes in my mind, bouncing off the

corners and filling the space.

After about a half hour, Bash pauses the TV and chuckles. “You’re being awful quiet tonight, bro.”

I reach over and smack him on the shoulder. “That loud enough for you?”

He smacks my hand away. “You know what I mean. What’s on your mind? You’re never this quiet.”

“Nothing. Just work,” I lie.

“Liar. You don’t get that sentimental look when you think about work.”

Shit. Is it that obvious?

I rub the back of my neck, a nervous habit I can’t seem to kick when I’m uncomfortable.

“Fine,” I finally say with a sigh. “I met a woman at the bar. She showed up with her friends right when I was about to close up for the night.”

Bash’s eyes light up, and he grins. “Aww. Look who finally learned how to talk to a woman.”

I roll my eyes. “Fuck off. You and I both know that I’ve talked to plenty of women.”

“Yeah, but nothing long-term.”

“At least I’m not still pining after a girl who hated me in high school.”

Bash ignores my dig. “So, who is she? What’s her name? Maybe I know her.”

I eye him hesitantly. For some reason, telling my brother her name makes it feel more real.

“It’s Sylvia.”

The sound of her name sends another unfamiliar jolt through me. It’s unsettling, but not in a bad way. It’s like suddenly realizing you’re on a roller coaster ride, and there’s no getting off until it’s over.

“Sylvia...” Bash repeats the name, playing with it in his mouth like a piece of chewing gum, and snaps his fingers as if that will help jog his memory. “Last name?”

“I don’t know her last name.”

He chuckles. “Playing fast and dirty, huh?”

“I’ve only met her once,” I remind him.

“Well, is she hot?” Bash presses. “Tits? Ass?”

For some reason, the thought of my brother imaging Sylvia’s body at all sends my blood pressure skyrocketing.

“None of your fucking business,” I snap. A wave of possessiveness surges through me for the second time tonight, and I shove Bash so hard that he falls off the couch.

“Whoa, relax,” Bash laughs as he sits up with his palms in the air. “I’m not about to hit on your girl.” He eyes me curiously as he brushes off his shorts. “Damn, you must have it bad.”

I feel off. Something is brewing inside me. Electric. Buzzing. It takes me a moment to realize what it is.

Strangely, it’s excitement.

I’m not much of a romantic. Like Bash said, I’ve never held onto relationships for very long. I’ve always been so focused on my work that keeping things intimate and healthy with a woman has just been secondary on my list of priorities. I always thought that would come later. Once I was successful enough and gained enough clout, I would be worthy of the perfect woman. I could give her everything her heart desired. I could give her the world because I would own a good portion of it.

Bash finally breaks the silence. His voice is deeper. Contemplative. “You want to know something weird?”

I sigh. “What, Bash?”

“I’m pretty sure that was the owner’s actual name.”

“The owner of what? Sugar Breeze?”

He nods. “Yeah. Sylvia. Her name was Sylvia.”

I STAY IN BASH’S GUEST ROOM THAT NIGHT. AND AS I LAY IN the dark, sleep takes its sweet time coming.

Slipping out of bed, I move as carefully as I can across the squeaking floor to my briefcase and pull out my files on Denise Lawson once again. I set the papers down on the desk and turn on the little lamp to see what I’m doing.

For the hundredth time today, I mull over my papers, taking in every word and memorizing it like I’m a university student struggling to study for finals.

And in a way, I am.

Harris, my supervisor, made the whole situation very clear when he handed me the files a few days ago.

“Your name has come up during our meetings, you know,” he said casually, leaning back in his glossy leather chair. Sitting behind his elaborate, expensive company desk. “You’ve shown great promise after all you’ve done with the Simon account.”

“I do my best,” I said politely, though I could feel my hands gripping the lining of my pockets as anticipation zipped through me.

He gave a closed-mouth smile. “Yes. You do. That’s what we need with Sugar Breeze. This one won’t be easy, Cooper. Our client has been trying to get the current owner to sell for a year now, but she refuses to do it. Inherited it from her mother, so I’m sure it’s got sentimental value. ‘Your best’ is exactly what is needed.”

He grinned again as he repeated my phrase. “You’ve worked here a long time, haven’t you?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes, I have. Got my Bachelor’s and MBA at UT Austin and quickly landed a job with WestRock. Been here ever since.”

“Twenty years. Wow.” Harris raised his eyebrows, but I could see in his eyes that he already knew all this. “Well, it’ll be a long time coming, then.”

With two gnarled old fingers, he tapped the stack of papers on his desk, the ones he was handing over to me. “This is the one, old boy. *This* is your golden ticket.”

I stare at the papers again, which I’ve spread out over Bash’s beat-up desk. And in my mind, I go over all the details. Everything about her. Everything I need to do to get this right. Everything I’ve dreamed of for all these years is scrawled between each typed line.

If Harris was telling the truth, this is the last rung on the ladder to success.

I hop back into bed and type out a quick text to Sylvia before turning out the light.

Tomorrow morning, I’m going to get exactly what I need. And no one—not even Denise Elizabeth Lawson—is going to stop me.

CHAPTER 5

Denise

I wake up the next morning to sunlight pouring down uncomfortably onto my eyes. As I try to sit up straight, my head begins to pound, and I fall back onto the pillow, burying my face in the fabric.

Ugh.

Last night was such a mess. It's making me cringe under the covers just thinking about it.

Things started off innocently enough. But as the drinks flowed, so did my lies.

Before I knew it, I told Brett my name was Sylvia. And then I *kissed* him, pretending to be the carefree, confident woman I always wished I was. For a moment, I forgot about my problems and just enjoyed all of the attention. And it felt good.

Really good.

One of the things that I've secretly hated most about getting older is the way I've started to feel invisible. It's like I'm slowly disappearing into the background. Like I'm becoming part of the furniture. Like I blend in with the wallpaper.

When I was younger, men would notice me and flirt with me when I went out. Even when my hair was a mess and I was trying to lose the baby weight, I could still go to the store and get a flirty smile or two.

But now that I'm in my forties it feels like everything has changed. Even in social situations, I feel like I'm not quite seen anymore. It's a strange feeling, as if I'm slowly losing my place in the world.

But with Brett, it isn't like that at all. No man has ever looked at me the way he looked at me last night.

He made me feel desirable. Wanted.

He kissed me like I was his. Like he owned me.

Except now I'm feeling conflicted.

Brett and I are supposed to go out on a date tonight. Do I come clean and tell him the truth?

Or do I continue pretending to be Sylvia, the hot woman he met at the bar last night?

I reach over to my nightstand to check my phone, squinting at the bright light. And when I unlock the screen, my stomach erupts into a plume of butterflies as I see a text from Brett.

Morning gorgeous. I'm looking forward to our date tonight. Steak sound good?

Another cheesy grin spreads across my face. And even though I still haven't decided how to tell him my real name, I decide to throw caution to the wind and text him back.

Steak sounds perfect.

A few seconds later, the little typing bubble appears.

Pick you up at 8. What's your address?

I text Brett my address and pull myself out of bed. Then I head to the bathroom and brush my teeth before shuffling my way to the kitchen, where I prepare a pot of coffee and breakfast. After a few sips and an omelet, I'm not quite back to myself, but I'm at least managing.

Glancing up at the wall clock, I check the time. Nine sixteen. Plenty of time before the bakery opens at eleven.

And I will need every second of it to prepare for whatever drama lies ahead.

Hardly a day at the bakery has gone by without incident in the past couple of months. If I go in still suffering from a hangover, that'll only guarantee it will be bad.

I take another sip of coffee, but before I've even swallowed, my phone dings with a text message. At first, I think it's Sheila. But then I see Brittany's name appear on the screen.

Instantly, I groan.

Brittany Martin is the assistant manager at Sugar Breeze. And given everything that has happened there this week, I'm guessing her text isn't good news.

Just as I'm about to open her message, my daughter Sophia's face pops up on the screen.

I decide to ignore Brittany's texts and answer Sophia's call.

"Morning, sweetie."

"Morning, Mom," Sophia's voice chirps back. "Did you and Aunt Sheila have fun at the bar last night?"

I laugh nervously, and it sends my pain spiking through my head. "Sure did. But don't worry. I'm drinking coffee as we speak."

"I'm sorry I didn't call yesterday," Sophia says. "There was a small disaster I had to deal with."

"Uh oh. Everything alright?"

"It is now," she says a little bitterly. "One of my roommates put the wrong soap in the dishwasher. There were bubbles *everywhere*. Farrah, the one who did it, ran off to class, so I had to stay behind and explain the mess by myself. But luckily, our RA just seemed to think it was funny."

I laugh. "Don't worry. You'll see much worse than that by the end of your four years. Remember the story about Lisa's boyfriend cooking pancakes while naked?"

“Ugh, Mom. Yes, I do, and I want to forget it.”

I close my eyes, feeling a warmth run through me like sunshine.

It’s so nice to hear my daughter’s voice again.

When Sophia went to college last year, we suddenly went from seeing each other almost daily to being several miles apart. And with all that distance and my needing to focus on the bakery, I don’t have as much time to talk to her as I’d like.

I sit in my little bungalow’s kitchen as she tells me about the dorms, the snooty algebra professor, and a new friend from her English class. And as wonderful as it is to hear about it, knowing what’s happening with her doesn’t make me miss her any less.

“That all sounds so great, Sophia,” I say warmly. “I’m so glad you’re having a fun time.”

As I’m about to tell her I need to go, she says, “And that’s not all. Remember that guy Blake from my sophomore year summer camp?”

“Yeah? What about him?”

“He’s here!” Her squeal rings through the phone’s speaker. “And he’s just as cute as ever! He remembers me, too. I think he’s going to ask me out!”

Even though she can’t see me, I can’t help but grin. “That’s wonderful, honey. I’m so excited for you!”

“I’ve already talked to Dad about it, and he recommended some things we could do if Blake asks me. To help it go well.”

My happy mood curdles. “You... you told your father?”

Before telling me?

“Yeah,” she chirps. “I’m sorry, Mom. Maybe I shouldn’t bring him up.”

“No, no,” I insist. “It’s fine. He’s your father. You’re allowed to talk to him any time you like. And get dating advice from him, too. Why not? He has plenty of dating experience, anyway.”

Sophia sighs, and I feel guilty, knowing I've said too much. I've gotten too sour. The divorce was as hard for her as it was for me. I don't like putting her in the middle again.

"Forget it," she finally says. "Pretend I didn't say anything."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"I should probably get going. I have lots of homework. You know how it is."

I sigh through my nose. "I know, baby. I'm sorry. I hope we can talk again soon."

"Of course, we can. Next time, tell me how the bakery is going. Maybe send me some treats for my RA—he deserves it!"

"I will."

"Bye, Mom."

"...bye, Sophia."

WITH MY HEAD STILL POUNDING, I DRIVE AS QUICKLY AS possible to the bakery.

And as Barton Beach sails past my window, I can't help but be reminded of how much it has changed since I was a child.

There's the ice cream shop I loved when I was eight, now selling Barton Beach memorabilia to tourists to keep the bills paid. The café I would frequent during my stressful college years is gone, now replaced with a dusty motel parking lot. The once short, one-story shops in town have grown into several-story buildings, turning the old fishing port and beach town into the full tourist attraction it has become.

In that way, the town and I are alike. We used to have simple dreams of love and fun.

And now, as we've gotten older, we've turned to a desperate need for money to keep our families and homes afloat.

As the van rounds a corner, I catch sight of another place full of memories, and my stomach sinks in my chest. It's been so long since I've been to this side of town that I almost forgot it was here. And like a slap to the face, I remember that not all my memories of Barton Beach are happy, idyllic ones.

It's Jerry's. The old restaurant where I used to work.

Just part-time, of course, as most first jobs often are. My business degree was still in progress, and I needed a little job to help pay off my tuition early. So that once I graduated, I would be able to start my life. To begin to live fully for myself, as so many young women dream of doing.

However, I didn't find the self-determination I thought I would within those restaurant's walls. Instead, it was where I first met the man who would quickly become my husband.

I feel a sadness grip me as those final images of Dave come back to me. Pictures of another woman on his phone. Hidden receipts. Lipstick behind his ear and the smell of someone else's perfume in his hair.

I harden my jaw and push all thoughts of Dave from my mind. If Sheila thought thinking of the bakery would bring me down, she certainly wouldn't want me dwelling on *him*, either. And besides, he's long since out of the picture now. There's no reason to let thoughts of him ruin my day.

After maneuvering through a surprising amount of traffic for this time of the day, I finally get into the parking lot of Sugar Breeze with about twenty minutes to spare before opening.

It's a quaint little space, much smaller than when my mother used to run it. Not just because I can only afford to hire a smaller staff but also because we've sub-leased the other half of the building to a little coffee shop chain to help make ends meet.

When I was a kid, the bakery looked like something from a children's fantasy book, and many of the old hallmarks of the place remain. The painted brick walls, while distinctly less white and slightly scratched up, still retain some shine when the Texas sun hits them just right.

The roof shingles are old and worn, but you can still spot patches of the cotton candy color my mom loved so dearly among the dark, rough patches. The stickers on the windows have begun to curl, but they still look pretty enough that I can't bear to take them down.

Even if I could afford to replace these things, I'm not sure I would want to.

As I dash from my car and into the bakery, I try to remind myself that the great Sylvia Lawson entrusted this place to me.

Whatever disaster Brittany was messaging me about, I can handle.

But as I push past the swinging glass doors and meet my assistant manager's eyes, I know I'm in for something bad.

"Finally," Brittany sighs. Her usual perky bun is already coming apart, with stray locks messily framing her anxious face. "I've been texting you all morning."

"What's going on?" I ask quickly, setting my purse down on the counter to free my hands. "You texted about the fridge, but I didn't know what you meant."

"I can't explain," she says quickly. "It's something you have to see for yourself."

She leads me into the very back of the bakery, where we keep the enormous industrial deep freezer.

Back in my mother's day, she required at least three of these things. But with our budget as strained as it is, I couldn't afford to keep them all powered and maintained. So we had two of them removed and made the most out of the one.

However, as soon as I see what's going on, I realize exactly why my mother had so many of the damn things in the first place.

“Oh gosh,” I groan, stepping closer to get a better look at the mess. Cream-colored liquid littered with sprinkles and bits of chocolate is spilling from the thin gaps in the freezer door. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yep,” Brittany says sourly.

Carefully, so I don’t get my shoes in the melted goo, I step closer to the freezer and crack the door.

A fresh flood of melted ice cream comes pouring out, carrying all the chunks of cookie dough and fudge brownie trapped inside. The inner shelves of the freezer are covered with the stuff and a whole array of broken and sagging cakes that look more like spray-on home insulation than something remotely edible.

“All the ice cream has melted,” Brittany grimaces.

“When did the freezer go out?” I run a hand through my hair and take a deep breath before closing the door again. “How does this even happen?”

She shrugs, her eyes following a chunk of cookies and cream ice cream now scooting across the floor. “It’s not a power issue since the lights are working fine. It just... died.”

“Have you called Pete?”

Pete is the town handyman, and it seems like he has been at Sugar Breeze constantly these last few weeks.

“Yes. But Pete said he would need a few hours to get down here. It probably won’t be until the afternoon.” She bites her lip briefly before adding, “I also had to call a locksmith.”

Taking another deep breath to try and swallow my brewing panic, I say, “And what is the locksmith for?”

“The bathroom. The door is stuck, and it says it’s ‘occupied,’ but it’s not. It just somehow got locked from the inside.”

“Don’t we have a key for these situations?”

“Of course, we do. But I can’t find it.”

My head begins to pound again, and I start to feel nauseous. Though goodness knows, if I do throw up, it's not like there's a bathroom to do it in. "Thank you, Brittany."

She meets my gaze, her big brown eyes sad, dreading what I will say next. "So... are we still planning to open?"

"How can we? All of our pre-made cakes were in that freezer. Whatever didn't get melted got melted *on*. Or worse, on its way to becoming stale. I can't sell any of that in good conscience."

Brittany frowns. "So, we just wait until it's fixed?"

"That's all we can do, I guess." I gesture to the soupy mess all over the floor. "Would you mind cleaning this up while I draw up a sign to put on the door?"

She frowns a little, though I'm certain it's more at the state of the mess than at me. "Of course."

"Thank you. You've been a real trooper through all this."

"It's what I do."

As I exit the back room, wondering exactly how my day could get any worse, I find my answer standing right in front of me. There's a man by the registers, rifling through a small stack of papers that he's holding in his hands.

Shoot. I must have left the front door unlocked.

"Excuse me," I call out to him. "I'm sorry, but the bakery's closed today."

The man turns to look at me, and as soon as my eyes meet his, my gut sinks lower than it's ever sunk before.

Brett Cooper is standing in the middle of my bakery, looking even hotter than he did last night.

He's wearing a crisp, tailored suit that accentuates his broad shoulders, and a gold watch glints on his left wrist. The flirtatious attitude from last night has been replaced with an air of confidence as he looks around appraisingly.

Shit.

“Hey, Sylvia,” Brett says with a surprised smile. “I didn’t know you worked here. Although I guess this explains the apron earrings.”

“Brett.” My voice is strained and high-pitched. “What are you...?”

He steps closer, seemingly unaware of my nerves. I glance toward the back room, wondering if Brittany can hear us.

Wondering if she’ll be able to hear him calling me by my mother’s name.

“Is Denise Lawson around?” Brett asks. “I’ve got a few things I want to talk to her about.” He glances back towards the kitchen and then gives me a flirty wink. “You look great, by the way.”

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry, Brett,” I say slowly. “But today is really not a good day for this.”

He chuckles as he quirks a brow at the ice cream covering my shoes. “I can kind of see that.”

Suddenly, Brittany’s voice calls out from the kitchen.

“Hey, Denise? Do you have the key to the storage room? I need the heavy-duty mop.”

All of the color drains from Brett’s face as a look of pure panic flares in his eyes.

He takes a step back from the counter.

“Denise?” He repeats softly. “*You’re* Denise Lawson?”

This cannot be happening.

I walk towards the kitchen without replying.

“Coming,” I say back, my voice a nervous squeak.

Pulling my keys from my pocket, I hand the correct one to Brittany. She looks over my shoulder at Brett before looking back at me with a smirk.

“Who’s the hottie over there?” she whispers teasingly.

“No one,” I snap. “I’m about to get rid of him.”

“Why?” She grins again, wiggling her eyebrows. “He’s pretty handsome.”

Feigning playfulness, I put a hand on her arm and push her into the other room. Her giggles ring through the little gap until I shut the door on her again.

When I return to the dining room, Brett is pacing back and forth in front of the cash register in a daze, rubbing the back of his neck.

That’s right, Brett. I’m not Sylvia Lawson.

I’m her useless disaster of a daughter, Denise.

But instead of looking angry, Brett looks almost... nervous? Flustered?

“I’m sorry, Brett,” I say quickly. “Things are already crazy here, and I just can’t deal with this right now.”

Brett takes a step closer to me. “It’s okay. If you want, I can—”

But I stop listening as I’m suddenly distracted as I look over his shoulder out the window.

A sleek, black limo has pulled into the parking lot, taking up five spaces as it comes to a stop.

The driver hops out of his seat before walking around the car to open the backseat door. And when he opens it, he holds out his hand to help a young woman climb out of the car.

This time, I curse aloud.

Then the bell to the bakery’s front door jingles, and Tinsley Simon walks inside. She’s wearing a silver sequined crop top that glimmers under the spotlight, paired with high-waisted black leather pants that accentuate her slender figure and neon pink sandals.

“Hello there!” she says in her sing-song voice. “I hope it’s okay that I stopped by a week early. My wine tasting got canceled, so I thought I would—”

She stops herself short, mouth agape as she pulls off her sunglasses.

“Brett Cooper?!” she squeals. “I didn’t know you were in town!”

“Tinsley.” Brett gives her a tight-lipped smile as she hugs him like they’re old friends. He pats her awkwardly on the back. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m getting married, silly,” she says, wiggling her dazzling blueberry-sized diamond ring in his face. “And Sugar Breeze is going to make my wedding cake!”

I blink for a moment, feeling like a tsunami wave has swept me away.

“That’s right, Denise!” Tinsley beams at me. “Ford and I heard all about Sugar Breeze and how you make the best cakes and cupcakes in town. You’re hired!”

CHAPTER 6

Brett

Fuck.

For a second, I just stand there blinking, finding myself at a loss for words.

My only consolation is that Denise looks just as confused and windswept in this moment as I feel.

But considering that until about a minute ago, I'd thought her name was Sylvia, I think I have much more to be confused about.

Why would she lie about who she is?

Tinsley prances over to Denise and begins chattering with glee.

“This is just *so* exciting, isn't it?!” the young star squeals, jostling Denise in her arms. “Oh my *gosh*, Denise, you look like a scared little doe! Don't worry—I don't bite. Unless you're a cake!”

Tinsley gives me a huge smile as she laughs at her own joke. I come down from my high of confusion enough to give a polite laugh of my own.

“So that's why you're here?” I ask. “This is where you've decided to get married?”

“I know, I know.” She rolls her eyes and waves a hand at me. “Mr. Money, always worried about the cost. But don't sweat it! Ford is helping cover most of it. And we'll be live streaming every step of the way—this wedding will practically pay for itself!”

Tinsley looks down at her as if remembering Denise is still clutched in her arms. “Oh, Denise, I hope that’s okay. You’re not camera-shy, are you?”

Swallowing slowly, Denise shakes her head. “Nope. Whatever you need, Ms. Simon.”

Tinsley bursts into a laugh again, and even I let out a real chuckle.

“Silly goose,” Tinsley says. “It’s okay to call me just Tinsley. We’re all friends here!”

“I made the same mistake when I first met her,” I say. “Professional propriety washes off Tinsley like water off a duck’s back.”

“Did Maria tell you to follow me here? To keep an eye on me or something?” Tinsley looks at me, her eyes electrified with new curiosity. “Make sure I’m not spending too much?”

“No, Tinsley. Your agent didn’t send me after you. I’m here on... other business.”

I catch Denise’s eye again to find that she’s staring at me too. But thankfully, she just looks to be sharing the same innocent curiosity as Tinsley Simon.

I don’t think either of them has figured out why I’m really here and I cringe at myself internally.

And at the deepest core of it, I feel a hard pinch of shame.

In all the two and a half decades I’ve been in this line of work, I have rarely felt this bad for doing what I do. Yes, I can get uncomfortable. Yes, I can pity those caught in-between. But in the world of business, it’s dog-eat-dog. You’ll get eaten if you’re not ferocious and insistent enough.

Consumption is the name of the game, and I have strived to climb to the very top of that food pyramid.

As I have reminded myself time and time again, sometimes buying a business off of someone can be a kindness. A lump sum is far less stressful than a rickety old building and a handful of ungrateful employees. At WestRock,

we take a business, clean it up a bit, and then put it into surer hands. It's good. It's fine.

It's all fine.

But now, looking into Denise's eyes, I have never felt more ashamed of what I do.

I remember my conversation with my brother in his office yesterday, the look on his face when I said I was going after Sugar Breeze. His description of the stressful owner, who seemed in way over her head but was still trying her best.

And that is exactly the woman I see here before me now. A woman buried beneath more stress and disaster than she could ever deserve. I feel my resolve falling to pieces for the first time in years.

They don't know why I'm really here.

And for now, I want to keep it that way, at least until I can figure out a better way to approach this.

A way that won't get Denise hurt.

"Well," Tinsley continues, re-centering me in the present, "I promise I'm being very responsible with my money, Brett. I will try Denise's cakes before I put down the deposit."

"Sounds good," I say. "You're picking up everything I taught you."

"How's Tuesday for you?" Tinsley beams down at Denise again, holding her at arm's length like an adoring aunt admiring her baby niece. "For the cake tasting? Two days is enough time to get everything prepared, right?"

"T-Tuesday?" Denise stutters.

"I know, I know. The wedding is still three months away, so why am I getting everything set up now?" Tinsley suddenly shoots me a wink. "December eighth, by the way—I'll send you an invitation, and you better be there, Brett!"

I do my best to hold back a grimace. "I'll, uh, do my best."

Fortunately, Tinsley doesn't notice my tone. "But Ford—you know, Ford Augustine, my fiancé—will be on tour right

before the wedding. And even once he gets back, there will be meetings with the press, fittings, getting the venue ready—there won't be any time for it then! I know it's a bit of a rush, but I hope you can understand." She bats her long eyelashes at Denise, emphasizing her big, puppy dog eyes. "I don't want him to miss out. That's why I was so happy I could arrive here early."

"Of course. I understand," Denise says, clearing her throat once more. Finally, she appears to be centering herself again, too. "I can do that for you, Ms. Simon—I mean Tinsley."

Tinsley squeals again. "Yay! Thank you so much!"

"Are there any flavors you would prefer to have? And any food allergies I should know about?"

"I'll have my agent message you all the nitty-gritty details," Tinsley responds. "We're going to have a *lot* of guests, and things like food allergies are just way too much for me to keep track of!" She laughs her tinkling laugh again. "And there's no way I could choose just one flavor! But just so you know, the theme of the wedding is the sunset. If that helps inspire you."

I snort, and Tinsley wrinkles her perky little nose at me.

"Don't laugh at me, Brett Cooper," she snaps teasingly. "The sunset is *beautiful*! And there's no better place to celebrate it than out here on the Texas beaches. Can't you just picture it? The ocean behind us and the sun as orange as a... well, an orange! And me on the beach in my beautiful white dress with shells all pinned up in my hair? Oh! It'll be gorgeous!"

Grasping Denise's hand one last time, she says, "I'll see you on Tuesday, Denise. I have to get going, or I'll be late for an interview with... what's your local newspaper's name again? Oh, it doesn't matter. See you soon!"

And, blowing Denise and I each a kiss, Tinsley swishes her way out the front door of the Sugar Breeze Bakery and back to her limo outside.

Denise and I stand in silence for a moment, watching the young starlet go. The silence between the two of us is almost palpable as neither of us can apparently think of anything to say.

But it doesn't stay silent for long. Suddenly, a loud crash of clattering metal hits the two of us like a slap of lightning.

Denise whips around, and I crane my head to see what has happened. Once again, Denise's redheaded employee has poked her head into the main part of the bakery. She's staring out the window, unblinking, at Tinsley. And at her feet, the source of the abrasive sound: a metal tin full of melted mint ice cream that has slipped from her hands and crashed to the floor, spilling the green liquid all over the white tiles and the wall.

"*Brittany*," Denise groans.

The redhead's cheeks puff up like a fish. "Was that... *Tinsley Simon*?" Her eyes grow wide. "She came here early? And you just let her leave without giving me a chance to say hello?"

"It all happened so fast, Brittany. I didn't even think about it. I'm sorry."

Brittany's lips turn down into a pout. "I can't believe you didn't tell me. How often do you get to meet a celebrity that big?"

"Sorry, I'll try to keep that in mind for next time." Denise lets out a laugh, though it sounds like she's still full of nerves.

"And what—he's like, her manager or something?" Brittany points at me, and even though there's a clear edge of playfulness to her tone, the narrowing of her eyes seems to be real when she looks at me.

Turning back around, Denise regards me with a similar kind of suspicion. "No. He's not here with Tinsley. He does know her, but that's because he's just her...." She presses her lips together. "Actually, I don't know that for sure. Why *are* you here, Brett?"

"I didn't say?" I ask, dancing around the question.

But she doesn't fall for it. "Well, earlier you mentioned that you wanted to speak with my boss about something." She puts a hand on her hip, her suspicion growing. "And since *I'm* the boss here, you can take it up with me. How can I help you?"

My mind buzzes for a moment, searching for something to say. Her gaze penetrates me, strengthening that pinch of shame that I feel.

"Well," I swallow hard. "I talked to my brother yesterday, and he mentioned how great Sugar Breeze was." At least it's only partially a lie. "I thought I would come to check it out." I lean forward and wink. "I only asked about the owner because I've heard *very* good things about her."

She blushes under my gaze. "What are all the papers for, then?"

As she gestures to the files in my hands, I realize I've forgotten I was holding them. I quickly fold the small stack in half, obscuring them before she can see what they say.

"Oh. It's nothing. My brother wrote down some directions for me. And a reminder to order some donuts for him."

She raises an eyebrow. "And the suit?"

I grin at her. "Is it a crime to want to look nice?"

She bites her lip. "I guess not." Her face falls. "I'm sorry, Brett. But I'm not opening the bakery today. I can't fill that order for your brother."

"Yeah, I can kind of tell things are a mess around here."

"You could say that again," Brittany grumbles.

The little redhead had been so quiet that I'd almost completely forgotten she was there.

"Brittany," Denise starts to groan again.

But Brittany interrupts her. "It's true, Denise," she insists. "With the way things are going, something new breaking every other day, there's no way we can keep the bakery alive

until Tinsley's wedding in December. It's only the beginning of August!"

"Well... when she gives us her down payment on Tuesday, that will help pay to fix these things up, right?" Denise's eyebrows pinch together, her confidence falling even further like she doesn't believe her words.

"Let me help," I blurt, just like I did right before Tinsley arrived. "Broken freezer, right? Let me take a look. I can be pretty handy."

Denise shakes her head. "No way. I can't ask you to do that."

I reach out and touch her arm. "Sweetheart, you aren't asking. I'm offering."

"Please, Denise?" Brittany pleads. "It will be at least a day until the repairman arrives. Let this guy come help us out."

Brittany's eyes shine as she looks me up and down, and a sharp needle of discomfort shoots through me.

Denise pauses as if in thought, then shakes her head again. "No. I can't ask someone to work without pay. It's not right. And if I'm not running my business the right way, then I shouldn't be running it at all."

But a new idea enters my mind.

"How about this—my brother has a huge condo just a couple blocks from here. It's got an enormous chef's kitchen that he never uses and a big freezer." I wink at her. "If you wake up tomorrow morning and decide you don't want to struggle with a busted freezer, call me. I'll have my driver pick you up and take you there."

Denise sighs. "Brett, that's very nice of you. But I can't impose like that."

I open my mouth to say something again but decide against it. Pushing Denise too hard might scare her away. And I don't want that to happen.

So instead, I keep quiet and let my eyes flit over her.

And just like last night, I'm dazzled by what I see. This woman is so fucking pretty.

She's in jeans today, and while the fabric would be stiff on someone else, it looks perfect on her. It hugs the wonderful curve of her hips, accentuating her full shape. Her pink dress shirt is stretched tightly across her gorgeous tits, and for a second, I think about how they felt pressed against my chest yesterday.

Goddamn.

I swallow hard and force myself to bring my eyes back to her face.

Finally, her eyes meet mine. And for a moment, I feel that draw to her that I'd felt last night at The Silver Coop.

What can I say to make her trust me?

In a split decision, I reach out and gently take Denise arm, pulling her away where Brittany can't hear us.

"Look, I know today has been a little chaotic," I begin. "But I really want to help you. So, if it makes you feel better, let's start over. As friends. We can reschedule our date for tonight to some other day. You can come to Bash's house tomorrow and get Tinsley's cake tasting out of the way. And we can worry about the rest later."

Finally, she says, slowly, "I'll think about it."

For a moment, she opens her mouth as if to say something else. But she seems to think better of it. Instead, she nods and walks back to the kitchen.

And with that, I make my way back out the door.

Fuck.

My body still aches at the thought of her. And I absolutely *hate* the idea of volunteering for the friend zone. But if that's what it takes to buy me some more time with her, then that's what I'll do.

I climb into the back of my car but tell Mar to take me back to Bash's bar. There's a phone call I need to make first.

And even though I really don't want to, I know I'll regret it even more if I don't make it now.

After a couple of rings, Harris answers the phone.

"Cooper." His voice is surprisingly cheerful. "That was fast. Great work."

"Actually, I'm not calling with good news just yet," I say. "I'm calling to ask for a bit more time."

I can practically hear Harris frowning through the phone.

"More time? So you weren't able to get the sale?"

"You were right, Harris. The owner of the Sugar Breeze Bakery will be a tough egg to crack. I'm going to need a few more days in Barton Beach. But I promise you—a sale *is* going to happen. One way or another."

CHAPTER 7

Denise

“Wait, Tinsley and Brett *know* each other?!”

Sheila and Lisa gape at me across the dining table, their eyes almost as wide as their open mouths.

I take another sip of my wine to refresh myself. “I know. I can’t believe it, either.”

The three of us just finished eating dinner at Sheila’s. It was a delicious lasagna and a welcome treat, given how crazy my day has been. After dinner, Paul put the baby to bed and took the other kids into the living room so the three of us could have some alone time. And that’s when I tell Sheila and Lisa everything.

About the freezer giving out and the bathroom door locking itself.

About Brett showing up at the bakery and finding out I lied about who I really was.

About Tinsley Simon arriving a week early for her appointment and hiring me on the spot.

And, worst of all, about Brett inviting me to use Bash’s kitchen to make Tinsley’s cakes.

Trying to recite it feels more like trying to tell the story of a wild dream I had under the influence of cold medication than something from my actual real life. And based on their reactions, Lisa and Sheila are having as much difficulty believing it as I am.

“It’s crazy, Denise.” Sheila shakes her head, still shocked. “What are the chances of that happening?”

“Right?” Lisa agrees. “Brett and Tinsley just *happen* to know each other?”

“Definitely. But I meant that Brett found her at the bakery in the first place,” Sheila clarifies.

“Yeah, that too.”

“I mean, you kiss a random guy at a bar one night, and the next morning he shows up at your *job*?” Sheila shakes her head again. “This honestly sounds like something that would happen at Fit Mountain, not in real life.”

Right as Sheila finishes her sentence, Paul walks into the kitchen and chuckles.

“Don’t let my brother hear you say that,” he says. I hear the sound of the refrigerator door opening and closing. “You know, as far as he and the rest of the Walkers are concerned, Fit Mountain is real life.”

I can’t help but giggle.

Last year, Paul’s brother Boone was honorably discharged from the military and moved from Texas to Fit Mountain, Wyoming. Fit Mountain is run by the now-billionaire Walker family and is world-famous for hot mountain men who fall in love instantly with the women who visit the town.

When Boone moved back to Fit Mountain, he fell head over heels in love with the Walkers’ sister, Caroline. And now he is just as sold on “instalove” as the rest of them.

“Well, I don’t think this is quite to the Fit Mountain level,” I say.

Sheila gives me a devilish smirk. “I don’t know, Denise. Don’t forget that I lived through your puberty. I know what it looks like when you’re mind-blowingly attracted to someone. And you were more horned up for Brett than I’ve seen you horned up for anyone in years!”

I cover my burning face with my hand. “Sheila!” I hiss. “Your kids are in the other room!”

She shrugs and takes another sip of wine. “They’ve heard much worse. If they don’t know by now not to repeat what Mommy says, that’s not on me.”

Even though I know she’s joking, I still turn to peek out the open doorway into the living room just to make sure. Thankfully, no one out there seems to be listening to anything going on in here.

“So,” Lisa says, and I turn to face her again. “You’re going to call Brett, right?”

“No,” I insist quickly. “I don’t need to.”

The two women whine and groan. Sheila even lowers her head to the table and pretends to beat her forehead on it.

“What’s the big deal?” I ask.

“You *have* to say yes!” Lisa says. “This is the chance of a lifetime! You’re living a real-life rom-com right now! And you’re just going to throw it all away?!”

“I’m not throwing anything away,” I say, my annoyance growing. “I think you are both missing the point here.”

Lisa and Sheila share a knowing look. “And what point is that, honey?” Lisa asks.

“That my life is a *mess*.” I rest my head on the table and groan. “And that even if this was a rom-com, Brett wouldn’t want someone like me.”

My sister smiles sweetly across the table at me, then scoops my hand into hers. Giving it a gentle squeeze, she looks up at me and says, “I’m sorry, Sis. But fuck that.”

I laugh out loud, eyeing her mostly empty glass. “Excuse me? How much wine have you had?”

“Just this one glass. This isn’t Drunk Sheila talking. This is the real Sheila. And I’m getting tired of your moping.”

“I am not moping.”

Sheila purses her lips. “Are too.”

I look away from my sister and to my best friend seated beside me. “Lisa, aren’t you going to defend me?”

Lisa chuckles and raises her glass to her lips. “Nope.”

