



SURPRISE

*Daddy*

CRYSTAL MONROE

# SURPRISE DADDY

A SECRET BABY ROMANCE



CRYSTAL MONROE

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## LET'S STAY IN TOUCH

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# CHAPTER 1



“*P*op that ass out too, Jennings!” Nadia shouted over the music blasting through the dance club.

I raised a brow at my best friend, but she ignored me.

“*Feel* the music,” she instructed. “Own it!”

“The only thing I’m going to own is a concussion—unless these heels kill me first. These shoes are a death trap.”

I teetered in my stilettos. Nadia cackled and brushed her red hair out of her face. Then she went back to demonstrating how the dance move was *supposed* to look.

Why she wanted to teach me on the dance floor in front of everyone and their hip grandmother, I had no idea.

One thing was certain. I was floundering.

“Dakota. Honey. Darling. Please, just... *more ass*. I’m begging you.”

“You sound like my ex.”

“Poor Jackson,” Cassie, the sweet third of our trio, chimed in. “Nadia’s right, though. It’s your best *asset*.”

Cassie snorted at her own joke, leaving me rolling my eyes. She was having no issues emulating Nadia’s dance, which inspired me to put my all into it. If shy little Cassie could be a sexy dance club goddess, then so could I!

“If you want more of this ass, you’ll get it!” I exclaimed, causing both of my friends to laugh as I popped my butt like it



had never popped before. It seemed to be working, no matter how awkward it felt.

Then my high heel promptly buckled against the floor.

I stumbled and started to fall. Panicked, I flailed my arms, managing to regain my balance just before I completely wiped out.

I steadied myself, raising my arms above my head victoriously.

“I am the queen of grace and all that is sexy!”

“Sexy, yes,” Nadia confirmed. “Grace? Well... we have some work to do.”

We all dissolved into laughter as I composed myself, and my eyes wandered around the club. How many people had just seen me nearly break an ankle?

“Oh, my,” I breathed, my lighthearted laughter cut off abruptly as my eyes settled on the opposite end of the club.

A group of three men had just appeared, and among them was the most gorgeous human being that I had ever seen.

His gaze was intense, and he towered over his friends in a powerful, confident stance. His muscular body was on full display in his tailored suit, and I had the strangest thought that he was built for the sole purpose of pleasuring a woman.

I took in his muscular form, then looked once more at his chiseled face. Now he was staring at *me*.

*Oh, God.*

The intensity of his blue eyes focusing on mine startled me so much that I actually *yelped*.

“Dakota, are you all right?” Nadia asked.

“Yup!” I squeaked.

Nadia wasn't convinced. She followed my gaze, which was still glued to the delicious stranger. Dark hair, blue eyes, and a body that made me want to sit up and beg.

Did I mention absolutely gorgeous?

“Oh. I see!” Nadia exclaimed with a giggle, pulling Cassie to her vantage point and nodding toward the guy. “Dakota’s in *love*.”

“Wha—” I was snapped out of my trance by the utterly ridiculous statement. I shook my head. “No, but *look* at him.”

“Oh, we’re looking,” Cassie said with a knowing grin.

“You totally want to bone him.”

“Nadia!”

“It’s obvious,” Nadia said, as if she were the authority on the matter. “He is bona fide boneable.”

“Oh my God.” I covered my face with my hands, peeking through my fingers to find the guy again. Yep, he looked just as good the second time, only now he was distracted, speaking to one of his friends.

“You should probably go talk to him. You know, since you want to rip his clothes off and all,” Cassie said with a sage nod.

“I bet he could take you places,” Nadia continued. “Make you forget your own name.”

“I bet *he’d* get you to pop your ass,” Cassie said.

“Properly,” Nadia agreed.

“Please shut up.” I laughed.

I dropped my hands from my face, which was still burning, and searched for the handsome stranger again. My heart sank when I realized he had been lost in the crowd. I looked back to my friends.

“He’s probably got, like, seven girlfriends already. Or a wife. Or a husband. Maybe even a cult. There’s always a catch.”

“Dakota Jennings! You’re talking yourself out of it before you even try!” Nadia scolded. “You’re radiant. Beautiful. Fun. And smart. That hunk of walking sex would be lucky to have you.”

“I’m sure he’s got a name, you know,” I pointed out. “He’s not just a piece of meat.”

“Well, you’re never going to know a *thing* about his meat just standing here.” Nadia winked.

“You should go dance with him. Show off your sexy moves.”

I snorted. “Sure, because every guy wants to see me fall on my face.”

“Hey, you don’t have to dance.” Cassie waggled her eyebrows. “You can do a lot of *other* things that don’t require heels. Or clothes. Or balance.”

I burst out laughing, my cheeks burning scarlet. “Yeah, right.”

“Why not?” Nadia asked, her eyes sparkling as we made our way to the bar. “Tell me you don’t want that guy to drag you to his bed, caveman style.”

I blushed harder. “Guys, come on.”

“She’s right,” Cassie agreed. “You need to let your hair down and *live* for a change. We didn’t come all the way to Vegas to celebrate graduation for you to sit in the corner and be a prude.”

I started to protest, but my mind wandered back to the way he had looked at me. The electricity in his eyes, and my body’s response to him.

“Seriously, you studied your ass off in college. What better graduation gift can you give yourself than a night with *him*?”

“It’s time to clear out the cobwebs, Kota,” Nadia said. “Ride his cock.”

“Suck him dry!” Cassie added.

“Could you two get any more obnoxious?” I cried, causing my friends to laugh even harder. “I don’t know... He might be a bit out of my league.”

“There’s no way he’s out of your league, Dakota. You’re so beautiful. In every possible way. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“You haven’t been with anyone since Jackson, Kota,” Cassie said. “Not every man is going to break your heart. You don’t even have to give him your phone number.”

So, I hadn’t done all that much sleeping around. Not like—*ahem*—some of my friends. But maybe they had a point.

It was our last night in Las Vegas before we went back home. Soon, I had a life to plan, a future to build. This was our last hurrah, a shout into the void that we were still young and free.

There was nothing wrong with having some fun.

“Don’t you want to?” Nadia asked. “Because if you don’t, I—”

I didn’t want Nadia to finish her sentence, and my voice came out far louder than I intended.

“Fine! Yes! I want to ride his cock, okay? All night long! Happy now?”

My admission caused Nadia to throw her head back in laughter. Laughter that was halted abruptly as her green eyes grew wide, her focus fixed on a point just behind me.

I frowned and glanced over my shoulder, and I swear I could feel my soul leaving my body.

Mr. Hot as Hell was standing there, so close I could almost touch him. A dizzying flurry of emotions went through me. I froze.

“I’m flattered,” he said, his deep voice washing over me, just as delicious as the rest of him. “I’d love to discuss these little whims of yours over a drink. If you’re willing.”

## CHAPTER 2



*H*oly f\*ck.

She was even more beautiful up close. Especially when her cheeks burned bright red with embarrassment.

She wasn't the type to throw herself at a guy—her reaction said it all. She was a little shy, a little awkward, and I was completely taken by her.

Since the moment we locked eyes when I walked in that door, I'd been drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

Her eyes, wide-set and dazzling brown, were fixed on me, petrified, and I offered her a reassuring smile. Did she doubt that I wanted to spend more time with her? I knew it couldn't be that she wasn't interested.

She had said it all herself. She wanted me. And from the way her friends had been egging her on, I could tell she wasn't the type to sleep around.

"I had to come over to meet you," I went on, realizing she was too stunned to speak. "It's rare to see such skill on the dance floor. Your grace was impressive. Especially the part where you nearly face-planted."

I hoped my gentle tease wouldn't scare her away completely. She looked about three seconds away from bolting to the door and never coming back. To my relief, she fell into easy laughter.

"Oh, God. You saw that?"

“I’m afraid so. I’m actually impressed. You mastered the art of falling.”

“This is easily the most mortifying moment of my entire adult life.”

“Just your adult life?” I asked. “I’d love to hear about the most mortifying moment of your early life too. Maybe we can do a little compare and contrast.”

“Oh, oh, I know this one!”

The gorgeous blonde’s friend, the one with the long red hair, raised her hand and bounced on her heels, eager to spill the dirt.

I grinned, raising my brow at the blonde. “Well? Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to get my information from a secondhand source?”

She shot a look at her friend, who grinned knowingly but simmered down.

“I really don’t think that’s first-date level sharing,” she said. “That’s, like, at least date four.”

“So you’re going to have that drink with me then.”

Her beautiful face did that adorable flush again, and her voice came out flustered. I was done for.

“What? No, that’s not... I mean. God, I can’t believe you’re still interested in me after all this.”

“What red-blooded man *wouldn’t* be interested after hearing a sexy woman shout she wants to ride his cock?” the redhead asked.

I had to agree with her logic.

The blonde groaned. “Nadia, please just shut up now.”

The racy little speech she made earlier had nothing to do with why I had approached her. There had been something else about her. The way she carried herself. Her confidence and humor.

She seemed fun. And so insanely beautiful. The fact that she wanted to ride my cock was just an unexpected bonus.

“I’m Ben,” I said, offering my hand to try to direct everyone’s thoughts away from my cock.

She took my hand reluctantly, looking down at it as she put her hand in mine. The contact of her fingers left me feeling a little lightheaded. Strange.

“Dakota,” she murmured.

“Can I buy you a drink, Dakota?” I asked.

“Please,” she said. “Anything to drown my embarrassment.”

I laughed and leaned on the bar, signaling the bartender. I ordered a round of drinks for Dakota and myself, and a refill for her friends.

“Learning to dance, huh?” I asked, turning to her.

“Nadia thinks I need lessons.”

“I happen to be a decent dancer.” I was blowing my own horn, but I had liquid courage—I’d downed a couple of drinks before coming to talk to the goddess who had all my attention.

“Yeah?” she asked. “You should show me sometime.”

“How about—”

My sentence was cut short when Emmett and Jake joined us, barging in on the conversation.

“This is Jake and Emmett,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“What’s taking you so long, man?” Jake asked.

I shook my head with a laugh. “I was just talking to these lovely ladies here.”

Nadia and the other girl stepped closer, and I introduced my friends. Emmett and Jake were happy to meet them and started flirting. The girls liked the attention. I studied Dakota as she watched her friends, who were confident with the guys. She wasn’t as forward and open as the other two, but I liked that about her.



I leaned in so that my mouth was close to her ear.

“How about we go onto the dance floor and I show you some of those moves I was talking about?”

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

She took her drink with her, and we made our way through the crowd. The others followed suit and we found a space, huddling together in a group. I took her hand and pulled her against me, moving my body to the music. With my hands on her hips, I guided her, but she was better than I’d thought she was—she moved fluidly to the beat, and my cock twitched in my pants.

“I thought you said you can’t dance,” I said in her ear.

“I can dance. I just can’t dance like Nadia wants me to.”

She shimmied herself against me and I stifled a groan. She was mesmerizing.

I ran my fingers along her thigh. Her short skirt left just enough to the imagination, and her round hips made me salivate. When I pulled her against me, feeling her lush curves under my hands as we moved to the music, my cock punched up in my pants.

I wanted her. Badly.

I hadn’t come to Vegas to get laid. It hadn’t been my intention to find someone who would capture me the way she did, but the moment I first saw her, I was done for. I couldn’t stop staring. Dark blonde hair, large brown eyes that drew me in, and full, pouty lips that had me in a trance.

The music thrummed through me, and I held her close.

She moved her body to the music, her hair falling over her shoulders. I put my hands on her hips and moved with her. She mirrored me, and we swayed in sync like we were one.

When she shimmied closer, she pressed the length of her body against me. I was achingly aware of the swells of her round breasts against my chest, her slim fingers around the back of my neck, and the way her hips shook hypnotically.

I breathed in her floral scent, and I was consumed by a wild desire to claim this girl in every possible way.

I'd had my fair share of one-night stands—a guy had to take the edge off, after all.

But I didn't want to fuck her just to get off. I wanted to get closer to her. This feeling I had with her was different, almost like I knew her from somewhere.

I knew I didn't, though. I would have remembered a woman like Dakota.

She turned around and ground her perfect ass against my cock. I groaned, lust coursing through my body.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at me, her eyes locking on mine again. I glanced down at her lips—perfectly plump and begging to be kissed.

“I need some water,” she said when the song changed.

I nodded. When she moved away from me, I felt her absence acutely. She signaled something to her friends, who followed her. Jake and Emmett fell into step behind me, too.

We ordered a round of water, and Dakota sipped the ice-cold water from the bottle. Condensation from the bottle dripped on her chest and ran between her cleavage. I desperately wanted to follow that trail with my tongue.

I forced myself to look up at her eyes.

“Tell me what you do,” I said, settling on the barstool beside her.

“I just graduated from college,” Dakota said. “That's what we're here for—to celebrate before we go to grad school.”

“What are you studying?”

“Business,” she said.

I raised my eyebrows. “Yeah?”

She nodded again and sipped more water. “I want to run our family business eventually.” She lifted her hand to her chest and touched a necklace that hung around her neck. “I

want to turn it into one of the most profitable businesses in LA.”

LA? My heart sank. Los Angeles was a hell of a way away from my home.

“What about you? Are you studying?” Dakota asked.

“No, I already have my MBA.”

Her eyes lit up. “Nice. A fellow business nerd.”

I nodded. “I started a company out of school a couple of years ago. I’m based in New York.”

She looked disappointed, too. But the world was a small place these days, right? We could stay in contact. Maybe things could work out somehow.

I didn’t usually give a shit where the girls were from. The farther from home, the better. It saved me from having to avoid them. But Dakota wasn’t the kind of girl I wanted to keep at arm’s length.

I could already tell one night with her wouldn’t be enough. I’d have to see her again after this.

Something about her made me feel like I’d known her for a long time. I was comfortable around her, and conversation came naturally.

“Why are you in Vegas?” Dakota asked. “Also celebrating something?”

I shook my head. “It’s just a boys’ weekend. Sometimes you just have to get away, you know?”

Dakota giggled. “People *get away* by going to the beach or taking a day off work. They don’t do a whole trip to Vegas.”

I shrugged. I had more than enough money to go all out. Lately, everything back in New York had started to feel boring. I pushed harder, faster. I wanted something that would shake me to my core, jolt me awake when I felt like I’d fallen asleep.

Dakota was a breath of fresh air. I hadn’t felt this intrigued by anyone or anything in a long time.

“I’m not *people*,” I said.

“No, you’re not,” Dakota said.

A smile played around her lips. She leaned in a little, as if drawn to me like a magnet. Her large eyes slid to my mouth, and I was done holding back.

I pushed my hand into her hair, palm in her neck, and kissed her.

She kissed me back, allowing me in when I slid my tongue into her mouth. She tasted as sweet as candy, and my cock throbbed.

Dakota placed her delicate hand on my chest. Even through my shirt, her hand was hot on my skin, branding me. She pushed herself against me, and I wrapped an arm around her waist.

She felt like heaven. I wanted more—so much more.

I pulled back to study her face, feeling like a ravenous wolf. “Where are you staying?”

She blinked for a moment, as if to recover from the kiss. “The Metropolitan.”

“Are you kidding?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide.

“I’ve got a room there, too,” I said.

“What a small world,” she said.

“Not small enough. There’s still too much space between us.” I closed the distance between our bodies and kissed her again. I sucked her bottom lip into my mouth and pressed my rock-hard length against her flat abdomen, letting her feel how badly I wanted her.

“Let me walk you home,” I growled. It was just a block away. “Come see my room.”

“Your room isn’t all I’ll be seeing, is it?” she asked with a smile.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

She giggled and kissed me again.

“Okay,” she breathed.

I took her hand and kissed her knuckles, my eyes still locked on hers.

Tonight, I was going to make this goddess mine.

## CHAPTER 3



This wasn't like me.

I didn't do one-night stands, and I didn't go back to strangers' hotel rooms. I was the girl who always kept things straight—I studied hard, I was cautious, and I kept my eye on future plans.

I wasn't the type to live recklessly.

But around Ben, I couldn't help myself.

At our hotel, we stepped into the elevator and he pushed the penthouse suite button.

I raised my eyebrows. "When you said you had a room, I thought you meant... a *room*."

Ben shrugged. "If I'm going to go out and enjoy myself, I'm going to do it properly."

I giggled and leaned against his shoulder. It was the most natural thing in the world to slide my hand into his, and he interlinked our fingers like it was what we always did.

He didn't feel like a stranger. We'd only met a short while ago, but I felt like I'd known him forever. This was why I was here, going to his room—or his suite—despite not knowing him.

I could imagine how thrilled Nadia and Cassie were that I was finally doing something crazy. This was my wild side they'd been trying to coax out of me all night. They didn't get it, though. I would have said no to any other guy.

Ben was different.

The elevator doors slid open, and we stepped into a short hallway with two other doors.

“Those two doors are Jake’s and Emmett’s,” Ben said, nodding in the general direction of the other doors.

“You all got your own rooms?”

Ben nodded.

“Nadia, Cassie, and I are all sharing,” I said.

Ben smiled. “I’d rather have my space, you know?” He swiped his key card and pulled me through the door. He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me against him, leaning his forehead against mine. “I couldn’t be alone with you if I was sharing, now could I?”

He kissed me before I could respond. I melted against him.

The need for him flared up again. I’d squashed some of it in the club, behaving as best I could when we were in public. But now I wanted him, and I no longer had to hold back.

He pushed his hands into my hair and slid his tongue into my mouth, kissing me in a way that made me feel like he wasn’t holding back, either.

Ben ground his massive cock against me, showing me just how hard and ready he was. I moaned into his mouth. He sucked my lower lip into his mouth, scraped it with his teeth, and I shivered. It was like he wanted to devour me, and the thought thrilled me.

He sparked a flame at my core, and heat washed through my body, pooling between my legs.

Ben walked me backward toward the dining room table and lifted me onto the edge. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he pushed his cock against me. He held me up with one hand, and his other cupped my breast.

“You’re so unbelievably gorgeous,” he muttered.

He kissed his way down my neck. I gasped as he left a trail of fire in his wake. Pulling my top down, he kissed his way



onto my chest and massaged my breast through my lacy bra. My erect nipples pointed upward as I arched my back.

Ben drew a circle around one nipple with his tongue, and the rough fabric against the delicate skin created an erotic sensation before he pulled the cup down, too, and sucked my nipple into his mouth. With a hand on my other breast, he worshipped both breasts simultaneously.

I buried my fingers in his hair, throwing my head back with pure pleasure. His mouth around my nipple sent pulses of electricity straight to my pussy, coaxing the flame at my core into a raging furnace.

The wet spot grew between my legs. I wanted his cock deep inside of me.

He grinned as he moved his mouth to my other nipple. I cried out from the frustration his teasing brought me.

He took his time, paying attention to my body, working me up into a frenzy.

Suddenly, he pulled my shirt up and I lifted my arms. When my top landed on the floor, I reached behind my back and unclasped my bra.

Ben stared at my bare breasts as they bounced free, his eyes darkening with primal need.

He met my eyes again, then leaned in to kiss my lips. With his large, powerful hands on my shoulders and waist, he gently eased me backward until I lay on the table. I shivered at the cold wood against my bare back.

Ben kissed his way down my chest and onto my stomach, his large, muscular body bent over mine. He pulled my skirt down in the process, tracing a finger along the lace waistband of my panties. I drew in a breath and looked at him with lips parted as he slowly pulled the bit of fabric down my legs. Grinning, he dropped my panties on the floor.

He stood over me, taking in the sight of my naked body spread before him on the table. With a smile, he removed his suit jacket and tossed it aside. I felt vulnerable for a moment, but then at ease. Ben made me feel safe and cared for.

The way he looked at me was thrilling, and I knew this experience was going to be amazing.

“So beautiful,” he said.

He ran his hands over my hips, onto my thighs, and parted them. He slid his hand between my legs, cupping me, and I gasped when he flicked his fingers over my clit. He locked eyes with me and drew small circles around my clit. The eye contact was intense, making the moment personal. I felt a connection with Ben I hadn't with anyone before.

He also touched me like no man had before.

God, I could barely contain myself as pleasure spread through my core. Already, my body was wired tight with the promise of release, an ache for him blossoming inside.

Ben pushed two fingers into me, and I cried out in pleasure. Closing my eyes, I lost myself in the sensation. He stroked his fingers in and out of me, shifting the focus from my clit to a sensitive spot inside me. It increased the buildup toward climax, and I trembled on the table.

“Ben,” I moaned, pleading for release.

Ben chuckled, the sound velvety smooth and deep.

He sank to his knees between my legs and ran a hand down my leg, wrapping his fingers around my ankle. My heels had fallen off when he'd set me on the table, and he lifted my bare feet onto his shoulders. Now he was perfectly positioned between my legs, and I was totally exposed to him.

When I glanced down at him, he looked delicious, his piercing blue eyes boring into my soul and a naughty smile playing around his lips.

He closed his mouth over my dripping flesh, making me cry out when he flicked his hot tongue over my clit. I shivered and moaned as he licked and sucked, moving faster and faster until I felt I would burst with pleasure, only to slow it down and leave me teetering on the edge.

I moaned and reached for him, running my fingers into his thick, dark hair.

He moaned against my body and the sound vibrated into my core, deep and delicious.

Ben sucked my clit gently into his mouth. At the same time, he pushed two fingers into me again. I swear I saw stars.

He pumped his fingers in and out of me as he licked and sucked my clit, and the double onslaught was more than I could bear.

I raced toward the edge of orgasm, at last toppling over. Pure ecstasy flooded my body, filling me up to the brim. I bucked my hips against Ben's mouth and trembled on the table, arching my back.

Ben slowed down his movements as I rode out my orgasm, enveloped in pure sexual bliss.

Finally, when I came down from my high, I collapsed, breathing hard.

Ben stood and grinned at me, his eyes filled with animalistic desire. "You're even more beautiful when you come."

I felt my face grow warm. "You're still dressed," I said in a breathy voice.

"Can't have that." He unbuttoned his shirt and removed it, dropping it on the floor. I stared at him.

Ben was sculpted as fuck. He was a chiseled, muscular god, with bronze skin that accentuated every toned, taut muscle on his huge frame. I could stare at him for days.

He chuckled.

"Do you live in the gym?" I asked, sounding like an idiot.

He laughed. "Almost."

He took my hand and pulled me up. With his hand behind my head, he kissed me again.

I fiddled with his buckle and undid his pants. When I reached into his pants, I pulled his cock free.

He was *impressive*.

I trailed a finger along his long, hard shaft. Ben groaned against my lips.

I worked his pants down his hips. He helped me, kicking off his shoes, pants, and boxers.

“Come here,” Ben said and picked me up. His cock pressed against my lower stomach, scalding hot, branding me when I wrapped my legs around his waist. He cupped my ass and carried me through the penthouse suite to the bedroom.

I was vaguely aware of my surroundings, that we were in the lap of luxury. I’d known the Metropolitan was fancy—at the price we paid per night it had to be—but this suite was next level. It was only fitting. Everything about Ben was amazing.

He placed me on the comforter of a king-sized bed. I watched him walk to the nightstand and take out a condom. He ripped the foil and made quick work of wrapping himself up before he got onto the bed with me.

When he hovered over me, his weight held up by his elbow next to my head, he kissed the tip of my nose.

“I haven’t had a night like this with anyone before.”

“Sex after going to a club?”

“Sex with someone as special as you.”

I smiled and kissed him. I felt the same.

Ben rolled onto me. The time for talking was over.

My thighs fell open for him. I wanted him inside of me. I wanted to give it all to him—I hadn’t had a night like this before, either, and I wanted as much of this man as I could get.

I held my breath in anticipation when I felt his huge cock against my entrance. We both moaned as he slowly slid into my sex. He paused when he was buried inside of me, letting me adjust to his sheer size. I trembled around him.

“Oh, God,” I breathed.

“Are you okay?” he murmured.

I nodded. “More than okay. It feels amazing.”

Ben dropped kisses on my lips as he started thrusting. Slowly, at first, sliding out of me almost all the way before pushing back in.

I moaned at the feel of him, stroking every inch of me, even the parts his fingers hadn't reached.

Slowly, Ben picked up the pace. He bucked his hips and hammered into me harder and faster, until he grunted with exertion and the air pumped in and out of my lungs in rhythm with his movements.

He was incredible. His body was taut, the muscles rippling under his skin as he moved. I ran my hands over his huge, strong back, surrendering to his power and size. I grabbed on to him when he fucked me harder still, and my fingernails dug into his skin.

He grunted with pleasure, ducking his head to suck on my nipple.

I neared another orgasm, reaching the precipice in no time. I teetered on the edge for just a moment before I fell apart a second time.

This time, Ben kissed me, swallowing my cries. He slowed down his pace until he stroked his hard cock sensually in and out of me while the rush of pleasure flooded me.

When I opened my heavy eyes, Ben's gaze rested on my face. He ran his fingers through my hair and studied me, as if he was committing this moment to memory.

He pulled his erect length out of me, and we didn't need to say anything. He lay on his back and reached for me. I clambered onto him, straddling his hips. I braced my hands on his perfectly chiseled chest, and he moved his hands over my breasts.

He groaned when I lowered myself onto his cock, his voice rumbling through his chest beneath my hands. I moaned as I rocked my hips back and forth, stroking him in and out of me.

Ben grabbed hold of my hips to guide me. I closed my eyes, biting my lip as I rode him.

*Unbelievable.* I was approaching yet another orgasm. Ben knew just how to pleasure me, as if he were intimately familiar with every erogenous spot on my body.

He knew me as if we'd done this a hundred times before.

Ben grunted, the sound of our sex filling the room. A moment later, I cried out. I was peaking, and Ben was on the verge, too. I could tell by the way his breathing had become shallow and erratic and his brows knitted together in concentration. I bucked my hips harder and faster still as I gave in to the climax.

He bit out a sharp cry and pulled me forward, burying himself deep inside me—deeper than I thought possible.

I came undone at the seams and collapsed on Ben's chest. He wrapped his arms around my back and held me tightly as we rode out the waves of pleasure together.

When we came down from our high, I rolled off to the side and lay on the bed, gasping for breath.

“Wow,” Ben gasped.

“Yeah,” I answered.

We breathed hard. My skin was slick with sweat. His hairline was wet, his lips parted as he panted.

“I'll be right back,” he said and leaned over to kiss me before he walked to the bathroom. He came back shortly after without the condom and crawled onto the bed again.

He pulled me against him, and I put my head on his chest. It fit perfectly, like we were made for each other, like we were meant to do this all along. We were silent for a long moment.

“So, business school in the fall, huh?” Ben finally asked.

I giggled, startled by the question. “Yeah, I want to keep the family legacy going. Studying business just makes sense.”

“I like that,” Ben said. His voice was soothing under my cheek. “I'm at the start of that journey, you know? I want to

build something that lasts, something that will stand the test of time.”

“We all have to start somewhere, and from the look of things, you’re doing pretty well for yourself.”

Ben shrugged. “Money isn’t everything.”

“But it helps,” I pointed out. “I’m pretty sure I’d feel better crying in a Lamborghini than in a beat-up Toyota.”

Ben chuckled. “Do you have any idea how uncomfortable a Lambo can be?”

I giggled. “Oh, well, then we’re all doomed.”

Ben dropped a kiss in my hair.

“Do you think the others are still at the club?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I stopped thinking about them the second I laid eyes on you.”

I laughed. “That was hours ago!”

He didn’t answer me. I giggled again, looking up at him. I traced his jaw with my finger. He was incredibly handsome, but it wasn’t just his looks that got me. Something about Ben made me feel at ease, like I could just be myself.

He pulled me tighter against him and kissed me. I wrapped my arm around his neck and lost myself in his kisses. I could kiss this man all day and all night and I would never tire of it. Being with him felt like perfection.

“What time are you leaving tomorrow?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know... early.”

“Stay the night.”

I nodded. I didn’t even have to think about it—I couldn’t imagine being anywhere but in his arms.

“Good,” Ben said and rolled over so that he was on top of me. “Because I’m far from done with you.”

My face opened into a smile, and he grinned before he kissed me deeply. He moved his hips against me. His cock was fully erect again.

I shivered when he ran his hand down my body, tracing my curves.

When he pushed his hand between my legs, I was wet for him again.

His eyes changed.

“You’re wet,” he said.

“You’re hard,” I countered.

“What are we going to do about that?” he asked and planted kisses on my lips.

“I can think of a couple of things,” I said.

He chuckled. “Yeah? You’ll have to show me.”

“Okay,” I gasped and wrapped my fingers around his shaft.

He groaned, and our laughter faded as we got lost in each other all over again.



## CHAPTER 4



I blinked my eyes open and squinted when the sun fell through a crack in my curtains. My head ached dully after the drinks I'd had last night, even if I'd spent most of the night working them off.

I grinned at the thought and rolled over to see Dakota. She spent the night—we'd finally fallen asleep after round three. Or was it round four?

When I rolled over, the bed was empty. The sheets were rumpled and turned over, and when I ran my hand over the mattress, it was cold.

I sat up with a frown. "Dakota?"

No answer.

I got up and pulled on a pair of boxers before I walked through the penthouse, but she wasn't anywhere to be found. It took me a moment to realize her clothes, shoes, and purse were gone, too.

Shit!

Had she really left without so much as a goodbye?

I ran my hand through my hair and spun around, looking for a note. She *had* to have left something for me somewhere. No way she'd just *leave*—not after the night we'd had. She'd been like an apparition, a dream, but last night had definitely been real.

The satiated feeling I had after a night of mind-blowing sex was proof of that.

But that was in stark contrast to the sinking feeling in my gut.

I looked for my phone and found it on the dining room table. My mind flashed on Dakota, lying naked on her back before me. I could still taste her sweetness on my lips.

When I checked the time, it was barely past seven. She'd said she had to leave early, but surely not *this* early.

I jogged to the bedroom and pulled on jeans and a fresh T-shirt—I would shower later. Right now, I had to find her. She was staying in the same hotel. She had to be here somewhere...

Except the Metropolitan had over five hundred rooms. Short of banging on every door, I couldn't find which one she was in.

I rode the elevator down to the lobby. While I descended, I drummed my fingers against my thigh. I checked the time again.

"Hi," I said to the concierge. "I need to find someone who's staying in the hotel."

The concierge only frowned at me. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't think I understand..."

"I just want to find out what room she's in. I need to contact her."

He shook his head and offered me a polite smile. He looked polished and put-together and absolutely empty, like he wasn't planning on giving me what I needed.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not at liberty to disclose that kind of information without the lady in question giving her room number to you herself. It's a matter of security."

Damn it!

Of course, that made sense. I wouldn't have wanted the hotel to give out my information to any stranger, either, but that wasn't what this was. I wasn't a stranger, and I wanted to see Dakota again, at least to get her number.

Why hadn't I gotten her number last night?

The answer to that was simple. She'd stayed over, and we'd had other things on our mind. There had been no reason to exchange numbers then. I would have asked for it this morning.

"Thanks anyway," I said to the concierge, another idea popping into my mind. I walked across the lobby to the breakfast room where a breakfast buffet had been laid out for guests. I scanned the room, looking for three women having breakfast together after a night of partying.

Most of the guests were still asleep at this hour on a Sunday morning, but Jake and Emmett sat at one of the tables. When they saw me, they waved me over.

I walked to them.

"Hey, man, you look like shit," Jake said, looking me up and down. "Rough night, huh?" He waggled his eyebrows at me and took an oversized bite of a breakfast roll.

"Have you seen any of the girls?" I asked.

"What?"

"The girls from the bar last night. Didn't you guys get their numbers or something?"

Emmett and Jake both shook their heads.

"After you left, we partied together a bit longer, but it didn't gel like it did when you were with us. They left soon after. Then we went to this Irish pub just down the road... What was the pub called, Jake?"

"Hell if I remember," Jake said around the food in his mouth.

The guys guffawed.

"Get some food, man. You look like you need it. Did you sleep at all last night?"

"He had better things to do with his time," Emmett said with a wink.

I shook my head. “I just want to find them.”

“Come on, man, sit down. Grab an omelet or something. Tell us what she was like—hot, right? Good in bed? How kinky did it get?”

“I don’t have time to talk right now.”

“Come on, man,” Jake complained.

Emmett frowned, concerned. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I’m just not hungry. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay, but our flight is at eleven,” Emmett called after me.

I nodded. Right, the flight back to New York.

I left the guys in the breakfast room and walked to the in-house casino. The slots dinged incessantly and it irritated me. I was already in a bad mood, and the noise only made it worse.

While I walked through the rows of machines, looking for a blonde woman with eyes I could get lost in forever, I grew more and more upset.

Where the hell was she? Why did she just leave like that?

I charged through the first hallway of hotel rooms I came to. Maybe I’d get lucky and spot her coming out of her room on her way to the airport.

I stalked up and down every hallway on the first floor, then ran up the stairs and began to search the second floor.

I didn’t usually give a shit about keeping in touch with women I hooked up with. I’d always made it clear I didn’t want anything more than a good time and an uncomplicated goodbye.

This time it had been different. Dakota was different than any woman I’d ever met. She was funny and sweet and I related to her on a level I’d never related to anyone. I didn’t know what it was, but we’d had a connection. It was surprising how close I’d felt to her. Shocking, even.

I'd thought she'd felt it, too. I couldn't have been the only one who'd been so comfortable, who'd felt like we'd been doing this for years.

Clearly, I'd been wrong.

When I was halfway through the fourth floor, my phone rang. My heart beat faster as I grabbed it from my pocket, even though there was no way she could be calling. What if she'd somehow gotten my number? What if...

"Where are you, man?" Jake's voice came through the phone.

"What?"

"Get your ass down to the lobby or we'll miss the flight."

Shit, I hadn't even packed my bags yet.

For a crazy moment, I considered missing the flight. I could keep searching for her. What if I found her?

No, I scolded myself. That wasn't going to happen. She'd left *early*. She'd said so herself.

She'd left without saying goodbye. Wasn't that a clear sign that she wasn't interested in staying in contact with me? I was running around like an idiot looking for her when she'd told me loud and clear it was just one night.

"I'm coming," I said. "Don't leave without me."

Jake snorted. "As if we would do that."

I left the fourth floor and rode the elevator up to my suite. While I threw my stuff in my suitcase, I tried to force Dakota out of my head. She was gone. It had just been one night.

A good fuck, and that was it. It wasn't like I would have found love, anyway. It just wasn't in my stars, and this proved it. Even when I felt a connection with someone, it disappeared at first light.

It was how my life had always been. The good was fleeting as long as it came from someone else. The only constant in my life was what I created myself.

It took all of ten minutes to pack. I glanced under the bed to make sure I didn't drop anything. Something shiny caught my eye.

Frowning, I reached under the bed. It was Dakota's necklace—a silver chain with a small purple stone. Delicate and pretty, like her. The clasp had broken—it must have happened during our wild night, and she'd left it behind.

The stone was smooth around the edges. She had a habit of touching it. It was special to her.

I tucked the necklace into the pocket of my carry-on suitcase. This was all the more reason to find her—I had to return this to her.

With a sigh, I stood and grabbed my bags. At the door, I paused and glanced back.

I flashed on Dakota beneath me, gasping and moaning as I pounded into her. I remembered her giggle when she lay next to me, the way our bodies had fit perfectly together when we'd snuggled close to sleep.

I shook my head and left the penthouse suite to meet the guys in the lobby.

“About fucking time,” Jake said. “Let's get cracking. The Uber is on the way.”

Emmett sighed and looked at his watch. “I guess I owe you a hundred bucks, asshole,” he said to Jake.

“I bet you'd be twenty minutes late,” Jake explained to me. “He bet it'd be over thirty.”

“You bet on me being late?” I asked.

Jake and Emmett guffawed.

“You're always late,” Jake said.

“That's bullshit,” I clapped back. “I haven't been late to a business meeting in my life, and that's what's important.”

“Oh, we're not important, are we?” Emmett folded his arms in a mock pout.

I rolled my eyes. They were in a good mood, fucking around. Usually I was right there with them, but even when I forced a laugh and tried to join in, my heart wasn't in it.

My mind kept drifting to Dakota.

The Uber arrived moments later, and we got in. As the car pulled away, I glanced back at the hotel.

It felt like I was forgetting something important. Like I left a part of myself behind.

*Stop it.*

What had I *expected* to happen this morning? I was being ridiculous.

Dakota had just been a one-night stand.

It was better this way. Love was a sham, anyway. Nothing good could come from it. Dakota's disappearance saved me a lot of time. I would've ended up alone one way or another.

Even if it had felt like we had something that could be different.

I'd been wrong.



## CHAPTER 5



DAKOTA

I turned up the volume when the song started.

“Let’s go, girls,” I said along with Shania Twain.

Nadia groaned from the passenger seat. “We’re not listening to your old-school shit all the way home, Dakota!”

“My head already hurts like a bitch, guys,” Cassie complained from the back seat.

I rolled my eyes and switched off my playlist, putting on the radio instead. “You guys have no culture.”

“No, honey, we just have *taste*,” Cassie said.

I glanced at her in the rearview mirror, feigning shock, before we all burst out laughing. “Ready to go?” I put my RAV-4 into drive.

Last night, I’d joked with Ben about driving a beat-up Toyota. The moment made me smile.

“Ready,” Nadia said. “I’m actually excited to get back home.”

“I’m not,” Cassie groaned. “I’ll have to start seeing all my extended family because Mom wants me to say goodbye to *everyone* before I go. As if any of them spoke to me the past four years. And it’s not like Seattle is a different country.”

“I’m sad you’re leaving,” I said, glancing at Cassie in the rearview mirror.

“Me, too,” Nadia said.

Cassie was going to study medicine in Seattle. I was happy for her. She was chasing her dream and she's gotten a scholarship. Her life was practically made already.

Our little trio was down to two, though, with me and Nadia staying behind.

I shook my head. "But we're not thinking about that, at least until we get home, okay? This weekend still isn't over!"

"I'm ready for mine to be over." Cassie put her hand on her head. "We should have gone to the breakfast room first."

"We can get food on the road," I said. "This was the plan, remember?"

"You always stick to plans like they're set in stone," Nadia said.

"It's a great character trait," I said with a wink. "My mom always says so."

"I don't know how you're so chirpy today; you didn't sleep at all last night."

I giggled and blushed. "That's not true. I slept."

"Yeah, with Mr. Hottie himself," Nadia said and nudged me. "Enough to put a spring in your step, huh?"

I blushed harder.

"Come on, spill! We want to know everything," Nadia said.

Cassie leaned forward eagerly, straining against her seatbelt.

"What's there to know?" I asked nonchalantly.

They both groaned loudly.

I laughed. "Okay, okay. He was fucking *amazing*."

"I knew he would be!" Cassie cried out. "With a face and body like that, he can't be anything other than a conqueror in bed."