Sheila smirks triumphantly. “There are two reasons that you are going to go and call Brett tomorrow morning.” She holds up one finger. “The first reason is practical. Like you told us, the Sugar Breeze Bakery is barely holding itself together. You need to work on Tinsley’s cakes in a kitchen that won’t explode as soon as you turn it on. And Brett has offered to lend a state-of-the-art kitchen to you *for free*. You’d be a fool not to take that opportunity! At least until you get Tinsley’s down payment and use it to fix up Sugar Breeze.”

Lisa swallows her wine. “I agree. It makes sense for the business, Denise.”

“And the second reason,” Sheila continues, holding up a second finger, “is that Brett is hot.”

I flush. “Whether or not that last point is true—”

“It’s true,” the two of them say together.

I roll my eyes. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” Sheila presses.

“Because...” I feel my face starting to burn hot once more. “Because there’s no way he’s still interested in me now that he knows I lied about who I was.”

As I say the words, I watch the sassiness in Sheila’s eyes melt away. But now that I’ve finally said it out loud, the rest of my worries come spilling out.

“I completely embarrassed myself last night,” I continue. “I pretended to be this confident, flirtatious woman. But in real life, I’m not any of those things. Brett has his life together. He’s a successful businessman. I’m a divorced, middle-aged, single mom who runs a failing bakery. What would someone like Brett want with someone like me?”

Lisa’s eyes soften with sympathy. “You don’t know that, Denise. Maybe he sees something in you that you don’t see in yourself.”

Sheila takes my hand for real this time, stroking her thumb comfortingly across the back of it. “He likes you. Believe me—he does.”

“He’s just trying to be nice,” I insist. “He’s not offering to help because he likes me. It’s because he pities me.”

Leaning closer, Lisa wraps an arm around me and lays her head on my shoulder. “I promise that’s not true, Denise. We saw the way he was looking at you last night. He asked you out on a date, remember?”

I sigh again. “He and I decided to put that on hold after everything that happened this morning.”

“So? The man likes you.”

And while I’m not sure I fully believe them, I want to so badly that I let myself give in to their words, even just for a moment.

I don’t know why a guy like him would be interested in me. Handsome, successful men like that don’t usually go for older, struggling women like me. They want something tiny and flouncy and perky. Someone young and too naïve not to be impressed at everything they do.

Just like Dave wanted, in the end. It wasn’t me that he loved. It was the youth that I have now lost.

At the end of the night, Sheila walks me out to my car. Before I can hop in, she throws her arms around me, and I melt against her.

“You don’t have to be so tough,” Sheila says into my shoulder. “That’s what I was trying to show you at your party yesterday. You’re allowed to live for yourself. You gave so much up for Sophia, and for that deadbeat you call an ex-husband. You need to learn how to spoil yourself.”

“I’m not sure I know how,” I admit.

Sheila pulls away and smiles. “That’s why you are going to call Brett tomorrow morning. You’re going to let him spoil you for a change.” She places a kiss on my cheek and then opens the car door for me. “You need it, Sis. Believe me.”

Stepping back, she looks into my eyes and gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze.

“It’s okay to ask for help, Denise,” she reminds me. “Even Mom knew she couldn’t do everything alone. She wasn’t Superwoman. Please don’t forget that.”

WHEN I GET BACK TO THE BUNGALOW TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I’m exhausted. But Sheila’s words about self-care still linger in my mind.

As much as it annoys me to admit it, she’s right. I need to spoil myself more often.

I head into the bathroom and decide to take a long “everything shower” as Sophia calls them. I condition my hair, scrub my skin until it’s soft and pink, and let the hot water wash away all the drama from the day.

When I finally step out, I’m feeling refreshed and re-energized. So I wrap myself in a fluffy white towel.

And then, I text Brett.

Hey. Change of plans. I think I just might take you up on your offer.

Brett responds almost immediately.

Evening, beautiful. Sounds good to me. Text me a list and I’ll buy what you need. Mar will swing by your place tomorrow to pick you up.

My heart races as I read his words.

Same address as before?

Maybe Lisa and Sheila are right. Maybe Brett really is into me.

Just as I’m about to respond, the phone rings. It’s the call I’ve been waiting for.

“Hey, Austin,” I answer. “Thanks so for returning my call.”

My brother replies in a curt voice. “I saw your text this morning. What did you want to talk about?”

Asshole.

A sour taste builds in the back of my throat. “I wanted to talk about the bakery.”

The last time Austin and I spoke was last summer after our mother’s funeral. It was at the reading of the will.

Everyone had been expecting my mom to leave the bakery to Austin. Austin had been in the real estate business since he’d graduated from college, and Sugar Breeze would have been a prize property to receive. At least if he got it, he could shine it up again and send it on to someone who hopefully shared my mother’s vision for it, who could keep her alive in her place of business for generations to come.

But when the will was read, Austin’s name wasn’t the one that was called. He wasn’t the one chosen by our mother to take over the Sugar Breeze.

To everyone’s surprise, I was.

“You want to talk about the bakery?” Austin asks, echoing me. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” I say automatically. Then, taking a deep breath, I make myself tell the truth. “Well...actually, things have been a little rough.”

Austin snorts. “I’m sure they have been rough, given your abysmal lack of business experience. What’s going on?”

“Too much to go over all of it. But, um....” Another deep breath. “I’d like to ask you for help,” I say.

Another pause. Finally, he says. “I’m not really sure how I can help you, Denise.”

I take the deepest breath yet. Saying this one is going to really hurt. But I remember Sheila’s words.

“I was wondering if you could loan me some money.”

I bite my lip as my insides become a jittering, nervous mess. I can't believe I actually asked him that.

As I open my mouth to take it back, he responds: "You're having money problems?"

"Yeah," I say roughly. "For a while now. I just need enough to cover some maintenance we're having done today and to help cover rent for this month."

He pauses again, and the silence is unbearable.

"How'd you pay last month's rent?" He asks slowly.

I wince. "Well, um... sales were just better last month," I lie. "But this month has been slow. And I had to pay for the air conditioning to be fixed last week. And the week before that, I had to get one of the windows replaced. And the week before that—"

"Okay, okay, I get it." He sighs. "Sounds like things have been crazy for you."

"They have. But I have a really big job coming up that should fix everything. It would be nice to have some help covering everything until then. I would pay you back by August at least. I promise."

"Denise.... I'm sorry. I really am. But I can't."

"Oh."

"I've got two houses stuck in renovation hell," he continues, "and three more places on the market. And I'm sure you've heard how the housing market has been swirling down the crapper lately. I'm sorry, but... I just can't do it. Jaime's got lacrosse gear we gotta keep buying because she's been having growth spurts left and right, and Jane's school has her in this intense biology program that needs her to buy all these expensive textbooks."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I get it. You have put your family first."

"That's right," he says. "I do."

I rub the space between my eyebrows with my fingers, trying to smooth out the wrinkle I know has formed there. The stress of the past year has been bad for my wrinkles in particular, and while none of this is the fault of Austin or his frugality, I can't help but feel very let down by his answer.

"Thanks for hearing me out," I say quickly. "But I have to get going. It was so nice to talk to you. Let's talk more often, okay?"

"Sure thing."

CHAPTER 8

Denise

When I arrive at Bash's condo the next day, Brett is already waiting for me in the lobby.

He struts over to me, and though his clothes are far more casual today I can already tell it's going to be a problem.

He's wearing dark washed jeans and a fitted grey shirt that shows off his rippling muscles. I force myself to keep my eyes on his face, refusing to get distracted.

Brett smirks as he eyes the bulging bags that I'm carrying.

"Sorry if I wasn't clear," he says in a teasing voice. "We're using my brother's kitchen. You didn't need to bring your own."

"Everything but the kitchen sink," I say, playing into his joke.

He holds out a hand to take the bags from his driver.

"Thanks, Mar," he says. "And feel free to take the afternoon off. Just make sure to return around five to take Denise home."

The driver nods and turns back around to head to his car.

Brett gives me another big grin. "You ready for this?" he asks.

"Of course."

I follow him to the elevator and climb in next to him. I don't prepare myself for what it will be like once the metal

doors close because this is the first part of the building that *hasn't* been like a five-star hotel.

Hotel elevators are designed with luggage in mind, so their interiors are usually pretty spacious. This one isn't. Brett and I are standing closer than ever, alone in a sixteen-square-foot box.

And in this tight little space together, I have never been more aware of a man's body beside me.

Every breath that enters and exits his body. Every blink of his long-lashed eyes. Every subtle movement of his lips and the bobbing of his Adam's apple when he swallows. I'm aware of every little thing he does.

This is going to be a long day.

As we reach the door to Bash's condo, Brett pauses, his hand resting on the handle. Before he turns it, he looks down at me, giving me a sheepish smile.

"Sorry for what you're going to see on the other side of this," he says. "My brother is in charge of his own decorating."

I shoot him a smirk. "I get it. Champagne and roses. Fur rugs and crystal chandeliers. I'm not intimidated by those things."

For some reason, he seems to think this is funny. "Champagne and roses, huh? I'll keep that in mind."

Turning the handle, he opens the door for me, and I almost audibly gasp. The inside of his brother's apartment is nothing like the outside.

The apartment's main living room has a big leather couch, a wide-screen TV hanging on the wall, and a large stretch of soft, grey carpeting.

A signed baseball bat that should be in a display case on the wall has instead been discarded on the floor, propped up against what looks like an open bag of kitty litter. Old, half-empty beer bottles stand on the coffee table, where many

moisture rings have been left on the wooden surface as the coasters go unused.

And, worst of all, a pile of laundry is sitting on the couch with at least one pair of men's boxers peeking out of the mound.

I glance at Brett.

"I'm sorry about all this," he says, carefully setting my bags on the counter before rushing to grab the laundry. "I tried to clean up as much as I could this morning, but I'm just one man."

"It's alright." I stand near the now-closed door, nervous to take another step forward. "So, this is Bash's place?"

"And his mess," he assures me, wrinkling his nose at the underwear as he tosses it into a laundry basket. "Unfortunately, he's out of the house right now, or I'd force him to help. Then again, he'd probably just stand there and try to tell you about one of his old baseball tricks anyway, so he wouldn't be that much help."

"He plays baseball?" I ask, eyeing the discarded bat once more.

"Used to. But right now, he just owns and runs a certain Silver Coop." He winks at me, carrying the now full laundry basket in his strong arms.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Of course," he says. "I talked to my brother about us using his kitchen, and he said it's fine."

I frown. "No, I mean... are you sure this place is, uh... sanitary?"

But Brett just laughs. "Yes, everything should be fine. I spent most of my morning cleaning the kitchen this morning, but there wasn't much. Like I said, he doesn't even use it. It'll be fine."

His eyebrows raise a little as he remembers something. "Oh, and I also got all those ingredients for you. The ones you

texted about. Had everything delivered a couple of hours ago. Eggs, cake flour, sugar, a bunch of fruit....”

“Thanks so much for doing this last minute,” I say, my feet shifting beneath me. “I’ll pay you back for the ingredients and your time—”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s my pleasure.” Gesturing to the open doorway to my left, he adds, “Why don’t you start setting everything up while I put this away—” he shakes the full laundry basket “—and also make sure the cat is shut in her room. We don’t want the winning cake flavor to be cat hair.”

To my relief, the kitchen is exactly as Brett described it. With a huge fridge and freezer combo, a pair of ovens still pretty much on their factory settings, and two stand mixers, this kitchen is as good of a last-minute replacement to the Sugar Breeze’s as I could hope for.

I’ve just finished putting on my apron and washing my hands when Brett struts into the room sans laundry basket. Standing a few feet away, he rubs his hands together excitedly.

“So, what can I do?” he asks.

“You want to help?”

He winks at me. “Of course, I want to help. I actually have some experience with baking, believe it or not.”

“Making brownies from a box doesn’t count,” I say with a laugh.

“I’m serious.” Sidling up beside me, his hip presses against mine, and a little thrill runs through me at the contact. “I used to help my mom with this stuff as a kid,” he says as he squirts some soap into his hands. “Besides, things will go a lot faster with an assistant.”

“Okay,” I say. “But if you’re going to help, you’ll need to be properly dressed.”

I grab my spare apron from my bag and hand it to him. It’s pink and patterned with little unicorns. His eyes search mine as if trying to find the joke, and after a moment, he does that same old smirk.

“Well, I definitely want to be properly dressed.” He takes the apron from me and pulls the loop over his head. Then he ties the belt around his waist. “How do I look, boss?”

I can’t help but giggle. “You look so pretty.” I tease him.

He grins like he’s impressed with himself and takes a step closer.

“So do you,” he replies, brushing a strand of hair away from my cheek. But before I can register his touch, he clears his throat. “So, what’s the plan? What do you need me to do first?”

My cheeks flush pink.

“Um, why don’t you start by taking everything out of my bags and setting them up on the counter? Make sure to keep all the same-sized pans together. *And* be careful not to drop the piping tips. They can be a little slippery.”

Brett gives me a cheeky salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Rifling through the cupboards and the fridge, I pull out the ingredients we’ll need for the first batter. And just like he said, everything on my list is here. Even the almond flour and the freeze-dried strawberries. It’s a simple thing, but a warmth spreads through me at his thoughtfulness.

“So,” he says between the clanking of the metal pans, “how many cakes are we making?”

“Four,” I answer. “I figure that’s a pretty good selection for Tinsley to choose from. Normally, I would try to do more, but as you know, things are a little tighter than normal.”

On the other side of the kitchen, I spot the coffee maker. Perfect.

He must notice me turning it on because he says, “Oh, coffee. Is that one of the flavors?”

“Yes and no.” And even though I don’t turn to see it, I can picture his look of confusion. It’s the same one Brittany wore when I told her about this little baking secret.

“Uh oh,” he says in a joking voice. “You’re not making some weird flavors, are you? I was confused when you had me pick up mayonnaise, but I thought maybe you were hungry for a sandwich or something.”

“No, that’s for a cake too. But it doesn’t actually flavor anything.”

“But—”

“Look, just watch and learn from the master, okay?” I say, shooting him a smile. “Trust me.”

Even when puzzled, his blue eyes are penetrating.

“I do trust you,” he says gently.

His eyes pierce mine, and it sends another shiver through me. I’d forgotten just how blue they were. Cornflower blue. And just how hypnotic they could be. That tingle deep inside me buzzes to life once more, not the tingle of nerves but of something baser, more carnal. But by holding my breath, I manage to keep myself centered.

It’s just a pretty face, Denise. Don’t let yourself be fooled. Not again.

Thankfully, he breaks eye contact and turns away to work on the pans again. He asks, “What flavors are we doing, then?”

“Well,” I say, taking a deep, steady breath, “based on the list of the guests’ food allergies, I’ve narrowed it down to some options I think will work. You’ve got to keep some basics, of course, so there will be a chocolate one. It will have an orange filling to tie it back to the sunset theme.”

“Of course,” Brett says sarcastically. “How could I have forgotten the almighty sunset?”

“After that, there’s the strawberry cake with chocolate chips and a lime buttercream.” I reach into one of the drawers and pull out a handheld citrus juicer before moving to the fridge and collecting a few oranges and limes into my apron’s large pocket. “And then the cherry cake, which is an almond cake with cherry filling, covered in marzipan.”

“Didn’t realize the sunset tasted so fruity.”

I lean over to wash the fruits in the sink. “Well, what else would it taste like? Besides, that’s how you get the sunset colors.”

“And the last flavor? Let me guess—pineapple upside-down cake with apple buttercream and mixed berry filling?”

“Are you finished?”

Over my shoulder, I hear him chuckle again. “Never.”

Involuntarily, I smile to myself. Enjoying the back and forth we’re having, despite my worry.

“It’s actually a lemon chiffon cake, ombre style,” I say.

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll see. It’s the one I’m most excited about, and I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

THE REST OF OUR BAKING SESSION GOES MUCH THE SAME WAY.

Despite his jokes, Brett does everything I ask quickly and well. I have him start to mix the buttercream base in one of the stand mixers, and even when I ask him to grind up the freeze-dried strawberries in the food processor, he does so without question.

And the whole time we work, I find myself catching glimpses of him when I think he’s not looking.

He’s impossible *not* to look at.

The width of his shoulders beneath his shirt. The way his pants stretch against his thighs. The waves of his hair at the base of his skull. Things I haven’t thought of doing with a man in years suddenly come back to me. Like a part of myself I thought had been lost was really just hiding, locked deep inside. And Brett has a key to unlock it.

But that's all this is. Attraction. Looking. Wanting. There are plenty of other things in my life that I wanted but never got to have. What's one more addition to that list?

As the thought settles into my mind, I can feel my sadness blooming once again. But I have to believe this. It's the shield I've learned to protect myself with. An exoskeleton of survival I've built up in my mind. Without it, I could lose all I am. All I've worked so hard to be.

These words slither into my mind, my wants and my base desires wrestling each other endlessly. As I pour the hot coffee into my chocolate batter, I step back, intending to grab the jar of mayo, when I suddenly feel him at my back.

I must have been too distracted to hear him approach, to realize his closeness. My rear connects with his lap, my back with his chest. His heat shoots through me, his tantalizing male scent playing around my nostrils.

I freeze, but he just laughs again, stepping back. "Sorry," he says. "Didn't mean to stand so close. I was just curious."

Words have escaped me. I can still feel the warmth of his body on my back. It was such a brief touch, but it's been stamped on my skin.

"So that's the chocolate cake," he says, leaning past me to look into the bowl and thankfully, not at my flushed face.

I force myself to breathe again. "Yep." My voice sounds strained. I try to clear my throat.

"But you put coffee in it." Finally, he does look at me, eyebrow raised. "And it's not meant to be coffee-flavored?"

"Nope," I say. Baking. Talk about baking. "Pouring hot coffee into the batter actually helps boost the chocolate flavor. They won't taste coffee." I grab the jar of mayo.

"Does the mayo do that, too?" he asks, peering at the jar in my hands.

"Adding a bit of mayonnaise actually keeps your cake moist once it's baked," I explain.

“I guess that makes sense. Mayonnaise is just eggs and oil,” he muses thoughtfully. He sends me another of his smiles, and I feel myself quiver inside. “You’re pretty clever. This has been a lot of fun.”

As he helps me slide the filled cake pans into the oven, and I’m still looking for a distraction, I ask him, “Hey, Brett? You said you used to bake with your mom?” If I get him talking about something else and not teasing me so much, maybe I won’t feel so tempted.

“Yeah. I did say that.”

“Did she run a bakery too? Like mine?”

He chuckles and gives me a look. “That’s right. Your mom. I finally Googled her, and you won’t believe what her name is.”

Shoot. My blood turns to ice in my veins, and my hands grip the side of the pan I’m holding. “Brett, I...”

“I guess Sylvia is just a pretty common name, huh?” To my surprise, he smiles when he says it.

But after a moment, that smile fades. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he says.

Still shaking a little, I say, “Thank you. And your mother is...?”

“Gone, too. But that was a while ago. I’ve had a lot of time to recover. Thirty-six years to recover, actually.”

“You must have been young.”

“Eleven. But it’s fine,” he says, waving his hand through the air like he’s brushing the sadness away. “We made the most of our time together. My brother, Bash was always running around with Dad in the backyard, playing ball or wrestling in the mud or whatever they did. I wasn’t so athletic. I would always volunteer to stay behind and help Ma in the kitchen. Dad wasn’t really into baking, so... once Mom was gone, the baking went with her.”

“Well...” I say slowly. “If it helps, you definitely have a gift. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Thank you.” His eyes meet mine again, and I realize this attempt at distracting myself was a mistake. It’s only made me more curious. More tempted.

When the cakes are finished, we let them cool before we remove them from the pans to build them. He stands near me while I put the cakes together, handing me piping bags or bowls of curd and filling as I ask for them. And then he takes the cakes to the fridge to set before we do the final coat of buttercream.

I’m not planning to do anything fancy today, since these samples are just for the taste. But based on Brett’s reaction when I put together the lemon cake, you’d think I was making the most extraordinary dessert in the world.

“That’s incredible,” Brett says, crouching down to look at the ombre layers. The bottom layer is salmon pink, the next is a pinkish orange, and the top layer is a soft lemony yellow. “When they cut into it, they’ll be able to see all the different layers. Just like a sunset. That’s so smart.”

“I mean, I didn’t invent it,” I say, feeling my chest fill with pride, though my cheeks still flush red. “But thank you.”

“It’s a piece of art,” he continues. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I say again.

There’s a pause, and then he says, out of the blue, “I wasn’t teasing, by the way. Earlier.”

“Hmm? About what?”

His breath grazes my cheek, and I feel his closeness once again. “When I said you were beautiful.”

Against my better judgment, I look into his eyes again. They’re mere inches from mine, and as his warm breath runs across me again, I shiver. That look he’s giving me eases right through me like warm syrup, slipping down to my very core.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I whisper.

Brett’s brow furrows. “Is something wrong?”

“Please don’t flirt if you don’t mean it.”

“But I....” He trails off, lips parted as if waiting for the rest of the words to come. But they don’t.

After a moment, he closes his mouth, swallowing. He steps back. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

And with that implied rejection, a cave forms in my chest where my heart should be. Brett doesn’t want me. It’s exactly as I thought it was.

I was right. And I hate it.

CHAPTER 9

Brett

It's the next day, around one in the afternoon. Denise texts me that she's outside the building with her refrigerated van.

Lucky for me, Bash isn't around to snoop on this. He didn't come home last night, instead spending the night at a friend's house for poker. And while I miss him, I'm glad he can't see me moping.

I don't want him to question my relationship with Denise. I've been doing that on my own for hours.

If Bash finds out what I'm doing with the owner of the Sugar Breeze? If he discovers that I'm stringing her along like this? He'd get that look in his eye, the one I don't want to see. The one that tells me I'm doing something wrong.

Until yesterday afternoon, I would have told him it was just business between me and her. Business is neutral, a way of life. It's not wrong to want to succeed.

But after yesterday I'm not so certain anymore.

I've stepped over the line, that's for sure. I've never done anything like this with any other client. Helping them with their business before I take it from them? And flirting with them? It's definitely against protocol.

It doesn't help that I also received an anxious email from the client this morning. Querying about my progress.

I'd sent him the same old spiel I've been giving Harris—the “I promise, it's coming soon. We've just run into some unexpected delays” routine. But that, I feel less guilty about.

I'm not fond of this client. Better Horizons Realty or "A. L." or whatever impersonal signature he wants to give this time.

I've never liked working with A. L. before. I consider myself passionate about my work, but he's an absolute hard ass. Maybe that's part of it, though. Seeing him be so impatient has reminded me of the pace of the business I'm in and how things should be going with Denise.

It's reminded me that maybe I should try being a little less personal, too.

I remember what's at stake here. Partner at WestRock. The thing I've been building toward for twenty-five years. The title that will finally make my name worth something.

I have to tell her the truth and stop stringing her along.

I have to acquire the Sugar Breeze Bakery. Now or never.

But my resolve wavers when I meet Denise out by her van with the first of her cakes.

"You okay?" I ask, peering down at her shaking hands.

She spots me looking at them and quickly shoves them into her pockets. Her eyes are trained on the ground, avoiding mine. "I'm fine," she says quickly. "Just a little nervous."

She takes the cake box from me and loads it into the van. And as I help her load the rest, she avoids looking at me, making my heart sink into my stomach. Feeling less close to her should be helping me tell her the truth. But every time I open my mouth to say it, I lose my nerve.

Once all the cakes are loaded, she slams the door shut. Then, she extends a hand for me to shake. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Cooper," she says softly.

I swallow, then take her small hand into my much larger one. "Of course, Denise. Anything."

She blinks, slowly. "One second." And before I can stop her, she dashes around the van and opens the passenger's side door.

I take another deep breath. I can't let this go on anymore. I have to tell her. I have to say that I'm—

But when she comes back around the corner, and I see what she's holding, the remains of my resolve shatter completely. Instead, it's replaced by awkward, nervous laughter. "Cookies?" I ask.

She's holding a big sealable plastic bag full of them. They're shaped like crescent moons and covered in a tangle of chocolate and little marshmallows.

"Well, you said you didn't want to be paid," she says, a little breathless from her sprint. "So, I found a good alternative. Old family recipe. My mom was famous for them."

My fingers close around the bag, and that hardened clot of guilt pains me anew. It's thick and heavy, like oil in water.

"Thank you," is all I say. "Thank you, Denise."

"No. Thank *you*." Finally, she looks up at me, straight into my eyes. And even with her eyes darkened with sadness, she gives me a soft smile. "You didn't have to help me, but you did. Not everyone would have done that for me."

The guilt grows heavier. "Well, I hope that's not true."

"Well, it kind of is. No one else did help, so...." She trails off. "Anyway... see you later."

"Denise, I..." My breath catches in my lungs, the words refusing to leave my mouth. I can't do it. "It was nice meeting you," I finally say.

She half-smiles. "You too. Good luck."

And then, with that, she hops into her van and drives away.

I sit around Bash's apartment for a couple of hours, unsure what I should do. Should I tell Denise the truth, knowing it will absolutely break her heart? Or worse, make her hate me? Ever since that awkward exchange last night, she seems uncomfortable around me. This would just make it a million times worse.

The more I learn about Denise, the more I want to help her, to protect her from a world that keeps trying to shut her down. I try to remember my motivations from just a couple of days ago when I was sitting in Bash's office and explaining to him that what I was doing wasn't wrong. Where was that motivation now?

I believed that taking Denise's bakery wouldn't hurt her. She inherited the bakery, after all. It's not like she built it from the ground up. While that's still true, the reality of the situation—her inheriting it from her deceased mother, the bakery going up in smoke around her while she struggles to put out the flames—puts it in a completely new perspective.

Opening the baggie of cookies, I slip one out, playing with it between my fingers. She must have made these last night, in her home kitchen.

There has to be a kind way to do this, I think. Some way that will hurt her less. She'll fight for her bakery, that's for sure. I can tell. But if I can come up with the right words to say, maybe there's a way we can both win here.

I bring the cookie to my nose. Chocolate, and something even sweeter that I can't put my finger on. I take a bite.

And boy are these things delicious.

THE SUGAR BREEZE BAKERY IS ONLY A FEW BLOCKS AWAY from Bash's apartment, and even then, I walk as fast as I can. I don't know if she even wants to talk to me. But I have to see her again. I have to.

As I stand across the street and wait for the light to change, I see Tinsley and Ford exiting the Sugar Breeze's front door. They must have only just finished their cake tasting with Denise. The light changes, and I dash across the road.

Tinsley's face lights up when she sees me, and she clicks her way over to me for an enormous hug.

“Denise is incredible, Brett!” she squeals. “The cakes were amazing! I’m so happy!”

Ford Augustine grunts behind her in agreement, still wearing his near-permanent frown.

“Is she still inside?” I ask quickly, very out of breath. I shouldn’t run in my work shoes.

“Yes,” Tinsley says. “She’s cleaning up the cakes right now. Oh, they were beautiful, Brett! There was this chocolate one that was *so* soft. Oh! And this cute strawberry one with chocolate chips and green frosting looked just like a watermelon when she cut into it! But our favorite was the lemon. It was perfect.”

“That’s great, Tinsley. And it was nice seeing you again.” I give Augustine a nod. “You too, Ford. But I need to run in and talk to her.”

“Better be quick,” Tinsley says. “Denise was talking about heading out to dinner to celebrate. We would go with her, but we have another meeting with, um....” She turns to her fiancé. “Is it the magazine interview or the kid’s birthday party? I can’t remember.”

But before either of them can figure it out, I’ve already run inside.

I spot her instantly. The freezer door is propped open, and she’s putting the leftovers of the cakes we made into a giant freezer. She spots me and smiles, the biggest one I’ve seen since her birthday party at the Silver Coop.

“Hey, Brett,” she says with a huge grin.

I can’t help but smile along with her. Her happiness is contagious. “I heard it went well.”

“*Really* well.” Hands empty after putting the last piece of cake in the freezer, she kicks it closed and hurries over to me. I start to step back, assuming she wants to get past me. But instead, she wraps her arms around my neck.

“Thank you so much for your help, Brett,” she gushes. “This is the best thing that’s happened to me or the bakery

in... in so long.”

A sob breaks from her throat, and even though I’m certain it’s from happiness, I can’t help but hug her back, trying to squeeze some comfort into her. I press my lips against the top of her head, and her sweet smell enters my nose. Lavender and honey.

“You’re welcome,” I murmur. “You deserve to be happy, Denise.”

Stepping back, she looks up at me. “I’m sorry for... how awkwardly things ended last night.”

“No, no, Denise. It was my fault.”

“No matter whose fault it was, you did a very kind thing for me, and I want to pay you back. For real, this time. Something more than cookies.”

“But Denise.” Saliva pools in my mouth just thinking about them. “They were *damn good* cookies.”

She smiles again, pleased with herself. “Thanks. But let me take you to dinner. I’m about to head back to my house to change and then go somewhere to have fun. My sister says I’m too wound up anyway. And I’m just so excited!” She hops on the balls of her feet. “I just want to keep the happiness train rolling.”

“Of course, we can go to dinner,” I chuckle as I take a step closer to her. “But you’re not taking me. I’m taking you.”

Her lips part in surprise. “Brett, you don’t have to—.”

But I cut her off.

“What time should I pick you up?”

She bites her bottom lip as if in thought. Then finally, she says, “Is 8 p.m. okay.”

I grin. “Eight is perfect.”

CHAPTER 10

Brett

I head back to Bash's and search in the guest room closet for my nicest suit.

Luckily, Bash has already headed to the bar at this time of night, so there's no chance of running into him. I text him that I might be home late, and he sends back a hamburger emoji. Whatever that means.

As I wait for the car outside, I search my phone for the perfect restaurant and text Mar with the address.

I try to tell myself that this is not a date. It's a business dinner. A dinner where we'll talk about business. First, hers, as she recounts her meeting with Tinsley, and then... mine....

The familiar car pulls up, and I walk down the front steps of the building toward the sidewalk. As I open the door to the car, I'm surprised to see Denise already seated in the backseat.

She looks good enough to fucking eat.

Her dress is dark, the dark blue of the deep ocean, and though a wide belt hugs the fabric to her waist, the skirt flows in gentle waves down to her knees. The neckline is low, held together by two knots on her upper arms.

Like the first night I saw her, I'm mesmerized by her figure. Curvy, feminine. Mature. A magnet for my eyes.

Instantly, my skin grows hot. Denise turns to me and smiles.

"Hey, Brett," she says shyly.

“Hey, gorgeous.” I press my lips to her hair. “You look amazing.”

She smiles and blushes a little. But this time, she accepts that I’m telling the truth. “Thank you.”

My body surges with desire, and I look out the window, struggling to catch my breath. To cool myself off.

I want her. *Badly.*

She’s sexy. She’s funny. She’s smart. She’s everything a guy like me could dream of.

Fuck being friends. This *is* a date.

Ten minutes later, we arrive at the restaurant. Slipping out of the car, I dash to her side, where her door opens. I reach out a hand to help her, and she bats it away.

“I can get myself out of the car,” she insists. But her mouth twitches, and I can tell she’s trying to hide a smile.

Once inside, I tell the hostess my name, and she opens her notebook, running her finger through her list. Denise’s eyes sparkle as she looks around the restaurant, and I follow her gaze. I’ve become so accustomed to places like this that I hardly take the time to notice them anymore.

The Sandcastle Steakhouse is one of the most expensive restaurants in Texas. It also lives up to its name, with large windows facing the open sea and rows of glittering chandeliers reflecting the light off the water.

The sun is just beginning to set, so the scattered sun rays on the ocean’s surface are an array of golds and oranges. The restaurant’s inside is much more muted, but its style is still classic. Crystal sconces shaped like seashells and simple white tablecloths lined with a waving blue trim.

It’s beautiful. A place a woman like Denise deserves to be.

As I expected, the hostess eventually spots my name in her book.

“Mr. Cooper,” she says brightly. Then she grabs a pair of menus from beneath her station and hands them to a waitress.

“Please follow Caroline to your table, sir. And enjoy your meal.”

“You really didn’t have to go through all of this trouble just for me,” Denise says after we’ve been seated. “I would have been happy with somewhere casual.”

Plucking up my menu, I begin to peruse it casually. “It’s no trouble, Denise. And even if it was, you’re worth it.”

Her face flushes at my words, and she decides to change the subject. “What made you pick this place, anyway?”

I shrug. “I’m technically in town on business, and my company booked me a room here.”

Her eyebrows rise up her forehead. “Wow. That must be some company you work for. This is one of the most expensive hotels in Texas.”

Taking a sip of my water, I say, “I declined it because I wanted to stay with my brother. But they’d still ordered a few meals for me at the hotel’s restaurant, the Sandcastle Steakhouse.” I smirk at her. “For strictly business purposes, of course.”

Denise rolls her eyes. “Of course.”

Our drinks arrive quickly, and the waitress pours us two glasses of shining white wine. I hold up my glass for a toast. “To business,” I tease.

Snickering, she clinks her glass to mine. “Is that what this is?”

“Of course. You said you wanted to celebrate your meeting with Tinsley going so well.”

“That’s true.” Her giddiness from the back room of the Sugar Breeze returns, lighting her eyes up as brightly as the sun-treated sea outside. “I still can’t believe it.”

“You should believe in yourself a bit more,” I say. “You do great work.”

That thick feeling slips into my chest once again. A flash of guilt. I try to swallow it down.

“Well, thank you.” Denise blushes deeper this time and puts her wine glass to her mouth as if to hide it. After taking a sip, she asks, “So what kind of business does a man have to do to earn his way to a free meal at the Sandcastle Steakhouse anyway?”

I feel myself pale and take a big sip of my own. “Investments,” I finally answer, hoping that’s innocuous enough. I’m not ready for her to know more. I don’t have a good, balanced solution to this yet. “That’s how I know Tinsley. I help manage her account, make sure she’s putting her money in good places, spending it wisely.”

“Oh. So, you’re purely a numbers guy.”

“Always have been.” I puff out my chest and raise my chin. “You are looking at one of the Texas state champions in athletics from 1992, after all.”

She snorts into her glass, nearly spilling it. “Geez. I had no idea you were such a nerd.”

Our waitress is timely and attentive with our orders, and our food arrives within ten minutes of placing them. I ordered the lobster thermidor and a side of gazpacho soup. Denise has gone simpler, with a crab ravioli and a small salad.

Once the waitress has left, Denise looks down at her plate and laughs. “I should have ordered something less messy,” she giggles, running her fork through the pile of sauce before her.

I laugh with her. “It doesn’t matter to me. Make all the mess you want.”

And even though she blushes a little again, she insists, “It’s not you that I’m worried about. This is my nicest dress.”

Swallowing a spoonful of my soup, I say, “If you need it to be dry-cleaned, just send me the bill.”

But this offer only seems to bother her.

“Please stop doing that,” she whispers.

I frown. “Doing what?”

“I’m not a charity case.” Her face has become a little pinched.

“I never said you were.”

Now, she frowns. “You didn’t have to say it.”

I reach out and touch her arm. “Denise, I’m sorry if I did anything to make you feel that way. I was just trying to be nice.”

After a couple more bites of her meal, she sighs, her shoulders sagging.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Money has just become a sensitive thing for me, I guess.”

“You doing okay?” I ask.

She gives me a sheepish look. “Things have been... difficult since Mom passed. That’s why this meeting with Tinsley Simon mattered so much. I... I’m no Sylvia Lawson. But this proves that maybe someday, I *can* be.”

I smile along with her. “Of course,” I say. “You are a phenomenal baker.”

She rolls her eyes at me like a child. “I’m not as good as Mom was. Not by a long shot. But she left all her recipes behind for me, so I’m trying my best. It was a big shock when she gave the bakery to me. I was a stay-at-home mom for most of my life, so I don’t have any experience running a business like this.”

Before I can stop myself, I ask, “You have kids?”

She nods, chewing her next bite of food. “My daughter Sophia just started her freshman year at Texas A&M.”

I smile. “You must be proud. Although I’m guessing you probably miss her too.”

Denise nods. “Very much.” She swallows and clears her throat. “But I want her to get a good education, you know? I don’t want this bakery to hold her back too.”

The words hit my ears, and it takes a moment for me to process them. *Too?* Does Denise think the bakery is holding

her back?

The sludgy feeling of guilt shifts inside me again, but I force myself past it. This is the first chance I've seen to even bring this up with her. I have to take it. "Have you ever thought of selling it?"

She looks up at me, puzzled. "The bakery?"

I gulp. "Yeah. Instead of running it." I grip my spoon tighter, feeling my fingers getting sweaty.

Her eyes stray from mine to the large window beside us, looking out over the sea. I wonder for a minute if she's considering it, trying to come up with a reason to not say yes.

Instead, out of nowhere, she starts to laugh.

"What?" I ask, surprised.

"I'm sorry," she says between giggles. "It's just that I honestly thought of doing just that the day I got it. My brother wanted it so badly. He's in real estate, you know."

"But you got it instead? Were you closer to your mother or something?"

Her lips press together pensively. After a moment, she says, "In a way, I guess so. I knew her the longest."

"You're the oldest?"

She nods. "By about five years. And that's just between me and my brother. My sister, Sheila, is four years younger than him."

"Those are some age gaps," I say.

"Everyone thinks so." She giggles to herself again. "But that's just how our family was. My parents, they... they tried for many years to have children, but it was a struggle for them. My mother was a bored housewife at the time, and she was always the kind of person who wanted a project. And a baby would have been that for her. But they couldn't have one of their own. So, they adopted."

"All of their kids?"

“Nope. Just little old me.” Denise smiles at me over her wine glass again as she goes to take another sip. “When I was three, my mom bought the bakery, which became her side project. But it was a struggle. It was a lot more work, and she had very little help. They wouldn’t have the money to adopt again. But then a miracle happened. She got pregnant and gave birth to a healthy baby boy.”

“That’s amazing,” I reply.

She smiles again. “Isn’t it? They told her she was completely infertile, but in fact, there was just a small chance for her to conceive. Which she proved again a few years later when she had Sheila.”

Denise purses her lips. “You remember Sheila, right? At the bar? The blond one.”

“The really annoyed one, right?”

This makes her laugh too. “Not at you. She just wanted that night to be perfect for me. She knows things have been stressful.”

I nod, running my spoon through my soup again. “But you didn’t give up the bakery,” I say. “What about your brother?”

“Oh, Austin?” She shrugs. “He thought he could do more with it. And that’s probably true. That’s what he does, after all. But... I just couldn’t bear to part with it. It’s the last bit of my mother that I have.”

I feel the sensation of something crumpling like a tin can in my chest.

“Besides,” she continues. “It’s my birthright. Well, maybe more like my adopt-right.” She giggles at her own wordplay, and I get the feeling the wine might be starting to go to her head. But soon her smile is soon replaced by a frown.

“He talked to me after the will was read,” she says, tracing the rim of her wineglass with her finger. “Tried to get me to sell. Said that I might be Sylvia Lawson’s oldest child, but *he* was technically her *firstborn*.” Her nose wrinkles in disgust.

“That’s terrible,” I say.

“That’s Austin,” she corrects. “He’s always been the blunt one of the family. Knows what he wants and pressures anyone around to give it to him.” After a moment, she shrugs. “I guess that’s why he’s so successful. Better Horizons Realty wasn’t going to build itself up from the ground, was it?”

My spoon slips from my fingers, clattering into my bowl. Soup flies into the air and splatters across my white shirt, staining it in streaks of red.

“Oh no!” Denise stands and, dipping the corner of her napkin in her glass of water, walks over to help me wipe it up. Her hand starts to stroke my chest, but I barely notice her touch, our closeness, as my mind is still reeling. “Are you okay?”

“I—I’m fine,” I stutter. “Gazpacho’s cold, so it didn’t burn.” Grasping her hand, I gently push her napkin off of me. “Thank you, but it’s fine. I can afford a new shirt.”

Better Horizons. That’s what she said, wasn’t it?

No.

That volcano in my chest erupts, turning into an angry plume of sparks. I feel lied to. I feel cheated. And, on Denise’s behalf, I feel immeasurably betrayed.

Austin Lawson is her brother. He owns Better Horizons Realty.

Austin Lawson.

“A. L.”

What the fuck?

THE DRIVE HOME IS QUIET AS THE REALITY OF WHAT I’VE BEEN sent here to do crashes through my mind. While so many of my questions have been answered, a whole new crop of them burns in their place.

That's why nothing about this job has felt right. When I first received Denise's files, I knew there was something about her. Something more to her case than what was said.

My mind was filled with excuses for why I needed to take her business from her, and I struggled for a good way to convince her, which only became so much worse after meeting her. But now that all made sense.

I wasn't here to acquire a business genuinely. This was all about inter-sibling rivalry. Spite over the reading of a will and a loving mother's dying wishes.

I'm angry. I'm pissed. But I also recognize the part I've played in this shit show.

If Denise finds out why I came here and who sent me, it would crush her. She loves her family more than anything. Even her bastard of a brother.

And I can't do that to her. Her spirits are so high after her meeting with Tinsley, her image of herself so much closer to the beautiful woman before me, that I can't bear to do anything to take that away from her. My night might be ruined. But that doesn't mean hers has to be too.

As the car pulls up outside her house to drop her off, I can't even bring myself out of my own head enough to look at the place. As I open my car door, the smell of the sea hits me, but that's all I notice.

I swing around the trunk, and this time, she lets me open her door for her.

Taking her by the arm, I walk her through the darkness of the night up the numerous stairs to her front door. She fumbles for her key inside her purse but soon finds it.

But, rather than going inside, she looks up at me once more, her eyes sparkling against the stars. Her brow is furrowed in concern. "Are you alright?" she asks quietly.

"I'm fine," I answer swiftly. "Just tired."

"I don't believe you. But tonight, I'll pretend to."

Her eyes shine into mine, and before I know what's happening, we are leaning closer together. She reaches up, wrapping her arms around my neck, pushing up on her toes to bring her face closer to mine.

She glances down at my lips, and within her gaze, I can see her desire. She wants me, too. My heart hammers in my chest. My body aches for her touch. Her body eases forward, leaning against mine, and I put my arms firmly around her waist.

“Brett,” she whispers, closing her eyes and waiting for me to close the final gap between us.

I want to kiss her. Every atom in my body is screaming to do it, to bring my lips down on hers, to taste her, to sing with her mouth, to bring her into her home and undress her beautiful body and make her mine.

But I can't. Not when I am who I am.

The man who has been hired to ruin her life.

Moving my head to the side, I kiss her on the cheek. It catches the corner of her mouth and presses into her soft and supple flesh. Goddammit, I want her so badly. I want more than this. She does, too.

But to give it now, knowing what I know, holding the secrets that I do, would just be cruel.

So, as much as it hurts, this kiss on the cheek is all I can give.

I set her on her feet. Wish her goodnight. Ignore the look of sour disappointment in her eyes. And then I retreat down her stairs and back to my car.

CHAPTER 11

Denise

“**H**ow was your daaate?” Lisa’s voice croons through my phone.

“Mul, iff mushn’t mish—”

She cuts me off.

“Girl, what are you doing over there? I need to hear the details!”

Begrudgingly, I spit out my mouthful of toothpaste. I stand before the sink in my bathroom, my toes buried in the shaggy rug and my phone on the counter beside me.

“Sorry. I’m still trying to get ready for work.” I set my toothbrush back in the cupcake-shaped holder. “We’re reopening the bakery today, and I can’t look like a mess.”

“I’m sure you look fine.”

“I know. I’m just trying to make sure everything is perfect. Especially now that the Tinsley Simon news is out.”

Lisa’s sigh echoes through the speaker, bouncing off the walls in my tiny bathroom. “I’m still sad that I didn’t get to meet her.”

I wiggle my eyebrows even though she can’t see me. “She’ll be back. Maybe I can get you an invite to the wedding.”

Lisa squeals. “Really?”

“Or I could take you as my plus one.”

But instead of taking the bait I've dangled for her, she brings up the thing I'm currently trying the hardest to forget: "Don't you want to save that for Brett?"

"Well...." I hold back the groan building in my chest. "I don't think things are going in that direction for me and Brett."

"What? Why?"

Grabbing a lock of my hair, I twist it around my hand, pulling on it in my frustration.

Not with her, but with how things went during and after my dinner with Brett.

"Denise, what *happened*?"

I take a deep breath before saying, "Brett was fine at first. He seemed to like that dress you picked for me."

"I knew he would! Your curves look phenomenal in the dress."

My eyes avoid the mirror again as I feel a blush creep up my neck. "And dinner was great. He paid for everything."

"Oooh, a gentleman, too," her voice chirps through the phone. "I'm liking everything I'm hearing so far."

"But then something... changed. He got this strange expression on his face like I made him uncomfortable. We kept doing this dance where things were flirty one minute but then awkward the next."

Lisa hums to herself as if in thought. "Maybe he's just shy, like Sheila said?"

Even though she can't see me, I shake my head. "I don't think this was shyness. It didn't go away for the rest of the night. And then, when he took me home...."

I close my eyes as the memory returns, the feeling of his arms and his lips still fresh on my skin as if it happened just moments ago.

"I told him to kiss me, Lisa. I *begged* for it. And for a moment, he leaned in like he was going to. But then he just

kissed my cheek and gave me a quick goodbye. Like the whole night was just a business transaction between us.”

Lisa makes a humming sound again. “Ugh. Yeah, you’re right. That is a little weird.”

I jam my brush through my hair harder than I mean to. “It’s fine. It’s not something to be sorry about. I’m not sad. If anything, I’m angry.”

“Oh?”

Gathering up my hair, I start to reach for my clip to hold it in place. But instead, I look at myself in the mirror again, letting my hair fall around my shoulders as I take in my reflection.

Standard brown eyes beneath short lashes. Wrinkles forming along my face like lines of sand beneath rolling waves. Dark hair the color of dirt, straight and flat and heavy.

My work shirt, freshly washed and ironed, hangs from the back of the door, and without it on, I can see my body, too. Every inch of it above my thighs is visible in that mirror.

Even with my bra on, my breasts hang low, worn from breastfeeding Sophia all those years ago. Stretch marks line my belly, which no longer has the beautiful flatness I was so proud of in college. Age and a baby have changed my body forever, and no matter how many times I see myself, it never feels quite right. Like I’ve taken the body of someone else.

“He’s a grown man,” I finally say, tearing my eyes from the mirror. “He should know by now how to state what he wants instead of stringing a woman along like this.”

“Not all men get to that point, Denise. And even if he didn’t use the words, he still kissed you, right?”

“On the cheek, Lisa. It barely touched my mouth.”

“Still. That’s more than I’ve had in a while. I would love to get any kind of kiss from a man who looks like *that*.” In the smallness of my bathroom, her giggle bounces off the wall like the buzzing of flies. “Do you remember what set him off?”

“We might have been talking about my siblings. And then he spilled some soup on his shirt.”

“And then the last time he got awkward was when Tinsley and Brittany were there,” Lisa muses, her speech slowing as she thinks. “I think he’s just not used to the chaos of your life like you are, Denise. He gets flustered after a point. You’ll have to move quickly. Snatch him up before he freaks himself out.”

Another sigh escapes my mouth. “I don’t know, Lisa. I... I think I just wish he could make his feelings clearer like Dave used to. Even though Dave is a sleaze, of course.”

“Of *course*,” she parrots.

“And even though that relationship didn’t turn out that great in the end... at the beginning, he told me I was beautiful. He told me that he wanted me. But with Brett, I just feel... confused. I just want him to tell me outright how he feels. I don’t have time to dance around anymore. Either he wants me, or he doesn’t. It’s his choice. And he better make it fast.”

My phone chimes, and I peek at the incoming message. “Hang on a second,” I say, quickly gathering up my phone from the counter. “I just got a text from Tinsley.”

“Ooooooh,” Lisa sings. “What does it say?!”

I start to read Tinsley’s text out loud.

Hey Denise! I’m throwing a party this Friday, and I want you to come! Then there’s a sparkle emoji. And then she says, ‘You can bring something from the bakery if you want, but you don’t have to. I just want you to meet everyone else who’s working on the wedding!’

“Oh my gosh, Denise! Text her back and tell her you’re going!”

“I don’t know, Lisa...”

Lisa’s voice suddenly gets serious. “Denise. *Take her offer*. I know you’re not a party person, so that’s why I’m *telling* you that you need to suck it up and go.”

I slip my shirt over my shoulders. “Are you sure this isn’t just something you want? Like, you want me to go to her party and get some kind of scoop on her for you?”

“I’m not gonna lie,” she says, “I wouldn’t say no to some juicy gossip if you happened to come across some.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I’m just thinking about your business, Denise. Things have been kind of falling apart at the Sugar Breeze lately. Wouldn’t it be great if you had a bunch of rich celebrity friends? If they all start buying cakes from you, you’ll be set for the rest of your life!”

I bite my lip, knowing that she’s right. It can only help my business relationship with Tinsley to spend more time with her.

“Fine. I guess I’ll have to find another dress,” I say. And right on cue, Lisa squeals.

THE REST OF THE MORNING GOES SMOOTHLY AT THE SUGAR Breeze Bakery.

Other than giving a customer a raisin muffin when she’d ordered blueberry (she’d been very nice about it, though) and a dropped plate of cookies behind the counter, things are going about as smoothly as they can for me.

All my unsettled feelings from last night are starting to slip away, replaced by an edge of confidence. Maybe I *am* starting to finally get the hang of this.

Finding a quiet moment between customers, I pull Brittany aside and show her the messages from Tinsley.

Once she’s done reading, her eyes flash up to meet mine, shining and electrified.

“Denise?!” she shrieks. I gesture for her to quiet down so we don’t bother any of the customers at the tables just trying to enjoy their desserts. “We’re really going to a party with—”

Then, as if remembering she's supposed to keep this a secret, she lowers her voice and says, "With *you-know-who?*"

"Oh," I say. "I mean, I'll ask if you can come, but she didn't say if I was allowed to bring a plus one."

"*Please!*" Brittany grabs my sleeve with both hands and tugs on it, begging like I've never seen her beg before. "If I get to go to one of her *parties?* All my friends will worship me! You have no idea how jealous they'll be, Denise!"

Shaking her off, I let out a laugh. "Alright, Brittany. I'll ask her."

Brittany thanks me again before scampering off to bring more donuts from the kitchen.

I send a quick text back to Tinsley, asking if I can bring someone with me.

Unfortunately, I should have included who I meant before I sent it.

Of course, you can bring Brett! Her reply says a minute later. *You two make such a cute couple!*

Then she sends me a swarm of heart-eyed emojis, and I blush, frantically typing another text.

But as the little bell over the door rings, I look up to find a pair of beautiful blue eyes staring at me from across the bakery, and I momentarily forget all about Tinsley.

"Hey, Denise," Brett says with a grin.

Despite my feelings from last night, my heart still flutters in my chest, and my eyes flash down to those soft, kissable lips.

Geez, Denise. Get a grip on yourself.

Brett starts to walk between the dividers we use to manage the queue.

I struggle to hold back my smirk. "You don't have to walk through all that," I say, my eyes following him back and forth as he goes. "You can just come straight up here to talk to me."

“No,” he says, giving me another half-smile. “I’m a paying customer today. I’m going to do this right.”

“Oh. Really?” I blink at him as he finally makes it up to the counter. After a moment, I kick back into business mode. “What would you like?”

His eyes trace the rows of baked goods in the glass displays on either side of me. Slices of cakes, big donuts, and small ones, cookies, and tarts. For some reason, I feel my blush returning. Why do I want him to be impressed with my work?

After a moment, he smiles at me again. My lips twitch against my will, returning that smile.

I can feel myself starting to melt again. I want nothing more than to be back in his arms, to feel his warmth wrapped around me. I want to grab his hair and pull his lips down to where they’re meant to be, right up against mine.

I bite my tongue, trying to hold myself together.

“Actually,” he says, “I was hoping to buy more of the cookies you gave me yesterday. My brother ate most of them, and I want to bring some back to Houston to share with some of my coworkers. This is kind of my last chance to do that.”

My heart doesn’t just sink this time. It divebombs.

“Oh,” I say again, my smile fading. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah. In a couple of hours, actually.” His expression flattens, becoming serious and businesslike, though I swear I see a flash of sadness in his eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t say anything sooner. Something came up last minute, and I have to cut my business trip short.”

Maybe it’s the way his mouth is pinched, or maybe it’s the fact that he’s suddenly avoiding my gaze. But for some reason, I feel like he’s lying. I feel that flash of frustration in my chest again, remembering that I’m not happy with him.

“Unless you’d like to just give me the recipe,” he suggests a little awkwardly, and I realize several moments have passed, and I haven’t responded to him.

I force my mouth back into a friendly retail smile. “Can’t do that,” I say. “It’s a family secret. If I give you that, my mom’s ghost will come back and haunt the hell out of me.”

At that, he laughs. “Well, we wouldn’t want that.”

I can’t help but smile along with him. “I’ve got a bunch of Crescent Moons in the back. How about two dozen for the road?”

His teeth press into his bottom lip like he’s holding back what he really wants to say. After a moment, he nods. “That would be perfect.”

When I enter the back room to fetch the cookies, I find myself alone. My hands start to shake, and a familiar pressure builds in my throat, the kind that aches when I try to swallow it down.

Brett is leaving.

A hole of sadness opens in my chest, and my eyes begin to prickle. Why am I feeling like this? Why am I about to start crying? He’s a man I barely know. I don’t have a right to feel this way.

Grabbing a pastry box, I go to open it and stop myself. The Sugar Breeze logo is printed on the top, the one that Mom designed all those years ago. A curvy woman bent over a tray of something sweet. Her pink mouth stretched in a friendly smile.

I sigh. Sylvia Lawson wouldn’t cry over some man. She had more important things to do.

And so do I.

Once I’ve collected the cookies (and myself), I head back out into the main part of the bakery. Brittany is leaning across the counter, her youthful breasts pressed over her crossed arms to emphasize them. Fortunately, Brett isn’t paying her any attention. Instead, he spies me walking back in his direction, and that pleasant smile reappears.

That pain in my throat surges again.

Nudging Brittany aside, I set down the box of cookies and type up Brett's order into the register.

"Two dozen Crescent Moons," I say.

Brett grips his credit card in his hand, and his eyes trace my face, his smile finally gone. "Everything okay back there?" he asks.

"Of course," I lie.

Brittany throws an arm around my shoulders. "Fridge is working fine, now," she says, as if that's what he was asking about. "I'm still disappointed you didn't get to work on it for us, but what can you do?" She shakes me playfully. "*This* one wanted to get a professional."

"Well," Brett says, finally slotting his card into the reader. "Denise deserves only the best."

My eyes catch the pink logo on the box once again. I never realized it before, but she looks a lot like my mother.

"Everything I make here is made with love," Mom used to tell me, leaning over a tray of something hot from the oven, just like the lady on the box. "Love is only worth so much without someone to give it to. That's why I made this bakery, Denise. To give everyone in Barton Beach a little bit of my love for you."

Love.

Sadness wraps around my throat.

I glance at Brittany. "Hey, Brittany. If you don't mind, could you check on the kitchen? Make sure things are still running smoothly?"

"Of course, boss," she says, and with one last wink at Brett, she heads back to the kitchens.

The machine beeps, telling Brett to take his card from the reader. As he does so, his receipt prints, and I tear it out of the slot.

I hand it to him, and as he grasps it, his fingers touching mine like they did back at the bar just a few days ago, I look

him right in the eye. Refusing to let myself falter.

Picking up the box, he turns slowly and heads for the door. Another customer enters the bakery, the bell jingling above their head, and I try to quickly calm myself before talking to them. I remind myself I have a reputation to uphold.

Unfortunately, Brett seems to think the same about himself. He whips around to look at me once more, taking a few steps back in my direction. “You know, Denise, I thought that you were—”

But the new customer cuts him off, bumping past him in her haste to get to me.

“Are you the manager?” she asks, her voice snippy and her lips pinched in a frown. She drops a pastry box on the counter.

“Yes,” I say sourly sweet, my eyes avoiding Brett’s completely. “Welcome to the Sugar Breeze. Can I help you?”

The woman taps the box with a long-nailed finger. “You sold me this cake three days ago,” she snips, ripping a receipt from her pocket and waving it in my face. “I’d like a full refund.”

And somewhere beyond her grimacing face, I hear the chiming of the bell above the door once again. Brett has finally left.

CHAPTER 12

Brett

“So, we’re all in agreement, then?” Harris asks.

His heavily lined face sags in a frown as he looks from me at one end of the conference table to the screen hanging above the other.

I can see Austin’s mouth twitching on the other end of the video call, struggling to hold his smile in position. To remain professional through our negotiations.

I’m not even trying to force a smile at all.

“Yes, Mr. Harris,” Austin says, his voice smothered in canned politeness. “I agree. It all sounds great to me.”

My discomfort slithers in my stomach like a snake once again, and my fingers clench into fists in my lap.

Harris’ eyes meet mine again, pointed and probing. He’s waiting for me to speak up.

“This sounds fine to me as well.” I have to force out each word. “I would be happy to work on this new project for you, Mr. Lawson.”

“Well, I’m just sorry the last one didn’t work out,” he says, and I catch his lip twitching again. “Although I have some questions about that if you don’t mind.”

“We don’t mind,” Harris says for me.

“Thank you. I was wondering, Mr. Cooper, what issues did you encounter with this property? It’s just a little, struggling

bakery. I just want to understand what the trouble is. What if you run into similar trouble on this next project?”

I swallow. “It wasn’t my inability to get the sale. It was the owner’s unwillingness to sell. The bakery is an inheritance from her late mother. And because of that, she refused to let it go. I can’t force someone to do something they don’t want to, Mr. *Lawson*.”

I put as much strain as I can into his last name. Reminding him of the person he’s betraying in all of this.

Even after my last conversation with Denise, where she called me out on my bullshit, I faltered. I still feel the desire to defend her right to her bakery. She can be mad at me all she wants. I don’t blame her for that. But I won’t play a part in trying to pry her mother’s last gift from her. On principle alone, I can’t.

Austin’s mouth twitches again as he recognizes how I’ve said his name and realizes that I’ve put the pieces together that he’d been trying to hide from me.

He shifts in his seat, though he tries to play it off casually. “What tactics did you try?”

My jaw clenches. “I used every page of those files you sent us. I got to know the owner very well during my stay in Barton Beach. And—”

“How well?” he suddenly asks, his brow furrowing as he leans closer to his camera.

Crap. Did my tone give something away? No, that’s not possible.

My eyes flicker to Harris, wondering if he also sensed something in my tone. Something about my feelings for Denise. But he’s currently thumbing through the folder before him as if he’s almost bored.

“Well enough,” I respond. “You gave me files on her life to give me an edge. And I learned all of it. I feel like I can accurately say I know her well. And I did my best to entice her to your deal. But again, I can’t force her to accept a deal she doesn’t want.”

“And how did you ‘entice her?’” he asks. A smile suddenly cracks across his face. “Did you do as I suggested to Harris? You played to her female sentimentalities?”

Anger rips through me again. I have to remind myself to play along. “Yes. I even took her to dinner. Strictly for business purposes, of course. That still wasn’t enough. She won’t be moved.”

Austin leans back in his chair and sighs. “Well. I guess you did try your best then. That’s okay. You’ll enjoy this new project a lot better. Harris—did you forward the files to Mr. Cooper?”

Harris glances up at the screen, hazel eyes baggy with boredom. “Of course, Mr. Lawson.”

I pull my open laptop closer and find the email from Harris with the new files. Austin has sent us a PDF file much larger than the one about Denise.

“This will involve several more properties than the last project, Mr. Cooper,” Austin continues. “But you shouldn’t need to travel for it. In fact, I bet you could even do a lot of it working from home.”

“Sounds nice,” I say.

His eyes meet mine through the screen, eyes so unlike Denise’s in every way. “Hopefully, you’ll find this job a lot more doable, Mr. Cooper,” he says. He emphasizes the word “doable,” and I know exactly what he’s getting at.

Asshole.

I meet his eyes, not just through the screen but looking directly into the webcam itself. “I’m sure I can handle it just fine,” I assure him, my tone hard. Unyielding.

Harris clears his throat. “Excellent. I’m glad we got this whole matter sorted out.” Nodding to the camera, he says, “Thank you for your time, Mr. Lawson. We’ll let you get back to your work, and we’ll update you on the progress of this new project very soon.”

“I hope you do. Goodbye, Mr. Harris. Mr. Cooper.”

Austin ends the call, and even with him gone, Harris sits there momentarily looking down at his notes, his mouth clamped into a hard frown as if deeply lost in an unpleasant thought.

Ignoring him, I push a few buttons on my laptop, downloading Austin's new files and sending them to print.

"I'll go pick up these new files from the copy room and then head back to my desk," I say, hopping up from my chair and heading toward the door. "Got a lot more work to do on this one."

But before I can take two steps, a hand suddenly grasps me by the front of my shirt, stopping me in my tracks.

I realize just how fast Harris has moved from his seat at the table. In all my years working for him, I've never seen him move that quickly. He pulls me closer to him, squeezing my shoulder so hard it makes me see stars.

"Harris?" I ask.

In a calm, gravelly voice, he says, "I don't appreciate playing mediator like this, Cooper. I'm not your father. I don't know what happened out in Barton Beach, but you need to promise me it won't happen with this next Better Horizons project. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," I say quickly. "I promise you. I'm disappointed that the project in Barton Beach failed. And I don't want this one to either."

"Good." His gaze penetrates mine again, more serious than I've ever seen him. "Because you're still up for partner. There will be a meeting in August to discuss moving you up in the company. When that meeting happens, I want to have some good things to say. You understand what I'm getting at?"

Swallowing again, I say, "Yes, sir. Clear as day."

LIKE AUSTIN SUGGESTED, THE NEW PROJECT I'M WORKING ON can be done entirely from home. And after my discussion with Harris after the meeting, I'm not keen on hanging around the office. I leave the WestRock building early, and as I pass by Harris' office door on my way out, it's been firmly shut.

On the ride home on the METRO Rail, I look up the properties that Austin is attempting to acquire. He's only given me a few places so far, what he described as half of his intended full list, and thankfully, everything seems to be pretty local to Houston. No more traveling for me for a while.

Somehow, that thought only makes me disappointed.

Probably against my better judgment, I look up another business online. The Sugar Breeze Bakery. I was only there two days ago, yet it seems like a dream or another lifetime. But for some reason, I feel drawn to it, to see it again, even if its just on a screen.

Clicking on the "About Us" section of the website, I see a picture of the bakery that must be over thirty years old. It's glossy and grainy, like so many pictures taken in the 1980s are, but I still see the familiar pieces of the bakery there. The shingles are all a bright white, rather than dappled and wind-torn as they are now, and the stickers in the windows all look brand new.

Scrolling down past the photo's description, I catch sight of the next photograph, taken around the same time. Standing in front of the building is a woman who must be Denise's mother, Sylvia Lawson. Beneath her big blond feathered hair and bright turquoise mascara, I can tell she was gorgeous. She smiles, the bakery glowing in the sun behind her while her three children cling tightly to her side.

I recognize Austin, of course, his hair dark and full and his face a scowl as he blinks against the Texas sun. He must be only about five years old, by the look of him. Beside him is a baby carrier, the reddened face of a crying infant poking up over the blanket. Based on their ages, this must be Sheila, the youngest of the Lawson children.

And under Sylvia's other arm is what must be a ten-year-old Denise.

I can't help but smile when I see her. I would recognize her anywhere. Her hair is down, a dark mane that shines proudly in the sun. Her eyes are squinting like her brother's, but rather than from discomfort, it seems to be coming from her enormous, gap-toothed smile. It's the happiest I've ever seen her.

Once I'm back home, I kick my shoes off and look at the picture again as I open the box of cookies Denise gave me. They were a pain to bring back since the box was so big and the chocolate was melting, but it was worth it just to bring back a piece of my time at Barton Beach. As I eat, I keep scrolling through the Sugar Breeze's website, and each bite is as good as that first one back at Bash's loft.

Sweet like honey and just as soft, each bite melts against my tongue in the most delicious way. The chocolate and the little marshmallows almost reminds me of s'mores made while camping with my dad, all those years ago. Bash and I were probably out camping with him the same year Denise was having that picture taken. And just like that picture of her, it's one of the times I also remember being truly happy.

It was one of those rare times we got to see our dad after our mother passed, when he came to pick us up from our uncle's house or our cousin Veronica's or wherever he'd put us that year. It was one of those times we would forget our worries and just go out and have fun. One of the good times.

I finish the first Crescent Moon cookie, but it's so good that I can't stop myself from grabbing another. I settle on the sofa with it in my hand, staring at the most recent picture of the Sugar Breeze Bakery on their website. There is a photo of Denise holding a whisk in one hand, smiling nervously at the camera with the bakery behind her. A lonely recreation of the 80s picture.

Damn, this woman is beautiful.

I cringe at myself, knowing I should have said something. Wishing I had taken the chance when I could have. I could

have told her how I feel, even if it had only ended in hurt. She deserved as much.

But I couldn't say it. Telling her how I felt would just complicate things more. And as I realized after our dinner, bringing her further into this mess would just be cruel.

I reach over to the side table and root around in the Sugar Breeze box for another cookie. And I pause as my fingers brush something that feels wrong. Like a scrap of paper instead of the edge of a baked good.

Putting the phone down, I pull the box onto my lap and push the cookies around, searching for it. And right there, buried at the bottom of the box, is a little slip of paper. It's not even laminated. And after spending Wednesday through Friday morning under a pile of cookies, it's become spotted with grease stains. I carefully pull it up, not wanting to accidentally rip it.

Flipping it over, I read what has been typed across it as best I can through the stains. Cups of flour, cups of honey, chocolate chips....

It's a recipe.

And it isn't until I read to the end that I put the pieces together. It's not just any recipe. It's the recipe for Crescent Moon cookies. The one that she said was a guarded family secret.

Shit.

Before I can rethink what I'm doing, I've already jumped off the sofa.

I've made a fucking mistake.

CHAPTER 13

Denise

The hours before Tinsley Simon's party are swiftly ticking away, and when I'm down to just two hours left, Sheila finally knocks on my door.

I whip it open, expecting to see her makeup bag in her arms. But while I do see the makeup bag, I see something else in her arms as well.

"I'm sorry, Denise." Sheila brushes past me, and I realize how exhausted she looks. "Peter was running a fever this morning, so I couldn't send him to daycare. You know how kids are—one of them gets sick, and the next day, everyone else in the house has it too."

My nephew screeches, and Sheila bounces him to her other shoulder. "After I feed him, he'll be out like a light, and then all my focus will be on you. I promise."

Although I'm disappointed, I refuse to complain. I know what it's like to be a mother with a fussy baby. And little Peter was one of the fussiest I'd ever seen.

And probably because it's such a minor problem compared to what I've been going through, I almost feel relieved. Finally—something I know how to handle.

Holding out my hands, I gesture for Sheila to give him to me. "Come here, sweet boy," I say. "Let Auntie Denise have a try."

She puts him in my arms without hesitation, and I cradle him close against my chest, his head nestled in the crook of my arm. He's almost too big at ten months old to hold this

way. The poor thing kicks and cries as I bring him inside the house, and Sheila follows close behind me, shutting the door as quietly as she can.

As I walk, I bounce him, humming so deeply in my chest that he can feel it. And while he's still not very happy, he at least stops his screeching, replacing it with a muffled and closed-mouth whimper against my chest.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Denise," Sheila says through a sleepy smile.

Taking my nephew's hand and putting it gently to my lips, I say, "Now we're even. I don't know what I'd do without you either."

I give Sheila the guest room to feed him and a stack of pillows to keep him safely on the bed as he sleeps. After about half an hour, she meets me in my bedroom. With a quiet thumbs-up, the signal is clear: the baby is napping, and thus my makeover can finally commence.

I've already got on my pantyhose and my slip, and with her help, I can tug myself into my dress. It's the stereotypical little black dress, the one all women should have. And while I don't wear it very often, after the disappointment with Brett, I just want something simple and elegant. Something to make me feel beautiful but not garner too much attention from wayward men.

As I curl my hair with the curling iron she's brought, Sheila pulls all manner of creams and powders from her makeup bag.

I laugh. "Just some mascara and lipstick for me."

"Really?" Sheila groans, disappointed. "I was so excited to doll you up."

"Don't bother. It's not like I have a date going with me tonight." It comes out more harshly than I mean it. While I've told Sheila about what happened with Brett, I've been careful not to give away how much his rejection hurt me.

Thankfully, she doesn't make a big deal out of it. Patting my hand, she says, "I know, sweetie. But I wasn't talking

about doing this for a man.”

“You weren’t?”

“Nope. I was talking about doing this for revenge.” She winks. “Revenge for all the times you used to dress me up when I was little.”

I’m so surprised by her answer that I laugh so hard I nearly burn myself with the curling iron. “I totally forgot about that!”

“I never did.”

My heat protectant sizzles against the heat of the iron again. “Don’t pretend you didn’t like it,” I tease. “Besides, I was always jealous of how good of a model you were.”

Sheila pauses, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “You really thought so?”

“Of course. I was insanely jealous of your blond hair. You were like a little two-and-a-half-foot Madonna.”

She giggles. And even though she nudges me in the side, playing it off like a joke, I still catch her eyeing herself in the mirror and playing with her beautiful blond tresses.

Once my hair is curled, Sheila helps me with my mascara and chooses a lipstick color for me. It’s more purple than what I usually go for, more of a burnt burgundy than my usual red. But once it’s on, I realize she was right to pick it. It’s perfect. With my black dress and the deep brown of my curled hair, the whole ensemble makes me look like a dark, mysterious lady. Someone at this fancy party who is worth knowing.

Wrapping an arm around my shoulders, Sheila squeezes me against her. “Look at us,” she says, her eyes switching between us in the mirror. “We got a Madonna and now an Audrey Hepburn.” She plants a big kiss on my cheek, and I brush her off, failing to hold back my giggles.

As we head into the living room to make sure my purse is together, there’s a knock at the front door. I stop short and glance at Sheila.

“Were you expecting someone?” she asks quietly. I shake my head.

Tip-toeing to the door, I carefully peek through the peephole. Shocked, I throw a hand over my mouth.

“It’s Brett!” I whisper. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“I thought he went back to Houston?” she hisses back. “That’s what your text said!”

Brett knocks again, his knuckles rapping the door directly behind my head, and I jump. “He *did!*”

“Well...” Hardening her jaw, Sheila suddenly straightens her posture. “Move so I can let him in.”

“*What?*”

She struts over, waving me out of her way. “If he rings the doorbell, he’ll wake Peter,” she says simply.

Stepping back to let her pass, I realize how lightheaded I feel.

What is Brett doing here?

He callously rejects me after days of back and forth and then just expects to come to my house like everything’s fine?

No. I refuse to put up with this. Men always think they can get away with their dumbest behaviors. It’s time they learned the consequences.

I grasp Sheila’s wrist to stop her. “Actually,” I say, “let me get it.”

There must be a look in my eyes because she immediately nods. “Maybe you two should talk outside. If there’s going to be fighting, I don’t want it to wake the baby.”

“Fine. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

Turning around, I grab the handle and twist it. As the door swings open, Brett’s eyes land on me, and he releases a breath he’s apparently been holding.

“Denise,” he says, relief filling his face. Despite his obvious exhaustion, his blue eyes are intense on mine, his brow low with determination.

“What are you—?” I start to ask. But as his lips suddenly crash against mine.

In an instant, his arms find my waist, tugging me against his chest. Then his lips press into mine, silencing me as he kisses me.

Caught by surprise, I put my hands on his shoulders as if to push him off. But as his lips move against mine, I feel my resistance slip away.

This is all I wanted after our dinner date. This is everything I’ve been wanting from him.

Well... not everything.... And as I feel his warm body, his chest pressed against my breasts, I remember the other things I want from him too....

I don’t know how long our kiss lasts. But all too quickly, it’s over.

As his mouth leaves mine, his eyes stare into me once again, intense. Passionate. Full of overwhelming desire. My mouth hangs open. I’m completely caught by surprise.

“I’ve been waiting to do that,” he says between pants, “since the first moment I laid eyes on you.”

My body shivers at his words. But by sheer stubbornness, I keep myself together.

“Brett, what are you doing here?” I ask. “Shouldn’t you be off in some other city lusting after some other girl?”

He frowns, obviously taken aback by my response to his kiss. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s what you do, isn’t it? Some kind of businessman playboy? Breaking women’s hearts all over Texas?”

“Denise,” he says firmly. “That’s not what it was.”

“Then what the hell *was* it?”

“I wanted to tell you, Denise, but I...” His eyes wander from my curling hair down to my dress, admiring my figure, my body. “Damn,” he says. “You look amazing.”