I burst out laughing. "A *what*?"

“He’s the perfect catch, babe. Hot as hell, and rich, too. Good in bed, and charming... everything you want in a guy. You guys went at it like bunnies, didn’t you?” Nadia was eager for more dirty details. “How big was he? Did you *suck him dry*?”

I laughed. “Well, I did proclaim I was going to do that. And like you said, I always stick to the plan...”

The girls squealed and Cassie stamped her feet in glee.

I laughed, my cheeks turning hot at the memory of Ben’s large frame moving above me. God, I wished I could’ve had another night with him. Or ten.

“Where were they from again?” Nadia asked when our laughter died down.

“New York,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Cassie said. “I remember now. We drank a *lot* last night. I don’t remember most of what those guys said.”

“I’m surprised you remembered your own name last night,” Nadia joked, looking over her shoulder.

Cassie made a face at Nadia before looking at me.

“New York is a long way away,” she said. “Is he going to visit you in LA?”

“Do you think he’s been to LA?” Nadia asked. “He looks like the jet-setter type—”

“He might have already seen LA, but he hasn’t seen the inside of Dakota’s bedroom.”

“Oh, honey, you have a lot you can show him.” Nadia patted my leg.

“Actually, I—” I started, but Cassie cut me off.

“He can fly you to New York! It’s the gentlemanly thing to do, you know, since he’s got all that money.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I don’t think I’d have let him pay.”

“Oh, I would let him pay,” Cassie said. “Then you can just make it up to him with sexual favors.” She winked at me in the rearview mirror.

“He’s so dreamy,” Nadia said with a sigh. “The whole thing is like a movie. You have the perfect meet cute and hot hookup. The distance could be a problem, but he’s too smitten to let that get in the way, so he does everything he can to—”

“I didn’t get his number,” I said, cutting off Nadia’s perfect love story.

She stared at me, her mouth still open.

“What?” Cassie asked from the back seat. “Are you joking?”

I shook my head and trained my eyes on the road, focusing hard to avoid the stares of disbelief on my friends’ faces.

“Why the hell not?” Nadia demanded.

“You would have made the perfect couple!”

I shook my head again. “It just wasn’t the right time.”

“What do you mean, it wasn’t the right time?” Nadia asked, still shocked. “If a gorgeous, funny man with a lot of money marches into your life, you’d best believe the time is *right*.”

How could I explain to them? Everything about Ben had been perfect. He made me feel things I’d never felt with anyone.

That was just it. I couldn’t let him be that perfect guy. If I did, I would fall for him.

There was no doubt about it—Ben was a man I could fall desperately, hopelessly in love with. And when he would leave me—which he inevitably would—I would be crushed. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

“I have too much to focus on right now,” I said. “I don’t have time for a relationship. Not with studying in the fall, and the bakery being where it is right now—”

“I can’t believe this,” Nadia said and shook her head, looking out the window at the Nevada desert passing by.

“My mom needs the help. I’m going to do everything I can for the bakery. Making sure the family business doesn’t die is a lot more important than chasing a hookup who will turn out to be a dead end.”

“Not all men are dead ends, Dakota,” Cassie said carefully from the back.

“Of course they are,” I said. “I haven’t dated a single guy who’s been worth my heartache.”

“Yet,” Nadia said.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to get distracted now by something that can’t last. The bakery is way more important. It’s been on life support for years, and if I don’t do something to pull us back up again, we’ll have to close our doors. My mom will be devastated, and I will, too. It’s our family heritage.”

Cassie sighed. “Yeah, yeah, we know. We know how important the bakery is, and your mom and everything. I just hoped you could find someone who was good for you, too.”

“We *both* want that for you,” Nadia said.

“Thanks, guys,” I said with a smile, ignoring the lump in my throat. “The right time will come. Someday.”

My friends both sighed and resigned themselves to my stubbornness. After a while, Cassie fell asleep and Nadia put in earbuds with her punk rock music that we liked even less than they liked my ‘90s tunes.

I fell into the calm relaxation that road trips always afforded me. I loved being alone with my thoughts. This was when I figured things out, when I planned the future and the steps I had to take to get there.

My mind drifted to Ben, even though I was trying not to focus on him. He was great, and leaving without giving him contact details had been hard. We’d had an instant connection, and I’d really liked him. For me, that was new. I didn’t *really*

*like* any guy I just met. I barely liked the guys I'd known for months and years.

But no, it had been the right choice to make. Mom and the bakery needed me, and I wasn't ready for heartbreak. Better to end it before it started. The fewer distractions I had in business school, the better.

Even if that distraction was the best guy I'd ever met and the lump in my throat grew larger with each mile I drove from Las Vegas.

I stopped for gas, shaking off the thoughts plaguing me. Cassie stirred awake, and Nadia removed her earbuds.

"My time to pay," she said.

"Thanks." My hand went to my chest, but something was wrong. My necklace wasn't there.

"Oh, shit," I said, pressing my hand against my chest. "My necklace."

"Did you lose it?" Nadia asked.

"I must have. I didn't take it off." My stomach dropped and I tried to rack my brain, remembering where I'd last had it. In the club? In the hotel? In Ben's bed...

"Do you want to go back to look for it?" Cassie asked.

I bit my lip. "Did you check the room?"

Cassie and Nadia both nodded. "I looked under the beds and everything," Cassie said.

"Shit," I said again. "If it's not in the hotel room, there's no way I'm going to find it."

I suddenly felt like crying. My Gran had given me that amethyst necklace as a birthday present when I'd turned thirteen, and I'd worn it ever since.

"We'll call the hotel and ask if anyone turned it in," Cassie said.

"And if not, we'll get you a new one," Nadia said gently.

I nodded, biting back the stupid tears.

“It’s fine,” I said. I forced a smile.

It was just another piece of my heart I’d left behind last night.



The rest of the month flew by. I helped my mom at Sweethearts Bakery all summer long. She could use the extra hands, and though I didn’t want her to pay me, she put a little cash into my account every week.

I loved her for her business sense. I loved her for always wanting to do the right thing.

I saw Cassie as much as I could before she left, and every time was even more bittersweet than the last.

When we finally said our goodbyes two months later at the airport, we cried like babies and promised we would video call every week. We dropped her off, then I pulled away from the curb with an uneasy feeling in my gut.

“I hate goodbyes.” Nadia sighed when she leaned forward toward the windshield and looked up at the sky. “Do you think it’s going to rain?”

“No,” I said. “And I hate goodbyes, too.”

My stomach twisted and I pressed my fingers to my lips.

“Are you okay?” Nadia asked.

I nodded. “I just feel so sick. I don’t know if it’s something I ate, but lately...” I swallowed hard and pressed my fingers to my lips again.

“How long has it been?” Nadia asked.

“I don’t know, a couple of days. A week? Something like that.”

“It doesn’t sound like something you ate. And you never get sick.”



“Yeah, Mom said that, too. I just feel so ill. And drained, too. I have no energy. I wanted to jog yesterday and just couldn’t.”

Nadia narrowed her eyes at me. “And you’re throwing up?”

“I haven’t since two days ago, but if I don’t watch what I eat—”

“When was your period?” Nadia asked.

“What?”

“Your period.”

I scrunched my nose. “I don’t know. Two weeks? Three? It has to be...” I tried to remember when I’d had my last period and failed.

“Oh, I remember. I had it at Ash’s pool party. Remember? I didn’t swim that day.”

“Right...” Nadia gave me a weird look.

“What?”

“That was six weeks ago, Dakota.”

“No, that can’t be right,” I said and scratched my head. “It’s not six weeks; it was in June.” My blood ran cold as I realized Nadia was right. It had been six weeks ago, which meant I was late.

Very late.

“No,” I said firmly, pushing the very thought away. “It can’t be.”

“You have to take a test, Dakota,” Nadia said carefully. “You can’t just leave it.”

“I don’t need a test,” I said. “I’m just late because of stress. It’s because the bakery might go under and what it would do to my mom. It’ll come.”

“Have you ever been late?”

“No, not really.” I was like clockwork.

Nadia sucked in air through her teeth.

“Shit,” I said. “It can’t be.”

“Look, just take the test. It won’t change anything. You’re either pregnant or you’re not. You’ll just be more informed after you take it.”

I scowled. “I hate how logical you can be.”

“In this case, me too,” Nadia said.

I drove to a drugstore, and Nadia stood by my side as I bought a few test kits. The cashier was polite and friendly, giving me a bright smile, but I couldn’t help but wonder if my life as I knew it was coming to an end.

“We’re going to have a big laugh when these come back negative,” I said.

Nadia forced a smile. “I hope so.”

We drove to my apartment, where I lived alone now that Cassie had moved out. I missed her already, but I knew I was going to enjoy having my own space.

Just like Ben. The familiar lump in my throat returned at the thought of him.

In the bathroom, I did my business. I’d bought three different test kit brands in case one of them—or two of them—were faulty.

“How long?” Nadia asked as I came out of the bathroom.

“Two minutes for all of them.”

Nadia nodded and glanced at the time.

I paced the room, fidgeting.

“It’s going to be okay,” Nadia said.

“Is it?” I asked. “What will I do about business school? I can’t do classes and have a baby at the same time. How will I help my mom if I don’t go to school?”

“Calm down,” Nadia instructed. “Let’s just find out if you’re pregnant or not. Maybe it’s just a scare.”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

Maybe it *was* just a scare.

Those two minutes felt like forever, but finally the time was up.

I walked into the bathroom and picked up the tests, but I didn't have the courage to look at them. Nadia was right behind me.

"You look," I said, spinning around.

I held up the tests and looked at Nadia's face rather than at the results.

Nadia's face was expressionless, except for her eyes widening a little. She looked at me, her brows knitting together, before she stepped forward and hugged me.

"Oh, no," I breathed.

"You're going to be okay," Nadia said.

I shook my head, stunned.

"We'll figure this out. I'm here for you, Dakota."

"I didn't even get his last name."

"Ben's?"

I nodded.

"So... you have no way of finding him?"

"I can't find him on the web. Can you imagine how many men named Ben live in New York?"

"Too many," Nadia said grimly.

I nodded.

"What are you going to do?" she asked quietly.

My hands went to my belly, and I closed my eyes. My own mother had raised me alone. Being a single mom was hard, but it wasn't impossible.

And this baby was Ben's. For some reason, that made me feel attached to it already.

“I guess I’m going to be a mother.”

Why, oh, why hadn’t I gotten his last name?

Because I’d been determined to keep him at arm’s length.  
Because I didn’t want to get my heart broken by another guy.

Because I’d thought it was what I *had* to do. What was necessary to help my mom and repay her for a lifetime of sacrifice for me.

Except now, I realized what a terrible mistake I’d made.

I resolved to search high and low for Ben, but how on earth would I find him?

I was going to be a mom, which meant he would be a dad.  
At the very least, he deserved to know.

But finding him? That would take a miracle.

## CHAPTER 6



*Five Years Later*

“Get in, buddy, we have to beat traffic,” I said when Oliver knelt in front of the car to watch a ladybug crawl across a blade of grass. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

I’d already stood talking to his pre-K teacher for longer than I’d wanted to, but on a Friday, I couldn’t rush his progress report.

“Why is it called a ladybug?” Oliver asked, walking to the rear door.

I opened it for him and helped him into the car seat.

“I have no idea.”

“Is it a lady?”

“Not all of them.”

“What is a boy called?”

I thought about it.

“We could call the boys a sirbug.”

Oliver giggled. “That’s funny.”

I handed Oliver his sippy cup and ruffled his hair. He’d gotten my light hair and Ben’s piercing blue eyes, giving my four-year-old boy an angelic look.

Oliver was perfect in every way.

I climbed into the car and put it in drive, heading into traffic. The cars were already backing up. I cursed in my mind because I couldn't do it in front of Oliver.

"My shoes hurt me," Oliver said.

"Are they getting too small?" I asked. Oliver grew so fast, I struggled to keep up with his wardrobe sometimes.

"No."

I looked over my shoulder at his shoes and laughed.

"They're on the wrong feet, Olly."

Oliver studied his feet with a deep frown.

"I don't have any other feet, Mommy."

I burst out laughing and shook my head. "Your feet are fine. You have to swap your shoes around, then they'll hurt less."

I turned my attention to the traffic, trying to weave my way through the cars when a gap opened. I heard the Velcro strap rip as Oliver tried to swap his shoes and sighed when one fell with a thud to the floor.

"I'll help you when we get to the bakery," I said.

Oliver curled his toes and kicked his feet while he drank from his sippy cup. He watched the traffic slide by, his large eyes taking in everything.

"Come on, come on," I muttered at a woman who took her sweet time turning across an oncoming lane, and when she finally got her move on, I floored it a little harder than was necessary.

I was already half an hour late for my shift at the bakery.

"Did you have a good day at school, buddy?" I asked, glancing at Oliver in the rearview mirror.

He nodded and chatted about his friends, telling me about Ethan—his best friend right now—and Ethan's really cool bug collection. I shuddered at the thought. Ethan's mom was okay with him collecting all kinds of creepy-crawlies, but I wasn't

ready for that kind of a commitment. I was lucky Olly had safer interests than bugs I had to watch over and make sure they didn't escape from their jars with holes in the top.

The traffic thickened, and I groaned. My mind spun, trying to think of a better route, and I gripped the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles turned white and blew out a series of short breaths. My stomach was a twisted knot. I was frazzled and frustrated.

Finally, I arrived at the bakery. I got out and helped Oliver get his shoes on right before I let him out of the car seat.

Sweethearts Bakery was quiet when we walked through the front doors. The tables and chairs scattered across the dining room floor were all empty, and Mom stood behind the counter, packing freshly baked croissants in the display window.

"Grandma!" Oliver cried out when he saw her. He ran around the counter.

"There's my favorite boy," Mom said and knelt to cuddle him tightly. "How was school?"

"Good," Oliver said.

Mom pinched his cheek before she stood and hugged me, too.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Mom."

"It's fine, we're not busy," Mom said, waving her hand.

"Eat something, honey," I said to Oliver. "Come, sit." I led him to the table and put a carrot muffin and a plastic cup of milk in front of him. "Both hands, okay?" I said when he picked up his milk. He drank it, milk spilling down both sides of the cup when he tilted it too far.

"Whoops," he said and wiped his mouth with his shirt.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but let him eat in peace. The only way he would learn was by doing it himself.

I put on an apron and walked into the kitchen to start the prep work for tomorrow's bread and pastries. Mom watched



Oliver while he ate, chatting to him in the soothing tone I'd grown up with, before she led him to the office. She settled him on the carpet with his toy cars and trucks he liked to play with before she joined me in the kitchen.

"I'm going to try to figure something else out with traffic," I said. "It might help cut down on travel time so I'm not so late every time."

"Don't worry, Dakota," Mom insisted. "It's okay. Really."

I nodded. My mom always said it was okay that I was late, but I felt bad about it. Mom already had to postpone her retirement to keep the business going. If I'd been able to study the way I'd planned, things would have looked different—Mom would have been able to put her feet up.

The bell above the door jingled.

"Hello?" Mr. Nicholson's familiar voice called out.

"Coming," Mom said and walked to the front with a smile. I heard her chatting to the elderly Mr. Nicholson—one of our most loyal customers. He came in for a cinnamon roll every afternoon without fail, and Mom always made sure they were baked fresh for him.

I stayed behind, working on the dough. I hated that things were so stressful with the bakery and my schedule. Never in a million years would I have changed having Oliver—I loved him more than life itself, and having him was only a pleasure. He was a little ray of sunshine and being a mother was fulfilling in ways I'd never imagined.

I just would have wanted to do things different. I would have liked for Oliver's father to be in his life, for starters. I would have liked someone by my side to share the load, to help me when I got stuck, or when Oliver was sick and I couldn't be more than one person to get it all taken care of.

That morning five years ago in Las Vegas, instead of leaving without a number, I should have found a way to stay in contact with Ben. It would have made it possible for me to find him when I'd realized I was pregnant.

After I discovered the pregnancy, I'd done everything I possibly could to track the guy down, but with nothing more than a first name, every attempt I'd made to find him had been fruitless.

Eventually, I'd had to let it go and focus on my baby boy. I hadn't been able to afford daycare, and Mom couldn't watch him since she worked at the bakery all day. I couldn't study; I couldn't do things the way I'd planned. So, I'd quit business school after my first semester. I came to work here instead. It brought in extra cash, and Oliver grew up in the bakery, playing at my feet.

My mom and I had managed to keep the bakery afloat all these years, but it had been touch and go. We'd come way too close to shutting our doors for good for either of us to be able to relax. I wished I could do something to change that. We had a handful of loyal customers—the only reason we were still in business at all. But the neighborhood wasn't the best to get feet through our doors, and the building was small and cramped.

I'd had a dream, once, where I'd wanted to move the bakery downtown, into one of the shops with large windows that let in a lot of sun, with a dining room big enough to employ servers for the mothers who came in to drink coffee after dropping their kids off, and the students who came in after class to fill up on caffeine and carbs.

I'd wanted so much more for this business, my mom's life, my future, than I had right now. I wanted a better life for Oliver, too.

The only thing we could do right now was power on. Something had to give one day.

Mom came back into the kitchen after Mr. Nicholson left.

"I didn't tell you," she said. "Frank came by while you were gone."

I frowned. "What did he say?"

Frank was the contractor we'd hired to give us an estimate for the repairs to the roof. We'd been able to get by with

buckets for the leaks in the kitchen, but we couldn't do that in the shop where the customers were.

"It's going to be a lot," Mom said.

"More than we have?"

"A lot more. Three thousand more than we expected."

I groaned. "Shit." I glanced toward the office to make sure Oliver hadn't heard me. He copied everything he heard these days. "I wasn't counting on this." I'd been in charge of paying the bills. We didn't have much extra.

The mortgage payment was due, too. I'd applied for a loan, but I hadn't heard from the bank yet.

Mom leaned against the doorpost, arms folded over her apron. "Maybe we should sell and get it over with."

"No," I said firmly. "We're not selling."

"We can't keep going like this, honey. It's not working."

Mom and I were co-owners in the bakery. If we wanted to sell, both of us had to be on board. I understood why Mom wanted to do it—we were going under and the business was more stress than anything else right now.

I just couldn't bear to sell.

Sweethearts Bakery had been in our family for decades. My grandparents had started it, and it was a sin to let a legacy like this die by just giving up. I'd grown up here, just like Oliver was doing now.

"We can't sell, Mom," I said softly. "This bakery is everything. It's the heart of our family."

"Honey, our family is the three of us. As long as we're together, nothing else matters."

She was right, but I didn't see it that way. This bakery was all about tradition and family, about having something to fight for. I wanted Oliver to grow up with the same values, the same foundation he knew he could turn to when it felt like everything else crumbled. It was what had gotten me through when I'd learned I was pregnant. It was what had gotten me

through a lot of heartache, the loss of my grandparents—the bakery was home.

“We’ll figure something out,” I said.

“We’ll have to do it soon,” Mom said, and she was right yet again.

If only I could find the perfect way to draw customers.

I wanted a stable life for Oliver. I wanted to be able to breathe easy, knowing he and my mom were taken care of.

I had to figure out a way to get around this stumbling block. That was what this was—it couldn’t be the end of the line.

What would my life have been like if Ben had been in the picture? If I’d gotten to attend business school and learned how to properly manage a business? What would it have been like for Oliver?

I pushed the thoughts away. That wasn’t my life, and it didn’t help to yearn for something that could never be. It was better to put my energy into saving what we did have than dreaming about something we didn’t.

## CHAPTER 7



“*A*nd that’s why I believe it’s in your best interest to invest in my theme park,” Hans Jorgenson finished. He put his meaty hands flat on the restaurant table in front of him. His eyes were filled with anticipation.

“I see,” I said and wiped my mouth with a napkin.

“What do you think?” Hans added in his thick Norwegian accent. He stroked his blond beard with one hand.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Hans,” I said. “I don’t see this business venture aligning with McCullough Industries’ future. I’m taking the business in a different direction.”

Hans frowned. “So you won’t support Norwegian Wonderland?”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid not.”

I couldn’t get involved with a man who didn’t understand why his theme park didn’t draw customers. Fermented fish and log rides weren’t exactly fan favorites, and I wasn’t about to hitch my business to a sinking ship.

“Thank you for taking the time to see me,” I said and lifted my hand to summon the server.

Hans tried to persuade me, but I was over it. Why the hell had Jen scheduled this meeting in the first place? My assistant knew where I was trying to go with my LA branch—half-baked theme parks were not in my future.

I paid the bill, while Hans became more and more dejected. By the time I left, he looked almost depressed.

I felt for the guy, but in the business world it was sink or swim. It wasn't personal. He had to find some other fool to save his Norwegian Wonderland.

When I stepped out into the LA sun, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

I'd been in LA for a month now, and business was better than I'd expected. McCullough Industries had been thriving for years. I'd decided it was time to expand. Everyone had told me to be careful—opening a second branch often caused the downfall of a company if it wasn't done right.

But I was Ben McCullough. I knew what I was doing.

So far, so good—despite the wasted lunch meeting with Hans.

My phone rang.

“What were you thinking, Jen?” I asked when I answered my assistant's call.

“I know, I know,” she muttered. “He wouldn't stop calling and begging for a meeting. I figured that if you saw him and told him no yourself, he'd get the message.”

I groaned. Some people were like that—a total pain in the ass.

“A heads-up would have been nice, but he got the message loud and clear now. What else is on the calendar for the day?”

“Your three o'clock postponed, so you're free,” Jen said. “I'm going to take care of a few things here, but you can do whatever.”

I grinned. “That sounds like a good day.”

“It will make up for the rough lunch you had.”

I agreed and we ended the call. I headed toward the lot where I'd parked my Maserati, but then I changed my mind and took off in a different direction. I wanted to explore the neighborhood on foot.

It was a quaint part of town, with tall buildings squashed together to save space, and people hurrying back and forth,

going about their business. Everywhere, bursts of color showed through the gray concrete, in the form of street art, window boxes with flowers, or people who dressed to stand out.

I'd walked a couple of blocks when my phone rang again. Jake's name flashed on the caller ID.

"If you weren't all the way on the other side of the country, I'd ask you to go out for drinks right now," Jake said.

It was already 5:00 p.m. in New York.

"I would have agreed," I said with a grin.

"You really ruined my game moving out there. You were a good wingman."

I laughed. "It's nice to be missed."

"What are you up to?"

"Not much. My afternoon cleared up. You should come visit sometime. It's really great here."

Jake snorted. "Stop trying to convince yourself you're happy there and come on home."

I chuckled and shook my head.

"Denial is an ugly beast, Jake. I'm serious, I love it here."

"Really?" Jake asked, and I could just picture the deep frown on his face when he tried to work something out. "How the fuck did that happen?"

"If you come visit sometime, I can show you," I suggested.

"Nah, the West Coast's not my scene," Jake said. "But good for you, though. Settling in, then?"

"I'm still figuring it out, but the change has done me good. Something about all the sunshine here."

"Fucking cliché," Jake muttered.

I laughed. I did miss the guys back east. I was still close with Jake and Emmett, and we'd lived it up through our twenties and early thirties in New York. Coming to LA had been an adjustment.



“What’s so great about a place without us?” Jake asked.

“LA has redeeming qualities,” I said.

“Like what?”

“The people here are a lot more laid-back, which is a nice change of pace. Everyone isn’t just always running everywhere to get the next thing done.”

Jake scoffed. “As if you’ve ever cared about that. *You’re* one of those people always running around, getting things done.”

“Yeah,” I said with a grin. “Watch me get laid-back, too.”

“And trade your suit for jeans and a T-shirt? Not your style.”

“The weather is great, too. And the beach is perfect.”

Jake sighed. “Fine. It really does sound like you’re happy.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re thrilled about that.”

“Obviously not, I want you back here.”

I laughed. “We’ll figure something out. I’ll see you soon.”

We finally ended the call and I tucked my phone back into my pocket.

I hadn’t told Jake or Emmett this, but I’d also felt a pull toward LA. Ever since...

*Stop it.*

I wouldn’t think about Dakota right now. It had been five years, and she hadn’t reentered my life—how could she? She’d run out on me without so much as a number, a last name, or a goodbye. It had been nothing more than a one-night stand, so there was no point in looking back.

I had no idea why the hell I still thought about her. It was ridiculous to keep holding on to something that had clearly been one-sided.

I glanced around me, taking in the new neighborhood I’d ended up in. This part of town was older and a little more rundown. Despite the buildings having a neglected air to them,

the people still looked happier than most New Yorkers as they walked past me.

My stomach rumbled. I'd only had an appetizer with Hans Jorgenson at the restaurant. When I'd realized his pitch was only a waste of time, I hadn't wanted to order an entrée. Now, I was hungry.

Across the road, I spotted a bakery. A large pink and white sign read Sweethearts Bakery, and the smell of fresh bread filled the air, drawing me in.

When I stepped through the doors, the aroma of sweet, buttery pastries was divine.

An older woman stood behind the counter, humming softly to herself.

"Good morning," she said brightly when she saw me. "What can I get you today?"

Her name tag read Cynthia.

"Hmm, what's the special today?" I asked and studied the display case.

"The chocolate croissants are always great," Cynthia said. "We make them with hazelnut chocolate spread. Those are fresh out."

"That must be what I smelled," I said with a grin. "I think I'll try those."

"Perfect choice. To go? Or would you like a cup of coffee and stay awhile?"

She nodded toward the round tables in the dining area.

"Coffee sounds great. For here," I said.

"Have a seat," Cynthia said. "I'll be right with you."

I walked to the tables, sitting down at the nearest one to the front counter.

"Are you new in the area?" Cynthia asked while she took a croissant out with a pair of tongs.

"I moved to LA about a month ago for business."

“Oh, new to the city, then. That’s adventurous.”

I chuckled. “It can be.”

“Going well so far?”

I nodded. “Very.”

Cynthia put the croissant on the counter and turned to a large coffee machine where she prepared me a cup.

“First time in this neighborhood,” I added. “This is a stunning bakery.” It was cozy and welcoming, with a homey atmosphere.

“Thank you,” Cynthia said. “My parents started it sixty years ago.”

“Ah, a legacy. I love the idea of passing something on to your children.”

Cynthia nodded and brought the cup of coffee over along with the pastry.

“It’s a pity it will all be over soon.” She looked sad.

“What do you mean?” I asked with a frown.

“Oh, I shouldn’t even mention it,” Cynthia said with a wave of her hand.

I frowned, but she turned away, leaving me to take a bite of the chocolate croissant. I closed my eyes. It was the best pastry I’d had in years.

She wiped down the display case while I devoured the pastry, but I could tell she had something on her mind.

“You’re not going to close up, are you?” I asked.

She hesitated. “I don’t want to bore you with my sob story.”

“I like talking business. Shoot.”

Cynthia gave me a quick rundown of the bakery’s issues. It was short on cash and long on needed repairs. Everything, she said, was going wrong. I listened sympathetically but didn’t say too much just yet.

“I told you that you didn’t want to hear all that,” she finally said with a shake of her head. “Did you enjoy that croissant?”

“More than I should have,” I admitted. “What else should I try?”

“Our cinnamon rolls are a hit, and people love our cookies and muffins. Our apple pie is pretty good, too... unless you don’t want more sweet stuff?”

“Load it up,” I said. “I’ve got a sweet tooth, and I train hard so that I can eat whatever I want.” I patted my stomach.

Cynthia grinned and hurried around the counter to fill my order.

While she did, I looked around the bakery again. It had a lot of potential—the food was incredible and the atmosphere made me want to stick around. I was sure others felt the same way. If I bought the place, I could give it the cash injection it needed.

Hell, I could turn it into a thriving enterprise.

That was what I did best.

“Thank you,” I said when Cynthia brought me a sampling of several items and sat down opposite me to keep talking.

I listened to her share what it meant to be a baker, how she’d loved the bakery since she was a kid.

I didn’t say a word about my idea to invest in the bakery. I had to run some numbers first, but it already seemed like a promising idea. My fingers were itching for a new venture.

Finally, when I was stuffed, I stood to pay for the food.

“Thank you so much for supporting us,” Cynthia said when I put a handful of notes in her tip jar. “I’m sorry to ramble on like that.”

“Not a problem at all. You’ll see me again,” I promised with a smile. “And I hope your luck changes soon.”

I turned to leave, but a sudden movement caught my eye. A little boy emerged from an office door as I walked toward

the shop entrance.

“Grandma?” he asked.

I opened the door, glancing at the kid one more time before I stepped outside.

Shivers ran down my spine. That little boy looked incredibly familiar. I couldn't place it at first.

Blond hair, the sweet little face...

Then it hit me. If it hadn't been for the blue eyes, I would have sworn I was looking at a little Dakota.

I shook my head.

*You're ridiculous. Now you're seeing her everywhere. Let it go.*

With an inward groan at my pathetic obsession, I headed toward the parking lot.

## CHAPTER 8



DAKOTA

Oliver was up at the crack of dawn on Saturday, jumping on my bed until I woke up.

“Can we watch *Ears and Paws*?” Oliver asked when I groaned and peeked at him through one eye.

“Is it on?”

“I don’t know,” Oliver said with a shrug.

“I don’t think it’s on. It’s too early.”

*Ears and Paws* was Oliver’s favorite cartoon, about a vet that helped all kinds of animals at his pet hospital. Oliver loved seeing the characters go on adventures.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. When I climbed out of bed, something crunched beneath my feet. When I looked down, cereal was strewn in a trail from my bed out of the room.

“Olly, why is there cereal on my floor?”

“I made breakfast,” Oliver said.

I shook my head and followed the trail of cereal to the kitchen, where the counter was a lake of spilled milk, and a bowl of half-eaten cereal sat on the coffee table.

“What time did you get up?” I asked.

“Just now,” Oliver said.

I narrowed my eyes and stifled a groan. “You have to wait for me before you do something like that, okay?”

Oliver didn't answer me, only tilted his head. He was adorable and he knew it. Those big blue eyes could convince me to do anything. He could charm himself out of any trouble in a snap.

I glanced at the time. "Your show isn't for another half hour. How about we clean up this mess? Then when it's clean, we can watch together."

"I don't want to clean."

"I know, but no clean, no show."

Oliver pouted, trying to decide which was more important to him. Finally, he stomped to the cabinet next to the fridge and wrestled out a broom.

Together—with me doing most of the work—we swept up the cereal and wiped up the counter. After the kitchen was clean, I flew through the shower, and we sat down in front of the TV just in time for *Ears and Paws*.

When the show was over, we got ready to go to the bakery. Oliver had a backpack on with all the toys he wanted, and I was determined to make the most of the day.

If we could just get ahead at the bakery, we'd be okay. I didn't want to have to close our doors. Walking away from the business I'd built my life around was inconceivable.

We got into my car, and I turned over the ignition.

The car wouldn't start.

"No, no, no," I muttered. "Not now."

I tried again and again, but the car only wailed and coughed before dying down again.

I groaned. I didn't have cash to fix my car. I didn't have cash for anything.

I looked at Oliver, strapped into his car seat.

"We're going to take the bus today," I said.

"Why?"

"The car won't start. The bus will be fun—an adventure."



Oliver cheered, and I took him out of the car seat. We walked to the bus stop together, and Oliver chatted happily about the bus and how much fun it was going to be. It was cute to see him still excited about the small things.

I was less enthusiastic. I wished things could just be easy for a change.

“Good morning, Mom,” I said when we arrived at the bakery.

Mom had already opened the doors early this morning to let the first customers in.

“I’m sorry I’m late; the car broke down.”

“Oh, no,” Mom said, her brow furrowing into a frown.

“I won’t worry about it now, we’re fine. I took the bus, and I can keep doing that for a while.”

Mom wanted to say something, but I shook my head. “I’m going to get started on the pastries.”

I walked into the kitchen, tying my apron around my waist. I heard Mom talking to Oliver, giving him cookies and getting him settled in the office with his toys before she manned the counter again.

This was what we would keep doing until we got through, I decided. No way we were going to close these doors. I wouldn’t allow it.

The day passed in a blur. Despite business dwindling, we had a busy day. The morning was filled with prepping and baking, and Mom helped customers as they came and went.

Oliver and I had lunch together in the office before Mom took her break, and then I got him down for a nap on the large comfy couch my granddad had bought when I was a kid.

He’d brought it in specifically for naps—he’d told me so himself.

“Is he down?” Mom asked when I joined her in the front of the shop.

The dining room was empty. It was worrying so soon after lunch. We were usually full over lunchtime.

“He is. You can take your break now.”

Mom shook her head. “I’ll just stand here and eat. No one’s in the shop, anyway.”

I nodded. “I still haven’t heard from the bank. They’re taking their sweet time.”

“It’s a good sign they didn’t just tell you no right away.”

“I don’t know...” I said. They were still deciding about refinancing the mortgage for us. I hoped they would agree—I had no idea how we would get through, otherwise.

Mom took a bite of a sandwich. “I think we should consider—” She started talking around her sandwich but was interrupted by the bell above the door jingling as a customer walked in. Mom turned her back and swallowed her food down quickly, while I turned to the door with a bright smile.

“Good afternoon! What can I—” My words caught in my throat when I saw who’d just walked in. Dark hair, icy-blue eyes, square shoulders. My stomach fluttered when I saw him... and then it dropped.

Ben.

He stared at me, frozen in place.

“Oh, you’re back!” Mom said, turning to see him. “I was hoping we’d see you again today. Loved those pastries, eh?” She giggled and nudged me.

I still couldn’t stop staring. Ben was an apparition, a ghost from a time long gone. What was he doing here? Wasn’t he supposed to be in New York?

Ben cleared his throat, his professional mask slipping into place.

“I’m actually here for business,” he said to my mom.

“Business?”

He nodded. “I want to buy the majority share of your bakery.”

It was Mom’s turn to stare at him, dumbstruck.

“What?” I asked.

Ben started explaining that he wanted to buy the bakery since we were in trouble. He knew all about it being a generational business, but he was willing to pay us handsomely...

I stopped hearing his words when blood rushed in my ears and my cheeks burned hot.

He’d come here to take it all away from us? The nerve!

My blood boiled, and I curled my hands into fists. Was he really going to stand there and offer to shut our doors and pretend to not even know me?

He was Oliver’s father. I’d searched for him for months!

Fuming, I bit my tongue, hard, to stop myself from exploding then and there.

When he finished his proposal, I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Mom, how does he know you were thinking about selling?” I asked.

“Oh, we got to talking yesterday over apple pie, and one thing led to another. I might have mentioned I was considering selling.”

I narrowed my eyes, my stomach tightening. I was furious, and I had to get out of there before I unleashed a verbal assault on Ben in the middle of the bakery.

Spinning on my heel, I walked to the office where Oliver still lay on the couch. I needed to take a moment or I’d lose it.

I huffed, trying to reel in my anger, my frustration, my pure *mortification*.

Did Ben really not want anything to do with me? How could he ignore me like that? He obviously recognized me, judging from the way he froze when he first saw me.

Dizzy and overwhelmed, I paced through the small space, trying to get a grip on my emotions. I was angry that Ben was butting into our business. I was shocked that it was him, here, of all places, of all people.

My mind spun, my stomach twisted, and I felt sick.

“Mommy?” Oliver asked in a sleepy voice.

“Hey, buddy,” I said and forced a smile. “How was your nap?”

Oliver pushed up and rubbed one eye with a small fist. Ben was right out there, and Oliver and I were in here. His son was here, just a few feet away, and he didn’t know.

It suddenly all became too much. It felt like the walls were closing in around me.

I turned around and stuffed Oliver’s toys into his backpack.

“What are you doing?” Oliver asked.

“Packing up. We’re going home.”

Oliver watched, and I scooped him up when I was done, nuzzling his neck.

“Do you know how much I love you?” I asked.

“To the moon and back,” Oliver said.

“That’s right,” I said with a smile, and my heart melted. “Let’s go.”

I left the bakery through the back door where we received deliveries. I didn’t have what it took to face Ben again right now. Not if he was going to pretend I was a stranger.

Not if he was going to take away one of the most important things to me.

When I stepped outside, I remembered my car wasn’t there; it was broken.

God, could things get any worse?

“Come on,” I said and took Oliver’s hand. “Just a short walk to the bus.”

The walk was three blocks, but it was good for me to get my mood under control. Who the hell did Ben think he was?

I'd spent so much time trying to find him after I'd found out I was pregnant and it had been a dead end every time. Now, he showed up in LA as if it was normal. Even though he'd been impossible to find.

Was he here for me? Had he somehow found me, found out about Oliver? Did he want to get involved with him?

Well, if that was what he was doing, I wasn't going to make it easy for him. He couldn't just waltz in here and make demands, waving money in my mom's face when he knew it was a touchy subject right now. If he wasn't honest about his intentions... he didn't need to know anything about me and my life, either.

Finally, we reached the bus stop and sat down on the bench to wait for the next bus.

"Why did we leave without saying goodbye to Grandma?" Oliver asked.

I sighed. "We'll see her soon. I need to go home to rest. I have a headache."

That was true—a dull throbbing had started between my temples, a result of all my emotions erupting at once.

"Okay."

I dug in his bag for his sippy cup. I handed it to him, and he drank his juice while we waited.

My mind spun. The little fissures in my heart I thought I'd patched up showed themselves again.

Ben was here, after all these years of longing to find him. All these years, I'd dreamed of how different it might have been if only I'd left him my phone number. I'd wondered about what our lives could have been so many sleepless nights.

Only for Ben to treat me like he didn't know me, like I was just another business he could scoop up.

My eyes stung with tears, but I blinked them away. If there was one thing Ben didn't deserve, it was me crying over him.

I'd done everything alone all this time, proving I didn't need him.

There was no reason any of it had to change. Not for the bakery, and not in my own life.

We were just fine without him.

## CHAPTER 9



“*H*mm,” Cynthia said, tapping her forefinger to her chin. “I won’t lie. It is a tempting offer.”

I swallowed hard and forced a smile, keeping my cool business front in place. Inside, I was reeling.

Dakota was here somewhere. *Dakota.*

Just thinking about her made my head spin and my heart accelerate. I felt hot under my collar and fought the urge to tug at my tie to breathe easier.

How the hell had I run into Dakota? It had been years since I’d seen her, years spent wondering *what if*, and now she was here in the same building.

Cynthia said something, but I struggled to focus on her words. I watched her mouth move as she talked, and I heard nothing.

After all these years of dreaming, of fantasizing and scolding myself for it, Dakota was here. This was real.

Dakota was now even more beautiful than I remembered her—dark blonde hair, those beautiful wide brown eyes, and a mouth that made me want to kiss her. No, *devour* her. I hadn’t thought it possible that she’d become even more beautiful, curvier, *irresistible* than before, but she’d been a dream, a vision... until the moment she’d run away.