My belly flutters. “How dare you?” I ask.

He pulls my face closer again, but rather than putting his lips on mine, he brings them to my neck and along my jaw. As he kisses the sensitive patch of skin, my legs fall weak, and I begin to sag against him. If we weren’t currently outside, the things I would let him do to me....

His mouth traces a path along my jaw and back up to my mouth. As I feel his kiss for the second time—his *real* kiss—the last dregs of my anger melt completely away. A moan enters my mouth, giving away my true feelings, and he pulls me even closer, pressing his hips against mine.

Throwing my arms around his neck and shoulders, I fold completely against him, his warmth buzzing through my body, his touch vibrating in my skin. I could stay like this forever.

With much difficulty, he pulls his lips away.

“That’s how I feel about you, Denise,” he says, still breathless. “That’s the kiss I wanted to give you Tuesday night.”

“Then why didn’t you?” My voice is a whine of need.

He swallows. “It was complicated before. I’m not good at this romance thing. I didn’t want you to think it was more serious than I was afraid I could get.”

“What changed your mind?”

A smirk graces his lips. “An angel gave me a certain cookie recipe. And I realized I’d been an idiot.”

A flush rushes over my cheeks. “Don’t ask me why I did it.”

“I’m glad you did.” Swiftly, he presses his lips hard against mine again. I feel my knees swivel beneath me, threatening to give out.

As he pulls back again, he grins at my dress. He still hasn’t taken his hands off me. “So, what’s the occasion?” he asks.

My blush deepens. I’d almost forgotten. “Tinsley Simon is throwing a party tonight. I actually have to get going, or I’m

gonna be late.”

“Oh,” he says, eyebrows raising in almost happy surprise. “Would it be alright if I went with you? My driver is already here. Just give him the address.”

Following his gaze, I peer down at the road and spot Mar standing beside his sleek black car. He nods at me, tipping his chauffeur’s cap and giving a little wave. I shyly wave back, suddenly aware that Brett and I have had an audience.

Stepping out of Brett’s arms, I brush myself off.

“Well, I was already planning to bring Brittany as my plus one. My assistant manager,” I clarify as I see his confused expression.

“That’s right, the redhead. I remember her.” He shrugs. “But I also know Tinsley personally. She wouldn’t turn me away if I crash her party. And we can pick up Brittany on the way.”

“Huh,” I say, surprised that what I’d been worried would be an issue hasn’t turned into one. That’s a rare occurrence these days. “G-good. Sounds good. Let me just get my purse.”

I push the door open once again. To my embarrassment, Sheila is standing on the other side.

Smirking.

I know her well enough to tell that she was watching us through the peephole.

“Don’t say anything,” I tell her sternly, pointing a threatening finger.

She holds up her hands, playing innocence. “These lips are sealed. At least until you get back.” Her smirk grows. “Actually, I probably shouldn’t be here when you get back, huh? Based on that kiss, I’d guess you two will want some *privacy*.”

Purse in hand, I whack her in the arm with it. But as I look at Brett again, standing so patiently on the porch with his trim suit and slightly tousled hair, I want Sheila to be right.

I want her to be right more than I've wanted anything in the world.

Because I *want* Brett. And he's finally made it clear that he wants me too.

CHAPTER 14

Denise

The rest of the night is a blur.

As Brittany slides into the car's front seat, she turns around to spy me and Brett holding hands in the back. She grins at him, but in her eyes, I can tell she knows not to be such an obvious flirt with him anymore.

I have claimed him. This beautiful man is mine.

Tinsley is ecstatic when we arrive, and as I struggle to blink through the dazzling lights and the flashy clothes, she takes me in her hands and begins to steer me around. She's gorgeous in a pearl-white dress with a low back, and a series of silver chains dangling across her exposed skin, making her shine like a mirror ball.

Names fly over my head and faces blur into one as she introduces me to the other wedding vendors. Caterers and planners and managers and accountants and tailors.

In my surge of adrenaline, I can barely take any of it in.

And while I quickly lose Brittany in the faceless, jostling crowd, Brett never leaves my side.

I'm supposed to greet people, helping my business by rubbing elbows with the higher classes like Lisa suggested. But now that I'm here, I'm barely paying them any mind. There is only one person on my mind tonight....

After the party, we take a tipsy Brittany home. She gushes about how wonderful the party was and how she somehow weaseled a business card from some rich lawyer she's

planning to call in the morning. Brett gets out of the car with her to make sure she gets inside her apartment safely, and then he returns to the backseat with me.

My house isn't too far away, and with each block we pass, I find my need swelling larger and larger inside me. Brett rubs his thumb across the back of my hand.

"You're almost home," he says softly.

"Yep," I say back.

He wets his lips with his tongue, and my need surges inside me again. He seems to sense it. "Do you... want me to go in with you?" he asks.

Grasping his hand in mine and squeezing it hard, I nod. "Yes, Brett. I want it."

He nods back, understanding exactly what I mean. "Okay. Whatever you want."

His words thrill through me, making me shiver with desire. He grips my hand harder.

"You feeling okay?" he asks me.

I lean across the car, laying my head against his shoulder. "Better than I have in years."

THANKFULLY, SHEILA AND PETER HAVE GONE HOME BY THE time we enter the bungalow. And with Brett sending Mar home for the night, it's finally just the two of us alone.

Tossing my purse on the sofa, I turn around to eye him. He's standing behind me, and for the first time, I realize his height. A little over six feet tall, he towers over me. Another shiver runs through me. I feel it deep in my belly, at the center of desire. I think again of his lips on my neck and jaw, and that desire pools deeper within me.

I need him. And as I look up into his intense eyes, a beautiful electric blue, I can see how much he needs me, too.

Removing his blazer and tossing it aside, he envelopes me in his arms again. For the first time, I allow myself to melt in his arms, and he holds me steady.

Brett's lips coast against the shell of my ear. "You are so fucking beautiful, Denise Lawson." Then, without another word, he kisses me.

It's reckless, deep and needy.

Pleasure grips me in a way I haven't felt in so long.

As our lips move against each other, he wraps my hair around his fist, using his grip to angle my head exactly where he wants me.

I run my hands down his back, gripping his shirt. Beneath it, I can feel his muscles, warm and tight. He feels tense. He wants this as badly as I do. And as he presses his tongue against my lips, encouraging them to part, I feel his thick erection against my thigh.

I'd forgotten how powerful this feel.

To make a man hard, desperate. To turn him into a wild animal.

I moan into his mouth.

He takes the hint and lifts me up to sit me on the back of the couch, our lips never parting as we move. Our tongues continue to dance, my hands on either side of his head, my fingers running through the little silvery hair at the base of his skull.

His hands leave my waist and he yanks off his belt. He tosses it to the floor before unbuttoning his pants and climbing out of them, tossing those away too.

Then, he fists his cock through his underwear. "See what you fucking do to me, baby?"

I pull his hips closer to me, his hardened erection bumping against me as I wrap my legs around him. My fingers find the buttons of his shirt and tug them open slowly, exposing his wonderful chest to my waiting eyes and hungry hands.

The shirt goes to the floor too. I run my hands across his chest and follow his muscles to the base of his stomach, my fingertips dipping beneath the elastic of his underwear.

He grabs my wrists, keeping me from freeing him completely.

“You said I could have anything I wanted,” I whine softly.

“You can,” he says. He steps back, eyeing me up and down. “But first I want to see you. All of you.”

As if hypnotized, I remove the clip from my hair, letting my curls fall across my shoulders. Reaching back further, I fumble for the zipper of my dress.

I tug at the zipper, but it hardly budes. With a bashful smile, I gesture to it. “I’m having a bit of trouble,” I say.

Brett chuckles in that familiar way of his, then crooks a finger toward me. “Come here, gorgeous.”

I walk around the couch, and he grabs the zipper. As the zipper slides down inch by agonizing inch, Brett plants kisses along my shoulders and down my back.

Even such a simple touch as this sends my head spinning. As he goes further down, my back arches at his touch, shivers of pleasure running through me.

I hop off the couch and take the dress off completely and the slip. But as I start to wrestle with my pantyhose, Brett holds up a hand to stop me. “I want to do this part.”

Taking me by my upper arms, he guides me around the couch and lays me down across it on my back. Then, sitting by my feet, he reaches up and plays with the waist of the pantyhose just like I did with his underwear.

He tugs them slowly down, kissing his way down my leg as he goes. Each time his fingers touch the newly exposed skin of my thighs, it leaves a tingle behind. My back arches again, my hips twisting. Needing him inside me.

Finally, he slips my pantyhose completely off and then takes a moment to admire me.

Out of habit, I wince a little and fold my arms over my stomach.

“No, don’t hide from me,” he murmurs, grabbing my wrists and pinning them above my head. “I want to see every inch of you.”

A gasp leaves my mouth and this is all the encouragement he needs. His breath picks up as he kisses me, his lips moving down my chest.

His tongue begins to flick at my hard nipple, and each lash of his tongue sends pulses of pleasure coursing through my body.

And then, just as I begin to writhe beneath him, he bites it.

I see stars, moaning wantonly.

I love that Brett knows exactly what he’s doing to me. It’s like he can read my mind and knows exactly what I want.

“You’re really good at this,” I pant.

To my surprise, he plants a tender kiss on my forehead. “So are you.”

Then his mouth finds mine again, his tongue snaking against mine. He tastes wonderful. Like nothing I’ve ever imagined. And once again, I want this to never stop, to be with him like this and to feel this way forever.

“Don’t stop,” I say breathlessly again. Hungrily. “Please. Kiss me. Everywhere.”

He grins and licks a trail from my earlobe to my neck while his fingers travel downward. His breath is hot and wet against my skin. Every slide of his tongue feels like it goes straight to my clit.

“I hope you know what you’ve asked for.” Brett’s voice is husky with desire as he tugs my panties down my thighs.

“Oh?” I smirk down. “What have I asked for?”

Slipping me free of my panties, he tosses them aside. Fixing his ocean blue gaze on me, he grins again.

“You’ll see.”

Grasping my thighs, he yanks my legs up and apart, opening me to him.

Then he groans. “You’re so fucking wet for me, baby.”

His mouth lowers to my belly, trailing more worshipful kisses downward until he finds my pussy. His fingers push it open, and with his lips, he plants a kiss right where I want him most.

A shiver runs through me, making my legs shake.

He does it again and again, and finally, he presses his tongue against it, drilling into it like an expert. My back arches again, and I have to grab onto the couch with both hands to keep myself steady.

Brett’s tongue continues to thrust into me, and I slowly feel myself building. I start to tremble again, feeling myself edging closer and closer to climax. I pinch my nipples between my fingers, and it crashes over me all at once. I hit my peak with a yelp, my body seizing as pleasure explodes through me.

And all too soon, it’s over.

But as Brett stands up, wiping his mouth, he smirks at me once again. Then, he slips off his boxers so he’s standing completely naked in front of me.

The head of his thick length bobs against his stomach and I swear he’s so hard that he looks like he’s about to burst.

I spoke too soon.

This isn’t over yet.

Not by a long shot.

“More please,” I whisper.

CHAPTER 15

Brett

Denise spreads her legs wide. “More, please.”

Fuck me.

This woman is everything.

Absolutely everything.

How in the hell I got so lucky will forever be a mystery.

Her sweetness is still fresh on my tongue as I gaze down at her, letting her catch her breath. And I wish I could take a picture of how she looks right now.

Glistening skin. Just fucked hair. Puffy pink lips.

Goddamn.

I love that she’s still coming down from the last climax, but she already wants to go again. I wonder how long it’s been since she has done this.

Too long, probably.

“You can have more, baby.” My voice comes out like a growl. “But I’m not going to fuck you on the floor our first time. I’m taking you to bed.”

I scoop her into my arms and carry her into the bedroom, laying her down while I watch the moonlight spill onto her face.

And once again, I’m amazed at her beauty.

Every freckle, every pucker of skin, every stretch mark. She’s gorgeous.

And in this moment, every inch of it is *mine*.

I loop my arms under her thighs and drag her to the edge of the mattress.

“Is this what you wanted, baby?” I rub the head of my cock against her entrance. She’s wet and warm, and my body tenses in anticipation of how good she’s going to feel. “You want me to fuck you bare? Fill you up with my cum?”

She moans. “Brett, yes. *Please.*”

“Good girl.”

I fill her to the hilt in one brutal thrust, groaning as she fits perfectly around me.

Heaven.

Denise Lawson is pure fucking heaven.

She stifles a moan of her own as I penetrate deeper, our hips knocking together. Her eyes close, drinking in the feeling of it.

I do the same, leaning forward to drag my teeth along her collarbone before kissing along its gentle swooping wave and feeling her heart beating hard within her chest.

Her nipples rise and fall with every breath and I kiss them too, stunned at their perfection.

She’s ready for me, and that alone nearly sends me over the edge.

I want to ride her, to fuck her, to make her scream. I growl again and her breath hitches, her hips moving against mine. I love that she wants this as bad as I do.

So badly that she can’t even form the words to tell me anymore.

Grabbing her by the waist, I flip her over onto her stomach and begin to pound her like a fucking animal.

Each time I move within her, she cries out in pure pleasure. She meets me thrust for thrust, pushing her ass back against me as she moans.

She's good without even trying.

I fall forward and rest my weight on my forearms, leaning over her back as I press my lips to her ear.

"You're so fucking perfect, Denise," I grind out. "Look at you, and this pretty pussy. Taking this cock like a fucking pro. You look so good with my dick buried inside you, baby."

I slap her ass hard. Our hips grind together and my jaw begins to clench as I feel myself building.

Denise closes her eyes, too.

Seeing her so moved by me, so undone by our bodies, I already can't wait to do this again. I want to take her as many times as I can, to drive her into delirium with need like she's unwittingly done to me.

I bite my tongue, holding my climax back as I continue to drive myself back and forth. It's rhythmic now, and her body pulses with mine, her hips grinding me, struggling to find her second peak.

Finally, she gasps and cries out once again. As she climaxes, she pushes her thighs together, tightening her grip around me, and I can't take it anymore. With a few more pumps, I find my release too.

We're both breathless and sweaty at this point, but I flip her over and tuck her into my side. We lay there for what must be several minutes, still attached, just trying to catch our breaths.

After a few minutes, she reaches up and she runs her fingers through my hair, sighing a little as she yawns.

Damn.

It's never, *ever*, been this good.

ABOUT HALF AN HOUR LATER, I HEAR HER VOICE COMING FROM the bathroom.

At first, I think she's talking to me through the door. My heart leaps as she says the word "baby," like that's what she's decided to call me. I'm about to joke back with her, tell her that I've always thought my pet name should be "tiger" or "stallion" or something. But then she says the name "Sophia" and I realize she must be on the phone with someone.

The more I think about it, that name sounds familiar. Didn't she tell me about a Sophia? So much has happened in the last several days, I can't even be sure anymore. All I know is that I probably shouldn't be eavesdropping.

After a few minutes, she comes out, clad in her soft bathrobe and a crease of worry between her eyebrows. She sets the phone down next to the bed and I walk over to her, wrapping her in my arms and kissing that spot on her forehead.

"What's wrong?" I ask her gently.

Her breasts rise against me as she takes a deep breath. "That was my daughter, Sophia. She and her friend best friend had a bit of a falling out and she needed to talk."

That's right. Her daughter. I realize once again that there are so many things I don't know about her.

But as much as I yearn for an answer, Denise stays silent. But as she pulls me into the bathroom with her, she makes her intentions clear: she wants us to shower together.

She runs the water and steam begins to fill the space in the tiny room. She then slips off her robe, revealing her beautiful body to me again and causing my body to respond instantly. I'll never get over how wonderful she is.

She slides around the shower curtain and pulls it closed behind her, giving me space to change. After all we've just done to each other, I can't help but chuckle at the idea of her thinking I'm shy.

Slipping my boxers off again, I climb in with her.

Denise is standing before the water, it hitting her belly and spilling down her legs, though the hair on her head is already soaking wet. She's facing away from me, still quiet.

I search among her bottles for her shampoo and squirt a large amount into my hand. After running some through my hair, I start to wash hers. She stiffens, as if surprised that I'm doing this for her. But then she melts again, her shoulders falling.

"I was married," she finally says, still not turning to look at me.

I chuckle. "I gathered as much."

Her shoulders press up against my massaging hands as she takes a deep breath. "We met here, in Barton Beach, a little over twenty years ago. He had a great job and there's a certain confidence young men get when they succeed early. It goes to their heads. And as a young woman trying to figure out how to pay for college, I mistook my need for his security as love."

I swallow as she pauses, trying not to rush her to tell me more. Instead, I slowly rinse the shampoo out of our hair and reach for her conditioner.

"He convinced me to move to Houston with him," she continues. "We got married a couple years later and then I had Sophia. And I was so distracted by her that... well...."

She takes a deep breath again.

"A month or two before my mom died, I discovered he'd been cheating on me."

My hands freeze in her hair. I swallow again, trying to keep my temper even while white-hot anger burns in my chest.

"Fucking asshole."

Denise sighs. "He'd been doing it for years, too. I ignored the signs. I didn't want to see them. The lies that didn't make sense, the gaps of time in his schedule.... He'd been sleeping with his secretary. Well, at least two of them, from what I heard."

My teeth grind together.

"I wanted you from the moment I saw you at the Silver Coop, Brett," she continues, the words now rushing from her mouth. "But I was afraid. Afraid you would tell me I was too

old, that I was past my prime. And worse—that even if you gave me the chance I so desperately wanted, that you would go down the same path he did. That... that you would....”

She trails off, but I don't wait for her to find the words.

Taking her in my arms again, I turn her to face me. Her eyes are trained on the bathtub floor, so I take her chin between my thumb and forefinger and gently raise her face to meet my gaze.

“I would never do that to you, Denise,” I assure her.

She starts to roll her eyes.

“No, really.” Taking her head in my hands, I kiss her again, hard. “Your ex? He sounds like a huge dick. Anyone daring to mess up a chance to be with a woman like you is a fucking idiot. Trust me—I know. I almost did it myself.”

Her mouth forms a small smile, her eyes glittering as they survey my face. “You kind of did, actually.”

“Well, never again. You're perfect, Denise. I mean, I just flew back from Houston all because you gave me a cookie recipe. At this point, I would do anything for you.”

In a rush, she leaps up on her feet to kiss me again, wrapping her arms around my shoulders so tightly it's like she wants to stay there forever.

After our shower, Denise takes me into her bed, and we make love again. Slowly. Deliberately. And once it's over, she lays beside me beneath the covers, her wet hair splaying across the pillow as she burrows into my arms.

I hold her close, pressing my lips against the crown of her head until she falls asleep.

And when I finally follow her into dreamland, it's the most peaceful sleep I've had in years.

CHAPTER 16

Denise

I wake to sunlight streaming between the curtains over my bedroom window. But rather than having a hangover to nurse, I find myself in bed with something much better.

Although he's backlit by the sun, I can still make out Brett's face half-buried in the pillow.

His salt-and-pepper hair glitters in the early morning rays and his long dark lashes lay still and peaceful below an unfurrowed brow.

Last night was incredible.

It has never, ever felt that good. I want nothing more than the luxury to do it again and again and again until the end of our days on this earth. I want nothing more than him.

Making love to him had released a flood from within me, a fear of intimacy I'd only partially realized I was grappling with since my marriage fell apart. Even now, flushing at the memories of our bodies entwined, I realize I haven't felt this happy in years.

After a few minutes spent gazing at him, I feel his long legs shift beneath the blanket as he begins to wake. His eyelashes flutter, and a moment later, he opens a pair of sleepy blue eyes to me.

I smile. "Hey," I whisper, as if afraid speaking any louder will disturb the magic in this moment.

"Hey." Brett runs a hand through his hair and grins. "Sleep well?"

His hand finds mine from under the blanket. Grasping around my fingers, he brings them to his mouth, kissing each of my knuckles in turn.

“Better than I have in a long time.”

“Me too.”

He scoots closer to me and presses his lips to mine again. And even though I should be completely spent after last night’s adventures, I can’t help but feel that stirring once more. That need for him, that desire pooling deep in my belly, growing even at his simplest touch.

He pulls his mouth back, his striking eyes finding mine again. “What’s the plan for the day?” he asks.

I tug on the back of his neck, wishing to have his mouth on me again. “We could do more of this.”

But he just chuckles. “As much as I would like to do this—and believe me, I would,” he says, stroking my side and making me shiver. “We should probably get ready for the day. Let me make you breakfast.”

I sigh. “I guess so. Curse this human body and its need for food.”

Brett chuckles again, harder this time, and a thrill runs through me. I like it when I make him laugh. “How do you like your coffee?”

“Splash of cream, two sugars.”

“Okay. I’ll go get some brewing.” He leans down and plants a kiss on my lips. “Meet you there?”

Giving me one last peck on the lips, he rolls over and out of bed. My disappointment at his absence doesn’t last long, though, because as soon as he stands, I realize he’s still very naked.

I must make some kind of noise at the sight of him because he turns around, wearing an amused expression.

“Doing okay over there, beautiful?”

For a second, I don't answer. Instead, my eyes devour every inch of him. Even without the raw sexual heat of last night, he looks fantastic.

Feeling myself flush again, I give him a teasing smirk. "Yep, just admiring the view."

He chuckles and shakes his head before disappearing downstairs.

I head into the bathroom and realize I look an absolute mess. My curls from yesterday are long gone, lost in the heat of the moment and the shower afterward. What's left in their place is the haphazard look of slept-on wet hair. I do my best to tame it and eventually settle on rolling it into its usual clip. Then, I slip on a robe and head out to the kitchen.

As soon as I open my bedroom door, the smell of freshly brewed coffee nuzzles my nose. I follow it to find Brett standing at the coffee maker. He's wearing his boxers, but fortunately for me, his chest and legs are still bare.

Wordlessly, I start to cook us some breakfast. Eggs and toast, nothing special. We sit on the stools along the kitchen island as we eat, and he asks me about the Sugar Breeze. "Do you have work today?"

I look down at my plate. "Technically, yes."

He takes another bite of his eggs. "Why did I sense a 'but' there?"

"Because I was thinking of adding one. I usually don't take days off. Not even Saturdays. Things have been so crazy at the Sugar Breeze that leaving someone else in charge doesn't make sense. As capable as Brittany is, I don't want her to deal with any disasters alone. But today I don't want to go."

"Ever consider that you're the one causing the disasters?" He grins down at me, his cheek full of toast.

I nudge him in the side. "Very funny." However, I can't keep my lips from twitching into a small smile.

Swallowing, he laughs. "Brittany adores you. She's a little goofy and too flirty for her own good. But from what I've

seen, she's pretty capable." His blue eyes stare into mine, pensive again. "As a bit of a workaholic myself, I'm not suggesting you just skip out on work completely. But have you ever tried taking some time off?"

"Is that what you're doing?" I ask him. "Taking some time off?"

"Actually, no." He gestures to his wonderful half-naked form. "What you're looking at is a man working from home."

I laugh. "Obviously. How could I not see that?" After chewing and swallowing another bite, I ask, "So what is it that you do for work anyway? What kind of work brings a man out to Barton Beach?"

"Investments." His tone is suddenly flat. "I manage people's accounts, make sure they're putting their money into the right ideas and places. That's how I know Tinsley Simon. Hers is one of my more notable accounts."

Setting my fork down against the plate, I take a moment to process this. "That makes sense. So that's what you were out here working on?"

His eyes stray back down to his eggs. "Kind of," he says. "I was here on behalf of a client to check out a business they wanted to acquire."

"Your brother's bar?" I tease.

He cracks a smile again. "You know, he thought that too."

"Is that why you're back? To finish the job?"

"No. That job is finished." There's a hard edge of finality to his tone. "I'm working on something else now. It's similar, but I should be able to do it all remotely."

"So, you...." Realization surges through me, and my belly tightens again. "You're back in Barton Beach... just for me?"

Brett looks at me again, a smile gracing his lips once more. "Yes, Denise. Just for you." He stares at me for the longest time with the strangest expression. Then he pushes his eggs aside and turns sideways in his seat, beckoning me with his finger. "Come here, beautiful."

My heart skips as I climb onto his lap and wrap my arms around his neck and shoulders.

Desperately, he presses his lips to mine. I thread my fingers through his hair, needing his lips on me again. Needing *him*.

My phone buzzes on the counter, and I pause, his delicious tongue just beginning to enter my mouth. Checking the phone, I see it's a text from Brittany.

Brett's lips find my collarbone again, sucking at my skin. "You have to go?"

A groan forms in my throat. "Unfortunately."

His teeth graze my shoulder. "Okay. I can head back to my brother's place."

"No," I say firmly. "After I see Brittany, I can take the day off."

He pauses, leaning his head back to look into my eyes. As surprised to hear the words leave my lips as I am. But now that I've said them, I feel determined to stick to them.

"Really?" he asks.

"Yes. You came all this way just to see me. It would be rude to leave you to go do something else." And besides, it's something I want.

Brett smiles. "Tell that to my brother," he says. "Remember the night we met? He and I were supposed to go to the beach that night. You saw what we did instead."

"I remember," I say with a girlish giggle. "Well, after I stop by the bakery to talk with Brittany, we'll go there."

"The beach?" It's subtle, but his blue eyes light up.

"The beach."

Scooting off his lap, I shovel the rest of my breakfast into my mouth and then rush to my bedroom to find clothes for the day.

If Sheila could see me now, she probably wouldn't believe it. I hardly can. Denise Lawson taking a day off from breaking her back at the Sugar Breeze? Impossible. Sheila could barely get me to take a day off for my birthday. And now here I am, playing hooky on a whim for a man I've known barely a week.

Brett's not just any man, though, I remind myself. Especially when he comes back into my room, half-dressed and with his button-up shirt hanging open to reveal his wonderful chest.

"Alright," he says. "I'm almost ready to go. I'll call Mar and arrange a—"

"Nope," I say. "We always take your car. Today, I'm driving."

BRITTANY GIGGLES. "SO, IS IT OFFICIAL, THEN? THE TWO OF YOU?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose and curse inwardly. I just stopped by the bakery to check on Brittany, but for some reason, Brett insisted on following me inside. Now, he is standing conspicuously by the door while customers give him curious glances.

"Not exactly," I tell her. "It's complicated."

"I don't know, Denise," she continues, eyes shining as she looks at him, "He looks pretty smitten to me."

I flush, ducking my head slightly to hide how flustered I feel. "I'm your boss. That's none of your business."

"You've literally brought him into my place of employment," she says with a giggle. "That kind of makes it my business."

I roll my eyes. "Please, Brittany," I urge her quietly. "Just take my notes and promise you won't forget to lock up at the end of the night."

Brazen sass still on her face, she tugs the paper list from my hand and tucks it into her little pink apron pocket. “Okay. But tomorrow—or whenever you get a break from him—I want details.”

Seeing my expression, she makes a sound of exasperation. “Oh, come on,” she whines, jostling my shoulder. “You keep dangling him in front of me, and I’m not even allowed to ask questions?!” Suddenly, a new expression sends her eyebrows raising. “Wait, he’s not married, is he?”

I stiffen. “No, of course not.”

“Because you can tell me if he is.”

“I don’t date married men, Brittany.”

I purse my lips for a moment, thinking over her reaction. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but I almost feel like somewhere behind her words, there’s an admission that she’s had experience with married men.

“Your real estate friend from the party last night,” I say. “He isn’t married, is he? You wouldn’t actually do that. Right?”

She shrugs, then shakes her head. “Doesn’t matter if he is. He seems to have changed his mind about me since last night. Been texting him this morning, but he’s ghosting me, I think.” Rolling her eyes, she shrugs again. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Have fun on your date. Take notes! I want to hear *everything*.”

When Brett and I get back to the car, I glance at the clock on the dashboard. It’s still early enough in the day that we don’t have to head to the beach right away.

Turning to glance at him, I ask, “Scenic route?”

Thankfully, he grins. “Whatever you want, Captain,” he answers, nodding to the wheel. “You’re the one piloting the ship.”

We spend the rest of the morning driving around Barton Beach, taking in the sights together. And though I’ve lived here for a year, it’s not until now that I finally allow myself a

real look at the changes that have come to the place where I grew up.

Like I realized when Paul was driving me to The Silver Coop, I haven't taken the time to relearn the city since I moved back. I had just assumed that seeing the changes in plain view would make me too sad for all the things I had lost, and so I just focused on my little corner of the world and tried to forget about the rest.

But with Brett here, it's so easy to see everything anew. He makes the sunshine brighter, the ocean sparkle fiercer, and the buildings stand taller. With him by my side, my city has become a fun new adventure rather than a list of broken things.

Parking in the center of town, we see all the sights, new and old. We go to a gift shop in an old aquarium, where we peruse stacks of postcards and duck bobbleheads. On our way across a walking bridge, we look down to catch sight of a marine-themed playground full of kids as they ride the seahorse-shaped swings, and the curling slides the color of seaweed.

At the Barton Beach Theater where they hold the local film festival, Brett hands me his phone to snap a picture of him with the theater behind him, its infamous orange and pink statue of a crab waving from the slanted rooftop over his head.

I've become a tourist in my own home. It's almost like being a kid again, where the world around you is a big and colorful adventure.

We arrive at the beach around lunchtime to find it packed with people, a few thousand at least. They crowd around a series of banners and canopied fair stalls and, at the far end, a cluster of old carnival games. Ring tosses, duck shooters, and tests of strength, their flashing lights dazzlingly bright even beneath the hot Texas sun. Live music blares from an unseen stage, and smoke rises from many hot grills.

For a moment, a sense of nervousness swims through me as I wonder if I've made a mistake bringing Brett to this

particular beach. With these crowds, any amount of privacy will be impossible to find.

And all at once, I want nothing more than to return to this place of my childhood. To revisit my past for the first time in decades. To begin to heal it.

With Brett by my side, I feel stronger. Impervious. With him here with me, maybe I can heal.

We grab some sandwiches at one of the stalls and a cup of hard lemonade to share as we walk around and take in the sights. I see a few of my regular customers, and as they eye Brett beside me, my nervousness about sharing him starts to slip away. I find that I like it when people see us together. When people see us as an item. He is beautiful, magnificent—and when people see me at his side, in their minds, he is mine.

I want him to be mine.

We arrive at the carnival games and play a few rounds. My old favorite as a kid was the ring toss, but I've gotten pretty rusty in the decades since I've last played. Brett beats my score by a lot and gets to choose one of the fuzzy plush prizes from the prize wall.

I sip our lemonade, expecting him to turn the prize down. This grown man doesn't want to carry a toy bear with him around the rest of the festival. But after he makes his choice and the game attendant hands him a large plush crab with a cowboy hat, Brett immediately turns to hand it to me.

My whole body goes warm at the gesture. I hold the silly crab close to my chest as I take it. For some reason, this simple gift is one of the best I've ever received.

Hopping up on my tiptoes, I plant a kiss on his lips.

“That was so cheesy,” I say.

“Absolutely,” he agrees.

“But I love it. Thank you.”

He turns up his chin to plant a kiss on my forehead. “You're welcome.”

WE RETURN TO THE BUNGALOW JUST AS THE SUN IS BEGINNING to set. We have another shower together, and as I wait for my hair to dry, I start making dinner for the two of us.

As we eat, we sit on the sofa side by side, and I turn on the evening news. I lean my head against Brett's shoulder without even thinking about it, and as I do so, I realize this is another thing I've been secretly missing. The soft closeness of just sitting next to a man and watching TV with him. It's wonderful.

I set my plate on the coffee table when I'm done eating and lean further into him, burying my face in his shoulder. He smells so clean, all flowery from using my body wash, and the desire blooms within me to make him smell like himself again. I want to make him sweat.

I place my lips against his neck, and the rest of the world fades away until he says, "Look, it's Tinsley."

There she is, Tinsley Simon, her long blond hair in a massive bun on the top of her head.

"So, Tinsley," the reporter asks, grinning from ear to ear, "are the rumors true? You and Ford Augustine are getting married here in Barton Beach?"

Tinsley giggles, her whitened teeth shining brighter than the moon. "I guess it's okay to talk about now," she says. "Well, Ford and I debated for what felt like forever about where we wanted to get married. But eventually, he agreed that Barton Beach was the only place we could do it."

The reporter practically squeals. "That's wonderful! We're so happy to have you!"

"I'm so happy to have *you*. In fact, I want to personally invite you to the big day." Tinsley takes the reporter's hand and squeezes it.

Brett chuckles. "So she finally announced it. That's gonna be good for business, right? More people in town means more

people coming to the bakery?”

“Tinsley was right about you,” I tease. “You only think about the money.”

He shrugs. “I’m a numbers guy. What can I say?”

“But it’s not like she said anything about Sugar Breeze,” I say.

As Brett holds a finger to his lips, his eyes telling me to wait just a moment before I say anything more, he points back at the TV.

“And I would also like to *personally* thank Denise Lawson and her historic Sugar Breeze Bakery,” Tinsley’s voice cheers from the screen. “She’s going to be making our beautiful cake, and it will be *amazing!*”

“You said the Sugar Breeze Bakery?” Rosa asks, eyes sparkling. “Right here in downtown Barton Beach?”

“The very same one,” Tinsley giggles. “Denise does such good work. Without her, this wedding would be just falling apart!”

“See?” Brett gives me a smug smile. “You spoke too soon.”

“I wish she wouldn’t do that,” I say before I can stop myself.

Brett’s smile falls. “Do what? Say how amazing you are?”

“Isn’t she getting people’s expectations too high?”

Bringing his face closer to mine, he lays the curves of our noses together. His breath caresses my face as he says, “No, she isn’t. Your Crescent Moon cookies alone are good enough to earn all the praise she can give. You’re better than you give yourself credit for.”

As his words pass into me, hovering for a few moments in my mind, they begin to settle. I think about my debts, the things I did to keep the Sugar Breeze on its feet. I need this money. I need Tinsley’s words to keep me going.

And, somewhere deeper in my soul, I need Brett's words of praise too. Every compliment, every sweet word, makes me feel like a goddess on earth.

As we lay in the afterglow in my bed, waiting patiently for sleep to come again, he holds me to him, the big spoon to my little spoon. Periodically, he kisses my neck and strokes my arm adoringly. And though sleep found me so quickly last night, tonight it takes a bit longer to arrive.

Brittany's question at the bakery floats once again into my mind: "*Is it official, then? The two of you?*"

And though it seemed too ridiculous to think of Brett and me as a couple just this morning, now that I realize how he makes me feel—and knowing how he makes other women feel too—I want nothing more than for him to be officially mine. Whenever he goes back home to Houston and some other woman tries to come on to him, I want him to say, "No thanks. I can't. I have Denise. I have a girlfriend."

That's it. That's the word. *Girlfriend*. Possessive and intimate. I want to be his girlfriend. I want him to be mine and only mine.

"Brett?" I ask quietly through the dark.

"Mmm?" comes his sleepy response, humming against me as his chest presses into my back.

"What... What happens when you go back home? What happens to this?"

He shifts against me, and his lips find my shoulders again. "You mean you want to make this...?"

"Official?" I say. "Yes. That's really what I want."

"You realize it'll be long-distance, right?" he asks, hesitation in his voice. "I'm still based in Houston, where my office is. I'll come here as often as I can, but I will have important things to do there. Maybe other places to go."

Rolling myself over, I look deep into those blue eyes, azure in the shadowy dark of night. "I'll be busy too, Brett. I just want to know that this matters to the both of us."

Cupping my hand in his, he brings it to his lips. “Of course, you matter to me, Denise. I’d give you anything.”

And, deep down to the very base of my beating heart, I believe it’s true.

CHAPTER 17

Brett

“Alright, everyone. that’s a wrap.”

I nod in response to Austin’s announcement, a fluttering sense of relief in my gut as this final meeting ends.

“Good to hear,” I say, trying to keep my voice from sounding tense.

Even after a month of working on this new project, I still haven’t gotten used to seeing Austin’s face on that big screen. Especially knowing what he tried to do to his sister.

Hopefully, all these newly acquired investments will keep him too busy to bother me and Denise.

“And I’ve got to say that you were exceptionally thorough, Mr. Cooper.” Austin’s eyes move to Harris. “You were right when you said he was one of your best.”

“We are excellent judges of character here at WestRock, Mr. Lawson,” Harris says, a tired smile pinching his wrinkled face.

“Definitely,” Austin agrees. “I’m very satisfied with this work. I’ll get things going on my end, get my construction guys to survey the properties, and....” He trails off before shrugging. “I guess I’ll be in touch.”

“Great,” I say. And as he finally signs off the call, an entire wave of relief comes crashing through me. Holy shit. It’s over. I can finally breathe at the office again.

I’m still not entirely sure what he plans to do with all these places now that he has access to them. But, since he’s no

longer going after the Sugar Breeze, what he does with his time is not any of my concern.

Harris turns to me, folding his paper folder and interlacing his hands over it.

“Good work, Brett,” he says, and as he smiles again, I know he means it. “Better Horizons would have been a painful client to lose.”

“Indeed,” I agree. Though inside, I wouldn’t mind seeing Austin kicked to the curb. “I’m just glad this job went much better than the last one.”

Something behind his eyes flashes. “Me too,” he says slowly. “So will the board when they hear about this.”

Through the cloud of relief, I feel the centering weight of satisfaction.

This is it. I’ll finally be a partner at the firm in a few weeks. Since I graduated, it has been my one guiding goal.

Once things are stable for me, I can finally give Denise everything her heart desires. I can get her a beautiful house, a nicer car and even help spruce up the Sugar Breeze Bakery. Anything she wants or needs, I’m going to give her.

Closing my eyes, I bring myself back to the present.

“What’s the next project?” I ask Harris. It’s always made the higher-ups happy to show initiative.

Predictably, Harris smiles at my offer.

“I’ll have some files sent to your office,” he says. “I’ve heard that the Tinsley Simon account has been hitting some rough waters.”

My back stiffens. “What? Tinsley’s having trouble?”

He shrugs. “Public weddings that big always have some kind of hiccup. I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

Just as I get back to my office, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I see it’s a call from Denise. I shut the door behind me and quickly move to answer it.

This past month, my only bright light has been my relationship with Denise. Though I've been spending my weekdays in Houston, every weekend has been in Barton Beach, laced between her arms and legs. She is wonderful. Delightfully insatiable. I can't get enough of her.

I've had girlfriends on and off before, but never anyone that's made me feel this way.

My body craves her when I'm not with her, keeping me agitated and sweaty in my empty bed at night. Her image dances in the back of my mind, begging for my attention with her smile, the curves of her hips and ass, the feel of her heavy tits in my hands.

None of this was ever something I knew I could feel for someone else. And now that I have her, I can't get enough of her.

But I know if I come on too strong and give in to desire too many times, I could lose track of the other essential things. So far, that's mostly meant my work here at WestRock. Pushing myself into my work has been sobering, albeit painful.

Even still, if she calls me at work—especially when I feel as satisfied as I do now—I can't resist answering.

"Hey, babe," I say into the receiver. As usual, her breath shudders at the pet name.

"Don't do that," she giggles. "That's not fair."

"What? Calling my sweet girl sweet things?"

Her breathing hitches again. "You know what that kind of talk does to me. It's not fair to play with my feelings like that when you're so far away."

"I'll be down in a few days," I remind her. "I'm just trying to keep the engine warm until I get there. Helps things run better."

She blows a little raspberry. "You're such a tease."

I can't help but laugh. I adore playing with her like this, especially since I know she loves it so much. She and I had

already fostered a teasing relationship before, but ever since meeting her sister more officially last weekend, I learned just how much Denise enjoys it.

Going to her sister's for Saturday night dinner was an interesting experience.

As a man from a small family with no children of his own, being surrounded by all those wild, tiny voices was like being on a whole other planet. For the first hour or so, I felt almost overwhelmed, especially when buried under an onslaught of probing questions from Denise's sister.

Just like at the bar, Sheila was a little firecracker, the biggest defender of her older sister, and taking absolutely no shit. She wanted to know every little thing about my life, and in a way, meeting her was as intimidating as it would be to meet a girlfriend's mother. But I answered every question as best I could, and by the end of the meal, Sheila had backed down, revealing her silly side over a couple of glasses of wine.

Sheila exemplified the best of Denise's funny side. The two of them finished each other's jokes in the most hilarious way.

Even Sheila's kids seemed to take from that side of their mother's personality, cracking jokes at everything from the shape of the steamed potatoes to the rough stubble on their father's chin. Denise didn't always show it, but she came from a family full of love and silliness. In many ways, it reminded me of my brother Bash. The resilience of his humor against the crappiness of the world.

No matter how intense they all seemed at first, by the end of the night, I was already planning to have dinner with Sheila and Paul again. Denise had been so happy that she'd squealed the whole ride home. As if I couldn't love the people and the things that she loved.

That last thought bounces in my head like a pinball. How did I become a head over heels romantic like this?

"So," I continue, forcing myself out of my reverie, "what's up? How are things on the Texas Riviera?"

To my surprise, I hear her sigh.

“Things are... okay, I guess,” she says. But I can tell that she doesn’t believe the words.

“You guess?” I prompt.

“Well, you know how crazy things have been at the bakery lately. I’m on break right now, and I’m already exhausted. I never knew my feet could hurt this much.”

“I told you to get some new shoes, baby.” Sitting in my desk chair, I scoot myself over to my computer to check for the updated files about Tinsley. “I’m going to take you shopping for some next time I’m out there if you want.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she mutters. “Actually, I kind of never want to go out in public again.”

Pursing my lips, I ask, “Sounds like something big happened.”

She sighs again. “You could say that.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s not the same without you here. It’s so much better to talk about these things face to face.”

“Well,” I say, “you can either wait a few days until I’m there or tell me now over the phone. I’m sorry, I just can’t be in two places at once.”

“I wish you could. I wish you could teleport down here to surprise me. Are you sure you’re not outside my door right now?”

I chuckle. “You would know it if I was, Denise. I can’t keep myself away from you when I’m in town.”

She pauses, and I can picture the wonderful blush that has probably crossed her cheeks. “That’s true,” she says quietly. “I guess I was just hopeful.”

“I have to work, honey. That’s how I can afford to come there to see you in the first place. Now tell me what’s going on. Please.”

“Don’t rush me.”

“Okay,” I say. “Take all the time you need. I’ll be here.”

Glancing at the door, I peek at the gap between it and the carpet to see if anyone’s standing outside. Not that we’re not allowed to take calls at work. But there’s a good reason for the saying about business and pleasure.

Business and pleasure.

Hell, I’ve screwed that one up already, haven’t I? Dating my client’s sister? Now *that’s* a family dinner I’m not looking forward to.

Denise takes a deep, rallying breath on the other end of the call. As I wait for her to find the words, I check my emails and see the updated Tinsley Simon account.

I open the files and start to skim them, my eyes darting back and forth as the list goes on and on for pages. I lean closer to the screen as if getting a new angle will dispel some optical illusion.

What the hell has Tinsley been doing?

It looks like she spent tens of thousands on her wedding dress and a couple hundred thousand on the venue.

That’s to be expected.

But two hundred thousand dollars on a new car? Several hundred dollars on a bunch of new big-screen TVs? Even more money spent on gaming devices? None of that sounds like her.

I lean back in my chair, running a hand through my hair. What the hell is going on? Either Tinsley’s gone spend-crazy, or someone else has access to her accounts.

Forgetting I’m on the phone, I buzz my secretary. “Amber?” I say, holding the button down. “Get Tinsley Simon on the line for me. Or her agent. Thanks.”

“Is this a bad time?” Denise asks in my ear, and I remember she’s there.

“Everything’s fine,” I say, not wanting to worry her. “Just managing accounts. The usual. Now tell me what’s going on.”

And while I can still hear the hesitation in her voice, she at least has finally found the words.

“You didn’t hear about this at the time,” she says, “but about a month ago, we had a really rude customer in the store. She came in, made a huge fuss and tried to return a cake she said didn’t have enough filling. I tried to offer her a replacement, but she’s one of those people who would rather humiliate me than find a solution.”

“Did she come back?” I ask.

“In a way,” Denise grumbles. “She told me she had some social media followers and tried to use that clout against me. But as it turns out, she’s a pretty big mommy blogger with over a quarter million followers.”

I blink. “She makes what kind of blog?”

“You know, one of those blogs that’s all about how to raise a perfect family and be a better mom and stuff. She gets paid a lot of money by toy and diaper companies to push positive reviews of their products. And, on the other side of that coin, she can post a negative review of a company and get them in big trouble with her following.”

My gut sinks. “Did she?”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “It went a little viral, actually, it was so scathing. She may not be a good person, but she’s apparently a great storyteller. A lot of people want to buy that story. I had people coming into the bakery with their phones out to take videos of me, trying to catch me doing something silly or awful. Taking pictures of the roof, implying that the bakery must not be up to code. Telling lies about how the food is made. I’m not on social media, but Brittany is. She was showing me everything they were saying....”

I feel my fist curl up at my side as anger burns in my gut.

“What’s the name of the blog?” I ask before I can stop myself.

She sighs into the phone again, louder this time.

“Brett, no. There’s nothing you can do now. Brittany said the best thing to do is nothing. Just wait for it to die down.”

“That can’t be the only thing we do. I’ll tell you what—I have a buddy that works for a PR company. I’ll give him your number, and he can find a way to spin this whole thing back around.”

“I said no, Brett.” Her tone is stern, unwavering. “I don’t have the money to pay for a PR person right now—”

“Even with all the extra business from Tinsley’s announcement?” I ask, incredulous. I know I’ve interrupted her, but I’m in problem-solving mode now. And I’m getting a little frustrated with her that she isn’t. “I thought business had been booming?”

“Yes, but that money went to... other expenses,” Denise insists.

“Then I’ll pay for it,” I say, digging in my desk drawer for the guy’s business card.

“Brett, stop it,” she hisses. I pause what I’m doing, and she takes a shaking breath. “Stop, Brett. I don’t want Business Brett right now. I want... I *need* Boyfriend Brett.”

Her breath trembles again, and I realize how close she is to crying.

“Hey,” I say gently, pushing my drawer closed again. “Everything’s okay. I promise.”

“I just wish you were here.” Her voice is barely audible.

“I wish I was too.”

I take a deep breath of my own, knowing exactly what she’s really asking me. She wants me in Barton Beach today. To just zoom down there like I did a month ago to comfort her. But I can’t. I’ve got work. I’ve got this thing with Tinsley to figure out.

“I’m sorry, Denise,” I say. “Time and money aren’t endless. I need to stay in Houston until the end of the week.”

I'll be there Friday night. I promise.”

After a moment, she sighs again. “Alright. I guess I can wait until then. Talk to you later, Brett.”

“Okay. Talk to you soon, babe.”

And with that, she hangs up.

CHAPTER 18

Denise

I put the phone down on the table of pastry boxes and put my face in my hands. My throat burns as tears travel to my eyes, and I struggle to swallow them down.

It's selfish of me, I know. But I want Brett here. When he's around, I feel stronger. He's so worshipful of me, of everything I do.

And right now, I just want someone like that to remind me that I'm good at what I do at the bakery.

I glance again at the pastry boxes, at the logo of the pink woman and her tray of desserts. She smiles up at me, holding all my mother's love for this place and her three of her children.

I decide to call Sheila to help cheer me up.

When I pull up outside her house, Sheila's waiting on her porch for me with a couple of metal thermoses clutched in her arms. Before I can even start to unbuckle myself, she rushes over and bangs on the passenger side window until I unlock the door.

She climbs into the car beside me, closing the door quickly behind her.

A moment later, she holds out one of the thermoses for me to take. "Here," she says a little forcefully. She's obviously in full Mom Mode.

"What is it?" I ask, grasping the thermos and feeling its immense weight.

“Your medicine. Take a bit of it, and then we’ll talk.”

I shake my head. “Sheila, I have to drive home after this. I can’t drink.”

“You can stay here tonight. I’ll tell the kids to leave you alone. Now come on.”

At her insistence, I twist off the thermos cap and pour a large gulp of wine into my mouth. Sheila does the same.

Though it comes out airy and half-hearted, I snicker at her. “Sheila, I really think you have a wine problem.”

“Never mind whatever issues I’ve got,” she says. “What’s going on? You wouldn’t tell me what’s going on over text.”

“Sorry, it was just too hard to explain over text.”

As I tell her about the blog post and the awful fallout, she listens quietly, her brow falling lower and lower with everything I say. By the end, she looks so angry I would believe she could breathe fire.

“Well, shit,” she says once I’ve finished. “What an entitled woman. Fuck her and all her stupid followers.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “I wish I could, but I have a reputation now. All of Tinsley Simon’s followers are watching this too.”

“Maybe you can’t fight back, but I can. Fire with fire,” Sheila says, her eyes growing dark. “Two can play her game. Hell, if anyone on this planet is qualified to run a mommy blog, it’s me!”

I let out another airy laugh into my next sip of wine. “I don’t think it works like that. Brittany told me to just sit back and let it happen. These things run out of energy eventually. And I think that means you shouldn’t do anything either. You pick up a blog, and they’ll trace it back to me or something.”

“I was just kidding,” she says, before adding, “kind of. But we’ve got to do something. At least to take your mind off it.”

Gesturing with the thermos, I say, “Honestly, the wine is kind of helping.”

“More than that, Denise. You just... you look so defeated.”

“I feel defeated.”

“You can’t give up,” she insists. “Like you said, you have your reputation. You have Tinsley’s wedding to think about.”

“Well, maybe not....”

Her fingers clench around her metal thermos, her knuckles turning instantly white. “What did you say?” she asks. “That sounds like... the bakery....”

I nod. “Yeah. I might not have it for much longer.” I swallow, feeling the burning of tears in my throat again. “A new landlord took over the building. I got a letter from them that I never renewed my lease. I thought I had, but things have been so crazy that I don’t remember if I did. They’re planning to kick me out at the end of the month.”

Sheila looks like she’s about to spout fire again. “They can’t do that. Besides, it should be an easy fix. It’s not the end of the month yet—you still have time to renew it.”

“That’s just the thing, Sheila. In the letter, they said they’re not interested in renewing.”

As I say it, I can’t look at her. Instead, I look down the barrel of the thermos into the deep red pool within.

Despite her confidence in me, and despite her willingness to defend me, to continuously put me on an unearned pedestal... Sheila is the one person I didn’t want to admit any of this to. Telling her about these problems, revealing to her the precipice I’m standing on, is indescribably painful. I wish for a moment I could take the words back, snatch them back out of the air, and go back to teasing her over a stupid thermos of wine.

When I told Brett about the blogger over the phone, I wanted the comfort only a boyfriend can bring. I wasn’t afraid to tell him about that. And though the call didn’t go as I’d hoped, I could still believe things would be better in person. That talking to him face to face, feeling his breath, lips, and body on me, would take all the bad feelings away.

He does that better than anyone else ever has.

But even face-to-face isn't better when it comes to Sheila. Admitting to Sheila that I've jeopardized our mother's bakery feels like dragging my soul across a thousand knives. And as her silence extends, tears finally begin to prickle up into my eyes and pour across my cheeks.

Sheila and I shared Sylvia Lawson. Out of Sylvia's two birthed children, Sheila is the one who looks the most like her. She got her smile and her hair. She moves her hands the same way my Mom used to when she talks.

For the first time, I can't separate the two of them in my mind. Sheila and Sylvia have become one. To tell Sheila the bad news is to tell it to my mother's disappointed face.

Sylvia would be just that, I realize. Not angry. Not even sad. Just disappointed. And it's that disappointment from my mother's lingering spirit that I've been struggling to avoid since I found out that the bakery would be mine.

Oh, Mom. I'm so sorry.

Finally, Sheila gives a great huff through her nose. "Nope," she finally says, shaking her head. She holds out her hand to me, wiggling her fingers expectantly. "Give it to me."

Confused, I go to hand the thermos back to her, but she gently pushes this away.

"No," she insists. "The letter that your landlord sent you. I know you very well, Denise, so I know you have it with you. Give it to me. I want to read it."

"I don't think that's—"

"I don't care," she hisses. Definitely in full Mom Mode today. "Give it to me. I need to see it with my own eyes."

Reaching into the back, I pull up my purse and unclasp it. As I hand Sheila the letter, she whips it open, and her eyes begin to dart furiously along the typed text.

"You're not gonna find anything new," I start to say, but she shushes me quickly and keeps reading.

After about a minute, she looks up at me, her eyes bright and triumphant. "A-ha!" she exclaims. "There's an appeals

process! You just need to make an appointment, and you can go and appeal the decision!”

I shake my head at her. “Yeah, they say there’s an appeals process. But that’s just a legal formality. Look at the rest of the letter. They’ve already decided what they want to do.”

She smacks me across the arm with it. “Yeah, it’s a legal formality. But that means they legally have to hear you out if you call to make that appointment. This isn’t a failure on your part, Denise. This is a bunch of rich douchebags trying to step on your dreams, and I won’t let that happen. Even I have to march into that appeal myself and shout in all their faces. I’ll do it!”

“I’m not sure shouting would help—”

She cuts me off again, turning to me with wide eyes. “Brett!” she almost yells. “He’s a smart guy. Get his help on this!”

“He’s definitely smart, Sheila. But he’s a money guy. Not a real estate guy.”

Sheila wiggles her eyebrows. “But you know who *is*, right?”

“No *way*, Sheila. I’m not asking Austin for help. Do you know how embarrassing that would be? To admit to the person who wanted the bakery that I can’t handle it?”

“I don’t care. Austin is our brother, Denise. No matter what happened with Mom’s will, there’s no way that he’s still holding that against you now. He’ll help you. You just have to try. You have to be willing to fight for it.”

FRIDAY NIGHT, BRETT’S CAR ROLLS UP OUTSIDE THE bungalow.

He’s barely shut the door behind him when I bring my arms to the buttons of his blazer and shirt. Wordlessly, he finds

the buttons of my shirt, too. He knows what I need. And he gives it without complaint or any hint of hesitation.

He lays over me in the bed, the muscles of his shoulders and arms bulging as he rides me. I let him take over, let him master my body the way he knows how. I submit to his animal sexuality, letting my mind and nerves disappear for the night.

Afterward, he holds me close, his hand still on my bare hip, his fingers cupping the curve of my rear.

“You ready to talk about it?” he whispers, his eyes peering straight into mine, holding me there as if frozen by his gaze. He’s serious, intent on not letting me duck the question. “I gave you what you wanted. Now it’s your turn to do the same.”

“Brett...” I bite my lip. “I... I already told you. It’s just work drama. It’s fine.” My eyes pull away from his, staring down into the wrinkles of the sheet beneath us, the patches of sweat left from where we just made love.

Moving his hand from my hip, he grasps my chin and gently turns my face back to look at him. “It didn’t seem fine on the phone on Tuesday. You sounded upset. And you’ve avoided the question every time we’ve talked since then. You told me it’s easier to talk in person. Well,” he gestures to his wonderful form. “Here I am. Talk. Please.”

I take a deep breath, thinking hard about what to say. Brett only knows about the mommy blogger. He doesn’t know I’m potentially about to lose the bakery too. For some reason, even with Sheila’s insistence that he’d be able to help me, I can’t bring myself to tell him.

He’s already so offended by the blog situation. If I tell him about my landlord, he will focus on that. Like he proved on the phone, he’s a problem solver. But what I want is comfort. I want to possess him. For his focus to be all on me, on my body, the entire time he’s here.

Again, I think about how selfish I’ve become.

But Brett and I have only been dating for a month. It’s still that honeymoon phase, that sweetly glowing time where we

stay wrapped in each other's arms, enamored with each other before reality crashes back down. And no matter how selfish it is, I don't want that crash of reality. I want him to stay my perfect fantasy for as long as I can keep him that way. Forever, if possible.

Something stirs within me, a deep and foreign ache.

"Denise?" he presses, and I realize I still haven't said anything.

I swallow and put on a smile. "Like I said, it's fine, Brett. I've actually got Sheila on the case now. And you know how she is. She won't stop until this whole thing is fixed."

"I could help too," he insists, letting his hand fall from my chin and bringing it along my side once more, skimming his fingers down the length of my body. A shiver runs through me.

"You could. But fixing my life isn't your job when you're in town," I say. "And you're in town so infrequently."

He quirks an eyebrow, his smirk returning. "And what job is that, Ms. Lawson?"

Wrapping him in my arms, I pull myself close to him. He's strong and sturdy against my body, my rock against the harshness of this world. Enveloped in his arms, I feel small and delicate and taken care of.

"You know what that is," I whisper against his chest, the curling hairs tickling my nose and cheek.

Brett plants a kiss on the top of my head, and I melt completely against him, forgetting where I am, forgetting my mother, my siblings, my work, my name. All that I need is him.

That deep ache grows in my chest, blooming through me like a drop of ink in water. Filling me up. And as I recognize what it is, I give a little gasp.

His arms loosen their grip around me. "You okay?" he asks, as if afraid he's held me too tightly.

But I am okay. I'm more than that.

I am... in love.

As I put a name to the feeling inside me, it grows larger, and I let it, floating in its wonderful warmth. I *love* Brett.

And for the first time since my divorce, the word doesn't sting.

CHAPTER 19

Brett

A few more weeks pass.

During this time, I keep up my visits with Denise. But every time I see her, she looks exhausted.

And just like the old Denise, she isn't letting me help.

I try not to get frustrated with her. But it's difficult to see her like this. To know I'm right here for her, sometimes right up against her for hours on end, and she won't let me in. Sure, she opens her door for me every time I visit and immediately pounces.

But when we have sex, she doesn't scream for me like she used to. She's lost her passion. Sex isn't about pleasure anymore. It's no longer a reward. For her, it's become a lifeline.

We have another dinner at Sheila's, and they are quiet over their wine. Not teasing and shoving like they were before. Sheila eyes me periodically from across the table, and once, I catch her nodding in my direction while giving Denise a look. It is as if Sheila knows what's going on and wants Denise to tell me, too. When I see this, I take Denise's hand and squeeze it. Reminding her that with me, she's safe.

And that night, as I drive her back to her bungalow, she finally tells me what she's been keeping inside. She stares out the window as she says it, her eyes glittering with unshed tears as the streetlights pass us through the dark Texas night.

She's losing the bakery.

It hits me like a punch to the gut.

I ask her about the letter from her landlord and the appeals process. She says Sheila helped her put a case together, but the landlord didn't even show up when she got to the meeting. Instead, he sent a lawyer who was far more prepared than she could ever be.

The lawyer brought up the state of the bakery. The poor sales figures. The few times she was late with the rent. They strung her up for all to see. The only thing she had to defend herself with was her business with Tinsley Simon. And with how cagey Tinsley had been since the whole mommy blogger incident, that wasn't much of a defense anymore.

Shortly after I'd found those weird purchases in Tinsley's account, I contacted her agent, Maria. And I'd discovered that Tinsley hadn't lost her mind or her credit card.

She'd heard about the Sugar Breeze's tanking reputation, and to save her own skin, she'd started buying expensive items in bulk with plans to publicly donate them on one of her live streams to local charities and children's hospitals.

At the time, I didn't blame her.

Tinsley has her reputation to consider. Her business is public relations, whether we call it that or not. And if her relationship with the public is less than spotless, she could lose her whole foundation.

But knowing what it had done to Denise, how she'd been left high and dry with nothing to defend herself with in her appeal? Let's just say I'm feeling less than charitable about it now.

So, in mid-August, just a week before Tinsley Simon's wedding, when Harris holds an executive meeting and calls me to the head of the conference table to make the announcement, I walk up there feeling a bit lost.

This is it. This is the moment I've been wanting for almost three decades.

So why does it feel so hollow?

Harris shakes my hand, slapping me on the shoulder like a proud father, and the room fills with applause. Harris was telling the truth—all I needed was that one final job, and now here I am. Partner at WestRock.

I smile and nod to the rest of the room, knowing I should feel the most satisfied I've ever felt. I have a wonderful girlfriend, and now I have my dream job. My life should be all in order.

But instead, I just feel off-kilter. Like the room tilted sideways, I'm the only one here who feels it.

My smile feels tight on my face. Ill-fitted. Strained. And deep in my chest, where I know my pride should be sitting, there's just a vacuous feeling. An emptiness.

Maybe I'm just in disbelief. That's probably it. I've spent every moment of my life working my ass off to get here. The fire that has been lit under my ass, the one that has burned deep inside me all these years, has finally been put out and left an empty space behind. That's what I'm feeling. That's all it is.

“And with Mr. Cooper becoming a partner with us, I'd like to make one more announcement,” Harris continues, the clapping dying down to let him speak.

As he grins at me, it takes me a moment to process how heartfelt it looks. In fact, as he takes a breath to speak again, his wrinkles ease, like years of his life are being erased before my eyes.

“This month,” he says, “will be my last at WestRock. I'm finally retiring. Mr. Cooper will be my replacement.” He smiles at me again. “Thank you, my boy. You will be the perfect successor to my legacy.”

The meeting winds to an end, and that void in my belly still hasn't softened. And as Harris invites me into his office for a drink, I jump on it immediately. Suddenly, a glass of whiskey sounds really good. Something to take away the edge I'm feeling inside.

Harris lounges in his desk chair and pulls a bottle of whiskey and two glasses from a small liquor cabinet against the wall. Even once he's closed the door, I keep staring at the cabinet.

I'd seen it before, been wracked with jealousy at the sight of it. But now, knowing that it's soon to be mine... I'm not sure what to think of it anymore. Being high enough up the ladder to drink at work without complaint? It almost seems a little silly. Cliché. I half expect him to bring out a pair of celebratory cigars next.

Harris pours a glass for me, and as I raise it quickly to my mouth, he chuckles. "No, no," he says. "Hold on, boy. There's a tradition here."

Raising his own glass, he nods at mine, encouraging me to do the same. "To changing tides," he says as our glasses meet. And with that, he brings the drink to his lips and knocks the entire thing back.

Pouring himself another glass, he laughs again. I've never seen him this bright, this happy. He winks at me. "Don't look so nervous, Brett. You've done well. You've earned this. There's no one else I'd rather have to replace me."

"Good," I say, though he seems to notice the lack of conviction in my tone.

"I know that look," he mutters, sipping his drink. "You're seeing your life flash before your eyes. The things you passed up to get here, the things you gave away. Everything that is to come." His eyes meet mine, shining. "You remind me a lot of myself, you know. Buried in the work. Never any time to marry, to have a family. And look at me now, retiring at sixty-four with a pile of money and my best years ahead of me. Not everyone ends up in this position, you know."

"You never married?" I ask him suddenly, surprising even myself. "You never found anyone?"

"Oh, there were girls here and there," he says, waving his hand a bit dismissively. "If you're worried about finding a woman to share a bed with, Brett—don't. Women flock to

money. You can have your pick of them. But a man in our position must have his priorities straight.” As he bends his face down to meet his glass again, he pauses, his eyes flicking up to meet mine. “Do you understand what I mean?”

I lean back against my chair, gripping my glass hard in my fingers. And my thoughts immediately return to Denise.

The last time I’d seen her, just a few days ago, she’d still been devastated about the appeal. I’d also shared a few drinks with her, and she’d been uncharacteristically quiet over hers.

She and I had only known each other for a couple of months. In that time, we’d argued, we’d fought, we’d struggled through her bakery falling apart, through work drama around her brother that I still had not admitted to her.

And even then, I didn’t want to picture the rest of my life without her in it.

A chuckle rumbles in Harris’ chest again. “Look at both of us, Brett. You’re just like me. There’s no use pretending otherwise. Now, have another drink and be thankful. The rest of your life sits before you. Relish it.”

TRADITIONALLY, WHEN SOMEONE MAKES PARTNER AT WestRock, the company takes him out for a fancy dinner. They invite the firm’s biggest clients, especially those they have worked closely with. And all men in the company are encouraged to bring their wives and girlfriends to show them off in a parade of beauty.

I could still remember the last guy to make partner, how his wife dressed up like she was going to a movie premiere, not just a business dinner. All flouncy skirts and fistfuls of glitter and sequins. She walked in like a prize for all the other men to gawk at and appreciate. To be jealous of.

Even knowing this, I’m still torn about bringing Denise.

She probably wouldn’t say no. Even as bummed as she’s been lately, she still enjoys going places together. Showing me

off in her little city. It would be nice to repay the favor for once. To show off the fabulous catch I've stumbled into. Even with the bakery to take care of, I know she would love the reprieve, the chance to come back to Houston and share my side of life and escape hers, even if for just one night.

But despite this, I know that I shouldn't. I shouldn't even tell her about it.

Not because I don't think she would enjoy it or because I think she'll say no.

It's because I know Austin is going to be there.

With the way things have been for her lately, I can't invite that kind of drama into her life. In two months, once her lease is up and she's officially moved out for good, maybe we can talk about her brother. Mention my working relationship with him. The heinous betrayal that I almost carried out for him.

Maybe.

A couple of hours before the dinner party, as I'm struggling to get my tie exactly how I want it, I hear the buzz of the callbox. Thinking it's just a delivery man ringing for the wrong person, I step over and hit the button to talk to him.

"Hello?" I ask, not even trying to cover the edge of agitation in my voice. "What do you need?"

"What I need," says the voice on the other end, "is to give my baby brother a big, fat hug."

I blink. "Bash? What the hell?"

"I'm here to support my baby brother!"

I wince and pull my ear from the speaker as he shouts.

Buzzing him in, he bounds up the stairs in less than a minute and does exactly what he said he'd do: before I can even get a word out, his arms wrap around me, squeezing all the air from my lungs.

He eventually sets me down, and I brush off my shirt and straighten my tie again. I ask, "What are you doing here?" But as my eyes glance downward and I realize what he's wearing,

I find the answer to my question before it leaves his stupidly grinning mouth.

Holding his arms out to model his scruffy attempt at business attire, he says, “I’m here to go to your fancy party! You said you weren’t bringing that girlfriend of yours. So, I thought, what the hey? I’m the next best thing!”

I purse my lips, trying to keep them from curling in pre-embarrassment. “Bash. That is such a... *sweet* gesture. But I’m fine going alone.”

He slaps me roughly on the shoulder, laughing dismissively. “I knew you’d say that. But I’m not gonna give you a choice this time. You need someone there who’s got your back.”

“I’m a partner now. Everyone there has my back.”

“Yeah, and now you have me too.” Putting his hand to his forehead, he bends backward, pretending to swoon. “You simply must promise to save me a dance, sir! I’ve always wanted a dance from a handsome man like Mr. Brett Cooper.”

I push him, and he catches his balance again, cracking up. “That’s no way to treat your date, Brett.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I wrack my brain for *anything* to say to convince him not to come. Bringing him to this party means bringing someone for me to babysit. And lord only knows how he’ll behave in front of the other partners and the employees now under my authority. If my brother makes a fool of himself and me, and I might lose all the credibility I’ve worked to create for myself all these years.

But the more I think about it, the more I realize that if I don’t take him with me, he’ll just wreak havoc on my apartment while I’m gone. After seeing the state of his office at The Silver Coop, I’m not sure I’d ever want to risk that.

Besides, if I’m being honest... I do appreciate him coming here. He came here just to support me on one of the biggest nights of my career. I guess I understand now exactly how Denise felt when I went to Barton Beach just for her.

I know it will only encourage him, but I step forward and wrap my arms around my little brother. I almost can't help myself.

“Wow,” Bash mutters, patting me on the back. “Where's my brother gone? He's never been a hugger.”

We've been through hell and back together. Absent parents, crappy homes. He's been my one consistent thing, my one shining light guiding me through.

Deep down, I know that if I can't have Denise here, there's no one else I'd have going with me than him.

THE DINNER STARTS WELL, AND, FOR THE MOST PART, BASH seems to behave himself. He cheers a little too loudly as Harris makes his toast, treating the whole affair too much like a raucous baseball match than a professional dinner. But he seems to settle in pretty nicely once the food and drinks are served, and he's one beer down. It's good to see the more business-minded side of Bash, the one that has managed to build a successful business for himself.

A thought strikes me as I watch him, and as he turns to say something to me, he pauses, catching something in my expression. “Oh,” he says, teasing, “there's that face again. Ol' reliable.”

“What face?” I ask him.

He takes another sip of his second beer. “That face you get when you're lost in your own thoughts. You get like that sometimes. Just go off on this train of thought that pulls you into yourself. So, what is it this time? The massive payload you're about to get dumped in your lap? The Parisian beach house you're going to buy?”

I snort. “There are no beaches in Paris. It's riverside.”

“I stand by my point.”

I stare into my glass. “I’m just thinking about... well, about how proud I am of us, Bash,” I say halfheartedly. “Considering what we came from... for both of us to have achieved our dreams? It seems incredible.”

Bash lowers his glass and chuckles. “If you really think that, then tell your fucking face.”

I elbow him in the ribs. “Knock that off. It’s my party. You’re not allowed to speak to me that way.”

“Sorry, your *highness*,” he says sarcastically. “But you can’t say things like that while you look so bummed. Might make someone think being a partner isn’t your dream.”

He raises his glass to his lips, prepared to take another drink, but he pauses, seeing something new in my eyes. “Oh no,” he grumbles. “There it is again. The Look.” He chugs the rest of his drink before standing. “I’ll leave you and your mind alone for a moment. Besides, there’s this cute redhead across the way I’ve had my eye on all night.”

As he turns to leave, I open my mouth, wanting to say something to refute his point. And for the first time in years, when I’m supposed to talk about how much I love my work, I come up empty.

What the hell is wrong with me? What’s changed?

Bash trots through the crowd to a table on the other side of the room, and I quickly take another drink, waiting for some kind of clarity to return. I feel the floor turning sideways beneath my feet again, threatening to throw me off of it.

Is Bash right? Is being a partner not what I want?

A fist of anger fueled by sheer stubbornness forms in my chest. Of course, this is what I want. I’ve spent my life getting here. I’ve made it. I’ve got the title, got the clout. I’ve gotten everything I’ve ever wanted. I should be fucking happy about it.

Taking another drink, I glance over at Bash again, at him fawning over some girl. She’s a skinny little thing half his age, with a tight black dress and a matching clutch purse. She starts

to shake her head at him, obviously rejecting his advances, and as her face turns to me, I almost choke on my drink.

I recognize her. It's Brittany. The assistant manager of the Sugar Breeze Bakery.

I put down my drink, feeling my fingers going numb against the glass. What the hell is she doing here? As I watch, that terrible question is answered, and my lungs become ice blocks in my chest.

A man approaches Bash from behind and, putting his hands on my brother's shoulders, moves him away from Brittany. She stands, a smile across her face, and leans into the man, her hand on his chest. Enamored with him, even as he scolds my brother away.

It's Austin. Austin *fucking* Lawson.

I'm pissed. For me and *especially* for Denise. How long have these two known each other? I'm sure Denise told me once that Austin is also married, with two kids, no less. Fucking bastard.

My hand twitches into a fist. If this weren't my dinner party, if Harris wasn't sitting just a table away, I would go over there right now and teach Austin a goddamn lesson.

Fuck. As another thought strikes me, I unwrap my fist and run my fingers through my hair. *Shit*.

I can't even tell Denise about this, can I? If I tell her I saw Austin, she'd find out about this dinner party, that I didn't want to invite her. That my stupid brother came with me instead. And worse, she'd find out about my professional relationship, however tenuous, with Austin. That I lied to her. That when we first met, I'd wanted to take her bakery from her without flinching.

What the hell am I going to do?

CHAPTER 20

Denise

My hands are shaking. I shove them into the pockets of my shorts before Brett can see them. I don't want him to worry.

Things have been tense between the two of us since the appeal went down. The sex is still good, of course. He still flies in every weekend, and with his new promotion, he can even afford to show up a day or two early. We'll stay in my bungalow, just the two of us, his lips on my body and my head in the clouds. It's been incredible. But when we're not having sex, things just seem to have a strange awkwardness to them.

I noticed it in pieces. In the mornings, after we'd make love, he'd trudge to the kitchen to make us coffee, his gusto gone and replaced with tiredness. He'd eat his breakfast quietly, no longer taking an interest in what's going on at the Sugar Breeze. No longer asking me about my work, something that used to be such a point of interest.

The worst was when he came with me to the bakery yesterday to help out. But despite his enthusiasm in the morning, as soon as he stepped in through the doors, he got that look again. The one he had before we gave in to our attraction. Back when I thought he didn't like me.

Nose wrinkled and eyes darkened, he stood against the far wall, putting fruit tarts into the glass case one at a time, his eyes flicking to the counter.

"You okay?" I asked him quietly as I passed by.

"Fine," was all he said back. He didn't even meet my gaze.