She’d been just as shocked as I had. The color had drained from her rosy cheeks, and her eyes had widened. I thought she might faint for a minute.



I'd always imagined what it would be like to see her again. I'd gone through all the different scenarios, from demanding why she'd left that morning without a reason, to scooping her up in my arms, to ignoring her altogether.

Reality had played out very differently.

When I saw her standing behind the counter with the apron tied around her narrow waist, an angry confrontation was the furthest thing from my mind. All I wanted was to tell her how happy I was to see her again.

Like an idiot, I hadn't done that. Instead, I'd gone into fucking business mode because that was all I knew how to do.

And it had been the *wrong* thing to do, too.

Fuck.

Where was she?

"I really think it's a good idea," Cynthia said. I forced myself to focus on her words. "Let me find Dakota and bring her back to discuss this. I don't know what's gotten into her."

"It's okay," I said. "We can discuss business between the two of us."

Cynthia shook her head. "Dakota is co-owner of the business. We make all our decisions together."

I flashed on Dakota telling me she wanted to get her MBA so that she could manage the family business. Sweethearts Bakery had to be that business.

"It wasn't very professional of her to just walk out," Cynthia added. "She's not very happy about me wanting to sell. I'll find her and we can try this again."

Cynthia turned and walked into the office. I watched her come out again with a frown and walk to the kitchen.

When Cynthia returned, her frown had disappeared. Her eyes were wide and she looked bewildered.

"It looks like she... left," Cynthia said. "I'm so sorry, it's all very rude. I don't know why she would run out like that." Cynthia raised her hand to her light hair streaked with gray

and raked her fingers through it. She took out her phone from her pocket. “Let me see if I can reach her.”

She pressed her phone to her ear, only to shake her head a moment later.

“No answer.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It might be better to discuss this among yourselves. We can arrange a formal meeting to discuss the terms later.” I opened my briefcase and took out the document I’d prepared. “I’m going to leave this with you to go over at your leisure. Call me when you’re ready to talk.”

Cynthia nodded, taking the document from me.

“Have a good day,” I said with my brightest, most charming smile before I left the bakery.

I walked to my car and climbed in, started it, and drove off. I floored it, speeding through the streets of LA.

“What are you running from?” I asked myself out loud before I slowed down to an agreeable speed and let out a breath.

My mind spun. In five years, I hadn’t been able to put Dakota out of my mind. I’d thought about her day and night, no matter how much I’d told myself not to. I’d searched for her everywhere, trying to find her. And now...

She was taken, wasn’t she?

She had a son. That child didn’t look like he’d only recently come along, either. He had to be... what? Five or six?

Which meant she must have had him before we’d met.

Shit.

Of course a woman like her would be off the market—why the hell would anyone let her go once he had her? She was everything a man could hope for: smart, funny, sweet, *beautiful*.

And married, apparently.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She must have been involved with that kid's father when I'd met her in Vegas. She had a whole life built up around herself, a life I could never have been a part of. Not if she was already married with a kid. I'd just been a fling when she'd wanted to color outside the lines in Vegas.

I'd been nothing more than a fucking hookup. No wonder she'd left before I'd woken up, with no way to find her again.

She hadn't *wanted* me to find her. She was married with a baby back home at that point.

I scowled, a bitter taste in my mouth. I'd been nothing but a piece of meat to her, a way to get off.

She'd *used* me.

I shook my head, anger bubbling up in my chest. I'd had my fair share of women before and after Dakota. I wasn't a saint, but I'd never used anyone. I'd never let them believe one thing when the truth was something else.

And here I'd been dreaming about her for years.

I stopped at a red light and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, gripping the steering wheel tightly with both hands.

Even though I knew she'd used me, it had still been incredible to see her again. She still held this incredible magnetism I'd never felt with any other woman.

I drove back to the house I'd bought when I arrived in LA and walked inside. The house was minimally furnished—I was barely ever here, and I hadn't had time to turn it into a home yet.

I needed something to keep me busy. Television, work... anything.

But I couldn't focus. There was nothing on, and all my work had been taken care of today.

I got up and walked through the house, pacing through the empty rooms. I'd bought a family home, but I had no family to fill it with.

The house was nothing more than a shell of what it could be, with rooms filled with empty promises, potential that would never be realized.

I scowled and walked out of the house and into the backyard.

The realtor who'd sold the place to me had told me it was a landscaper's dream, that this yard could be turned into something spectacular. She'd been right. I'd liked the idea of creating something of my own, back then. Now, I wished I'd just gotten a place with the landscaping already finished.

Everything about this place screamed money—I'd bought the best of the best—but what did it mean? It wasn't anything special if I couldn't fill it with anything meaningful. All it was right now was an embodiment of my whole life—empty.

My phone rang in my pocket, snapping me out of my thoughts. My heart beat faster for a second; what if it was her?

My brother Adam's name flashed on the caller ID, and I felt like a fool. Of course it wouldn't be Dakota. I was being an idiot.

“Hey, big brother,” Adam said happily. “Are you sleeping?”

I smiled in spite of my foul mood. “It's still early here. I'm three hours behind you, remember?”

“Right, right... are you tired of Cali yet? Ready to come back to New York?”

“Nah, I'm good here.”

Adam sighed. “Fine. What about a weekend visit? You know, Sienna has a twin sister.”

“Who's Sienna?”

“My girlfriend, asshole,” Adam said.

I laughed. “I can't keep up with how quickly you cycle through them.”

“I'm serious about her, though,” he said. “We could go on a double date.”

“With your girlfriend and her twin?” I laughed. “Too creepy. I don’t think I can handle that.”

“Come on, it will be fun. Since when do you turn down the company of a woman, anyway?”

*Since I ran into Dakota again.*

“I have to go,” I said. “I have... a meeting.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Do the work thing, make money.”

“That’s the plan.”

We hung up, and I tucked my phone back into my pocket. Of course, I didn’t have a meeting, but I wasn’t going to discuss my love life, or my lack of one, with my brother. Adam was a pain in my ass sometimes, and he wouldn’t get it.

No one would. No one knew about this thing I had with Dakota. A thing that had been all in my head this entire time.

I walked back into the house and poured myself a glass of whiskey. It was almost five, and who the fuck cared when I started drinking?

I just wanted to get her off my mind, stop thinking about her and our past, the night we’d spent together and what it did—or apparently *didn’t*—mean.

If I’d known Sweethearts Bakery was the family business Dakota had talked about back then, I might have thought twice about offering to buy it. But I’d already given Cynthia the proposal now. It was way too late to back out.

Besides, why should I be the one running when I’d done nothing wrong? I’d been very clear about my intentions that night, serious about following up the next day.

She’d been the one to screw me over.

I huffed when I thought about it. If Dakota was one to play games, I wouldn’t allow her the space to do it. I would be strictly professional with her, keep things businesslike and nothing else.

That was, of course, if I ever saw her again. After her terrified expression when she’d seen me, followed by a swift

disappearance, maybe she wouldn't show her face again.

*Good*, a part of me thought. If she had a family, I wasn't interested.

But another part of me wanted to see her again, badly.

“And what would that do?” I asked myself out loud.

It wasn't like I could ever have anything real with her.

No, I wasn't destined to find love. It was better that way, anyway. It never worked out. It was simpler not to get involved in the first place.

# CHAPTER 10



“*A*re you hungry?” I asked Oliver when we got home.

He shook his head. “Can we watch TV?”

“Not yet,” I said. “We’ll watch after supper. What toys are you going to play with?”

Oliver considered it. “My toy plane!”

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “I’m going to make a quick call.”

Oliver ran to his room to find his toy plane, and I walked to the living room. I dialed Nadia’s number and looked out the window while I waited for her to answer.

“You’ll never guess what happened,” I said when she answered.

“You won the lottery,” Nadia said.

I groaned. “I wish. No, it’s something crazier—and less likely—than that.”

“What could be less likely than getting suddenly filthy rich, buying an island, and drinking pina coladas for the rest of your life?”

“Ben came into the bakery today.”

Nadia didn’t answer me.

“Did you hear me?” I asked.

“Yeah, I heard you. I’m assuming you mean *Ben Ben*.”



“Yeah,” I said. “I do.” I filled her in on what happened—how Ben had just waltzed into the bakery, demanding to buy it as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

“I can’t believe it,” Nadia said. “I just... I can’t believe it!”

“Yeah, trust me, your stunned silence is an echo of what happened to me when I saw him. How long did I look for him? It’s been five whole years, and now he’s just... here.”

“Incredible,” Nadia said.

“And the asshole wants to take everything we have away from us, too.” I added the last in a bristling tone.

“Oh, whoa,” Nadia said. “That was a quick change. Asshole?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he wants to buy the bakery because he’s some hotshot businessman with a metric ton of money, and we’re going under. Mom told him so yesterday. Which was the first time he came in, apparently, when I wasn’t there.”

“He did have a lot of money in Vegas, too,” Nadia pointed out.

“That’s not the point at all.”

“I know.”

Nadia had been by my side every step of the way when I’d found out I was pregnant. She’d seen how hard I’d tried to find Ben. She knew everything about my life—we had no secrets from each other.

“After I left, Olly and I were at the bus stop when he came by in his fancy douchebag car. He floored it as he drove past. He couldn’t get away fast enough.”

“Did he see you?”

“He must have; why else would he have acted like that? Not only did he treat me like he didn’t know me, but he also couldn’t stand being around me. I’m supposed to consider selling the bakery to him?” I laughed bitterly.

“It might change things for you,” Nadia said carefully.

“I can’t even think about giving the place up! And not to him, of all people.” I sighed, trying to calm down. I walked to the hallway and glanced around the corner into Oliver’s room. He played with his toys, oblivious, and I walked away. “I don’t know what to do. I’m so angry, I can’t even think straight.”

“Don’t be angry,” Nadia said.

“Thanks for that.” I walked to the kitchen and switched on the fancy coffee machine my mom had bought me for Christmas. I could only imagine how long she’d saved up to get this for me.

“No, I mean, take a deep breath,” Nadia said. “Wait and see how this thing plays out. You’re not going to do anything drastic right away, are you?”

I shook my head. “No, I can’t. I won’t. The bakery is everything, but we have to do something drastic soon. You know how bad things are.”

“Yeah, I know. But wait to see what happens. Maybe it’ll all work out, you never know. Maybe Ben could even be a dad to Oliver.”

I ran my fingers along my forehead. “I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“Didn’t you want him to be in the picture?” Nadia asked.

“Of course,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m ready, after all this time doing it alone, to just let him get involved as if he’s always been there. Especially not after he ignored me, pretending like I didn’t exist. I don’t need the extra drama.”

“I would just take the whole thing one day at a time. Allow yourself the chance to process it before you do something major.”

I smiled. “You always give me such great advice.”

“It’s much easier to give it than to take it,” Nadia said, and I heard the smile in her voice, too.

“Thanks for listening to me rant,” I said.

“Anytime, my friend. Let me know how things go.”

“You know I will.”

I sighed heavily as I hung up. I had no idea how to figure this out. I didn’t know how to handle my emotions; I didn’t know what to do about the bakery... for the first time in five years, I felt totally lost.

“What do you want for supper tonight?” I asked Oliver, returning to his room.

“Can we have pizza?”

I shook my head. “Unfortunately not, sweetie pie. Chicken or pasta? Those are our options.”

Oliver tilted his head.

“Chicken,” he said.

I nodded and walked to the kitchen to defrost one of the ready-made meals I’d put away for us before I opened my laptop.

An email from the bank dropped into my inbox, and my stomach twisted. I opened it and read the words feverishly.

*Your application for a mortgage refinance loan has been denied.*

My heart sank. How were we going to make the payment now? Forget about the repair bills.

Someone knocked on the front door. With a sigh, I opened it to see Mom standing there.

“There you are,” Mom said, walking into the apartment. “I was worried about you when you disappeared like that.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I just... had to clear my head.”

“Sweetheart, I know this is a lot to take in. Selling the bakery brings up a lot of emotions. I feel it, too.”

I swallowed and nodded. Mom didn’t know about Ben and who he was. It was easier to keep it that way, at least for now.

“I’m making coffee,” I said. “Want a cup?”

“That would be great,” Mom said, and we walked to the kitchen together. “I want to talk to you about the proposal Ben

brought over.”

I bristled. “I’m really not in the mood to talk business, Mom.”

“I know, I know. Look at it anyway.”

I glanced at my mom, and she pinned me with a level stare. There was no getting out of it. She was my mother, and this was *our* business together.

I sighed and took the documents from her. I flipped through the pages, scanning the contents. The further I read, the deeper I frowned.

“He’s not trying to buy the bakery from us outright,” I said.

“Right, just fifty-one percent.” She poured us each a cup of coffee while I read the documents.

Ben only wanted to buy the majority of the shares in Sweethearts Bakery; he didn’t want to take the whole thing away from us.

“If we agree, he’ll give us a cash injection now so we can keep going,” Mom said.

I nodded while I read how he would supervise a restructuring of operations to bring in more business.

“A year?” I asked, reading the next page. “That’s how much time he’s giving us?”

“If we make a profit, he’ll give the business back to us, minus his cut of the profit since he’ll be the main shareholder. This is a chance to get back on our feet, Dakota, and we could even get the bakery back after a while. If we do it right—and money will help us so much—then we’ll end up with a successful bakery.”

Mom’s eyes were hopeful. It had been a long time since I’d seen a flicker of hope in them, and my heart constricted.

I put the documents down and doctored my cup of coffee with sugar and milk before I took a sip.

“Grandma!” Oliver cried out when he came into the kitchen. He ran to her and Mom hoisted him onto the counter.

“You’re growing way too fast,” she said. “I swear you’re already taller than you were this morning!”

Oliver beamed. “It’s because I’m growing up to be big and strong.”

“That’s right,” I said with a grin. I watched the interaction between Oliver and my mom. It was sweet—they loved each other. I didn’t know what I would have done without my mother all these years.

I glanced down at the proposal I’d put down on the counter. I sipped my coffee and mulled it over.

As much as it pained me to admit it, it was a good deal. The bank had just denied my mortgage refinancing application, so I had no other way of bringing money in.

“This might actually work,” I said.

“I think so,” Mom said. She tickled Oliver so that he squealed. “It’s our only option, honey.” She added it with a smile, keeping up the happy façade for Oliver’s sake.

“It’s your decision at the end of the day,” Mom said.

“Why mine?” I asked.

“The bakery is more yours than it is mine now, sweetheart. You’ve been managing it for years now, and you put everything into it.”

“So do you,” I pointed out.

“It’s all for you, honey. You know that. It’s your call what we do at the end of the day, okay?”

I nodded. This was a big decision. It would change everything. That was scary, but nothing could forever stay the same.

The bakery needed this. Hell, my mom and I needed this—we could do with a break from the gut-twisting stress we had every day trying to keep the business afloat.

But it was about more than that—it was about Oliver and his future. I wanted him to grow up in a better neighborhood. I wanted him to have a full life, where I was present, not where he had to make do with the scraps of attention I could afford to give him in between trying to manage the business and keeping the doors open.

Oliver deserved so much more. We all did. Even if it meant Ben would be the one to help us get there.

After the cold way he'd treated me today, I didn't want to relinquish the bakery to Ben. I wanted to prove that I could do it. The truth was I just couldn't.

It wasn't like I was handing it over to Ben. It was just a helping hand, for now. Nothing personal. I didn't have to even like him.

This could be the answer to our prayers.

“Okay,” I said.

Mom looked up at me, eyes sparkling. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

What choice did I have?

# CHAPTER 11



I checked my tie and smoothed invisible creases out of my blazer. I rubbed my palms against my thighs and checked the time. Again.

If I left now, I would be too early. Far too early.

I'd been dressed and ready to go to Sweethearts Bakery since first thing this morning, but I didn't want to look overeager—not for Dakota, and not to buy their business.

I was nervous. Not about the sale part, but about seeing her again.

Why the hell was I nervous?

I could just hear Emmett and Jake laughing at me for being whipped, about being head over heels for a pretty girl.

They would have been right, too.

“It's going to be fine,” I said. “This is what you do. You're good at it.” This business was my lifeblood—I'd done this for years now, and it always went well.

I didn't usually work with a blast from the past, though.

But I had to get over that. Dakota and I had had something once, but that ship had clearly sailed for her a long time ago. It was time for me to move on and focus on what was important.

Business, business, business.

Finally, I got into my car and took a slow cruise through LA. The longer I lived here, the more I came to love the place.



It was so different from the life I'd grown up in, but maybe that was part of its appeal.

As much as I loved the concrete jungle that was New York, it was cutthroat, dog-eat-dog. There was no rest and no peace.

Of course, it had less to do with the city and more with the life and the family I'd grown up in. Being this far away from it all allowed me to breathe easier.

After driving around the block twice to waste time, I finally parked in front of the bakery. It closed early on a Sunday, which was why we'd agreed to meet after lunch rather than first thing in the morning.

When I walked in, the smell of freshly baked goods still hung in the air. I took a deep breath.

The pastries would pull this place through, I just knew it. I hadn't been able to contain myself when I'd tasted the delicacies they offered, scarfing down one after the other until I'd been stuffed. If that was the general response they got, this place was the goldmine I knew it could be.

It just needed the right kind of management.

The door was locked, but when I approached, Dakota walked over to unlock it for me.

"Thank you for meeting with us," she said. "Come in."

I frowned. She was very cold and formal.

"Ben," Cynthia said. "It's so good to see you again." She smiled brightly at me. Her greeting was a lot warmer than Dakota's.

I tried not to mind.

"You can have a seat," Dakota said, pointing to one of the large tables in the dining room. "Coffee?"

I nodded. "Sure."

Cynthia poured cups for us, while Dakota glanced toward the office door nervously.

“We’re just waiting for the babysitter to arrive, and then we’ll get started,” Cynthia said warmly when she brought me my coffee.

I nodded and took a sip. A babysitter for the kid Dakota had before she met me.

Dakota looked uncomfortable. She shifted her weight back and forth from one foot to the other and pressed her hands against her thighs, bending her fingers backward as far as they would go.

Cynthia’s phone rang. “Yes?” She listened before her eyes snapped to Dakota. “Oh, dear. Okay. No... that’s fine. Okay.” She ended the call and turned to Dakota. “That was Clara. Something came up, and she can’t come watch Olly.”

“Oh, no,” Dakota said. She looked flustered. “We need someone to watch him while we discuss this. Should we postpone the meeting?”

I cleared my throat and stood. “I can come back later.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” Cynthia said with a wave of her hand. “I’ll watch Olly. I’ll take him to the park, and you two can talk business.”

“What?” Dakota cried out. “We’re supposed to do this together.”

“We’re supposed to *sign* it together. But you can straighten out the terms and fill me in later.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. Dakota twisted her hands. She didn’t look like she wanted to be alone with me.

“Perfectly sure,” Cynthia said with a smile. “Olly!”

The little boy emerged from the office, his blue eyes wide.

“Come on, honeybunch, we’re going to the park.”

“Right now?” he asked.

Cynthia nodded. “We’re just grabbing your bag, and then we’ll skedaddle.”

The boy laughed.

His blue eyes locked on mine and he walked toward me.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Oliver,” Dakota admonished him.

“No, it’s okay. I’m Ben. What’s yours?”

“Oliver,” he said and beamed. He looked like a miniature version of Dakota, with the same features and the same unassuming look that made me so fond of her. If it wasn’t for his eye color, they could have been the same person.

“Do you like planes?” Oliver asked.

I nodded. “I do.”

“What kind of planes?” Oliver asked.

I hesitated. What kind of planes? I glanced at Dakota.

“I like fighter jets,” Oliver said simply. “They’re really cool. Green ones.”

I laughed. “Green ones are the best.”

“Helicopters are cool too, but they’re not planes.”

“I guess they aren’t,” I said, frowning.

“Mom says one day we can go on a plane,” Oliver said.

Dakota smiled at him. “We’ll figure it out, buddy.” Cynthia appeared, and Dakota knelt and hugged her son. “Have fun. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Oliver said with a grin and Dakota kissed him on the nose before he walked to the door with Cynthia.

When he was gone, Dakota cleared her throat and came to me.

“Let me give you a tour,” she said. “That way, you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I have a feeling whatever it is, I’m going to like it,” I said.

Dakota glanced at me, her expression difficult to read.

“If your pastries are anything to go by, I mean,” I added.

Dakota nodded. “We try to keep our standards high. We want to be the kind of place that leaves a lasting impression, not just another chain store with mass-produced goods. My grandparents started the place, and they always believed a personal touch makes all the difference. I agree with them.”

I nodded. “I like that you’ve invested so much of yourself in this place.”

Dakota nodded. “When it’s the place you grew up in, it’s hard not to.”

We walked into the kitchen. Dakota walked ahead of me and my eyes couldn’t resist sizing her up.

Her ass was as delectable as it had been before. She wore her skintight jeans like she was doing them a favor, and I wanted to peel them off.

“I spend most of my time here, prepping our pastries, while Mom works the front of the shop,” Dakota said.

When she turned, I forced myself to look up at her eyes again, although I wanted to study her curves, to greedily stare at her delicious body.

“So, this is where the magic happens,” I said. I looked around, forcing myself to focus on business.

“You could say that,” Dakota said. “The pantry is through there, the fridge right next to it. We have deliveries coming in twice a week to keep our shelves filled, and the rest we do as we go along.”

I studied the oven. “Do you do all your baking in here?”

Dakota nodded.

The oven was old—clearly one of the original industrial oven models.

“We’ll have to upgrade the kitchen.”

Dakota frowned. “Why?”

“It’s outdated,” I said simply. “If you want to run an efficient kitchen, you need to make sure you have the right equipment.”

“Our equipment works just fine,” Dakota said tightly.

“It’s just an upgrade. If you can afford new things, it’s worth the effort.”

“My grandparents built this kitchen and equipped it with everything we need. There’s no reason to change things if it’s not necessary.”

“You can’t fall back on sentimentality, Dakota. That’s not how you run a business.”

She bristled, her eyes shooting fire at me. God, she was incredible. The angrier she became, the more beautiful she was.

“We can discuss it later, after we sign the contract,” she finally said. She was trying to defuse the argument. It was professional of her, but part of me wanted her to get angry again so that I could see that glorious raging fire within. She was a wild card, and I loved that about her.

It was a very different side of her than when I’d met her in Vegas all those years ago.

“Let’s talk expansion,” I said.

“You mean, our menu? It’s quite extensive as it is.”

I shook my head. “I mean the bakery. It can be bigger. Better.”

“Our goal’s always been to keep it homey and cozy. If you make it too big, it becomes impersonal. The idea is to make customers feel like they’re visiting a relative who offers homemade baked goods.”

“And you do that really well, but going bigger won’t mean you have to sacrifice that.”

She was getting upset again. Her business model was clearly different from mine, and she wasn’t willing to budge on it.

Yet.

I could convince her of it, make her see how much better it could be.

“Ben, I know you’re a businessman, but this is my family’s bakery. We’ve been doing things a certain way for decades and we’re not going to change it. This is how it’s done.”

“Might I remind you that doing things *the way you’ve always done* isn’t doing you any favors. You’re going under. It’s time to change something.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” she snapped.

“Actually, once we sign, that’s exactly what I get to do. I’ll be calling the shots.”

Dakota only glared at me.

This was going to be a lot harder than I expected. When I’d walked in here, I’d seen a bakery that needed a bit of help, and it was what I did best. I’d decided to buy the place before knowing this was Dakota’s family business.

I knew what I was doing, and if she wanted anything to change, she had to let me take over.

“I need more coffee,” she said. “And we should discuss the proposal.”

“Let’s,” I said.

Dakota walked to the front of the shop and prepared two cups. Instead of returning to the table where we sat before, she led me to the office.

“This is where we do all our business, so we might as well sit here,” Dakota said. “I guess this office will be your office, too.”

The office was a small room, with every inch of the walls covered with family pictures. I looked at the pictures of Dakota’s family—her grandparents on the first day the bakery opened, her mother as a younger woman, working in the store. Dakota as a little girl, sitting in this very office.

From the photos, it was clear that this bakery was more than just a business—it was filled with memories and happiness. It was a home.

“Have a seat,” Dakota offered and I sat on one end of the couch against the far wall. Dakota sat on the other end, and we sipped our coffee together in silence. As she lifted her hands, bringing the cup to her mouth, I noticed she wasn’t wearing a ring. That was odd—I’d assumed she was married. But Cynthia *had* said they needed a sitter for Oliver... maybe his dad was out of the picture.

“You’re very passionate about the bakery,” I said.

Dakota nodded. “It’s everything to me. I grew up here, and I want Oliver to have something he can fall back on one day, too.”

“Passion is always attractive,” I said.

Dakota blushed lightly. “Did you just say I’m attractive?”

“Now, a compliment like that in a business meeting would be very unprofessional,” I said with a grin.

A smile played around her mouth, and I wanted to suck on her bottom lip.

“We can’t have that, can we?”

I glanced down at her chest, the swells of her breasts that disappeared in her shirt, leaving just enough up to the imagination.

Not that I had to imagine anything—I knew what she looked like without a top. Although... I would have loved a refresher course.

When I glanced at her eyes again, they’d grown darker.

“It’s a shame we have to meet as professionals,” she said. “I would have liked to hang out as friends. In a different life.”

She was referring to our history together.

I sighed. “Yeah, it would be good to go back, huh?”

“So, there’s a ‘back’ you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” I said. “How could I forget?”

“You put on a damn good act.” Her face was serious now, the flirtation of a moment before gone completely. “It’s all business, huh?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t know it was *your* family business when I drew up the proposal. When I saw you yesterday, it was surreal. What are the odds, right?”

“Right,” she said softly, her eyes searching mine.

“Besides, I’m not the one who ended things abruptly, so being in business mode isn’t impossible to understand.”

“I thought you wanted me gone.”

“What gave you that idea?” I asked. “I asked you to stay the night.”

She looked down at her hands.

“I looked for you, you know,” I said. “All over the hotel, and later, all over the internet.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “Do you have any idea how many people are named Dakota?”

She giggled shyly. “I didn’t realize you liked me that much.”

“I did.” I shifted closer to her on the couch. “And now you’re here, like a dream, and I have no idea what to make of it. Is this fate? Or is this just some twisted joke, fucking with my head?”

“A twisted joke?”

I took her hand. “I was sure you were taken, but then...” I ran my fingers over hers. “You’re not wearing a ring.”

She shook her head. “I’m not with anyone.”

My heart leaped when I heard that. It was impossible to believe that Dakota, an incredible woman, was single, but I would take it. I would take it any day.

“Were you single when I met you?”



She blinked. “Yes, of course.”

“I’m unattached, too.”

Dakota smiled, and it was like the sunrise—bright and beautiful.

“Well, would you look at that,” she said softly.

I leaned in to kiss her. I couldn’t help myself. She wasn’t in a relationship, and she was here. She’d been just a dream or a fantasy for so long, to have her right next to me, to be able to touch her, was more than my self-control could bear.

When I brushed my lips against hers, she didn’t pull away. I pushed my hands into her blonde hair and kissed her, sliding my tongue into her mouth. She moaned softly, and my cock punched up in my pants.

“I don’t know what it is about you, but you get me so worked up in no time.”

She smiled against my lips.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her onto my lap. When she was on top of me, I pushed my cock against her.

Dakota gasped into my mouth and cupped my cheeks with both hands, kissing me more urgently.

I cupped her breasts, kneading and massaging. Her body was incredible, and I wanted more.

I wanted all of it.

When I pushed my hands under the hem of her shirt, Dakota moaned again. Feverishly, I pulled the cups of her bra down. Her nipples were erect in my palms.

“I want you naked and underneath me,” I growled into her mouth. “Right here, right now.”

Dakota moaned, but then she froze.

She broke the kiss.

“Oh my God, we can’t do this.”

“What?” I asked. “Why?”

“Because this is my office, Ben. Mom is out with Olly and she can come back at any moment. This is the last thing I want my son to see, and what would my mom think?”

My mind spun. Blood flowed freely to my cock, making it harder to think. My body hummed with need for Dakota and I wanted a release, but she was right.

She clambered off my lap and I tugged at my pants, readjusting my erection. My cock throbbed, eager for something more.

“You should go,” Dakota said. She fixed her bra, righted her shirt, and raked her fingers through her hair.

“You’re asking me to leave?” How did we go from nearly having sex to her kicking me out completely?

She nodded. “You can come back tomorrow, when we’re open, and see how we run things.”

“Okay,” I said, dejected. She was right, but this wasn’t what I wanted. Business had been the last thing on my mind.

I stood, tugged at my belt again, and then walked to the door. Dakota saw me out. The atmosphere was suddenly tense, awkward.

When we reached the door, I turned to her.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

She nodded. “It has to be strictly business, okay? This can’t happen again.”

I didn’t answer her. I didn’t want that.

“I’m serious, Ben. We can’t lose control. This thing between us...” Her eyes trailed to my lips and she visibly forced herself to look into my eyes again. “This can’t happen.”

“Okay,” I said with a smile.

“I’m serious,” she said.

I nodded. She may have been serious, but that didn’t change the fact that we wanted each other, and no matter what her mouth said, she wanted me.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said again and turned to leave.

When the door shut behind me, I grinned and shook my head.

After all this time, our chemistry was still as strong as it had always been—nothing had changed. It was like the past five years hadn’t happened.

I wanted Dakota now more than ever.

## CHAPTER 12



DAKOTA

*B*en was everything he'd been when I'd met him in Vegas that night.

And more.

It didn't make sense. People weren't usually the same as their first impressions. Not when there was as much alcohol involved as there had been that night.

Ben was exactly the way I remembered him. Scratch that, he was even more charming, more attractive, more *real*.

I was in trouble. It had been easy to walk away from a one-night stand. We'd had an incredible connection and a night together I'd dreamed about for years afterward, but he'd only been someone I'd met that night. I hadn't known him the way I was getting to know him now.

It was getting harder and harder to keep my head straight the next couple of days. I saw Ben often. He kept coming to the bakery, first to sign the contract with us, then to watch how we ran the business.

It was getting harder and harder to be pissed off at him. Every time he walked through those doors, butterflies erupted in my stomach, and when he left again, I missed him.

That spark, that attraction, was still there and burning as powerful as ever.

The problem was me.

Ben was the same guy, and what I felt for him was the same, but I'd changed. I wasn't the same person anymore.

Raising a child alone changed me.

Ben didn't know Oliver was his son yet. I was planning to tell him, but I didn't know *how* yet. He deserved to know—hell, I'd jumped through every hoop I could to try to find him so that he could be a dad.

How would he take it? What would he do once he knew?

The exchange with Oliver when Ben had met him first had given me a snapshot into a future where Ben and Oliver were a family. Ben was so good with Oliver, and Oliver seemed at ease with him instantly.

That had to be a sign, right?

If only I knew how to talk to Ben, to tell him about Oliver in a way that wouldn't go horribly wrong.

That was what I was afraid of. What if he shut down on me? What if he didn't want to be a part of our family? As a businessman, sure, he was all hands on deck—he was eager to get involved in a big way, but being a father, being a family man... did Ben even *want* something like that?

When we'd been together that night, it had felt like we'd known each other for a long time, like we'd known every part of each other that mattered. The truth was we'd been complete strangers.

So far, Ben didn't have suspicions about Oliver. The kid was like my clone—everyone always commented on how he looked exactly like me. Except for his eyes, of course. He had Ben's blue eyes all the way.

I arrived at the bakery on Tuesday morning and settled Oliver in front of the computer where I let him watch kids' videos while he ate a croissant and drank milk for breakfast.

"If you need me, I'm right outside," I said and dropped a kiss on Oliver's blond hair. "Love you."

"Love you too," Oliver answered without taking his eyes off the screen.

I smiled and left the office to get to business.

Ben stepped in through the door, the bell jingling to announce his arrival.

My stomach did a little flip when I saw him. He looked so handsome in his suit and tie—although he spent a lot of time here now, he still dressed to the nines. There was something so sexy about a man in a suit who carried himself with power and authority.

“Good morning,” Ben said to me with a smile.

I smiled at him, trying to fight the blush that crept up my cheeks involuntarily. Was I always going to act like a lovesick teenager around him?

We exchanged pleasantries, my mom joining in the conversation. She laughed and gushed over Ben—she’d loved him from the minute he walked through the door.

That made two of us...

“Where are we on the new oven?” Ben asked.

Mom frowned. “The what?”

I bristled. My irritation squashed the butterflies in my stomach. “I didn’t know we were still talking about that.” I glanced at Mom. “Ben thinks we should replace the oven.”

Mom frowned. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“It’s very outdated,” Ben said. “The bakery would do well with the latest model to speed up productivity.”

Mom tilted her head. “That makes sense.”

“What? No. Mom, Gramps put in that oven, and it’s served us well. You want to get rid of it?”

Mom hesitated, but Ben put his foot down.

“It’s about profit, Dakota. If we want to increase productivity, we need the right tools. You wouldn’t build a new car with old parts and expect peak performance, would you?”

“This isn’t a car. It’s a family business that’s been passed down through generations,” I said hotly. “I know this oven

well and don't have time to learn on new equipment.”

Ben wanted to argue with me. Mom was stuck between her partnership with me and her complete adoration of Ben.

I turned around and walked away. If I didn't, I was going to say something rude. I was under a lot of pressure, and having Ben here in our space was a challenge without him pretending like he knew anything about the business we'd been running for years.

What did he know about bakeries? He was a businessman, but not all businesses were the same, and he didn't care about this one the way we did. It wasn't *his* family who'd invested their blood, sweat, and tears all these years.

“Dakota, sweetie,” Mom said, finding me kneading the bread dough with vigor in the kitchen. She glanced down at my work. “If you punch the bread like that, it's not going to rise.”

“I guess we could add flat bread to the menu, then,” I snapped. “Since we're revamping *everything*.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to collect myself again. “Sorry. I'm just upset. We've been baking for years. What does he know? He can't just walk in here and take away everything that means something around here.”

“He's not trying to take anything away,” Mom said gently. “He's trying to help.”

“He's trying to boss us around!” I cried out. “We have to answer to *him* now, when he doesn't know what he's talking about. Grandma and Gramps established this place before I was born. This isn't just any old business; it's a legacy, and he wants to change *everything*.”

Mom nodded while I ranted, letting me get it out.

“I know it's hard,” Mom finally said when I calmed down enough to take another deep breath. “We need this, honey. You know we do.”

Mom was right. If Ben hadn't swooped in when he had, we might have lost the bakery altogether. As much as I hated to admit it, our attempts to save it just haven't been enough.



I just hated that he didn't have respect for our approach. He had the typical mass production mentality, and that wasn't what mattered to us.

"It's going to be okay, Dakota," Mom said, patting my hand. "You'll see. It's hard now, but without friction, we don't grow stronger, right? And when it's all over and done, and the bakery is safe, we'll look back and realize how good this was."

I nodded. "You're right." I hoped sincerely it would be like that.

With a sigh, I finished kneading the dough and moved on to prepare the pastries. Mom joined Ben at the front of the store, helping customers when they stopped in and talking to Ben about the business in between orders. I watched them through the open door, catching snippets of their conversation.

They got along really well—Mom loved him, and why not? He was a great person. He was charming, that was certain.

My phone rang.

"I'm taking it outside," I called to my mom, who waved her hand over her shoulder at me.

I stepped through the delivery entrance and sat on the step, answering Nadia's call.

"You have no idea how good it is to hear from you," I said.

"Can you talk?"

"Yeah, I'm taking a break."

"I just wanted to check in with you, see how things are going."

"It's horrible," I said. "He knows everything and he's changing everything, saying it's the only way to make it work."

"Is he right?"

I groaned. "Yeah, he is."

"Then what's the problem?"

“He’s just so... rich.”

Nadia burst out laughing. “What? Is that supposed to be an insult?”

I closed my eyes. “It’s not. I mean, his money is saving the place, so I guess it’s nice that he has a ton of money he just wants to throw at us.”

“He sounds downright evil.”

I giggled. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Tell me what you meant,” Nadia said, still giggling.

“He has everything he ever wanted. His life carried on and he reached his goals and realized his dreams. Nothing stopped him from being the man he’d wanted to be five years ago, when we met. And me—” My voice caught in my throat. I swallowed hard.

“You have Oliver,” Nadia said softly.

“It’s not that I don’t love him to death. I wouldn’t change a thing—Oliver’s the best thing that ever happened to me, but I sacrificed so much to raise him. I wanted to be so much more than I am now, and being a single parent is *hard*.” I pressed my fingers to my temple. “I guess I’m just pissed that he got it all and I didn’t, but I wasn’t the only one who made this baby.”

I realized how resentful I was. Was it fair of me to feel this way? A part of me felt like it wasn’t—how could I be upset when Ben hadn’t known about Oliver and I hadn’t been able to find him? It wasn’t his fault.

Another part of me felt like it was so damn unfair that I’d carried this weight alone, and Ben hadn’t had a care in the world.

“Oh, Dakota,” Nadia said sympathetically. “I know it’s tough. I get where you’re coming from and you’re not wrong to feel the way you do.”

“No?” I asked with a sigh. “Sometimes I feel totally justified and sometimes I feel as if I’m just like a sullen child, having a temper tantrum.”

“It’s okay to be upset about something,” Nadia said. “As long as you deal with it and move forward. Otherwise, you just stay bitter.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“I usually am,” Nadia said with a laugh.

“And you’re so incredibly modest, too.”

We laughed together.

“I have to get back in there,” I said. “Thank you for calling. You have no idea how much I needed a dash of perspective.”

“I’m always here for you, my friend,” Nadia said.

We ended the call. I took another moment to pull myself together.

I had to tell Ben about his son. Tomorrow, I would pull him aside and tell him we needed to talk, and I would come clean with all of it. It was the only way.



On Wednesday, Oliver and I arrived at the bakery only to be nearly trampled by workmen carrying one of our large display cases through the door.

I pulled Oliver back and tucked him behind my leg until the workmen had passed. We watched in shock as they loaded the display case into a truck.

“What’s going on here?” I asked, barging through the front door.

“Oh, Dakota, there you are,” Mom said, coming to me.

She looked flustered, and my stomach dropped. Was the bank repossessing our stuff? That wasn’t right—Ben had made sure that we were okay financially, that had been the whole point of him being here.

“We’re moving the bakery,” Mom said.

“What?” I asked.

Ben came to us with a broad grin. “I just bought a new building a mile away, in an up-and-coming part of town. It’s going to be much better for the bakery—more space and a brand-new look.”

I stared at him. “When did you decide this?”

“It just sort of happened. I saw the space, envisioned the future of the bakery there, and decided to take the leap.” He rubbed his hands together. “Don’t look so scared; this is exciting!”

The workmen returned and Ben shifted his attention to them. He pointed out things they had to load.

“Did you know about this?” I asked my mom.

She shook her head. “I arrived to this chaos just before you did.”

“Mom?” Oliver asked, clinging to my leg.

“It’s okay, honey,” I said. “We’re just moving to a new place.” I knelt in front of him and ruffled his hair. “We’re going to a bigger, better bakery. Won’t that be fun?”

Oliver frowned.

“Almost like when we moved into our apartment and you got your own room,” I added.

The first three years of Oliver’s life, we’d shared a bedroom at my mom’s apartment until I’d been able to get on my feet and afford a place of my own.

Oliver’s face broke into a smile. “That’s really cool.”

I stood. I didn’t think it was really cool. Ben hadn’t talked to me or my mom about it before finalizing the move.

“Cynthia, we need you,” Ben called to my mom.

Mom glanced at me before she walked to Ben.

“You’re going to be in charge of shop decorations when we get there, so I need you to think about how you want to arrange it all when we arrive,” he said.

“Me?” Mom asked, confused.

“Yeah, you’re manning the front of the shop, right? So, we’ll make it so that you love it, first and foremost.”

Mom beamed at him, and that just pissed me off. He was reeling her in by making it sound like he gave a crap. If he really cared all that much, he might have asked us how we felt about moving.

“I need you in the kitchen,” he said.

“Oh?” I asked. “Why?”

“We’re organizing the baking equipment and we could use your expertise—”

“Why don’t you take the lead on making those decisions?” I snapped. “Since you’ve made every other decision around here without consulting us. The *owners*.”

Ben’s face hardened. His blue eyes rested on my face.

“This isn’t a bad thing, Dakota,” he said. “A new location will do wonders. It’s like a makeover for the business.”

“That’s suggesting there was something wrong with it to begin with.”

“There was,” Ben pointed out. “Or it wouldn’t have been on its last legs.”

My blood boiled. If it wasn’t for Oliver who stood right next to us, watching the exchange, I would have given Ben a piece of my mind in a way he wouldn’t easily forget.

I shook my head, biting my tongue. I dug my nails into my palms, letting the short burst of pain ground me.

“Why don’t you sort out the kitchen?” I said tightly. “I’ll make sure Oliver and I aren’t under your feet.”

“We want you to be a part of this, Dakota,” Ben said.

“No, Ben. You don’t.” I turned around and led Oliver away from Ben.

He was uprooting everything I’d held dear for as long as I could remember. Leaving this place behind would hurt like

hell.

When I closed the office door behind me, locking us in, I looked at all the photos on the wall—photos of my grandparents, my mom, me, and Oliver. Photos that showed all the good times we'd had here, the bakery the only constant we'd ever known.

It was all slipping through my fingers. No matter how much I fought, I couldn't hold on to it. I'd wanted Ben in my life so badly for so long, but now that he was here, it felt like everything I wanted him to be a part of was falling apart. Why could I have one, and not the other?

My eyes welled with tears.

“Mommy?” Oliver asked.

I blinked away my tears and forced a smile. “Yeah, baby?”

“Why are you sad?”

“It's just hard to say goodbye sometimes. Here, why don't I put on a show for you? Or do you want to play with your planes?”

“Planes,” Oliver said, and I settled him on the carpet.

I sat behind the computer and powered it up. It would have been better to take down the pictures against the wall and pack them, to empty the desk, to make sure our files were all arranged right so that when we moved into the new place—it had all happened way too fast—we would know where everything was.

Instead, I stared at the computer screen, trying to keep it together.

I typed Ben's name into the web browser when the computer was started up. This time, I had his last name and the name of his company. Ben McCullough, McCullough Industries. I hadn't thought to research him since his reappearance into my life until now—I'd had my hands so full with everything else.

Immediately, everything there was to know about him popped up. Photos of him, his company reputation, a few

interviews in New York publications—it was all there. It would have been so easy if I'd had this information five years ago.

Mesmerized, I started reading about who Ben really was. I read about his success in the business world, the way he'd made his mark from a young age. I read about his brother, who walked in his shadow, and how Ben had launched the McCullough name to new heights when his father had only started making a mark decades ago.

It all looked very good. He was a smashing success, without any marks against him. He was the kind of person any woman would want in their lives... until I opened the handful of articles in popular New York magazines.

There, they portrayed Ben as a very different person. He was suave and debonair, alright. Every woman out there wanted him, and by the looks of some of the photos... a lot of them had had him, too. A serial dater—that was what they called him. A man who refused to settle down, enjoying the prime of his life, with a different girl on his arm at every event.

He was a playboy, they said, a heartbreaker who left a trail of women behind him who wished they could have been more.

I thought back to that night in Vegas. I'd thought he was so handsome when I'd met him, charming, *delicious*. I'd wanted him, and that night he'd made me feel like I was the only woman in the world.

That hadn't been true, though. That was his game, judging by what they were saying about him.

He'd been such a breath of fresh air. I'd thought he was different than the rest of the men I'd met. Had that all been a façade? Had I been nothing but another one-night stand in a long string of women?

I wanted a man who would be loyal to us, stable, someone we could rely on. Oliver needed a good role model, not someone who slept with one woman after the other and discarded them when he was done.

I'd meant to talk to Ben about Oliver today, but maybe it was better if I waited a little. He'd barged into our lives and changed everything, and I had to focus on what that meant in the long run. I had to keep my mind on Oliver's happiness.

Ben made it hard to focus on work. I couldn't help how drawn I was to him, and he didn't make it any easier. He flirted with me, looked at me like I was everything, touched me like he felt something...

What did it all mean? I'd thought I knew before, but now, I had no idea who he was.

Ben opened the door suddenly. I jumped, shutting down the internet browser, even though he couldn't see the screen from the door. I swallowed hard.

"We have to get in here," he said. "The office needs to be packed up."

"Right now?" I asked.

"Yeah, I want us out by the end of business day."

I bristled, my anger returning.

"I think we need to revise exactly what our contract says," I said. "I'm a little hazy on the terms. I thought we still had some say in the business, but it looks like you're the only one in charge now."

Ben frowned. "Of course you still have a say. This is your business."

"Is it?" I asked. "It feels a hell of a lot like it's yours." My anger rose, crackling in the air around me, and I was about to explode when Ben glanced at Oliver.

Oliver sat on the floor, looking up at us.

I clenched my jaw, swallowing the words I'd wanted to say.

"Why don't you come over to my house this evening to discuss it further?" Ben asked in a calm voice. "Then we can straighten this out."



I swallowed hard and nodded. It would be better to have a screaming match while Oliver wasn't present.

"Fine," I said and scooped Oliver up, leaving the office so Ben could get his team in there to pack.

## CHAPTER 13



I looked around my house. I didn't have a whole lot of furniture and decorations—I'd spent more time at the office, and now the bakery, than at home.

Now, I wished I'd appointed a decorator to make the place seem more homey. I hadn't thought about that when I'd invited Dakota over to discuss her issues with the business.

At least, I'd gotten wine and some food. Let it not be said I wasn't a good host.

I glanced at my wristwatch. She would be here soon.

It wasn't that I was nervous to see her. More like anxious—I wanted to spend some time alone with her. It had been torture being with her around her mother and the customers all the time. It had been tough on her, too.

That was my fault, though.

I'd made life hard for her, flirting with her one minute and bossing her around the next, watching her move around in her leggings and apron. She was so fucking sexy—even more so when she was riled up and angry with me. The fire within her made me want to grab her and fuck her.

It was one of the reasons I kept bossing her around. She *hated* it and I *loved* the way her eyes grew bright, her cheeks flushed and she pouted those full, kissable lips.

I shook my head. I'd been messing with her. I loved it, but I also felt a little guilty.

The sound of a car pulling up snapped me out of my thoughts, and I opened the front door.

Dakota slammed the door of her mother's sedan and approached me. She wore jeans and a T-shirt, her blonde hair up in a bun, and she looked incredible. She was nothing like the poofy-lipped models with makeup caked onto their faces. Dakota was down to earth, a natural beauty. She wore minimal makeup, which only made her that much more attractive.

When she looked at me, her brown eyes were hard and her lips pursed into a line.

"I can't stay too long," she said. "Mom's watching Oliver."

I nodded and stepped aside to let her in.

"Wine?" I asked.

She hesitated, then nodded. I poured us each a glass from the bottle I'd let breathe on the counter. I offered her the glass and led her to the living room where a platter of finger food sat on the coffee table.

"This is... nice," she said.

"I thought it would be," I said with a smile. "I like to mix my business with a little pleasure."

She looked up at me, the skin tightening around her eyes. "I can imagine you do."

What did that mean?

I shook my head and sat down. She sat down next to me, but perched on the edge.

"Look, Dakota," I started, getting right to the point. "I didn't mean to step on your toes."

Dakota sipped her wine, frowning at me over the rim of her glass.

"I want to save your family business. We have the same goal here. The only way we're going to be able to pull that off is if we work together as a team."

“I could say the same thing to you,” she countered. “If you want us to work together, you have to stop excluding me and my mom from big decisions.”

I considered it and nodded. “You’re right.”

She blinked at me, surprised. Hadn’t she expected me to agree with her?

“Although I’m just getting on board with the business now, I really do want to make sure everything ends well,” I said. “I know you’re invested in the business, and I’m not one to do something half-assed. Companies I invest in don’t just survive. They thrive. I want the business to generate its own financial insurance. That’s what I’m pushing for.”

As I talked, I watched Dakota relax a little. She shifted on the couch, leaning against the backrest and crossing one leg over the other.

“At the end of it all, I want you to be able to breathe and have some free time for yourself and Oliver.”

When I mentioned her son, an expression flickered across her face too fast for me to analyze.

“He loves it there,” she said softly.

“I can see why,” I said with a smile. The kid was growing on me, and just thinking of him warmed my heart. Then again, his mother had wriggled her way into my heart almost from the get-go, so why would it be any different with Oliver?

Dakota hesitated. I waited for her to say whatever was on her mind. The silence stretched between us, and I didn’t make a move to fill it with unnecessary words.

“I don’t want the business to fold,” she finally said. “I know that the point is to keep going, to make it work. It’s just... there’s so much going on, so much change. It’s a lot to take in.”

I nodded. “I know. Change isn’t always easy, but it’s the only way forward, most of the time.”

“Is this what makes you happy?” she asked.

“What?” Her question confused me.

“Saving businesses. Is this what you always wanted to do?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I always knew I wanted to do something that would make me feel fulfilled, but this sort of took its own course. It started with me helping a friend, a long time ago, and it worked out so well, I thought I would try it again. The rest is history.”

She nodded and swirled the wine in her glass. I studied her features—she’d only become more beautiful over the years. She’d grown up. In all the right ways.

The last few years, I felt a void. My life was full of work and I was good at it—I had a lot of parties to attend and meetings to take care of, but I didn’t feel complete. When I looked at Dakota, I knew she was what I was missing.

Maybe there was a reason I never forgot about her, never got over her.

When I was with her, everything clicked into place. It felt right.

She looked up at me and our eyes locked. The atmosphere in the room shifted, growing thick. Dakota licked her lips, and I was painfully aware of how close she was now that she’d shifted on the couch.

I wanted to kiss her so badly.

When her eyes slid down to my lips, I leaned forward and pressed my mouth against her lips. Damn it, if she wanted it as much as I did, what the hell was I waiting for?

Dakota didn’t hesitate. She kissed me back, and I slid my tongue into her mouth. Kissing her was like *déjà vu*, going back to the night in Vegas when the world had been full of endless possibility.

I broke the kiss and took her wineglass from her, putting our two glasses on the table.

I pulled Dakota down on the couch with me and kissed her. I ran my hand down her body, tracing her curves. Dakota

wiggled herself against me, and my cock—already hard in my pants—twitched with need. I wanted her. I *needed* to be buried deep inside of her, with nothing between us.

When I cupped her breast through her shirt, she gasped and arched her back, pushing herself into my hand. I massaged and kneaded her through her clothes, thrusting myself against her. The length of her body pushed up against mine.

I lifted her shirt and she wriggled on the couch, helping me get it over her head. When I rolled onto her, I grabbed my shirt and pulled it over my head so that we were both shirtless. She was a vision in her pink lace bra.

She looked up at me with wide eyes, and I kissed her again.

I pulled down her bra and rolled her nipple between my fingers, relishing the sounds of her pleasure.

“Wait,” Dakota said, and I sat up. She moved out from underneath me and nudged my legs so that I sat on the couch.

She knelt on the floor between my legs, then kissed me again.

“You look so sexy like that.” I buried my hand in her lush hair.

With a smile, she kissed a trail down my chest and stomach. Goosebumps broke out on my skin when she licked and sucked her way down to my lower stomach. I stroked my fingers through her hair.

She undid my belt and jeans. When she reached into my pants and wrapped her fingers around my cock, I sucked my breath through my teeth. She looked up at me, pumping her hand up and down, and I groaned as pleasure coursed through my body.

“You’ve always been so good with your hands,” I said in a thick voice.

“It’s all the practice I get in the bakery every day, working the dough, kneading the bread...” Her voice was breathy and she offered me a come-hither look while she talked.

“Never has baking sounded so fucking sexy,” I growled.

Dakota giggled before she licked her lips. I struggled to let her stay in control—I wanted to grab her and drag her to my bed, caveman style.

Dakota lowered her head and sucked my cock into her mouth, and I fell back against the couch and rolled my eyes shut. I groaned as she sank her mouth over my length and bobbed her head up and down. Her mouth was hot and wet and delicious.

“Fuck,” I moaned, clenching my jaw and watching her lips tighten around my swollen cock.

The pleasure in my body increased. She was as incredible with her mouth as she was with her hands. I wanted a release, but not yet. Not like this.

I ran my fingers under Dakota’s chin, and she pulled back and looked at me. I leaned down and kissed her before I took her hand and pulled her up.

I lifted her body and stood up with her. She wrapped her legs automatically around my waist.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked when I marched out of the living room with her, my cock pressing against her jeans.

“I’m taking you to my bedroom so I can have my way with you,” I growled.

“Mmm, I like the way you think.”

When we reached my bedroom, I dropped Dakota on the mattress and she lay back. I undid her jeans and peeled them down her legs, unwrapping her like a present, taking her panties along with it in one go. The scent of her arousal reached my nostrils and my cock twitched. I ached for her.

I kicked my pants off and crawled over her. I kissed her and pushed myself up against her, letting her feel the length of my shaft against her stomach. She gasped and moaned through our kisses.



I tugged the bra strap down her shoulder, and Dakota arched her back. I reached under her and unclasped the bra easily, pulling it off. I tossed it to the side, not caring where it landed.

She still had glorious tits, and I sucked each nipple into my mouth, causing her to moan and writhe.

I gyrated my hips, pressing my erection against her softness. Her body pushed against my dick, making me want to fuck her that much more. I worked her up into a frenzy, listening to how her breath became shallow and erratic.

Kissing her deeply, I dipped my fingers into her soft folds between her legs and groaned.

“You’re so wet,” I growled.

“You drive me crazy,” she murmured.

I wanted nothing more than to push into her right then and there, but I had to be responsible. I wanted to take her just like that, to feel every inch of her body, but I lifted myself off her and opened the nightstand drawer. I found my box of condoms, tore one open, and slid it over myself before I went back to the goddess on my bed.

I kissed her.

“I want to fuck you,” I said.

She gasped between our kisses.

“Then fuck me, Ben.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

I flipped her around, and Dakota yelped. She hadn’t expected it. With my hands on her hips, I nudged her up and she got onto all fours, knowing exactly what I wanted.

When I gripped her hips and pushed my cock against her entrance, she gasped. Her ass was delicious and I took in the sight of her wide hips, her narrow waist, and her perfect back, with her blonde hair falling over her shoulders.

I slid into her tight, warm pussy. The sound of her moan as I pushed in all the way to the hilt was music to my ears.

When I was buried inside of her, I held still for a moment. She trembled around me, her body adjusting to my size.

I pulled back, and she gasped when I pushed into her again. I fucked her faster and faster, pounding into her, and she moaned loudly with every stroke.

My balls slapped against her as I bucked my hips, and I reached around to grab her breast. Her breasts jiggled back and forth as I rocked her body, slamming my cock into her.

Her body trembled and shivered, her cries becoming sharper and higher-pitched, and a moment later, her body contracted around my cock as she reached her first orgasm.

She fell silent and collapsed on the bed with her chest so that her ass was in the air. I loved being the one to give her this kind of pleasure. I could just keep going and fuck her forever—with Dakota, I never got enough.

How long had it been for her? How long since she'd felt this kind of pleasure? Had it been as long for her as it had for me?

Until now, I'd been able to keep the thoughts of her at bay, but things were becoming more and more real. I wasn't going to be able to just forget now that she was back in my life.

I pulled out of her and she lay down on the bed, trying to catch her breath.

I wasn't done yet, but I wanted to see her face.

"Come here," I said in a throaty voice.

She pushed up and clambered onto me. When she straddled me, I reached up and cradled her cheek. She sank slowly onto my cock. I ran my thumb over her cheek and hooked her hair behind her ear.

"Hello, beautiful," I said, tracing her lower lip with my thumb.

Dakota's face split into a grin and her cheeks colored. "Hi."

God, I was in trouble with Dakota. She wasn't just a girl I'd found to help me take the edge off, someone I wanted to get rid of in the morning. This was the woman I'd been dreaming of for years, the one I'd thought had gotten away. I cared about her more than I'd been willing to admit to myself, and now that she was here, this close to me, it only made my feelings that much more real.

She leaned down to kiss me, then she rose and braced herself on my chest. She rocked her hips back and forth, stroking me in and out of her, and I watched as her face changed, opening with pleasure.

She rode me harder and harder, and her little whimpers were adorable. She pushed herself closer to another orgasm and I was so here for that. I loved it when she came undone with pleasure.

I put my hands on her hips and helped her rock back and forth. I thrust up inside her, driving deeper and deeper with every stroke until she closed her eyes and threw her head back in ecstasy.

While she surrendered into orgasm, her pussy clamped down on my cock and she cried out. I was close, too. I pounded into her from beneath, and a moment later, my balls tightened and a wave of pleasure rushed through my body.

My cock jerked and twitched inside her walls as I came, and we rode out our orgasms together.

It was so incredible, so perfect, so *right*, it was hard to think that I'd lived without this magic for so long and survived.

Dakota lay on my pecs, breathing hard. Her heart hammered against my chest and I wrapped my arms around her. With a giggle, she rolled off a moment later.

"Come here." I pulled her against me and she wrapped her arm around my chest. Her head fit perfectly into my shoulder as if we'd been made for each other and right in that moment, I was more than willing to believe we had.

My pulse slowed, my breathing evened out, and I was suddenly exhausted. When I turned my head to Dakota, the rhythm of her breathing suggested that she'd fallen asleep, too.

I closed my eyes and let sleep pull me under. This was the purest form of bliss.

When I opened my eyes again, Dakota was shuffling around as she looked for her clothes. She'd already put on her jeans and her bra.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I shouldn't have fallen asleep,” she said. “I have to pick up Olly from my mom.”

I wanted to ask her to stay, but her son needed her. I hated that she had to go.

Where was the boy's father? Who was he? He didn't seem to be a part of their lives.

I nearly asked Dakota, but the words caught in my throat. It was none of my business. All I knew was that if I had someone like her in my life, and we had a family, I wouldn't let her go in a million years.

## CHAPTER 14



## DAKOTA

So, maybe sleeping with Ben hadn't been the best idea.

I mean, it had been an *incredible* idea. I couldn't get enough of him, and the tension had built between us so much, rising to a peak so that when he'd kissed me, I hadn't been able to resist him.

It hadn't been a good idea to make everything so much more complicated. The problem was... everything about being with Ben was just so great. Plus, he was damn good in bed. When I thought about our night together, my stomach twisted and my core tightened, and I got wet all over again.

No one had ever made me feel as sexy and desirable as Ben did.

The next morning, I walked into the new bakery and looked around. There was still so much work that needed to be done—everything the workmen had dragged here had been dumped on the floor and the boxes needed to be unpacked. The shop needed to be decorated; the office had boxes of files and papers that needed to be arranged in the bookshelves. It was one big mess.

I hated the place.

I also loved it.

I hadn't wanted Ben to call the shots. I hadn't wanted him to waltz into our lives and act like he was a god, but I couldn't for one second say that the new bakery wasn't amazing. If we'd had the money, Mom and I would have done this years

ago. It was so much better than the building we'd been in before, and the neighborhood was promising with a lot more potential for customers walking through our doors.

I wished I'd been the one to make this happen, and not Ben. It would have been so much sweeter. I still had my pride, and knowing that he'd been the one to save the bakery left me with mixed emotions.

I glanced at Ben where he stood behind one display case. He studied our menu while Mom unpacked boxes in the shop, putting up pictures and hanging curtains. Mom was a whiz at making a place look more homey.

"We need to revise this menu," Ben said.

"Revise it how?" I asked with a frown.

"We don't need to offer nearly as many pastries as we do." I bristled at his use of *we* all the time now. "We really need to focus on quality, rather than quantity."

Mom looked up at me, already knowing that Ben's words would hit a nerve.

"Are you saying that the quality of our pastries isn't up to snuff?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all."

"The customers love our variety. They don't come in here for the same thing twice."

"Because there's so much to choose from, they can't decide."

"What are you talking about?" I cried out. "I remember distinctly that you sampled nearly every pastry we had when you were first here." My mom had told me about Ben's original visit to the bakery.

"From a business perspective, sampling the goods makes sense," Ben said.

I shook my head and left the front of the shop, walking to the office. Oliver lay on the couch, legs up against the wall,

humming a song to himself while music blared from my phone which I'd left for him to play on.

"Hey, pumpkin pie," I said to him, trying to be cheery and upbeat. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Oliver said. "Can I have a snack?"

"Yeah, let's go get you something," I said. I'd meant to unpack some of the files in the office, making sure the business side of Sweethearts Bakery was up and running, but I always took care of Oliver first.

When we walked into the shop, Mom looked up from her boxes.

"There's my favorite Oliver," she said with a grin.

"I'm the only Oliver!" He giggled.

Mom laughed. "And you're so great, too! Is it snack time? How about we go hunting for something yummy in the kitchen?"

"Hey, Oliver," Ben said. "After you have your snack, I have a surprise for you."

"Really?" Oliver asked, his face lighting up.

I frowned at Ben. "What kind of surprise?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise anymore, now would it? What do you think, Oliver?"

"What is it? Can't I have it now and then snack after?"

Ben shook his head. "First your snack, then the surprise. Deal?"

Oliver pouted, but then he nodded. "Deal." Mom took him to the kitchen.

"What did you get him?" I asked, suspicious.

Ben was so good with Oliver, it made my heart constrict. He deserved to know that Oliver was his. Oliver deserved to know about Ben too, but that would come later. It was a week down the line since Ben had walked back into my life.



Oliver and my mom came back in record time. Oliver ran to Ben.

“I had a snack,” he said.

“What did you have?” Ben asked.

“A jam sandwich and milk.”

Oliver had the white mustache on his lip that proved his point.

Ben laughed. “Okay, I think it’s time, then.” He walked to the bag he always brought with him and reached in. He pulled out a model airplane.

“Oh, wow!” Oliver cried out and held out his hands.

“You have to be careful with it because it’s a really special plane.”

“Why?” Oliver asked.

“It’s a very rare plane. You don’t get it just anywhere anymore. This is a plane that I played with when I was your age.”

“Really?” Oliver asked.

Ben nodded and smiled at him. “My parents got me this plane for Christmas one year. I kept it all this time, just so that I could give it to someone who I knew would look after it.”

Oliver looked at the plane with added reverence and took it from Ben like it was a holy grail.

“What do we say?” I said.

“Thank you!” Oliver cried out. “I promise I’ll look after it.”

“You’re welcome,” Ben said with a grin.

Oliver turned to my mom to show her his new plane.

“I’ll be in the office,” I said and walked away with a lump in my throat.

Seeing Ben with Oliver was too much for me to deal with right now. Ben was sweet with him. Giving him his own toy

plane was so special.

It made me feel guilty for not telling Ben about Oliver. I couldn't do it yet, though. I still had so many questions, and every time I thought I'd found an answer, Ben did something that made me wonder if doing it was the right thing.

In the office, I opened some of the boxes and started unpacking files into the bookshelf. Some of these files had been filled by my grandparents and contained handwritten ledgers, old recipes, and nostalgia.

I didn't know the door had been opened until Ben cleared his throat.

When I looked over my shoulder, he slid his eyes up and down my body. His gaze was filled with heat, and my stomach clenched. When he looked at me like that, I wanted to be alone with him. I shook off the thought.

"Thank you for the toy," I said to Ben, turning to him. "Oliver loves it. You're not sentimental about it?"

Ben shook his head. "My parents and I aren't on good terms. Oliver has much more use for that plane than I ever will."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. Ben came closer to me, and my breath caught in my throat when the scent of his cologne wrapped around me, drawing me in.

Ben pulled in for a kiss, and a part of me wanted to give in. I wanted him to kiss me, to hold me. I wanted to be close to him.

I pulled back instead.

Ben was my boss right now. He was trying to change everything, and we weren't alone. We were in the office alone, but Oliver could run in at any moment, or my mom could come in to say something... If either of them saw me kissing Ben, it would make things even more complicated than they already were.

"We shouldn't do this here," I said.

Ben frowned slightly.

“I think it’s better to keep some professional distance, especially here. We work together; we can’t jeopardize that.”

“Do you think the other night jeopardized it?” Ben asked.

I closed my eyes for a second and flashed back on the way his body had felt between my legs, his chiseled chest under my hands, the feel of his cock deep inside me.

Heat washed over me and pooled between my legs, and all my reservations about Ben fell away for a moment.

I snapped myself out of it. This was exactly why we couldn’t do something like this—I had to keep my head in the game.

“I have to get back to unpacking,” I said tightly.

Ben sighed and nodded. “Okay. I’ll see what Cynthia needs help with.”

I nodded and watched him leave the office. A part of me wished he would turn back, but I squashed it with reason.

I had to stop letting Ben distract me.



“It’s so good to see you,” Nadia said when she sat on a stool at my breakfast nook while I poured us each a glass of wine.

It was evening and Oliver was already in bed. I should have been in bed, too, but I had too much going on for my mind to stop mulling over it, and I wanted a moment to unwind before I went to sleep.

“I’m sorry things have been so chaotic lately,” I said. Nadia and I usually saw each other more often than I saw her now. “It’s a madhouse with the move and having Ben around... it’s torture.”

“In a good way or a bad way?” Nadia asked.

I sighed and pushed a wineglass to Nadia before I sipped my own.

“Both.”

Nadia frowned, so I elaborated.

“He’s everything I could ever want in a man,” I said. “He’s sweet and caring and funny, and he makes me feel things I haven’t felt in a long time.”

“That sounds like a good thing,” Nadia said.

“Sure... except for the fact that he’s also bossy and irritating and he keeps acting like he’s in charge.”

“Isn’t he?” Nadia asked.

I sighed and leaned my elbows on the counter. “Yeah, I guess he is. It’s his money, and we did sign that contract. I just didn’t know what it would mean to have him here. Just when I think I can do this without falling for him because he rubs me the wrong way, just when I think my heart might not be in danger after all... he does something so sweet, redeeming himself, and I’m in trouble all over again.”

I told Nadia what Ben had done for Oliver, giving him a toy plane. I also told her about the tabloid articles I’d found, and all the women Ben had been involved with over the years.

“Do you see what I mean?” I asked. “Just when I’m about to tell him about Oliver, he does something to make me doubt whether he’d be a good dad.”

“You can’t keep this from him, Dakota,” Nadia said. “Even if he isn’t someone you want to be with, Oliver deserves both his parents in his life, and Ben has every right to know. And from what you’re telling me, it sounds like he would be really good for Oliver. The thing with other girls... that’s really more about your heart, isn’t it? Not Oliver’s.”

“Yeah, but I just don’t want Oliver to get hurt if Ben rejects him.” I knew from experience the pain of having a dad bail on you as a kid.

“Never know until you try.”

“Do you know how much I hate it that you’re always right?” I asked with a laugh.

Nadia looked pleased with herself. “I just think you should do the right thing and take that next step. If he’s good with Oliver, it will help you. You could have a break once in a while, and a bit of child support wouldn’t hurt, either.”

Nadia was right, yet again. I nodded, swallowing down the rest of my wine.

“Tell me about you,” I said, changing the topic.

Nadia smiled, knowing I needed a topic change so I could process what she’d said, and she launched into a story about a difficult client of hers, telling me how they’d argued and Nadia had come out on top. We shared a few laughs and another glass of wine before she had to go home.

Nursing a headache already from the wine, I climbed into bed and scrolled through social media to switch off my mind so I could go to sleep.

An interview on a news channel with Ben from last year popped up as a suggested video to watch. Since I’d searched his name and company, the algorithms threw more of the same on my home feed.

Great. Even in bed, far away from him with nothing on my mind anymore but sleep, he still plagued me.

I couldn’t say I despised it.

I clicked on the video and waited a moment for it to buffer.

“You’re one of the most powerful investors in New York,” the show host said. “Why do you think that is?”

“Well, the facts speak for themselves, don’t they?” Ben said arrogantly. “I do what needs to be done. I take the leap, invest, take risks, and so far, it’s paid off.”

“It certainly has,” the host said. “Your family must be incredibly proud.”

“I like to think so,” Ben said, nodding. “But I’m not doing this to make them proud, or to make others think something of me. I’m doing this because it makes sense, and I’ve always been a person of logic.”

“Ah, not only handsome and highly coveted by every woman from Manhattan to Brooklyn, but selfless, too.”

The audience laughed and Ben grinned, shaking his head.

I smiled when he looked bashful. Seeing him on the screen was so different from the way he acted in person.

“What would you say gives you your edge in the business world?” the host asked.

“Well, that’s a complicated question,” Ben said with a frown. “I think success is a combination of a lot of things—determination to reach the top, tenacity, hard work, even when everyone else is having fun, and a big dollop of luck.” He grinned. “But I think what really makes it possible for me to do all those things is the fact that I’m completely independent.”

“You mean you don’t have a business partner?”

“I don’t have a partner, period. I’m single, and I get to decide what’s important without having to take things into account like a wife and children, a family life that could get neglected if I’m at the office all the time. I would never want to be tied down like that. I’m married to my job, and everyone who’s come close enough to me will know exactly what I mean—business comes first.”

I paused the interview and swallowed. My heart sank.

Ben didn’t want to be tied down. He didn’t want a wife and kids, and now, that was exactly what I was about to do for him—tie him down.

How could I tell him about Oliver now? What if Ben hated me for it, resented me for taking away his independence, his edge in the business world?

What was worse, what if he resented Oliver and decided to leave him? I could deal with heartache. I could deal with life handing me curveballs, but Oliver was only four. I couldn’t let that happen to him. I couldn’t watch Ben treat Oliver without the love and warmth my son deserved.

I didn't want Oliver to spend his life chasing after Ben, trying to win over his love and affection, his approval, when it might never be there.

God, this was getting more and more complicated by the day. How was I supposed to find an answer?

Maybe it wouldn't have been so difficult if my heart wasn't so involved. The problem was I felt something for Ben. A lot more than I was willing to admit. I wanted him in our lives, not just as someone who dropped by now and then, but someone constant.

I wanted us to be a family.

Until now, I'd had a flicker of hope that it might work out—Nadia had talked me into believing that I could have the kind of happy ending I'd only dreamed about.

After this interview, all those hopes were squashed, and all that remained were more unanswered questions.

## CHAPTER 15





I knew Dakota wanted me.

The hot, passionate sex at my place the other night confirmed that she did. But she was cold with me at the bakery, keeping me at arm's length.

A part of me wanted to demand what was going on. Why did she push me away when she'd clearly wanted me when we were alone?

Another part of me liked that she put her foot down and told me no.

So many women fell at my feet, wanting a piece of me, of my life and my riches. Women were usually after me for my money.

The moment I'd walked into Dakota's life, it was very clear she didn't want my money. Hell, she hadn't wanted me to help save the bakery at first, even though it had meant me putting a lot of cash up for them. She'd been to my place, seen the size of my house, seen my Maserati, and yet she didn't want anything from me.

It was refreshing that she turned me down, and it only made me want her that much more.

It also made me respect her more, which I hadn't thought was possible. Dakota was a good mom, a hard worker, and she put others' needs before her own, time and time again. Add not being a gold digger to that, and I wanted to marry her on the spot.

*Marriage?*

Where had *that* idea come from?

I shuddered, snapping out of my reverie. I was getting way ahead of myself.

“You’re avoiding me,” I said to her when I found her alone in the kitchen one afternoon.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, rolling out the croissant pastry dough for the next morning.

“I hardly see you at all these days, and we work together. That doesn’t happen by accident.”

Dakota didn’t answer me.

“Will you let me take you out?”

She looked up at me. “Out?”

“To dinner.”

She pursed her lips. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“What could be bad about it? It’s just a business dinner, two colleagues having a meal together. We all gotta eat, right?”

She gave me a pointed look. “We don’t have the best track record when it comes to having a business meeting.”

Her cheeks flushed pink. My cock twitched in my pants remembering our last “meeting.”

“Come on, it’s just a meal,” I said. “It will be out in public so it’s not like anything can happen.”

“I’ll check my calendar,” she said.

I grinned at her. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“It’s not a yes,” she hedged.

“It’s not a no,” I said.

She didn’t answer, and I chuckled. That was good enough for me.

Dakota's phone rang, and she wiped her hands on her apron before taking it out of her pocket. When she answered, her face changed from confusion to concern.

"I'll be right there," she said and ended the call.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's the mechanic," Dakota said.

When I'd realized she was taking the bus because her car had broken down, I'd insisted we repair it. *She'd* insisted that she would pay me back. The car had been in for two days.

It was wrong for a mother and a working woman to have to struggle so much.

"He said he found something else wrong with it and I should come in to discuss the options. It's okay if I go?"

"Of course," I said. "We work together; you don't have to ask me permission to leave."

She shook her head and took off her apron, hanging it on the hook behind the door. She found Cynthia in the office to tell her where she was going and she hugged Oliver goodbye before she left the bakery. She took her mom's car to drive to the mechanic.

I walked to the display counter and studied the pastries on show for the day. They all looked good, with warm lights that made them seem golden and delicious. Dakota had been furious when I'd suggested we reduce the menu. I wondered if she had a point.

Not that I would give in—seeing her mad at me gave me more pleasure than I should have felt.

"What are you doing?" Oliver asked, appearing next to me.

"I'm trying to decide which one looks the tastiest," I said to him. "What are you doing?"

"Walking around," he said. "I'm bored of my toys and Grandma is working on the computer where I watch my videos."

"Ah," I said.

“Do you have a phone?”

I eyed him. “I do, but it’s a work phone. It doesn’t have any games.”

“Oh,” Oliver said, his face falling. “That one’s nice.” He pressed a small finger against the glass, leaving a sticky fingerprint behind. “It’s yummy.”

I looked at the chocolate chip muffin.

“Why don’t we each have one?” I asked. “And... go for a walk.”

“I’m not allowed to go for a walk without Mom or Grandma,” Oliver said.

“You won’t be alone. You’ll be with me.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “Muffin and walk.”

“Right,” I said with a grin. “Let’s check with your grandma.”

I walked to the office and checked with Cynthia that it was okay for me to take Oliver—and two muffins—on a walk. I promised just to go around the block, but Cynthia looked relieved that I would keep Oliver busy.

Armed with our muffins, we headed out the door and turned down the street.

“What do you think about the new bakery?” I asked while we walked. I took bites of the muffin. Oliver had been right—it was delicious.

“I like it,” Oliver said. “There’s more space to play.”

“Yeah, I think the space is nice, too.”

“And it’s closer to the park,” Oliver said. “I like the park.”

“Always a bonus,” I said, nodding.

We walked down the street and discussed the cars walking past.

“Spotto!” Oliver called out.

“What?”

“The car,” he said and pointed.

A yellow Nissan drove past.

“Huh,” I said.

“Spotto!” Oliver cried out a moment later, pointing at a yellow Mini Cooper.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It’s a game we play,” Oliver said. “If you see a yellow car, you shout. Spotto!”

“Oh,” I said. “I get it.”

We walked, and I kept my eye on the road. “Spotto,” I said when a yellow delivery truck passed.

“Ah, no,” Oliver complained. He eyed me. “You’re tall.”

“You’re getting pretty tall, too,” I said.

Oliver shrugged. “But I can’t see far, so it doesn’t help.”

“How tall are your friends?” I asked. “Are you turning six? Or seven?”

“What?” Oliver asked. “I’m not six.”

“Seven?” I asked.

Oliver giggled. “I’m four!”

I stilled. “You’re four?”

Oliver nodded.

“I thought you were older.”

“I’m mature for my age. That’s what Grandma says. What does mature mean?”

I laughed. “It means you’re smart, almost like a grown-up.”

Oliver crinkled his nose. “That’s stupid. How can I be grown-up if I’m a kid?”

“Hmm,” I said, not sure how to answer. I didn’t have a ton of experience with children. A point driven home by my wildly inaccurate estimation of his age.

Oliver chattered on while we walked, talking so much he barely ate his muffin. I listened to him rattle on while my mind spun, trying to put the pieces together.

Oliver wasn't six or seven.

He was *four*.

He had no father in the picture, and his age put him in the right place for him to be *mine*. Right? That Vegas night had been five years ago...

I studied Oliver, really taking in his features. He had Dakota's hair, but his eyes were a bright blue... just like mine. He was tall for his age, which I'd also been as a child.

The closer I looked at him, the more I saw what I hadn't seen before—features that resembled not only Dakota, but me.

How could I not have seen this before?

The answer was simple—I hadn't known to look for it. I'd been under the impression this whole time that Oliver's father was somewhere else.

When we got back to the bakery, Cynthia was done with her paperwork.

"Did you have a good walk?" she asked.

"Yeah," Oliver said. "We saw seven yellow cars! I taught Ben Spotto."

Cynthia laughed. "You've been roped in, huh?"

"I'm in over my head," I said.

*In more ways than one.*

"It's time for a nap, buster," Cynthia said to Oliver.

"I'm headed out again," I said. "I have... a few things to take care of."

Cynthia nodded and Oliver waved at me before I left the bakery again. I didn't have anything to take care of, but I had to get away from there. I had to think.

At home, I struggled to wrap my mind around what was going on. I didn't know what to make of it, didn't know how

to deal with my suspicions.

Finally, hours later, I got into my car. Mulling it over again and again, coming up with the same conclusions and the same questions, wasn't going to cut it. I had to talk to Dakota and get down to the truth.