I looked at the counter as if hoping to see what was bothering him. But all I found were a bunch of colorful pastries and Brittany giggling happily with a customer. Nothing offensive in sight.

“You don’t have to come here if you don’t want to,” I said quietly, my hand on his arm. Insecurity wiggling under my skin. “It was a nice offer, but if you’re uncomfortable, you can sit in the back. I know it’s more active than what you normally do for work.”

“I’m fine,” he repeated. “Please. Don’t worry about me. There’s nothing wrong.”

And when I’d gone to check in with Brittany, she’d pointed out Brett’s odd behavior too. “Your little friend over there feeling okay?” she asked.

I nodded. “He says he is.”

“Maybe you need to let him outside. Take him on a walk. Get some fresh air.”

I snorted, snuggling my shoulder up against hers. “I know you’re just teasing,” I said. “But he’s the one thing I need to be working right now.”

When we’d failed the appeals process, the landlord’s lawyer thought it was fair to give us sixty days to move out. It had been a couple of weeks, and already the signs of the change were obvious. The tables and chairs were gone, and we’d narrowed our menu considerably. I’d even had to let a few of the bakers in the kitchen go, as much as it had pained me to do it. Most of them had been working here for years and had worked directly for my mother. It was embarrassing to keep letting people down like this.

At the end of the day, when I’d taken Brett back out to the car, I’d reached for the shifter only to find his hand on mine, stopping me. And as I turned to meet his eyes, they were even darker than they’d been that morning.

“What?” I asked him. “What’s the matter?”

He’d bitten his lip for a moment, his eyes flicking to the bakery. Was he trying to give me a silent signal? Why did it

look like something was eating him up inside?

“Brett, talk to me,” I insisted.

Finally, after shifting uncomfortably in his seat, he’d managed to say, his tone flat and measured, “I just want you to be careful. Remember that not everyone has your best interests in mind.”

“I know that.” I was almost offended. “I’m losing my mother’s bakery because of my awful landlord, Brett. I know to watch out for scumbags.”

“No,” he said, those serious blue eyes meeting mine again. His hand was still gripping mine, and in fact, his grip had tightened. I stared at him for what felt like several minutes, waiting for him to say what was on his mind. For him to tell me exactly what he was so worried about.

But instead, he just shook his head, his jaw tightening and his eyes falling from mine. Holding back whatever it was he’d been thinking of saying. “Never mind,” he said. “I just want you to be happy.”

That night, as Brett was out in the kitchen starting our dinner, I left the room to take a call from Sophia. With her getting on the plane to come down here in less than twenty-four hours, we were doing our final check-in for the night. And even then, I couldn’t help but bring up what had happened with Brett at the bakery. The way his attitude had shifted, becoming quiet and pensive. Even evasive.

“That’s kind of a red flag, Mom,” Sophia had said, making my stomach sink in my chest. “A guy suddenly changing attitudes? Not wanting you to trust the people around you? I know he’s kinda swept you off your feet or whatever, but you need to be careful of stuff like that.”

“I don’t want to think the worst of him,” I said, my nerves still crawling around inside me. “He cares about me, Sophia. He really does. You’ll see when you meet him tomorrow.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say,” she grumbled.

“Uh oh,” I said, noticing something hidden in her tone. “What happened? What man messed with my daughter?”

Instead of answering, she'd just sighed. "I'll tell you about it when I see you."

"It wasn't your father, was it? I told you that you should have come to stay with me once school was over. I know he's got that big house and the cute dogs, but he needs to have your best interests in—"

"It wasn't Dad, Mom. Calm down." Like the young woman she was, she gave another exasperated sigh. "It's just boy stuff. We'll talk in person. See you tomorrow, Mom. Love you."

My hands grip the insides of my pockets again as my palms turn sweaty. Brett and I are standing in the airport, the luggage carousels whirring behind us, staring at the escalators and waiting for Sophia to appear among the crowds of people on them. As he wraps an arm around my waist, I can feel his muscles still tense against me. Not tense with need like they used to be, but tense with something I can't put a name to.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. I turn to look up at him. "Whatever this is that's going on with you, knock it off. It stops now," I say. He blinks, his blue eyes widening a little in surprise as he turns to meet my gaze.

"I don't know what you—" he starts to say, but I cut him off.

"Don't lie, Brett. No more lying. There's been something off about you for a couple of weeks now. I can't take it anymore."

His surprise fades, replaced by a lowering brow. "You've been off too," he says, almost defensively.

"Yeah, well, at least I have a good reason. I'm losing everything I care about." My voice trembles, and I quickly catch my breath, holding back the tears that are threatening to flow once again.

After a moment, I say, "I can't go on like this, Brett. I want to connect with you emotionally again. You know what I mean?"

His eyes move to the floor, and he frowns. “Yeah,” he admits. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“Things have been so great for you, Brett. I mean, your career dreams are coming true.” His pensive frown deepens. “I just want to know what’s wrong. Is it... is it something I’ve done?”

Taking my hand in his, he brings his lips to my knuckles, kissing them hard. “Of course not,” he insists, his lips brushing against my skin as he talks. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I know I’ve been sad lately, and if that’s too much for you to handle—”

He chuckles a little. “I promise, you will never be too much for me to handle.”

“Then what is it?” I look him deep in his eyes now, holding him in my gaze. “Please. I’m already losing so much. I... I can’t lose you... too....” As I say it, the tears return, stinging my eyes and my throat. Closing my eyes, I think about my daughter, about wanting to be strong for her. Forcing calmness and coolness to return.

Brett drops my hand, bringing both of his to either side of my face. Immediately, his lips are on mine, and in that one kiss, I feel everything he feels for me. His continuing passion, his undying attraction to me. His adoration. His desire.

For a moment, it’s almost like we’re alone in the bungalow again. His teeth emerge, biting at my lip. I almost want to drag him into the nearby bathrooms to see all this through. To let him show me his passion in full. To let him take me over and over again.

But with Sophia’s upcoming arrival, I know we can’t. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I draw myself back, pulling our lips apart.

“Let’s put a pin in that,” I whisper.

“Not for too long, though,” he agrees. “I want this to work, Denise. I promise.”

“Then help me make it work. Don’t clam up.”

He sighs, his wonderful breath grazing my face. I put my hands on either side of his head, holding him exactly as he held me. Keeping him steady while letting him know exactly how serious I am.

Finally, he says, “Okay... there is something I haven’t told you about....”

But just as he takes a slow breath, preparing himself to say more, there’s a happy cry from the escalators.

“Mom!”

I whip around to look for her. A plane must have just landed and let all its passengers loose, as the escalators are packed with people again. And right there in the middle of the crowd is Sophia. My heart becomes as light as a balloon when I spot her, a vision of beauty in the center of the crowd. It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other, it feels like a lifetime.

As she reaches the end of the escalators, she rushes over to me, a large bag slung over her shoulder. She’s as lovely as ever. Dark almond eyes pinching with her large smile, her coffee-brown hair up in two buns on top of her head. Her arms wrap around me and squeeze me tightly, and I do the same to her, holding her as close as I possibly can.

Far too quickly, she lets go of me again and stepped back, tears shining in her eyes as well. “I’m so sorry about Grandma’s bakery, Mom,” she says.

I kiss her on the cheek, stroking her soft hair. “I know,” I say. Swallowing the tears down, I let out a little laugh. “Let’s not talk about it here, okay? I’m already enough of a mess.”

Sophia giggles too. But as Brett steps forward and offers to take her bag, her smile transforms into a squinted look of suspicion. “So,” she says, her tone hardened. “You’re the boyfriend, then?”

To my surprise, Brett’s intensity melts, replaced with that old familiar smirk. “Yeah. You’re the daughter?”

“Yeah.” She eyes him up and down. And as her mother, I notice her cheeks sucking inward. I know her well enough to know she’s struggling to hold back a smile. “Wow,” she finally says. “My Mom sure has a type, doesn’t she?”

I flush, smiling in embarrassment. “Soph, stop it.”

“What does that mean?” Brett asks, his smirk growing. The old Brett returning right before my eyes.

“Oh, you know,” Sophia says. “Tall. Dark. Incredibly handsome.”

“Really?” Brett raises an eyebrow at me, obviously finding all of this very funny. “Handsome?”

“Don’t act so humble,” I tease, elbowing him in the side.

He chuckles. “I’m just saying there’s a good number of handsome men here in Texas. Guess I got to keep my eye on you.”

And even though I can tell she’s still holding back a smile, Sophia makes an annoyed sound in the back of her throat. “C’mon, you guys. It’s dinner time, and I should eat. Don’t make me sick.”

We stop at a local bistro for dinner, despite Brett’s insistence that we go back to the Sandcastle Steakhouse. But with my daughter home after almost a year away, I just want something simple and fast. I slide in beside her in one of the red booths and snuggle against her, laughing as she tries to push me away in embarrassment. Brett sits across the table from us, his foot settling against mine underneath the table.

The waitress arrives, beaming at us, our menus in hand. “Aww, what a happy little family,” she says.

To my surprise, Brett doesn’t move to correct her use of the word “family.” Sophia looks at me as if expecting me to speak up when Brett doesn’t. But I say nothing. I let the word hang in the air, giving a wonderful weight to our sweet little threesome. I like it a lot.

After our orders are taken, Sophia gulps down her complimentary glass of water like a suffocating fish.

“Here,” Brett says, pushing his water closer to her. “Have mine too. No doubt you’re parched from the plane ride.”

Sophia pauses, lowering her cup and eyeing him again, still looking for any sign that he’s not what he seems. But eventually, she accepts his offer, pulling the cup closer.

“Thanks,” she says simply, finishing her first glass. “So, Brett. What do you do for a living?”

“I work for an investment firm in Houston. I just made partner.”

She nods. “Hm. Make a lot of money?”

“Yep,” he says, the corner of his mouth sliding upward. “Rolling in the big bucks. That’s how I can afford to fly down and see your mom every weekend.”

Sophia nods, giving me a little sideways glance of approval.

I bite the inside of my cheek, sucking them in just like she did as I struggle to keep from laughing. I knew having the two of them meet for the first time would be a little awkward. But it’s not at all like what I expected it would be. Instead of arguing and pestering, or even just agitated silence, there’s this silly reversal of roles.

When Sophia first started dating as a teenager, I would grill every boy that came to our door, trying to figure out if he was worth a second of my daughter’s time. And now here she is, trying to do the same for me with my boyfriend. I snuggle closer to her, feeling safe again now that she’s around. Feeling whole.

Even with the bakery falling through my fingers after just a year, for the first time since the landlord’s letter, I feel a small sense of peace. If I were to lose everything, I would still have Brett, and I would still have my darling Sophia. I would still have Sheila and Paul and the kids. My gifts from the universe.

My little hodgepodge family.

No matter how bleak things have been, I know this for certain. And it's a very comforting thing to know.

Sophia and Brett continue like this for several minutes. Through her, I learn his parents' names, his middle name and his brother's, the day of the week he was born, and his favorite wrestler growing up. Not even our food arriving at the table can slow Sophia down. Instead, she continues to pester him with questions, even with a bite of Monte Cristo tucked into her cheek.

Once she feels she's done, Sophia finally turns to me with a sigh and gives a brief nod. "That's all I got," she announces. "You did good, Mom. I can't find anything wrong with this one."

"Good to hear," I say, meeting Brett's eyes and returning his smirk. Beneath the table, I rub my foot against his leg. "But from what I've heard, you haven't been so lucky."

When she realizes my meaning, she deflates a little. "Yeah. Do you remember that guy I told you about over the phone? The one I met a few years ago at summer camp? Turns out he wasn't a great guy to hang around. All he wanted to do was party and smoke weed. It's not like we were exclusive, but I caught him trying to flirt with other girls behind my back. He was a pig."

I wrinkle my nose. "Yeah, I don't blame you for feeling that way. I'm sorry, baby." Stroking her beautiful hair again, I add, "You deserve only the best."

"You both do," Brett says, winking at me. I give him a little kick under the table.

"Anyway, don't worry about boys just yet," I say, scooping my fries onto her plate. "It's only your first year of college. There's going to be all kinds of ups and downs, and boys are included in that. Trust me, you'll be fine."

Sophia says through a mouthful of fries, "Oh yeah, Mom. Speaking of school, I've signed up for next semester's classes, but there's been some kind of issue with the college fund you and Dad made for me. The school only accepted part of the

money for tuition, and I can't remember my login to the account to check why they can't access the rest. Do you have it?"

I stop breathing, feeling my whole face going white.

Sophia rolls her eyes at me. "Yeah, sorry, I mentioned Dad," she says, misdiagnosing my reaction. "I'll try not to. Don't worry, we'll figure out the login at the bungalow."

As she digs back into her fries, Brett peers at me from across the table. "You okay?" he mouths, his foot rubbing my ankle affectionately.

No. No, I'm not. I bring my hands under the table, pretending to adjust the napkin over my lap. But really, it's to hide the returning shaking of my nerves. I grip the napkin hard, biting down on my tongue. For the first time in weeks, I had felt happy, content. *Of course*, something else had to come up and suck that all away again.

How do I tell Sophia that when she goes to look in her college fund, she will find nothing there?

Ugh.

CHAPTER 21

Brett

When the alarm wakes me at four a.m., I groan deeply, rubbing my hands over my stinging, sleepless eyes.

Before I've even opened them, I feel Denise slip out of bed and quickly shut the alarm off.

"Come on," she says, throwing the blankets off of me. "Time to get to work."

It's the day of Tinsley Simon's wedding, and while Denise and her remaining baker have done most of the prep work, there's still quite a lot left to do if we're going to have everything ready on time. Over the next twenty minutes, we gulp down as much coffee as possible and gather a mountain of supplies and a zombie-like Sophia into Denise's car to take to the Sugar Breeze.

When Denise asked me a few days ago if I would come and help, I immediately said yes. Of course, I was going to help my girlfriend on the most important day of her career. I mean, I'd just had mine. Time to share the wealth. Especially since, most likely, it would be one of her last.

Even considering that, I'm worried about her being nervous. Something seemed to switch in her mind during our dinner last night. In the beginning, she was bright and happy. Then, about midway through, something changed. Some of her goofiness around her daughter had fallen away. In fact, she'd even turned a little green and hadn't eaten another bite for the rest of the meal. So, despite my sleepiness, I keep a close eye on her, determined to keep her in an alright state of mind.

As she drives through the early morning sunrise, her eyes are huge as they stare at the road. I swear she isn't even blinking.

"It's going to be okay," I say, reaching for her hand. But she bats it away.

"You don't understand, Brett," she says, biting her lip. Distressed, she glances in the rearview mirror at Sophia in the backseat. I turn around too, finding the young woman back asleep and softly snoring, her head uncomfortably angled to rest on her shoulder.

Beside me, Denise sighs. "I'm going to tell you what's up, Brett," she whispers hurriedly. "But Sophia *can't know*. Do you understand?"

"Of course," I whisper back. "What's going on?"

"Well..." She chews her lip again, and for a horrible moment, I think she's going to talk herself out of saying anything. But as her eyes meet mine, I give her an encouraging nod, and she seems to find the strength she needs to say it. "You know the bakery hasn't been doing well since I took it over, right?"

"I disagree."

"Well, a few months ago, I was struggling to meet the rent payment. I had just enough for utilities and restocking, but none of that was going to matter if I couldn't get the rent in for the bakery on time. I'd already asked for an extension, but it wasn't helping and..." Even in the dim lighting, I can tell her face is growing pinched, forcing herself to hold the tears back. "And I borrowed some money out of Sophia's college fund. Without telling her I was doing it."

My whole body stiffens. "You did?"

"Yeah." Quietly, she takes a shaking breath, trying to remain calm. "I planned to put it all back in there before the next month was over. But then I couldn't meet the rent that month either, so I... I took the rest."

I run my hand through my hair and blow out a breath. "Denise."

“I was desperate,” she hisses. “You don’t understand. And that was right when I got the phone call from Tinsley’s agent saying she was considering me for her wedding, and I thought this would be my lucky break. With Tinsley’s down payment, I was able to pay the rent and had some leftover, which I put into Sophia’s account immediately. But it wasn’t going to be enough. Not even to cover just the dorm room. College is expensive these days.”

Taking a deep breath to stop my reeling head, I ask her, “I know you haven’t told Sophia about this, but have you told her dad?”

She huffs. “I can’t, Brett. I can’t admit to him that after the divorce, his life became a paradise and mine... m-mine became a....” The words catch in her throat as she sobs, the tears flowing freely now.

“Pull over, baby,” I tell her. “Slowly.”

She does as I ask, turning slowly into the nearest parking lot and easing the car to a stop. Leaning across the car, I fold her into my arms.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say softly, though inside, my mind is still going a hundred miles an hour. “It’s fine. We’ll figure this out.”

“That’s why I *need* this wedding to go well, Brett,” she whispers into my shoulder, her voice so small I can barely understand her. “With the bakery going, the rest of Tinsley’s payment will go into Sophia’s account before she even notices it’s gone. I c-can’t let her know what I did, Brett. I need this day to go p-perfectly.”

I rub her back, trying to calm her down. “Shh. Don’t worry. It will. You’re great at what you do. Everything will be fine.” And even though I’m not sure yet that I believe it, I hope she will.

From the backseat, I hear Sophia let out a sleepy sigh, shifting as she starts to sit up.

“Are we there?” she mumbles, stretching. Then she pauses. “Oh jeez. You guys couldn’t even wait ten minutes to before

crawling all over each other? Come on.”

“Sorry,” Denise says quickly, sitting up and clearing her throat so Sophia won’t hear how upset she is. “We’ll get moving again.”

“Like a couple of teenagers,” I hear Sophia murmur to herself before she quickly falls back to sleep.

PAUL AND SHEILA ARE ALREADY WAITING OUTSIDE THE SUGAR Breeze when we arrive, along with one of Denise’s bakers. As Denise hops out of the car and directs them to bring the supplies in, Sheila’s eyebrows are furrowed in concern. She can tell Denise has been crying. But luckily, she knows better than to say anything. At least not yet.

As a group, we all head into the kitchen. With her little ragtag team of inexperienced helpers behind her, Denise quickly whips us all into shape. It’s fascinating seeing her at work like this. When she wants to be, she can be an excellent boss, even on a day like this.

She and her baker will be at the dough station, cutting out hundreds of cookies and filling dozens of little pans, bringing them all to the ovens to bake. She puts Sheila and Sophia at the end of the line while Paul mans the ovens.

I’m at the far end of the kitchen with the large industrial mixers and hands a small stack of paper recipes.

“You’re a smart man,” she says, patting my arm affectionately. “I trust you can follow these recipes. They’re not very complicated. I promise.”

“Of course,” I assure her, giving her a peck on the cheek. “Anything for you, babe.”

Denise flushes a little, but my assurance seems to put a little extra pep in her step.

With all of us working together like this, the job gets done quickly. In fact, it all gets done so quickly that, within half an

hour, Denise has moved from the dough station to the end of the production line, loading pastries into boxes to free up enough counter space for everything the ovens are still churning out.

The finished wedding cake sits in the corner, thawing from its night in the fridge and looking gorgeous. Virginal white with delicate icing swoops, edible pearls, and a sugar sun that looks immaculate at the top. Perfect and shining like stained glass.

Denise really is great at what she does.

After a few hours, Brittany finally arrives, smiling and waving shyly and apologizing for the delay. When Denise sees she's already come dressed for the wedding, she directs Brittany to bounce around the kitchen instead of a specific station. She's free to go wherever help is needed. And as Brittany immediately turns to me and gives a wave, my mood immediately sours. I do not return her greeting.

Because the more I think about it, the more things about the state of this bakery start to make less and less sense. And the connecting fiber between all of them in my mind is Brittany.

The more I think about it, the more I realize how strange some of the bakery's problems seem. How unlikely is it for so many different things to go wrong at once? Even the types of things that have gone wrong seem increasingly suspicious to me as each day goes by.

The bathroom door that mysteriously locked itself, for instance. The more I think about it, the weirder it gets.

Obviously, a door wouldn't just do something like that alone. It had to be a person. But not a customer. I've been in there. There are no other exits. No extra doors to pry open, no windows to climb through. It had to have been someone with access to a key. And the only two people I know for sure had access to the bathroom key are both standing in this room. Denise and Brittany.

And I know for sure that *one* of them didn't do it.

It seems so far-fetched, doesn't it? When Denise told me about the bathroom at first, about the myriad of problems at the Sugar Breeze, I realized they were strange, but I didn't put too much thought into it. Other things were going on in our lives that seemed more important. And besides, I was new in town. I had no reason to suspect anyone in the bakery of any wrongdoing.

But after seeing Brittany at the party with Austin....

Day by day, my suspicions of her only grow.

How does a woman like her come to not only have met but *intimately* know Austin Lawson? This isn't an assumption on my part, either. They know each other. I didn't talk to them the entire night of that party, but I watched for hours from a distance. Observing them. Every time their hands touched, she stroked his chest, his hair. Every time, he laughed at one of her jokes.

Austin had introduced her to Harris as a good friend of his, no doubt trying to excuse why he brought some girl and not his wife. But I could tell from their body language that they were so much more than just "good friends." They were comfortable with each other. Whatever this was between them, they'd been doing it for a long time.

And then there was that moment, later in the night, when Austin and Brittany were preparing to leave. They hadn't spoken to me all night, even though this was a party in my honor. They didn't say hello, and at this point in the night, they certainly weren't going to come over to say goodbye. Good for them. I don't know what I would have done if they had.

Even then, Austin didn't need to say anything to me to get his point across. As he turned away from Harris, readying himself to go to the coat check for his jacket, his eyes landed directly on mine. And a smile had crossed his face. A horrible, smug grin. Like he knew something I didn't.

It sounds conspiratorial, even in my own mind. I don't have all the pieces to the puzzle yet. I don't know how they got the new landlord in on this, for one thing. But there's

something fishy going on here, that's for sure. And when I figure out what that is, I'll—

“Hey there,” Brittany says beside me, perky as ever. I jump, nearly dropping my measuring cup into the active mixer. She laughs. “Didn't mean to scare you, Brett. Uh, I mean Mr. Cooper.”

“I hope not,” I say dryly.

“Definitely. You've got a really important job over here.”

I curl my lip. “Yeah. Important jobs shouldn't be messed with.”

Her eyes sweep across the kitchen, not catching the meaning within my tone. “It's amazing, isn't it? Making a cake for *the* Tinsley Simon? I never imagined this would happen! I'm so excited!”

“Are you?”

Brittany blinks at me in confusion. “Of course I am.”

I snort. “Could have fooled me.”

The smile slips from her face as her eyes narrow. “You're being really intense right now.”

I set down the measuring cup harder than I mean to, sending it clattering across the countertop. “Fuck off, Brittany.”

She scowls. “Wow. You really aren't a morning person.”

I scowl at her. “I said what I said.”

“*Hey.*” Denise walks over, putting her hand on Brittany's shoulder and her body between the two of us. “Knock that off.”

She steers Brittany around to face the packaging station. “You go and start putting everything in boxes, okay, sweetie? I'll be over to help you in a second.”

Shooting me one last glare, Brittany does as Denise suggests, scurrying away across the kitchen. But even the distance between us doesn't dissolve my anger. I turn back to

the recipe I'm working on, and as soon as I pick an egg up into my hand to separate it, I accidentally crush the entire thing in my fist.

"What is going on with you, Brett?" Denise asks in a hushed tone. "I know we're all feeling the pressure, but don't take it out on my assistant manager. Please."

"You don't understand," I spit, roughly wiping my hands clean.

"Then tell me," She insists. "What don't I understand? Is this..." Her eyes flick almost instinctively to her daughter. "Is this about our conversation in the car?"

"No. It isn't."

"Good. Because that's not Brittany's fault, and taking it out on her isn't helping."

You have no idea.

My theories fly through my head again. And for a moment, I'm desperate to tell her what I know. So desperate that it almost hurts.

But as I look down at Denise again, considering saying the words, I feel my resolve crumpling like an old receipt. Despite the intensity of our conversation this morning, there is a passion for baking in her eyes again. Even beneath all the stress and the concern over my fight with Brittany, she looks... truly happy.

I think back on how she's been this morning at the bakery since we stepped into this kitchen and got to work. While I've been bent over the mixer, buried in my mind, she's been laughing again. Heartily, deep from her chest. She's been happy here in the bakery with all of us working together. All her favorite people are in one place. The sister she adores, the daughter she never gets to see anymore, the boyfriend of a couple months. This day isn't just about her career to her.

Looking back at her, my heart swells in adoration. I've never felt this way for a woman before. Never in my forty-seven years. This level of need, this desire, and this

overwhelming call to protect her, are all new to me. New and unfamiliar and... wonderful. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

She seems to notice a change in my gaze, and a soft blush rises in her cheeks.

"Don't look at me like that," she whispers. "Not today."

"Like what?" I ask. I take a step closer, wanting to feel her shape against me again. Needing my arms to envelope her, to keep her safe.

"Like you... want us to be *alone together* in the other room." Her blush deepens. "Now's not the time, Brett. I need to concentrate. You do, too. You're about to overmix that batter."

I find the switch and shut the mixer off for a moment.

"Now," she says gently. "What were you going to tell me?"

I pause, feeling the words bubble in my chest again. Not telling her the truth feels like a terrible betrayal. But the need to protect her overrides the rest of what I'm feeling. I can't tell her about Brittany and Austin's relationship on her big day. I can't tell her about my professional relationship with her brother.

For the first time in weeks, she's excited. She's happy. And I can't yank that rug out from under her. Not yet, anyway.

Not until after the wedding. But when everything is said and done, when she's been paid, and Sophia's college fund is secure again, then I'll admit everything.

Everything.

Finally, I shrug. "Nothing," I say. "You're right. I'm getting a bit intense about all this. I just want this day to go well for you."

"It already is," she admits, propping herself up on her tiptoes to kiss me. It takes every ounce of strength in my body not to take her in my arms in front of everyone, to show her and anyone with lingering doubts how much I care for her.

Stepping back, she taps the bowl of the mixer. “You’re doing great. Just finish this batch of Crescent Moons, and we should be done.”

“Okay. Can do, boss.”

“Thank you for your help, Brett,” she says.

My heart swells again. “Of course.” As she turns away to head back to her station, I let one part, one single sentence of the words I’ve been holding back, finally escape. “Love you.”

She pauses, and while I can’t see her face, the part of her ear I can see has turned almost crimson from the intensity of her blush.

Turning her chin slightly, she whispers, “You too,” and then hurries back to her station.

CHAPTER 22

Denise

We get to the wedding venue in record time. And even though I try to shoo Sheila away, she and Paul insist on helping to carry everything inside. While I know she's just using this as an excuse to sneak a peek at the wedding, I appreciate her enthusiasm.

I hand a few boxes to Sophia, and as I move to grab the cake, I bump my elbow against something. It's Brett, leaning in to help me. As my eyes meet his, I remember our conversation from earlier and turn away, trying to hide my furious blush.

He told me he *loved* me.

My nerves have completely gone. They've even taken my sadness and shame with them. Today, I am nothing but delighted. Today, I am in *love*.

I am in love with someone. He is in love with me. Isn't it perfect? Isn't that what weddings are all about?

I direct everyone inside. The reception venue is an enormous seaside banquet hall. It has glamorous, high ceilings with glass windows that overlook the sprawling sea. Tinsley's designers have done a wonderful job decorating it just right.

The room's centerpiece is an enormous painting of her and Ford embracing, all in sunset tones. It hangs over a low stage where the hired band sets up their instruments and lights. Orange, yellow, and white flowers decorate every table, matching the warm orange color of the dishware, and even the

wrapping on the mountain of gifts against the wall matches the wedding colors.

The wedding planners give us a table by the long window, set up specifically for the Sugar Breeze. Through the window behind it, I can see what seems like miles and miles of sandy beaches and aqua waves, and down near the shoreline behind the venue, a row of white chairs and a glass archway in beautiful shades of gleaming orange.

With everyone's help, it only takes us a few minutes to lay out as many pastries as possible and put the rest in the designated fridge in the back. The cake sits in the middle, its sun-shaped topper almost glowing with the window behind it. In rows, we set up the little quiches, the trays of mini Tres leches and zucchini cakes, the gluten-free and vegan cupcakes, and right in front, the revamped Crescent Moons, now shaped like sweet yellow stars.

It's gorgeous. For a last hurrah for my mother's bakery—for *my* bakery—it's a hell of a good one.

"Selfie!" Sheila squeals, dashing around the table and whipping her phone out. She grabs me around my shoulders and pulls me in next to her, snapping the picture before I can even try to wiggle free.

As Sheila looks at the picture, her grin broadens. "Wow," she says. "I didn't even have to tickle you that time. That's a real smile there, Denise."

"Of course it is," I tease back. "I just feel like indulging you in your weird selfie obsession today. You're welcome."

"Based on earlier, I wasn't sure I'd see a smile from you today."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

Her eyes meet mine, filled with concern. "When we got to the bakery earlier, it looked like you had been crying."

Glancing behind me to make sure Sophia hasn't heard, I grab Sheila by the arm and gently tug her across the room, pretending to admire the huge painting of Tinsley and Ford with her.

Already, Sheila is rolling her eyes. “Don’t lie to me, Denise. I know you well enough to know that—”

“I’m not going to lie, Sheila,” I insist, lowering my voice as if afraid my words will echo through the huge room. “Yes. I was crying.”

“What’s going on?”

Biting my tongue for a moment, I search for what to say. But, finally, I decide that honesty is the best medicine for my nerves. It felt surprisingly freeing to tell Brett the truth this morning. There’s no reason telling my sister shouldn’t feel the same way.

“To be honest, I woke up feeling very stressed this morning,” I say, watching her eyes for her reaction.

“Because of the wedding?”

“I just need this job to go perfectly. Before, I needed it to be perfect to keep the bakery going. And even though that isn’t happening, I still need it for my pride.”

Sheila’s expression turns terribly bitter. “I’m never going to get over what that stupid landlord did. If I ever meet him, I’ll punch his lights out.”

“But now it’s just about the money, Sheila. I... I did something.... Something I shouldn’t have done. And today is really my last chance to make everything right again.”

As I tell her about taking the money from Sophia’s college fund, I feel the weight of my secret finally leaving my shoulders. It’s like I can fully breathe for the first time in months. Even with the pressure still lingering, not having to worry about my secret anymore, no longer leaving it to fester inside, is such a freeing feeling.

But... there’s something off about Sheila’s reaction to all of this. As I tell her about what I did, she doesn’t jump to her usual supportive, problem-solving self. Instead, she’s.... I’m not sure.

“Denise, I...” She swallows, her eyes searching the floor. “I can’t believe that you would do something like that.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks to the chest. It's unprecedented. "You... what?"

"I can't believe that you did that," she repeats, a little louder this time. "I mean, I knew things were bad for you, but... To sink that low."

"Low?" It's almost like I'm in a haze, in a dream. Sheila isn't being supportive. She isn't having my back. "What happened to my sister?"

"What happened to *mine*?" she asks, anger flashing in her eyes. "As a mother myself, I would never do something like that to my child. I told you to *ask* for help, not to take it!"

I wave my hand, gesturing for her to quiet down. "Don't let Sophia hear you. I'm going to fix everything today."

"You should," Sheila says. "But the most important part of fixing it isn't telling *me* about it. It's being honest with your daughter. Making *amends*. Not doing things behind her back. She's an adult now. She deserves your respect."

"You don't understand," I hiss through my teeth, anger flaring up inside me too. "You don't know what it's like to have all this pressure on your shoulders. To struggle to live up to the family name! To a mother who you don't look like, who you don't even share blood with."

Sheila's mood is fully soured now. The furrow of her brow deepens, and her frown grows, revealing the start of age lines on that too-perfect face.

And as she finally says, her tone dark and distant, "Mom would never have done this," my heart drops through me like a rock. In that one instant, with those few words, all my anger fizzles and dies, leaving nothing but a gaping hole in its wake.

THROUGHOUT THE CEREMONY, I TRY MY BEST TO SMILE AND act like nothing is wrong. But after my talk with my sister, it's hard.

Sheila and Paul left right after our heated conversation. In my despair, I don't even try to convince them to stay. And right now, I just want some space.

My sister has been my one supporter this whole time. My one shining light since my mother's death has suddenly gone out. And without her, I'm lost.

I knew what I'd done had been bad. But she doesn't understand what it's like. Paul makes good money. They're madly in love. She'll never have to go through a divorce, through inheriting a business she never expected to have. She wasn't adopted into a childless family and will never know the pressure that comes with that to be the perfect daughter our parents didn't believe they could produce. And until today, she's been able to understand that.

I feel selfish. I feel pitiable. But I know in the reasonable part of my mind that it's counterproductive to focus on the excuses rather than the solutions. What I need to do now is to make things right for Sophia by making Tinsley's wedding a success. I can fix everything if I can survive this wedding without any hiccups.

I can fix it.

The ceremony lasts for what feels like hours.

Tinsley looks angelic in white, the train of her dress as long and flowing as an ocean wave. She walks down the sand with the biggest smile, beaming for the cameras as she clutches her father's arm. Ford is in an all-white tuxedo, which surprisingly suits him. His hair is still disheveled and sun-bleached, and the tattoos on his fingers stand out more than ever. They both perform songs to each other rather than make the traditional vows. By the end, when they finally kiss, and everyone stands to cheer for them, I cheer the loudest.

Once the reception starts, the Sugar Breeze dessert table is open for business. Tinsley's guests love the pastries and keep coming back for seconds and thirds. The wedding cake is also a hit. As the happy couple cut the cake, the crowd "oohs" and "aahs" at the ombre effect hidden inside.

Finally, after about two hours, things start to calm down. Brett, Sophia, and I are all still manning the dessert table, but most guests have already visited the bar and are now ready to let loose on the dance floor.

Sophia stands behind the dessert table and watches the dancing with me as other fathers and daughters in the crowd join. I put my arm around her, holding her close, sad she doesn't have the same opportunity as the other young girls here.

Brett taps my shoulder. As I turn to see what he wants, he leans past me and holds out his hand to Sophia.

“Can I have this dance?” he asks.

My heart swells again. I can tell Sophia is hesitating, her eyes meeting mine as if looking for permission to give her answer. I rub her shoulder to encourage her.

Finally, she shrugs and steps out of my arms. “Sure. Why not?” she says, and grabs Brett's hand.

They run out onto the floor together and start to dance. It's not quite as awkward as Tinsley and her father, but it's still not great. Unfortunately for Brett, Sophia inherited her sense of rhythm from her mother. But seeing them having fun together, playing a father and daughter pairing if only for the night, almost makes the rest of the day worthwhile.

Once the music has died down and Brett and Sophia leave the dance floor, he turns to me and puts an arm around my waist.

“Now,” he says gently, “it's our turn.”

“But someone has to watch the table,” I start to say, but he cuts me off, looking at Sophia.

“You got this?” he asks.

“You betcha,” she says, winking at him.

With Sophia's confirmation, Brett immediately pulls me out from behind the table and over to the dance floor as a slow song begins to play. Then, he takes my hand with his free one and begins to lead me in a simple waltz. It's effortless, the way

we move. Like my daughter, I've never been much of a dancer. But with Brett's arms around me, my movements are suddenly graceful. Fluid. Perfect.

I giggle as he spins me and then pulls me close to his chest. "You're always so full of surprises," I whisper dreamily. "I would have never guessed you were such a good dancer."

His lips coast along the side of my ear, making me shiver. "You're only as good as your partner."

My cheeks flush pink at the memory of my drama with Sheila from earlier. If Brett only knew.

"I'm not that great, Brett," I whisper back.

He stiffens at my words, pulling back and cupping my chin so that I'm looking up at him. "Listen to me. You are fucking perfect, Denise Lawson," he insists. Then he presses his lips to mine.

After what feels like forever, he finally breaks our kiss, letting me lay my head against his chest. For the first time since the wedding started, I am in bliss. With him so close to me and concerned for me, I feel cared for. Protected.

In this moment, I don't have to be the boss. I don't have a reputation to maintain. I haven't caused any hurt or damage between us. Things with Brett are perfect.

"I know I didn't say the words earlier," I murmur, feeling his warmth through his shirt against my cheek. "But I love you too, Brett. More than I have ever loved anyone before."

And while I can't see his face, I hear his breathing change. I smile, knowing how I've affected him. Knowing how much he truly cares for me.

"I love you too, Denise. Always."