Using the address listed on her paperwork, I pulled up at her apartment for the first time. I was in a daze. I needed answers.

Maybe it was all a big mistake—maybe I'd gotten it wrong and there was some other explanation for it.

Either way, I had to know the truth.

When I knocked on her door, Dakota opened it, already wearing pajamas and a robe.

“Oh, Ben,” she said and tugged her robe tighter around herself. She absently touched her hand to her hair. “Is everything okay?”

“Can we talk?” I asked.

She nodded and opened the door for me to come in. I looked around her apartment. It was small, with the open-plan kitchen almost in the living room. It was neat and well decorated. This was where she'd raised Oliver all this time. Alone, apparently.

I turned to her. “Is he asleep?”

“Yeah, I just got him down. Why?”

I swallowed. “Is he mine?”

Dakota froze and stared at me.

“Well, is he?” I demanded.

“Ben...”

“You might as well come clean. Did you think I was stupid, that I wouldn't figure it out?”

“No, of course not...”

“Why?” I demanded. I tried to keep my anger at bay, to stay calm and talk to her about this, but I felt so betrayed.

“How could you keep this from me knowing I saw him every day?”

“Because I’m protecting him,” she said.

“It seems to me like you’re protecting yourself,” I snapped. I felt unsteady on my feet. I’d guessed Oliver was my son, but now that she’d confirmed it, the news hit me like a freight train all over again.

“Don’t you dare,” Dakota snapped. “I gave up everything for Oliver and no matter what, he comes first. You have no idea what the last years have been like, and why would you? You haven’t had to worry about any of this. I’ve been doing it all by myself.”

“You should have told me the moment I walked in that door,” I said, pointing in the general direction of the bakery.

“I was going to! I just needed some time. If you weren’t such an asshole when you first showed up, maybe I would have done it sooner.”

“When? Between you getting pissed at my suggestions or storming away because you don’t want to deal with something, there hasn’t been a hell of a lot of time where it looked like you planned to do it.”

She gasped. “You’re one to talk about my behavior—you’ve been a jerk of a boss and a hell of a flirt in equal measure, taking over my life and demanding to be in it at the same time. You waltzed into my life and took over, and now you’re upset I did what any mother would do and put up walls to keep us safe.”

I glared at her. “I’m not the enemy, you know. What did you need to keep yourself safe from?”

“You can’t tell me you’re here as a friend,” she clapped.

“What am I supposed to be?” I cried out. “You fuck me one moment and keep me at arm’s length the next. Don’t tell me I’m wrong for playing with you because you’ve been doing it right back, and whatever it is you wanted me to come here as... Oliver’s father sure as shit wasn’t one of them. Was it ever the plan to tell me?”



“I already told you it was.”

“Until it wasn’t.”

“I don’t know you!” she cried out. “I don’t know if you’ll be good to him, good *for* him.”

I stilled, finally able to reel my emotions back in.

“You’re right,” I said. “You don’t know me, Dakota. Maybe if you hadn’t snuck out that night without saying goodbye, without leaving a number, you *would* know me now.”

She gasped, at a loss for words. I turned around and marched to the door, letting myself out. I slammed the door shut behind me. Only after I got in my car did I wonder if I’d woken Oliver up.

I turned over the ignition and slammed my foot on the gas.

Suddenly, my tidy life felt very out of control.

## CHAPTER 16



*I* tried to breathe through the shitstorm that just hit me, but I was reeling.

It had been surreal when I'd put two and two together, but now that Dakota had not only told me it was real—Oliver really was my son—but acted like I was the villain in this little fairy tale, I was seething.

Who did she think she was? It wasn't that I'd ditched her, left her with a baby to fend for herself, without stepping up to the plate. I'd had no idea she'd gotten pregnant! I would have been there for her if I'd known, but she'd taken that away from me by sneaking out in the middle of the night like I hadn't meant anything.

I gripped my steering wheel and tried to figure out where to go. Right now, I couldn't stomach the idea of my empty house.

Despite being furious with Dakota, I wanted to be with her. Lately, she'd been the person I felt closest to.

Without thinking about it, I drove to the bakery. The new location was perfect—the bakery already did well in the new area and I had big plans for this place. Right now, though, I just wanted to feel close to Dakota without the risk of arguing again.

When I parked against the curb, yellow lights fell through the large windows. I'd thought the bakery would be dark and quiet, but someone was still here.

I unlocked the door with my key and let myself in. The light came from the office, the door ajar. Cynthia sat behind the desk my team had brought from the old bakery, with boxes still scattered around her.

I knocked softly on the door before I pushed it further open.

Cynthia looked up. Her eyes were red and her hair a mess—she'd been working long and hard and she was tired.

“Ben,” she said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“You're still working,” I said.

Cynthia nodded. “I had a few things I wanted to take care of. During the day, we're just so busy I don't get around to it.” She glanced around the office. “There's still a lot to do around here, so I'd best get as much of it out of the way when I can.”

“We'll get through it,” I said.

Cynthia nodded. “One step at a time, but everything in life works that way.”

I nodded. She was right. Right now, I just didn't know what exactly those steps should be.

Cynthia gestured toward the couch against the far wall for me to take a seat. I hesitated—I'd come here to be alone with my thoughts, but I liked spending time with Cynthia. I'd liked her since the moment I'd met her. It ran in the family, clearly.

“The new bakery is a blessing,” Cynthia said. “I don't know how to thank you.”

I shook my head. “It was necessary; it's part of business. No need to thank me. This is what you signed up for.”

Cynthia nodded. “I know, but still.”

“Dakota doesn't seem to like it all that much,” I said.

“Dakota is nervous with change because of how it might affect Oliver. She'll come around when she sees how good it will be for the future.”

“She's very dedicated to the business,” I said.

“Oh, yes. She’s always loved the bakery. And she has more on the line now,” Cynthia continued. “She’ll do whatever it takes to make sure Oliver has a good life. She does what any mother would do—at least, it’s what she does and what I did. She hasn’t had it easy, you know.”

“Hmm,” I said.

We sat in silence for a while. Cynthia’s words echoed in my mind.

*She hasn’t had it easy.*

“Well, I think that’s it for me tonight. I can’t think anymore, I’m so tired.”

“You should go home and rest,” I suggested.

“Exactly what I’m going to do,” Cynthia agreed and stood.

We left the bakery and locked up together. I watched her drive off before I got into my own car.

Dakota had done everything for Oliver. I thought about this when I pulled onto the road.

She’d still taken over the family business, to a point, but it couldn’t have been easy doing it all with a baby. Had she studied business, as she’d planned to? I doubted it—she’d been a single mom.

How much had she had to sacrifice with Oliver in her life? Her studies, her freedom, she had to worry about money, about a roof over their heads, about a failing bakery.

What had I had to give up all these years? Nothing. I’d lived my life the way I’d wanted to. I’d done whatever I felt like, and I had the freedom and the money to put into anything I wanted.

The realization hit me like a fist.

I’d been furious at her for not telling me about Oliver. She hadn’t lied to me, but she hadn’t told me the truth, either. She should have told me about Oliver the moment I walked through those doors. She shouldn’t have left me without a contact number in the first place.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly when I stopped at a red traffic light.

*She hasn't had it easy.*

I couldn't imagine Dakota had had an easy life, and being pissed off at her for not telling me wasn't completely fair. What would I have done in the same situation? I couldn't even imagine it, which only reminded me how wrong it was for me to judge her.

She was trying to protect Oliver. He was only four.

God, I had a *son*. The idea filled me with nervous energy... and it made me giddy.

I hadn't ever thought about being a father. It hadn't come up—I hadn't even dated seriously since that night with Dakota, and I didn't have a good relationship with my parents at all. Parenthood brought up troubled images of my unhappy childhood.

But when I thought of Oliver, I thought of chocolate chip muffins and planes and yellow cars, and the idea that the child was mine excited me. I wanted to get to know him better, to be a part of his life. I hadn't seen the first few years of his life, but if I could be there for the rest of it, watch him learn and grow and become his own person... I wanted that.

Dakota was still mad at me. She had reason to be—I'd barged into her apartment and accused her of lying to me, of never wanting to tell me about Oliver, when she'd only done what a good mother would do.

Then there was the matter of her apartment. It was tiny, all their furniture squashed together, and they lived in the same part of town the original bakery had been in. If that area wasn't adequate for the bakery, how could I leave Dakota and Oliver living there?

The more I thought about it, the crappier I felt about how I'd reacted. I'd freaked out, only focusing on my own needs and feelings. I hadn't considered what she'd been going through—for years—and how she must have felt during all of this.

“Way to go, jackass,” I said out loud to myself.  
This wasn’t the end. This was only the beginning.  
Now that I knew the truth, I could do something about it.

## CHAPTER 17





DAKOTA

I stared at the door Ben had slammed on his way out, and my stomach dropped to the floor.

I was losing him all over again, except this time, he knew about Oliver.

If he disappeared, it would be a knife in my heart, because he'd be leaving us both.

I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to take a deep breath.

"You've done it all alone so far, you can do it now," I whispered. It wouldn't be a big setback if I didn't allow it to be, and the business was still in the middle of a renovation. Ben wouldn't walk out on that too, would he? We had a contract, so at least there was that.

I opened my eyes and walked to Oliver's room. He lay in his bed under his airplane-themed bedsheets, tangled into a pretzel, snoring lightly. The fight, the door slamming, hadn't woken him up. Luckily.

I locked everything up, switched off the lights, and got into bed. I was emotionally and physically drained after a long day.

Tomorrow, I would face reality again. Right now, I just needed to sleep to escape it all.



e decided to temporarily close the bakery while we got organized in the new location, so everyone took the next day off.

“Olly, sweetie pie, come on!” I called from the kitchen. “It’s pancake day!”

On Sundays, Oliver and I made pancakes for breakfast. It was usually a rush job because I needed to get to the bakery, but since the bakery was closed, I’d slept in a little. Oliver and I could spend some quality time together today.

Oliver didn’t answer when I called, so I walked to his room. He lay on his bed, legs up against the wall.

“What are you doing, silly goose?” I asked.

Oliver looked at me upside down and giggled.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it?” Oliver asked.

“I don’t know. It’s way too early. Let’s go see.”

We walked to the front door together. When I opened the door, I blinked in the morning light.

“Uncle Ben!” Oliver cried out.

I stared at Ben, shocked. He stood on my doorstep with two paper grocery bags in his arms.

“Hi,” Ben said, looking sheepish. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No, we wake up early,” Oliver said.

“We were up,” I answered tightly. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought we could have breakfast together,” Ben said. “I want to make some pancakes.”

“Pancakes!” Oliver cried out. “Sunday is pancake day!”

“Is it?” Ben asked. “Then I’m at the right place.”

“Come to the kitchen,” Oliver said excitedly, tugging at Ben’s coat sleeve to get him to follow him inside.

Ben glanced at me, his blue eyes filled with questions. I nodded slightly. I wasn't sure what I felt. I was shocked to see him, but a part of me melted into a puddle of relief. Last night, I'd feared he would walk out of our lives for good.

Oliver was excited to see him, and it warmed me to think that Oliver was so happy with his father—even if he didn't know that's what Ben was.

Ben stepped into the apartment after I silently agreed to it. He walked to our small kitchen. I watched as Oliver led Ben around, showing him where everything was that he would need. I'd never seen Oliver this chatty so early in the morning, and so invested in cooking.

Ben was amazing with Oliver. He asked him questions, allowed him to help, and laughed at his silly little jokes.

I sat on the stool on the other side of the counter. I would just be in the way if I joined them in cooking, and I didn't want to interfere in their moment together. It really was sweet.

My wishes were coming true, weren't they?

*You don't know that*, I reminded myself with a sharp dose of reality. Just because Ben was here this morning with breakfast ingredients, chatting away to Oliver as if they were good friends, it didn't mean this would last.

Last night I'd felt the sting of what it could mean to lose Ben, and I had to be careful with my heart. This scene in front of me was something I could get used to all too easily.

And losing it again would be hell. Especially now that Oliver was attached to him, too.

"Give the first ones to Mommy," Ben said when they plated the first two golden brown pancakes.

"Are you sure you don't want them?"

"Mommy gets the first ones," Oliver said firmly.

"Because ladies first," Ben said with a nod. "And because Mommy makes food for everyone all the time and she deserves to be spoiled, too."

My heart melted. Oliver showed Ben where to find the syrup and Oliver squirted a generous amount on my stack.

“That’s enough,” I said with a laugh when Oliver nearly drowned my pancakes in syrup. “Thank you, sweetie pie.”

“You’re welcome.”

He and Ben returned to the stove. All the while, we chatted away. Oliver talked about his friend Ethan, and Ben asked him questions, showing genuine interest in his life.

The conversation turned to my childhood. I told Ben about my life growing up at the bakery, and how it had been when we hadn’t had modern technology like we did now.

“I used to play with cookie dough, making different shapes, and my gran would bake them for me and let me decorate them. She always asked me if I wanted to sell them, and I loved the idea of making some money of my own. But I always ended up eating them all myself.” I laughed, thinking back.

Ben glanced at Oliver, who had his cheeks full of pancakes and sticky syrup on his chin. I smiled at Oliver and took out my phone to snap a photo.

Ben leaned down so that he was in the photo too.

When I stared at the photo, my heart constricted. Oliver and his father.

After breakfast was done, Oliver asked if he could watch *Paws and Ears*.

“I think it’s on,” I said.

“What is it?” Ben asked.

“It’s the best,” Oliver said simply. “Do you like dogs?”

“I love them,” Ben said.

“Me too. One day, I want a dog.”

“You know what they say about dogs, right? They’re man’s best friend.”

Oliver considered it and I smiled and turned to the sink to start on the dishes. I washed while Ben and Oliver watched TV together, and it was a relief that Ben was keeping Oliver busy. It didn't sound like it was a chore—Ben was more engrossed in the show than Oliver seemed to be. I giggled when Ben cried out in real agony when one of the main characters went missing.

“It’s okay, they always find them again,” Oliver said and patted Ben’s arm with his small hand.

I glanced over my shoulder at them and caught Ben’s eye. I struggled to read his expression.

When lunchtime rolled around, another knock sounded on my door but this time, I’d expected it. When I opened it, my mom stood there with a smile on her face. When she saw Ben, her eyes twinkled.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you had company,” she said. “I can come back another time...”

“It will be great if you could still take Olly,” I said softly. “I’d like to chat with Ben.”

Mom nodded.

“Where’s my favorite Oliver?” she asked.

“Grandma!” Oliver cried out, and he ran to her, throwing his arms around her. “We made pancakes and we let Mommy eat first because she always feeds us first.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

“Ladies first,” Oliver said.

I laughed. Kids echoed what they heard so quickly. A good example was imperative. So far, Ben seemed to be a really good example for Oliver.

“Well, that’s very good manners,” Mom said. “I’m proud of you, Olly.”

Oliver beamed.

“Guess what I have?” Mom asked Oliver.

“What?”

“A picnic basket. We’re going to have lunch in the park today.”

“I love the park!”

Mom laughed. “I know. Come on, let’s go.”

Oliver turned around and hugged me before he hugged Ben.

Ben looked surprised, and an expression of joy flickered across his face.

I waved at Oliver when he and my mom drove off, and I closed the door. When we were alone in the apartment, I suddenly felt self-conscious.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked.

“Coffee would be great.”

I nodded and busied myself with the machine.

“I owe you an apology,” I said. “I should have told you about Oliver sooner. I’m sorry.”

Ben shook his head. “You don’t have to be sorry about anything. I should have been more sensitive. I thought about what you said and how things must have been for you all this time. My outburst was out of line. The last five years must have been really rough for you.”

When the coffee finished, I poured Ben a cup and pushed sugar and a spoon toward him.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through,” Ben continued. “But you’ve done a great job.”

I looked up at him, surprised. “Really?”

“Of course, really,” Ben said. “Oliver is a great kid. He’s a well-mannered, self-confident, and well-adjusted child from what I can see, and that doesn’t happen all by itself. You’ve really worked hard to give him a stable life, and it shows.”

Something inside me cracked a little and a lump rose in my throat. It wasn’t always easy to see what the results of my

parenting were. I slogged on every day, doing what needed to be done, giving my all, but I didn't always know if I was doing a good job.

To hear Ben say those words made me want to sit down and cry with happiness. It meant the world to me—I'd worked so hard for so long and kept a strong front. Knowing that someone saw it and appreciated it was everything.

I poured my own cup of coffee and gestured for Ben to follow me to the couch. We sat down together, and for a moment we sat in silence.

I swallowed hard.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," I said softly.

"What is it?"

I hesitated for a moment. "Do you want to do a paternity test?"

Ben frowned. "A what?"

"You know, to see if Oliver is yours—"

"I know what it means," Ben interrupted. "The question just caught me off guard. I don't want to do a test."

"Really?"

"I can see he's my son, Dakota," Ben said. "Besides, I believe you."

My cheeks colored and I sipped my coffee.

Ben took the cup from me and put it down on the coffee table. He pulled me closer and leaned in to kiss me. When his lips brushed against mine, I sighed into his mouth. It felt so good to be with him. The way he kissed me was tender and sensual.

He cared so much—not just about Oliver and him being his son, but about me and what the past years have been like for me.

The kiss became urgent, and Ben wrapped his arms around my body. He pulled me onto his lap and thrust his hips against me. He was already hard, his erection pressing up against me. I moaned softly at the back of my throat.

No matter what we went through, how much we got stuck about business or Oliver, I would always melt when he kissed me, and my body caught alight when Ben pushed himself against me.

He'd always been that guy, the one I was drawn to, the one who was perfect for me. When we were alone, it was like two puzzle pieces coming together to complete the picture.

With Ben, I was home.



## CHAPTER 18



*I* loved having her close to me.

With Dakota on my lap, grinding herself against me, my cock was hard in my pants. I wanted her in every way I could have her.

My hands roamed her body. I squeezed her ass and held on to her perfect hips. I followed the dip from her hips to her narrow waist and fondled her breasts. She moaned into my mouth and the sound sent a direct message to my cock, making it twitch.

“I want you,” I growled. “Naked and underneath me.”

Before she could respond, I picked her up and stood. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I carried her to her bedroom where I placed her on the bed.

I kissed her and pushed her shirt up while my tongue explored her mouth. She wriggled, and I tugged at her clothes and managed to get her shirt up and over her head.

I kissed my way onto her chest, pushing her breasts together and planting kisses on the delicate skin, but I didn't linger there. Right now, I wanted to taste her sweet nectar.

I kissed a line down her stomach and relished in the way she squirmed on the bed, arching her back, pushing her breasts up. She was so fucking sexy.

I curled my fingers around the waistband of the leggings she wore—she was so fucking hot in those leggings, I wanted

to peel them off her twenty-four-seven—and slowly, I pulled them down.

With her pants on the floor, I wrapped my hand around her ankle and slowly worked my way up her leg. I kissed and nibbled on her soft skin, and she moaned and mewled through sharp intakes of breath.

When I reached the apex of her thighs, I blew on her pussy. She shivered. I nibbled her hips and pubic bone, but I didn't yet touch her where she wanted me to touch her.

Instead, I moved my way to her other ankle and started over again. I worked my way up her leg, worshipping every inch of her body, drawing it out, teasing her.

I wanted to show her how much I cared. I wanted to show her how much she meant to me and how close I felt to her now that we didn't have any secrets between us.

I teased her again between her legs, blowing on her, planting kisses all around her pussy. She moaned.

“Ben, *please*.”

I chuckled softly. I loved it when she wanted me so badly she had to beg.

I closed my mouth over her pussy and she sucked air through her teeth. She pushed her hands into my hair and her body jerked when I flicked my tongue over her clit. I licked and sucked her, moving faster and faster, listening to her breathing as it became more and more erratic. When it was shallow and fast, I knew she was getting close to an orgasm. I didn't want her to topple over the edge, yet.

I slowed down my onslaught, licking a long line from her entrance to her clit and back. She was sweet like honeydew, and the sounds she made drove me crazy. I wanted to pin her down and fuck her, but I restrained myself. I didn't want to hurry.

Dakota pulled me closer with her hands in my hair and bucked her hips, gyrating against me. I picked up the pace again. She gasped and writhed on the bed, rocking her hips in

the same rhythm as my motion. When she got closer, her breath shallow again, I pushed two fingers into her.

I loved the way she cried out, and she was tight around my fingers. I pumped my fingers in and out of her without letting up on her clit.

It only took a short while before she cried out and closed her legs around my head. I felt her pussy tighten, her muscles contract around my fingers. She breathed hard, and then the orgasm took her breath away and she tilted her head back, her mouth open in a silent scream of pure pleasure.

I loved being the one to give her that pleasure.

Finally, she came down from her sexual high, and I crawled over her to kiss her.

“You’re amazing,” she gasped.

She tugged at my shirt, too weak from her climax to be effective. I pulled it over my head in a quick motion, then pushed up and undid my jeans. My cock sprang out, hard and ready. Before getting rid of my pants completely, I found a condom in my wallet and rolled it over my length.

When I was ready, I kissed her. She sat up, meeting me for the kiss, and she ran her small hands over my chest. I loved her touch—she was delicate and gentle but her hands were more than capable.

She pushed me onto the bed, and I lay back, letting her take the lead. I’d teased her enough that she wanted to be in charge and I was happy for her to take over. It was so fucking hot when she decided to take control.

She climbed onto me and straddled my hips. When she knelt over me, she locked her eyes on mine and unclasped her bra. I watched as she slowly let it fall down her arms and she tossed it to the side.

“You’re a beautiful woman,” I said, studying her form. Her curves, her perfect breasts, and delicious ass were to die for and her large eyes filled with hunger.

She leaned down and kissed me. I pushed my hand into her hair, squeezing one breast with the other hand. Dakota reached between her legs and wrapped her fingers around my cock, guiding me to her entrance. When she sat down on me, I gritted my teeth in pleasure and groaned. She moaned as she sat down, sliding me into her.

When I was deep inside of her, she trembled around me, her pussy tight and delicious. She breathed hard and fast, her eyes dark. She rocked her hips back and forth and moaned as she stroked my cock in and out of her. It was pure sexual heaven to have her on top of me. She rode me harder and faster, bucking her hips so that her breasts jiggled and her blonde hair fell over her shoulders. I reached up and cupped her breasts, kneading and massaging them as she rode me.

She pushed herself closer to a second orgasm. I could tell by her breathing and by the look of pure pleasure on her face. She closed her eyes, brows knitted together and lips parted. I squeezed her ass, guiding her up and down my cock.

A moment later, she cried out sharply as she orgasmed. She collapsed forward onto my chest and I felt her walls contract around my cock. Her whole body shivered and trembled on top of mine, and I relished in the feel of her orgasm.

When she pushed up, her eyes were glazed over, eyelids drooped, and she had a smile on her face.

“Wow,” she said.

I grinned at her. “You’re wow.”

She giggled. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you’re amazing,” I said and held on tightly to her. I rolled us over so that I was on top, and Dakota yelped in surprise when she was suddenly on her back beneath me.

I stroked her hair out of her face and studied her features.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I said.

She blushed. “You keep saying that.”

“I know,” I said. “I can’t help it. I can’t get enough of you.”

She blushed harder and it felt so good to be so open about my feelings for her. I cared for Dakota in a way I’d never cared for anyone before.

I pushed into her, and Dakota’s legs fell open for me. She gasped and moaned when I slid into her, and when I was buried inside of her, I paused. I planted kisses on her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, and then her mouth. I slid my tongue into her mouth and tasted her, probing, exploring.

I committed the feel of her beneath me, her body around mine, and the sounds of her gasps to memory. This was what I’d been dreaming of for five years. This was what I’d lost.

I was such a lucky fuck to have it back again.

I moved inside Dakota, pulling out slowly before I pushed back into her. I picked up my pace, fucking her faster and faster. Her gasps and moans came in the same rhythm as my fucking.

I bucked my hips harder and faster. I ached for a release—I wanted to finish inside of her, to bring her to another peak of pleasure while I reached mine.

“Oh, God,” she murmured.

“Come for me again, Dakota,” I growled.

My cock hardened, growing thicker inside her moist tightness. She was getting close, and my balls tightened. I pushed into her as far as I could go. I released, groaning as my cock jerked and spasmed, and Dakota cried out as my climax pushed her over the edge to her third orgasm.

It was incredible to come together.

It felt like the wave of pleasure lasted forever. We rode it out together, clinging to each other, sharing in our ecstasy.

I dropped my head into Dakota’s neck. I took just a moment to catch my breath before I rolled off her so I didn’t crush her.

“I’ll be right back,” I said and got up.

In the bathroom, I got rid of the condom, then returned to the bed where Dakota lay stretched out. Her skin still had the red flush of sex. I stared at her, and I couldn’t believe how fucking lucky I was.

Dakota blushed when I stared at her. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said with a smile. “I’m just one lucky guy.”

I crawled into bed and pulled her tightly against me. She lay on my chest, her cheek against my shoulder. Perfection.

We were together, and we were going to make this work. I was determined. I wouldn’t let her slip through my fingers and disappear from my life again.

“Thank you,” Dakota said softly.

“For what?”

“For who you are. I missed you.”

“I missed you more than you know,” I admitted. “I know it was just a one-night thing in Vegas, but...” I glanced at her. “It didn’t feel like it. I’ve been thinking about you for five years, wondering what if.”

“Me too,” Dakota said.

“Really?”

“All the time. What would have happened if I’d left my number? If I hadn’t left before you’d woken up...” Her voice cracked, and she shook her head. “I’m sorry I left like that. It was a mistake... I thought I was doing what was best.”

I nodded. “I get it.”

“I’ve ached for you for five years. To be together now feels like everything finally fell into place.”

I dropped a kiss in her hair and squeezed my arm around her shoulders.

“Do you want to give this a shot?” I asked. “Let’s see where it takes us. I want to be together, to try to work it out.”

“I’d like that,” Dakota said softly. “I’d like it very much.”

She tilted her head up and kissed me before she lay back on my chest, and I meant what I'd said. It hadn't felt like just sex back then, and it didn't feel like that now. We were meant to be together.

I closed my eyes and settled into the knowledge that this was it—the happy reunion I'd been waiting for.

“We should probably get dressed,” Dakota said. “Mom isn't going to be in the park with Oliver for much longer. We don't want either of them thinking something's going on between us.” She pushed up and slipped out of bed, looking for her clothes.

I frowned. “Don't we?”

“Well, no,” Dakota said. “We can't just—” The sound of a car outside made Dakota cut herself short. “They're here. Get dressed quickly. I'll see you out there.”

She walked to the living room, leaving me to find my clothes and pull them on.

My head spun. I thought this was it—we were going to be together and give this thing a shot. Why didn't she want anyone to know we were together? Why was she trying to hide me?

My stomach twisted.

I'd thought everything was perfect, but maybe it wasn't so perfect, after all.



## CHAPTER 19



“*T*hanks for doing this, Nadia,” I said when my friend and Oliver were settled in front of the TV with two rented movies for the evening.

It was the night of our soft opening for the bakery’s new location, and it was an event that would go late into the night. Our usual babysitter hadn’t been able to make it.

“Of course,” Nadia said. “Olly and I have the best time together, right, buddy?”

“The best,” Oliver said with a grin.

I chuckled and kissed Oliver on the cheek. “Be good for Nadia, okay? I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Oliver nodded and turned his attention back to the television when a knock sounded on the door. When I stepped out of the apartment, Ben waited for me. He looked dashing in a black suit, as opposed to the navy or gray suits he wore during the day, and he offered me a charming smile. His eyes slid up and down my body and I blushed.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

I glanced down at the red cocktail dress I’d donned. “Thank you. You look great, too.”

He smiled at me and offered me an arm. We walked to his Maserati together, and he opened the door for me, ever the gentleman.

“What should I expect tonight?” I asked.

“Influencers,” Ben said.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve invited a couple of influencers who will talk about Sweethearts Bakery on social media. The idea is to reach as many new customers as we can, and we do that by telling the right people about it. The soft opening is a VIP thing that will create a buzz and make the rest of the world curious. By the time we host the grand opening, the turnout will be great.”

I nodded. Ben had explained his business strategy to us when he’d talked about the soft opening and grand opening, but I struggled to wrap my mind around the part where he invited influencers. I always thought social media influencers were women who posted makeup videos online, or men who talked about passive income and the fancy hotels all over the world they visited. Sweethearts Bakery was a small family bakery—what did we need influencers for?

“Trust me,” Ben said as he noted the uncertain look on my face. “We’re giving you clout by inviting the who’s who in LA.”

I nodded. He reached over the gear shift and squeezed my hand on my lap.

“This is going to be great.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said.

This was Ben’s forte. I couldn’t do anything but trust him. So far, he’d done a lot of things I hadn’t been ready for. I’d been upset about it, but it seemed to be working all the time, so I would let him do what he did best.

He was invested in me, and Oliver, too, so I couldn’t imagine he would do something that would sabotage the bakery in any way. Besides, he’d made his millions and he had the reputation and the bank account to attest to his success.

“How’s Oliver doing?” Ben asked.

I had a feeling he was trying to distract me from my stressing about the soft opening. He’d seen Oliver just earlier today, but I humored him.

“He’s doing well. He loves spending time with Nadia. She’s been a big part of his life since he was born—she’s like the crazy aunt who dotes on him.”

Ben grinned. “I can imagine she’s the adventurous one who swoops in and spoils him.”

I laughed. “Something like that.”

“She knows, right?” Ben asked.

“What?”

“That Oliver’s mine.”

I nodded. “Yeah, she’s been there through it all. She knows.”

“When are we going to tell your mom?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Ben frowned and glanced at me. “Do you think she’ll have a problem with it?”

“Not at all.” I fidgeted. “I just need more time.”

“For what?” The atmosphere shifted to a different kind of tension.

“Time for what? I’m not going to be Oliver’s dad any more or any less the longer you wait, you know. Facts are facts, and the sooner we face it—”

“I just need time, Ben,” I said again.

“It’s been more than a month that we’ve been working together, more than a week since I’ve known... Why can’t we just tell them and get it over with? We should tell Oliver, at least.”

I shook my head. “Let’s just take this one step at a time, okay?”

Ben clenched his jaw. He was irritated that I wanted to take things slow, but it wasn’t that simple for me. I’d been doing everything alone for so long, it was hard to take that next step and break out of the bubble I’d been in all this time.

How would Oliver react? I didn't know if finding out about Ben would affect his life. He was old enough that he knew what was going on in his life and if something ever happened that Ben left us... Oliver would struggle with that. I didn't want him to have to go through that if it wasn't necessary.

Of course we'd tell Oliver. I understood why Ben was anxious to tell him. I just wasn't ready to take that leap of faith and put my son in a position where he could get hurt.

I didn't know how to tell Ben any of that without it coming across hurtful. I didn't think he planned on leaving us; I just didn't know him well enough to know for a fact that he would stay.

I just wanted to live the fantasy that everything was perfect for a while. Right now, being with Ben was amazing. We were together and he made an effort every day to make me feel special. I wanted to live the dream a little while longer before facing reality and the potential heartache that could come with it.

"Let's talk about extracurricular activities," Ben said, changing the topic again. I was relieved he wanted to avoid conflict. I wasn't ready for a fight tonight.

"What about it?" I asked.

"I want Oliver to start doing something that will keep him busy and teach him something new. What about a sports team?"

"Oh," I said. "I don't have any money for something like that. After we take care of everything—"

"I've got it, Dakota," Ben said gently. "I want to do this. I want to add to his life."

I smiled. It was heartwarming that Ben wanted to do something for Oliver.

"Well, he's always liked ballet."

"What?" Ben asked, his smile fading.

“Ballet,” I said. “We watched *The Nutcracker* on television a couple of months ago and he loved it.”

“Loving it on TV isn’t the same as doing it,” Ben said tightly.

“Yeah? I know that... I’m sure he’d still like that, though.”

“What about baseball or soccer—”

“Why can’t he do ballet if that’s what he wants to do?” I asked.

“Because he’s a boy.”

“So? Men do ballet too, you know. It takes incredible strength and discipline and those are good qualities. Even for *boys*.”

Ben shook his head. “I’m not paying for ballet.”

I gasped, shocked.

“Really? Because you think it’s a girl’s sport so he can’t do it? What if he really wants to?”

Ben only clenched his jaw and searched for a parking spot close to the bakery. Cars lined the streets. There were already a lot of guests, but my mind was on other things right now.

“Oh, boy,” I said and looked out the window as we circled the block. “I didn’t think you were a chauvinist.”

“I’m not!” Ben cried out. “I just want him to be well rounded. You’re raising him to be a mama’s boy.”

“What?” I cried out, my surprise quickly turning into anger. “Are you kidding me? I’ve been raising him alone all this time and I’ve been doing a fine job, thank you very much.”

“There are a few things I would have done differently—”

“You weren’t here, Ben,” I snapped. “It doesn’t matter what you *would have done*. What matters is what’s happened. You can waltz into the bakery and turn it around any way you please, but I have to draw a line at calling shots about Oliver.

He's your son but you don't get to tell me I've been doing it wrong." I glared at him, seething.

"I'm not trying to take over," Ben said.

"Then don't," I clapped back.

Ben watched me with a level stare. His calmness frustrated me. I was furious, waiting for him to shoot back at me, but he finally nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry."

"What?" I asked, blinking at him.

"I know I haven't been around, and you've been doing it all. I won't tell you how to raise him. I just want to be involved."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Ben was being sincere. He was being very reasonable, too. It was tough to swallow my anger, but he meant what he said, so I nodded.

"Okay."

Ben offered me a smile and took my hand. "We'll figure this out. You and me, okay?"

I nodded, feeling relief that Ben wasn't fighting me on this but accepting that we needed to take time to change how things were.

"Let's get this party started," Ben said, and we climbed out of the car.

The bakery was filled with guests when we walked in, with music floating from the speakers and two servers walking between the guests with trays with champagne flutes or samples of what we would sell at the bakery. Everywhere, people talked and laughed in little groups, everyone cocktail formal and clearly having a good time.

In the corner, someone had set up a ring light and people were taking photos and videos together, posting them to all kinds of social media with the hashtag #sweetheartsbakery. Ben wanted to get it trending to spread the word.

Mom came to us, beaming. She wore a long silver dress that shimmered in the lights, and her smile matched how bright her outfit was.

“This is incredible,” she breathed. She turned to Ben. “Thank you for all of this. Without you, it would never have been possible.”

“I love being involved,” Ben said with a smile.

I glanced around the bakery. I’d been furious when Ben had bought the new place and organized the move without consulting me or my mom, but I had to admit the new location was great.

Now that we’d been here a while, it was growing on me. It had so much more space, with large display cases, and the rebranding was exactly what we’d needed. It was the type of bakery I’d always dreamed of having.

We joined the party. Ben and I mingled with the crowds, talking to the guests and enjoying the night. I took a couple of photos with influencers who posted it to their social media channels, and my mom offered a grand prize drawing where the winner would get daily croissants free for a month.

The night was beyond successful.

When the party wound down after midnight, Mom and I handed every guest a small parcel with a mini donut, a chocolate-filled pastry, and a card that thanked them for attending.

Finally, we were alone. Ben stood outside, talking to a few more people, but the bakery was empty, and Mom and I were alone inside. We sat down at one of the tables and I glanced around.

“This was more successful than anything I’d imagined,” I said.

“I think we’re going to see a spike in sales after this,” Mom agreed. “If you search the Sweethearts Bakery hashtag, it’s everywhere on the internet!”



I smiled. I had to admit, Ben's strategy had been very successful.

"Ben's really good at what he does," I said. "He came at just the right moment and turned things around."

"He's very involved," Mom said. "And he looks like he's very involved with Oliver, too." I glanced up at her, and Mom gave me a knowing look. "Almost like a father figure, you could say."

My stomach twisted, but I smiled. "Guessed it, huh?"

"I'm not your mother for nothing," Mom said with a smile. "I hoped it was him. He's a dashing young man and he has his life together in a big way. He's a good father to look up to. Why didn't you say anything to me before?"

"It's a long story," I said.

Mom glanced toward the window where we saw Ben still talking and laughing with some of the businesspeople he'd rubbed shoulders with before.

"I think we have some time."

I'd never told her about meeting Oliver's dad in Vegas. I'd always said I never wanted to talk about it, and Mom assumed I'd had a fling with a local guy in LA.

I smiled when I thought back to the night in Vegas. I told my mom how we'd met when we'd gone on our graduation trip, how I'd left, and how I'd wished every day he'd been in our lives.

"It's almost like a dream come true," I ended the story.

"I'm so glad you're reunited," Mom said. "A boy needs his father, and it looks like you're happy, too."

I nodded. "I really am. I didn't think my life could change so quickly."

Mom stayed silent for a moment.

"What?" I asked.

“I want you to be happy. You know that’s all I want for you. I just want you to be careful.”

“Of what?”

“You don’t know Ben very well. He’s a great guy—there’s no doubt about that—but just guard your heart, and make sure Oliver is safe, too.”

Yet again, my stomach twisted.

It was exactly what I was nervous about. What if Ben left us? What if he hurt Oliver? The idea of my son getting hurt made me feel sick. I could deal with heartache, but Oliver was so young and pure and innocent in all of this. He didn’t deserve pain.

“It’s always been me and Oliver against the world. Now everything’s changing so fast.”

“I understand what you’re saying, honey. Just keep in mind that Ben has a legal right to be in Oliver’s life and if he decides to contest custody...”

My stomach dropped. “Why would you even suggest that he might want to take Oliver?”

“I just want you to look at the bigger picture. I can’t imagine he’d want to take Oliver away from you, but he does have a right to get a lawyer involved.”

I felt sick. “I don’t know why you’re saying that.” I felt like I was going to throw up. “He won’t take Olly away from me. He can’t.”

“I don’t think he will,” Mom said again. “I just need you to understand the facts, look at it from all angles.”

I nodded. My mom was always very practical, but I hated how she burst my bubble sometimes. I *did* need to look at the facts, to be realistic, but it still hurt.

If Ben took Oliver away from me, I wouldn’t survive it. He was my everything—I’d sacrifice my whole life for him. If I lost him...

“He wouldn’t do that,” I said firmly.

I would do whatever it took to take care of Oliver, to keep him in my life.

No matter what it cost.

## CHAPTER 20



*I* drove to Dakota's apartment, busting with excitement. When I knocked on the door, Oliver opened it.

"Uncle Ben!" he cried out and hugged my leg.

"Hey, big boy," I said and ruffled his hair. I didn't like it when he called me Uncle Ben. I would have preferred him calling me Dad, but we would get there.

Dakota appeared at the door with a smile.

"Come in."

"No, first I want to show you both something."

"Right now?" Dakota asked.

I nodded and looked down at Oliver. "Go put on some shoes, kiddo."