The next song starts, and while this one is a little more upbeat, intended more for the younger guests to come out and jam to, I don't let Brett go. I don't stop my waltz with him. It's like a dream, like the end of the fairytale cartoons from my childhood. The happily ever after I've always wanted. In his arms, I am a princess. I could stay here forever with him.

And that's the moment I hear a voice from behind me. A voice I did not expect to hear at all tonight.

"Hello, Denise."

Confused, I peel my cheek from Brett's chest, turning around to find my brother standing behind me.

"Austin?" I ask. For a moment, I'm excited to see him. It's been so long since I've seen him in person. It's like having my whole family together in one place again.

But as I try to pull away from Brett, his strong arms keep me pinned in place, a growl forming in the base of his throat.

"Brett?" I ask. "What's going on? This is my brother, Austin. The one I told you about."

"Oh, so you two *do* know each other," Austin sneers, an unreadable expression on his face. "You were just *playing* ignorant. Somehow, I think that's even worse."

Brett growls again, his arms tightening around me even more as his muscles tense up. Like a lion preparing to pounce. But still, he's not saying anything.

"Austin, what are you talking about?" I ask for him. "This is my boyfriend, Brett. You must be mistaking him for someone else."

"I can assure you that there's been no mistake, Denise," Austin insists. Squaring his shoulders, he says, "Brett James Cooper. Twin brother Sebastian Cooper. Forty-seven years old. Lives in Houston. Works for WestRock. Just made partner—"

"What are you doing?" My head is spinning. I can't make any sense of what is happening. And while Brett is frozen in rage, he's not helping the situation one bit.

"Wait, I have one more," Austin says, holding up a finger. "He's also done wonderful work for a little place called Better Horizons Realty."

A sliver of relief cracks through my nerves. "Oh. He does some of your accounts. That's how you know each other. That makes sense."

But Austin's grin only grows. "I guess that's one way to put it."

Suddenly, Brittany appears from behind Austin. Her eyes grow wide with shock as they flick back and forth between me and my brother.

"Hey, gorgeous," Austin purrs as he pulls Brittany close. "I was wondering where you went."

And then, without warning, he kisses her on the lips. While she still looks nervous, she leans into his mouth, enjoying it.

Twisting against Brett's grip again, I nearly shout, "Brett, let go of me!" He does as I ask, and I take a couple steps away, trying desperately to catch my breath. I'm so confused I feel dizzy.

"What the actual fuck is going on?" I demand.

Austin shrugs. "Brittany answered the phone at Sugar Breeze one day, and we started chatting." Then he smirks. "I guess you could say the rest is history."

At this point, I feel almost sick. "Austin, you're *married*. Does Jessica know about this?"

"She and I have an arrangement. She lets me do what I want as long as I don't embarrass her. Brittany and I had a wonderful time with Brett the other night, as a matter of fact."

"Shut up," Brett growls, the first words he's said this entire time. "Shut up, you asshole."

"What?" I ask, whipping my head between the two of them. "What's he talking about?"

"It was Brett's party, actually," Austin says. "You know, the one to celebrate him becoming a partner at his company? He didn't invite you? That's strange. All the men are supposed to bring their wives and girlfriends. It's tradition. Who did you bring instead, Cooper?"

"Shut. Up," Brett says. A vein is popping in his neck.

"Oh, that's right. You brought your brother. Sebastian. Boy, what a strange choice."

I look up at Brett, another wave of nausea crashing through me. He didn't even tell me there was a party. But, even as the thought goes through my mind, I realize that's not the strangest thing that Austin just said.

"Wait," I say. "Why were *you* at the party, Austin?"

"Well—" But before Austin can get the words out, Brett's arm shoots out and grabs my brother by the shirt collar. He pulls him a foot forward, unlatching Austin's arm from around Brittany and bringing Austin's face within inches of his own.

"Shut the fuck up," Brett growls again, a threat laced through every syllable.

I dash forward and claw at Brett's hand, trying to loosen his grip. "No, Brett," I insist, pulling them off each other. "Let him say it."

"Denise," Brett says, his eyes finally back on me. Their blue color has darkened and become almost unrecognizable. Deep and dangerous. "Don't listen to him."

"I think you *should* listen," Austin insists. "I'm the only one here telling you the truth, after all."

"Only now," I say bitterly.

"Yeah. But at least I'm not trying to date you under false pretenses."

I blink, my veins going cold.

"That's exactly what you did to her assistant manager, you fucking bastard!" Brett shouts.

For the first time, the dancers all around us seem to realize something is happening. And though the music continues playing, a ring of still bodies forms around us, all watching the drama unfold.

"You told Brittany to sabotage the bakery, didn't you?!" Brett continues to yell, face red with rage. "You took advantage of a poor lonely girl and forced her to trash your sister's dream!"

“A dream she didn’t deserve to have!” Austin’s grin has dropped, replaced by a rising anger of his own. His eyes pop, his cheeks turn purple. “I was the one with the real estate business! I was Sylvia Lawson’s *fucking son!* It wasn’t hers to inherit!” He throws a hand out, pointing a finger at me, which Brett protectively smacks away.

“Don’t you point your fucking finger at her! Now get the hell out of here before I walk you out!”

“You know, I never got to thank you, Brett,” Austin continues. “For all you did for me!”

Brett shoves against Austin’s shoulders, making him stumble. “OUT!”

“I know your first attempt to get the bakery from her didn’t work out, but hell, you did *great* the second time!” Austin lets out a laugh. “You bought out the landlord that owned her building! Giving me the chance to finally evict her! I could never thank you enough!”

A fire burns in my belly. Without any control over what I’m doing, I rush forward and slap Austin so hard across the face that he stumbles backward. The band stops playing as the crowd gasps, and suddenly everything around us is quiet and still.

The whole world is watching.

I look at Brittany, who looks pale and deathly, like she’s about to puke. I look at my brother, bent over and cupping his reddening cheek. I look at Tinsley in the distance, her expression confused and shocked. But even more than that—exhilarated. Think of the views she’s going to get for this.

And then I look at Brett, who looks so wracked with shame and guilt that he looks like he might be sick as well.

“I....” The words struggle to exit my mouth. My breathing quickens. “I have to go.”

CHAPTER 23

Brett

I ‘ve been feeling lately like the floor is giving way beneath me. But this?

This feels like the floor has suddenly become the ceiling, and I’m upside down with my head dangling perilously close to the ground. I feel upturned. Delirious.

Right after she slaps her brother, Denise stands there, panting hard and looking like she’s about to vomit. She can barely even bring her eyes up to look at me. Honestly, after what just happened—the callous way she learned about my association with her brother—I don’t really blame her for feeling this way.

She inhales sharply, and like a spooked rabbit, she turns on her heel and runs through the gathered crowd away from the three of us. Her smaller frame allows her to slip through the small gaps between onlookers, and I lose sight of her quickly.

“Denise!” Austin calls, still cupping his reddened cheek.

Despite Brittany’s affection toward Austin at the party, her body hanging all over his like a human garland, she stands beside him now with a frown, not moving an inch to comfort him. In fact, she looks like she’s about to cry herself. I guess she didn’t expect Austin to be this cold-hearted, this bitter, either.

Peering at Austin one last time, my stomach sours, filling with a barely ignorable desire to toss him out the window. But, as much as I would love to stay and berate him for everything he’s done, I need to catch up with Denise.

I need a chance to explain myself. To tell her my version of the truth. Not her brother's. Not Brittany's. Mine. The man who loves her more than life itself.

I turn and press through the crowd, but I don't move through it as easily as she does. I catch glimpses of her, signs of her departure, and I have to physically move the crowd with my hands and arms to get through, like struggling to break through an overgrown hedge.

I hear Tinsley Simon shouting somewhere in the banquet hall, but I don't even take in her words. Another person is shouting with her, too, and in the back of my mind, I recognize the voice as Ford Augustine's. If I were in my right mind, I would have been surprised to hear him so loud, so adamant. He's the quietest talker I've ever met. But I don't have a second to spare for the thought or to wonder what they're shouting for.

Peering over the heads of the crowd, I spot Denise again, a shock of turquoise fabric over by the front doors. She pulls one open and darts out into the parking lot, not even bothering to close the door behind her in her hurry.

It's a few minutes before I finally get out of the building. I blink, my eyes adjusting as I search for any sign of her. It's dark outside, long after Tinsley's idyllic sunset has come and gone. The enveloping, inescapable dark of a Texas night. Cold and uninviting.

I spend far too long darting between cars, struggling to recall where she parked the Sugar Breeze's van. When I finally discover it, I find its engines off and its seats empty. She isn't here. Her plan wasn't to drive away.

Then where the hell could she have gone?

The parking lot is huge, filled with dozens and dozens of cars. I shout her name a couple times, but my calls get easily drowned by the size of this cold metal maze and the rumble of the ocean.

The parking lot is lined with a low two-foot-tall stone wall, giving a full view of the swelling ocean just a hundred feet

away. In the daytime, it was beautiful. At sunset, more so. But now, the whole place just feels oppressive. A big wet mouth swallowing the world.

The only reason I finally find her is because of Tinsley's dress. Even in the darkness, she's glowing like an angel between a pair of cars.

As I approach, I hear her speaking to Denise and see her arms wrapped tightly around my girlfriend's shoulders. Her words of comfort are framed by the low hiccupping sounds of Denise's sobs.

"It's okay, Denise. I promise everything's fine," she says. "He's been removed from the wedding. I had my guards make him leave." This is punctuated by another quiet sob. "If I had known anything about this, I wouldn't have let your brother in. I swear. He came with your assistant manager, so I didn't think anything of it."

Tinsley must spy me out of the corner of her eye because she suddenly turns to look at me. As she moves, I finally spot Denise curled up on the low wall, the sea swirling behind her. I can't see her face as she's buried it completely in her hands.

"Brett's here," Tinsley says gently. "Maybe he can—" But as she's interrupted by another choking sob, she lets her suggestion fall, hugging Denise around the shoulders even tighter instead.

Standing up, Tinsley approaches me, and even in the consuming dark, I can see the slight pinch of her lips and that almost accusatory look in her eyes. She overheard a lot more of my talk with Austin than I had assumed.

Shame grips me again, even harder this time. Denise needed this wedding to go perfectly. Her relationship with her daughter depends on it. Could my anger and stubbornness have just ruined it all for her?

"Tinsley," I say quickly, but she holds up a hand to silence me.

"No excuses, Brett," she insists, her tone serious for once. "I'm not the one you need to explain yourself to right now."

“I know. But promise that this won’t affect your relationship with Denise. Whatever I’ve done, it’s not her fault.”

A sigh escapes through Tinsley’s nose, her posture and hardened expression easing a bit. “No. It’s not her fault.”

Taking a few steps forward, Tinsley wraps me in a tight hug, as if hoping to comfort me too. For such a silly and disorganized young woman, she really is more emotionally intelligent than I’ve been giving her credit for.

For the moment that she’s holding me, I feel hopeful. But as soon as she’s let me go and started the long walk back to her wedding, I feel anxious and bereft once again.

Kneeling down before her, I put my hand tenderly on Denise’s arm. “Denise...” I say softly. Her fingers part slightly as she peeks through them, a single eye searching my face. “If I had known he was going to be here, I would have—”

“Ugh,” she groans, silencing me. Her hands form into tight fists, and she finally pulls them away from her face, revealing her reddened eyes and tear-covered cheeks. “Don’t blame this all on him, Brett.”

“I’m not trying to.”

“No excuses, no bullshit, no honeyed words,” she insists. “I need to know... that everything we’ve done together... that everything you’ve said to me... wasn’t all based on a lie.”

My fingers clench. I swallow slowly, searching through my mind for the right words. Anything I can say to make this all okay. And once again, I can feel my words failing me.

I take a deep breath. “Not everything...” I say. But even I know I don’t sound convincing.

“Start from the beginning,” she demands. “How did you meet my brother?”

“Through my company, WestRock. I worked on some of the accounts for his real estate business. Helped him acquire a few businesses and advised him on how to rework them. Helped him make them more profitable in the long run.”

“Starting when?”

I sigh. “A few years ago. But I’m trying to tell you, I didn’t know it was him back then. I only ever spoke to him through his company’s email system. Oftentimes, I was just talking to his secretary or someone else in his company. Even when I sent him emails, he only used his initials to sign off. So when I met you, I didn’t know it was your brother sending me after your business.”

“But you found out,” she insists, her lip trembling. But whether it’s in sadness, anger, or a hazardous combination of both, I can’t really tell. “You *knew* who he was when you saw him tonight. You’ve met him.”

“Only over video calls. And those only started a handful of weeks ago. Shortly after I met you. And after I... after I realized who he was.”

“*When?*” she asks me again, her tone hard. Unyielding. “When did you realize?”

“I realized it the night you and I had our dinner at the Sandcastle Steakhouse. When you were telling me about your family.” My free hand curls into a fist, my fingernails digging into my palm. “I wouldn’t have done that if I had known, Denise. I swear—”

“Done *what?*” she asks. “Seduced me? Toyed with me?”

“I wasn’t toying with you.”

“You *were*,” she spits. She’s definitely trembling in anger now. “Even if you didn’t know you were working for my brother initially, you still knew you were going after my business. Right? You still took me on a date under false pretenses to *manipulate*—”

“They weren’t false pretenses,” I insist, my fist clenching painfully now. “I never lied about my feelings for you. About how beautiful you are, or how much I cared—”

“But you lied by omission, Brett!” she shouts, standing up in a rush and knocking my hand away. “You knew I wouldn’t want to go out with you if I knew what you were here to do! You wanted to rip my mother’s bakery out from under me! I

can't *believe* I let you help me at the Sugar Breeze—I can't believe I let you anywhere near—!”

I stand too, towering over her. “I did everything I could to stop this, Denise. To *not* be involved. I risked my job by refusing to go along with Austin's plan to take the bakery from you.”

“But you still helped him do it! You kept working for him!”

My belly burns with frustration now. Why is everything suddenly my fault? I expected her disappointment, her feelings of betrayal. But she has no right to blame me for everything that her brother did. “I didn't know one of the people I was buying out was your landlord. I had to help your brother with *something*, Denise. He works closely with my boss, and if I wanted to make partner, I had to—”

“That's right,” she says bitterly, crossing her arms. “*Partner*. It's always about your job with you, isn't it? I guess I should have expected this. Your job is the only thing you care about, after all.”

I suck in a deep breath. “That's not true, and you know it. I care about you, Denise. More than I can explain. More than I can put into words.”

“Yeah. You haven't put much into words ever.” She lets out an exasperated sigh, her eyes straying out to meet the sea. “You'll say anything to woo me. But you still couldn't tell me the truth.”

“That's rich, coming from you,” I say bitterly. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. “Sorry.” But it's too late.

Denise looks at me again, her nostrils flaring. She's fuming. “Don't you turn this back on me, Brett. I have been nothing but honest with you. This isn't about my relationship with my daughter.”

“We've both made mistakes in this, Denise,” I say, trying to calm myself, no matter how much her anger stings. “But

now that everything has come to light, there's nothing else to do but to talk about it. To work through it together."

"When were you planning to tell me?" she asks, her voice so quiet now it's almost drowned out by the ocean behind her.

"Tonight. Or tomorrow."

"Or next week, or next year." She rolls her eyes. "Typical."

I chew my tongue again. "It's not like that. I waited until after the wedding to tell you because I knew how much this all meant to you."

"And Brittany... oh my God, Brittany," she says, as if only just remembering her assistant manager's role in all of this too. She runs a harried hand through her hair. "You knew about her too... *my God*, Brett!"

"I only learned about Brittany and Austin at the party last week. I didn't know how to tell you. I thought it would be kinder to wait."

"What if she *was* trying to sabotage this job for me, Brett?" Her eyes glare at me, dark as the night sky around her. "Just like she was messing with the bakery. What if Tinsley had cut open the cake and a... a...." She waves her hands through the air, exasperated. "I don't know. A bunch of fake spiders suddenly poured out of it? A dead rat?! If you had warned me, I could have stopped it—"

"But that didn't happen," I remind her. I rub my forehead, feeling tired of this back and forth. "Everything was fine, as far as we know."

"Yeah," she says bitterly. "As far as we know." With another sigh, Denise sits on the low wall again, her eyes cast downward. "I don't even know if I can describe... how much this hurts me, Brett.... To be lied to like this again... it feels so...."

"Hey," I say gently, "it's not the same as Dave. Not by a long shot."

"But... it feels so...." Her teeth appear, biting down on her lip as her eyes search the sand beneath her shoes for the proper

words.

After a moment, she stands again, though her eyes stay locked on the ground. “I can’t be here anymore. I... I have to go.”

She tries to sidle between me and a parked car, but I quickly grab her by the shoulders, trying to hold her here. To keep her with me. She can’t go. She can’t leave.

“Denise, I... wait,” I say quickly. “I can’t let the night end like this. Please.”

She shuts her eyes firmly, her shoulders stiff beneath my grip. “I’m sorry, Brett. I... I can’t be around you right now. I... I need some time.”

When her eyes reopen, they are once again full of tears.

“Like... just some time to think or...?” I swallow, my mouth refusing to finish the question. To say the thing I dread hearing the most.

Slowly, she nods. “Yeah,” she chokes. “You know what I’m going to say.”

I want to pull her close, to show her how much she means to me. To show her how much I can’t stand to let her go. I’m a desperate fool madly in love. She can’t go. It can’t be over. “No, Denise. Not over this. You can take a few days away, and then we’ll talk. We don’t need to—”

“Maybe you don’t want to, Brett, but I...” She gulps, and it looks almost painful. “I need to think about my needs and Sophia’s right now. I promised myself I wouldn’t get caught up with another man just to get betrayed again. And I... I broke that promise to myself. I broke that promise to my daughter.”

“You didn’t break a promise,” I insist. “I did. But I can fix it. This is still—”

“No, Brett.” Putting her hands on my arms, she stares into my chest, unable to fully meet my eyes. “Now, please, let me go.”

As much as it hurts me to do it, I listen, releasing her. She steps away toward the direction of her van, stifling another sob with her hand.

I have never been a very sentimental person. Even when things were toughest for my brother and me, I never cried about it.

But seeing Denise walk away... knowing that I may never hold her again... I feel the pain of salt in my eyes for the first time in decades.

“Denise,” I say one last time.

She pauses at her name. But she does not turn back. “Go home to Houston, Brett,” is all she says. “I’ll leave your luggage on the front porch. I trust you can get yourself a ride somewhere?”

The sound of approaching footsteps breaks through the intensity between us. I blink, trying to dry my eyes, but that wet feeling won’t go away.

It’s Sophia. She dashes over to her mother, and they wrap their arms around each other tightly, holding each other close enough to pop.

Sophia turns her head to look at me through her mother’s arms and narrows her eyes in accusation, just like Tinsley did.

“Goodbye, Brett,” she says in a sour tone. Hooking her mother’s arm around her shoulders, she begins to guide Denise toward the van. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll drive.”

They slowly make their way to the Sugar Breeze Bakery’s van. As they pull out of their parking space, that logo peers at me across the parking lot through the dark.

I barely knew my own mother long enough to even talk to her about dating, about girls and women. But here is Denise’s, as if alive once again. Sylvia Lawson staring at me through the dark with her bubblegum pink eyes. Eyes filled with ageless disappointment.

The van turns and takes off. And once again, I am alone. I’d forgotten how empty the world was without Denise in it.

CHAPTER 24

Denise

“Denise?” Sheila asks softly. “Could you move your foot, please? I’m trying to get the next box.”

“Oh,” I say, shifting in my seat so she can grab what she needs.

She kneels before me to sift through the pile of folded cardboard boxes, searching for the size she wants. When I see her like that, I have to shut my eyes and turn away. It reminds me of that night in the parking lot... with Brett down on his knees....

I had never seen his eyes so sad.

“You okay?” Sheila asks, and I feel her hand on my arm.

Quickly, I suck in a deep breath, hoping it will sober me. “I’m sorry, Sheila. I just needed a break for a few minutes. All this packing is... wearing me out.”

She pats my arm comfortingly, and I open my eyes to meet hers. She smiles in sympathy. “I know, honey,” she says softly. “Take all the time you need.”

Sheila stands, taking a couple boxes with her over to the table. Carefully, she unfolds them into their full size and tapes them, readying them to hold the small pile of cake pans stacked beside her.

The easiest thing about packing up my mother’s bakery has been finding enough boxes. After all, my house was full of them, unopened and undisturbed since my move to Barton Beach over a year ago. Now, instead of just random clothes

and decor pieces, they'll hold all my mother's memories. Gathering dust until I can bear to think of something to do with them.

It's strange, honestly, how much I'll miss this place. The Sugar Breeze Bakery. I'll miss the building, of course. The white shingles on the roof, the silly awning, the peeling stickers. All things made by my mother's hands. All things that can never be remade.

I guess, in a way, they'll still be with the family. But goodness knows Austin won't care for them the way I did.

No, I'll miss this place for other reasons too. Reasons that have surprised me. The baking, for one thing. I've never done so much hard work in my life. But every day, seeing someone eat something made by my hands and smile at the taste or seeing children giggle at the fun decorations and sprinkles I took so much care in perfecting? Those are the things I'm going to miss the most.

A tissue appears before me, and I blink for a moment before I realize Sheila's hand is attached to it. "Here," she says. "You look like you need it."

"Thanks." Taking it from her, I wipe my eyes and blow my nose again. My whole face is sore from the amount of crying I've been doing lately, and my nose has a permanent pink tinge to it.

"You sure you want to be here?" Sheila asks, putting a business-like hand on her hip. "Because I can totally get Paul and the kids to help. We'll take care of everything. You know that. In fact, those kids could probably use something to do. Little demons have been driving me wild all summer."

I let out a soft laugh. "Yes, Sheila, I want to be here. It makes sense. You and me packing away our mother's things. If the bakery had to end, at least her children get to spend quality time together because of it."

Sheila frowns in distaste, ripping another strip of tape roughly from the dispenser. "Not *all* of her children, thankfully."

No matter how betrayed I feel by what Austin had done, it was nowhere near how furious Sheila was when I told her.

I went to her house to apologize for our fight a few days after Tinsley's wedding once I had recovered enough from the breakup to attempt human speech again. Sophia had gone with me and had even carried the apology gift of a bottle of wine in her hands despite not being old enough to partake in it herself.

As Sheila opened the door, hugging a fussing Peter to her chest, she'd turned her nose up at me, prepared to send me away. But as soon as she'd eyed that bottle in Sophia's hands, it was almost like all was immediately forgiven.

Almost.

Over a couple glasses in her kitchen, I'd made my real apology and told her I'd also admitted to Sophia what I'd done.

"You were right," I said. Taking Sophia's hand in mine, I squeezed it. "I should have been honest about what I was going through. It was just a lot of pressure, being given a bakery you don't know how to run. Living under your mother's dying wish like that. Trying to keep her dream alive when you don't know what you're doing half the time. I didn't want to admit that I was a failure."

"But you're not a failure, Mom," Sophia said, squeezing my hand back.

"Definitely not," Sheila said, holding her glass in the air. "I just wish you wouldn't hold the world on your shoulders so much. It's not healthy. I'm here to support you, of course, but... not if you're going to take my help for granted."

Swallowing more wine, I shook my head. "Never again."

"Now," Sheila said, her eyes gleaming wickedly like her usual self again. "Where is Brett? Shouldn't he be the one holding your hand? Or more?"

"Sheila," Sophia groaned. "If you're not going to let me drink, the least you can do is not be disgusting in front of me."

But by this time, Sheila's attention was solely on me. Her smile had fallen again, as quickly as it had returned. "Sophia? Would you mind holding the baby for a minute? Maybe take him into the living room to play with some of his toys. You know how much the kids have all missed playing with their favorite cousin."

Sophia got the hint, and as soon as she and the baby left the room, Sheila's hand replaced hers, holding my fingers tightly and stroking them with her thumb.

"What happened?" she asked softly. "What did he do?"

And, no matter how much it hurt, I told her the truth. Everything. About Austin, and Brittany, and finally... about Brett.

The shouting. Brett grabbing Austin's shirt collar. The admission. The taunting. The slap. And everything that had happened in the parking lot. It had all replayed itself so many times in my mind that, at this point, it felt more like reciting a movie or a dramatic TV show than my own life.

As I finished, Sheila took another long drink of wine, emptying her glass completely and quickly pouring herself a new one. "What pigs," she finally said. "I knew something was up with Austin when he didn't come for Thanksgiving and Christmas last year. But I never would have guessed he was capable of... well.... I can't believe he'd do something like *this*."

"I know. I didn't believe it either," I admitted. "Things were always weird after the funeral. I'd thought he was just in mourning, like the rest of us." I bit my lip, feeling that horrible clinging guilt in my belly.

"Oh, sweetie," Sheila said. "He fooled all of us."

I opened my mouth to say more and let her know what I was thinking. But I knew that I shouldn't. And my darling sister wouldn't like me wallowing in my self-pity. Even though these days, that's all I could seem to do.

I knew her well enough to predict exactly what Sheila would say: "Stop blaming yourself. What Austin chose to do

was not your fault. What Brett did wasn't your fault, either. You are not responsible for the hurt they chose to cause."

Well, knowing Sheila, it might have had a few more expletives thrown in and a large chug of wine in the middle. But she'd say something along those lines, at least. The meaning would be the same.

And it's strange to me that, while I have learned her words of comfort so well, enough to parrot them back to myself, I still can't seem to take in their meaning. She is one of the few rays of sun still shining. But a couple rays of sunlight can't do anything to stop the rain cloud from pouring down.

Leaning across the table, Sheila pulled me in for a warm hug. Like she could tell what was running through my head and knew that while the words wouldn't help, holding me to her just might.

After my reverie, I stand, assisting Sheila with packing all the boxes. It's taken us days to get everything packed away, and to see the bakery so empty for the first time in decades is....

It's impossible to describe the feeling.

Even Sheila seems to be moved by the sight. Her eyes follow the lines of the empty glass displays and the erased words on the chalkboards to the boxes filled with innumerable kitchen utensils that will now go unused.

"So," Sheila finally says, "what's the plan now?"

"We put all these boxes in the van and drive them to the bungalow," I say. "We'll have to be careful, though. I'm going to put the van up for sale, I think, and it needs to be clean."

"That chump brother of ours didn't take the van, too?" she asks bitterly.

"Nope. He didn't get the van."

"So you'll probably have to get it painted, then? Don't want him to fucking sue you over the logo."

"Well... technically, I think the logo is still mine. The name, too."

Sheila turns to look at me, her eyes brightening with hope. “Oh. I guess that’s right. He only has the rights to the building, doesn’t he? Ha ha!” She pumps her fist in the air, whooping with laughter. “So he got nothing! You still have the bakery!”

“Not really,” I say. “Not much of a bakery without somewhere to bake out of.”

“We could get you a new place.”

“With what money, Sheila? I have no prospects, and you and Paul need to focus on the kids’ futures. Don’t you dare spend any more money on me.”

She blows a raspberry. “Alright, sour-pants. You could use the van as a food truck.”

I snort. “That’s the worst idea yet. No way.”

“I do have one more idea. But you’re not going to like it.”

“I’m sure I won’t. Go ahead. Lay it on me.”

Sheila bites her lip for a moment, searching for the best way to phrase it, and that’s how I know it’s bad. “Well... if only there was someone we knew with enough money for a place. A rich benefactor, if you will.”

Stepping away from her, I make a noise of disgust in the back of my throat. “Please, Sheila. I am not going to beg Brett for money. Are you insane?”

“No,” she insists, “I meant his *brother*. ‘Blam’ or whatever he’s called.”

“You mean Bash? Why would I go to Bash about this?”

“I don’t know. You used his kitchen before.”

“Sheila. I... I can’t. I don’t have his number. And even if I did, it... it’s too close to... you know....” I frown. “Like... what if Brett shows up while I’m there? I couldn’t handle that.”

“I know, I know.” She sighs in disappointment. “I’m sorry I brought it up. Anyway, let’s get back to it. These boxes aren’t going to load themselves.”

After another hour of sweating and swearing, loading heavy box after heavier box into the back of the van, the place is finally empty. Same exterior as always, but hollow inside. Skeletal. Lifeless.

Sheila nuzzles up against me. “Hey,” she says so quietly it’s almost a whisper. “How about one more picture? Just the two of us? Right where Mom used to stand?”

I turn around and spot it, that small section of the bricks where Mom used to pose us for pictures in front of the bakery. It seems like a lifetime ago, yet I can picture her as clearly as if she were standing right before me. Her hair puffed up in a perm, her face still young and bright. And hopeful, endlessly hopeful. Her children gathered around her legs. Not fighting. Not bickering. We never did when Mom was around.

What would she think of what we had become?

I peek up at the sky and the powerful Texas sun as if trying to spot her there. And while I don’t see her face looking down on me, I do sense something else.

The unending warmth of the air and the sun. The whispering of the sea in the distance. It’s home. The home she gave to me.

Though the bakery is gone, I still feel my mother here with me, in the bricks of Barton Beach, the town she used to command with such grace and beauty. She’s here with me. She’s in Sheila, in her face and her body. And she’s in me, too. Somewhere.

She never truly left.

Sheila wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me in close, holding her phone out in front of us for the picture. And though my cheeks are crusted with dry tears, and my eyes and nose are red and sore, I still manage a big smile. Putting an arm around my baby sister, I tug her close to me. I feel comforted with her beside me.

She snaps the picture and then takes another as she turns to kiss me on the cheek. It’s bittersweet.

We climb into the van, with me behind the wheel. Turning the key in the ignition, the van begins to rumble beneath me. But I don't take off right away. I peer out the window one final time at the last home of the Sugar Breeze Bakery.

Sheila looks through the pictures she's just taken. When she sighs, I assume it's with the same kind of sadness I'm currently feeling. But when she speaks, I realize that's not true.

"I really wanted the two of you to be together, you know...."

"What?" I ask, blinking in confusion.

She turns her phone's screen to me, and I see what she's talking about. It's a picture of me that I didn't even know she'd taken. Me and Brett together on the day of Tinsley Simon's wedding. My hand is on his cheek, feeling the smoothness of his freshly shaven chin, and his hands are on my waist, holding me tightly. Our lips are pressed together, and despite the emotion behind it, the intensity we feel for one another, both of us are smiling as we kiss.

It's like the end of an old fairy tale cartoon or the final page of a picture book. The prince embracing his new princess. Totally and hopelessly in love.

I pull my eyes away, feeling new tears brimming. "Please don't show me that right now, Sheila."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I was just so happy for you. I thought... well, I thought you'd finally found your one."

"You know why that can't happen," I say, my voice shaking.

"Why not?" I shoot her a look, but she shoots one back. "I'm serious."

"He *lied*, Sheila. It's as bad as what—"

But she groans, interrupting me. "No, Denise. It's *not* as bad as what Dave did. I promise you that. Yes, he got himself in too deep. Yes, he lied by omission. But that doesn't take away the genuine way he felt for you. I saw it in his eyes every time he looked at you, Denise. That man was smitten. He

would never, ever hurt you the way Dave did. And he didn't this time either."

"He still hurt me, Sheila," I insist, staring out the windshield. "The pain is the same."

There is a pause, and for a second, I think I've finally convinced her. But of course, my wonderful, annoying sister loves having the last word. "I just don't want you to hurt yourself too, Denise, by pushing away a good thing. Whatever you decide, I'll support you. Wholeheartedly. And so would he."

CHAPTER 25

Brett

The days pass by in a haze.

Most nights, I sit around my apartment with a glass of something dark in hand, just waiting for sleep to come. I am a wreck of a man.

Whenever I show up to work, people seem to avoid me. I sit in meetings, rolling my pen between my fingers, not even removing the cap to take notes. My secretary barely talks to me. I have become a ghost looking in on my own life.

And hell, I hate the man that I see in my place.

It's like a veil has lifted, and now I see it all clearly. The hollowness of it all. The repetition. The decay. This is a job that will eat you alive.

What was it that Harris said? That I couldn't have both the success and the life, the family, the wonderful wife? I'd said he was wrong. I was determined to prove it. What a fucking joke.

In the end, I couldn't have them both. In exchange for getting my dream job, I lost Denise. The only woman I ever truly cared about.

I can now say without a doubt that making partner wasn't worth it.

My sullen mood has also affected Harris. He retires in a few months and wants me at his side every day until then, learning his every move. But if I'm being honest, I don't know if I can.

Before I met Denise, I didn't mind being alone. An empty apartment, a life consumed by work.

I loved it.

I would work my ass off all day, taking phone calls from rich people asking me how to spend their money, and I always had an answer. After I'd clock out, I would take the train home, surrounded by people yet bored by the idea of connecting with any of them.

When I got home, I would head upstairs to my apartment, ignoring the dozens of others living in my building, holding open stairwell doors for them but unwilling to learn a single one of their names. And at the end of it all, I would sit on my couch and watch sports, drinking alone, and like an idiot, I would think I was living the good life. Like I had it made. Like I was somebody.

There is nothing lonelier than life without Denise.

If I have to feel the emptiness and the quiet for one more night, I'll go insane. So I take off from work and immediately head to the airport, suitcase in hand and credit card in the other, willing to buy a ticket for any amount of money.

I head straight back to Barton Beach.

Bash lets me into his loft without question, carrying my suitcase into one of the guest rooms while I pour myself another drink. As I sit on the couch, he returns, his cat in his arms.

Without any warning, he dumps her on my lap. "There," he says firmly like he's just put out a fire. "That'll help."

"More than the whiskey?" I ask halfheartedly, taking a deep drink from my glass. It always empties too fast.

As Bash watches me, he frowns. "Yeah. More than that."

The cat, Jackie, sits precariously on my lap like she's considering whether or not to leap away. Her large yellow eyes meet mine, considering me. I pet her cautiously, and to my surprise, she leans into it, her purr vibrating against my legs.

I take her into my arms, holding her against my chest. Bash was right. This might be better than whiskey.

“Okay. Now that I’ve got you comfortable, I’m going to take these away,” he says, plucking the bottle of whiskey and my empty glass off the arm of the couch, “and you’re going to tell me what’s going on.”

“Hey,” I protest. “Give those back. I’ll gladly pick the drink if it has to be the drink or the cat.”

He gasps playfully. “Don’t let Jackie hear you say that. Her paws may seem furry, but weapons are hiding there.”

Setting the bottle and glass back in the kitchen, Bash returns to the living room and sits in an armchair across from me. His jaw is set, and his gaze is clearer and more determined than I’ve seen him have in a lifetime together.

“This is an intervention,” he announces. Pulling a slip of paper from his pocket, he unfolds it and clears his throat.

“Fucking hell,” I groan, making the cat tense against me. A few pets help her settle again.

“Dear Brett,” Bash begins to read, ignoring me completely. “How are you? Because, from what I can see, it’s not so good.”

“Look, you don’t need to read from that. If you have something to say, just say it.”

Bash glances up at me, obviously annoyed that I’ve cut him off in the middle of his speech. But after a moment, he just shrugs and puts the paper away again. “Fine. You want me to say it, I’ll say it: I was right.”

I blink. “What?”

He shrugs again like his meaning should be obvious. “I was right.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time, Bash. I mean, what were you right *about*? Be more specific.”

“That your job is crap, and you deserve a lot better.”

I swallow, trying to hold back the annoyance I suddenly feel. “Really? When did you say that, Bash?”

“I implied it. When you first came to Barton Beach in May, we talked about you taking away Sugar Breeze. I told you not to take it from her. I didn’t like what you were doing to her and other perfectly nice businesspeople, and I told you as much. And now, I hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

“What lesson? I didn’t take her bakery away, and you know that. Well... not directly, at least.”

“Indirectly or directly, it doesn’t really matter. The result is the same. She has nothing, and you have everything, and yet you’re miserable.” Putting a finger to his temple, he says, “That’s your conscience speaking. Telling you that you fucked up.”

“Look, Bash, I didn’t come here for a lecture,” I say, really annoyed now.

“I can’t just sit by and watch when you’re this torn up,” he insists earnestly.

“Well, I’d probably be happier if you’d bring that bottle back.”

“It’s like I told you at your party, Brett. It just doesn’t seem like your heart is in this anymore. You picked a dream when you were a kid and spent your whole life with blinders on, focused only on that one thing. And in the meantime, you’re letting the best things about the world pass you by. In the end, well... your heart belongs to something else. Something more important.”

Like Denise.