Oliver ran to his room. Dakota looked confused. "Where are you taking us?"

"To your new home."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"I bought you a new place. You can't stay here—this place isn't safe. I want you to be comfortable and taken care of. It's closer to the bakery, too."

I'd meant to surprise her when we arrived, but I couldn't keep it to myself.

Dakota frowned. "I don't understand."

“I bought you and Oliver a new home. A condo.”

Dakota’s eyes widened before a look of suspicion crossed her face. “Why?”

“Because you deserve it,” I said simply.

Dakota opened her mouth to argue, but she couldn’t say anything to that. Oliver came back, shoes on his feet.

“Ready?” I asked him.

“Ready!” Oliver cried out.

“Come on.” I looked up at Dakota, who just looked irritated now.

I didn’t let it get to me—she was always a bit apprehensive about change at first. She’d been exactly the same way about the bakery move. She’d hated the idea, and she was angry that I’d made the choice, but she loved the place now.

I was convinced she would feel the same about the condo, too.

We drove in Dakota’s car so Oliver could sit in his car seat, and I directed her where to go. When we stopped in front of the condo, Dakota glanced up through the windshield.

“I still don’t think this is necessary.”

“I already bought it, and I’m not giving it back,” I said with a chuckle. “Come on, have a look around, and then you can decide if you still hate it.”

We walked to the front door, and I unlocked it. Oliver ran into the condo.

“Not too fast,” Dakota warned.

The place was much bigger than what Dakota had now. The condo had three bedrooms, an open-plan kitchen with a breakfast nook and a dining room area, and an archway that led to the living room where double doors opened onto a beautiful garden with a pool.

“A pool?” Oliver cried out, pressing his face against the glass as if he could transfer himself through it.

I laughed and found the keys to unlock it for him. “It’s for those hot summer days, so you can cool down,” I said.

“Are we going to live here?” Oliver asked, turning to his mother.

I looked at Dakota. She looked at Oliver, and a smile broke over her face.

“Yeah, I think we are, honey. This is our new home.”

I sagged inwardly with relief. I’d already arranged a team to pack up and move their home, and I was happy Dakota actually liked the place. If she’d told me now she still hated it, it would be a lot of work to undo the sale and the pending move.

“When?” Oliver asked.

“Tomorrow,” I said.

“What?” Dakota asked, her smile fading and uncertainty setting in. “Are you serious?”

I nodded. “The team will arrive early to pack, and then you’ll be in here by tomorrow night. It’s all taken care of.”

“Ben...” Dakota’s voice trailed off.

“There’s no point in waiting,” I pointed out quickly. “It’s better to get something done, right?”

I’d always believed that as soon as I decided on something, it had to be taken care of. Right away—I didn’t see the point in waiting. It’s what made me succeed in business.

Dakota was more reluctant to move fast. I was starting to learn that she liked to think something over and get used to the idea before she did something.

“I guess so,” she said softly.

Oliver cheered and ran into the house again. Dakota didn’t admonish him for running down the hallway, and he took the chance to enjoy himself. He ran back and forth and jumped up and down like a puppy full of energy.

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but I would have liked a few days for the news to sink in,” Dakota admitted. “Or even being consulted first.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, I guess it was a little impulsive when you put it that way. But you gotta move fast on these things.”

“A move is a big deal, and uprooting Oliver... Change is hard on him at his age.”

“He looks happy,” I said.

“He does,” Dakota admitted. “But—”

“There are no buts,” I said gently. “I want to take care of you. I like looking after you, doing things for you to make life a little better.” I stepped closer to her and pulled her into my arms. Oliver was too busy running up and down the hallway to notice, and Dakota looked a little shaky. “You have no idea how much I care about you. Both of you. I want you to be safe and happy.” I kissed her forehead. “Let me take care of you.”

Dakota glanced up at me and nodded.

“I care a lot about you, too, and I know Oliver loves you already. It’s just a lot to wrap my mind around. Everything’s changing so fast.”

“Change is good,” I said.

Dakota nodded. I wanted to say something about her statement that she thought Oliver loved me. I hoped she was right. I just wished I could tell him that I was his dad.

Dakota was holding back. She still wanted time, and I didn’t understand what she was waiting for. I was here to stay—I did everything so that they could have a better life. Why wouldn’t Dakota let me tell Oliver who I really was?

I wanted to ask her about it again, but now wasn’t the place or time. She was still reeling after the reveal that they were moving so soon, and a conversation now wouldn’t go down well if I pushed more change on her so quickly. I just didn’t understand what the holdup was. I wanted us to be a happy family with the three of us all together.



Dakota seemed to want the same, but she was scared to take that last step. She hesitated, but she wouldn't tell me what she was worried about or why we were waiting.

She wanted us to be a family, didn't she? Her hesitation made me wonder.

## CHAPTER 21



DAKOTA

*B*en was doing everything I'd always fantasized about.

Like a knight in shining armor, he took care of us. I hadn't expected the ways in which he did it—when I'd dreamed about having him in our lives, I hadn't thought about a new home or a new bakery, just that life would have been easier.

He made it easier with all the small things—and big things—he did for us. I was stunned and grateful.

Every day, he showed me how much he cared about us. He made it more and more clear that he was here to stay. He was serious about being in our lives, about looking after me and Oliver as if we were his family.

I wasn't good with change. I wasn't used to decisions happening so fast and things changing in a blink, but with Ben in my life, everything was different. The changes were all positive, though.

I couldn't complain.

Despite how fast it all happened, Oliver seemed happier than ever. I'd worried that he would struggle with all the changes. First, the bakery where he spent every day after school, and now our home, where he spent his nights and weekends. Nothing was as we'd known it anymore. He seemed to take it in stride, though.

I always tried to protect him, to introduce things slowly, but he seemed to adjust to this new life we lived with ease.

Despite my discomfort with Ben's sudden take-charge attitude, part of me was relieved. A weight had been lifted off my shoulders with Ben doing so much for us.

It had been a week since we'd moved into our new home, and I had to admit I loved the new place. We had so much more space now, and Oliver loved the big yard and pool. He'd spent a couple of afternoons splashing in the kiddie pool, and he loved the water. I was thinking about asking Ben for swimming lessons for Oliver—Ben wanted to sign him up for sports, and maybe swimming lessons was something we could agree on.

We hadn't talked about Oliver's upbringing since our argument in the car before the soft opening, but I was sure we could find some middle ground.

Oliver was getting more and more attached to Ben. In a way, it made me happy to know that Oliver liked him so much. On the other hand, I worried that being attached to Ben meant there was a bigger chance Oliver could get hurt if something went wrong.

I pushed the thought from my mind. Ben was here to stay—he was doing so much for us. A guy who wanted out wouldn't have done what he was doing.

Besides, there was no time to worry. I had to focus all my attention on the grand opening that we would host in less than a month. So much had to happen before then—marketing campaigns, recipes for the new menu, and I had to train our very first nonfamily employee, Liz.

Ben had asked me to hire a new baker to help with the workload. Liz was a godsend. She was passionate about baking and enthusiastic about the vision for the bakery.

She was also young and pretty, with cute little outfits and a bubbly personality. Thankfully, Ben hadn't given her a second glance. I felt stupid for even wondering about that.

“Hey, boss. What do you need me to get started with?” Liz asked when I arrived at the bakery after dropping Oliver off at school.

“The pastry dough would be great,” I said with a grin. “Thanks.”

I usually did that task, but I had to go through the statistics for the marketing campaign. Ben was running—and paying for—the campaign, but I wanted to keep a close eye on it so that I could replicate something like that when the bakery was ours again.

“Oh, there you are,” Mom said when I walked into the office. “Have a look at the order sheet; tell me if I’m missing something. I can’t think straight. I’ve been staring at this all morning.”

I looked over her shoulder at the spreadsheet she had with our order list and nodded.

“I think you’ve got it all down.”

“Good. This new process is confusing. I’m still learning, but I think it will take a while to wrap my head around it.”

“I prefer the old system,” I admitted.

“Me too, but Ben says it’s more efficient this way. Maybe we just need some time to get used to it.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“You don’t think so?” Mom asked.

I shrugged.

“I really like the new bakery and everything that Ben suggests make sense...”

“But?” Mom asked, knowing I had more on my mind.

“I just don’t know if this is what we signed up for.”

“What do you mean?”

“The bakery isn’t *our* bakery anymore. Gran and Gramps wouldn’t even recognize the place if they could see it now. We’re losing what it used to be, and I worry that it doesn’t have that personal touch anymore.”

Mom sighed. “I understand, honey. Change is good, though. We can’t keep everything the same; we have to move

with the times.”

I nodded. “I guess I understand that part. I just don’t want to lose the bakery’s charm and become another soulless corporate business.”

“As long as our hearts are in it, then it won’t be like that,” Mom said firmly. “This is for the better. The alternative was losing the bakery, remember?”

Mom was right. We’d been on the verge of losing the bakery when Ben had come in to save us. Maybe these changes were what had been needed to save the place. Ben knew what he was doing, right? He’d been in business for years; he was very successful, and I had to trust the process.

Wasn’t that what he kept telling me?

“I have to take care of a few things,” Mom said. “Will you put the order through?”

I nodded and Mom left me alone in the office to take care of the admin while she oversaw Liz and some of the renovations that were taking place before the grand opening.

When the workday was over, I was mentally drained. The changes were tough to swallow, but we were working our way through them.

I dropped Oliver off at my mom’s place before Ben came to my new condo to pick me up for a date.

“Where are we going?” I asked when I climbed into his fancy car. I’d become used to the feel of the engine beneath me purring to life and the power that roared as Ben sped down the road when the traffic laws allowed for it.

“A nice restaurant and then some dancing, what else?” Ben asked with a smile.

When he sped down the road, I laughed. I loved it when Ben was like this, playful and casual. Usually, he was all business, serious and efficient. Now and then, the mischievous side of him came out.

We stopped in front of a fancy restaurant. Ben gave the keys to a valet, then led me to the doors. The seating hostess

took us to our table. She left us with a wine list, and a moment later, our server appeared.

The night passed in a romantic blur. It felt like a dream. Ben was a gentleman, and he treated me to expensive wine, a steak dinner, delicious dessert, and after that, a night on the town. We danced until we were breathless, and it felt just like we were in Vegas again.

I was on cloud nine. He treated me like pure gold and every day I was with him, I fell for him more and more. I'd stopped trying to prevent it—I wasn't going to be able to help it, and maybe it wasn't such a bad thing after all.

After our night together, Ben took me back to his house. Mom had Oliver for the night, so I had no reason to rush home. I could stay out as late as I wanted, and I couldn't remember the last time I felt so free.

This was our chance to spend the night together. We hadn't done that since Las Vegas.

When we were inside, Ben undressed me, slowly peeling my clothes off me, and we had a replay of our night in Vegas with the same passion and the same level of connection we'd had then.

Whatever spark Ben and I had once shared, it was still here—and it was stronger than ever.

We lay in bed afterward, naked, pressed up against each other. I drank in the warmth that radiated from him and listened to his heartbeat against my cheek. He had an arm around my shoulders and stroked his fingers gently up and down my skin.

“I'm ready to tell Olly,” I said.

“What?” Ben asked into the darkness of the room.

“I think we should tell Oliver you're his father now.”

Ben lifted his head, his face surprised. “Really? You're sure?”

I nodded. I was surer now than I'd ever been. I trusted Ben.

Since the day he'd walked back into my life, he'd shown me how much he cared. We didn't always agree and he did things that pushed my buttons at times, but I had no doubt that he wanted to be in our lives.

It was safe for me to let Oliver know what was going on.

"I'm sure," I said. "I want him to know you're his father. I want you to be a dad in the full capacity of the word. I think it's time."

Ben's face split into a wide grin and his eyes sparkled.

"You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Thank you for waiting. It means a lot to me that you didn't put pressure on me." I chuckled. "Well, not *that* much pressure."

Ben laughed and nodded. I knew he didn't fully understand, but he'd been patient with me nevertheless and that was only another reason why I'd decided to do it now.

Ben was someone I could rely on. He was someone I could trust. After all this time doing everything alone, I finally had a guy who would be there for us.

I wasn't the only person in this equation looking after Oliver anymore. I wasn't a single parent anymore.

Since Ben had come into our lives again, everything had changed, and it had been for the better.

Telling Oliver Ben was his dad would be difficult because it meant things would change yet again, but it was the right thing to do.

Judging by the look on Ben's face, it had made him very happy.

He had no idea how happy he made me. It was the least I could do to make things right, to move forward in the right direction so that we could be a family.

I warmed at the concept.

Family.



## CHAPTER 22



*M*y stomach was a knot of nerves as I drove to Dakota's condo.

I was a businessman. I'd closed huge deals. I'd dealt with difficult people. I'd saved businesses from going under and handled people who weren't ready to take the leap.

None of that had been nearly as stressful as today would be. Today, we were going to tell Oliver I was his dad.

I wanted it to go well. I wanted Oliver to be happy about it. I was a virtual stranger who'd walked into his life, and although we got along well, it was one thing to like a stranger, and completely another thing to like that person as a father.

What if he didn't like the idea that I was his dad?

"It's going to be fine," I said out loud, trying to convince myself. "You've had more than enough examples of what *not* to do, so now you're geared with everything you should do."

I nodded, confirming it to myself. My dad hadn't been very present in my life. My parents had worked a lot when I was growing up, and I had a rocky relationship with them.

The last thing I wanted was for the same to happen with Oliver. The upside was that I was aware of it, so I could do something about it from the get-go. I was in a position of power.

I just had to keep reminding myself that it would be fine, and then eventually, hopefully, it would be.

When I parked in front of the condo, Oliver yanked open the door and bounded out.

“Are you ready, are you ready?” he asked.

I laughed. Oliver’s excitement was contagious. “Hey, buddy. I’m ready.”

“Are we leaving right now?”

“Let’s just see if your mom needs help, okay?”

Oliver nodded and ran back inside. I followed.

We were taking Oliver to Santa Monica Beach today, and he was crazy with excitement. We’d decided that it would be a safe place to do it, on the heels of a fun day.

“Hi,” Dakota said, coming from the room. She wore a white dress, her bikini showing through the thin fabric, and her blonde hair was twisted into a messy bun. She looked beach-ready and breathtaking. “Are you ready to go?” She chewed her lower lip.

I wasn’t the only one stressed about today.

“I’m ready,” I said. “What can I help with?”

“I packed a bag,” she said and pointed.

I picked up the beach bag stuffed with towels and sunblock while Oliver danced all around us.

“Okay, to the car,” I ordered and Oliver was first out the door.

“He’s excited,” Dakota said.

“I can see that,” I said.

“I’m terrified.”

I reached for her and squeezed her hand. “Me too. Whatever happens, we’ll get through this together, okay?”

She nodded and offered me a small smile before we walked out to the car together.

When we got to the beach, it wasn’t too busy, despite the beautiful weather. The sun shimmered on the waves and

seagulls circled the air, looking for a French fry or a sandwich to target.

We found a spot, opened up our towels, and I set up the beach umbrella I'd bought for the occasion—I'd sent my assistant out to collect a few things earlier today.

Dakota sat in the shade while Oliver and I built sandcastles. While we built, he chattered away about the knight who lived in the castle.

"He has a pet dragon," Oliver said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it blows fire and it keeps him safe. Almost like a dog, but really big."

"That sounds scary," I said. "I wouldn't want to attack the knight if I knew he had a dragon."

"That's why he's so safe," Oliver said. "But the knight can also fight really good."

"As a knight should," I said with a nod.

"Can you fight?" Oliver asked, looking up at me.

"Well, fighting isn't really good, unless you're protecting yourself, right?"

"Right," Oliver said gravely.

"But if I have to protect someone I care about a lot—like you and your mom, for instance—I'll do what I have to do." I glanced at Dakota. I hoped that she knew how serious I was when I said that. I would do anything for her and Oliver.

Dakota smiled at me.

When lunchtime rolled around, Dakota unpacked the sandwiches she'd made for us, and somehow, her simple sandwiches were better than gourmet. Dakota was a magician in the kitchen, and not just with pastry.

"It's homemade bread," Dakota said with a shrug when I commented on the food.

"And Mommy makes food with love," Oliver chimed in.

I laughed. “That’s gotta be what makes it so amazing, huh?”

Oliver nodded as he washed his food down with juice. He looked at Dakota. “Can I go swimming now?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. You have to wait a few minutes after eating before you swim.”

“Okay,” Oliver said, disappointed.

“Honey,” Dakota said, glancing at me. “We have something we’d like to tell you.”

My stomach bunched again and the food I’d just swallowed stuck in my throat.

“Look at me, sweetheart.” When Oliver looked at Dakota, giving her his full attention, Dakota continued. “You know how your friends ask about your dad sometimes, and I told you that not everyone has the same life and some people have their dads home and others don’t?”

“We all have different types of families,” Oliver said, clearly repeating what Dakota had told him before.

“Well, I have a special surprise for you.”

“What is it?” Oliver asked, looking around.

“It’s not a thing, it’s a person,” Dakota said.

Oliver frowned.

“Oliver, Ben is...” She swallowed, nervous. “Ben is your father, sweetie.”

Oliver frowned and looked at me, then back at his mother.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Dakota asked when Oliver didn’t respond.

“Ben’s... my dad?”

“Right,” Dakota said.

I watched Oliver. He blinked at me for a long moment, not saying anything.

What did his silence mean? Oliver was usually so talkative. Did he hate the idea? Was he angry? Did he understand what was happening?

I couldn't tell—he only looked confused and said nothing.

“Is he... from New York?” Oliver asked.

Dakota nodded. “That’s exactly where he’s from. I always told you, that’s where your dad was all this time.”

I stilled at that. She’d told him I was in New York? She’d been open and honest with him, even though she could have told Oliver anything.

Oliver tilted his head to the side.

“Why isn’t he in New York anymore?”

“I came to work here,” I answered.

“Are you going back to New York?” Oliver asked.

I shook my head. “No, I’m going to stay here. I like LA. A lot. And I like hanging out with you.”

Oliver still didn’t seem convinced. He looked at Dakota again.

“Do I have to have new rules now?”

“What do you mean?” Dakota asked.

“Ethan’s dad always goes away and when he comes back, Ethan has new rules. His dad gets angry and his mom doesn’t.”

Dakota laughed. “No, sweetheart. Everything is the same as before, but now you get to spend time with Ben. We’re going to be happy together.”

Oliver thought about it for a moment before he nodded and a smile broke over his face.

“Okay,” he said simply.

“Okay?”

Oliver nodded and came closer, almost as if he was worried I would push him away. When he hugged me, I

wrapped my arms around him. A lump rose in my throat unexpectedly, and I swallowed hard.

“Can we go swim now?” Oliver asked.

I looked at Dakota, and she nodded. “Stay close to the shore.”

“Of course,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I stood and pulled off my shirt. When I looked at Dakota, she had tears in her eyes that she blinked away quickly.

“Wait for Ben!” she called when Oliver ran to where the water crept over his toes. “Stay right next to him, okay?” she said to me.

“I’ve got him,” I said with a smile, and I really meant it. I ran after him, to spend some time in the waves with my son. Moments later, Dakota joined us, and the three of us splashed in the water.

It was the perfect day.



When we got back to the condo, Oliver was exhausted, and we were all a little sunburned. We pulled into the driveway at the same time Cynthia arrived. Dakota had invited her over for dinner.

“Grandma!” Oliver cried out and ran to her. “Guess what, guess what?”

“What?” Cynthia asked, kneeling in front of Oliver.

“Ben’s my dad!”

“What?” Cynthia asked, feigning surprise. She’d known we were breaking the news to him today.

“Yeah, it’s true! He’s my dad. I have a dad who lives here now!”

“Oh, my goodness,” Cynthia said. “That’s so cool.” She winked at me over Oliver’s head.

“Yeah,” Oliver agreed before he turned to Dakota. “Can I watch some TV?”

“Sure, honey,” Dakota said. “Let’s get a show on for you.”

She followed Oliver to the TV, and Cynthia and I stood in the kitchen.

“It went well, huh?” Cynthia asked.

“Better than I could have asked for.”

“You’re a good man,” she said and pulled me into a hug. “Welcome to the family, Ben. I’m glad that you’re here. For both of them.”

“I’m happy to be here,” I said with a warm smile.

When Dakota returned, we started making supper together—spaghetti and meatballs. It felt like we’d been doing this forever—we moved around each other like we knew where the other person would be, and Cynthia sat at the breakfast nook, chatting while we worked. Now and then, Oliver popped in to help with some task, and I loved every second of it.

Now that the truth was out there, and everyone seemed happy about it, we weren’t just *playing* happy family. We *were* a happy family.



The next morning, I parked in front of the condo and walked to the door with one hand behind my back. When Oliver opened it, he grinned at me.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” he said and hugged my leg.

“Is your mom around?” I asked.

“M-o-o-o-m,” Oliver called in a singsong voice and a moment later, Dakota appeared. Her hands were covered in flour and she blew a loose strand of hair out of her face.

“Ben!” she said when she saw me. “What a nice surprise.”



A whining sound came from behind me.

“What’s that?” Oliver asked with a frown.

I moved my hand from behind my back and showed Oliver what I’d brought him. A wiggling, adorable puppy.

“Oh, it’s a puppy!” Oliver cried out, stretching out his arms to take the dog from me.

“Oh,” Dakota said softly.

“Now,” I said to Oliver, “before you take the puppy, you have to remember that having a dog is a big responsibility. You have to look after it and love it as much as you can, because it will love you with everything it has. Okay? Do you think you can do that?”

“I can do that,” Oliver said gravely. “I can love it like crazy!”

I laughed. “Okay, here you go.” I handed the scruffy ball of fluff to Oliver, and he carefully took the puppy into his arms. The puppy licked his nose right away and Oliver giggled.

“What’s his name?”

“You get to choose the name,” I said.

“Rex!” Oliver cried out.

I laughed. “That’s a perfect name. It means king, you know.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “In another language. Take the puppy out onto the grass.”

Oliver did as I asked.

When I glanced at Dakota, still smiling, she didn’t look as excited as I’d hoped she’d be.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

“Well, it’s too late now to say no, isn’t it? You’ve already given it to him.”

“I just thought it would be a nice addition to this new home. You have a nice big yard, and—”

“And a lot of extra work I don’t have the time for,” Dakota said. “I know you mean well and he loves the dog. God, he’s always talking about having a dog. I just don’t have what it takes to train a dog and walk it and everything else I have to do on top of running the business and raising my son.”

“*Our* son,” I clapped back.

She glared at me. “Are you going to be here to handle puppy piss on the floor and a feverish child at the same time? Not everything runs smoothly all the time, you know. There’s a reason he doesn’t have a pet.”

“Why are you so upset?” I asked. She was more and more hostile, and I didn’t know what was going on.

“You should have asked me if I could do this, first. You’re not just buying him a toy; it’s another living thing I need to take care of.”

“It’s just a dog, Dakota.”

Dakota shook her head. “It’s easy for you to say when you’re still living in your mansion alone with your assistant running around taking care of the small things you don’t feel like. You don’t have to worry about it all.”

“How are we back on this?” I asked. “I get that the past couple of years have been hard for you while I’ve had no extra responsibilities to worry about, but I’m here now. I thought that’s changed.”

“Tell me how your life has changed since knowing you have a son,” Dakota said. “You’re still just doing whatever you want, when you want, and I’m still sacrificing everything for Oliver. I’m grateful you’re helping with the business and for the condo and everything else you’re doing, but you could have asked me first.”

She turned away from me, walking to the door that led to the yard, and I stared at her back, dumbfounded. I’d thought I was doing something nice for my son. Why couldn’t she see

how much I cared? I didn't want to make life harder; I just wanted to be there for them.

Dakota didn't seem to think that was what I was doing. I'd thought we were in a better place now, looking toward the future with the difficult parts out of the way.

Looked like I was wrong.

## CHAPTER 23



“Do you have everything?” I asked Oliver. “Jacket? Cap?”

“I have it, Mom,” Oliver said.

“Water?”

“We’ll get it there,” Ben said. “And it’s a warm day, so we’ll be fine. Whatever else we need, we can buy, right, buddy?”

“Right,” Oliver said.

“It’s going to be fine. Relax,” Ben said.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, nodding. Ben was right—they were going to be just fine. He was taking Oliver to a baseball game so they could have a “guys’ day” as Ben had called it.

I knelt in front of Oliver. “Be good, and have fun! I’ll see you later.” I hugged him. “I love you.”

“To the moon and back,” Oliver said, wrapping his arms around my neck before they left the condo.

I swallowed hard and tried to settle my nerves when they were gone. This wasn’t a big deal. They were going to have a good time, and it was right that Oliver and Ben did some bonding on their own. When Ben had suggested he take Oliver out, I’d been nervous, but this was a good thing. If Ben had been in the picture from the start, they would have done things alone together all the time. This was just new.

I could get used to it.

I cleaned up around the condo, putting things away, sweeping, mopping the floors, taking Rex out periodically. I tried to keep my mind off Ben and Oliver and my eyes off the clock. They would come back as soon as the game was over. I didn't have to worry so much.

Except, when the afternoon ticked by, I started to worry more and more. They were out a lot longer than I'd thought they would be. How long was a baseball game? I hadn't even asked.

I picked up my phone and dialed Ben.

He didn't answer.

I frowned and tried to keep busy with books for the business, going over the numbers.

I couldn't concentrate.

When I tried to call Ben again, it was almost an hour later and he still didn't answer.

My throat swelled shut and my heart hammered faster against my chest. What if something went wrong? What if something had happened to Oliver and Ben didn't know what to do? What if something had happened to Ben and Oliver was all alone?

"Calm down, it's fine," I told myself. "Maybe his battery just died."

Except, he'd known he was going out today, and Ben always had his phone on him and it was always ringing. I'd seen him in a normal business day at the bakery—he was on the damn thing all the time.

Except now, when I needed him to answer.

I tried to call him another time. I was starting to look paranoid, but where the fuck where they?

When he didn't answer—yet again—I tried not to freak out. I wanted to call the police, the fire station, the hospital...

anyone who could help me out, but that would just be crazy. My head spun and I felt like I couldn't breathe.

Finally, I dialed Nadia's number.

"Ben took Oliver," I blurted out.

"*What?*"

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to collect my thoughts before I spoke again.

"I mean, he took Olly out." I took a deep breath and tried to explain to Nadia what was going on.

"God, Dakota, I nearly had a heart attack when you started like that."

"Yeah... sorry. I just can't deal with this. My mind keeps going to the worst possible thing that could happen. Ben actually taking Oliver away from me is one of them, by the way. I keep thinking they could be in trouble or something went wrong. What if either of them got hurt? What if both of them got hurt? What if they were in an accident—"

"Dakota, take a deep breath," Nadia ordered, and I did as she said. "It's probably fine. I don't think anything bad has happened."

"Why the hell isn't he answering his phone?" I asked and my voice trembled, on the verge of a meltdown.

"I don't know. I think it's a bit of a dick move, I'll be honest with you, but I don't think you should worry about Olly's safety. I think it's just Ben not being considerate about this."

"It's the first time he's taken Olly out," I said, and my eyes stung with unshed tears.

Panic gripped my throat. I tried to swallow it down or breathe around it, but I couldn't make it go away.

"I know," Nadia said. "This is hard on you. You've always been alone, doing this without anyone to help you carry the weight, but this is a good thing. It's good for Olly, too. Soon, they'll be home and it's going to be okay."

I nodded. Nadia was a saint.

“Thank you,” I said in a thick voice. “I just... this is terrifying. All of it. I don’t know how to do this. Sometimes, I’m so damn grateful he’s in my life again and actually a part of the picture now with me and Olly, but sometimes I wish we could go back to the way it was. At least then, I knew what to expect.”

“Change is hard,” Nadia said sympathetically. “Once you’re through the adjustment part, you’re going to be fine. This is good, okay?”

I nodded. She was right, it *was* good to have Ben in my life and to have Oliver know his dad. It’s what I’d wished for, for years. It had been one thing as a dream, though. Now that it was reality, I struggled with some aspects of it.

“If you haven’t heard from them in another hour or two, call me again,” Nadia said.

I nodded, promised that I would, and ended the call.

Soon after, I heard a car in the driveway and I ran to the door.

I didn’t even try to contain myself. I yanked the door open to see Ben open the car door for Oliver and my son jump out, energetic and grinning from ear to ear. Suddenly, all the panic gone now that I knew Oliver was okay, anger washed over me in hot waves.

“Mommy!” Oliver cried out and ran to me.

“Did you have a good time?” I asked and hugged Oliver, holding on a little too tightly.

“It was amazing! Uncle Ben... I mean...” He frowned, confused about what to call Ben now. “We saw the game, and then we had hot dogs for lunch!”

Ben came up behind Oliver with a smile on his face.

“That sounds fun, honey,” I said, forcing a smile. I tried to keep my voice even. “Say thank you, and go put your things away.”



Oliver turned to Ben.

“Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome, buddy,” Ben said with a grin before Oliver ran into the condo to his room. I heard him greet the puppy with excited whoops that made the puppy yelp and bark, sharing in the excitement. With Oliver out of earshot, I turned my anger onto Ben.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I snapped. “Where the fuck were you?”

“What?” Ben asked with a frown. “We went to see the game, and—”

“For six hours?” I demanded.

“We decided to take a hike around the park after lunch. Oliver asked for it.”

“And you couldn’t have let me know that you’re not dead in a ditch somewhere?”

“What are you talking about?” Ben asked, shaking his head, confusion clear on his face.

I bristled. I was so angry, I struggled to find the right words.

“I tried to call you. You didn’t even answer your phone. You could have just called me or even texted me to let me know you’re still okay and that you’d be back later.”

“You called?” Ben asked. He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen. “Oh... yeah, I see you did. Sorry. We were busy; I didn’t hear my phone.”

I shook my head. “So, I’m supposed to just accept that and let it go?”

“What do you want me to say? I’m sorry I didn’t hear my phone ringing.”

I shook my head. “You should have come straight back home.”

“Come on, we hiked around the park!” His confusion had turned into anger now, too. “It’s not like we were breaking any laws. You have him in the bakery; you want him in ballet, and you have him doing a shit ton of other girly things. I thought it would be nice if we just did something manly for a change.”

I stared at him. “You did not just comment on the way I raise him,” I said in a low voice.

“I’m just saying you could rethink some of your parenting decisions,” Ben said. “A boy has two parents for a reason, and I’m here to give him the influence he needs now.”

I gasped, shocked.

“You can’t be serious? You were the one in the wrong, disappearing with my child for hours on end without so much as a peep, and now you criticize *me* as a parent?” I was so angry, I saw red.

I forced myself to count to ten before I said something I was going to regret. I couldn’t remember when last I’d been this angry. Thankfully, in the time I tried to collect myself, Ben didn’t add anything onto what he’d already said. I might just have lost my shit.

“Look, I’ve been doing this for a while on my own,” I said, trying to be calmer. “You have to respect my parenting decisions. I’m the only one who’s been taking care of him and aside from my mom, it’s been just me protecting Oliver and keeping him safe all these years.” Now that the anger was fading and I tried to be logical, to explain myself, the tears threatened to come and my voice trembled. “This is new to me, too. I’m not used to not knowing where he is, and I’ve never had my parenting skills questioned. You have to understand that and respect what I’m going through.”

“Are you saying that I put Oliver in danger?” Ben asked in a clipped voice. “Don’t you trust me with him?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I clapped back.

“Yeah? Well, it sounds like it. I know I haven’t been here for the past five years, but that’s not my fault.”

Blood rushed in my ears, and I fought to keep calm.

“I’m doing what I have to do, and if you’re not happy about it, I can—”

“Mommy, can I play in the yard with Rex?” Oliver asked, coming from his room.

“I’ll join you in a sec, sweetheart,” I said. “I’m just saying goodbye to Ben.”

“Bye, Ben!” Oliver said, waving. Ben lifted his hand in a wave, too.

“I can’t do this now,” I said, shaking my head. I was suddenly drained. “We’ll talk about it some other time.”

“You’re making me leave?” Ben asked, incredulous.

“It’ll be better if you do,” I said tightly. “I need time to process what happened and what you’ve said.”

He looked like he wanted to say something, but I wasn’t ready to hear it. If he questioned my parenting again, I was going to either explode in anger or have a meltdown and cry. I didn’t want Ben or Oliver to see either of those things.

So I closed the door. We would deal with this some other time.

“Mom?” Oliver called. He and Rex waited at the door.

“Coming, honey,” I said and squashed my feelings, forcing a smile for Oliver’s sake.

## CHAPTER 24



I looked through the windshield at the small building at the back of the long driveway and frowned at the address on my GPS. Was this it?

I got out and walked to the front door. A tired-looking woman opened it for me.

“I’m here to pick up Oliver,” I said. “I’m Ben McCullough.”

“Are you on the file?” she asked with a frown.

I nodded. Dakota had authorized me to pick Oliver up from his pre-K school.

“Let’s see...” She paged through a thick, archaic file and nodded.

“Yep, here you are. I’ll get him for you. You can just sign him out here, and you’re good to go.”

I nodded and filled out the form as she asked. While I waited for her to find Oliver in the bowels of the building, I glanced around. The place looked like it had had good intentions once, but it was tired and outdated now. Everything still worked on a paper system, rather than digital, and the building itself needed maintenance. Not just a fresh lick of paint, either.

“Ben!” Oliver cried out when he saw me. He frowned. “Where’s Mom?”

“At the bakery,” I said. “I thought it would be fun if I come get you.”

“It is,” Oliver said.

I wished he would call me Dad, but that would come in due time. He wasn't calling me Uncle Ben anymore, so that was something.

“Thank you,” I said to the tired-looking woman, and we left the building.

“How was your day?” I asked, and Oliver launched into a long explanation of everything he'd been up to. I smiled and nodded and gasped in all the right places, but my mind spun.

Oliver's school was as rundown and tired as Dakota's original apartment. I wanted Oliver to have the best in life, and that place wasn't it. He deserved more.

I drove to the bakery, thinking about the school and Dakota.

We hadn't really spoken since she'd lost her shit about me staying out too long with Oliver the other day. We'd both been busy and I'd figured she needed more time to cool off. She'd been so angry, it had been hard to reason with her.

I understood where she was coming from, in a way, but she needed to know that Oliver was every bit as important to me as to her.

I would give her the space she needed to think things through. She would come around, I was sure of it.

I parked at the bakery and we found Dakota in the kitchen.

“Hey, big boy,” she said and hugged Oliver. “Hi,” she added to me. We were still a little stiff with each other. “Thanks for picking him up.”

“Sure,” I said. “I had a chance to really look at the place while I was there. I think we should discuss his pre-K school.”

“Dakota?” Liz asked, coming from the pantry. “Which sugar should I use?”

“You don't want to use the brown sugar for croissants. Oh, God, can you imagine? Come on, let me show you.” She glanced at me. “I have to take care of this.”

I nodded, glad Dakota was training Liz in the kitchen. She needed another pair of hands to get everything done if we were going to start doing business on a larger scale.

I left the kitchen. Cynthia was busy with an inventory—I asked her to take note of everything we owned so that we could see what needed to be replaced or upgraded. I didn't want to bother her. She couldn't tell me what I needed to know, anyway.

So, instead of bothering either of the women, I told Oliver to follow me to the office.

“What are you going to play with today while I work?” I asked, copying the routine Dakota had with Oliver.

“Cars,” Oliver said.

“Good idea.”

He sat down on the carpet and meticulously unpacked his toy cars. I watched him for a moment before I opened the laptop.

Oliver needed to be in a private school, somewhere that would give him the best shot in life moving forward. I reviewed a few schools online, read up on them, and finally, I decided on the best one. Dakota was busy, and this was important—I wasn't going to bother her with it.

*Jen, get me the enrollment forms for the school attached ASAP. I want to take care of it before the end of the month.*

I sent the email to my assistant and closed the laptop.

“Are you still working?” Oliver asked.

“Not right now.”

“Have you seen my green car?”

“No,” I said and swiveled my chair to face him. “Show me.”



t took a couple of days for the enrollment forms to go through and for Oliver to be enrolled in the new school, but getting Oliver a spot wasn't a problem.

I was at home, trying to decide if I wanted to go out for dinner or order in, when someone buzzed my gate. When I walked to the screen that showed the gate camera, it was Dakota.

I let her in. When I opened the door, she blew into my house like a hurricane.

“Are you doing this on purpose?” she demanded.

“What?”

“I'm starting to think you're deliberately going against what I asked you. You're worse than a four-year-old when it comes to following directions!”

Her mood was black and the anger on her face only pushed me over the edge. I was pissed off now, too.

“Did you just call me a child?”

“You listen like one,” she snapped. “Which is not at all!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

She dug in her handbag and yanked out an acceptance letter for the pre-K I'd enrolled Oliver in.

“When were you planning on telling me?”

“I didn't realize they were going to send that to you.”

“You put my address down, didn't you?”

I nodded. Jen had taken care of all of that for me.

“What's your deal? I've asked you to stop taking control of my son, but you insist—”

“Our son,” I cut her off hotly.

“What?”

“He's *our* son. You keep saying he's yours, Dakota, but he's mine, too.”



“So that gives you the right to undermine my authority and do whatever the hell you want?”

“It gives me the right to be a part of the decision process.”

“Part of, Ben. You’re taking over.”

I shook my head. “That school you have him in is rundown and pathetic. He deserves more.”

“I couldn’t give him more.”

“Well, I can.”

“And I’m supposed to fall to my knees and thank you for swooping in and saving us? God, Ben, I know you have all the money in the world, but I couldn’t afford better. I did the best I could. I did it all alone, and you’re just waltzing in here being a dad at the last minute—”

“You have to stop saying how you did it all alone,” I snapped, cutting her off. “I get it. You raised him alone. You were a single parent and it was hard, but you figured it out. But it’s not my fault I wasn’t there. If you’d told me when you first got pregnant, I would have been a dad all these years. I’m not the type to shuck my responsibility. And I’m more than making up for my absence now.”

She stared at me, furious, but there was pain in her eyes, too.

“Did you really think I didn’t look for you all this time?” she asked in a voice that sounded dangerously close to tears.

I hated to see her cry. I could deal with her anger better than her tears. When she cried, I wanted to protect her. But now she was crying over me, and I couldn’t fix it this time.

“I searched for you, Ben. I constantly tried to find you to let you know, especially when I found out I was pregnant. Don’t you believe that I did? Don’t you trust me?”

“Don’t even get me started on trust,” I spat out. “You don’t trust me with Oliver. Not physically, and not as his parent. You want me to be a part of his life, but you don’t want me to be a parent with any kind of control. You just want me to be a glorified playdate.”

“That’s not true.”