This isn’t the first time we’ve had a conversation like this. I open my mouth to say all my usual refutations, to prove him wrong with all my facts and statistics. But, once again, I find myself running on empty.

Maybe it’s the fact that I’m emotionally spent. Maybe it’s the booze that’s been running through my system for who knows how many days on end. Or maybe it’s simply the sweet cat purring against me. Every defense of what I’ve done just

sounds hollow to me now. There's no point in arguing a dead debate.

To his surprise, I say, "You know what? You're right, Bash. I have lost something more important than all that."

The cat presses her head against my chest, and I scratch her behind her ears, watching Bash's reaction. He putters for a moment like an old engine out of gas, struggling to cope with the fact that I've just agreed with him. He's finally done it. He's won an argument. And for a moment, the two of us can do nothing more than stare at each other, unsure of what happens next in such an unfamiliar situation.

Finally, he clears his throat. "So," he says slowly, "what are you going to do about it?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"To fix all this." He juts out his chin and opens his eyes wide, like what he's suggesting should be obvious to me.

I sigh. "There's nothing I *can* do. Denise broke it off. She wants her distance. Maybe in a year or so, I can—"

"No, no, no." Bash groans, waving my words away in utter disgust. "You moron. It's obvious! You've been putting yourself and your career first for a while now. Denise needs to know that you can put her first. Without question."

"When did you become such an expert on women?"

He straightens his posture. "I live my life exactly how I please. And that's all I want for you. You love this girl. You've always wanted a woman in your life, a partner. She's everything you've ever wanted. Now you've got to do the same for her."

I sit up, and Jackie leaps from my chest and scampers away. The time for self-pity is over. Now, I'm in business mode.

"What would it even be, Bash? It's not like a call would be enough to—"

"No, stupid, don't you dare do this over a phone call," Bash says, that look of disgust back on his face. And though I

know he's just playing, on some level, I can feel myself getting annoyed again.

“Alright, smartass. What’s *your* plan?”

“You remember that game I played against the Cubs back in the day?” he asks me, his expression splitting into a nostalgic grin. “Johnny was out of the count for the rest of the game—he was our star hitter, but he’d twisted his ankle tripping over home plate. We needed a Hail Mary, and that’s when they decided to send me out. I was like, ‘Coach, are you serious? There’s no way I can turn this game around!’ We were screwed!”

“Uh-huh.”

“But then Coach says, ‘Son, don’t think about it. Thinkin’ will only ever get you in trouble.’ Coach was always full of wisdom.”

I say, smirking, “I think that advice was just specifically for you and that troublesome brain of yours, Bash.” But he’s not listening.

“And then he says, ‘You gotta go out there and just do it. Eye on the ball. Don’t think of the crowd watching. Don’t think of your friends out here rooting for ya, or even the guys on the other team. It doesn’t matter what team we’re playin’ for in the end, because we’re all playin’ the same game.’”

“Actually,” I say, “that seems like some pretty sound advice.”

“Yeah, exactly,” he insists. “So that’s what you need to do here, I think. Baseball is my mistress, and I focused on that ball, and I won the game. You just need to find the game that you’re both playing. The fundamental thing that brings you both together.”

In spite of myself, I smile. “Brett, you’re a fucking genius.”

Jumping out of my seat, I grab him by the shoulders and squeeze him in a brotherly hug. He holds me back, laughing and celebrating my new surge of inspiration.

But he's right. He's given me an idea about how to fix this.

Finally, I have my eye on the ball after all this time. And I don't plan to look away.

Not again.

CHAPTER 26

Denise

All too soon, it's time for Sophia to head back to school.

I drive her to the airport, and once inside, I take her as far as security will permit me to go. The queue for the security check is already piling up. But I can't bear to see her off yet. Not until I've said goodbye.

Setting her suitcase down, Sophia turns to me and hugs me, laying her head against my chest just like she did as a baby.

On the drive over, I made a silent promise to save my tears for after she was gone. I've been upset enough since Tinsley's wedding, and I don't want our last moment together until who-knows-when to be a downer.

But holding Sophia like this after everything that has happened, after all, that I have lost, and knowing I problem won't see her until Christmas makes my eyes betray that promise.

I try to keep my sniffing hidden, but apparently, I fail.

"It's okay, Mom," Sophia says softly, stroking my back. "It'll all be okay."

I let out a small chuckle. "Since when did you become the adult in this relationship?"

Sophia snorts. "We're both adults, Mom. That means the comfort goes both ways now." Stepping back, she holds me at arm's length and looks directly into my eyes. "You gonna be alright without me here?"

“Of course,” I reassure her, even with fresh tears sparkling in my eyes. “I’ll be fine. You just concentrate on your classes, okay?”

“Okay. But I’ll call you. More than I did last year. I think it’d be good for both of us.”

I pull her in for a hug again, kissing the top of her head. “I’d love that, sweetie.”

STILL IN THE AIRPORT PARKING LOT, I GET A MESSAGE ON MY phone as I sit down in my car. With a smile, I hurry to see it, sure that it’s from my darling baby girl, already living up to her promise to keep more in touch.

To my surprise, it’s a message from Brittany. I bite my lip, unsure if I should even acknowledge it. I’ve already blocked my brother’s number from my phone. After his tenth phone call, none of which I could bring myself to answer, I had Sophia show me how to stop them from coming through. Now that I know how to do it, I should probably block Brittany’s too.

I last saw Brittany in person a few days after the wedding. At her own request, she was coming to meet me at the Sugar Breeze to sign her resignation papers. I didn’t even have to fire her. She decided to leave on her own after everything that had happened.

I still really don’t know what to make of it. Was this another part of their diabolical plan? To have her abandon me at my lowest emotional point?

But as soon as I saw her through the window as she made her way to the front door, I knew that wasn’t the case.

Stepping inside and catching sight of me, she paused, letting the door slowly shut itself behind her. And for a long moment, we stared at each other, recognizing a bit of ourselves in the other woman. She had the same circles beneath her eyes,

the same flatness to her sloppily tied-up hair, the same absence of makeup.

And at that moment, I realized that she had lost a relationship the night of Tinsley's wedding, just like I had. She must have.

"How are you doing these days, Brittany?" I asked her, feeling my bitterness toward her lose some of its strength. "I haven't seen you since... you know."

"Yeah. I know." Her eyes trailed to the floor. "Things haven't been... great. But I'm sure you don't want to hear about that."

She remained silent as I handed her the papers and showed her where to sign her name. It was so strange seeing her this distraught. I had expected her to come in burning with confidence, glowing with pride from all the pain she had caused me. Instead, I swore I could see the lingering lines of tears on her cheeks.

But before I could think of the right thing to say, the questions I should ask to get the answers I'd been seeking, she closed her pink pen and put it back into her bag.

Turning to me, she said, "Thanks, Ms. Lawson. For everything. This was... this was a great place to work."

Until now, those had been the last words she'd ever said to me. Everything I wish I'd asked her had stewed inside me since then, questions fueled by hurt and bitterness.

Did Austin tell you he was my brother? I want to ask. What promises did he make you? And, at the heart of it all: "Why?" I just wanted to know the reason for it all. The purpose of going to such lengths to damage another person's dream.

And, as I look down at my phone, while I don't quite get the answers I was hoping for, I at least get something. Something not as good as answers, but close enough to begin my healing.

Remorse.

I'm sorry, Denise, the text says. I'm such an idiot. There's no excuse for the things I've done.

Another text pops in. I've taken Brett's advice, and I've broken up with Austin. I managed to sneak his wife's number from his phone, so I'm going to tell her what happened. Let her decide what she'd like to do about it. I'm going to be more careful with guys going forward. Again, I'm sorry.

And, as I sit there blinking, her final words pop up on the screen, making my heart sink a little in my chest.

Brett's one of the good ones, Denise. You're so lucky to have him. I wish the two of you the best.

So, she didn't know, then.

The reminder stings. I lay my head against the steering wheel, trying to hold myself together. My relationship with my daughter has been healed. My relationship with my sister, too. The things that have been broken in my life are starting to slowly rebuild.

But my relationship with Brett is one thing that will stay crumbled. I missed my chance to be with him.

Because Brittany is right, Brett was one of the good ones. He was perfect. Lightning in a bottle.

And I have to accept that he is never coming back.

LISA RETURNS TO BARTON BEACH TO STAY WITH ME AT THE bungalow to offer her emotional support. I've already told her everything over the phone, so there's no need to repeat the story of Brett and my brother all over again. Instead, we lounge on the couch and drink, gossiping about her coworkers and Mr. Grizzly. It's so nice having her back. Lisa has always been another ray of sunshine through my gloom.

She asks me about the mess in the kitchen, and I tell her all about my new job. With the pans and containers of icing everywhere, it's obvious I have a few projects going.

Shortly after Tinsley's wedding, I started getting phone calls and emails from her famous friends, asking me to make cakes for their events in Barton Beach. It's a small business so far, mostly whatever size of cake I can fit in my fridge. I still don't have enough counter space to make five hundred cookies in one go like I used to. But I don't need it to be more than this.

It's my own space, a business I carved out for myself.

"It kind of just started as a way to get out of bed in the mornings," I admit to Lisa. "I've got bills to pay. I can't lay around and do nothing all day."

I flush a little, bringing my glass to my mouth to hide my embarrassment. I don't want to admit to her that my post-break-up depression had been mostly me curled up in the bed where Brett used to lay, smelling the sheets for any lingering trace of his wonderful scent before crying myself into a stupor.

The cakes have become a perfect distraction from all that. They give me a reason to get out of bed, to shower and put on makeup. To leave the house and interact with my city once again.

Some days, I even grab a towel and walk down to the beach near my house, losing my thoughts beneath the drone of the surging waves and the families plucking shells from the shoreline. I've never had so much time to sit and relax. And, for the first time in years, I can confidently say that I am starting to like myself again.

"Sounds like you're doing well," Lisa observes during our conversation. "Well, at least mostly."

Playfully, I poke her in her shoulder. "Maybe the great company is just cheering me up."

Lisa giggles. "Give yourself some credit. I came down to help you get through this tough time, and instead, what do I find? A bit of a sad Denise, sure. But she's got a new job. She's been taking life at her own pace for once." Lisa smiles, setting her glass on the coffee table so I know she's serious. "This is the Denise I've missed."

“Have I been gone?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “Kind of. When you first met Dave, he seemed nice and everything. And when you had Sophia, you loved her so much that you were the happiest I think I’ve ever seen you. But years went by, and you started to disappear. I think Dave was just... wearing you down. And then last year, everything just went from bad to worse.”

Putting her hand on mine, she smiles again. “When Sheila and I took you to The Silver Coop, this is what we were trying to do for you. Take you out of your own head. Bring you out of your anxiety.”

“Well... it worked.” My eyes sting with tears again, and this time, there’s definitely no hiding them.

“I didn’t want it to happen this way. For you to hit your lowest point. But I’m glad you’re seeing yourself again, Denise. That you’re no longer doing what anyone else tells you to do. You’re a woman with ambition now. Just promise me you won’t stop.”

Setting down my own glass, I lean over and hug her tightly. “Of course not. I promise.”

From now on, I will listen to my heart. Not to people like Austin and Dave, who only see what they can take. Not to the legacy of my mother. As wonderful as she was, I was never meant to be her. I can only be me.

For the first time, I feel confident knowing that what happened wasn’t my fault. None of it was.

What Austin did to me. What Brett did. Even the stuff with Dave. For years, I’ve believed that because failure hurt, it must mean I had done something wrong. That I was responsible for it somehow. But that’s not it at all.

Lots of things will hurt. They’ve been hurting a lot lately, after all. But I think I’ve finally realized that I can only control my little corner of the world. Everything seems a lot more manageable from this new place, this new perspective.

That night, Lisa heads off to the guest room to bed, and I’m left with the impossible task of going to bed alone again.

It's in the darkness of the night that I hear my heart the loudest, that I know what I want deep, deep down inside.

What my soul craves is Brett.

Even without the constant reminders of him, like the way Brittany and Sheila both spoke of him, I would still want him badly. So badly that it drives me crazy.

Without Brett beside me, my life feels like something is missing. I make breakfast in the mornings, and he's not standing by the coffee machine waiting for me. When I step outside to get groceries, he's not waiting there for me in the back of a sleek black car.

I've let go of so many of the people who have hurt me. But Brett? He's the one thing I can't seem to fully let go of.

I try to distract myself and keep busy during the day. But at night, when I'm at my weakest, the positivity ebbs, and all that's left is a hunger for something I can no longer have. With him gone, it isn't just my heart that aches but every inch of my skin that he touched. It's like it remembers where he should be on me. Everything feels his absence.

The sheets are cold without the warmth of his body. I feel incomplete without his arms and legs around me, without his mouth on mine. My hands constantly recall the feeling of his hair around my fingers, the tautness of his muscles, the little scraping stubble he would have when we kissed the morning after.

And, when I am at my most lonesome, I remember the one thing that hurt the most to lose: the moment he told me he loved me. The feeling of being in love once again. That feeling was a soothing balm, a Band-Aid over all of my aches and pains, physical and emotional. And now that the bandage had been ripped away, leaving me sore and aching all over again. More so than I was before I met him.

Of all the things I've lost, I miss love the most.

THE NEXT DAY, AS I'M WASHING THE DISHES AFTER breakfast, Lisa makes a little squeak behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I spot her sitting on one of the stools and staring at her phone, an enormous grin on her face.

“What?” I ask. “What is it?”

“Oh.” She blushes. “It’s nothing. I just got a text from Sheila.”

“Does she want to come over? I’ll clean the wine glasses first so they’re dry by the time she gets here.”

Lisa snorts. “She says that she wants to take us out somewhere.” Lisa bites her lip, her eyebrows furrowed.

“Where?” I ask.

“There’s this new bakery opening just a few blocks from where the Sugar Breeze used to be.”

“Oh.” My stomach sinks.

“They’re holding some kind of ‘friends and family’ event today, and she wants to know if we want to go check it out. See your local competition. According to her, the guy they’ve got running the registers is pretty hot, too.”

I grip the dish in my hand so hard I almost drop it back into the soapy water. “I don’t think so. I only just got confident in my new solo business. You won’t believe how much food I had to toss out just to make enough room for the cakes. If I go and see what kind of equipment they got at some new place, I’ll—”

“Oh my gosh, Denise,” she says, cutting me off as she spots something else on her phone. “Please, just look at it.”

She holds the screen up so I can see the picture of the bakery that Sheila’s sent her. It has its charms, I’ll admit. The glossy windows are framed with bamboo shutters, and the siding is a wonderful sunny yellow color.

Opening my mouth, I start to tell Lisa that yeah, it looks fine. Nothing to get excited about. But suddenly, the logo catches my eye. It’s not just familiar. It’s something I *made*. It

looks exactly like the sugar sun I made for the top of Tinsley Simon's cake. The similarity is undeniable.

I lean in closer to read the name of the place. Initially, it's a bit unclear, as the picture is small for my eyes. But finally, it becomes clear.

Desserts by Denise.

What the hell?

Lisa grins again. "You still don't want to go?" she asks teasingly.

"Grab your purse," I respond, rushing to dry my hands. "We're getting in the car."

On the drive over, my mind is reeling. What the hell was this owner thinking? Is this some kind of practical joke? Stealing not just the little bit of clout that I have in the world of baking, but my own *name* as well? If this is Austin again, I'm going to give him a real piece of my mind.

And this time, it will be far more than a simple slap.

As we pull into the parking lot, I realize it's a location I recognize. A few days ago, this place was a rundown restaurant, its faux brick exterior crumbling away and a large "For Sale" sign slapped in its window. Almost overnight, it's had a full, cheery makeover.

I peer up at the awning, the words "Desserts by Denise" printed in curling letters. A fire fueled by pride bursts into life in my gut. Who the hell thinks this is okay?

Sheila meets us in the parking lot with her arms crossed over her chest as she leans against her car. To my surprise, she smiles at me as I approach, like she thinks the whole thing is very funny.

"I'm not laughing, Sheila," I tell her.

"Wait until you see the inside," she says, ignoring my point. Looking at Lisa, she asks, "Did you tell her about the hot guy behind the counter?"

To my frustration, Lisa giggles. “I tried, but she didn’t care. She’s too angry about the whole identity theft.”

“Well, I’m sure Mr. Hottie would like to hear all her complaints. Let’s go inside.”

Sweeping past her, I storm up to the doors and push my way inside. Despite this supposedly being a “friends and family” meet-and-greet before the grand opening, there’s only one man in here, stuffing his face with a cookie by one of the display cases.

An empty display case, I suddenly realize. Not one of the glass shelves in the entire place has any pastry on it. Even the chalkboards behind the counter are completely blank, not a speck of chalk dust on them. The place is empty, a large blank slate. Not a business ready for opening.

Stepping forward, I spy the cookie in the man’s hand, recognizing it instantly as a Crescent Moon. But before I can open my mouth to protest, the man turns around, and my heart skips a beat as I realize I recognize him too.

“Hey, Denise,” Bash says, a smear of chocolate in the corner of his mouth. He raises the cookie for me to see, nodding to it. “These are delicious. Though I bet they’re even better when you make them.”

“I... what...?” is all I can manage to say. My confusion has turned my tongue into a roadblock for speech.

And then, out from a swinging door to the back room comes....

Oh.

Oh, he’s even more gorgeous than I remembered.

He holds a tray of freshly baked Crescent Moons, setting them gently on the counter before removing his oven mitts. He’s wearing an apron so much like the one I made him wear once, a cream-colored base and a prancing unicorn across the chest. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me. He must.

His sleeves are rolled up, showing off the thickness of his arms and the sureness of his hands. He’s still dressed in his

tailored suit pants and button-up shirt, though he's let a few of the buttons stay loose, showing the top of his wonderful chest.

Finally—nervously—I bring my gaze up to meet his face.

He's smiling, a brilliant, white smile that makes my heart melt instantly. That jaw, that stubble my fingers have missed the feel of. That dark hair with the curling ends at the base of the neck. That brow still strong but much less serious than when I first saw it at The Silver Coop all those weeks ago.

And his eyes. I never forgot the way those eyes looked. But their power over me is something I will still never understand, will never get quite used to.

An endless, heavenly, sapphire blue.

“...Brett?”

CHAPTER 27

Brett

Denise stares at me for a long moment, her brows furrowed in confusion.

She looks like she's trying to decide between running away and slapping me. I hold my breath as if moving too quickly will spook her away again. This is my last chance.

And I'm not going to blow it this time.

"Brett," she says finally after a long minute, her voice soft. "What is all of this?"

"This is the new Sugar Breeze bakery," I say warmly.

Denise's eyes grow wide with shock. "The new Sugar Breeze Bakery?"

I take a step closer to her. "Yep. We decided that Sugar Breeze was too important for Barton Beach to let it go. So we got a new location. Today is the very first friends and family event."

Her eyes flash between me and the three others in the room with us. Lisa makes a subtle squeaking sound as Denise takes everything in. Sheila grins from ear to ear while Bash munches on the cookie I made for him, filling the tense silence with his crunching.

Finally, her eyes land on her sister. "Sheila, did you help plan this too?"

Sheila grins and nods in my direction.

“Sort of. Brett called me and asked to get you over here. And when I heard Lisa was coming back into town, I knew it would sound much more innocent coming from her.”

Lisa giggles again, scrunching her shoulders together. “I’m sorry, Denise.”

“Why?” Denise suddenly asks. She whips her head to look at me again. “Why are you doing all of this for me?”

I swallow, disappointment sticking to my insides like molasses. This isn’t the reaction I wanted at all.

I glance around at the others, the two women still smirking and my brother still loudly crunching and now eyeing the fresh batch of cookies I’ve pulled from the ovens.

“Denise?” I reach out and touch her cheek. “How about you and I talk in the other room?”

I expect her to pull away from my touch, but to my surprise, she doesn’t.

“Talk?” she repeats, as if she’s never heard the word before. She’s still in shock.

“Yes, baby. There are some things I want to explain.”

And though she seems so out of it, she finally lowers her hands from her face and nods. I open the little swinging door so she can join me behind the counter and then take her back into the kitchen.

As she sees all the state-of-the-art appliances in perfect mint condition, her eyes sparkle. She runs her hands across the clean oven handles, the large bowl of the new industrial mixer, and the stainless steel counters.

I’m entranced by the way her hands take in the shapes and textures of things. Remembering how those hands used to feel when studying me.

I take a deep breath, trying to keep myself focused.

“Brett,” Denise finally says, still looking around the room and not meeting my eyes. “Why would you do this?”

Quietly, I swallow, giving myself a moment to think of the right words.

No matter how much I want to take Denise in my arms now, to lay her over the counters or even the new floor tiles, and to show her with my body on hers how much I love her, I have to do this right. It's like Bash said. She needs to know that I can put her career over my own. So, after a moment, I say, "It's a gift."

She still doesn't turn to look at me, but I see her beautiful dark lashes move as she blinks in confusion. "A gift?"

"For you. And I promise you that's all it is. I don't expect anything in return."

Finally, she meets my gaze, and I hope my expression looks honest. I hope that my words ring true.

To my surprise, the corner of her mouth twitches with the hint of a smirk. Denise points to my chest. "What's with the apron?"

I let out an airy laugh. With the intensity of sharing a room with her again, I'd forgotten I was wearing this silly thing.

"I had to look the part, didn't I?" I tease, unable to help myself, "As we know from past experience, I make these aprons work."

"Yes. You do." She snorts, and for a moment, her expression lightens. And for just that brief second, everything is okay again. But then reality crashes back down on her. Her smile drops, and she looks down at her wringing hands.

Sucking in a tense breath, she says, "Giving me a bakery is very kind of you, Brett. It's a beautiful space. But I... I don't..." She trails off, biting her lip.

"I know," I assure her, reading her mind. "The bakery isn't my apology. Like I said, it's a gift. But I do have one if you'd like to hear my full apology."

Words still lost to her, she nods, still looking down and avoiding my eyes.

I clear my throat.

“When I was a kid, my brother and I didn’t have a stable home life. After our mother died, our dad was in and out of the picture so much that he stopped feeling like a dad. Bash melded well with the instability—in fact, I think he was made for it. But I just wanted things to be stable again. I turned myself into that stability, that anchor to hold my own life together when no one around me could do it.

“When I first came to Barton Beach, I was only worried about my career, to the point where it started to cloud my eyes to the world around me. I kept putting off love, thinking that it was a luxury reserved for men who already had it made. Men who had that stability to give. Not for men like what my father had been. And not for men like me. Not until I could prove I was worth something.”

Taking a moment to breathe and think of my next words, I peek at her, trying to understand how she’s feeling.

While she seems to be listening to what I’m saying, I can’t quite read how she’s taking it without her looking up to face me. I feel a little stab of nerves at the uncertainty, but I keep going in spite of them.

“The moment I met you, Denise, you took my breath away.” The small part of her cheeks I can see turns immediately red. “I thought I was speaking to a woman named Sylvia since that’s what you told me your name was. If I had known who you were that night, I would have told you the truth then and there. That I had been sent to claim your bakery right out from under you. But, in all honesty, I’m kind of glad that didn’t happen. Because I would have left Barton Beach a very different man than the one I’ve become.”

“Every decision I made to keep the truth hidden was made because I thought I was protecting you. But I see now that it only delayed the inevitable. You’ve changed me, Denise. You have opened my eyes to my own faults, my own callousness.

“And so, after our breakup, I took a good long look at my life and decided it was time for a change. Whether or not we end up together, I am a new man because of you, Denise.”

At this, her head finally begins to tilt upward, her eyes searching my face. But still, she says nothing.

“I’ve moved to Barton Beach to be closer to my brother,” I announce. “And I bought you this bakery. I have all the papers here and can sign everything over today. And, if it’s what you want, you never have to see me again. I just wanted you to have this. A place of your own. Where you don’t have to live every second of your life worried about whether or not you’re living up to your mother’s legacy.”

She blinks again, mulling the words over in her mind. Finally, she asks, “You’re living here now? In Barton Beach?”

“Right here, in Barton Beach,” I say with a grin.

She blinks at me in confusion. “But what about Houston?”

“What about it?”

She gives me a look like it should be obvious. “Your *job*, Brett. Don’t tell me they’re letting a partner be completely remote now.”

“Actually, I’m not partner anymore.”

Her eyes widen, and she’s finally fully looking at me again. “You what?”

“I quit,” I say simply. “Like I said, I used to think the job would give me some stability. But honestly, it’s given me anything *but* that. I was on track to become just like my boss, and I realized that was a cruel and unlivable future for me. I can’t stand to take away people’s dreams like that anymore. Never again.”

She’s frozen in place like a statue. I start to question whether she’s even breathing until she suddenly whispers, “But... what about *your* dreams, Brett?”

“Well,” I say, and I take a step toward her, looking her right in her gorgeous dark eyes. “Let’s just say my dreams have changed. There’s something else in my life that mattered to me more.”

Her cheeks flush again. She gets the message. Loud and clear.

Stepping forward, she reaches out a hand to me. Gently, as if she's afraid it'll hurt, she brushes my chest with her fingertips. Her touch sends chills down my spine, and I close my eyes, trying desperately to keep myself from moving closer. I've got to let her come to me.

Fortunately, I don't have to wait very long.

When my eyes are closed, I hear her take another few steps forward until she's so close to me that I can feel the warmth of her body. Her hand traces up my chest, finding my jawline and eventually settling against the back of my head, where her fingers twist through my hair, as she's always loved to do.

And then, just as I'm about to open my eyes, her lips graze mine. Hesitant and wary. Afraid of going too fast.

I can't take it anymore. Pushing my head forward, I bring our lips together and put my hands on her waist, pulling her hips against mine.

Electricity surges through me at her touch, forcing me to step forward, pressing her against the nearby wall between the cooling racks. Her hands find my chest, my waist, feeling every part of me she can reach. And I do the same to her. I tug at her hair, push my tongue into her mouth to taste her again, and even risk bringing a hand down to cup her wonderful behind.

The feeling is exquisite and euphoric.

It's better than anything I've felt before. It is ecstasy having Denise back in my arms.

All too quickly, she's tilted her head back, tugging her lips from mine. I open my eyes and watch her, her face flushed and her bosom heaving as she pants. She was enjoying the kiss as much as I was.

Catching her breath, she finally whispers, her voice barely audible over the blood pounding in my ears, "I missed you."

"I missed you too," I say, then tug her into a full embrace again.

I put my lips to her neck, licking her flesh, wanting to taste every inch of her body. She grabs my wrist and moans softly, bringing my hand up to take her breast. I pinch her nipple through her shirt, and her hips grind softly against me.

Oh, how we've both missed this.

CHAPTER 28

Denise

I 'll be honest - when I first saw Brett in the bakery, I was ready to slap him.

I wanted to yell at him, to tell him how much he had hurt me.

I was still seething from the whirlwind of events that unfolded between us. The betrayal, the lies, the heartache - all of it was still raw, fresh like a wound that wouldn't heal. When he pulled me back into the kitchen, I thought I was about to be in for another brawl.

Little did I know that he had something else in store.

I'm used to getting half-hearted apologies from men. But this... This was different. He didn't just apologize. He expressed genuine remorse and regret for the pain he caused me. I heard the passion in his voice, and it was as if a lightbulb clicked on in my head.

Brett and Dave are different. Dave never apologized for his lies and betrayal. He never took responsibility for his actions. On the other hand, Brett owned up to his mistake and did everything he could to make it right. He made me understand that he loves me and that I'm worth fighting for.

Sheila was right. I've found my one.

And judging by the way he's looking at me at me now, my guess is he feels the same way.

Brett holds my hand as we walk back to the front of the bakery, his fingers interlocked with mine. His touch is gentle

and cautious as if guarding a precious gift. And despite myself, I can't help but smile at the fact that I am that gift.

Bash, Sheila, and Lisa look at us expectantly when we return, their faces lighting up in delight when they see our intertwined hands.

Bash approaches us first, eyeing us cautiously.

"All is well, I take it?" He asks, a smile playing on his lips. Brett turns to me and squeezes my hand, waiting for me to reply.

I smile shyly and lean my head on Brett's shoulder. "Yeah, all is well."

Bash slaps Brett on the back while Sheila and Lisa cheer and pull me away from Brett, enveloping me in a group hug.

"Told you," Sheila says, her voice muffled by my shoulder. "I knew he was the one."

Lisa, never one to hold back her enthusiasm, winks at me and says, "I can't wait for the wedding!"

I laugh, savoring the moment. "Geez, one step at a time."

After the paperwork is finished, Brett gives us all an official tour of the new bakery. It's so much bigger than Sugar Breeze.

It's got high ceilings adorned with rustic wooden beams, gleaming new stainless-steel appliances, and a large glass display case for the pastries. Cozy seating areas invite patrons to relax and savor their treats, with vintage lamps that create a warm and inviting ambiance.

That, combined with Brett's promise to help me hire a team of quality bakers, makes this place practically buzz with potential.

Already, I have so many plans before the opening next month. New things to make, brand new recipes I was too scared to try. A way to stamp my name on the world. The possibilities are endless, and I can't help but feel that this is just the beginning.

And I'll have Brett by my side the whole way.

"You know, Denise," he teases me with a mischievous smile, "I *am* currently out of a job." His tone is playful, but his eyes are filled with heat when I meet his gaze. "So, if you're hiring, maybe you'll consider having me in for an interview sometime?"

I respond with a soft voice, trying to keep my expression neutral so that Lisa and Sheila don't overhear our flirting.

"I'm sure I could find a way to fit you into the schedule," I say, a hint of intrigue lacing my words. The air between us tingles with a mix of possibility and restraint.

He reaches out and plays with the ends of my hair. "Did I mention that the interview should probably be in private?"

A shiver runs through me, and my voice comes out in a whisper. "In private?"

Brett takes my hand and pulls me close to him, his breath coasting along my ear. "Yeah, baby. In private. I've got a lot of skills. And there are some things I want to show you."

He brushes his lips across mine, and for a second, I can't help but melt against him.

"I love you so much, Denise Lawson," he murmurs. "And I can't wait to take you home and show you how much I've missed you."

I beam up at him. "That sounds like a really good idea."

We'll make up not only for time lost but for the halfhearted love we made leading up to Tinsley Simon's wedding. Tonight, in my bedroom, all of it will be erased. We'll start again. A fresh start to love and life for both of us. For the first time, we're in this together. All the way.

Regardless of my efforts to keep my intentions hidden, it's like Sheila and Lisa can still read my mind. As we shut the door on the bakery and lock it up for the night, Lisa offers to spend the rest of the afternoon at Sheila's to give Brett and me some privacy in the bungalow.

Bash steps forward and gives his brother a huge pat on the back before they fold into an adorable hug. I turn to Sheila to find her next to me, with her arms outstretched for one final hug.

“Don’t have too much fun,” she whispers. “You’ve got work in the morning.”

BRETT POUNCES ON ME AS THE FRONT DOOR TO THE BUNGALOW is shut behind us.

Ripping his shirt off, he tosses it aside and dives for me, his mouth going right for the dip in my shirt, planting kisses in the valley between my breasts. I lean my head back, my body already trembling at his touch.

The longing between Brett and me had grown to an almost unbearable intensity during our time apart. Every stolen glance, every incidental brush of our fingers was charged with an undercurrent of yearning. And now, in each other’s arms once again, we felt a profound sense of completion, as though we were finally home.

His hands find the bottom of my shirt again, but there’s no interruption this time. He slips it off me and throws it aside, not even caring where it lands. We could be anywhere now, with any number of things happening around us. The oceans could swell, the sky could fall, the house could collapse around us. Neither of us would notice.

In mere seconds, Brett yanks off my pants and my dripping panties, all in one go.

“Goddamn, Denise.” He groans. His eyes are wild and hungry as he dips a finger into my wetness. “You’re so wet for me, baby.”

Reaching a hand forward, I cup the front of his pants and find him already hard and aching for me. I begin to massage him there, watching him close his eyes and his shoulders bulge as pleasure rushes through.

Quickly, I find the button on his pants and release his full form, his erection swollen and enormous, begging for my body. I reach out a hand to take it again, to pleasure him even more, but he grabs both of my wrists.

“No,” he says between gasps of breath. “Not too fast. I want to enjoy you.”

I melt to his words and let him take over, let him steer me over to the couch again, to the place where we first made love. He lays me down and climbs on top of me again, his body enveloping me, covering me up. Swallowing me.

His arms caress me, his lips worship me, finding every inch of my skin and tasting it. His teeth find my nipples, and I squirm as a pleasure so powerful, so intense, erupts through me that it's almost painful. He is a god, a master of my body. And I let myself go to him.

His hands find my thighs and force them apart, allowing his fingers to part me, to find me already wet for him. He pinches and tugs at my clit, sending my body spasming, before he finally finds a rhythm. The pleasure builds inside me, and I groan and grind against his touch, needing to release against him. Needing him to set me free.

As my first climax nears, I suck in a breath and brace myself, arching my back and ready to scream his name. But, like the sneaky devil he is, his fingers stop their rhythm.

“No,” I gasp, my voice strained and desperate. “What are you doing?”

“I said not too fast,” he answers. “I want to enjoy you.”

I groan again, but this time out of annoyance. “Fuck you.”

He laughs loudly, his taut belly shaking against my leg. “I think that's the first time I've heard you curse like that.”

“You deserve it.”

“Yeah,” he says, gripping the back of the couch with one hand and leaning over me again. “Maybe I do.”

His mouth finds mine, and he kisses me again, his tongue tasting every inch of me. Then he hums into my mouth as need

begins to build in him, too, his body as desperate for release as mine. But still, he holds himself back, letting the feeling smolder for a little while longer.

My blood pounds through my ears as he pulls away and lets his lips hover above mine. I take in the scent of him, letting it fill my lungs and cloud my mind.

My hands caress his shoulders, feeling the strength and force of his arms, the intensity of his feeling for me. I groan into his mouth again, arching my back and pushing my hips against his belly.

After what feels like forever, he finally leans back and puts his swollen tip at my entrance. Slowly, he enters me, dragging out every pleasurable second. It sends us both reeling.

He begins to pound into me, wanting to make me come. And I can't stop it from happening. Pleasure courses through me, and I scream as my whole body climaxes, my every cell shattering apart and pulling roughly back together.

After a moment, he comes too, filling me with a satisfied moan. He lays down beside me, sweating and gasping for air as his body recovers, and I do the same.

As his breath finally settles, he looks directly at me, his eyes fiercely blue with the same need as before.

He isn't done with me yet.

Later in the afternoon, we manage to make it to my bed, and he holds me in the half-dark of the setting sun. Tightly, so I know he'll never let me go.

Turning over, I say softly, "Brett?"

"Hmm?" he asks, his eyes watching mine closely.

I scoot my head across the pillow, bringing our lips together once more. After all our kissing, mine are starting to feel sore. But I don't care. I refuse to stop.

"Brett..." I say again. "I love you."

"I love you too," he assures me, kissing me hard again. "And I promise I am never going anywhere again."

The glow of the setting sun hums through the window, lighting up the silver streaks in his hair. He is beautiful. He is perfect.

And, after everything that has happened, he is mine.

The End....ish.

ALL OF YOUR FAVORITE BARTON BEACH CHARACTERS ARE back in Silver Fake! [Get Lisa and Mr. Grizzly's story here.](#)

CRAVING A QUICK HIT OF STEAMY ROMANCE? MEET THE Walker Brothers in my Fit Mountain Grumps series.

Steamy Bonus Epilogue

Want more Denise and Brett? Sign up for my email newsletter and get an exclusive [ultra-steamy](#) bonus epilogue scene.

About the Author

Stella Banks is a romance writer who loves nothing more than crafting a good happily ever after.

As a mother of three, she can often be found typing feverishly at her laptop while sipping on Prosecco (yep, that's multitasking at its finest!). She's passionate about writing stories that make her readers smile and creating romantic worlds filled with love.

When she isn't writing, Stella can be found admiring sunsets and plotting her next masterpiece.

Also by Stella Banks

Fit Mountain Grumps

Crazy Grump

Bossy Grump

Charming Grump

Cocky Grump

Fit Mountain Christmas

Mountain Wish

Mountain Spark

Mountain Gift

Sweet and Steamy Standalones

Melt: First Kiss Short Stories

Mine: A Possessive Boss Instalove

More: An Angsty Billionaire Romance

Tempted in Texas

Silver Seconds: A Hot Over 40 Romance

Silver Fake: A Hot Over 40 Romance