“No? Tell me how you want to hand over some of the responsibility. Tell me how you want me to make choices that might be better for him, to listen to my opinion and consider that I might be right. Tell me how you want me to be an equal father to him, that we’re fifty-fifty on parenting.”

She glared at me without saying anything. I nodded bitterly.

“You can’t, because you don’t want to share. The idea of having me around so that you’re not stuck financially sounds wonderful, but you don’t want anything else from me.”

“Don’t you dare make this about money!” she shouted.

“What else is it, then?” I demanded.

Dakota shook her head. “I’m not doing this. Damn it, Ben, why can’t you just put yourself in my shoes for once?”

“Because you won’t let me. You’d be pissed off about that, too!”

“You know what? Never mind.” She spun and stormed to her car, slamming the door louder than was necessary. I watched her peel out of my driveway and drive down the road until I couldn’t see her car anymore.

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm myself, but something inside me had cracked.

How could I have thought that love, family, all of this was real? I bought into a fucking fairy tale and it was already unraveling.

Damn it, I should have known that happy endings were reserved only for stories. A happily ever after was a luxury reality didn’t allow.

## CHAPTER 25



DAKOTA

“*I* made a mistake,” I said to Nadia. “I rushed into this whole thing without thinking about it because I was desperate for help, for the dream to come true.”

Nadia shook her head. “I don’t know if you can call it a mistake.”

I’d told her about Ben and how he’d started taking over. I’d told her about our fight. Oliver was in bed, and I was on my second glass of wine, pouring my soul out to the one person who’d always been there for me with objective advice.

“How can you say that?” I asked and looked up. The room already spun slowly. Since I’d become a mom, I could barely hold my liquor, and I didn’t have much time to drink, anyway. “I let my feelings get in the way of my most important job. Being a mom.”

Nadia sighed. “I think you’re just hitting a rough patch. You need to take time to work things out.”

“No,” I said. “I should have known with how he took over the bakery that he would do the same with Oliver. I don’t know him, Nadia. How could I? We barely spent any time together at all before any of this happened, and now... I don’t know if I can do this. I’ve been too trusting. I let Oliver spend too much time with him.”

Nadia didn’t look like she agreed with me, but it didn’t matter. This time, I knew what I was talking about. My best friend had talked me down from the ledge a lot of times when

I wasn't sure I could figure it out, but this time, I knew what I felt.

I felt betrayed.

How could Ben have suggested I was just after him for his money? That it was the only reason we were in his life? Hell, if I was after him for his money, I would have said something the moment he walked into the bakery. I wouldn't have waited.

The financial help was nice. The condo, the car repair, the splurges on dinners and items for Oliver... I appreciated it all—and it could be argued that Ben owed four years of back child support. But I'd never wanted Ben in my life for that reason alone.

"I just wanted someone by my side to raise Oliver, you know?" I said and rubbed my nose. "I wanted someone to have my back through all of this. I didn't want someone to take over."

"I get what you're saying," Nadia said softly. "Just don't make any rash decisions, okay? You're upset and you're tipsy, and it's been a rough couple of weeks. Just take it one step at a time."

I nodded. Nadia was right—I was being rash right now. I was letting my emotions get the better of me. I did that sometimes. I had a right to feel what I felt, though. I just had to sleep off the worst of my emotions—and the wine—and then I would think clearly about the whole thing.

"I have to get going," Nadia said. "I have work in the morning and my worst client's been nagging at me. Plus, you need sleep, my friend." She came around the counter to me and gave me a hug. "It's going to be okay. You know how the saying goes, right? Everything will be fine in the end. If it's not fine..."

"It's not the end," I finished the quote.

Nadia nodded. "Just take it one day at a time and don't make any decisions now while you're tired and hurt and it's dark. It will look better in the new light of day."

I nodded. "Thank you."

I let Nadia out before I locked up and switched off all the lights. I got into bed and closed my eyes, but my head still spun wildly. I got up for a glass of water. When I got in bed, I sat up and sipped the cold water, hoping to get myself back to a better state before I fell asleep. I was going to wake up with a hell of a headache if I didn't.

My mind drifted to Ben again.

How could he have suggested I just wanted to use him? How, after all this time, could he not trust me? I'd never asked for anything. He was the one who'd gone behind my back and bought all the new things, and now, he'd made major decisions for Oliver, too.

That part hurt like a bitch. Who did he think he was, taking parenting decisions like a new school away from me?

Maybe I just had to take a step back. Sure, Ben knew about Oliver and vice versa, and that wasn't wrong, but maybe we just had to take a breather for now. I had to wrap my head around what was happening. It all went too fast. We could do that, right?

Just take it slower and figure things out step by step, rather than hurtling forward into this unknown world.

I finished my water and sank under the blanket, closing my eyes.

Tomorrow, I would feel better like Nadia had said. I just had to get some sleep now.



When I woke up, it was to the sound of the TV blaring and Rex barking shrilly.

When I stumbled into the living room, Oliver stood in front of the television, dancing to a kids' show, and Rex jumped up and down, excited.

"Hey, Olly, what are you doing?" I asked and walked to the television. "We don't have TV time now."

“I wanted to watch,” Oliver said.

“Okay, but we don’t always get what we want.”

“Ben does,” Oliver said. “And so do I.”

I stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“I’m his son,” Oliver said. “So I should get what I want, too.”

I gasped, shocked. “What did you just say to me?”

Oliver jutted his chin up in defiance.

“You don’t talk to me that way, Oliver,” I said sternly. “We have rules and we’re going to stick to them.”

“Ben talks like that to everyone.”

“You’re not Ben,” I said.

“But he’s my dad.”

I shook my head and turned off the television.

“Go brush your teeth and wash your face, then we’ll have breakfast,” I said. I opened the front door for Rex. He’d already peed in the house so many times I wanted to pull my hair out of my head.

“But Mom—”

“I’m not telling you again,” I said in a hard voice.

Oliver stared at me with defiance for a moment before he buckled and nodded. He marched to the bathroom, his blond hair bouncing with his attitude as he took exaggerated steps.

“Unbelievable,” I muttered under my breath and stepped into the cool morning air with the dog.

Rex ran to the grass and relieved himself.

“Good boy, Rex,” I said absently.

My head throbbed dully. It was a combination of the wine and how upset I’d been last night—how upset I still was.

Oliver had never given me this kind of attitude. He’d never made it sound like he thought he was better than someone else.

He was mimicking Ben in his business mode—he'd seen it more than enough times at the bakery. I didn't want Oliver to be like that.

Oliver was sweet and kind and caring. He was the kid who watched ants march up and down a blade of grass for hours or ate his sandwiches under the table rather than on it. He'd always looked at the world differently.

If having Ben in our lives meant it changed Oliver, then this wasn't going to work. I couldn't do this anymore. Oliver was innocent and precious, and the negative influences were already too much. I couldn't stop Ben from seeing him, but I could lay down some limits and ground rules.

My heart was heavy and a lump sat in my throat after I'd made my decision, but I had to do what was right for my son and me.

After I dropped Oliver off at school, I drove to Ben's place. He only arrived at the bakery later in the morning—I knew he would still be in.

"You're here early," Ben said with a slight frown when he opened the door.

I swallowed hard. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," Ben said.

He was being so nice to me. After our fight, I almost wanted him to be rude to me. It'd make what I had to do easier.

I walked into the huge foyer.

"Coffee?" Ben asked.

I shook my head. "I won't be too long. I just want to talk."

"Okay," Ben said and sat down on one couch in the living room. I sat down on the other, opposite him so that the coffee table was between us and I faced him head-on.

I took a deep breath.

"This isn't working."



Ben frowned. “What isn’t?”

“All of it. I can’t be with you. It’s getting in the way of my parenting, and I can’t let that happen. I can’t be a mom and your girlfriend at the same time, apparently.”

“Dakota, that doesn’t make any sense,” Ben started, but I shook my head and held up my hand to silence him.

“Let me finish,” I said. A lump rose in my throat and my eyes welled with tears, but I powered on. “I tried, okay? I really wanted this to work, but I can’t do this. It’s just not working, and I’m unraveling. Oliver needs me to be a good mom, and I will always put him first.”

“You’re not serious,” Ben said. “We can work this out.”

“No, Ben,” I said. The tears rolled over my cheeks now. “We can’t. I’ve been thinking about it, and I know it’s better this way.”

“I can’t believe this. If that’s what you want...” Ben shook his head. “You’ll still let me see Oliver?”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “I don’t want to take him away from you. He likes you, and you both deserve to know each other. Just because it doesn’t work between us doesn’t mean you can’t have a relationship with him. A lot of families work that way now, right?”

I was crying freely now. Saying the words made so much sense, but feeling the emotions, feeling my heart crack and break as I talked, made it seem all wrong. I had to keep going, though. “We can make it work. We’ll just be a... modern family.”

Ben shook his head. He wasn’t happy, but this was about me. It was about Oliver.

“I want to sell you my shares to the bakery,” I added.

Ben jerked his head up, shocked. “What?”

“I can’t work with you. It will be too much.”

“You can’t do that,” Ben said. “Damn it, Dakota, it’s your family’s business. Since I met you in Vegas, you’ve wanted to

make it great.”

“Yeah, well, that dream is long gone,” I said bitterly. “And the truth is after everything that’s happened and how it’s all changed... I don’t even recognize it anymore. I’m getting out of it all, and you and my mom can make something great of it. Something different than what it was, but it will still be great.”

“Dakota, don’t do this,” Ben pleaded, but I shook my head.

“I’m sorry, Ben,” I said and stood, sniveling. I scrubbed my cheeks with my sleeves and tried to pull myself together. “It’s better this way.”

“Dakota... how can it be better if we’re not together?” he asked softly.

That only made me cry harder. I walked to the front door without saying anything else. I was sobbing too hard to find words.

I let myself out and got into my car. The driveway and then the road blurred through my tears as I drove away, but I had to keep going.

I was losing control of my life, of my son, of my dreams and my passion. I had to find a way to regain at least a part of that. I had to hold on to what I still had.

No matter how much it hurt.

What other choice did I have?

I’d sacrificed everything for Oliver since the day I’d found out I was pregnant, and I would keep doing that to give him the life he deserved. There was nothing else to it.

My emotions, my heart... that was beside the point.

## CHAPTER 26



What the actual fuck?

Just when I'd thought we could work through this shit, she hit me with a curveball and bailed.

I'd thought she wanted to be with me.

Hell, wasn't that what I was here for? Everything I'd done since the moment I'd run into Dakota again had been for her, to make up for lost time, to take the second chance I hadn't thought I would ever get.

How could she have slipped through my fingers like this again?

After she left, I paced my living room, feeling like a storm had erupted in my chest. I had heartburn. I rubbed my sternum with three fingers, trying to ease the pain that had opened up inside of me, but it wasn't going to work.

My heart had fucking broken, and this pain wasn't something I was going to be able to get away from.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

What the hell was I thinking? Why had I done this? I shouldn't have opened myself up to Dakota. Should never have fallen in love with her.

I shouldn't have let my guard down and entertained the idea that we could be a family. *Family* never worked out for me, did it? But no, I'd had to go there, test the waters, try the whole damn thing, hoping that it would have a different outcome.

My phone rang and I jumped. I grabbed it, hoping to God it was Dakota. Had she changed her mind?

Emmett's name flashed on the caller ID.

"Hey, man," Emmett said when I answered dully. "Where the fuck have you been?"

I frowned, trying to figure out what to say.

"We haven't heard a peep from you in days. You're so fucking quiet—are you still alive?"

"Oh, yeah, I've just been busy." I'd been trying to not only build a business, but to build a life with someone. A family, a home.

It had all turned out to be bullshit.

"When are you coming for a visit or something?" Emmett asked. "Hell, when are you coming home? We miss you. This place isn't the same without you and there are way too many girls for me and Jake to handle alone."

"I don't know. I have a lot of balls in the air right now."

*Nothing I can't just walk away from*, I thought. What if I just dumped it all and went back home?

"You okay, man?" Emmett asked. "You don't sound like yourself."

"I'm fine," I lied.

How could I tell him that I was anything but fine, that the woman who'd broken my heart five years ago had just done it again?

There was too much to pack into one conversation. Dakota and her mother, the bakery, Oliver and the fact that he was my son. Trying to save a business, to be a partner. Trying to be a father.

"It's just been a tough couple of weeks."

"Yeah, shit happens, huh? Did LA not pan out to be what you hoped it would?"

"Something like that."

“You know, you could always just come home.”

That idea sounded incredible right now. Tuck tail and run. Sometimes, businesses failed. Sometimes, new ventures didn't take off. I could go back home and say that I tried, it didn't work, on to the next project. I wasn't a stranger to a business deal not going the way I wanted it to. It would be the easiest thing in the world to return to New York, to invest in a new business...

Oliver was here, though. My son was in LA. I couldn't just leave him. A lot had happened between me and Dakota, but I wasn't going to let Oliver suffer because of it.

Now that I knew him, I didn't want to just leave. It was the right thing to do to stay, but I wanted to see him. I loved Oliver. I'd only known him a short while, but that kid had become everything to me. And Dakota had said I could stay in his life.

At least, after everything, there was that.

“I have to get going,” I said. “I'll call later and we can catch up.”

“Okay,” Emmett said. “Just drop a text or something once in a while so we know you're still alive and LA hasn't sucked you in completely.”

Oh, God, he had no idea.

“I will.”

“Liar,” Emmett laughed. “Chat soon.”

We ended the call, and I stared at my phone.

I wanted to drink myself into a stupor and forget any of this ever happened.

I hated that I felt this way. I'd always believed love was a bullshit scam. It turned out, I was right. It meant nothing to love someone.

The problem was that I did love Dakota.

Very, very much.

Now that I'd lost her, it hurt like a bitch. Who the hell was I kidding, thinking I could ever be in a loving partnership with anyone? Love was bullshit, and Dakota had just shown me that it was true.

Now I had this broken heart to deal with on top of everything else. My life had been fucking fine until she'd come along.

A little voice at the back of my head shouted at me that that wasn't true—I'd been pining for her for years. Well, now I'd found her, and I'd lost her.

I'd wanted to know how this story would end, right?

I shouldn't have asked questions I hadn't wanted to know the answer to.

CHAPTER 27





## DAKOTA

Tears streamed down my cheeks when I drove to the bakery, making it hard to see the road. I tried to swallow them down, to stop crying, but that only made me cry harder.

Why didn't I feel better? I'd done what I needed to do—I'd taken my life into my own hands and made a decision. I'd done the right thing.

Why the hell did it all feel so wrong?

I sat in the car, trying to pull myself together. I couldn't go into the bakery looking like this. I had to train Liz and I was a blubbering mess.

Come to think of it, I didn't have to train Liz anymore. Not if I was going to sell my shares to the business.

The idea only made me cry harder. Why was this so devastating? I didn't have to deal with Ben and his bossy attitude ever again. I didn't have to listen to him telling me how he knew better or see how everyone fawned over him. I didn't have to watch him remake what my grandparents had built.

I didn't need to have anything to do with him anymore, except when it involved Oliver.

The problem was, I *wanted* to.

It was a pretty stupid time to realize it, but I loved Ben.

I loved him a lot more than I'd realized.

The thought just made me cry harder. I was going in the wrong direction here—the idea had been to stop crying and pull myself together, not fall apart all over again.

The bakery door opened and Mom popped her head out. When she saw me, she frowned and came to the car. I rolled down the window.

“I thought I heard your car pull up. What’s wrong?”

“Mom...” I started crying again.

Her face crumpled and she walked around and climbed into the passenger seat. Leaning over, she wordlessly wrapped her arms around me and held me tight. I let go, sobbing against her shoulder. My mom’s arms had always been my haven. I’d always been able to come to her and she would hold me until whatever ripped me up blew over.

Except, this was never going to blow over. My heart was shattered now, and I didn’t know how to put it back together again.

“Tell me,” she finally said.

When I opened my mouth, everything gushed out like a dam had broken. I told her about Ben’s choices, his influences over Oliver, how he’d slowly started taking over. Not only the bakery, but my life. I didn’t recognize any of it anymore. I told her how I’d decided to call it all off, even the bakery.

Mom listened silently, letting me cry while I told her everything, pouring my heart out.

“I don’t know if I did the right thing,” I admitted through my tears. “I love him. I love him more than I love the bakery.” When I realized it, it shot into my chest, but I tried to shake it off. “I love him more than anything except Oliver.”

“Then why don’t you fix it, honey?” Mom asked.

“I can’t,” I said. “It’s too late.”

“Sweetheart, it’s never too late. You thought it was too late when you had a baby you couldn’t find the father of, and against all odds, he walked back into your life. Miracles happen, honey. Fate and destiny are at play, and—”

“I don’t believe in those things,” I said dully. “If fate cared that much about me, don’t you think my life would have been different?”

Mom sighed. “You know it doesn’t work that way. What’s meant to be will be, even if we don’t always like it.”

I shook my head. My mom had always believed in fate, although she backed it up with hard work. I believed that hard work was all there was. We decided what we wanted in life.

I’d made a decision about Ben and that was all that mattered.

“Sweetheart, listen carefully,” Mom said. “I know you’re terrified of losing Oliver, but you won’t lose him.”

“What?”

“He’s your son, Dakota. That will never change. He loves you. You’ve always raised him alone, but sharing Oliver doesn’t mean you’ll lose him. He won’t be any less yours just because he’s Ben’s now, too.”

I stared at my mom, my throat closing again with more tears. She was right. I couldn’t ever lose Oliver. I’d been terrified that Ben would somehow take him away from me. Maybe not physically, but Oliver had started changing, copying Ben. Why not? Ben was his father, and every little boy looked up to his father.

But Ben wasn’t a bad person to look up to, as far as role models went.

I covered my face with my hands and sobbed.

All these years of fighting to make ends meet, to keep a roof over Oliver’s head, and to make sure he was okay had changed me. I never used to be this hard, this mistrusting.

“Honey...” Mom looked like she felt guilty. “When I told you to be careful of Ben, I didn’t mean that he would be bad for you. I only wanted you to go into this with your eyes wide open.”

I lowered my hands and looked at my mom. She reached for me and wiped tears off my cheeks.

“I went through so much raising you on my own,” Mom continued. “I’d been disappointed by men a few times, and I always ended up alone again, raising you on my own. I didn’t want you to go through that, but I didn’t want you to push away something that could be amazing for you. I just wanted you to take it slow.”

“It’s not your fault, Mom.”

“I think a part of it might be,” Mom said. “I told you to be careful. I warned you that Ben could take Oliver, and I shouldn’t have done that. I should have put it in different words. I didn’t mean for my fears to rub off on you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said.

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. This isn’t your fault. It just...” I took a deep breath and let it out with a shudder. “It wasn’t working. I had to do something and this... it seemed like the right call.”

Of course, now that I looked back, it didn’t seem like the right call at all. I’d been stupid, terrified of change, worried about Oliver when I shouldn’t have been. I should have trusted Ben. He’d shown me from day one that he wanted to be there for us. I’d become scared, and now I’d messed it up when it could have been something beautiful.

“You won’t reconsider?” Mom asked.

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

Mom nodded slowly.

“Okay... I hate that it’s come to this. I hate that you’re hurting, and the thought of you leaving the bakery... if you sell your shares, I’ll sell mine, too.”

“What?” I asked, shocked. “You can’t do that.”

“Of course I can.”

“The bakery is everything, Mom. You love it more than anything, and it’s what Gramps and Gran left you.”

“It’s four walls and an oven, honey,” Mom said. “My true happiness, and the only thing I’ve ever done that’s worth a damn, is you. All I want is for you and Oliver to be happy. If this bakery doesn’t make you happy, we’ll take the money we get from the sale and reinvest in something else. I’m always behind you. I’ve got your back, kiddo.”

My heart melted at those words. My mom had always been my biggest fan. She’d been there for me through thick and thin, accepting me and loving me no matter what I did.

I hugged her.

“You are the reason I’m worth anything as a mother,” I said.

“Sweetheart, I love you more than life itself. I’m so sorry you’re hurting.”

“I’ll be okay,” I said, pulling away and sniveling.

I wasn’t sure if it was true yet, but I would *make* it come true. I had no other choice. I had to be okay with the decisions I’d made. I couldn’t keep looking back.

I’d wondered how my story with Ben would have played out for all these years, and now I knew.

Now, the only way I could go was forward.

## CHAPTER 28



*I* drummed my fingers on my thigh and checked the time. Where was she?

Dakota had asked to meet so we could discuss custody.

I'd never in my life thought I would use those words.

I tried to shake off the nerves. This was business, and I was good at business. It was like any other meeting I'd been in. I just had to keep my poker face on and not think about my emotions at all. Emotions were what fucked me over. In business, emotions could sink a ship completely.

The fact that I was crazy in love with Dakota didn't matter if she didn't love me back, which clearly she didn't.

God, I was such a fool for letting this go as far as I did. I'd invested everything in her. I'd been ready to commit to something long-term before she'd decided to rip my heart out and stomp on it.

"Just think about business," I told myself and let out a slow breath, composing myself. I was better than this—I wasn't going to fall apart over some woman who wasn't interested in me and the life I was willing to offer her. I was bigger than that.

Dakota walked into the café where we'd agreed to meet. She was like a vision. I saw her as I'd seen her that first night at the club—the blonde angel with slender legs and lips that made me want to kiss her every time she spoke.

She glanced around, and the skin around her eyes tightened a little when she saw me.

Right.

That wasn't how she'd reacted when she'd seen me that first night at the club.

She sat down opposite me.

"Thank you for meeting with me."

"Anything for Oliver," I said.

She nodded. "I'm glad you're still willing to see him."

"Of course. He's my son. It doesn't matter what you and I are, or what we aren't. He deserves my being a father to him."

I couldn't tell what she thought of that. She wore a pretty damn good poker face, too.

"Let's get down to business then," Dakota said. "I want you to be a part of his life, and I know he wants to see you, so we'll settle on a visitation schedule that works for both of us. Alternating weekends, maybe?"

"I'd like more time with him," I said.

"I understand. We can get there, but we have to ease him into it. It's new for him, too."

I nodded. "That makes sense."

She didn't seem like she wanted to keep Oliver away from me. She was sticking to her word, and it looked like she wanted this part of our relationship to work, at least. It was more than I could say about anything else.

"We'll have to figure it out as we go," Dakota said. "This is new territory for me."

"Yeah, me too," I said.

She nodded and looked up at me with those deep eyes that I could get lost in.

Fuck, I loved her so much. I hated that it had come to this. For a moment, something passed between us. That spark I'd



felt from day one was still there. I could just grab her and kiss her and—

She didn't care about me. I loved her, but there was no way in hell I was telling her that when she didn't feel the same way about me.

I cleared my throat. "I have to go. I have a business meeting."

"Okay," she said, and the moment between us passed.

I nodded and stood. "We'll figure it out."

"Right," she said and nodded, standing, too.

I didn't walk with her to her car. I didn't even look back when I marched out of the café. It all hurt too fucking much.

I drove home trying not to choke up. I didn't really have a meeting; I'd just had to get away before my emotions made me do something stupid.

A black car was parked in my driveway when I arrived, and I frowned.

It was my brother, Adam, and Emmett.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

Emmett laughed. "Don't be too happy to see us."

"Emmett said it sounded like you could use some company, so here we are," Adam said and held out his hand. I walked to my brother, and we clapped each other on the back before I did the same with Emmett. It was so good to see them.

"So, what's going on with you?" Adam asked. "You look like shit."

"Don't sugarcoat it," I said dully.

Emmett frowned. "You really do look like shit, though. What's going on?"

I sighed. "Nothing serious."

Emmett and Adam raised their eyebrows and glanced at each other.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “It’s serious, but I need alcohol and a lot of it if I’m going to get through this story.”

“I’m sure we can hook you up,” Emmett said, slapping me on the back, and we all piled into my car.

We drove through the city until we found a bar that was open this early. It wasn’t normal for me to drink midday, but it wasn’t like Dakota wanted me at the bakery as long as she was there. I had nowhere else to be, nothing else to do. As long as I wasn’t on the clock as a dad, I could do whatever the hell I wanted.

We sat down and after drinking a shot of tequila and ordering whiskeys all around, I started telling my story.

“Shit,” Emmett said when I finished. “A son, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t know about it. She said she tried to find me but the whole morning was a fuckup after she left.”

“I remember you running around in that hotel, looking for her.”

“You did?” Adam asked. “Why am I only hearing about this now? You never even mentioned meeting a girl like that.”

“There was nothing to say back then,” I said. “She’d left and that was the end of it.”

“Except, it wasn’t the end,” Emmett pointed out. “You have a... son.”

“Right,” I said. Emmett seemed to struggle more with wrapping his head around it than I did. “At least, I can still see him after she called the whole thing off, so that’s what I’m going to put my energy into.”

“And you’re going to get her back, right?” Emmett asked.

I shook my head. “It’s over. She called it. She doesn’t want this.”

“And you’re just letting this slide?” Adam asked.

I sighed and lifted my hand for yet another whiskey. This was my third since I’d started talking. Or was it my fourth? I

wasn't sure. The world was starting to spin and I finally felt sufficiently numb.

Adam and Emmett glanced at each other.

"Do you want to know what I think?" Adam asked.

"Not really," I said dully.

Emmett snorted. "Jackass."

"I think you're being a complete dick," Adam said.

"What?" I asked. "What the hell did I do?"

"You gave up," Adam said.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, because I should just tell her that her decision to call it off is wrong. That will make her fall right back into my arms. Damn it, Adam, she doesn't want this, and to be honest, neither do I."

"Bullshit," Adam said.

Emmett nodded. "Fucking lies."

I scoffed. "I thought you guys were here to cheer me up, not to tell me how to live my life."

"We're your friends, Ben," Emmett said. "We're here to make sure you're okay. You're not okay, but you don't want to do anything about it, and that's stupid."

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Fight for her," Adam said.

I shook my head and sipped my whiskey.

"Look, I'm going to be frank with you," Adam said.

"Because you've been mincing your words until now?"

Emmett laughed and Adam rolled his eyes.

"Get your head out of your ass, man. You're being an idiot. You're putting your pride first when you love this woman. You obviously want to be with her." I stared at my brother. He'd been serious when he'd said he was going to be frank.

"You're being just like Mom and Dad," Adam added.

I stilled. “What?” Comparing me to them was an insult.

“You’re letting your shitty little ego get in the way. If you don’t get up and do something to change your life, you’re just going to end up miserable and bitter like them. Trust me, it’s not a good look on you. You’re better than they are.”

I blinked at Adam. “What the fuck, man?”

That stung. Our parents weren’t happy, and they weren’t good people to be around. Their lives had been reduced to the sum of their possessions, and like Adam said, they were miserable. Not to mention terrible parents.

“If you love her, go after her,” Emmett said. “You deserve it, and if I remember, she was pretty damn awesome.”

“And don’t be some deadbeat dad, Ben,” Adam said. “Don’t be an every-other-weekend father. Step up and be the dad we never got, man.”

I swallowed, suddenly sober. Those words hit the hardest.

I wanted to shake my head, to tell them no again. Dakota had been the one to call it off, to tell me she didn’t want this. She’d been the one to make it clear that she didn’t care.

That didn’t mean that I didn’t care, though. It didn’t mean that a relationship with her wasn’t what I wanted.

Was Adam right? Would I become bitter and miserable if I let her leave? God, I was already an emotional wreck, ready to switch off any feelings because it was easier to deal with than feeling all the heartache that had come with knowing Dakota.

What if I could fix this heartache another way, by being with her, telling her that I loved her?

“Damn it,” I said.

“What?” Adam asked.

“You’re right.”

Adam looked shocked, glancing at Emmett. “You heard that, right? You heard him say it?”

“Fuck off,” I said with a laugh and stood.

I paid the bill in a hurry. For the first time since Dakota had come to my house, my head was clear.

“Where are you going?” Emmett asked.

“I have to find her.”

## CHAPTER 29



I taped the box shut and wrote “cutlery” on it.

Nadia sat on the kitchen counter, swinging her legs as she wrapped cups in old newspaper before putting them in a box.

“I hate this,” I admitted.

Nadia glanced at me. “Packing?”

I nodded.

It was the second time in about as many months that I was moving. Oliver and I were going to a new place. I had no idea where, yet. For now, we would move in with my mom until we had a place of our own again.

“I don’t know why you can’t just stay here until you find somewhere different,” Nadia said.

“I can’t keep living off Ben’s charity,” I said. “It was really great of him to look out for us, but it’s too much for me to deal with. Especially now...” My voice cracked and I tried to swallow down the lump that rose in my throat.

Thinking about Ben made me cry. Everything reminded me of him, and somehow, this was so much worse than when I’d found out I was pregnant and that I was going to have to raise a kid all alone. I’d lost Ben then, too, but it hadn’t been as difficult. I hadn’t known him the way I did now.

I hadn’t loved him the way I did now.

I kept telling myself this was for the best, but it didn't feel that way. Not yet. I would get there eventually—I knew it was the right thing to do.

I had to stand on my own two feet, and I couldn't do that if I lived the life Ben had created for me. The only way I would be able to move on from him was if I distanced myself from everything he'd brought into our lives.

“It shouldn't take too long to find a new place,” I said when Nadia didn't respond to my earlier statement. “The money I'll get when I sell my shares will be enough to get a decent apartment. Ben is going to pay for Oliver's school, so that won't be a problem, and then we'll figure out the rest. One step at a time, that's how I've always done it.”

“You've always been so strong,” Nadia commented. “It's not an easy thing you've done, raising a baby all by yourself. And now this... you're a lot stronger than you realize.”

I sighed. “It doesn't always feel that way. I should have known better with Ben. I should have been more on my guard rather than just falling for him.”

“Right,” Nadia said with a note of sarcasm.

I looked up at her. “You don't agree?”

“You know, I don't. You two are good together, and I've never seen you as happy as you were with him. I've also never seen you as sad as you are now that you lost him. That counts for something, you know.”

I sighed. “It's not that simple.”

“I think it is.” She pinned me with a level stare. “At the end of the day, though, this is your life, and you need to decide what you want from it. Just know that no matter what, I'll be here for you.”

I smiled. “You have no idea how much I appreciate you.”

“You could always show me by giving me that damn croissant recipe.” Nadia grinned. I burst out laughing.

“I can't give you the recipe! It's a family secret...” My voice trailed off when I realized what I was saying.



The recipe had been a family recipe, passed down to my grandmother by her mother, and her mother before that, but did it matter anymore if I was going to sell my shares in the bakery?

A pang shot into my chest and I felt like crying all over again.

“It’s going to be okay,” Nadia said gently, noticing the shift in my mood. “You got through it all until now. You can do it again.”

She was right. I tried to swallow my sadness and pull myself together. I’d come so far since the day I’d found out I was pregnant. I just had to keep looking forward.

I grabbed the nearest empty box and started on the plates, wrapping them up and packing them away. Working hard always helped—I just had to keep pushing on, switching off my mind and emotions. Maybe I could survive this.

My mind drifted to the future. The money I earned from selling my shares would get us a small home and a bit of money to carry us through while I looked for a new job. I would apply at all the bakeries in town.

Just because I wasn’t going to work in the family bakery anymore didn’t mean I couldn’t do what I loved. I could find a position somewhere that would allow me to bake as much as I wanted and bring in the cash we needed to survive.

“I have to go,” Nadia said when she finished her box and taped it up. “Are you going to be okay? Do you need me to take the day off—”

“I’m going to be perfectly fine,” I said, determined. I hugged Nadia. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Anytime,” Nadia said, squeezing me tightly. “I’ll be back to pack more when I have a chance, okay?”

I nodded, and Nadia left the condo. I sighed and turned back to my box. I had a lot to do still. Luckily, Mom was keeping Oliver while I packed.

I was leaving his room for last. He'd been uprooted so many times in different ways over the past couple of months, and I wanted to give him something stable before it happened all over again.

Someone knocked on my door. I wiped my hands—dirty from the old newspaper ink—on my jeans and wiped strands of my hair out of my face.

When I opened the door, Ben stood before me.

I stared at him. My heart constricted and my stomach flipped.

Damn it, why did I still react this way to him?

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I wanted to bring you something.”

“What?”

He pushed his hand into his pocket and took out a small package. He handed it to me.

“Open it.”

I frowned and carefully opened it.

“Oh my God,” I said, staring. It was the necklace I'd lost in Vegas.

“Where did you find this?”

“You left it in the hotel room,” Ben said. “I found it that morning after you left. The clasp had broken, and I got it fixed. I always wanted to return it to you.”

I blinked at him. “Do you have any idea how much I missed this?” I ran my finger over the amethyst stone. “Have you had it in LA this whole time?”

“Yeah,” Ben said. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I kept it close to me all these years. It was a reminder of you.”

I was speechless.

“I've wanted to return it to you since we reunited, but the moment never seemed right. Then you were gone...”

I shook my head and my eyes stung with tears. “Thank you for bringing this back to me. It means a lot that you kept it all this time.”

Now that I’d decided I wanted to sell my shares in the bakery, the necklace—a reminder of my grandparents—was bittersweet. I missed them so much. What would they say about all of this? About the changes to the bakery, about Ben, about the life I’d hoped I would have with him...

“I’m sorry, Dakota,” Ben said.

I looked up at him again. “For what?”

“Everything. Taking over. Being a pain in the ass. Stepping on your toes. All of it. I fucked up, and I lost you.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay, Ben. Some things just aren’t meant to be. There are no hard feelings—”

“That’s just the thing. Without you, everything sucks. I want you in my life. I don’t just want Oliver; I want both of you. I want a family.”

“You don’t, though,” I said, shaking my head. “You said it yourself—you got where you are now because you have no one to hold you back.”

Ben frowned. “Where did you hear that?”

“You said it in an interview.”

“You saw it online? Dakota, that was before I knew you, before I knew Oliver. That was before I knew what it means to have a family. Sure, not having a family meant I could put every spare moment into my business, but if I had to choose between the two... I’d choose you and Oliver. Every time.”

My eyes welled with tears. “You can’t do this to me... make me think we have a chance, then crush me.”

“I’m not trying to *do* anything to you. I’m doing this *for* you. I mean it when I say I’m sorry. I wanted to help, but I went about it all wrong. I’m so used to living on my own, it took some time to figure out what’s really important. I was slow on the uptake, Dakota, but I’m here, asking you to be with me.”

I shook my head. It was getting harder and harder for me to say no to him, but I had to remember why I did all of this. I had to do what was right for me and Oliver. I had to do what was good for my soul.

“We can’t work together, Ben. Too much water under the bridge.”

“I know,” Ben said. “Which is why I signed the bakery back over to you and your mom.”

“What?”

“I don’t care about the money or the business. I care about you and Oliver, and if having the bakery means losing you... I don’t want it.”

I didn’t know what to say. Ben looked at me with his piercing blue eyes, his stare boring into my soul, and I struggled to keep it together.

“I don’t know—” I started but my voice cracked and the tears rolled over my cheeks. I didn’t want to be a blubbering mess, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“I love you, Dakota,” Ben said, stepping closer. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone, and I want to be with you. I want you and Oliver in my life. I want us to be a family.”

He brushed my hair out of my face, his eyes searching mine.

“I...” I swallowed hard. “I love you too.”

Ben cradled my cheek, and his gaze was full of affection. He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. When he kissed me, I melted against him. All the tension, stress, and panic left my body.

Everything was okay.

“I’m sorry, too,” I whispered.

He shook his head. “We’re not looking back anymore. Now, we’re just moving forward.”

“I like that,” I said.

Ben kissed me again, more deeply, and the time for talking was over.

He walked with me inside the front door and kicked the door shut.

“I want you,” he growled.

“Then take me,” I said.

He spun me around and pushed me up against the door, pressing the length of his body against mine. His hands roamed my body, tracing my curves, squeezing my ass. My skin was hot, every nerve ending alive.

He moved his head into my neck and I gasped, pushing my fingers into his thick, dark hair. He lifted my shirt over my head and removed it, and I did the same for him. He unclasped my bra and pulled me against him. My naked breasts pushed up against his chest, and the feel of skin on skin made my mouth water.

Ben dipped his head. I shivered when his stubble scraped across the delicate skin on my chest. He teased me, kissing and caressing, and I loved every second.

He always knew just how to make me feel like I was everything. Not only physically, but emotionally, too.

I smiled as he worked his way down my torso. As he hooked his fingers into the waistband of my jeans, I wiggled my hips, helping him pull them down.

Ben knelt before me and wrapped a hand around my thigh. He lifted my leg and threw it over his shoulder. When he dove between my legs and closed his mouth over my sex, I saw stars. I whimpered, pulling his head closer to me, crazy with desire.

Ben gently sucked on my clit, gradually increasing the pressure. I gyrated my hips against his mouth as pleasure built inside of me, threatening at any moment to explode.

He pushed two fingers into me, pumping them slowly in and out, and I couldn't hold it anymore. An orgasm ripped through my body and I cried out with abandon.

Finally, after what felt like forever, the pleasure subsided and I sagged against the door. Ben rose to his feet, pulling me against him, and kissed me. I tasted myself on his lips, and it was hot as fuck.

My legs felt like jelly. I struggled to keep myself up, so he lifted me off my feet. I wrapped my arms around his neck, legs around his waist, and he carried me to my bedroom. He lowered me gently onto the bed and kissed me, his tongue sliding into my mouth.

When he broke the kiss, it was only to straighten up and undo his pants. He kicked them off along with his boxers, and he stood naked before me, erect and delicious to look at.

“Come here.” I reached out for him, and he bent over me. I found his cock and ran my fingers up and down his shaft, and we lay together, kissing and touching, drinking in each other’s company.

Ben rolled onto me, and my legs fell open for him. He started to pull away.

“Don’t,” I said.

“I’m getting a condom.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to.”

Ben frowned. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I want you inside of me with nothing between us.”

Ben’s eyes bore into mine, and he kissed me again. While he did, he slid into me, and I gasped as he filled me up.

“Holy shit, you feel good,” he bit out.

When he was buried inside of me, he paused, and I trembled around him. The feel of his bare cock was incredible. I’d never felt closer to him than in this moment.

Ben started moving, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, caressing his back. He pulled out, and slowly slid back in again, making me shut my eyes to relish the moment. Being with him felt so right.

We belonged together, and no matter what, neither of us would let anything get in our way again.

He thrust faster, and my whimpers turned into sharp cries of pleasure. His face was close to mine, his hot breath on my skin, and his eyes locked on my own. I could stare into those eyes forever.

He pounded into me harder and faster, and I bit my lip, nearing another orgasm.

When it broke over me, I surrendered to the warmth pulsing through my body, crashing into me like waves on the sand. He stroked my cheek, traced my profile with his fingers, and looked at me like he was committing this moment to memory.

Slowly, the orgasm faded, and I shivered and trembled on the bed in the wake of pleasure.

Ben planted a peck on my lips before he started moving again. He pushed into me, fucking me harder and harder, and I cried out. This time, it wasn't only for my pleasure, but for his, too. I held on to Ben's shoulders to anchor myself. I felt the muscles ripple under his skin, and I trailed my fingers over his powerful, muscular body.

Ben thrust deeper inside me, kissing me desperately before he pushed himself in all the way. His cock throbbed and pulsated as he pumped me full of his seed. He filled me up, and the sensation was so erotic it nudged me over the edge into yet another climax.

Pleasure wrapped itself around us and we were one, we were connected—so close that I didn't know where I ended and he began.

I didn't know how long we lay together as we came down from the peak. My heart hammered against Ben's chest and his rapid breath was warm on my skin. I wanted to stay like this, connected and perfect, forever.

Finally, Ben rolled to the side. He didn't move too far—he pulled me closer and curled his body around mine. I sighed happily.

Fighting what was happening between us was impossible. We belonged together, no doubt about it.

I had what I'd wanted all these years. Ben was here, in our lives, a man who wanted to be a father to Oliver and a partner to me. The future couldn't be any brighter.

With Ben by my side, we could face anything that came our way.



## CHAPTER 30



*I*t was the bakery's grand opening, and the turnout was incredible.

Our soft opening with the social media influencers spreading the word had done the trick—there were more people here than I'd expected.

This was good news for Sweethearts Bakery.

Dakota and Cynthia had tied a thick red ribbon across the bakery doors, and a large crowd of guests stood in the street. Excitement crackled in the air.

“Are you ready?” I asked Dakota.

She wore a classy sky-blue dress with her apron tied over it, and her hair was twisted into an elegant bun. She looked stunning. Cynthia had dressed in a longer purple dress and apron.

“I don't know if I'm ready,” Dakota said and nervously glanced at the crowd. “It's a lot of people.”

“They're all here for you. You can't go wrong.”

Dakota swallowed hard.

“You're going to be great,” Cynthia said.

Oliver stood next to his grandma, holding her hand. He wore dark blue jeans and a purple button-up shirt. I'd helped him put gel in his blond hair—he'd wanted to look “cool.” He looked like a little superstar, and my heart burst with love for that kid.

I was the luckiest man in the world.

“Come on, let’s go for it,” I said and put my hand on Dakota’s lower back.

She nodded and swallowed hard before she smiled brightly and stepped onto the podium we’d set up.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she started, looking around. “What a turnout, huh?”

They applauded.

“This is more than I could ever have imagined for the reopening of our little bakery. I can’t thank you enough for joining us on this special day. Sweethearts Bakery started as a dream by two people who took a risk and invested it all. Now, decades later, the family startup has grown into a successful business, and it’s thanks to each and every one of you and all your support that we’ve come this far.”

I glanced around the crowd. A lot of the regulars had followed us after we’d moved, but there were so many new faces in the crowd, too.

“I’m not going to keep you guys waiting with a long speech. I think we should get right to it!”

The crowd cheered and I smiled. They responded so well to Dakota and despite being so nervous, she was a natural in front of a crowd.

“Without further ado...” Cynthia handed Dakota a large pair of scissors. Cynthia and I held the ribbon taut on each side of the door. Dakota cut the ribbon, and the crowd cheered wildly.

“Welcome to Sweethearts Bakery!”

We opened the doors, and the crowd flooded in. Cynthia manned the counter where guests bought all kinds of pastries to sample. Liz walked around with a silver tray with champagne and fruit juice for the guests, and Dakota mingled with the crowd, talking and laughing.

The bakery looked incredible. Dakota and Cynthia had made a lot of the changes I’d suggested, despite Dakota’s

hostile response to them at first. They'd still managed to add a personal touch to it all. The bakery kept its original charm, with nostalgic photos on the walls and vintage, homey curtains on the windows to reflect the past that shaped the business.

So far, the grand opening was a huge success. The DJ we'd hired worked in his corner, playing the perfect mood music. We'd set up another ring light for people to post photos to their social media, and the combination was perfect.

Everyone was happy, and there was no doubt that the bakery was going to do great.

Oliver stood next to me in the corner as we watched the magic happen.

"Are you okay, buddy?" I asked.

Oliver nodded. "It's a lot of people."

"I don't love crowds too much, either."

"I'm hungry."

I laughed. "Okay, let's go get something to eat. A muffin?"

"Chocolate chip," Oliver agreed.

I nodded and held out my hand. Oliver took it, then looked up at me.

"Can I call you Dad?"

I blinked at him. The question was so out of the blue, it almost startled me.

"You want to call me Dad?"

"Well, you *are* my dad," he said.

I grinned. "Of course you can call me Dad."

"Okay, Dad." Oliver tugged me toward the counter, pointing at his favorite muffins.

I thought my heart would burst out of my chest. Not only did I have the most incredible girlfriend, but my son had welcomed me with open arms.

Everything had turned out perfectly.

I'd come to LA to find a life that could be more than what I'd known before. I thought I'd open another branch of McCullough Industries, enjoy the beach and sun, and expand my horizons.

I'd never counted on finding Dakota and Oliver. I'd never thought that having them in my life would be so fulfilling. But now, I was finally where I belonged.

I knew exactly what it meant to be happy.

Oliver and I stood at the counter, finishing our chocolate chip muffins, when the DJ caught my eye and nodded.

I grinned at him, wiped my mouth on a napkin, and took a big breath. I turned to Cynthia, who stood behind the counter.

"Come back here with me, Olly," she said with a nod to me. "We'll have a good view from here."

"For what?" Oliver asked, but he walked around the counter and joined Cynthia, who hoisted him on her hip.

I walked to the middle of the crowd, and the music dimmed so that everyone could hear me speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention, please," I called out. Everyone stopped talking and turned to me. "Dakota, where are you?"

Dakota raised her hand and pushed through the crowd to join me.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a low voice.

"Trust me," I said.

She nodded and I turned to look at the group of people who filled the bakery completely.

"First of all, I want to say thank you to Dakota and Cynthia for making this place as incredible as it is. Anyone can run a business, but not everyone can make it feel like home." I turned to Dakota. "You and your mother don't only bake the best pastries in Los Angeles. You've crafted a space where everyone belongs, where we're all one big family."

Dakota blushed, and all the guests nodded in agreement and applauded. Nadia stood nearby and caught my eye, winking.

“It’s on that note that I want to continue,” I said and cleared my throat. “I never had a very good sense of what family means, and I always believed I didn’t need one. I was fine on my own. That is, until I met you. You’ve turned my life around, Dakota. You made me realize that all this time, something was missing, and despite the success in business... there are some things money just can’t buy.”

Dakota frowned a little, confused about where I was going with this.

“The moment I found you again, I realized that this was what was missing all along—a family. Not just any family... you and Oliver. I want to be with you, Dakota. Always.”

I dropped to one knee, and Dakota’s eyes widened. She clapped her hands over her mouth at the same time surprised gasps came from the group of people around us. I took out the velvet box and opened it.

The diamond ring twinkled in the lights above us. Nadia had helped me pick it out, and I’d been waiting for this moment for weeks.

“I love you, Dakota. You complete me, and I don’t want a life without you. Marry me.”

Her eyes welled with tears when they locked on mine, and she nodded.

“Oh my God, yes!” she breathed.

The crowd erupted in applause as I took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger. I stood and pulled Dakota tightly against me, planting a kiss on her lips. The DJ picked up the volume again, and the party continued all around us.

“I can’t believe you just did that in public,” Dakota said, her cheeks bright red and her eyes sparkling with happiness as she looked from the ring on her finger to me. “What would you have done if I’d said no?”

“Found a way to convince you that we belong together,” I said simply. “Even if I had to fight for us every day for the rest of my life.”

“That’s a long time,” Dakota said.

“Trust me, babe, after five years... I know you’re every bit worth the wait.”

Her cheeks reddened even more, and she giggled.

I pulled her closer still and kissed her, and she melted against me.

“I love you, Ben. I can’t wait to be your wife.”

“I love you, too, Dakota. You make me so happy.”

Oliver ran up to us, making his way through the crowd. Dakota scooped him up in her arms.

“Did you hear that?” Dakota asked him. “We’re getting married.”

“Cool!” Oliver cheered. He turned to me and gave me a hug. “Does that mean you’ll live with us?”

“Yes. Maybe you guys can move in with me.” I glanced at Dakota and added, “Or I’ll move in with you guys, Oliver. I’m sure your mom is tired of moving.”

Oliver considered that, tilting his head. “Will I have to give up my room?”

Dakota and I shared a look, then we both burst out laughing.

“No, sweetheart,” Dakota said. “You get to keep your room. I’ll share with Ben.”

Oliver nodded, happy with that.

Dakota looked at me with so much warmth and love, and I pulled them both in close.

I was officially the luckiest man in the world.

# EPILOGUE





*One year later*

“*O*h my God,” Mom breathed when she walked into the bridal suite where we were getting ready. Her eyes filled with tears. “My darling, you look beautiful!”

I wore a dress straight out of a fairy tale. It was a princess-style wedding gown, with a lace bodice and full, gathered skirt. My hair had been pinned up professionally by a hairstylist who made me look like a goddess, and my makeup had been done by an artist who usually worked on celebrities on the red carpet.

Ben hadn't spared any expense. He wanted to give me the wedding of my dreams, and this was above and beyond anything I could have hoped for.

Mom wore a sophisticated, full-length dress in salmon with low heels, and she looked as classy as ever.

“I can't tell you how delighted I am for you,” Mom said in a trembling voice. “All I ever wanted was to see you happy, and I think Ben is just perfect for you and Oliver.”

“He's great, isn't he?” I asked with a smile and lifted my hand to the amethyst necklace around my neck, running my fingers over the smooth edge of the stone.

Mom nodded. “He's wonderful. You're going to have a good life together.” She hugged me tightly, and we stood locked in an embrace for a long moment.

“Thank you for everything, Mom,” I said, still holding her. “For raising me even though it was tough. For putting my needs above yours—I know now what it means to be a single mother. Helping me take care of Olly and helping me through every part of my life... Thank you for not only being my mom, but my best friend, too.”

“Anything for you, my sweetheart,” Mom said. “You’ve come so far, and I’m so very proud of you.”

We finally let go of each other.

Nadia came to me, wearing her mint-green bridesmaid dress.

“It’s time,” she said. “And you look gorgeous, Dakota.”

Cassie stood beside Nadia, wearing a dress in the same color but a different style.

“We better walk down that aisle before we all start crying and ruin our makeup,” Cassie said with a laugh.

I drew a deep breath. “Let’s get this party started.”

Mom left the room to hurry to her seat, and we walked out to cross the courtyard of the vineyard where the wedding was hosted.

The vineyard was incredible, with rolling hills and a Tuscan-style building for the reception, and the weather was perfect. Blue skies with white puffs of clouds above and sunshine that brought color and life to the world.

When we reached the doors to the chapel, Oliver waited there with Adam, Ben’s brother.

“You look incredible,” Adam said. “Let me be the first to welcome you to the family... sis.”

I smiled and hugged Adam. I’d met him soon after Ben and I had become official, and we’d gotten to know each other over the past year. Adam had flown out to visit us in LA several times, and we’d traveled to see Ben’s family in New York.

At first, Ben hadn't been on good terms with his parents, but they'd made an effort to repair the relationship. They loved Oliver and wanted to be in his life, too. Things were still a bit tense between Ben and his parents, but they'd all come a long way. I was positive about the future.

"I'm going in," Adam said. He was one of the groomsmen. "You know what to do, right, buddy?" he asked Oliver.

Oliver saluted him and nodded.

Adam grinned and left.

"Such a handsome young man!" I said, and Oliver grinned at me. He was growing like crazy these days.

The doors opened, and it was time.

"Just like we practiced, okay?" I said to Oliver.

He gave a serious nod and walked in with the rings he carried for us. I heard our family and friends inside all react with laughter to the adorable sight of my son in his tuxedo.

Next, Cassie gave me a big thumbs-up, then walked in carrying her bouquet. Nadia turned to me.

"This is it! I can't believe you've come this far."

"Not without your help," I said.

"You would have found your happily ever after either way, babe. I'm just glad to be along for the ride! I love you, my friend."

"I love you, too, Nadia."

She gave me a quick hug before it was her turn to walk in.

After that, it was just me. I'd opted not to walk down the aisle with anyone. I had so many people in my life who were there for me, how could I choose just one? I wanted to be the one to go to Ben, and for him to come to me—two individuals who chose each other. Not only today, but every day.

When it was my turn, the music changed, and I slowly walked in. Everyone stood, and all eyes were on me. In the crowd, I caught the eyes of Ben's parents, who both smiled

proudly. A few of my other friends were there, too. Among the crowd, I imagined my grandparents standing there, smiling at us.

Ben stood at the front of the chapel, with Emmett as his best man and Adam and Jake next to him.

Ben met me halfway, and we walked toward the altar together.

“You look fucking fantastic,” Ben said under his breath. “I love the dress, by the way... makes me want to take it off you.” He winked at me.

“Later, you get to do just that,” I said with a smile.

We stood before the altar where the officiant started the ceremony. I was sure her words were beautiful, but the truth was, I didn't hear a thing. All I knew was that Ben and I were committing to spending the rest of our lives together.

When it was time to share our vows, Ben turned to me with a smile.

“Dakota, from the moment I first laid eyes on you, I somehow knew you were the woman for me. I lost you once, and I can only chalk it up to fate that we found each other again. We got a second chance, and I'm not going to take it for granted. Dakota, I promise to cherish you forever. You and Oliver are everything to me. You are my happiness, and I love you more than you can ever imagine.”

My eyes welled with tears while he spoke. When it was my turn, I was a blubbering mess. Nadia handed me a tissue. I sniveled and dabbed at my eyes before I spoke.

“I should have gone first,” I said. “I'm a mess now.” Everyone laughed, and I took a deep breath before I continued.

“Ben, I didn't think that dreams could come true. I didn't think that I'd ever find anyone who could make me as happy as you do, who completes me so perfectly. You are what was missing from my life all these years. You're a wonderful dad to our son, and to me, you're the love of my life. I can't wait for the rest of our lives together, and I thank God for bringing you back to me. I promise to love you forever.”

Ben pulled me closer and looked at the officiant.

“By the power vested in me by the State of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife,” she said. “You may kiss the b—”

Before she could finish his sentence, Ben pulled me in for a kiss, making my knees go weak in front of everyone we knew.

Ben reached for Oliver, who ran up to us, grinning.

“How’d we do?” Ben asked him.

“Pretty good,” Oliver said casually.

Laughing, Ben picked him up and pulled both of us into his embrace.

We were officially married, and I couldn’t be happier.

After the photos, while the guests enjoyed canapes and champagne, Ben and I met at the doors to the reception hall. The sun dipped low behind us, setting the sky ablaze and casting beams of golden light along the rolling hills of the vineyard.

“Are you ready to do this?” Ben asked.

I nodded. “Just one thing before we go in,” I said.

“What is it?”

I leaned a little closer. “I hear you’re in the business of expanding.”

Ben frowned. “What?”

“Growth, expansion... that’s what you’re all about in business, right?”

“You want to talk business?” He furrowed his brow.

“Yeah,” I said. “I happen to be in the business of expanding, too.”

“What are you talking about?” It was adorable to see how confused he was.

“I’m pregnant, Ben,” I said simply.

He stared at me, wrapping his mind around the news for a moment.

“Really?” A broad grin spread across his features.

“Really,” I said.

Ben bent down and covered my face in kisses. “Just when I thought life couldn’t be any more perfect.”

I giggled and kissed him back. “I’m glad you’re pleased.”

“Of course I am. Another baby!”

I nodded. “It’s thrilling, isn’t it? Oliver’s going to be so excited to have a little brother or sister.”

“He’s gonna be the best big brother ever.” His eyes lit up as he thought of it. “You make me so proud, Dakota. I can’t wait to start the next adventure with you.”

I beamed. “I love you, Ben.”

“I love you, too. Come on,” he said, taking my hand. “Let’s go in there together.”

“Together,” I echoed.

The doors opened, and the DJ announced us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Ben and Dakota McCullough!” Upbeat music started, our loved ones cheered, and we took our first steps into the rest of our lives.

I couldn’t have picked a better man than Ben. I was happier than I’d ever thought I could be.

And this was only the start of our beautiful journey.

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

**One grumpy doctor.**

**One half-baked pretend engagement.**

**And two pink lines on the test stick.**

Dr. Ryder Finley is a smoking hot surgeon and a total grouch.

Arrogant.

Entitled.

So what if I notice the bulging biceps under his scrubs...

And that he's very good with his hands?

When he wants me to be his fake fiancée for a real estate deal,

I think he's lost it.

But I'm desperate to get my pushy family off my back.

So I agree.

I'll wear his ring and pretend to be in love.

Then I'll go back to hating him.

But I didn't count on two little details:

Ryder's not the devil I thought he was.

And I'm not acting anymore.

**I don't know what's crazier:**

**That I'm falling for my enemy...**

**Or that I'm having his baby.**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Whitney*

“Another year older. And still single.”

*Ugh.* My mom’s words echoed in my mind as I drove.

The radio was playing a sappy love song, and I changed the station with a little too much force. Too bad I couldn’t turn off the tape of my mother’s words in my head.

“That’s more like it,” I muttered to myself as Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off” came through my car’s speakers.

I was only turning twenty-eight, for Pete’s sake. Plenty of time to settle down. But on every birthday since my twenty-fifth, my family stepped up the pressure to find a man.

I drove with the windows down as I sang along, badly, with Taylor. My phone pinged just as I pulled my car to a stop in front of my friend Barrett’s house. I read his text with a smile.

#### **What’s taking you so long, Whit?**

Apparently Barrett didn’t look out the window before messaging me.

I got out of my car, swung my purse over my shoulder, and walked to his front door. He was my only friend who lived in a nice house and not a cramped apartment. I always told him he was lucky. He always responded that he worked hard. And he did—he was a pediatrician. I worked as a neurology nurse at the same hospital.

I was no stranger to hard work, either. In fact, today had been brutal. I was looking forward to a quiet evening watching TV with my best friend. I didn’t need a big birthday party for my twenty-eighth.

When I knocked, Barrett opened the door almost right away.

“Waiting for me, huh?” I asked, leaning in to give him a hug.

“I’m ready for the festivities to start,” he said.

I snorted. “What festivities? We’ll probably just watch reruns like we always do.”

“But with cake,” Barrett said and grinned his million-dollar smile at me. That smile captured a lot of women’s hearts—but not mine. I’d known Barrett since we were kids, and he was like the brother I never had.

I laughed and walked deeper into the house. I dumped my purse on the table where I always put it. It was getting dark outside, but the lights weren’t on in the living room.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked. “Becoming a hermit in here? I’m telling you, Barr, you need to get laid or something.”

Barrett chuckled. “Thanks for pointing that out. In company, that would have been incredibly embarrassing.”

“I’ll be sure not to make that joke at work,” I said, poking him in the shoulder.

The lights suddenly flashed on. From every corner of the room—behind the couch, next to the television, under the dining table in the corner—our friends and co-workers jumped out with streamers and rattlers.

“Surprise!” they all shouted.

“Oh my God!” I screamed in terror.

It was a surprise, all right. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Beside me, Barrett broke out in laughter. “We got you good.”

My hand flew to my heart as I narrowed my eyes at him. “I had no idea you were doing this!”

He laughed. “It’s not every day that you turn twenty-eight, Whit.”

“So much for ‘low-key’ and ‘just the two of us,’” I said as the shock wore off.

“I thought you were going to fight me on that.”

Ariel, my sister, piped up from the back. “You’re crazy if you think we’re going to let you turn a year older without everyone rubbing it in your face, sis.”

I smiled and looked around at my friends climbing out of their hiding spaces. Most of them worked at the hospital with me.

“Happy birthday, Whitney!” Charlotte, a fellow nurse, said. She wrapped me in a hug.

“You guys are amazing,” I said, touched that everyone had shown up for my birthday.

Ariel didn’t work at the hospital with us, but my sister and I were tight. I looked around at the food and decorations and realized most of this had been her doing. I met her eyes and mouthed, *Thank you*.

Barrett cleared his throat. “Whitney was just kidding when she said I needed to get laid,” he announced to everyone in the room.

Charlotte laughed. “Yes, Barrett, we all know you’re very successful with the ladies.”

“Come on, have a drink!” Kendall, another nurse, ordered. “We’ve got some partying to do.”

Someone pushed a margarita into my hand, and Ariel appeared from the kitchen with a platter loaded with cocktail Viennas, crackers, a selection of cheeses, and everything else that I loved.

“You better have more platters, because this one’s mine,” I joked.

The mood was upbeat, the food looked delicious, and the alcohol was flowing. I loved that my co-workers had shown up. The people I’d been saving lives with, side by side, for the past couple of years had become so close they were like family. Touched by the thoughtful gesture, I felt tears sting my

eyes. I forced them away and smiled. I wasn't going to cry on my birthday. It was going to be a good one.

Music started playing, and we danced and stuffed our mouths with junk food.

Ariel wagged a finger at me. "You're going to ruin your appetite for supper," she joked.

"It's my party, and I'll eat cocktail Viennas for dinner if I want to," I said. Ariel laughed and ran off when someone called her name.

I grinned at my own joke as I loaded a cracker with cheese dip.

Barrett was talking to Ariel, not too far off, and Charlotte stood with them. They all had drinks in their hands, and they were talking and laughing.

I grabbed a cocktail Vienna, popped it into my mouth, and joined them.

"How's the birthday girl enjoying the party?" Charlotte asked.

I smiled and washed down my food with a sip of margarita. "I'm loving it. You guys are the best."

"You never grow out of surprise parties," Ariel said.

Barrett laughed. "Some of us never grew into them."

"No?" I asked, amused. "Since when don't you like surprise parties?"

"Since always," Barrett said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "So, that party I threw for your thirtieth?"

"Hey, that was a bash," Barrett said. "I just prefer my bashes to be predictable."

I punched him lightly in the arm. "You mean boring."

He laughed, holding up his hands in defense.

"I never said I didn't love that party."

“The parts I can actually remember were great,” Ariel piped up.

We all laughed and I shook my head. I loved that my sister was a part of my friend circle. She was married with kids, so she couldn't always join us, but the times she could, she fit right in.

“Speaking of surprises,” Barrett said, sipping his beer, “my cousin is coming out to Peachwood.”

“Oh,” I said, perking up. “Max? The cardiologist from Atlanta? Is he coming for a visit or staying for good?”

Barrett shook his head, but his mouth was currently stuffed with cheese and crackers, so he couldn't answer.

“What's with the Finleys all becoming doctors?” Ariel piped up.

“They're a family of doctors,” I answered. “Finley kids are given a stethoscope as soon as they come out of the womb.”

Ariel snorted.

Barrett and I had been friends since we were kids. I knew most of his family. At least, I'd *met* all of them. Max was pretty cool. Most of Barrett's family was.

“No, not Max,” Barrett said. “Max is more than happy in Atlanta. I think he was just offered a promotion. He's not going anywhere. But Ryder, my cousin from New York, is ready for a change. You remember him, right?”

I rolled my eyes and groaned. Like I said: *most* of them were pretty cool.

“Remember him? I'd forgotten all about his existence.”

Barrett chuckled. “Yeah, since he embarrassed you like that in front of the family.”

I rolled my eyes again. Ryder was a jerk. He was about six years older than me, which meant that when I was nine, the first time and last time I'd seen him, he was a skinny, nerdy, fifteen-year-old who thought he was going to be the next big

thing. Teenage boys were all like that. Although, Barrett had never been a little asshole.

Barrett had invited me over to a Finley family gathering when Ryder was here in Georgia to visit his grandparents and his aunt and uncle—Barrett’s parents. I’d tried to be nice to Ryder. After all, Barrett and I had been good friends from day one.

But Ryder was nothing like Barrett. He liked to use big words that Barrett and I didn’t understand to make himself sound smart. He talked to all the adults rather than hanging with the kids, because he felt like he was on their level. He even argued with Barrett’s mom about sitting at the kids’ table.

He’d been a rude, conceited jerk.

When Barrett and I had asked him to come to the park with us, he said that parks were for babies. Then he asked Barrett—right in front of me—if my mom was paying him to babysit me. I still remember his words: “There’s no way you’d hang out with that loser girl for fun.”

Some other kids had heard and burst out laughing. I’d turned bright red and run home, humiliated and fuming over what that little jerk had said about me.

Since then, the few times Ryder has been in town after that, I’ve made myself scarce. I never wanted to run into him again.

“Too bad it’s him and not Max,” I offered. “I like Max.”

“Come on, it’s not a big deal,” Barrett said. “It will be fine. It’s not like you’re going to be forced to speak to him outside work or anything.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“What do you mean, *outside work*? Is he coming to Lakeview County Hospital?”

Barrett cleared his throat and rubbed his nose, not giving me an answer. And he didn’t have to—I knew everything I needed to know.

So, Ryder Finley had become a doctor. And he was going to work at my hospital.

“Hey, don’t look so down in the mouth about it,” Barrett said. “It’s your birthday. You’re supposed to be in a good mood.”

“Yeah,” my sister chipped in after listening intently. Of course, she knew all about Ryder—I’d told her exactly how I felt about him when he humiliated me as a child. “You should enjoy yourself. It’s not like you’ll be forced to shack up with the guy or anything. Besides, we aren’t kids anymore.”

I shrugged. “That’s true only if Ryder has managed to grow up.”

Barrett laughed. “I’ve got a surprise for you. Wait here. I know it’s going to cheer you right up.”

He disappeared down the hallway. I looked at Ariel and Charlotte, who both shrugged, claiming not to know what this was all about. I firmly pushed Barrett’s obnoxious cousin far from my mind. Tonight was all about fun.

I grabbed another cocktail glass—whoever made these margaritas was a whiz. I took a long drink and nearly choked. This one was *strong*.

A knock on the door sounded above the music.

“Barrett,” I called in the direction Barrett had run off. “More guests!”

“You get it,” he called out.

I nodded and walked to the door. When I opened it, I gasped.

I was looking at the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen—dark hair, dark eyes, square jaw. Under his fitted T-shirt I could tell he was chiseled and sculpted, and he wore black, distressed jeans.

“Hi,” he said, his mouth pulling up into a naughty smile.

I looked down at the duffel bag he carried, confused.



It dawned on me. This guy was no ordinary party guest. Men this handsome and well-built didn't work at the hospital.

He was a *stripper*. He probably carried props for his show in the bag.

Well, well, well. This *was* a surprise. And very unlike Barrett to get me a stripper. But we always tried to outdo each other. This year, I had to admit, was going to be hard to top.

I was totally down for a stripper. Especially one that looked like *this*.

"Come in," I said with a smile.

He stepped in, looking around. The group of girls in the living room all ogled him, and I knew they felt the same way I did—this guy was *hot*.

Suddenly I felt nervous standing so close to him. I took another big gulp of the margarita.

"Want one?" I asked him.

"No thanks," he said.

"Okay," I said. Liquid courage flowed through my veins, and I was getting hot now that I was looking at Sexy Bones right in front of me. "I'm ready. Do the thing."

He raised an eyebrow. "What thing?" he asked.

"Oh, you need the right music? I can choose a track. What do you want? Electronic, hip-hop, pop? I'm not sure what kind of songs you need for something like this."

He blinked at me, and I laughed. He must be new at this. Maybe this was his first job. Well, I'd do my best to make him feel at ease. I stepped closer to him so that only he could hear my voice.

"It's really not that big a deal. I'm not going to complain if you skip the pleasantries and just take off your pants."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"Come on," I said, threading my finger through one of the belt loops on his jeans and tugging a little. "That's the end

game, if you can get right down to it.” I leaned in a little closer and said in a husky voice, “I’ll take it however you serve it.”

*Did I just say that?* Damn, that tequila had really gone straight to my head. I couldn’t believe I was being so forward with this guy.

He chuckled, his eyes turning a little darker, and he moved even closer. When he talked, I could feel his breath on my neck. I shivered. Something delicious unfurled at my core. God, this guy was *fantastic*.

“If I take something off, you need to as well,” he murmured.

I looked up at him, surprised.

“What?”

“Okay,” Barrett said, coming from somewhere in the house with a large platter.

Oh... the kitchen. That’s where he’d gone. And now he was returning with a cake.

*Wait, what?*

Was *that* what he meant when he’d said he had a surprise for me? The cake?

My throat closed up as I struggled to compute this new information.

The cake was decorated in a nurse theme, complete with scrubs, a stethoscope, and a nurse’s hat made of fondant. Barrett carried it proudly. “This one is made, with *special* love, by—”

He cut himself off, freezing when he saw the stripper.

“Ryder?” he asked.

*Ryder?*

I whipped my head around and got a good look at the stripper. Or *non*-stripper, as the case seemed to be.

And sure as shit, now that I knew what to look for, Barrett was right. This *was* his condescending, self-absorbed older

cousin. Except, he looked almost nothing like the nerdy fifteen-year-old I'd seen almost twenty years ago. He'd grown up into a drop-dead gorgeous man.

I stepped away from him so fast, my margarita spilled out of the glass and splashed onto the leather loafers Ryder was wearing.

“Shit,” I said.

“I'd say so,” Ryder answered.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Ryder*

I needed a drink.

This was Whitney Miller?

This deliciously hot woman who stood before me was the gangly kid my cousin apparently still insisted on hanging out with? Except, the last time I'd seen her, she looked nothing like this.

Holy shit.

She'd turned into a real stunner. The freckled, skinny thing with knob knees and no idea how to handle herself had grown up to be fucking sexy, with a tight, curvy little body. She still had freckles, which were now cute as hell on her. Constellations on her cheeks and stars in her eyes.

Fucking poetic.

But she had a lack of class. Which sucked. Because a woman like that...

No.

It didn't matter.

I was off women at the moment. There was no way in hell I was getting involved with anyone. No matter how hot she was.

"Shit, I'm so sorry," Whitney said. She dropped to her knees and tried to wipe the cocktail she'd spilled on my shoes with a paper napkin.

"Just leave it," I snapped.

She glanced up at me, those big green eyes locked on mine, and fuck if I didn't picture her naked with her lips around my cock.

In response, my cock twitched in my pants.

I crushed the thought immediately.

“Well, this is awkward,” I said.

Whitney stood. Thank God. Now I could stop picturing her naked, sucking me off.

“Ryder, what are you doing here so early? I thought you’d get in after midnight,” Barrett said. He shook his head with a dismissive wave of his hand. “It doesn’t matter. You’re just in time for the party.”

“I can see that,” I said, glancing at the food and the alcohol, then at Whitney. “And I assume you’re the birthday girl.”

Whitney nodded.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” she said with a shrug.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, looking around the room at everyone who stared at me like I was an apparition of some kind, “I need to grab my bags.”

“Sure,” Barrett said. “You can bring them through to the guest room.”

“And we can take this party outside!” someone called out, holding up what looked like... were those squirt guns?

Everyone cheered. I fought the urge to roll my eyes and turned to follow Barrett down the hallway to a small but adequate guest bedroom.

“This is it,” Barrett said, gesturing around the room. “It’s not much. I didn’t exactly get time to put little chocolates on your pillow.” He grinned at me.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “It’s just until I find an apartment. I’ll be out of your hair in no time.”

“Hey, take as long as you need,” Barrett said, and sat down on the double bed. “So, had to get away in a hurry, huh?”

I sighed. “Yeah. Natasha was driving me fucking insane. Just when I thought she’d reached the limit to how crazy she could get, she showed me there was a whole new level.” I rubbed my forehead, trying not to think too hard about the

hellish situation with my ex-girlfriend I'd left behind in New York. "I left early this morning. I drove almost nonstop. Had to put distance between me and Natasha as quickly as possible."

"You should have ditched her a long time ago," Barrett said.

I nodded. I knew that. "There's just something about commitment," I said. "What's the point in trying to get somewhere if you run in the opposite direction at the first sign of trouble? No one's perfect. I mean... every relationship has red flags."

"Yeah, but some red flags you don't learn to live with, Ryder."

I sighed. "Thanks for your sage advice, Mr. Always Single."

Barrett snorted. "Hey, I'm better at giving advice than following it, asshole. Don't shoot the messenger. You're just in a shitty mood because I was right about her."

I had to admit it was true. Barrett had warned me about Natasha years ago. He hadn't told me outright that something was wrong with her, but when one glass of wine at dinner every night had turned into four, and she changed into someone I no longer recognized, Barrett had asked me how much I was willing to take.

Apparently, I'd been willing to look the other way for far too long.

But I'd learned my lesson now. It was two years too late, but it was all over now.

I thought about how Natasha had reacted when I told her I was leaving her for real. I'd threatened it too many times, but this time, it had been serious.

It would have been better for me just to pack my bags and disappear. It would have been less trouble.

I'd seen more tantrums from her in the past few days than most people with toddlers went through. She'd gone full-on

psycho.

I shook my head and pushed the thoughts away.

That was in the past. I was here to move forward.

“I’m going to grab the rest of my bags,” I said.

We heard squeals from outside, and I walked to the window.

Barrett had a large home with a spacious yard, and the party outside had escalated into a full-blown water fight. The weather was hot, the humidity pressing against my skin like a giant hand when I opened the window—a water fight worked in this weather. Although I would have imagined it to be for a slightly younger crowd.

I did a quick calculation. Twenty-eight, that was how old Whitney had to be now.

I watched as Whitney moved around the back yard, laughing when she got squirted, and firing right back. Her golden brown hair was wet, hanging over her shoulders. Her T-shirt—sadly not see-through when wet—clung to her body. It outlined her shape for me to ogle to my heart’s content.

Curvy hips, flat tummy, perfect breasts.

My cock twitched again, and I looked away.

I was going to get myself in trouble if I continued like this, and there was no way in hell I was going to get involved with someone like Whitney. From what I remembered, she was a royal pain in the ass.

A spray of water hit me in the face. I gasped, the water dripping onto my chest and the floor from my chin.

“What the fuck?” I said.

Barrett burst out laughing. He stayed away from the window I’d opened. Clever man.

“Oh, God, did I get you?” Whitney asked, coming to the window. Her face was concerned, but her eyes were laughing at me.

“Just a splash,” I said sarcastically.

Barrett was still laughing. Did he think this was funny? Children, all of them.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, but a smile played around her lips.

If I wasn’t so damn irritated with all of this, I would have fawned over how her smile lit up her face. But I wasn’t in the right mood to enjoy it. Maybe I should have gotten a hotel room instead of staying in my cousin’s guest room.

“Oh, don’t be such a grouch,” she said with a giggle when I didn’t answer her. “I really wasn’t aiming for the window. Or your face.” Another giggle escaped her lips. Something told me she wasn’t telling the truth. And she was clearly enjoying my frustration.

“Just be more careful,” I snapped.

Fuck, Whitney was as irritating as she’d been as a kid. She was attractive, and that was even more annoying. Damn it, I didn’t want to stare at her, but I couldn’t help myself.

Her cheeks flushed and her smile disappeared. The moment it did, I wanted it back.

“You’re here at my party. Barrett didn’t expect you this early. If you hate fun so much, close the curtains.”

She turned around and marched away. A moment later, someone squirted her from the side and she burst out in laughter again. I was completely forgotten.

I remembered her correctly from our childhood—a total pain in the ass.

When I looked at Barrett, he was grinning.

“What’s so funny?” I snapped.

He held his hands up in defense, but he was still smiling, his eyes dancing with laughter. Did everyone think this was funny except me?

“Hey, I’m just enjoying the show,” he said. “And I’m trying to picture what work is going to be like for you with that attitude.”



I rolled my eyes. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, all those childish people out there? They’re your co-workers. They all work at the same hospital where you’ll be.” He pointed through the window. “That over there is Charlotte, and Kendall, and Deanna. They’re nurses that work alongside Whitney. Over there is Dr. Erickson from Oncology, and Dr. Clifford Beck from Pediatrics, and Dr. Hailey Thompson. She’s an excellent—”

“Cardiologist. I’ve heard her name.”

“Yeah. All these fine physicians and nurses work at Lakeview County Hospital. And you just made a great first impression.”

“You could have told me sooner that they were all going to be working with me,” I said.

Barrett shrugged. “It was more fun watching you make an ass out of yourself.” He burst out laughing again.

“What a dick,” I said.

“Asshole,” he shot back.

“Jerk.”

“Pig.”

We both laughed. We’d been playing this game since Barrett was old enough to know insults.

When the laughter died down, he turned to me with a grin.

“Yeah, your first day on the job next week should be interesting.”

I shook my head. “I told the director I’d start early. I report first thing in the morning.”

He drew in air sharply and widened his eyes. “You’re still a workaholic, aren’t you?”

I chuckled. “You’re one to talk.”

“Touché.”

“So, karma seems out to get me, huh?” I muttered.

“Hey, look at it this way,” Barrett said. “The good part about making a bad first impression is that things can only get better from here.”

“I’ll pretend that’s some sort of consolation,” I said dully.

Barrett shrugged.

“Since I’m on the receiving end of Murphy’s Law right now, what department do all those nurses work in?”

“Can you guess?” Barrett asked with a grin.

I sighed. “Neurology.”

“Bingo.”

I groaned inwardly. My department. Which meant that I’d be working with Whitney too.

And she was already such a handful.

“Hey, don’t look so glum,” Barrett said. “Like I said, there’s loads of room for improvement, so you’re going to be fine.”

“Right,” I said, not sure if I believed him.

“Get those bags in here and then join the party. Have a drink.”

“The alcohol I can get behind,” I said. “I could sure as hell use a drink.”

Barrett laughed and clapped me on my shoulder. “That’s the spirit. Whatever’s wrong, you can extract with surgical forceps, a kind word, or a shit ton of booze.”

I chuckled and shook my head. Coming from a family of doctors has always been fun.

I walked outside to collect the rest of my bags from my car before I joined the party. It wasn’t exactly my idea of fun, especially after my twelve-hour drive. But I told myself it would be a good idea to be in a crowd, to be around people who weren’t dysfunctional, people who could be realistic about the demands of life. People I would be spending the next few months with, at the very least.

When I decided to leave New York, my aim had been to get away from my past, from everything that had been dragging me down.

I'd moved to Peachwood for a fresh start. Soon, I'd be the new attending neurosurgeon at a respected, if small, hospital. Now I had to shift my focus and start thinking about where I was going, what I was going to do with my life.

Thinking about Natasha and what had happened between us was just going to bring me down. No matter what I did from here on out, I had to keep my chin up and keep moving forward.

I'd have to keep positive about my new life in Georgia.

I only wished I wasn't going to be working side by side with Whitney Miller.

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